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Early Childhood &
Primary Education
RESEARCH GROUP

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

Perspectives of Leaders in Primary Schools, Kindergartens and Childcare Centres

RESEARCH REPORT 5

Dr Tania Muscat
Dr Charmaine Bonello
Dr Rosienne Camilleri
Dr Josephine Deguara
Dr Josephine Milton

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Foreword

The pandemic has created one of the largest disruptions to learning, teaching, and assessment in many education systems across the world (Pearson, 2022). For a period of time, spanning over at least two years, schooling has been upturned in ways that were unthinkable, particularly as teaching and learning had to go virtual from one day to another without any forewarning.

International evidence about school leadership during the pandemic shows that, overall, the demands on school leaders were unpredictable and relentless (Harris and Jones, 2022). School leaders in Malta too had to face many challenges as they scrambled to find ways to keep on educating children in the early years and primary as schools/childcare centres had to shut down from one day to another in March 2020. Keeping a whole school going as it physically shut its doors to its learners was one big challenge education leaders had to face. They also had to change the ways through which they supported teachers and other educational staff to ensure that teaching and learning continued to take place. Senior management staff in schools and childcare centres thus had to lead effectively and efficiently, while nurturing and maintaining relationships with their staff and stakeholders as they tackled problems which cropped up. Most importantly, they needed to ensure that the children's educational development continued as smoothly as possible.

Even if we are today in Malta back to normal schooling, it is important to understand what leaders went through and how they managed to support their educational staff, students, and parents through this ordeal. This research project aims to do exactly this as it provides snapshots of how leaders worked during the pandemic across two scholastic years: the first when schools shut suddenly for a prolonged period of time during the scholastic year 2019-20; and during 2020-21 when schools were mainly open but had to follow many restrictions on social distancing as set by the Superintendent for Health (Ministry for Health, 2021). The research explores the different ways in which the pandemic impacted leaders working in Maltese childcare settings, kindergartens and primary schools. It takes an educational view on how leaders tackled the challenge of continuing with teaching and learning. It also considers what learning spaces, physical or virtual, were available to leaders, educators and learners. The research also looks at the emotional aspect in terms of how the pandemic also impacted the livelihoods, relationships and personal well-being of educational leaders.

The trends obtained in the surveys provide a richness of data with respect to how Maltese educational leaders brought their schools together, even when they had to achieve this at a virtual level. They highlight how leaders demonstrated high levels of collegiality both within their own school as well as with leaders in other schools/centres. The research evidences how the education leaders and educators prioritised children's educational development. It shows how, at the end of the scholastic year, despite the increased stress due to having to solve so many problems, the leaders expressed satisfaction for what they had managed to achieve. While things may not have worked perfectly, the leaders' strong commitment expressed is commendable.

The research results also help educators to identify what lessons can be learnt about how schools can keep in touch with and cater for their learners when they cannot physically attend school. While the true extent of potential learning losses in the pandemic may not yet be clear, it can be an opportunity to use lessons learnt to make the much-needed systemic change in education provision. It is thus essential to reflect on the findings before rushing back to the old normal. It would be a missed opportunity if education policy makers do not take note of the leadership strengths demonstrated by senior management staff as well as identify what pitfalls can be avoided when tackling problems and challenges in education.

On a personal note, I congratulate my colleagues who have managed to carry forward and finalise an exercise where I played a significant role in its inception and first stages of our journey. Having participated in many of the meetings held, I am aware of the input and effort which they put in this project. Their effort is a gift to Malta's education system as it demonstrates how it is possible to produce evidence-based knowledge which policy makers and educators can use to improve education provision.

The report is overall an insightful read which will help all educators, ranging from policy makers and those in educational management, to teachers and other educational staff, understand the educational hurdles that school/centre leaders had to overcome due to COVID-19. One also has to acknowledge the researchers' great effort in contributing to research evidence about aspects of the education system in Malta during the pandemic.

I augur to all an interesting and informative reading.

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Prof. Suzanne Gatt

Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education,
Faculty of Education
University of Malta



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List of Abbreviations

Cov-EM	COVID-19 and Education in Malta
COVID-19	SARS-CoV-2 (2019-nCoV) coronavirus and Coronavirus Disease 2019
DECPE	Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECPE	Early Childhood and Primary Education
ERT	Emergency Remote Teaching
FoE	Faculty of Education
FREC	Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
LSE	Learning Support Educator
UM	University of Malta
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

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.



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.



CHARMAINE BONELLO is a Lecturer in Early Childhood and Primary Education. Her areas of research interest in Early Childhood Education and Care are Early Literacy, Children's Rights, Postcolonialism, Quality Interactions, and the Emergent Curriculum. She is co-founder and Vice President of the Early Childhood Development Association of Malta (ECDAM), a member of the Board of Administrators of the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the author of the Routledge book *'Boys, Early Literacy and Children's Rights in a Postcolonial Context'* (Bonello, 2022). She was recently appointed as the co-editor of *Postcolonial Directions in Education*.



ROSIENNE CAMILLERI is a Lecturer in Early Childhood and Primary Education. Prior to this engagement, she worked in several schools, both as a teacher as well as occupying various managerial positions. Her areas of special interest in lecturing and research include high ability and giftedness, transitions in education, the Emergent Curriculum, as well as teacher and learner identities. She was a member of the working committee for the recently published *Early Childhood Education and Care: National Policy Framework for Malta and Gozo (2021)*.



JOSEPHINE DEGUARA is Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood and Primary Education. She has occupied different roles in researching and working with young children and educators in Early Childhood and Primary Education. She is a member of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECRA) and the Editorial Board of the *International Journal of Early Years Education*. Her research interests focus on curriculum philosophy, children's rights, play and learning, the environment as a pedagogical tool and multimodal meaning-making in early childhood education and care.



JOSEPHINE MILTON is the Head of Department and Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood and Primary Education. She has worked in Early and Primary Education for over twenty years and has occupied various roles in working with educators and young learners in formal and non-formal organisations. Her research interests focus on teacher education within early childhood and primary education, the use of language in teaching and learning, children's literature, English language learning, and literacy.

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The present members of the Early Childhood and Primary Education (ECPE) Research Group for all the reciprocal support and encouragement in our journey to grow together professionally as teacher educators and researchers.

Executive Summary

In an attempt to contain the spread of COVID-19, like in many countries worldwide, the educational establishments in Malta were ordered to temporarily close their doors to face-to-face teaching and learning and switched to online teaching in March 2020. The pandemic caused an instant disruption and change of routines involving the entire education sector operations. The Early Childhood Education (ECE) and primary school leaders in Malta, like many of their colleagues around the world, found themselves in a challenging position where they relied on guidance about COVID-19 responses from higher authorities. Simultaneously, they dealt with changing staffing situations and teaching/learning arrangements. As all this was unfolding, five female academics from the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education (DECPE) within the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta decided to embark on a collaborative research project. The objective was twofold: to find out how the COVID-19 impacted different stakeholders in Early and Primary Education and to gather, share and produce knowledge collaboratively to develop and own their identities as academic researchers. This research report focused on leaders of childcare centres (0-3-year-olds), kindergarten (0-5-year-olds), and primary schools (5-11-year-olds). The other four reports focused on early childhood educators (ECEs) (0-5-year-olds), primary school educators (5 to 11-year olds), students following initial teacher education study programmes at the University of Malta and parents of children in early and primary education. Another report on children in early and primary education will follow at a later stage.

Methods

An online survey was chosen as a safe, reliable, and effective way to collect data throughout the pandemic. The initial survey was carried out in September 2020. Given the turn of events, the research team decided to release a second, modified survey version in September 2021 as the pandemic persisted. Some questions were only included in the first survey while other new questions were added to the second survey. The questionnaires measured respondents' attitudes, opinions, or perceptions. They 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 primary school leaders, and childcare centre managers living in Malta. A total of 126 participants responded to the first survey in September 2020, while 40 participants responded to the second survey in September 2021. In both surveys, the majority of participants were female (94.1% and 90%, respectively) and Maltese citizens (96.8% and 97.5%, respectively). The average age of the participants was 43.4 and 43.8, respectively.

Perspectives of Leaders in Primary Schools, Kindergartens and Childcare Settings

The purpose of the current research study was:

1. To explore the views of leaders in childcare settings, kindergarten, and primary schools about the impact of COVID-19 on **teaching and learning** in their schools/settings and gain insights on the leadership strategies implemented to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning in this period.
2. To learn more about the new **learning spaces** and environments used in childcare, kindergarten and primary school settings and how these influenced leaders' experiences and practices during the pandemic.
3. To examine how the abrupt transition to online teaching and learning and conformity to rapidly changing COVID-19 mitigation measures have impacted the **relationships and well-being** of ECE and primary school leaders.

Key Findings

The key findings from both surveys are presented below together with the yielded rounded percentages. Where the same question item is referred to for both surveys the percentages may follow in a bracket for the first and second survey respectively (1st% and 2nd%).

ECE and primary school leaders' views about the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning in their schools/settings:

- The majority of EC and primary school leaders were satisfied with the amount of online learning delivered (1st 75%, 2nd 95%), and the syllabus covered online (1st 67%, 2nd 86%) in their school/setting.
- Schools' virtual learning environment (VLE) was amongst the most recommended platforms by the school leaders to send homework and notes (1st 41%, 2nd 55%).
- The assessment of students' learning was one of the least satisfactory components of education during the 2019-2020 scholastic year (32%).
- The majority of the EC and primary school leaders (86%) recommended live (synchronous) online lessons during the COVID-19 lockdown in the 2019-2020 scholastic year.
- Live (synchronous) lessons were the most effective online mode of teaching/learning during the 2020-2021 scholastic year (67%).
- According to the majority of the EC and primary school leaders (67%), children have lost a substantial amount of learning/learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- During the 2020-2021 scholastic year, teaching and learning were mostly conducted in class with learners physically present (86%); it was followed by teaching in class using a 'bubble' system with helpers/assistants monitoring children in the second/third bubble (43%), simultaneous online access to the same lessons for vulnerable students (14%) and teaching remotely from home while learners were at school because the particular educator was vulnerable (10%).

ECE and primary school leaders' experiences and perception on managing learning spaces during the pandemic:

- Half of the EC and primary school leaders had internet access and the necessary devices (e.g. laptops and tablets) to work online in their houses (54%).
- Leaders spent time acquiring new digital skills to use learning platforms such as MS Teams and school VLE during the 2019-2020 scholastic year (88.2%).
- During the 2020-2021 scholastic year, leaders assisted their educators in improving their online/remote teaching through encouraging collaboration between staff (83%), providing professional development courses related to online teaching (75%), and providing technical support (67%).
- Most EC and primary school leaders frequently used VLE platforms (77%) and digital communication channels such as messenger, WhatsApp (77%), and video conferencing platforms (e.g. Zoom) (66%) to work online.
- The majority of EC and primary school teachers were willing to keep face-to-face education exclusively in the classroom upon returning to post-pandemic conditions (1st 66%, 2nd 79%).

How COVID-19 impacted ECE and primary school leaders' relationships and well-being:

- "Stress" was the most often used word to describe how school leaders felt throughout the pandemic. Compared to pre-pandemic times, leaders reported experiencing higher stress levels in their life (1st 72%, 2nd 57%).
- Leaders spent significantly more time corresponding with staff, parents, and students (1st 91%, 2nd 83%) and solving problems (1st 74%, 2nd 70%) when compared to pre-pandemic times.
- During the 2019-2020 scholastic year, leaders spent more time supporting teachers with online resources (80%), attending webinars to improve digital literacy skills (80%), trying to reach parents who lost contact with the schools (78%) and supporting teachers for their well-being (74%).
- Leaders were confident in their capacity to work well with colleagues online (93%), following continuous professional development online (86%), communicate with parents and learners online (84%), in adapting their teaching/care to online platforms (76%) during the 2019-2020 scholastic year.

Key Recommendations

- Directorates are called to provide detailed crisis management guidelines so that educational leaders can put them into action in their schools/settings in the event of a crisis. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Malta, most institutions were unprepared because severe conditions (e.g., force major) are uncommon in Malta. Given the possibility that climate change might cause new force major conditions in the future, one hopes that as a nation, we equip ourselves to be better prepared with significant adaptation strategies.
- Through policies and action plans, educational leaders in Malta should be encouraged to become technology leaders in their schools/settings. This would entail embracing the application of ICT, not only for curricular enhancement, but also for continuous professional development, innovation and creativity.
- Maltese pupils attending schools are among the most digitally equipped in the EU, particularly at the primary level. Investments in this area should be maintained ensuring that children from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as those who have additional needs are also covered.
- To fully harness the potential of digital education, all childcare centres, kindergarten and primary schools and learners should have access to devices and infrastructure to access age-appropriate online learning platforms conveying effective assessment and evaluation components.
- From the leaders' perspectives, we learn that further research is needed on the experiences of *children with additional needs during the COVID-19 pandemic* to fully assess the possible short-comings of school policies in Malta set for addressing their needs in times of crisis.





CHAPTER 1

The Cov-EM Study

1.1 Background to the ECPE Education and COVID-19 (Cov-EM) cluster of studies and the research team

Following the interruptions brought on by the unforeseen periods of school and university closure 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 the need to do something to react to the challenges being faced. This led to the inception of the Early Childhood and Primary Education (ECPE) research team. Eight female academics from the DECPE started to work together through online collaborative research work 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 team (Bonello et al., 2020) and another two 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 group's initial research work on the impact of **COVID-19** on **Education in Malta** with the **Cov-EM** cluster of studies. The cluster of studies includes five research reports based on surveys presented in this research report in addition to this report (Bonello et al., 2022; Camilleri et al., 2022; Deguara et al., 2022; Milton et al., 2022). These are:

Research Report 1: Perspectives of University Students in Initial Teacher Education

Research Report 2: Perspectives of Early Childhood Educators

Research Report 3: Perspectives of Primary School Educators

Research Report 4: Perspectives of Parents with Children in Early and Primary Education

Research Report 5: Perspectives of Leaders in Primary Schools, Kindergartens and Childcare Centres (This is Research Report 5).

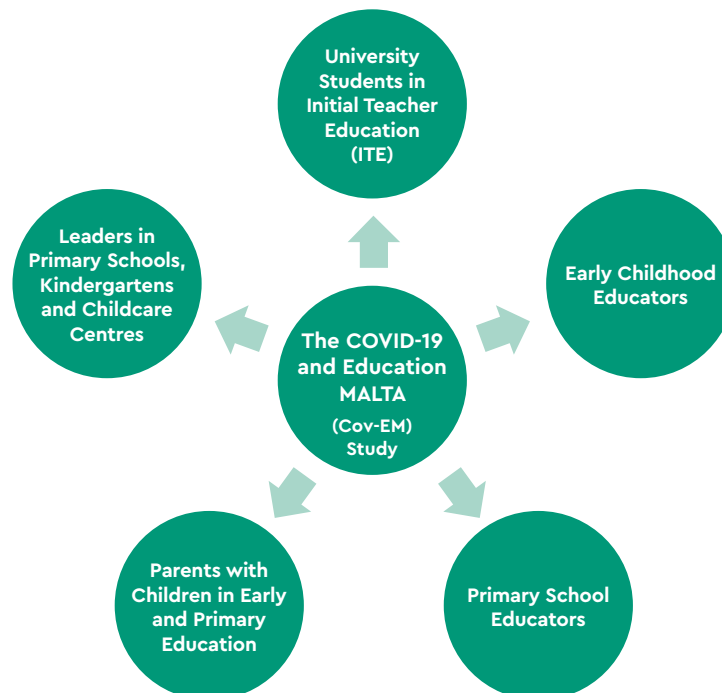


Figure 1.1: The cluster of five studies within the overarching COV-EM study

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

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

1.2 The development of the research questions, aims, objectives, and the conceptual framework 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 COVID-19 may influence our life for longer than we thought. Following two years of COVID times in Malta, newspapers reported that on the 10th of 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, Times of Malta, 2022, p. 1).

We continue to evidence how education at all levels, is forced to shape and reshape to meet the emerging needs of all learners and rely on several remote methods for a significant part of the learning process. As a research group, we are continuously concerned with the ways in which this new reality and changing educational scenarios are undoubtedly impacting stakeholders in early and primary education. When the research group was formed in 2020, we felt that it is apt to ask: *In what ways is this pandemic impacting the personal and professional lives of stakeholders in early, primary, and higher education in Malta over time?*

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 times and the relevant literature in search for the boundaries that were to frame our study.

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 an integral part of early years and primary education. Thus, 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?

To this, we were then able to identify the research questions that also contributed to the process of determining the boundaries of the Cov-EM study – in relation to the three main concepts (Figure 1.2) of teaching and learning, learning spaces and well-being and relationships.

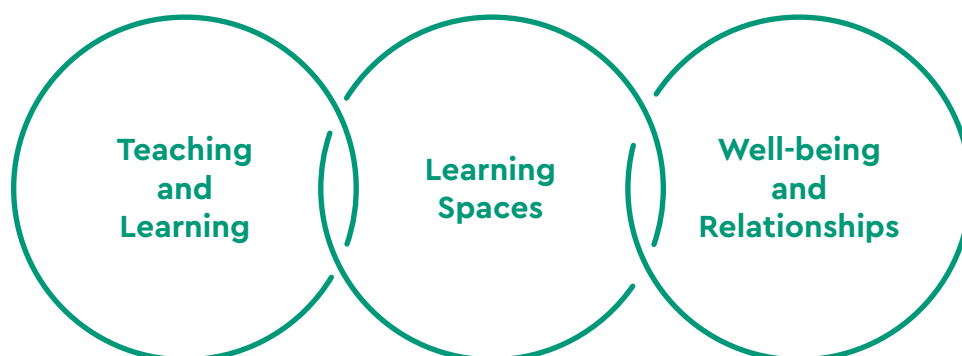


Figure 1.2: The three concepts that thread through the Cov-EM study

Teaching and Learning: The term ‘teaching and learning’ focuses more 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 presented study.

Learning Spaces: The term ‘learning spaces’ refers to those spaces where different stakeholders in early and primary education are experiencing online and/or offline teaching and learning during the pandemic. These include new learning spaces experienced by the different stakeholders: the home environment; online platforms; and school/university learning spaces functioning within both online and offline zones (e.g. children in class and children at home at the same time).

Well-being and Relationships: The term ‘well-being and relationships’ taps on the following aspects of these concepts as experienced by the different stakeholders during the pandemic:

- **Relationships** - 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.
- **Well-being** - the quality and opportunity of spending time with others in their personal (life relationships) and professional lives (working relationships).

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.

The overarching research question posed for the five studies was:

What lessons can we learn from the perspectives of different stakeholders in early, primary and higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malta?

Subsidiary research question Phase 1:

- *What was the overall impact of COVID-19 on the experiences of different stakeholders (in terms of - teaching and learning; learning spaces; well-being, and relationships) in early, primary and higher education in Malta (between March and June 2020 - the first school closure)?*

Subsidiary research questions Phase 2:

- *What was the overall impact of COVID-19 on the experiences of different stakeholders (in terms of - teaching and learning; learning spaces; well-being, and relationships;) in early, primary, and higher education in Malta (between September 2020 and June 2021 - the second school closure)?*

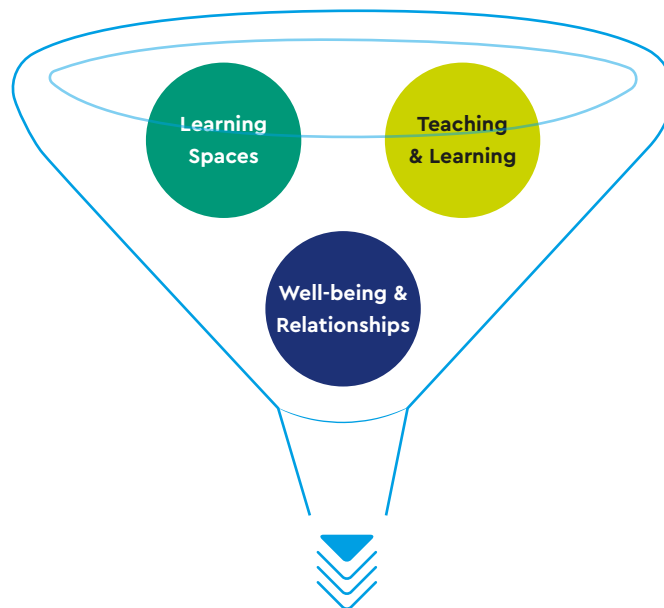
The ongoing collaborative research process and the identified questions listed above assisted the ECPE research group to:

- (i) setting the overall aims and objectives (see Figure 1.3) of the COV-EM study;



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

- (ii) generating the conceptual framework (see Figure 1.4) - grounded in three main pillars - most suitable to answer the overarching research question and guide the development of the research design.



What lessons can we learn from the perspectives of different stakeholders in early, primary and higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malta?

Figure 1.4: The conceptual framework of the Cov-EM study

1.3 Theoretical framework

Pandemic-related disruptions influenced the three concepts that frame the Cov-EM study (see Figure 1.4 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 environments; and
3. diverse physical and psychological aspects of well-being and relationships.

This study is framed in four main theories that apply to the needs mentioned above. 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 teachers, peers, family and friends; the people we learn from, the more knowledgeable others. Vygotsky's theory assists 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 popularity of online learning in the new reality, this study's theoretical frame extends to Siemens' (2004) contemporary learning theory. This theory sees the integration of technology and social interactions as a space for the co-construction of knowledge.

Maslow's (1987) popular work, the 'hierarchy of needs', underpins the concept of 'well-being and relationships' 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 different stakeholders in education during COVID-19, taking us back to the foundations of Maslow's hierarchy.

The fourth theory that frames this work is Bronfenbrenner's (1979) 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 diverse stakeholders in Maltese education.

1.4 The Cov-EM study: Research Report – Leaders in Primary Schools, Kindergartens and Childcare Centres

The study presented in this research report is framed within a triad conceptual framework (see Figure 1.4 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 leaders in childcare centres and primary schools in Malta. Participants in this study worked in childcare centres (service provision for 0-3-year olds), kindergarten, and primary schools (5 to 11-year-olds). The study set out to capture leaders' perspectives, voices and leadership experiences during the demanding and disruptive times brought about by the pandemic.

The specific objectives of the research study presented in this research report were:

1. to gain insight into how leaders in primary schools, kindergarten and childcare settings experienced technology and pedagogy and how this reshaped teaching and learning during the pandemic;
2. to examine how the sudden shift to online teaching and reliance on guidance about COVID-19 responses, procedures, and protocols affected leaders' professional and personal lives, practice, relationships and well-being; and
3. to uncover what can be learned from the experiences of leaders of primary, kindergarten and childcare settings during the first (scholastic year 2019/2020) and second waves (scholastic year 2020/2021) of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The main research question for the leaders' study was:

What lessons can be learned from the perspectives of leaders of Primary schools, kindergartens and childcare settings during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malta?

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

- (i) In what ways, if any, did leaders' foresight guide their context-responsive leadership strategies to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning of young school-age children during COVID-19 pandemic?
- (ii) To what extent, were 'new' learning online and offline spaces made available and accessible by leaders in educational settings during the pandemic?
- (iii) How did the pandemic impact on the relationships and well-being of leaders in Primary, kindergartens and childcare centres?

This chapter described the local-global educational landscape at the time the COVID-19 pandemic hit Malta and the rest of the world. This was followed by an outline of the key concepts and the theoretical framework used for this study. The next chapter describes the Maltese education context and reports the first and second school closures during scholastic years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 respectively. Chapter 3 presents a succinct literature review on the key concepts pertinent to the topic under study – school leadership in disruptive times. Chapter 4 describes and supports the study design and methodology. Chapter 5 presents the results and Chapter 6 the discussion of the results, while Chapter 7 concludes the study and provides several recommendations.



CHAPTER 2

COVID-19 and the Maltese Education Context

2.1 The local education system

For this study, it is important to provide a context through a brief overview of the Maltese education system. Malta adopts a split system in three sectors: state, church and independent. The early years sector is available for children aged 0-7 years (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012). However, children aged 3 months up to 2 years and 9 months are provided with early childhood education and care in childcare centres run by both the state and independent entities. Children aged between 2 years 9 months and 5 years attend kindergarten settings operated by state, church or independent schools. From the ages of 5 to 11 years, children attend compulsory subject-based schooling in primary school settings (Year 1 to Year 6). This is followed by another five years split between the Middle schools (from ages 11 to 13) and Secondary schools (from ages 13 to 16).

2.2 The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the first school closure in Malta in March 2020

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Malta on the 7th March, 2020. Similar to other countries, the Maltese government took drastic measures to control the spread of the virus by ordering that all education institutions close their doors. As from 13th March up till the end of the scholastic year in June, all school settings, from childcare to tertiary institutions were forced to close (Cefai, Skrzyzypiec & Galea, 2021; Bartolo, Grech & Grech, 2022). Schools had to find alternative ways of teaching. Virtual learning environments were quickly set up to provide educators with a remote tool as an alternative to face-to-face teaching and learning. Teachers had to quickly learn how to use online software such as Microsoft TEAMS and Class Dojo, teach their students, and simultaneously communicate with and provide support to parents (Grech and Bartolo, 2020). This resulted in considerable change in the children's learning environment: from physically being done at school, to being held remotely within the confinements of their homes (Cefai et al., 2021). Teachers tried to maintain some form of routine, where they planned modified timetables, where students had to follow activities or lessons in a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous modes. According to Grech and Bartolo (2020) and Cefai et al., (2021), this transition brought many challenges to children and their parents. It was recommended by the Health Authorities that children be kept at home and avoid going to public spaces such as playgrounds in order to reduce social interaction (Cefai et al., 2020). Some children found it challenging to settle in the new way of online teaching and learning and had to deal with academic and emotional struggles. Some schools even offered training for parents, students, and teachers on how to navigate around the school's online platform and were provided with webinars that helped them address struggles and anxieties brought up by the pandemic (Grech & Bartolo, 2020; Napier, 2021 as cited in Berger, 2021). While all schools were pressured to shift teaching to online, not all institutions and teachers were prepared for this sudden transition. While some teachers, with the support of their schools, were able to make an overnight to shift to synchronous online teaching. To this, children could participate in learning experiences from home and communicate with their peers and teacher in real time. Other educators opted for asynchronous modes, where they sent the taught material to children and their parents via PowerPoint presentations, e-mails, and links to online websites.

2.2.1 Scholastic year 2020 – 2021: The opening of schools

In August 2020, the Ministry for Health (2020a; 2020b), issued a set of guidelines to the educational sector for the re-opening of kindergarten, primary and secondary schools in Malta. These guidelines focused on providing a protocol for schools to follow in order to mitigate the transmission of the virus. However, each school was expected to adapt the guidelines according to the specific needs of the school in their preparations for the following scholastic year 2020-2021. The opening of schools in Malta was postponed by a week (Farrugia, 2020b), as schools were not fully prepared. When schools opened their doors on 7th of October, 2020, children started school “on different dates, according to their year group, over a period of not more than one week” (Ministry of Education as cited in Farrugia, 2020b) with all children back to school by the 14th of October, 2020. Attendance was at 75% where children had to follow pandemic protocols (wearing of masks, hand sanitizing, social distancing and the grouping of children in bubbles) (Micallef, 2020). The Ministry of Education stated that almost half the parents who decided not to send their children to school, did so on medical grounds. However, the unions of teachers (Micallef, 2020) were objecting to the streaming of live online lessons for the benefit of those students who could not physically attend school. As a countermeasure, the Ministry of Education prepared more than 400 recorded lessons that were available online for those children who could not attend school physically (Micallef, 2020).

Due to the high increase in COVID-19 cases, and after pressure from the Malta Union of Teachers (Calleja, 2021a), on 10th March, 2021, exactly a year after the onset of the pandemic, the government held a press conference and subsequently issued Legal Notice, 97 2021, communicating that, schools and other educational institutions, were to close down between 15th March and 11th April, 2021 (Public Health Act, Cap. 465, L.N. 97, 2021). Schools opened again for face-to-face teaching on 12th April, 2021 (Farrugia & Borg, 2021). This time round, schools and educators were more prepared to teach online and transition was smoother than in previous lockdown as the majority of children and parents were knowledgeable of the process (Napier, 2021, as cited in Berger, 2021). As a result, while in the first lockdown in 2020, schools had to provide constant technical support to teachers and parents to adapt new remote ways of teaching and learning, this was improved in the second lockdown as the majority of students and parents were confident in using online means of education. In fact, Napier (2021, as cited in Berger, 2021) claims that throughout the pandemic, schools shifted from “emergency education” as experienced in March-April, 2020 to “education in times of an emergency” in March-April 2021. This implies that by 2021, educators not only changed their pedagogy but had to plan and adjust accordingly. However, attendance was not regular during the academic year 2020-2021. In fact, the Ministry of Education (as cited in Berger, 2021) conducted a study about school attendance which showed that during the academic year 2020-2021, absenteeism was high for a considerable number of children.



2.2.2 Scholastic year 2021 – 2022: Regaining some form of normality

Taking into consideration the educational losses, the social disruption and distress children were exposed to in 2020-2021, in October, 2021, it was a priority for the Maltese government to have all schools open and all classes resuming to maintain some form of normality as well as routine in the children’s lives (Farrugia, 2021; Ministry of Health, 2021). As a result, on the 28th of September, 2021, schools opened their doors for academic year 2021-2022. In fact, in the third scholastic year that was being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, attendance became compulsory again, while the necessary protocols remained in place (Calleja, 2021b). Some 36,000 students across all levels of the education system, were expected to be back to school, following the necessary protocols such as the use of masks, social distance and bubble concept. In a set of guidelines published by the Ministry of Health, (2021), for the scholastic year 2021-22, which were drafted for childcare centres, kindergarten, primary and secondary educational settings, the aim was to, “enable the physical presence of children in school whilst protecting the health of children and the school community”, (Ministry of Health, 2021, p.6). In January 2022, schools were meant to open on the 7th of January face-to-face teaching, however, this was delayed as the country experienced another wave of positive COVID-19 cases (over 1,000 daily). Childcare centres and schools physically reopened their doors on the 10th of January, 2022, however, “several classrooms had to resort to online schooling because many students and teachers are stuck in quarantine” (Calleja, 2022). After a few weeks, the majority of children and teachers returned to school, and since then, the scholastic/academic year followed normally without any closure up till June 2022.

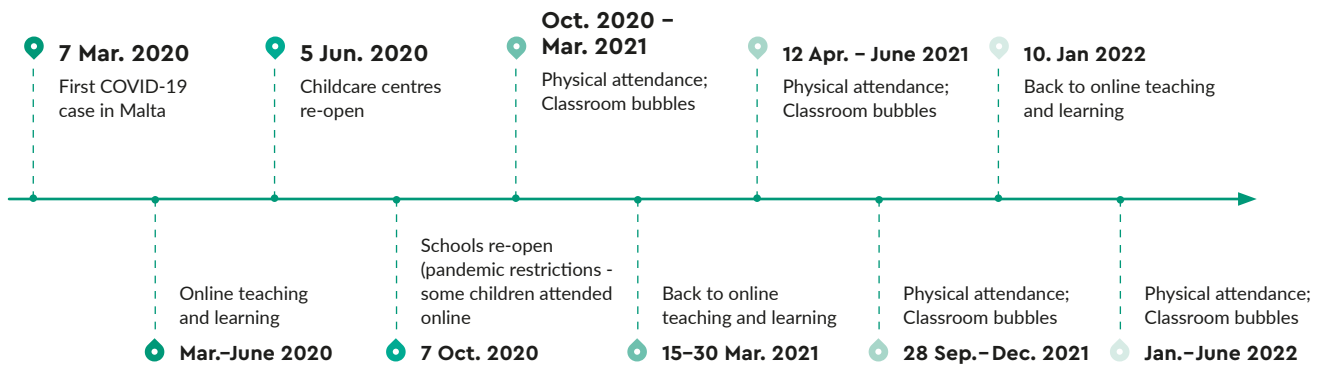


Figure 2.1: Timeline indicating physical attendance and online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Early and Primary Education Malta (2020–2022).





CHAPTER 3

Review of the Literature

3.1 Crises Management in Schools during COVID-19 Pandemic

In an attempt to contain the spread of COVID-19, in most countries around the world, educational institutions have decided to temporarily suspend in-person instruction and move to a remote learning model of delivery (Di Pietro et al., 2020). Likewise, in Malta, on March 13th, 2020, the educational institutions were ordered to temporarily close their doors to face-to-face teaching and learning and switch to online education as part of COVID-19 pandemic mitigation measures (Pace, 2021). In Malta, childcare centres reopened in June 2020, and Primary Schools reopened in September 2020 with specific guidelines and measures which were meant to mitigate the transmission of the COVID-19. The measures involved smaller cohort size for in-person learning, health and safety regulations for all staff members and students, and special teaching/learning arrangements for teachers and students who are susceptible to severe illness or who are infected by COVID-19 (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister Ministry for Health, Malta, 2020).

The sudden and disruptive events pertaining to the education sector due to the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the complexity of school leaders' work. The pandemic caused an instant disruption of routines involving the entire operations, and it generated organisational, logistical, educational, managerial, and emotional challenges (Husbands, 2020). School leaders were caught in an unfavourable position where they relied on guidance about COVID-19 responses and protocols from above, which could change almost overnight. Simultaneously they dealt with changing staffing situations and teaching/learning arrangements (Harris & Jones, 2020; Longmuir, 2021). During this time, leaders were being asked to intervene on many fronts, such as planning, security, privacy, relations with local authorities, trade unions, associations, and families (Dello Preite, 2021).

It is essential to underline that the school leaders' work has always been multidimensional. It involves complex decision-making, conveying strategy, culture, operations, and relationships with multiple dynamic parts and often conflicting stakeholder views (Viennet & Pont, 2017). School leaders are accustomed to handling crises in their organisations involving students, parents, staff members, infrastructure, and emergency responses to the force-major conditions (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). However, most leaders have never dealt with a crisis at the scale and duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. Contemporary research on leadership in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic is starting to emerge with an attempt to understand the early phases of the crisis. Some of these works state that, like no other crisis before, the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated various deficiencies of our educational systems and the lack of administrator preparation regarding the effective management of complex situations and change (Dello Preite, 2021; Harris, 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021).

3.2 Teaching and Learning

Leithwood et al. (2020) argue that school leadership improves teaching and learning, indirectly and most powerfully, by improving the status of significant key classroom and school conditions and by encouraging parent/child interactions at home that further enhance student success at school. Further literature suggests that school leaders are most effective when they have sufficient autonomy and support in decision-making, dedicate time to instructional leadership, and create a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility. Effective strategies can include transforming schools into sites of professional development through mentoring and coaching, facilitating peer learning, ensuring teachers work collaboratively to facilitate improvement in instructional practices, and encouraging a focus on shared goals (Pont et al., 2008; The Education Commission, 2021).

Harris (2020) argues that the current pandemic has shifted school leadership dramatically towards distributed and collaborative practices. Facing and addressing the challenges of a complex crisis like the current pandemic requires more than leaders acting alone Dirani et al., (2020). The disruption of the regular teaching processes by COVID-19 requires schools' collective efforts and enabling teachers' autonomy and expertise to deal with the methodical and organisational challenges of distance education (Kaminskienė & Chu Ling, 2021).

3.2.1 Managing Online Learning Environments during COVID-19 Pandemic

Pollock (2020) argues that since the pandemic outbreak, school leaders are engaging in a *two-pronged approach* to lead their teams. Leaders' responsibilities have been extended around providing safe schooling including implementing changes for the reopening of schools while concurrently, enhancing their role from an instructional leader to a digital instructional leader. According to the findings of a survey conducted between primary state-school leaders in Malta, before the COVID-19 pandemic (Scicluna, 2020), some characteristics of digital leadership, such as usage of social media for communication and public relations, were being manifested in schools. However, the findings also indicate that few school leaders had a clear, long-term vision for technology integration. Also, continuous professional development initiatives for teachers on using digital technologies were not being promoted enough. Lewis (2010), claims that school leaders who are effective technology leaders should have a clear vision and be comfortable enough with technology to decide what and how they plan to integrate technology into their schools. However, leaders shall balance leading with efficiency, learning, and adaptability in times of crisis. During the pandemic, effective leaders have worked as "technology enablers" (Dirani et al., 2020) by ensuring teachers' and learners' access to technology and promoting distributed leadership (Harris, 2020). Trikoilis (2021) also argues that promoting teacher collaboration and fostering teachers' online professional development is the key to effectively transitioning to distance learning during the pandemic. Trikoilis (2021) also suggests that another role of school leaders during the pandemic is to monitor whether parents are available and able to facilitate effective home-based distance learning.

Contemporary research on the challenges of teaching and learning during COVID-19 school closures supports the scholars' arguments given above. According to the OECD survey (2020) conducted between school teachers and leaders in 98 countries; the most important educational priorities in response to the pandemic were ensuring the continuity of academic learning for students, providing professional support/advice to teachers, and supporting students who lack skills for independent/online study (Ramiers & Schleicher, 2020). School leaders' survey conducted in Lithuania also indicates that the main challenges in the implementation of distance education during the pandemic were communication with students' parents or caregivers and; the provision of professional support to teachers (Kaminskienė & Chu Ling, 2021).

A recent international educational response survey shows that school leaders autonomously took decisions concerning pedagogical resources and teaching practices during the pandemic in more than half of the participating countries (OECD, 2021a). These decisions included the choice of distance learning tools, the adaptation of learning content, or the communication channels to maintain contact with students and parents. School closures and social distancing requirements reduced available instruction time and thus forced the schools to make difficult choices regarding the curriculum and the school calendar (OECD, 2021a). The duration of the distance learning units based on students' self-regulation and cognitive abilities, especially for screen-based learning, was also a factor in the curriculum and calendar arrangements (UNESCO, 2020). Most schools had to make decisions such as keeping the existing curriculum at more shallow depth or to teach fewer things at greater depth; or whether to use limited on-site learning opportunities to teach new content or to prepare and review material learned at distance. In the majority of countries participating in the survey, primary schools re-arranged their curriculum for the year 2020 and 2021 (OECD, 2021a).

3.3 Learning Spaces

When operations of the schools move outside of its usual physical location and space, the new situation requires rethinking of the conceptions on how teaching, learning, and space work together and how the relationship between teaching and learning, between teachers and learners, are formed and maintained (Husbands, 2020). Netolicky (2020) argues that moving away from the locus of measured performance, surveillance, and compliance has increased teacher autonomy. In the new learning settings, learners also gain more autonomy, and teachers lose some direct control and supervision opportunities. It is possible to say that remote learning settings made school leaders walk on a tight rope while trying to balance between their accountability and teachers'/learners' autonomy (Netolicky, 2020).

Although a significant portion of surveys related to the impact of COVID-19 indicates unexpected positive changes caused by the introduction of educational technologies and an increase in the autonomy of students to manage their learning process (Ramiers & Schleicher, 2020); there is also evidence that the sense of distance and disengagement can lead to learning loss for some students (UNESCO, 2020). Children in the first years of primary education are reported not to be autonomous enough in accessing and using digital technologies; therefore, parental support became crucial for them (Carretero et al., 2021). During the pandemic, to set the standards needed for home-based learning, school leaders were advised to foster parents' involvement and supervision on their children's learning activities and collaborate with parents and students on developing rules together

to manage daily home-based learning practices (UNESCO, 2020). On the other side, global surveys indicate a lack of adequate equipment and/or study space at home or a lack of parents' support, particularly for students from difficult or disadvantaged backgrounds (Carretero et al., 2021). According to the surveys conducted in Malta, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, teachers expect school leaders to defend every learner's right to accessible education and prevent the learning and achievement gap from widening (Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020; Huber & Helm, 2020).

During the pandemic, the availability of adequate ICT tools and access to an effective online learning environment became one of the main concerns for school leaders in many countries. According to the country surveys in Europe, in the majority of countries, private schools are more likely to have an effective Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) than public schools; however, this is not the case in countries such as Slovenia, Austria, Italy, Czechia, Poland, Romania, Estonia, Malta and Croatia (Di Pietro et al., 2020). Maltese pupils attending schools are among the most digitally equipped in the EU, particularly at the primary level (82% v 35% at the EU level). However, according to an OECD survey (2020), school leaders in Malta think that there is a socio-economic gap in access to ICT. According to the survey, a smaller proportion of students in disadvantaged schools have digital devices connected to the internet (46% v 82% in advantaged schools) and have poorer computing capacity (European Commission, 2020; Ramiers & Schleicher, 2020).

3.4 Relationships and Well-being

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of maintaining and strengthening relationships and connectivity between students, teachers, administrators, and families, became a clear priority for many educational institutions (McLeod & Dulskey, 2021). The school community relied on its leadership to provide certainty and redirect focus, nurturing hope, building resilience, and ensuring flexible communication. It is possible to say that the attitude of school leaders assimilates to how members of the school community react to crises in disruptive times (Kaminskienė & Chu Ling, 2021). In a recent primary school teachers' survey in Malta, teachers reported a sense of belonging, collegiality, and effectiveness in turning the difficulties into opportunities for the benefit of learners, families, themselves, and their colleagues; in the case of schools that were managed by supportive and inspirational leaders who provided training, communicated constantly, and encouraged teachers' collaboration (Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020).

In addition to organisational and pedagogical challenges inflicted upon the educational institutions due to the pandemic, school leaders face colossal challenges, including loss of life in the school community, concerns about mental and physical health, prolonged school closures, and its impact on students (Global School Leaders, 2021). Contemporary research indicates a shift in the priorities and concerns of school leaders after the reopening of schools compared with their responses collected during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Global School Leaders survey (2021) conducted in 24 countries, school leaders in different contexts unanimously declared similar major concerns for 2021. The great majority (80%) worry the most about students' and teachers' health and safety, followed by 55 percent about students being left behind in curriculum, and 39 percent about schools closing again due to the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, Maltese educational leaders collaborated with the two main unions for teachers (Malta Union of Teachers – MUT, and Union of Professional Educators – UPE), intending to strike a balance between non-discriminatory provision for every child and adolescent attending Maltese schools and a commitment to safeguarding teachers' well-being and working conditions (Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020).

In the case of early childhood education institutions, which has been insufficiently supported in policy responses and measures, especially when compared to other levels of teaching/learning segments (Nugroho et al., 2020; OECD, 2020; 2021b), there is evidence that some ECEC teachers experienced a moral injury in relation to needing to compromise on professional standards arising from their desire to safeguard their own health or due to the policy responses in place (Logan et al., 2021; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020). As moral injury has the potential to invoke long-term negative impacts on one's mental and emotional health and loosens organisational integrity, school leaders' acknowledgment of such impacts is important for the betterment of systems in place.

Because school leaders are managing the emotional responses of others to this crisis, including anxiety, frustration, loss, and anger, consequently, self-care must be a priority for those leading schools at all levels (Harris & Jones, 2020). Nevertheless, compared to the number and extent of studies conducted to investigate the well-being of teachers and students, there is far less academic research on the dynamics influencing school leaders' well-being. While the system puts school leaders at the forefront of a chain of responses and reforms (OECD, 2021a), there is little or no evidence that the same system equips school leaders constitutionally, but most importantly, morally, psychologically, and emotionally (Cutajar, 2020).



CHAPTER 4

Research Design and Methodology

Maltese children and young adults, like their counterparts all over the world, have had their education severely disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on this pressing need to respond to this crisis, the ECPE Research Group set out to undertake a quantitative study to gather data that captures the views and perspectives of various stakeholders in education. This reported study (Technical Report 5) explored the impact of COVID-19 on the professional and personal lives of educational leaders using an online survey. Given the restrictions imposed to control the spread of the coronavirus, the online survey allowed the researchers to collect extensive data with greater ease and speed than traditional methods. In adopting a positivist stance, the researchers concentrated on evidence-based facts and knowledge, rendering their approach a deductive one. Initially, this quantitative study was to be carried out once in September 2020 (Run 1). However, given that the pandemic was still with us a year later, the ECPE Research Group decided to launch a second run of the study (Run 2) in September 2021 using a modified version of the questionnaire with the aim of gathering further insights from educational leaders about the experiences, challenges and opportunities brought about by the pandemic on their professional and personal livelihoods, between September 2020 to June 2021.

4.1 The participants

The participants of the study were educational leaders working with children aged 0-11 in the primary state, church, and independent schools and kindergartens, as well as in childcare centres. The questionnaire was anonymous and recruitment of participants took place through the dissemination of the online survey via social media platforms.

Table 4.1 presents the participants according to their leadership role in education: whether they were head of primary school, assistant head of primary school, childcare centre manager or held other leadership roles in early childhood care or primary schools.

Role of Educators	Academic Year 2019/2020 1st Run		Academic Year 2020/2021 2nd Run	
	N	%	N	%
Head of Primary School	22	17.5	7	52.5
Assistant Head of Primary School	21	16.7	21	30
Childcare Centre Manager	15	11.9	12	17.5
Other Leadership Role/s	15	11.9	0	0
<i>Missing system</i>	53	42	0	0
Total	126	100	40	100

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

During the first run of the survey in September 2020, a total of 126 leaders completed the online questionnaire. The sample was composed of 94.1% (n=114) females, 26.5% (n=11) males and 2.9% (n=1) others. The participants ages ranged from 25 to 64 years, with the average age being 43.4 years old.

For the second survey run in September 2021, 40 leaders completed the online questionnaire. The sample was composed of 90% (n=36) females, 10% (n=4) males. The participants ranged from 25 to 64 years, with the average age being 43.8 years old.

The participants of the first and second surveys were similar in the distribution of gender, nationality, and average age group. The majority of participants were female Maltese nationals (as per Figure 4.1)

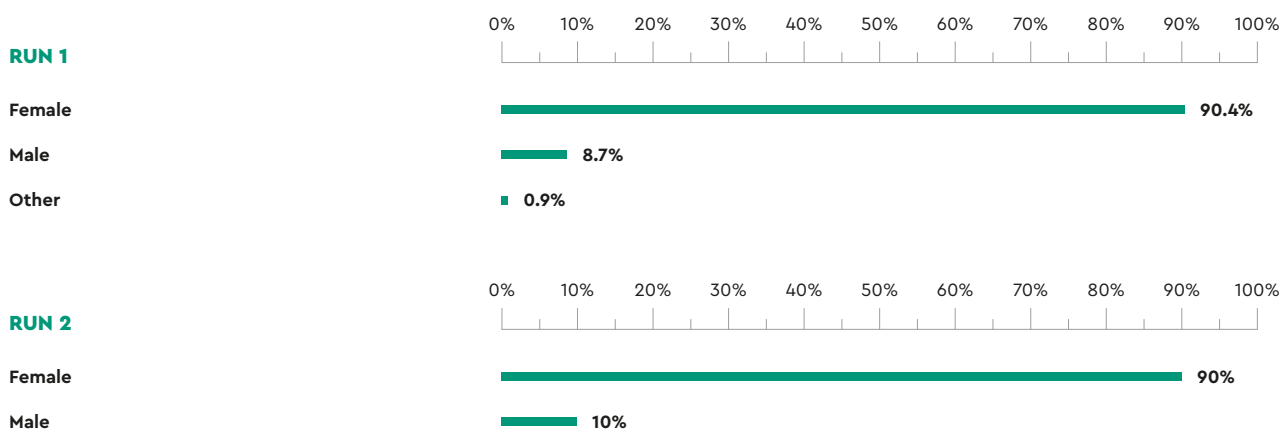


Figure 4.1: Gender of participants in both Surveys

In both phases of the survey, most of the respondents who replied to the questionnaire were females. Whilst this can be considered as a limitation because the perspectives of the male leaders are significantly under-represented in this study, these data imply that a greater proportion of female members become educational leaders/heads of schools because in the local teaching profession there are far more women than men working in the profession. Indeed, the teaching profession continues to draw female prospective student-teachers as corroborated in the demographic data presented in Research Report 1: Perspectives of University Students in Initial Teacher Education (Milton et al., 2022).

The first survey yielded a higher response rate, which can be seen as a result of higher social media usage rates when the pandemic was declared for the first time. Teachers and school leaders used social media channels frequently during the school closures to share and collect information and reach out to students, parents, and their communities in general (Pace, 2021; Rehm et al., 2021).

4.2 The Survey

4.2.1 Online Survey

Using an online survey was particularly advantageous due to limitations imposed by COVID-19 pandemics such as lockdowns and personal distancing rules. With online surveys, the data are readily available, allowing us to carry out this quantitative research effectively and efficiently (Sumi, 2019). The online nature of the survey allowed the facility to work remotely and collect data alone or remotely. Despite the benefits of online surveys, according to Wright (2005), one main disadvantage may be encountered in relation to sampling issues due to the respondents being those who regularly use the internet and social media. In this case, the targeted participants were school leaders. As a standard practice, school leaders often use social media channels to sustain communication to participate in research as part of their continuing professional development. Emails were also sent to state and church schools via the Ministry of Education and Secretariat for Catholic Education. Since the ECPE Research Group members conduct teaching practices visits in schools as part of initial teacher training, emails were also sent to colleagues in the sector via personal communication.

4.2.2 The Questionnaires

The questionnaires focused on the participants' views about their experiences of leadership during an unprecedented time in education brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both questionnaires were designed by the research team and were available in English. The first questionnaire consisted of 34 closed-ended and two open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions were mainly multiple-choice questions and 5-point Likert scales. The ECPE research group rose to the occasion and worked under pressure as the pandemic situation evolved rapidly. In a concerted effort, they prepared and designed a questionnaire with sets of questions to find out how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the personal and professional life of stakeholders in education. At the time, little did we know that the pandemic was going to take long and that it would be possible to conduct a second run of the questionnaire. Had the ECPE Research Group known this from the outset, the first questionnaire would have been designed with this in mind. In large quantitative studies, when data has been quantified, it can be used to compare and contrast findings and/or measure change. Since in this case, the design of the first survey allowed respondents to ignore or skip through questions this led to missing data for a number of question items. Aware of this limitation, in the second questionnaire, this was countered by the design. For this reason, the respondents were only allowed to move on to the next question (excluding the open-ended questions) once they have completed the previous one.

A number of multiple choice closed-ended questions included the 'other' option. This helped the respondents to express their opinion if they did not like the answer options given by the survey setters. The need was felt for data that delves deeper into the opinions, experiences, thoughts and feelings of leaders. For this reason, each survey contained a few open-ended questions to allow the respondents to give more information and contextual feedback. Additionally, the information provided by the open-ended questions allowed the researchers to conduct word cloud analysis. This visual representation helped bring forth important words or phrases from the survey responses. By studying the word clouds, the researchers could derive deep insights and quickly convey the gist of the answers to the readers.

The second questionnaire consisted of 32 items, of which 28 were close-ended, and 4 were open-ended questions that sought to draw on experiences, perceptions, and practices of leaders between September 2020 and June 2021. Several items were retained from the first questionnaire, some were adapted to reflect the changes in the situation since the previous year, and others were new. Some items pertaining to the previous version were reduced to encourage more participants to complete the questionnaire and reduce the incidence of missing data.

The questionnaires were designed in sections as indicated in Table 4.2 below:

Questionnaire Sections	Q1	Brief description	Q2	Brief description
1 Demographics & Background	8	age, gender, nationality, region, type of residence, role in education	6	Similar items were used except for the role in education were also categorized according to the type of school they work (government or church schools). Also, the questions related to the type of residence were excluded.
2 Pedagogy & Curriculum	13	The pedagogy, curriculum and schedules during and after school closures, the type and usage frequency of online teaching tools, level of satisfaction on the performance of their educators, school and children's overall education experience.	12	In addition to the questions related to pedagogy, curriculum, and schedules; leaders were also asked to compare their level of satisfaction and skills on the online/offline mode of teaching & tools when compared to last year.
3 Learning Spaces	5	Leaders' Physical Working Environments during school closures, virtual learning spaces and leaders' overall experiences and perceptions on the online and physical teaching spaces during and after school closures.	5	Similar items were used within a broader time interval (2020-2021).
4 Well-being & Relationships	10	Leaders' well-being, adaptation strategies, and resilience during COVID-19 pandemic; advantages and disadvantages of working from home; the level of support received from internal and external school networks.	7	Similar items were used within a broader time interval (2020-2021).
Number of items	36		30	

Table 4.2: Sections and items used for the first and second questionnaires.

Both versions of the questionnaire were field-tested with several volunteers before being disseminated amongst a small pool of educators. The feedback was valuable in ensuring the questions were clear, and answerable and that potential technical difficulties with the online format were resolved.

4.3 Data Collection and analysis

The surveys were launched online using SurveyMonkey and were disseminated on social media through various Facebook groups and pages as well as via Email, between August and September 2020 and then again in September 2021. The data were later extracted and imported into SPSS for analysis.

4.4 Ethical Procedures

The study was approved by the research ethics committee at the Ministry of Education and the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee. The online questionnaires included an introductory page detailing the purpose of the study and a data protection statement to explain the procedures set up to ensure data would be collected, stored, and used in an ethical manner. Participants were assured responses would remain anonymous, IP addresses would not be collected and the data would be used solely for the purposes of the research study. They were also informed that participation was voluntary and that submitting the questionnaire would be considered as granting informed consent (Allen & Roberts, 2015). No gifts or other incentives were offered to prospective participants. Contact details of the research group were available should additional information be requested.

4.5 Strengths and challenges

As with most research projects involving working in a team and collecting data, several challenges had to be overcome along the way. As a point of the departure, the ECPE Research Group embarked on the Cov-EM study within an individualistic culture in academia wherein tasks were, and to a certain extent still are, attributed to individuals and not to teams. Regardless of the setbacks encountered during the different phases of the study because scientific research is a process of exploring the unknown, the ECPE Research Group benefitted greatly from this learning opportunity. This said, some aspects of the collection of data could have served as a limitation to the present study and need to be acknowledged.

A possible limitation of this study is the sample selection. This study utilised leaders-respondents who were willing to participate by completing the questionnaires through self-reporting. The online questionnaires may have not attracted school leaders and childcare centres managers because at the time they were disseminated, leaders were reliant yet overwhelmed by regular updates regarding COVID-19 protocols and directives received via personal email messages and/or circulating on social media platforms. Every expectation from above or below, including filling up an online questionnaire like the one used in this study, may have been perceived as extra work and extra pressure, and therefore discarded. By conducting research using online questionnaires, the researchers learnt that although it is a convenient, low cost and efficient mode of data collection, this is not without its drawbacks (Jones, Baxter and Khanduja, 2013).

Although the respondents provided valuable data, some of them were limited in their use of digital media in management and/or personal life. The researchers were also aware of respondents' bias. The main limitation of self-reporting, as highlighted by Ferrando, Lorenz-Seva and Chico (2009) and Demetriou et al. (2019), is that at times, participants may unwittingly provide inaccurate information, invalid answers and/or may opt not to answer truthfully. The fact that the data collection was being carried out by a group of researchers who are members of the University of Malta might have motivated the respondents to give responses which the researchers wanted to hear or which allowed them to present themselves in a good light. Though no self-reporting endeavour can eliminate such limitations, the fact that the questionnaires were filled electronically and anonymity was reassured, one hopes that it encouraged the respondents to offer responses that align with a more truthful interpretation of reality.

The researchers also acknowledge that the female participants by far outweighed the males and constituted 94.1% and 90.0% in both surveys respectively. They are aware that this disparity in early childhood settings (Besnard & Letarte, 2017) and primary schools (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013) reflects the wider scenario (NSO, 2021b). Another limitation pertaining to the sample of this study is that the findings cannot be generalized. This is because in online survey sampling can be limited to or excluding of certain populations, and hence can affect respondents' availability. Considering that the aim of this study was to investigate a particular educational context hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, one can conservatively presume here that a comparison with other similar studies can contribute to a more universal theoretical understanding of school leadership in a time of crisis.

CHAPTER 5

Findings

This chapter presents the results from the two questionnaire runs. The data collected from the leaders of primary schools, kindergartens and childcare centre managers is presented in a sequential manner, starting with the data collected in September 2020, and followed by that collected in September 2021. Frequency and percentages figures of responses obtained are organized in a way to provide insights and answers to the research questions set in the Cov-EM study. The analysis is intended to explore the leaders' experiences across 3 educational elements – teaching and learning, learning spaces and well-being. The conclusions drawn from the findings help the reader gain insight into the trends obtained to a more general and theoretical perspective.

5.1 Respondent demographics

In total, there were 126 education leaders, working with children aged 0-11 years (childcare, kindergarten, or primary schools) who took part in the first run of the survey (after data cleaning). Data from the introductory Demographics and Background section reveals that the majority of respondents in this run were Maltese Nationals (96.8%, n=122) and female (94.1%, n=114). The largest group of participants (35.7%, n=45) were between 35-44 years of age. As indicated in Table 4.1 in Chapter 4, the distribution of the respondents' educational roles was quite balanced with around a third being heads of primary schools (30.1%, n=22), a little more than a quarter assistant heads of primary school (28.8%, n=21), and another fifth childcare centre managers (20.5%, n=15). The remaining leadership role/s (20.5%, n=15) included directors/owners, heads of department, program coordinators, administrators and quality managers.

A total of 40 leaders completed the second questionnaire in the second run of the survey in September 2021. The great majority of respondents were Maltese Nationals (97.5%, n=39) and female (90%, n=36). Participants were mainly over 30 years old with slightly less than half the respondents (42.5%, n=17) between 45-54 years of age, followed by a third of leaders at 35-44 years of age (35% n=14). In the second run, the majority of the respondents were assistant heads of primary schools (52.5%, n=21); followed by childcare centre managers (30%, n=12) and heads of primary schools (17.5%, n=7).

5.2 The Results of the First Survey

This section presents the results of the first survey held in September 2020, after the first scholastic year with school closure. Responses are mainly presented through figures that capture trends in the frequencies of responses to each questionnaire item. These are clustered into the three sections and are presented in the following order: teaching and learning, learning spaces, and well-being and relationships.

5.2.1 Teaching and Learning

Teaching and learning are a core activity of any educational organization. When COVID-19 struck Malta in early 2020 and schools had to close the doors, leaders had to find ways to enable educational staff (teachers, Learning Support Assistants etc.) to keep educating students. This was a major challenge as the pandemic was not foreseen and schools were caught unprepared. In trying to find out how leaders faced this challenge, the first item on the questionnaire in Survey 1 asked the educational leaders to indicate what they encouraged their educators to do as schools had to shut down due to COVID-19 in March 2020. The respondents were presented with a number of potential options to provide an answer to the question "Which of the following did you encourage your educators to use to teach when education institutions closed?" The leaders were free to select as many as the options provided in order how to highlight how they reacted at the beginning of the pandemic.

The leaders' responses show how they tried to use existing available technology to find ways to enable teaching and learning to take place despite the school was physically closed. The most common actions taken by a little less than half of the leaders included using emails to send content material and homework (44.3%), encouraging their educators to work within a school-wide policy to prepare audio-video lessons (42.6%) recommending using closed social media pages (42.6%) and using the schools' Virtual Learning Environment (41%). About a third of the leaders also tried to follow a timetable of live online lessons (32.8%) as part of a school-wide policy. There were fewer leaders who recommended: sending to parents links to websites and tasks to do with their children (16.4%); encouraging their educators to read stories to children online; singing songs live online with children (16.4%), and communicating with parents to give them advice about their children (14.8%).

It is to be highlighted that there was over one third (37.7%) of the leaders who did not take a school approach and recommended that their educators choose whichever approach they preferred. This can either reflect the leaders' trust in the professional capabilities of their educational staff, or else they may have also expected the pandemic to have a short rather than a long-term impact on schooling and thus did not need a whole school approach. On the other hand, only about a fifth (21.3%) recommended waiting and following the Education Directorate's instructions. This may reflect the number of respondents from other sectors than the State education sector who responded to the questionnaire and who do not receive the centralised directions given to State schools.

Figure 5.1 describes the approaches recommended by the school leaders at the beginning of the third term, which was after Easter 2020 of the 2019-2020 scholastic year. It was noted that recommendations made changed in priority. The majority of the leaders (80%) encouraged their educators to hold more live online lessons, whereas 50% encouraged more recorded lessons. A better schedule of regularly planned online lessons (60%) was the second most frequent recommendation by the leaders. They also encouraged the implementation of a school-wide policy for live online lessons (18%) and the implementation of a school-wide policy for recorded lessons (12%). This reflects a more organised approach to how the schools were to provide online teaching and learning.

What did you and your Management Team encourage at the beginning of the third term?

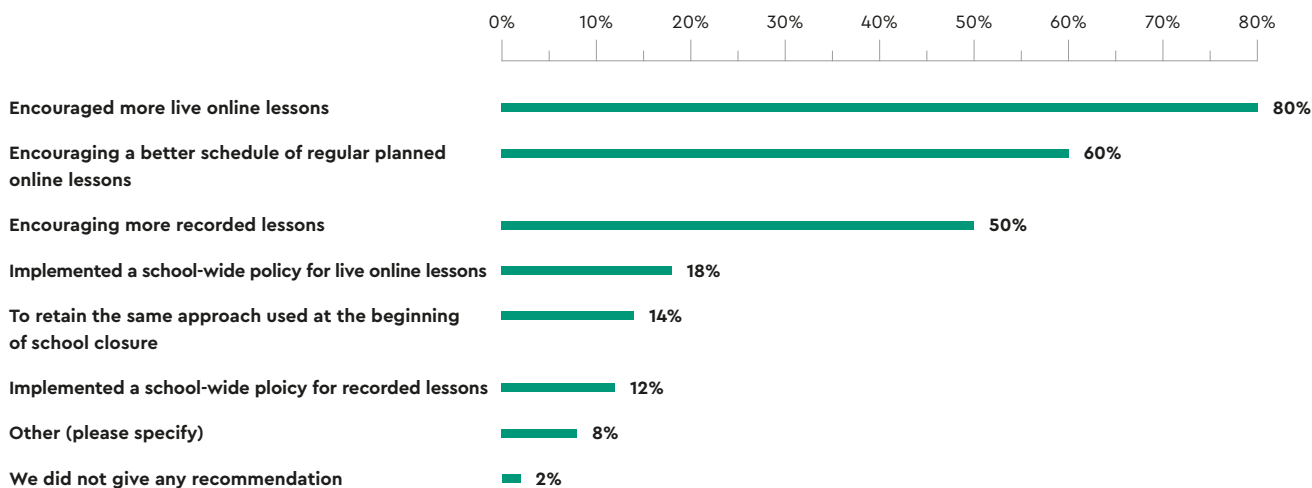


Figure 5.1: Approaches recommended by the school leaders at the beginning of the third term

When the school leaders were asked to indicate “which of the following approaches did you want your educators to use to teach during COVID-19 lockdown?”; the majority of the leaders recommended live online teaching (86%), posting recorded lessons (74%), and sending daily work to students (52%). The other approaches (14%) which were mentioned to a lesser extent in the survey were: “providing regular feedback on pupils’ work,” “supporting parents by sending them age-appropriate activities and keeping regular contact,” “teaching via Messenger, Teams, and Facebook,” “one-to-one revision and support sessions,” and “use of MS Teams and other digital resources e.g. SWAY”. This shows how the emphasis now turned to ensuring that the children were getting learning time while staying in touch with their teachers.

The leaders were also asked to indicate how frequently their educators use various online teaching approaches during the third term. As shown in Figure 5.2; the school's Virtual Learning Environment was the most frequently used online teaching approach, with nearly one third (31.3%) using it every day. However, there was also over another third (37.5%) who never used it. This probably reflects whether educators decided to use the VLE or not. Another approach used frequently involved sending emails to learners via the parents with homework list, where around one quarter (26.2%) did this every day, and another quarter (26.2%) who 3-4 times a week sent video recorded lessons. Live online teaching was also used to a good degree, with around one third (33.5%) using live video conference sessions with the whole class mainly 3-4 times a week and a little more than a quarter twice a week. Real-time live online small group sessions were also held every day by a quarter of the educators and 3-4 times a week by another quarter. These responses show how there were more efforts to ensure regular online learning and homework given after the third term. It demonstrates how the educational leaders took more action as they realised that schools would probably remain closed till end of the scholastic year.

How much did your educators use the following online teaching approaches?

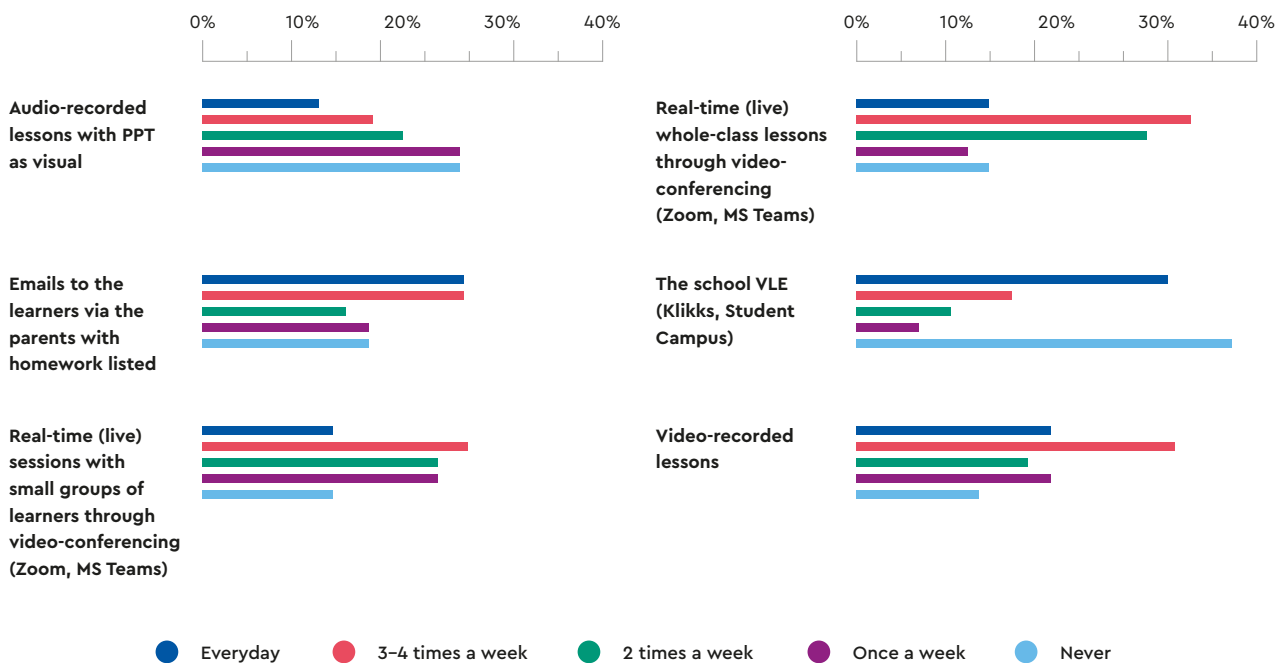


Figure 5.2: How often online/digital teaching approaches were used during school closures

Figure 5.3 represents how education leaders spent their time at work during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the previous years. The majority of the respondents stated that they spent more time in online meetings with colleagues (81.3%), finding solutions to problems that arise (80%), supporting teachers with online resources (80%), attending webinars to improve digital literacy skills (79.6%), trying to reach parents who lost contact with the schools (78%), supporting teachers for their well-being (74%) and with their lesson plans (70.2%); online meetings with education officers/directors (63.8%) and communicating with the parents about learning (63.8%). It is evident that they spent much more time trying to reach parents of children who lost contact with the school. This demonstrates that there must have been a significant number of children in early years and primary who lost contact with their school during this period. The respondents also stated that they spent the same amount of time communicating with parents of learners with a statement of need (38.8%) and supporting LSEs of students with their “specific” teaching (37.5%). This may reflect either having few students with special needs compared to other students, or delegating that responsibility to LSE, or else that the leaders were so much take up by other responsibilities that they may not have given this group as much attention as they needed.

Compared to pre-closing of schools, how much time did you spend on the following during lockdown?

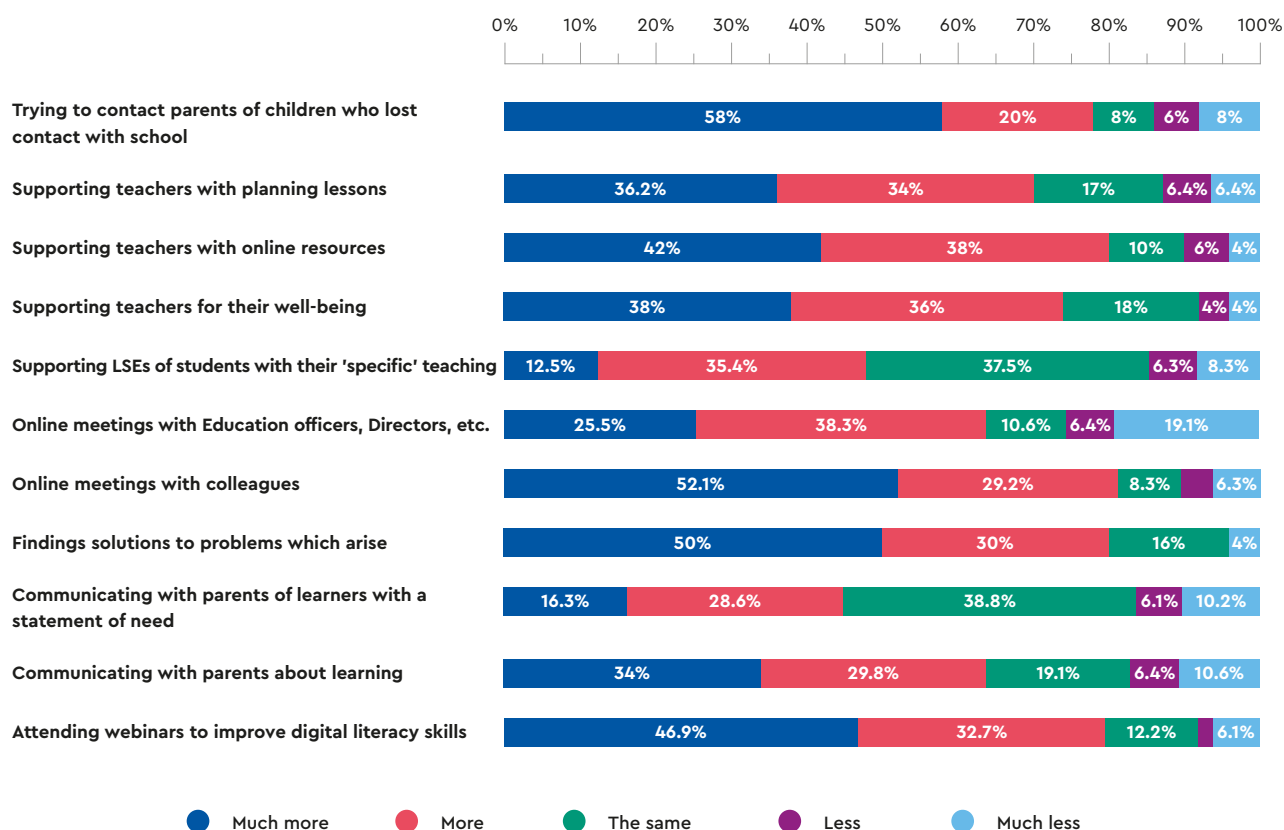


Figure 5.3: How leaders spent their time during lockdown compared to before school closures

An additional question was set specifically for leaders working in the ECE sector. This question asked the ECE leaders to indicate how they spent their time at work during COVID-19 compared to before-school-closure (Figure 5.4). Around two thirds of the respondents stated that they spent more time supporting KGEs/childcarers with online resources (70%), and in ensuring their well-being (63.6%). Half of the leaders (50%) also spent more time supporting KGEs/childcarers with the planning of online sessions. Leaders also stated that they spent ‘much more’ (18.2%) and ‘more’ (27.3%) time working to find solutions to problems which arose.

On the other hand, leaders tended to dedicate the same amount of time (57.1%) or less (28.6%) to supporting LSEs of students with “specific” learning needs. A similar pattern was obtained with respect to communicating with parents of learners with a statement of need (55.6%). This may be explained through leaders not needing to communicate with parents as they may have kept their children home during the period.

Compared to pre-closing of schools, how much time did you spend on the following during lockdown?

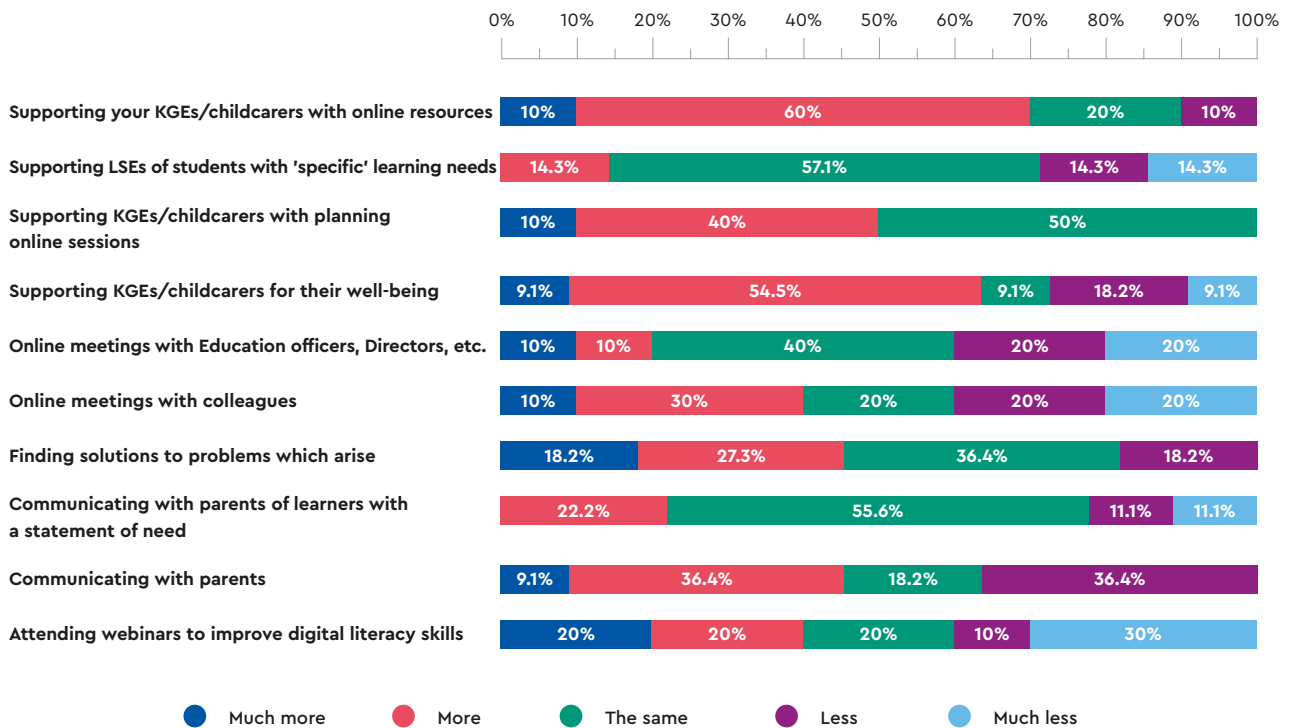


Figure 5.4: How ECE leaders spent their time at work during COVID-19 in comparison to pre-closing of schools

Figure 5.5 indicates how satisfied the leaders were with the online learning carried out by their teachers in the various primary curricular areas. The survey data shows that the satisfaction rates for Mathematics, English, and Maltese Language were significantly high. One finds that the majority of leaders were satisfied with Mathematics (85.4%), English (85.4%), and Maltese Language (78.3%) online lessons. Satisfaction rates were slightly less at around half of the leaders who were satisfied with online learning for Science (58.7%), other Subjects (57.1%), and Expressive Arts (56.5%). PSCD lessons were rated as satisfactory by 48.8% of the respondents. There were fewer leaders who expressed satisfaction with online learning taking place for Religion lessons (40%) and Social Studies (34.1%).

Indicate how satisfied you were with the online learning carried out by the teachers in the following areas:

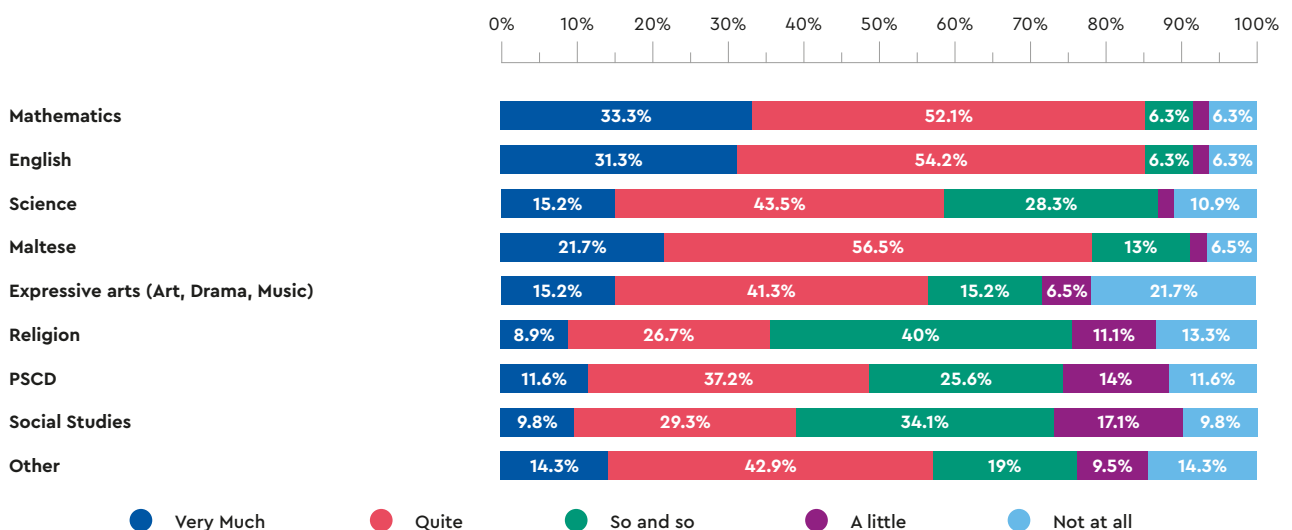


Figure 5.5: Leaders' satisfaction rates per subject in the online learning delivered by their teachers

Figure 5.6 provides further insights into school leaders' satisfaction with respect to the teaching/learning conducted in their schools. Most respondents were satisfied with the amount of online learning delivered (75%) and the syllabus covered online (67.4%) in their schools. Also, the majority (62.5%) were satisfied with the results obtained from chasing students who lost contact with the school.

Slightly less than half (46.7%) of the leaders were satisfied with the demands from Directorate/Head, while 35.6% remained neutral on this issue. Also, 50% of the leaders were satisfied with the demands from parents. On the other hand, the findings show that only around a third (31.8%) of the leaders were satisfied with student assessments for learning component. Slightly less than half of the leaders (40.9%) reported just a small difference.

How much did your educators use the following online teaching approaches?

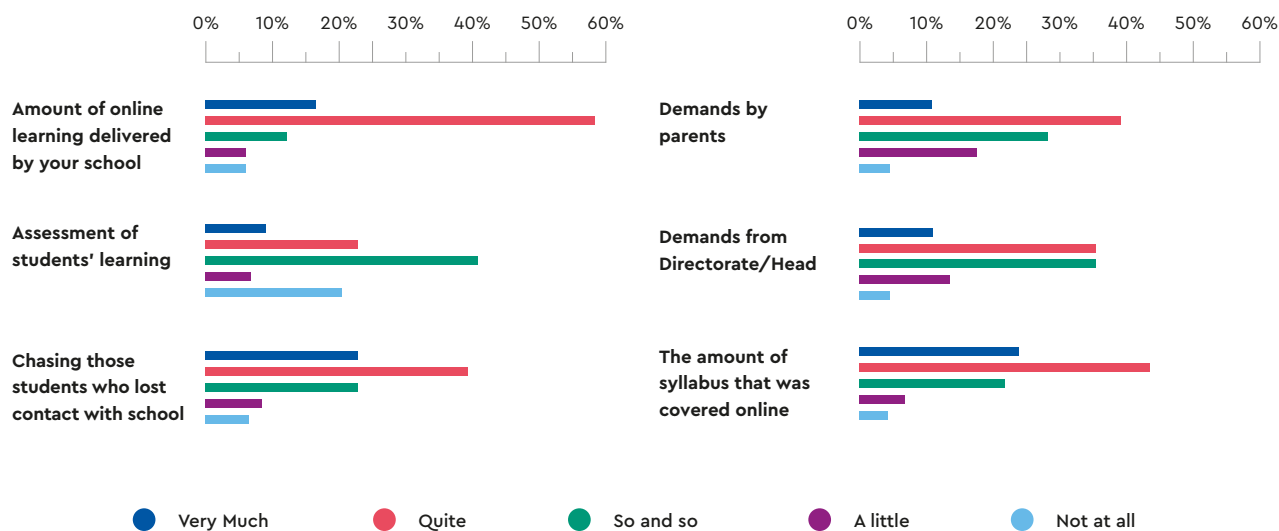


Figure 5.6: Leaders' satisfaction with teaching and learning in their school

When Leaders were asked “how they would rate the children’s overall educational experience during the lockdown,”; there were various responses, where a little more than one third (38.3%) of the respondents' perception was negative. Only a little less than one third (31.9%) of the leaders rated the children’s overall educational experience as 'positive'. Meanwhile, 29.8% of the respondents chose to remain neutral.

The leaders' response to the question, “which of the following did you encourage your educators to use to teach when education institutions closed?”; reflected the use of various approaches. These included: using emails to send content material and homework (44.3%), using closed social media pages to communicate with parents (42.6%), having a school-wide policy to prepare audio/video lesson materials (42.6%), and using school VLE to send homework and notes (41%). On the other hand, around a third (37.7%) of the participants encouraged their teachers to choose whichever approach they preferred or having a school-wide policy to follow a timetable of live online lessons (32.8%).

Only one fifth opted to wait and follow the Education Directorate’s instructions (21.3%); sending links to videos for children to watch (18%), singing songs live online with children (16.4%), sending parents links of websites and tasks to do with children (16.4%), reading stories to the children online (14.8%) and communicating with parents to give them advice about their children (14.8%) were amongst less common recommendations. The survey recorded that 16.4% of the participants also gave other recommendations such as; using MS Teams, Zoom, and tablets, telephone calls, one weekly online live revision session for kindergarten, using MS Teams as a common platform for live communications, voluntary online sessions.

The leaders of ECE were then asked to indicate the teaching approaches encouraged by the leaders at the beginning of the third term of the 2019-2020 scholastic year (when school premises were still closed). Figure 5.7 shows how most leaders reported retaining the same approach used at the beginning of closure (60%), whereas 50% of the respondents stated they encouraged their teachers to plan and deliver more regular planned online and more live online sessions. Very few ECE leaders opted for school-wide policies for recorded or live online sessions.

What did you and your Management Team encourage at the beginning of the third term?

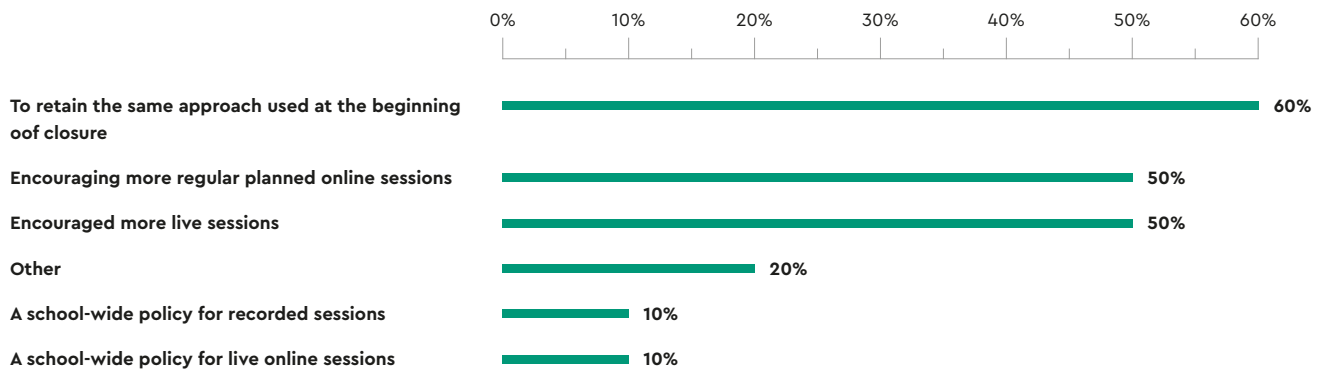


Figure 5.7: Teaching/learning methods were encouraged by the leaders at the beginning of the third term of the 2020 scholastic year

All the participants were invited to write any online experiences in which learners felt more motivated and engaged than usual. Forty-nine unique answers were recorded and presented below in a word cloud (Figure 5.8).



Figure 5.8: Word Cloud represents leaders' perception of the remote learning activities, which were more engaging and motivating than usual during the COVID-19 lockdown

“Interactivity” was the most common attribute amongst the individual responses. 40.8% (n=20) of the respondents mentioned positive experiences when pupils were given interactive tasks such as: games and science experiments or allowed to participate in live discussions, make presentations, and participate in online special events such as costume parties or mothers' day celebrations. A little less than one third 28.5% (n=14) of the leaders highlighted the importance of live online meetings between classmates and teachers. Using various digital platforms such as; Class DOJO, Nearpod, and MS Teams were also mentioned as more motivating and engaging than usual (10.2%, n=5). Some leaders mentioned the value of the involvement of parents (8.1% n=4), end of scholastic year virtual meetings (6.1%, n=3), and inviting guest speakers (2%, n=2). Two respondents on the other hand, stated that they never had any motivating or engaging online experience.

5.2.2 Learning Spaces

Learning spaces influence the learning experience. Effective learning requires to take place in spaces which are conducive to learning. For example, colour can serve to stimulate the senses if it is not overdone. On the other hand, too much clutter may affect learners' concentration. As learning moved from school to home, the learning environment for learners and teachers changed. People live in dwellings of different shapes and sizes. Some may have a noisy house with limited spaces due to larger families. Others may have ample space as they live in a large house. It is thus interesting to see how home spaces may have affected the provision of education and learning.

The education leaders were asked about their working environments when they had to work from home. As shown in Figure 5.9, during COVID-19 lockdown, the majority of respondents (86.5%) had access to necessary devices to work online in all rooms/spaces in their houses. Also, a significant portion of the respondents had an internet connection to work online in all the rooms/spaces in their houses (75%). They also had natural light where they worked online (73.1%). Moreover, 55.8% of the respondents stated that they had a quiet workspace in their study/bedroom/living room/kitchen. However, it was noted that 58% of the respondents rarely/never had access to work online outdoors during the COVID-19 lockdown, while 62.7% of the respondents stated that they also 'rarely' or 'never' worked online at another residence than home.

Indicate the degree to which you had access to the following during COVID-19 lockdown

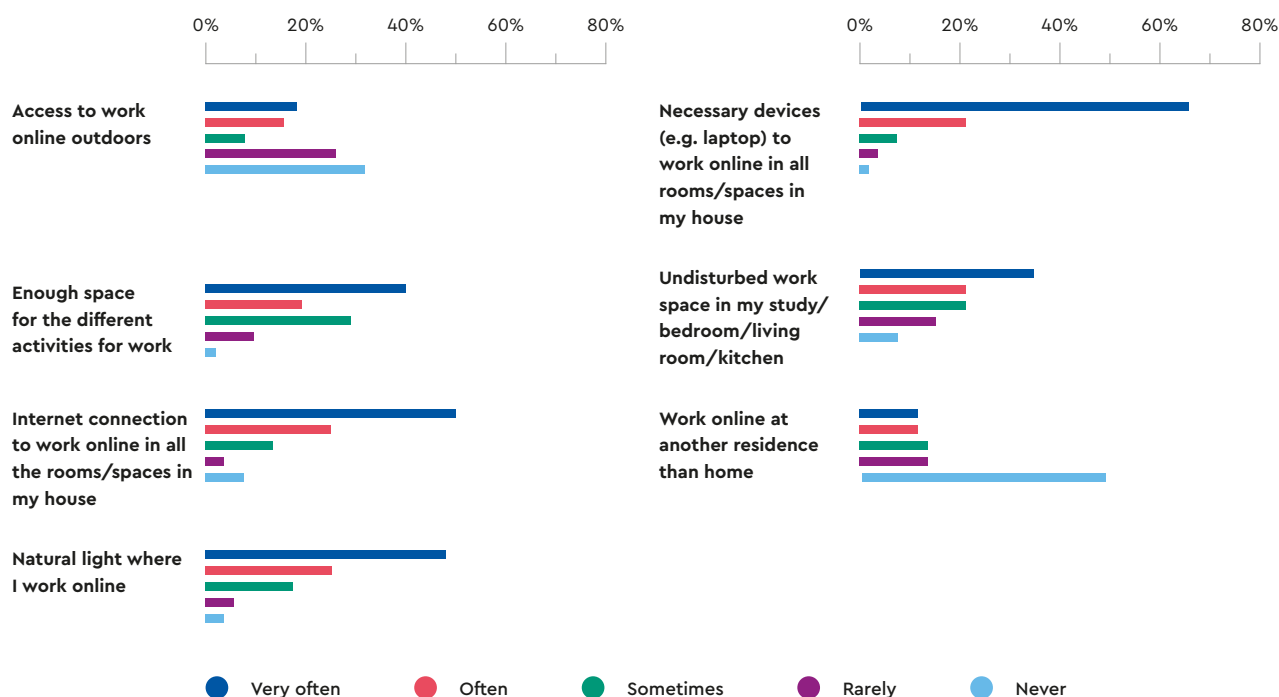


Figure 5.9: The attributes of leaders' workspaces during COVID-19 lockdown

The leaders were asked to indicate the many new skills they developed as they worked with the virtual learning space. Figure 5.10 shows that most respondents learned new skills related to using learning platforms such as MS Teams and VLE (88.2%) and video conferencing on Zoom (70.6%). A little less than half of the leaders also stated that they learnt 'a lot' or 'quite' an amount of skills related to Facebook pages and blogs. This probably reflects how leaders may have used these social media tools to communicate quickly and effectively with stakeholders such as staff and parents. Over a third of leaders indicated that they learnt new skills related to educational website such as Teleskola. This is understandable as Teleskola was set up during the pandemic and leaders needed to familiarise themselves with it to be able to give advice to their educators with respect to its potential and how they could use it.

There were less skills related to the use of Apps for quizzes and writing on tables, with around half (52%) stating that they did not need to learn many new skills. It was also noted that the respondents did not learn many new skills related to how to use Powerpoint presentations with written explanations (46%) or Powerpoint presentations with voiceover (46.8%). This is probably due to leaders focusing more on their leadership role where they engaged mainly in maintaining communication and providing guidance rather than be directly involved in the preparation of education resources such as powerpoint presentation.

Indicate the degree to which you learnt new skills to work with the following virtual learning spaces

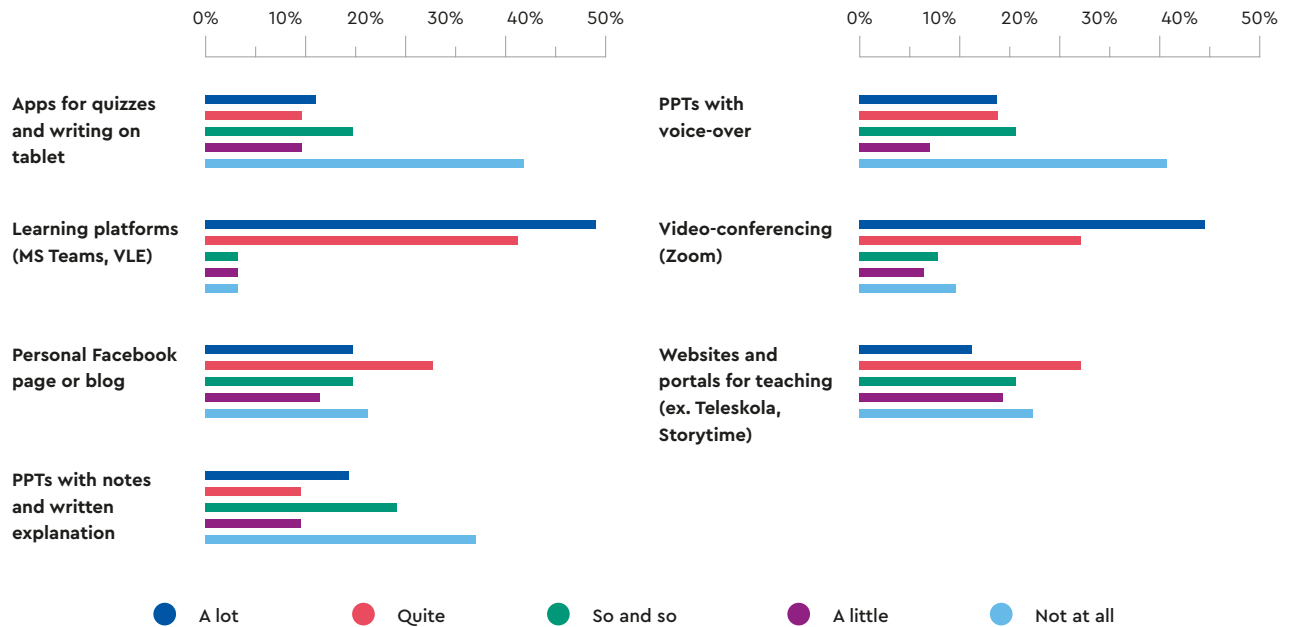


Figure 5.10: The degree to which leaders learned new skills to work with VLE spaces

The leaders were also asked to indicate how much they used various online platforms and applications to work online during the COVID-19 lockdown (Figure 5.11). Most respondents frequently used communication channels such as messenger, WhatsApp (76.9%), and video conferencing platforms (66%). VLE platforms were also used frequently by the majority of the respondents (76.9%). This again reflects their use of online tools mainly for communication and management purposes. The leaders also used Facebook pages to a lesser degree (43.9%), probably as a mean to provide updates and information for parents.

This probably explains why many 86% stated that they 'never' or 'rarely' used blogs to work online or shoot/ edit short videos (61.7%) as these mainly have a pedagogical function. Also, a significant portion of the respondents 'rarely' or 'never' used PowerPoint with notes and written explanations (66.7%) or used PowerPoint with voice-over (64.4%).

Indicate the degree to which you used any of the following to work online during the COVID-19 lockdown

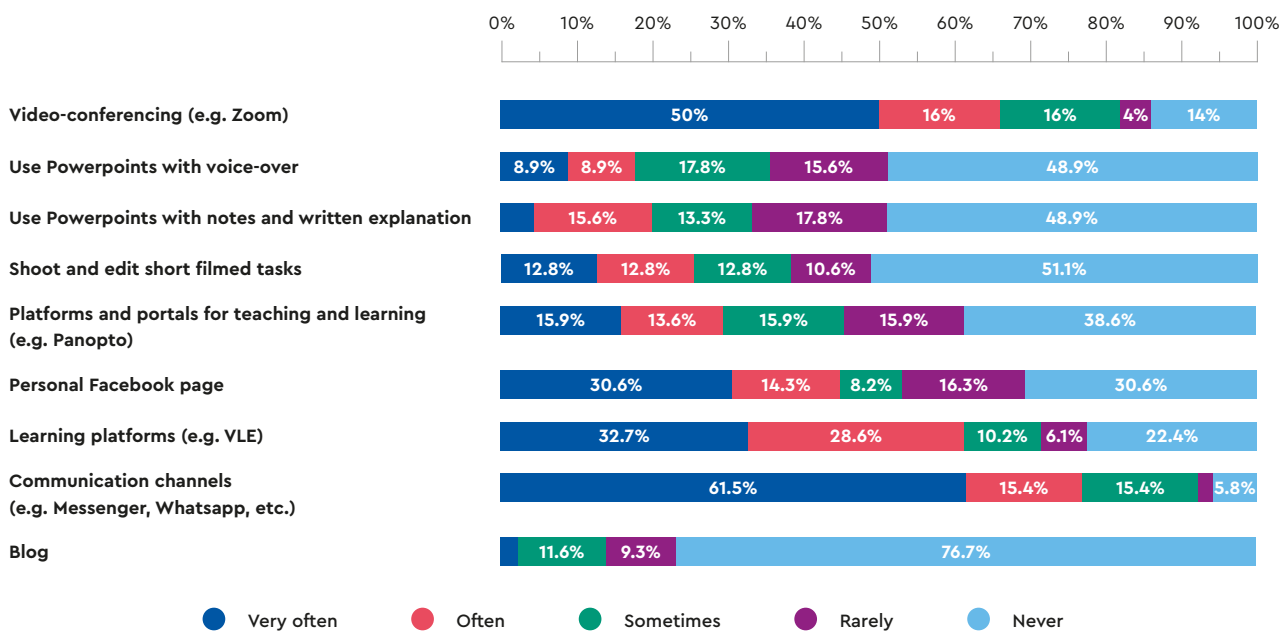


Figure 5.11: The degree to which Leaders used online technology to work during COVID-19 lockdown

According to school leaders (Figure 5.12), the majority of the educators in their organisation had to learn new skills. The main skills learnt mainly involved learning how to work with learning platforms such as MS Teams, VLE, etc. (76%) and video conferencing platforms (66%). This is probably due to educators having to use these tools to be able to teach online, a practice which was probably not common in the early years and primary prior to the pandemic. Educators also learned new skills which enhanced their pedagogical skills when teaching online. This is reflected in the leaders' response that 'quite' a number of educators developed skills related to the use of digital tools such as Powerpoint presentations with written explanations and voiceovers (52.1%) and personal Facebook pages or blogs (51%).

Indicate the degree to which educators in your organisation learnt new skills to work with the following virtual learning spaces

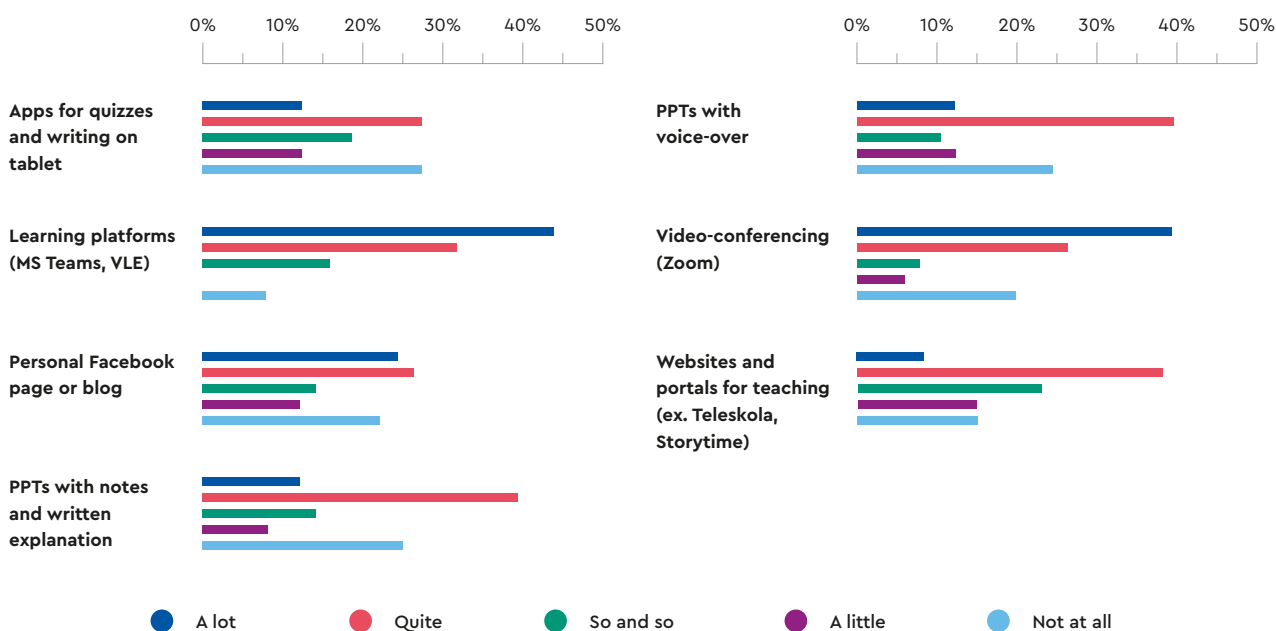


Figure 5.12: The degree to which educators learned new skills to work with virtual learning spaces

The leaders were asked to provide their perspective with respect to learning spaces after returning normality. The data (Figure 5.13) shows that nearly two thirds of the leaders (66%) were willing to keep face-to-face learning exclusively in the classroom when returning to normal life after the pandemic. It was also noted that nearly half (47.9%) of the respondents were willing to keep exclusively face-to-face learning in class and beyond school premises. The respondents had different opinions with respect to online learning and were more or less similarly divided between those willing to keep online learning modality in their schools (38%), were against it (36%), or wanted to keep the blended learning approach (32%). None the less, a good number of leaders seemed to be strongly against online learning or a blended approach in their school after returning to normality.

How much of the following learning spaces would you like at your school to keep when returning to normal life

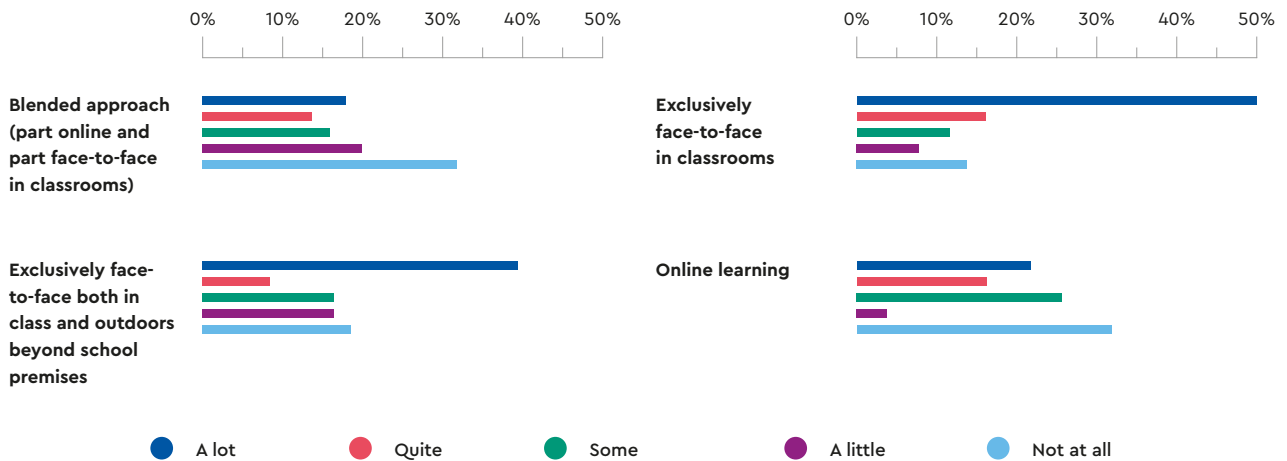


Figure 5.13: Leaders' perspective on learning spaces after returning to normal life

5.2.3 Well-being

One of the issues which attracted a lot of attention due to the pandemic refer to persons' well-being. Well-being is a complex concept which is related to various aspects such as a person's physical, mental, and emotional health as well as to social connections that people have. Well-being is often strongly linked to happiness and satisfaction that persons feel about themselves and their life. It was thus considered pertinent to know how the pandemic affected the well-being of education leaders.

Figure 5.14 provides insights regarding leaders' personal experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown. The majority of the respondents felt confident communicating through the use of online technology (74.4%), and in finding support from staff at their school/childcare concerning their duties (66.7%). Around half of the leaders also stated that they found meaningful ways to stay connected with family and friends (55.8%) which is very important for ensuring one's well-being. Nearly half of the leaders also stated that they felt productive during this period. This is positive as it shows that they could take on the challenges which resulted due the pandemic. However, a similar percentage stated that they felt less productive, showing that the pandemic had a different impact on leaders. Around a third (35.7%) also stated that they found support for their well-being from their own educational staff.

However a little less than two thirds (64.3%) of the leaders indicated that they could not switch off from work to make time for rest. Around less than half of the leaders also felt stressed and out of control (42.9%). It is thus evident that the leaders had to deal with a heavy burden of work which gave them limited time to switch off from work. The circumstances stressed leaders to different degrees.

Indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements with respects to your COVID-19 lockdown experience

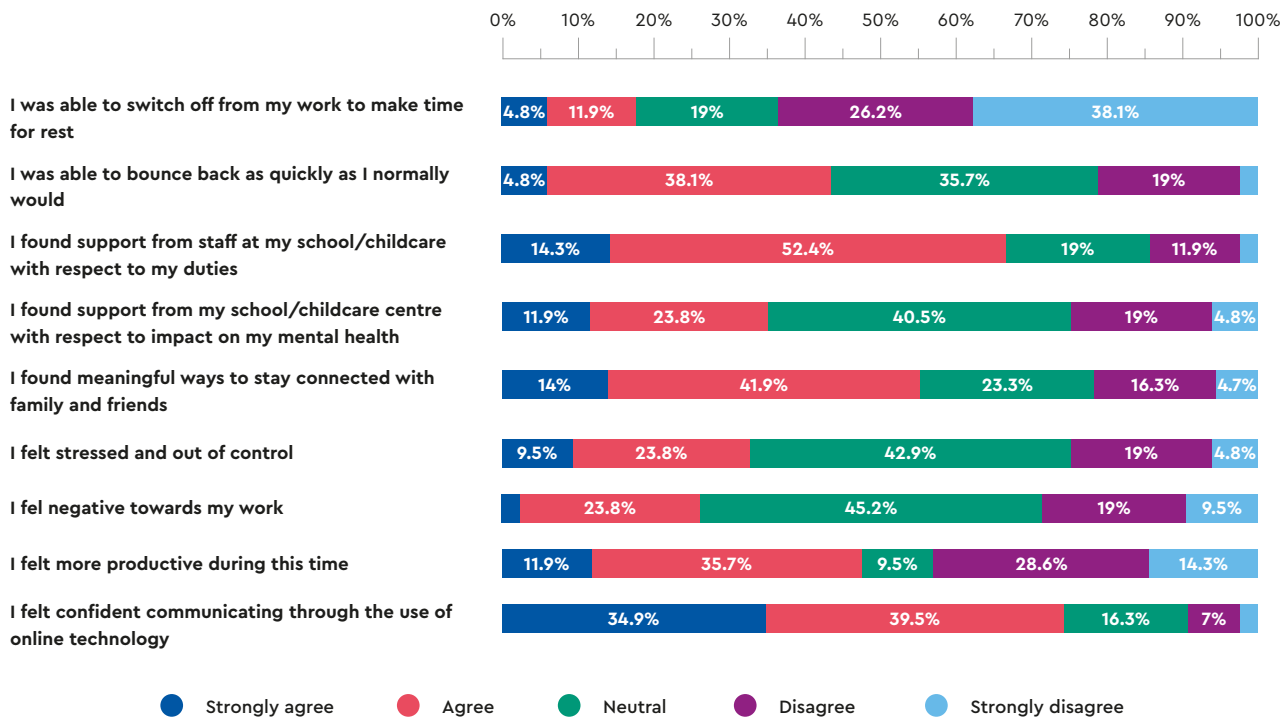


Figure 5.14: Leaders' overall experience during the COVID-19 lockdown

The leaders were also asked to indicate how they spent their time per day during COVID-19 in comparison to pre-COVID 19 times. As can be noted from Figure 5.15; the majority (90.7%) stated that they spent significantly more time corresponding with staff, parents, and students. Over two thirds (74.4%) spent a lot of time solving problems. On the other hand, over half of the leaders (55.8%) stated that they spent more time with families and talking to parents (54.8%). However, they spent significantly less time being outdoors (63.4%) and doing leisure activities (52.4%).

Compared to pre-COVID lockdown, how much time per day did you spend on the following during the COVID-19 lockdown

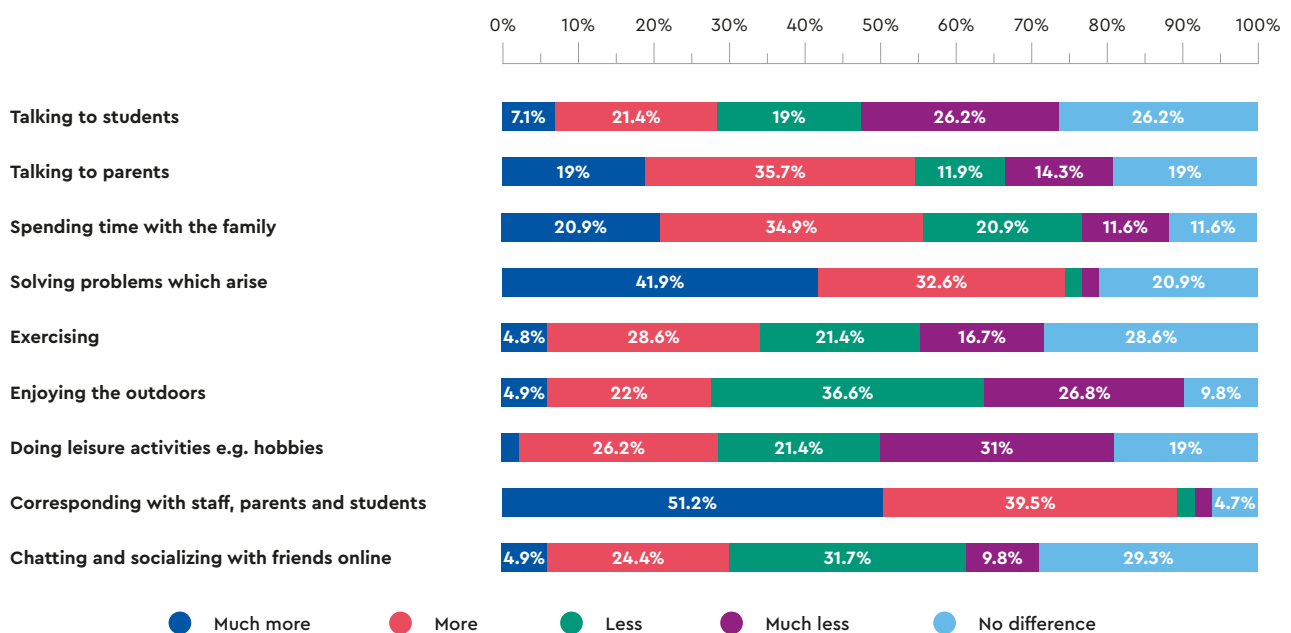


Figure 5.15: How leaders distributed their time during COVID-19 lockdown in comparison to pre-COVID times?

Key indicators of well-being refer to how happy, stressed and satisfied with their life persons feel. Figure 5.16 indicates the level of happiness, stress, and satisfaction level reported by education leaders during COVID-19 lockdown. The majority of leaders (72.1%) stated that their stress level was higher during the COVID-19 lockdown compared to previous year. About two-thirds (62.8%) of the leaders stated that they felt less happy while around half were less satisfied (53.5%) during the period. Only around one quarter felt just as happy and satisfied as at pre COVID-19 times. The responses show how the pandemic and school closures overall stressed many educational leaders and this has to degree affected how happy and satisfied they were with their life.

Compared to before COVID-19 lockdown, indicate

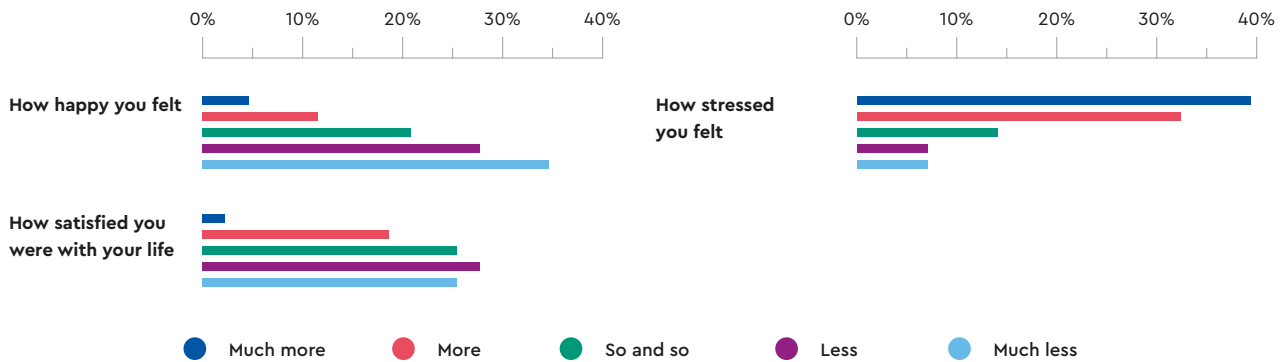


Figure 5.16: Happiness, stress, and satisfaction rates of school leaders during COVID-19 lockdown

Survey findings show that (Figure 5.17), despite the stress which the school leaders in Malta endured, they still felt highly confident in their capacity to adapt to change and lead their teams during the COVID-19 pandemic. The respondents were confident with respect to working with colleagues online (92.9%), following continuous professional development programs (86%). Moreover, over one third (39.5%) of the respondents did not feel that there was much advantage with respect to having more communication/interaction with parents. Communicating with parents and learners online (83.7%), adapting to new changes in their profession (81.4%), leading their educators in using online platforms (75.6%) and adapting to work remotely (74.4%).

Having gone through rapid changes due to the physical closure of schools, how confident do you feel with respect to the following?

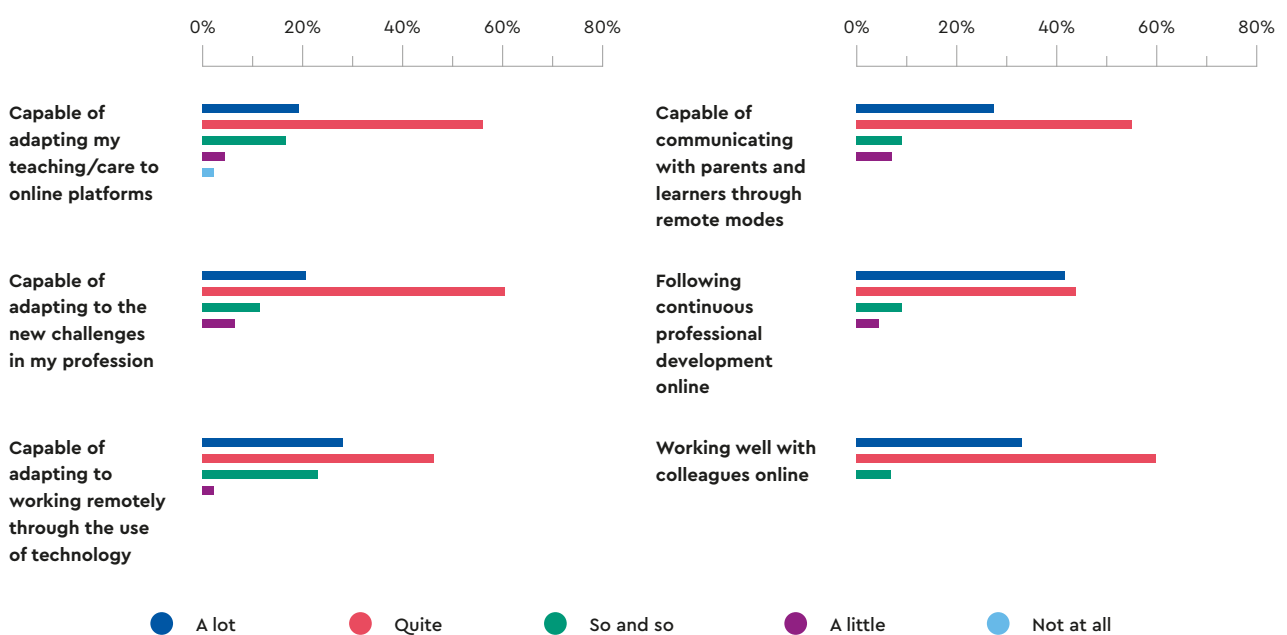


Figure 5.17: Leaders' level of confidence in adaptation to change during the COVID-19 pandemic

The school leaders were also asked to provide their perspective on the advantages on remote learning from home. Figure 5.18 shows that about one third of the leaders responded that remote working can have a positive impact in terms of having less stress to get ready for work in the morning (65.1%), spending less time commuting (65.1%), not having to think about what to wear at work (60.5%) and having more family time (51.2%). However, over half of them did not consider eating at home (62.8%) or getting to know their learners more through 'live lessons' and 'chit-chat' (59.5%) as an advantage. Furthermore, a little less than half (48.8%) also considered 'not having to go to work when their child is sick' as an advantage with having more communication/interaction with parents. This response probably reflects that there were always good level of communication with parents/caregivers even at pre-pandemic times.

Rate the extent of these advantages of learning remotely from home that you experienced during the COVID-19 lockdown

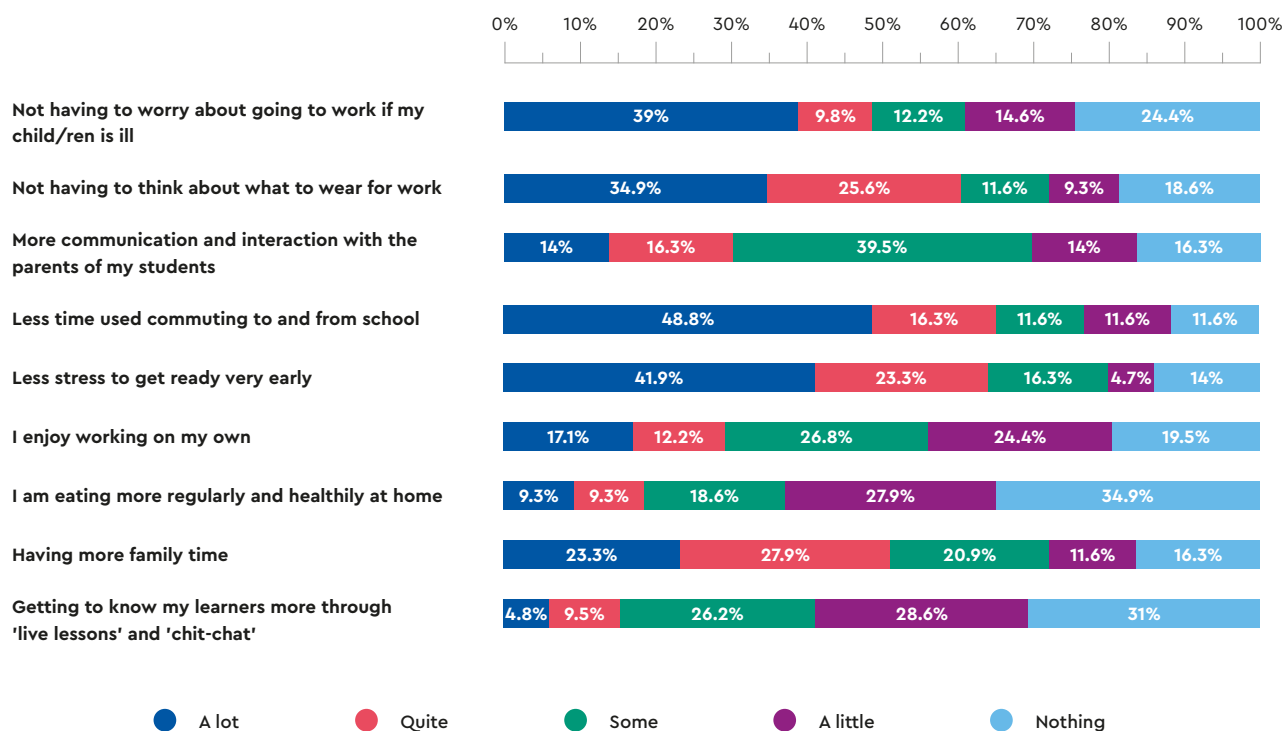


Figure 5.18: Leaders' perspective on the advantages of remote learning from home

Consecutively, the leaders were also asked to provide feedback with respect to disadvantages of using remote working. Figure 5.19 represents the school leaders' perspectives on the disadvantages of remote learning during COVID-19. The aspects perceived as great disadvantages by the majority of the respondents included: missing interaction with their colleagues (78.6%), more stress due to dealing with many changes at once (78%), missing the support and collaboration of their colleagues (75.6%), difficulties in finding a work/life balance (58.1%) and the lack of physical movement at home (57.1%) were among the perceived disadvantages by the majority of the respondents. On the other hand, 61% of the leaders responded that "remote learning can be invasive as learners, and their families are 'in' my home during live lessons" as being 'not' disadvantageous. The lack of classroom space at home (54.8%) and interruption of family members during a meeting or lesson (53.5%) were not also not considered a disadvantage by the majority of the leaders.

Rate the extent of these disadvantages of learning remotely from home that you experienced during the COVID-19 lockdown

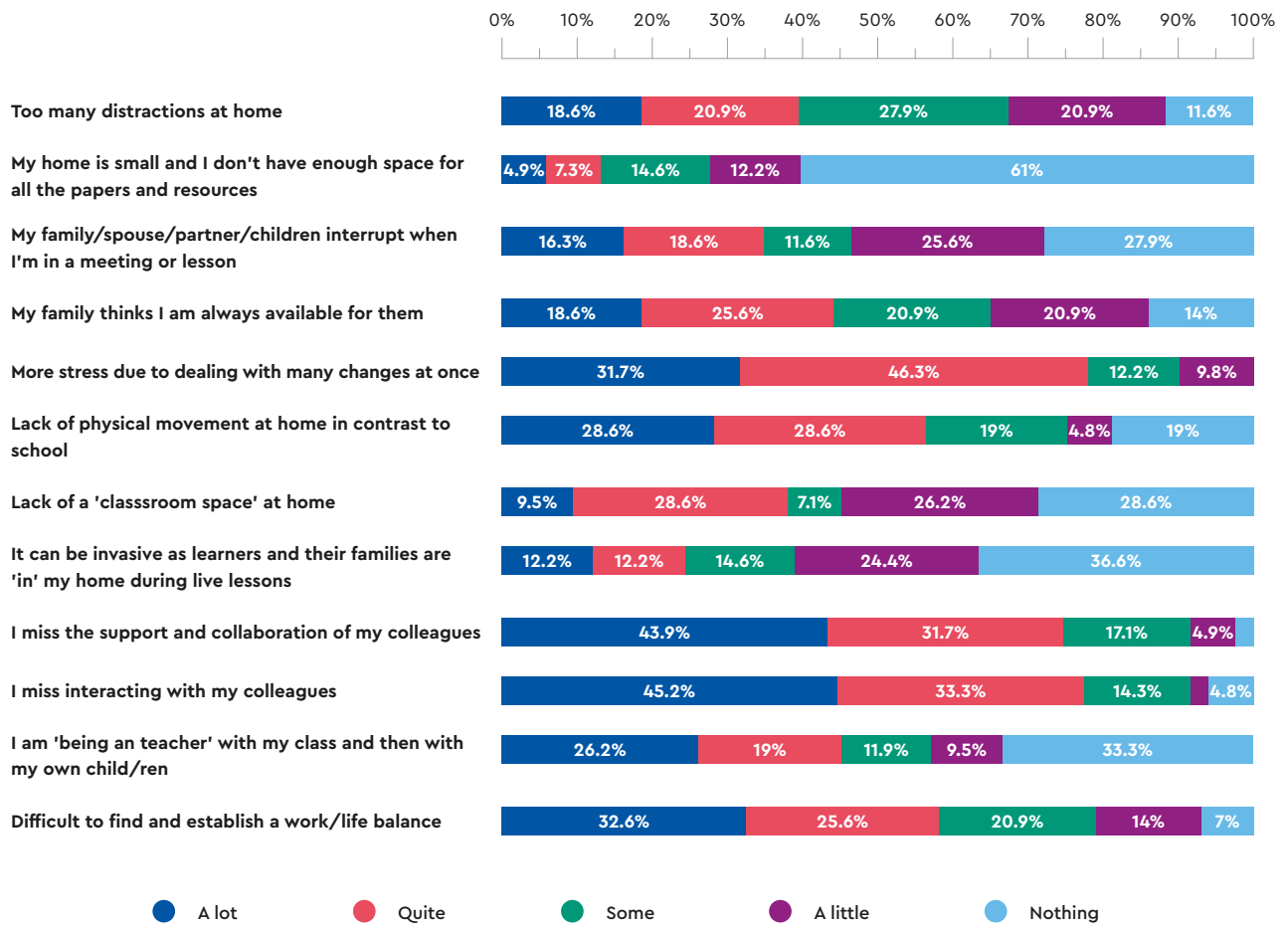


Figure 5.19: Leaders' perspective on the disadvantages of remote learning from home

The support of parents was essential in many aspects of schooling during the COVID-19 lockdown. Figure 5.20 show the leaders' perspectives on the level of support they received from parents during the COVID-19 lockdown. The data indicates that the areas which were supported more than average by the parents were with respect to: presence during online lessons or small group meetings (79.5%), making sure learners attend online lessons (79.5%), helping learners with tasks (79.5%), and sending photos/videos of the tasks carried out at home (75%). However, the leaders also stated that they did not receive support from parents with respect to suggestions for the activities (41%), emails with notes of appreciation (37.5%), and helping other parents to understand leaders' instructions (35%).

Rate the degree to which parent/s were supportive of your efforts through the following statements

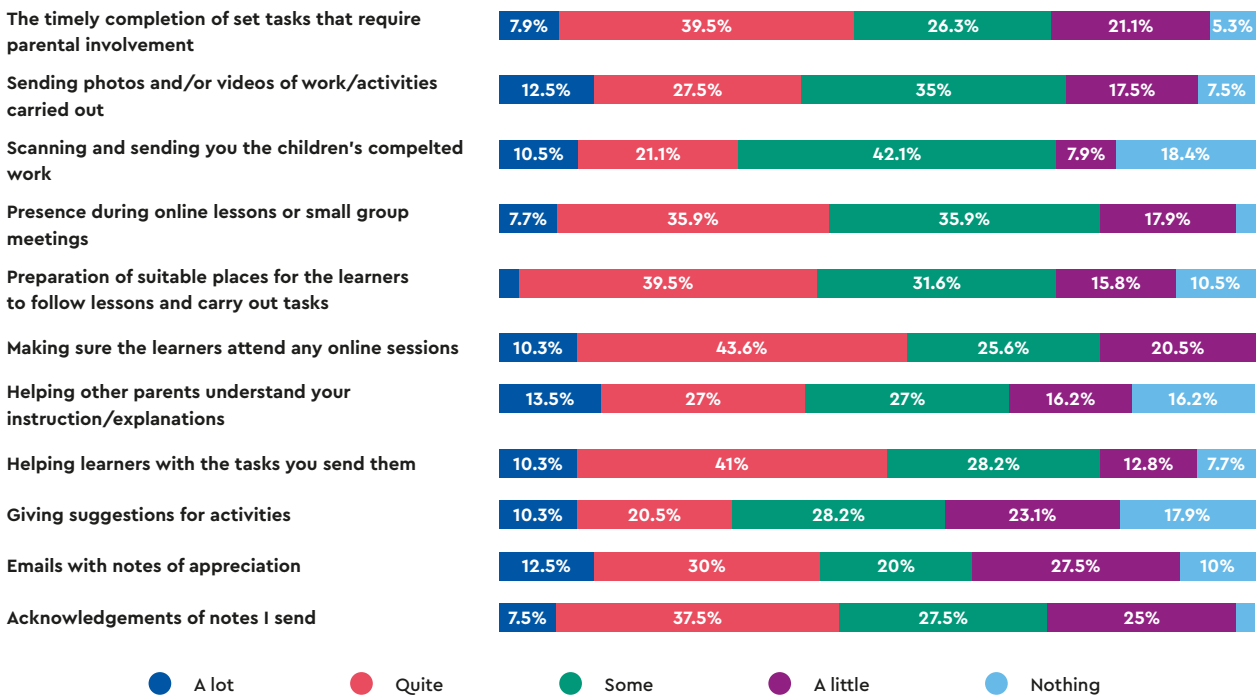


Figure 5.20: Perceived support by parents of learners during COVID-19 lockdown

It was also recorded that the leaders acknowledge the parents' support with respect to their children's learning process at home (Figure 5.21). However, most of the respondents remained neutral on the degree of support they received from the school parents, such as asking for clarification (56.4%), asking how to adapt to activities if their child did not understand (56.4%), sitting with their children to work on activities/tasks (53.8%) and not overly-supporting the children by doing the work for them (50%). On the other hand, 42.5% of the respondents stated that parents dedicated much time to be with children during online sessions. Also, 39% stated they received significant parental support in providing all the required learning resources, while 48.8% remained neutral on the same statement.

Indicate the degree to which parents supported their children in learning at home through the following:

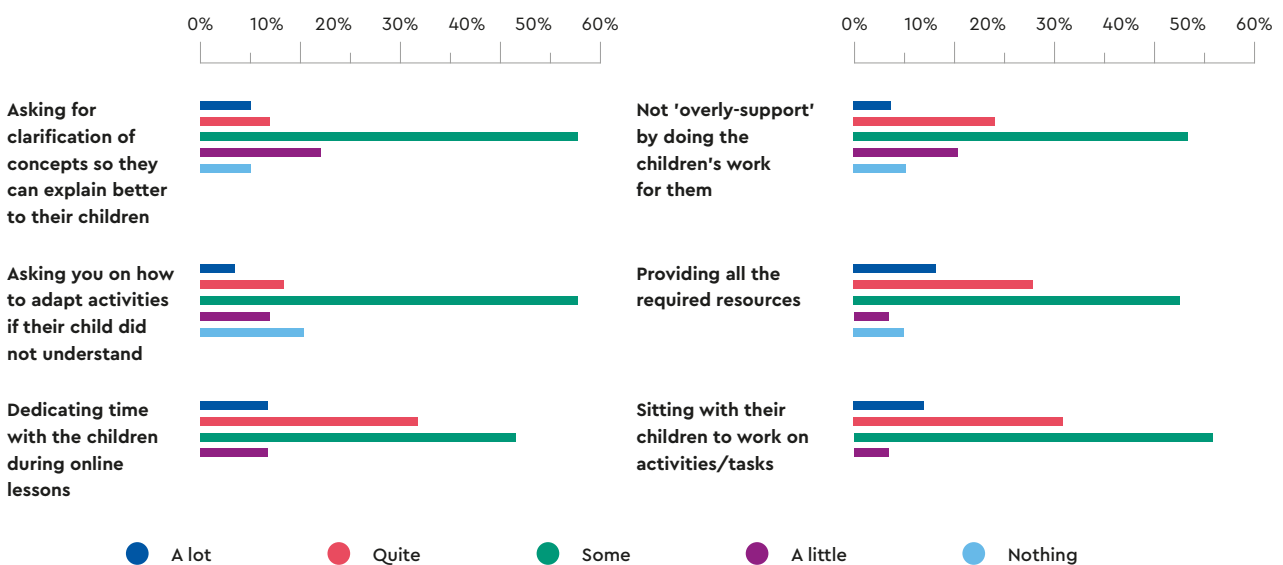


Figure 5.21: Leaders' perspectives on parents' support for their children's learning during COVID-19 lockdown

It was noted that most of the survey participants had positive views on the support provided by the school management teams during the 2019-2020 scholastic year (Figure 5.22). The management teams provided a lot of support with regards to: group meetings to discuss any difficulties (82.9%); giving clear direction about teaching and learning (78%); holding all staff accountable for their work (77.5%); keeping in touch regularly through online staff meetings (75.6%); administrative support to contact families and learners (75%); issuing clear directions about online platforms supported by the school (66.7%), providing technical staff support to move to remote/online sessions (61.5%); issuing clear guidelines about remote learning for parents (60%) and by distributing workloads fairly and equitably among staff (59%). “Organising whole-school webinars and training sessions for remote/online teaching and learning” (43.6%) had the lowest affirmation score in this category.

Indicate the degree to which the school management team was being supportive through the following:

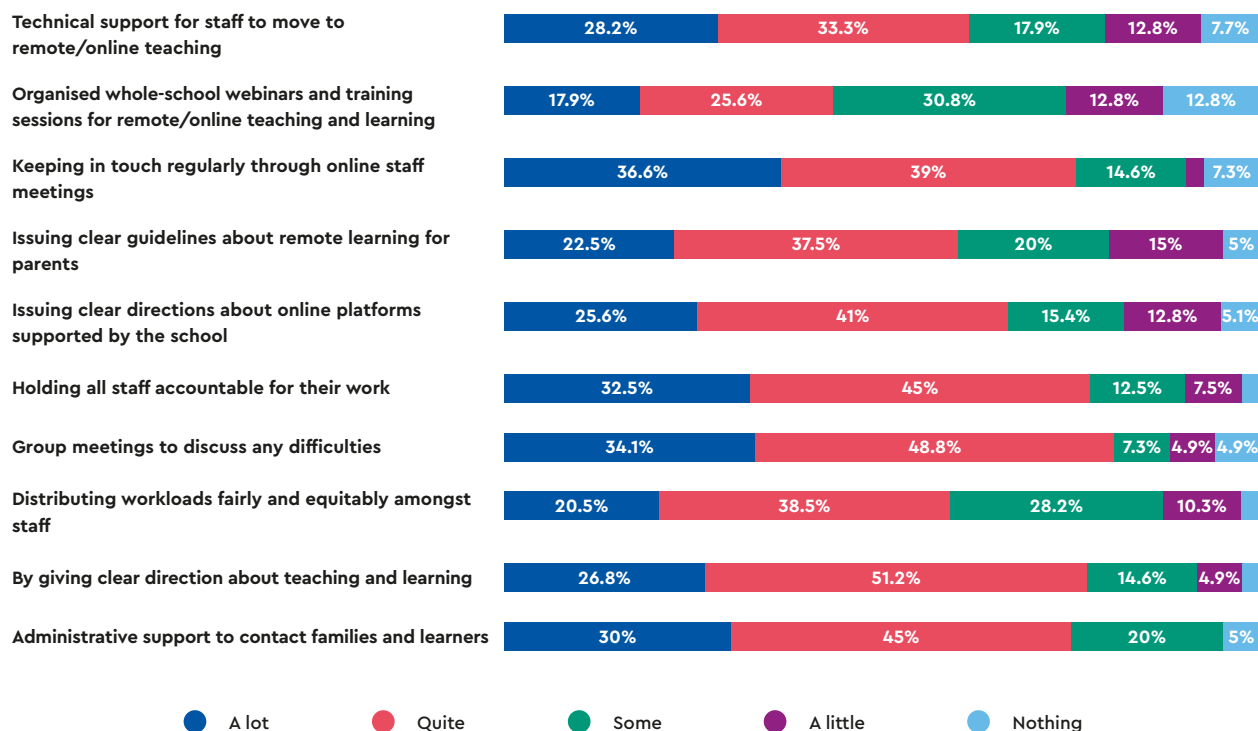


Figure 5.22: School management teams' support during the COVID-19 pandemic

The survey's last question (item 36) was an open-ended question to collect 'any comments' from the respondents. As a result, the entries (n=22) were varied and conveyed further insight into the perceptions and personal experiences of the respondents. These comments included:

Clear and timely directions and a sense of accountability needed by the Education Directorates (n=7):

- “Directorates should enforce the official platforms to be used in online learning as well as the standards for teachers.”
- “According to the union directives, it was up to the teacher to decide if she wanted to do online lessons or not.”
- “Timely directives are necessary to implement the requirements on time.”
- “Educators and management should be held accountable by the Directorate.”
- “Pupils' were at the mercy of the educators' level of commitment and performance.”

Online learning is not an ideal mode of teaching/learning. (n=7)

- “I feel that children have suffered emotionally and socially during the lockdown.”
- “I strongly believe that delivery of lessons is a very, very small part of what children gain from attending school. ”
- “Although COVID-19 in itself provided an opportunity for educators to grow professional vis-a-vis but, running a school from behind a screen is very stressful resulting in long hours in front of the computer”

The situation for early childhood schools and kindergartens was extra problematic (n=4).

“Unfortunately, childcare is still viewed as babysitting services by both parents and most importantly, by the authorities. Therefore, once parents were home and could take care of their children, the absolute majority did not find any need for childcare and thus, stopped all contact.”

“I feel that Early and Primary Education was very impacted by COVID. We had to move away from child-directed play to a very adult-led approach.”

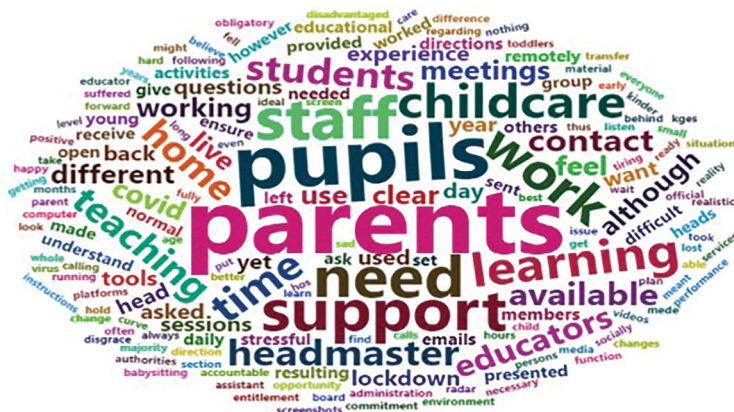


Figure 5.23: Word Cloud representing leaders' comments on Survey 1

This section has captured how much leaders felt stressed during the scholastic year. It also showed how they worked hard and experienced a steep learning curve with respect to using online technology needed both for online teaching as well as for managing their education institutions. What is evident is the time and effort that they put in doing their best to provide their learners with the best possible experience in view of the circumstances created by the pandemic.

5.3 The Results of the Second Survey

The Second Survey was conducted one year later in September 2021 with educational leaders working with children aged 0-11 in the primary state, church, and independent schools as well as in early childhood centres. The findings of the second survey will be presented in this section through figures illustrating the responses collected. As with the first survey results, these will be organised according to the three main themes of teaching and learning, learning spaces, and well-being.

5.3.1 Teaching and Learning

In Malta, schools reopened at the beginning of the 2020-2021 scholastic year with restrictions on cohort sizes. Schools remained open most of the scholastic year except for one month of closure between March-April 2021 to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The data was thus collected at the end of a scholastic year where schools were open but with COVID-19 restrictions.

Figure 5.24 represents the modes of teaching/learning adopted in primary school during the 2020-2021 scholastic year. Most respondents (85.7%) stated that teaching and learning were conducted in class with learners physically present; it was followed by teaching in class using a 'bubble' system with helpers/assistants monitoring children in the second/third bubble (42.9%). Other responses were as follows: *“Simultaneous online access to the same lessons for vulnerable students”*(14.3%), *“teaching remotely from home while learners were at school because the particular educator was vulnerable”*(9.5%), *“teaching in class with a few one-off*

online sessions for those at home”(9.5%), “teaching in class with a small group of learners and then teaching online with another group of learners during the same day (e.g., 08:00-12:00 class, 12:00-02:00 online)” (9.5%), “virtual lessons for vulnerable pupils” (9.5%) and “teaching in class for those physically present and recorded lessons for learners at home” (4.8%). These trends are understandable as state schools were following directions from the Ministry to open schools for face-to-face teaching but with COVID-19 restrictions as set by the Superintendent of Health.

If you are a Leader in a primary school, which of the following methods did your school employ during this past scholastic year (2020–2021)

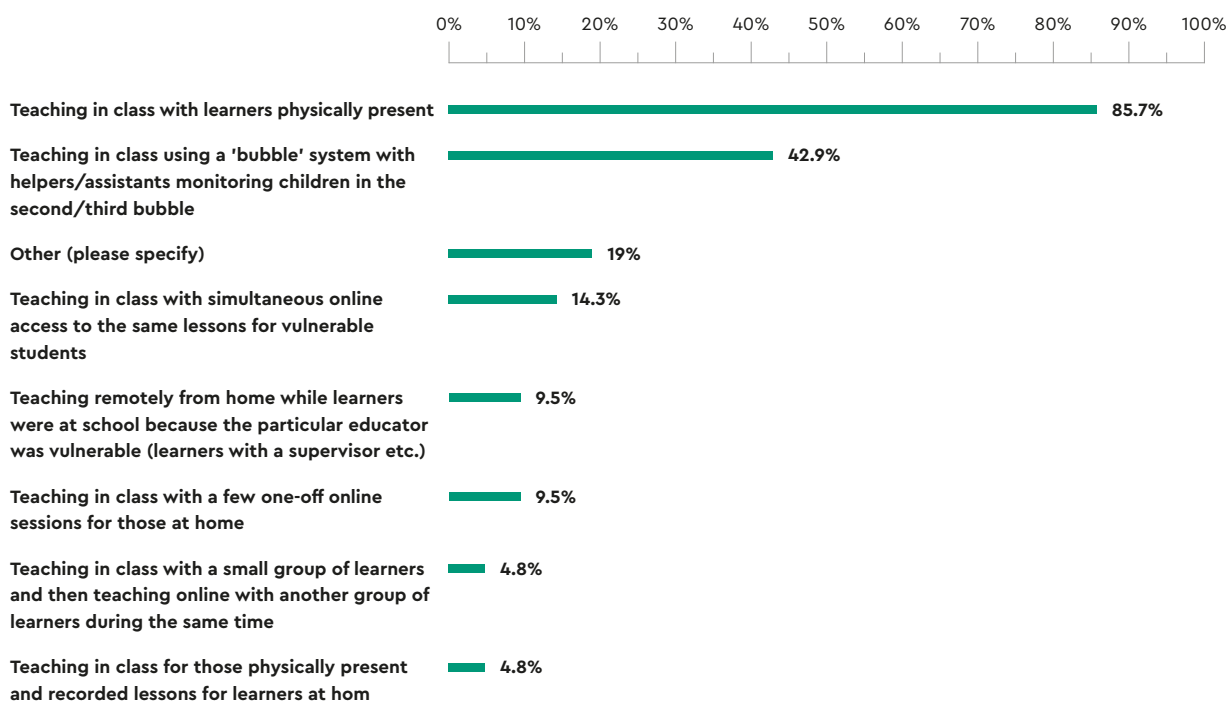


Figure 5.24: The modes of teaching/learning adopted in primary school during the 2020–2021 scholastic year

A variety of responses were recorded when leaders were asked about the teaching approaches they encouraged their educators to use when their institution had to close during 2020-2021 (Figure 5.25). More than half of the respondents (55%) stated that they encouraged using the school VLE to send homework and notes. A little less than half stated that they follow the Education Directorate’s instructions (40%) and adopted a school-wide policy to follow a timetable of live online lessons (40%). One third of the leaders also, used closed social media pages to communicate with parents (30%), while another third stated that they encouraged following Teleskola (for state schools) (30%). One fourth of the leaders encouraged using emails to send content material and homework (25%). Only 5% stated that they allowed educators to choose whichever approach they prefer. Some ‘other’ responses were also recorded, such as; *using TEAMS to upload material, a combination of remote online teaching, and video-recorded lessons for learners to access from home.*

If you are a Leader in a primary school, which of the following did your school adopt during this past scholastic year (2020–2021)?

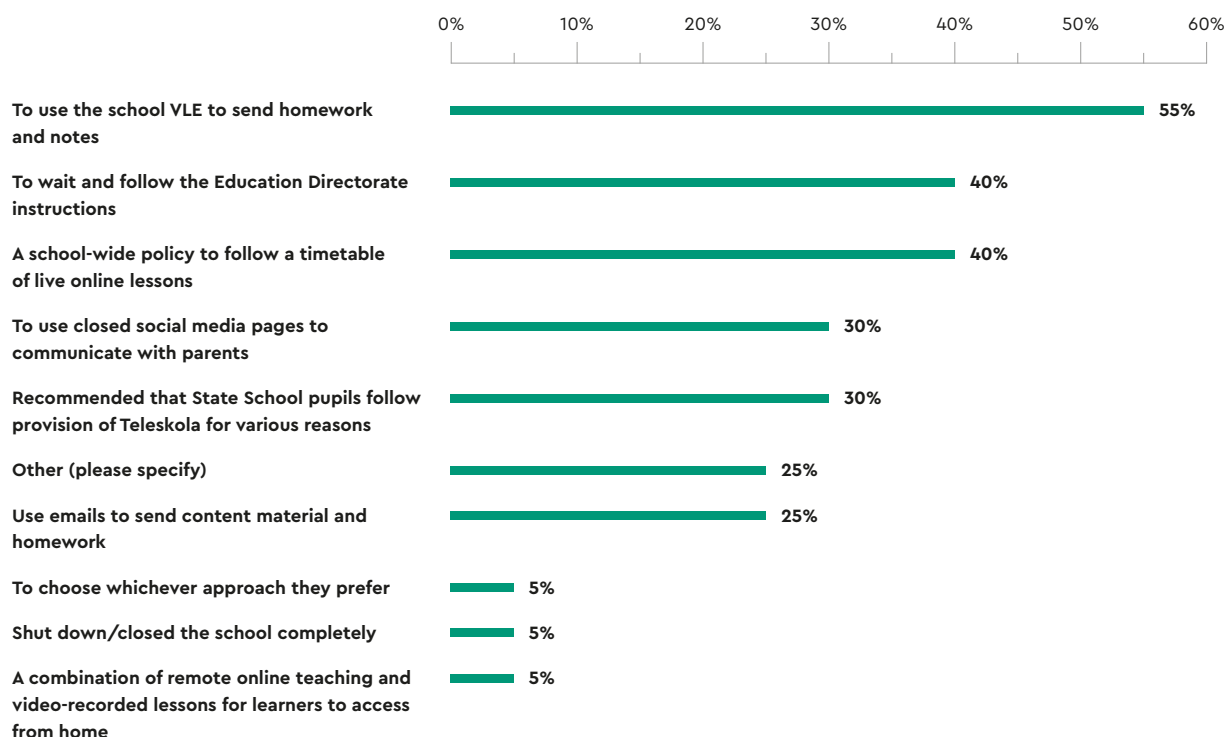


Figure 5.25: Teaching/learning approaches encouraged by school leaders during the 2020–2021 scholastic year

Figure 5.26 represents leaders' perception of the effectiveness of online/offline teaching methods used during the 2020-2021 scholastic year. Two thirds (66.7%) of the respondents stated that they found online/offline methods used during the 2020-2021 scholastic year as being 'more effective' whereas 29.2% of the respondents found them to be 'less effective' compared to last year. This shows how schools had learnt how to manage learning from the previous year. However, there still remained one third of the respondents who felt that the second year of provision of education for COVID-19 was less effective.

From your perspective as a leader, when comparing the above online/offline methods used this year with last years methods, these were:

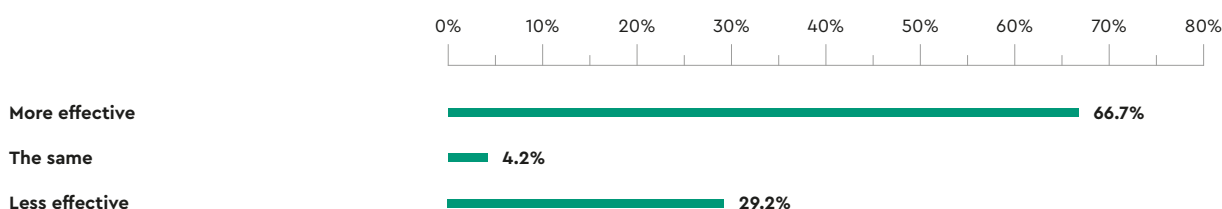


Figure 5.26: Leaders' perceptions of the effectiveness of teaching/learning conducted during the 2020–2021 scholastic year as compared to the previous year

During the 2020-2021 scholastic year, as shown in Figure 5.27, a good percentage of the leaders (83.3%) stated that they assisted educators in improving their online/remote teachings by encouraging collaboration between staff, over three quarters of the respondents also encouraged their staff by providing professional development courses related to online teaching (75%) and two thirds (66.7%) by providing technical support. However, on the other hand, only 25% of respondents encouraged sharing academic journal articles/books and/or websites. The trends show how leaders encouraged educators to work together while supporting them through pedagogical and technical support.

During the scholastic year 2020–2021, as a school/childcare leader, you assisted educators to improve their online/remote teaching through:

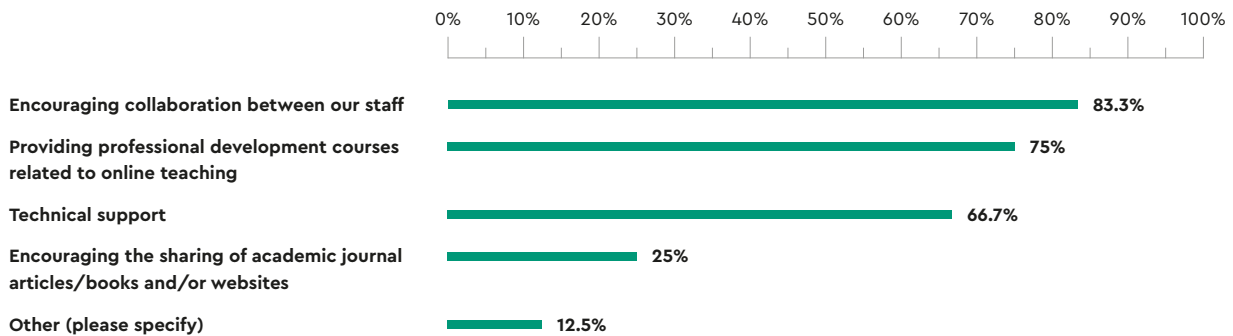


Figure 5.27: How leaders supported their educators to improve their online/remote teaching

Figure 5.28 reflects leaders' level confidence in their educators' ability to perform tasks during the time/s schools/settings were closed down due to COVID-19 in 2020-2021 scholastic year. Almost all the leaders (95.8%) stated that their educators were able to teach through a digital platform. Also, a majority of the respondents (70.8%) were confident that their educators were able to cover the curricular content as planned, as well as collaborate with parents (70.8%). Two thirds of leaders (66.7%) believed that the teachers were able to prepare online lessons and digital resources and just over half of the respondents (58.3%) stated that they could conduct synchronous 'live' lessons. These responses show how leaders held a good level in their teachers' efforts and commitment in providing alternative modes of learning when schools were closed for a period in 2020-2021. Leaders, however, were less confident on how much teachers were able to: plan for student individual and group collaboration; meet learners' individual needs; manage the children's behaviour in a digital class, and encourage collaboration in small groups. This shows how three quarters of the leaders were not sure, despite teachers' effort to teach online, whether the pedagogies used could engage and promote collaborative learning as in normal schooling.

During the time/s your school/setting had to close down and your educators had to teach online during this past academic year (2020–2021)

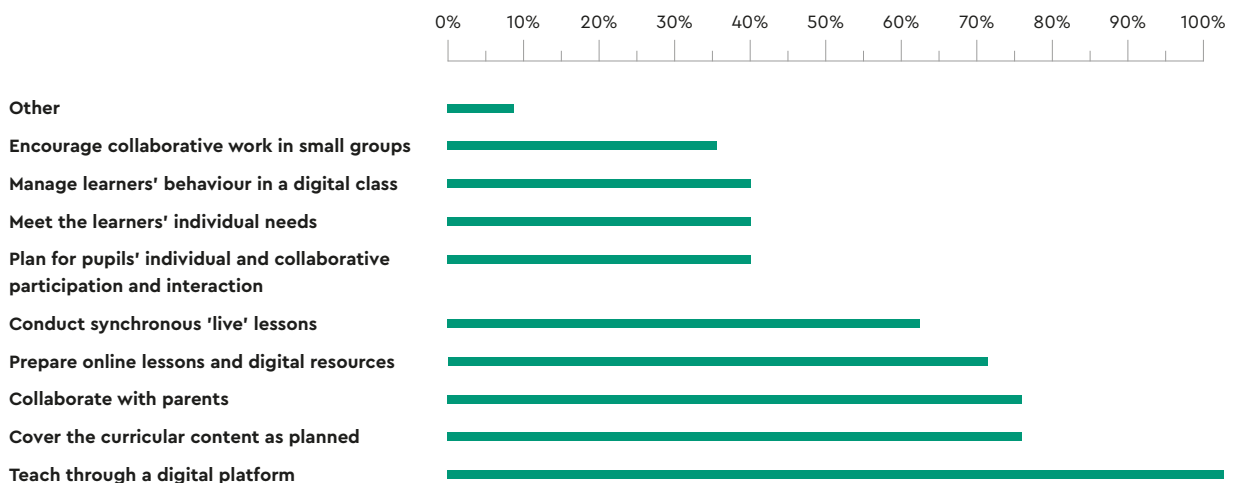


Figure 5.28: Leaders' confidence in their educators' ability to perform tasks (2020–2021)

Figure 5.29 represents how leaders spent their time during the 2020-2021 scholastic year. It is evident that leaders spent a lot of time problem solving while in the meantime also supporting teachers both with their well-being as well as with their work. In fact, over half of the leaders indicated that they spent their time supporting educators for their well-being (58.3%) and finding solutions to problems (54.2%). This was mainly achieved through online meetings with colleagues (41.7%), and in trying to contact parents of children who lost contact with school (37.5%). To a lesser extent, a quarter of the leaders stated that they also spent time supporting educators (teachers/KGAs/child carers) with planning (25%), and attending webinars to improve digital literacy skills (25%). Only 4.2% of the respondents stated that they spent more time in 2020-2021 on supporting educators with online resources. This shows how leaders had to step in by finding solutions to difficulties in delivering an education to students and also supporting educators, parents and children when schools were shut down.

Tick the activities that this year (2020–2021) required more time than in 2019–2020

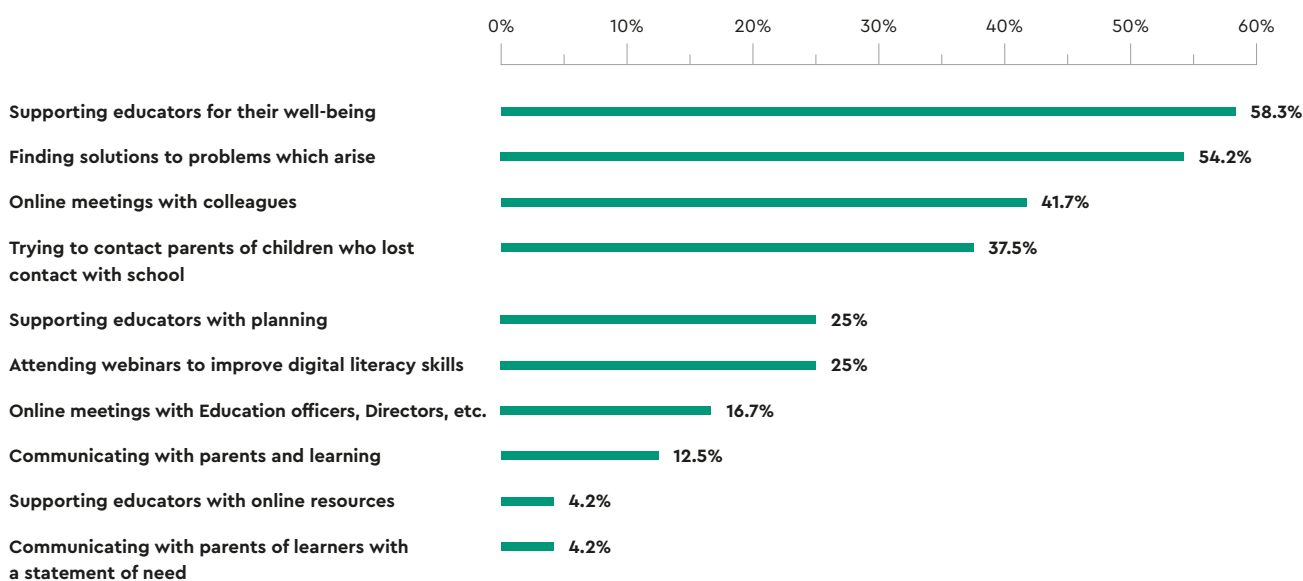


Figure 5.29: The tasks required more time during the 2020–2021 scholastic year

Leaders were asked to state which modes of online learning they think were most effective for the children in their childcare/ school during this past academic year 2020-2021 (Figure 5.30). Two thirds of the leaders (66.7%) identified synchronous (live sessions) as the most effective. 16.7% of leaders felt that the blended approach was more effective, while 8.3% stated that none of the models were effective. This is to a degree understandable in the context of young children in kindergarten and primary level where students need more support and guidance in learning, and are still learning how to carry out tasks on their own with limited teacher support.

Which mode of online learning do you think was the most effective for the children in your childcare/school during this past academic year (2020–2021)?

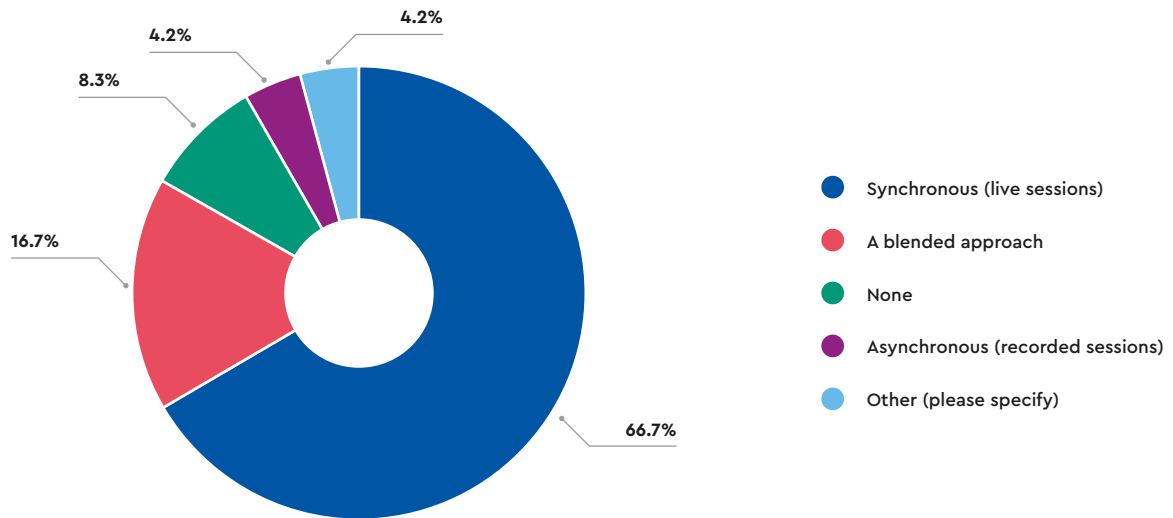


Figure 5.30: The tasks required more time during the 2020–2021 scholastic year

Even though a percentage of leaders reflected awareness of the limited pedagogical strengths of online learning (see Figure 5.28) in terms of engaging students and catering for their needs, they still were quite satisfied with the teaching/learning conducted in ECEC and primary schools. In fact, the great majority of ECE leaders (91.7%) were very satisfied (around one third) or satisfied (around half) with the online learning carried out by the teachers / KGAs/ child carers during 2020-2021 scholastic year; with only 8.3% who remained “neutral” on the same statement (Figure 5.31).

Indicate how satisfied you were with the online learning carried out by the teachers/KGEs/childcarers in 2020–2021 scholastic year

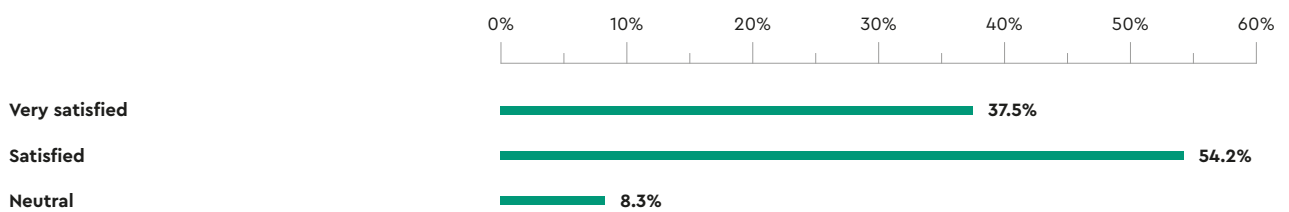


Figure 5.31: ECE Leaders' satisfaction with the teaching/learning conducted by their educators during the 2020–2021 scholastic year

The leaders in primary schools were also asked to identify their level of satisfaction with different aspects of education provision and asked to indicate how satisfied they were of these during the 2020-2021 scholastic year. The satisfaction rates of senior leaders in primary schools on the teaching/learning conducted by their organisation are shown in Figure 5.32.

Almost all respondents (95.2%) were satisfied with the amount of online learning delivered by their school. Also, 85.7% of the respondents were satisfied with the amount of syllabus that was covered online. They were also overall satisfied with both parents' and Directorate's/superiors' demands. The responses, on the other hand, reflect a lower degree of satisfaction with students' assessments and in reaching out to the students who lost contact with the school. One finds that nearly one fifth of the respondents (19%) of the leaders remained unsatisfied with the assessment. 57.2% of the respondents were satisfied with their effort in reaching out to those students who lost contact with the school, while 33.3% remained neutral.

Indicate the degree to which parents supported their children in learning at home through the following:

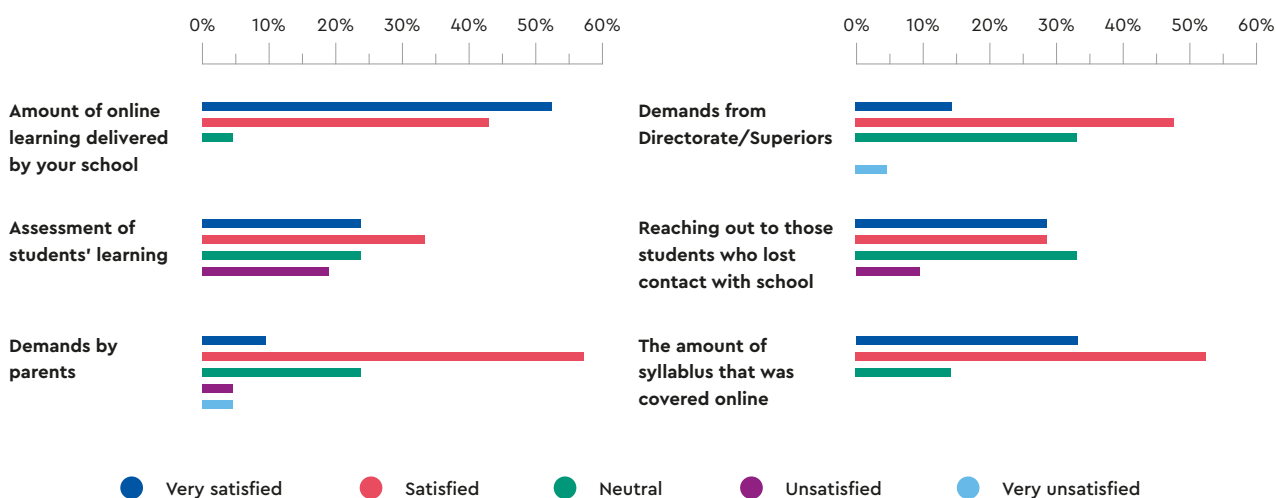


Figure 5.32: Senior Primary School Leaders' Satisfaction on the teaching/learning conducted in their school

Two thirds of school leaders (66.7%) stated that children had a better educational experience in the scholastic year 2020-21 when compared to the previous year of 2019-2020 when the pandemic struck. However, there were still one quarter of the respondents (25%) who believed that the children's overall experiences was worse as shown in (Figure 5.33).

How would you rate the children's overall educational experience during this past scholastic year (2020-2021) when compared to 2019-2020?

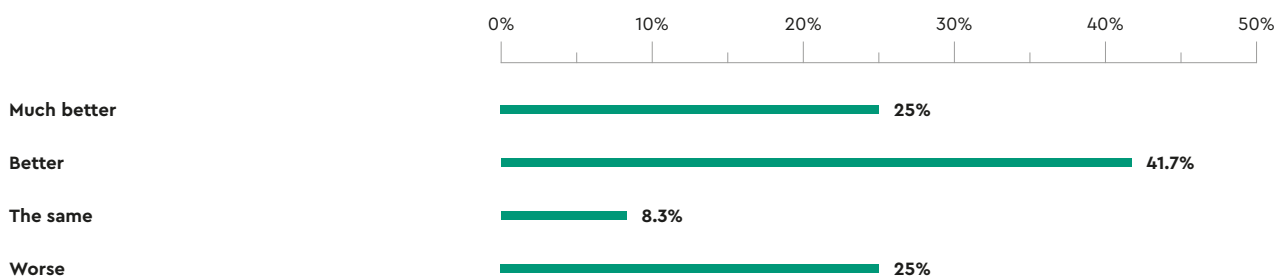


Figure 5.33: School Leaders' perceptions of children's overall educational experience during the 2020-2021 scholastic year

On the other hand, a little less than two thirds of the Heads/Assistant Heads of schools/Child Care Managers (62.5%) stated that they had a better year during the 2020-2021 scholastic year when compared to the previous year. It was only about one fifth (20.8%) who stated that it was 'worse' (Figure 5.34). This reflects how education leaders had adapted lessons learnt from the previous years' experience and were better prepared in the second year of restrictions due to COVID-19.

How would you rate your overall experience as a Head/Assistant Head of School/Childcare Manager, when compared to the scholastic year 2019–2020?

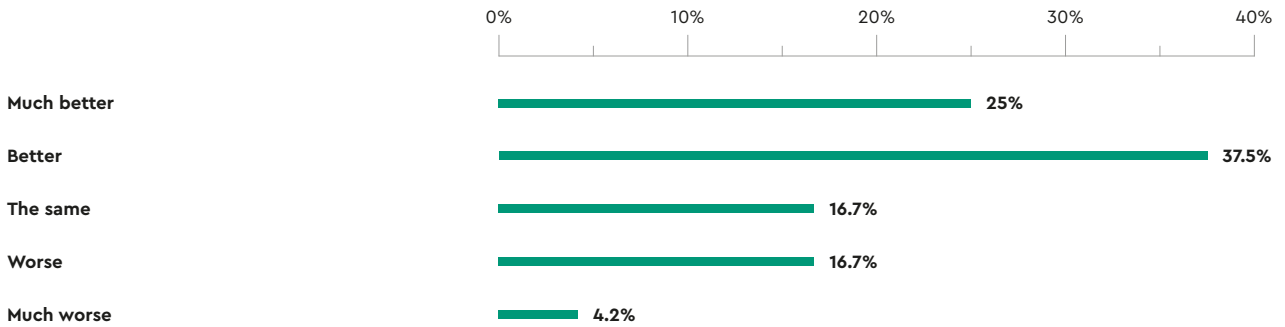


Figure 5.34: School Leaders' overall experience during the 2020–2021 scholastic year

The survey findings indicate that (Figure 5.35) during the 2020-2021 scholastic year, while school leaders varied in their opinions about whether the children benefitted academically by learning from home, they reflected a concern with respect to the children's social and emotional development as a result of learning from home. In fact, a great majority of the respondents think that the children/students in their setting/school did not benefit from learning at home socially (91.7%) or emotionally (87.5%). On the other hand, 41.7% of the respondents indicated that children/students in their setting/school academically benefitted through learning at home compared to 37.5% who disagreed. It was also noted that about two thirds (66.7%) of the respondents think that children have 'lost' a substantial amount of learning/learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas a quarter (25%) did not think that this was the case (Figure 5.36).

Overall, do you think that the children/students in your setting/school benefitted through learning at home during the academic year 2020–2021?

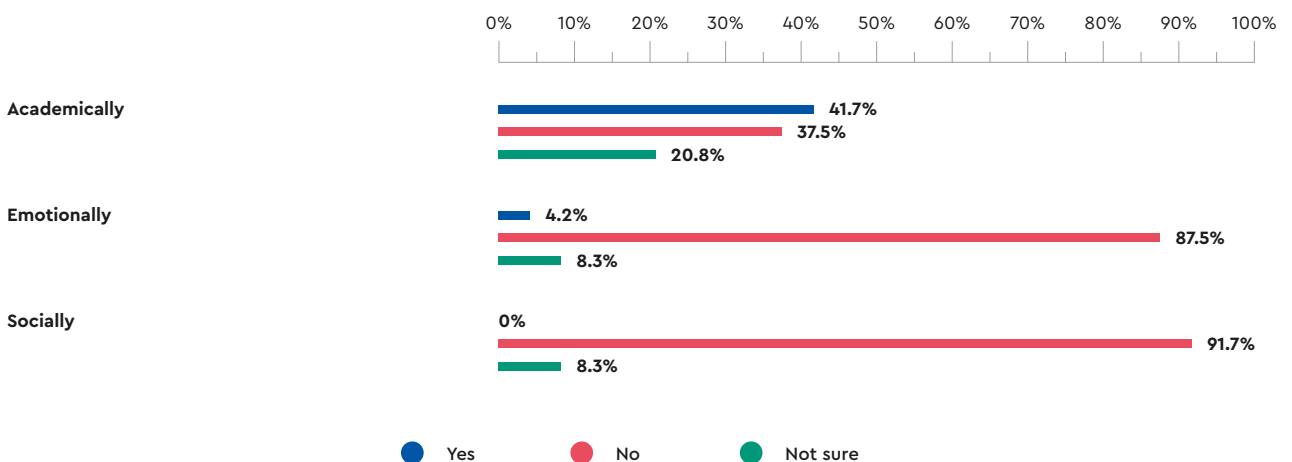


Figure 5.35: School leaders' perceptions of the children's academic, emotional and social development when learning from home during the 2020–2021 scholastic year

Overall, do you think that children have 'lost' a substantial amount of learning/learning experiences during these COVID-19 times?

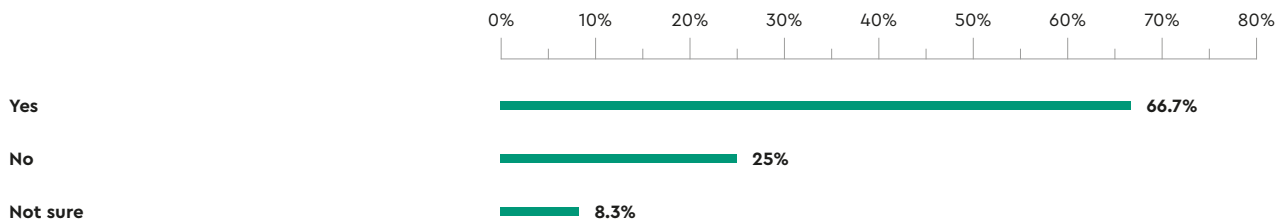


Figure 5.36: School leaders' perceptions of the children's learning loss during the pandemic

Leaders were also asked through an open-ended question to identify means through which it would be possible to address the situation related to learning loss which took place due to the impact of the pandemic. The few responses obtained (n=16) were varied, but still provided further insights on the causes of the problem and possible actions which might be taken. The most common suggestion made included: providing opportunities for revision lessons on the important topics (n=5), revising/adapting the curriculum according to the learning loss last year (n=4), more structure in lessons and school attendance (n=2).



Figure 5.37: Word cloud represents leaders' perspectives and possible remedies to the learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic

The word cloud presented in Figure 5.37 provides a graphic representation of the most common words used by the leaders in their replies above.

5.3.2 Learning Spaces

Learning depends on different factors such as teacher-student relationships, peers, student motivation, presentation of content among other things. The physical space where learning takes place is also important. Aspects such as seating, light intensity, level of noise, and even surrounding colour also determine the quality of the learning experience. Students need a positive learning environment so that they be motivated and engaged in their learning. Learning in uncomfortable, loud, or surroundings which are full of distractions make it more difficult for learners to engage in the learning process as well as to stay engaged over longer periods.

The leaders were asked to provide information about the physical spaces they worked in and the technological services they had in their remote workspaces during the 2020-2021 scholastic year (Figure 5.38). Only a little more than half of the leaders (54.2%) stated that they had necessary devices (e.g., laptop) to work online in all rooms/spaces in their house, while only around a third (37.5%) had access to a quiet workspace in their home. Only 25% of the leaders responded that they had enough space for the different activities for work.

Tick the statement/s that best describe your learning space during the scholastic year 2020–2021

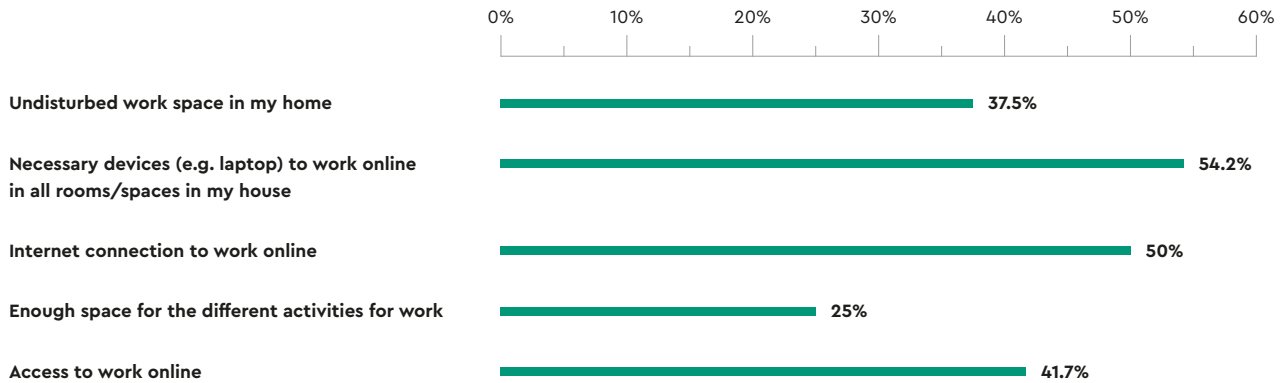


Figure 5.38: School leaders' remote workspaces during the 2020–2021 scholastic year

Figure 5.39 represents school leaders' preferences on the mode of teaching/learning in their school setting upon returning to post-pandemic conditions. There was a strong agreement among leaders (79.2%) to keep exclusively face-to-face education in classrooms. Only 16.7% of the leaders stated they are interested in keeping a blended approach (part online and part face-to-face in classrooms). It is understandable that face-to-face is preferred at early years and primary education as children are still young and they need more teacher guidance in their learning. They also need to develop their social skills which is promoted through interaction with others.

Tick the statement/s that best describe your learning space during the scholastic year 2020–2021

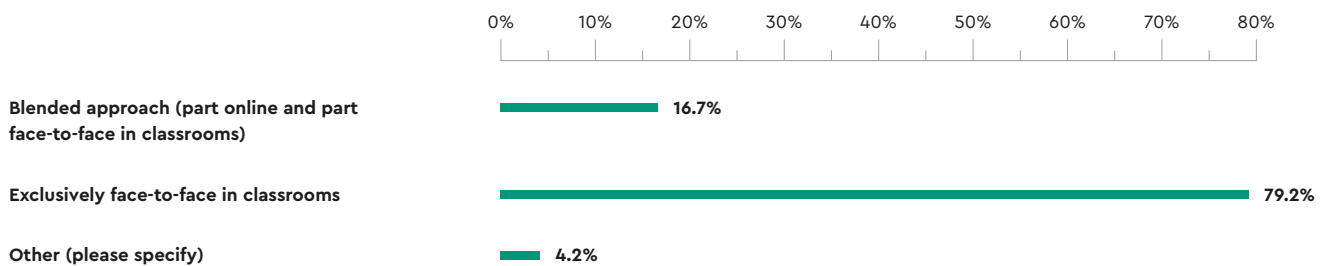


Figure 5.39: School leaders' perspectives on the modes of teaching/learning in post-pandemic conditions

Survey findings (Figure 5.40) show that most school leaders were unsure (58.3%) of the impact that the COVID-19 measures implemented in their organisation had on children's learning and development. A little less than one third (29.2%) of the respondents stated that children got impacted negatively due to the implemented measures. Only 12.5% stated that the measures were positive regarding children's learning and development. This strongly highlights the need to find ways through which to measure children's learning in order to identify whether there were students who missed on learning, in what areas and by how much. It is only possible to take action if the nature and degree of a problem is known.

How did the measures taken due to COVID-19 during the academic year 2020–2021 impact on the learning and development of the children in your school/childcare?

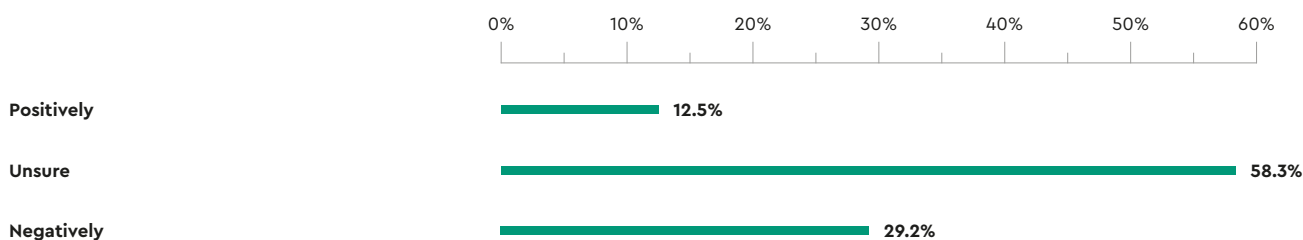


Figure 5.40: School leaders' perspective on the impact of COVID-19 measures on children's learning and development

In item 24, the school leaders were asked to write down their suggestions for ways to improve their school setting in the scenario that the schools/childcare settings will again be required to close down again soon. Only 8 responses (n=8) were provided.

Some suggestions highlighted how important it is to make sure that schools remain open. They also emphasised the need to use available school time efficiently to maximise the time spent on learning when at school. Ensuring school attendance was also suggested.

"All concerned (educators, parents, pupils, superiors) should be made aware of time."

"Ideally, schools are not closed again!"

"It ought to be mandatory, like when physically attending school."

"Assessment procedures and syllabus to be mitigated."

Leaders also suggested greater clarity with respect to the roles and responsibilities of schools' educational staff, more investment in their professional development as well as in ensuring their and the students' well-being.

"More help for teachers during teaching due to the large group of students."

"We now know what to expect and what is expected of us to deliver an effective approach. More training would be sought to ensure more confidence for teacher delivery and different online tools used."

"It is important to address the well-being of staff and pupils even when they are not physically at school. All the school community needs to feel well holistically to be able to teach well and for learning to take place."

There was one suggestion that syllabi demand should be reduced. This suggestion is often a bone of contention with different views, where arguments in favour of cutting down on syllabus may either imply better quality learning or, on the other hand, watered-down learning expectations.

One final comment referred to the importance of engaging parents, even if both worked.

"When it comes to childcare only meetings, parents showed little interest in attending due to work schedules"

5.3.3 Well-being

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of ensuring the teachers' and students well-being. The many uncertainties, social distancing, changing circumstances etc. all contribute to raising levels of stress within the education system. This survey thus asked leaders with respect their own well-being as well as of those at the school.

The first item asked the leaders to rate how stressed they were during the 2020-21 compared to before COVID-19 schools' closure. One quarter (26.1%) stated that they had the same level of stress. Only about 17% stated that they were less stressed. This shows that the pandemic brought a good degree of stress to many leaders in the early years' settings and primary schools.

There was less impact on how satisfied the leaders felt with their life as few (17.4%) stated that they were worse, and only 4.3% felt much worse. On the other hand, around one third (34.8%) felt the same, while more, at 39.1% felt better and 4.3% much better. It is not clear why many more felt more satisfied with their life despite being more stressed.

There was a greater distribution of opinions with respect to how happy leaders felt during 2020-21. One third (30.4%) of the respondents were 'less or much less' happier, while 34.8% said that they were as happy as before. On the other hand, 43.5% of the respondents felt more satisfied in this period. About one third (34.8%) of the leaders stated that they were as happy as before COVID-19. Around another third were either 'much better' (13.0%), or 'better' (21.7%). Likewise around another third either felt 'much worse' (8.7%) or 'worse' (21.7%). This shows that probably, while stress was related to the uncertainty that the pandemic brought to people's lives, it impacted people's satisfaction in their life and their happiness differently.

Compared to before COVID-19 school closures, indicate:

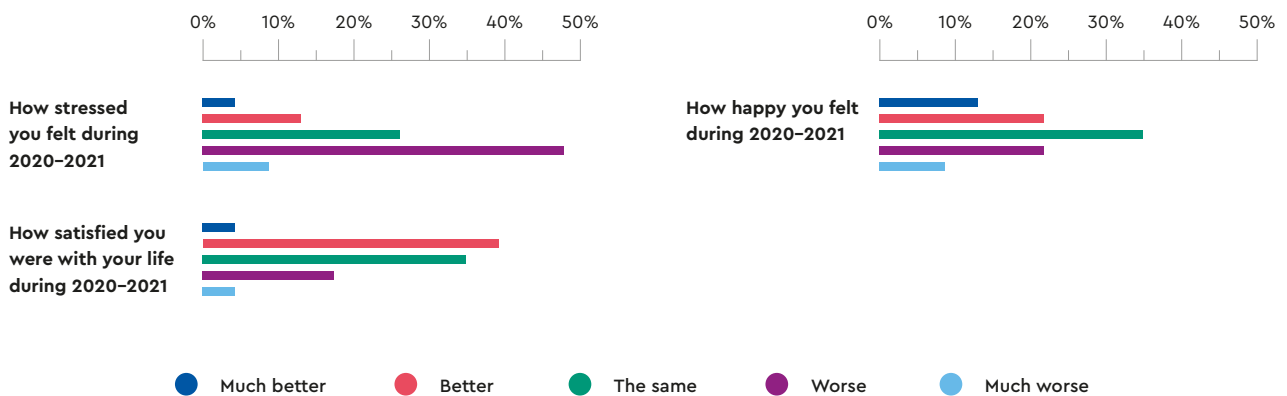


Figure 5.41: Leaders' well-being compared to the before COVID-19 school closures

The school leaders were asked to identify their three main aspects that they experienced during the short COVID-19 school closure which took place in March 2021 (Figure 5.42). The leaders most common experience in this period was increased stress, with a little over half (56.5%) the respondents stating that they felt stressed. A little less than half (47.8%) of the respondents also highlighted that they were able to adapt to the new situation quickly. This shows that they had learnt from the previous school closure the previous year. About a third of the leaders also stated that they could continue their relationship with their staff (34.0%), stay connected with family and friends (34.0%), as well as communicated online confidently (34.0%). To a lesser degree, only 13% said that they felt more productive during this time, experienced mental health issues and felt negative about their work.

Tick the statement/s that best describe/s your experience during the COVID-19 school closure

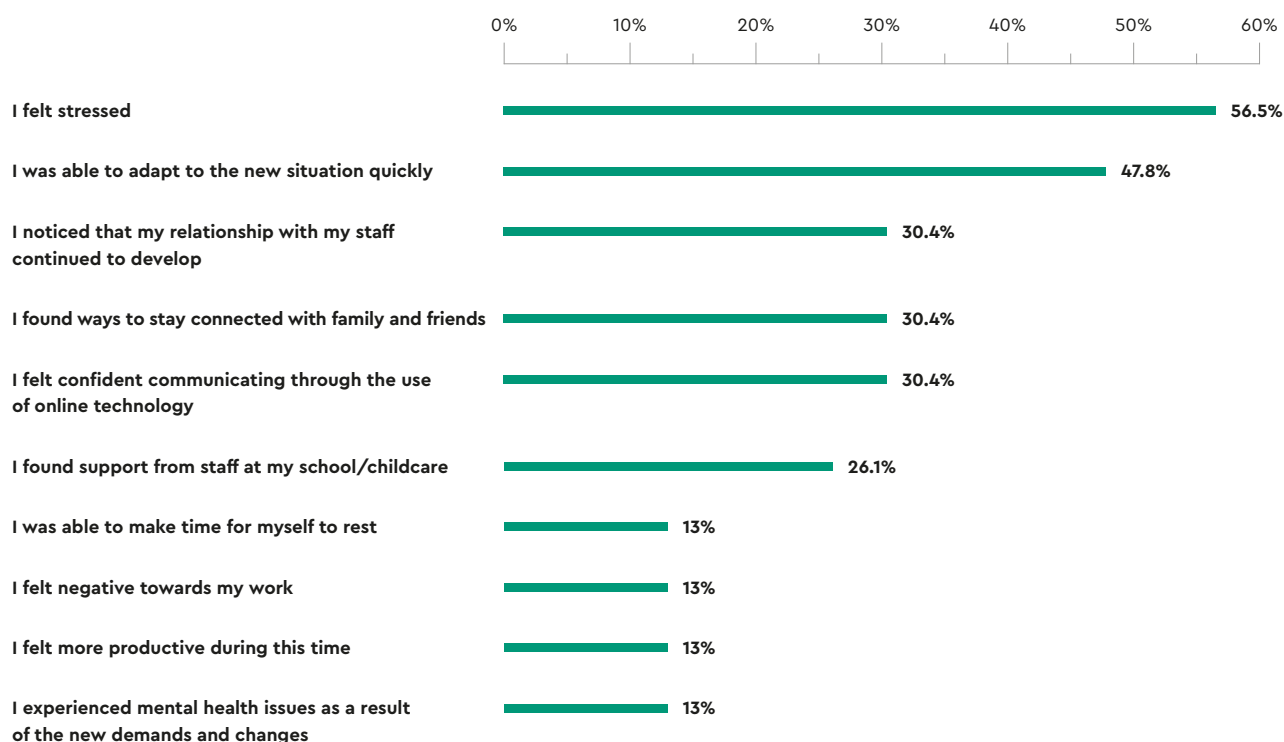


Figure 5.42: School leaders' personal experiences during COVID-19 school closures

Leaders were also asked to indicate how much they spent their time during on certain activities during the 2020-2021 scholastic year in comparison to pre COVID-19 times (Figure 5.43).

The majority of the leaders stated that they spent 'more' or 'much more' time corresponding with staff, parents and students (82.6%). This is understandable due to the changes needed when the schools were closed for a few weeks as well as a result of the 'strange' learning atmosphere created by the restrictions imposing social distancing. The leaders also indicated how this year they also had to spend a lot of time solving problems, with over two thirds (69.6%) indicating that this was 'more' and 'much more' than at pre COVID-19. There were different impacts, however with respect to how much the leaders spent time socialising with friends online, one finds that while around half of the leaders stated that they spent 'more' and 'much more' time, a little less than one third stated that they spent less and another fifth that it was the same. A little less than half also stated that they spent more time with their family, while another third said that they spent less time. This may reflect the different work commitments which leaders may have, where some may have had more challenges to manage the schools/centres compared to other leaders.

The one aspect which seems to have been least impacted by the pandemic is the time spent talking to students, where a little less than half of the leaders stated that they spent the same time. This is understandable as talking to students is a core aspect of the educational process, and which tends to be a priority to educational leaders. However, it still appears that the more time spent on problem-solving, and correspondence may have affected some leaders since around one third (30.4%) stated that they spent less time talking to students. A difference in impact across leaders was also obtained with respect to talking to parents, where about one third (30.4%) indicated that there was no difference, and around one fifth (21.7%) each indicated 'more' or 'less'. This could reflect the different types of educational institutions e.g. childcare centres against primary schools. It may also reflect the different catchment area of the school which have different levels of parental involvement and/or social issues.

Compared to before COVID-19 school closures, how much time per day did you spend on the following during academic years 2020–2021?

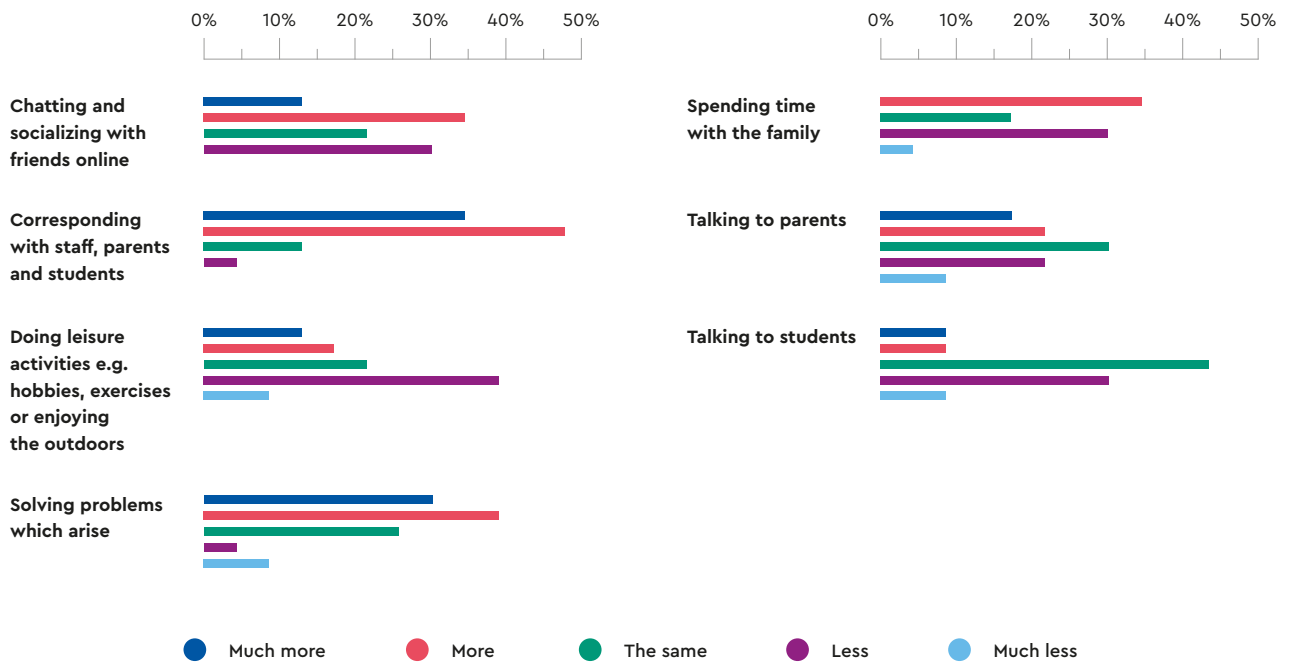


Figure 5.43: How school leaders spent their time during the 2020–2021 scholastic year in comparison to pre-COVID 19 times

The most negative impact on leaders in 2020-21 refers to their time for leisure activities, with a little less than half (47.8%) of the respondents indicating that they had 'less' or much 'less' time for hobbies, exercise and to enjoy the outdoors. There were, none the less, around one third (30.4%) who has 'more' or 'much more' time while it was the same for around one fifth (21.7%) the respondents. While it appears that the new models for schooling had some negative impact, this may also reflect persons' ways of using the less time that they have available.

The leaders were also asked to indicate the three main types of support that they received during 2020-21. The frequency of the options selected are provided in Fig. 5.44. The three most common sources of support to leaders reflect how a great majority of the school leaders felt supported through their relationship with their colleagues (87%), their own family and friends (78.3%) and to a slightly lesser degree by other SLT/managers (69.6%). On the other hand, only 21.7% of the leaders identified their relationship with parents were among the main source of support. This may reflect either limited school-parent collaboration, or else limited parental support as the pandemic created challenges to many people in different ways. It is also interesting that only 8.7% identified their relationship with education officers among the three main source of support.

The responses show how the leaders were overall supported by their staff, reflecting a positive level of collegiality. They also show how the leaders supported each other. This is also a positive. However, support from education officers does not appear to have been one of the main support structures to the leaders. This may either be due to E.O.s working more at teacher rather than at school level. Another explanation may be that the instructions by E.O.s to all schools due to Malta's centralized structure of the state education system was considered to be enough by schools, with leaders thus not seeking more support from the E.Os.

During this scholastic year (2020–2021), I felt supported through my relationship/s with:

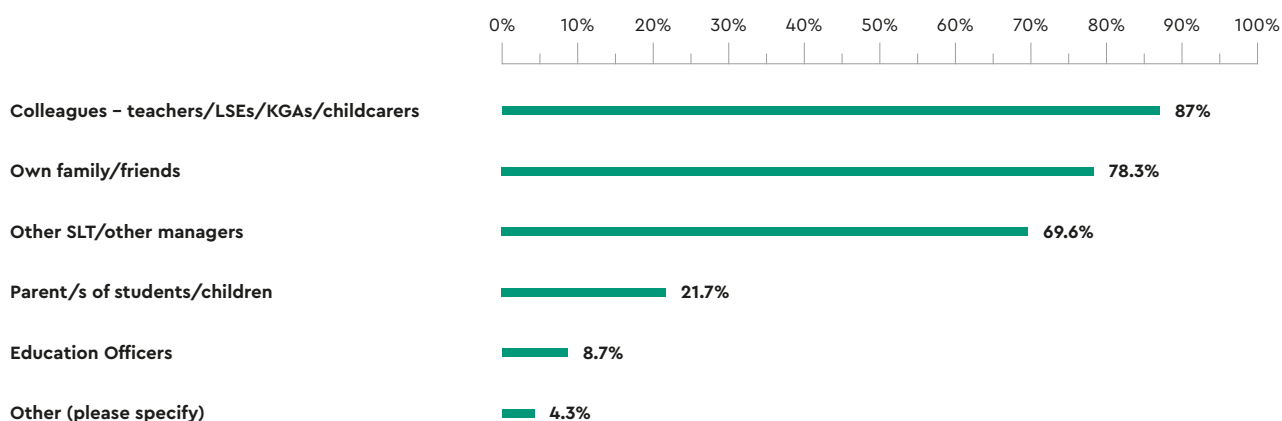


Figure 5.44: Leaders' support network/s during the 2020–2021 scholastic year

The school leaders/management teams were also asked to indicate the main three ways through which they supported their teaching staff during the 2020-2021 scholastic year. According to the responses obtained, the majority of school leaders/management supported their teaching staff through three main approaches: the use of online staff meetings for around two thirds (65.2%) of leaders, group meetings to discuss any difficulties by a slightly lower percentage (60.9%); and giving clear directions about teaching and learning by around half of the leaders (52.2%). Only a minority of the respondents stated that they provided support in the areas such as holding all staff accountable for their work (17.4%); organising whole-school training sessions for remote/online teaching and learning (17.4%), providing administrative support on contacting families and learners (17.4%), issuing guidelines for parents about remote learning (17.4%) and providing technical support for staff to move to remote/online sessions (13%).

These responses highlight the main approaches adopted by the leaders in a scholastic year which mainly involved physical teacher under COVID-19 restrictions with a period of schools' physical shut down. It is understandable that there was use of online meetings as physical meetings for large groups was not allowed under COVID-19 restrictions. There was also a need to tackle difficulties which cropped up as schools had to cater under different conditions to normal schooling. It was also important for schools to give teachers and other educational staff clear and direct instructions to help them understand how they have to operate and educate under COVID-19 conditions. These three approaches were probably the most effective ways to ensure that the schools operated in the best way possible under the conditions at the time.

The leaders' responses also reflect to a degree how possibly the schools had gained experience and were more conversant about how to use and operate online platforms for online teaching and learning. In addition, since the schools were physically open for most of the year, there was less need to use online teaching approaches. The low percentage of leaders issuing guidelines to parents may reflect the different modes of education provision, where some schools required all the students to attend physically while others operated a weekly roster of online/face to face teaching. The low percentage of leaders emphasising teachers' accountability also shows how the education system depends more on a culture of collegial professional trust and less on ensuring that teachers are fulfilling their duties efficiently.

Tick the statement/s that best describe how the school/setting leadership team was supportive with the teaching staff during the scholastic year 2020–2021

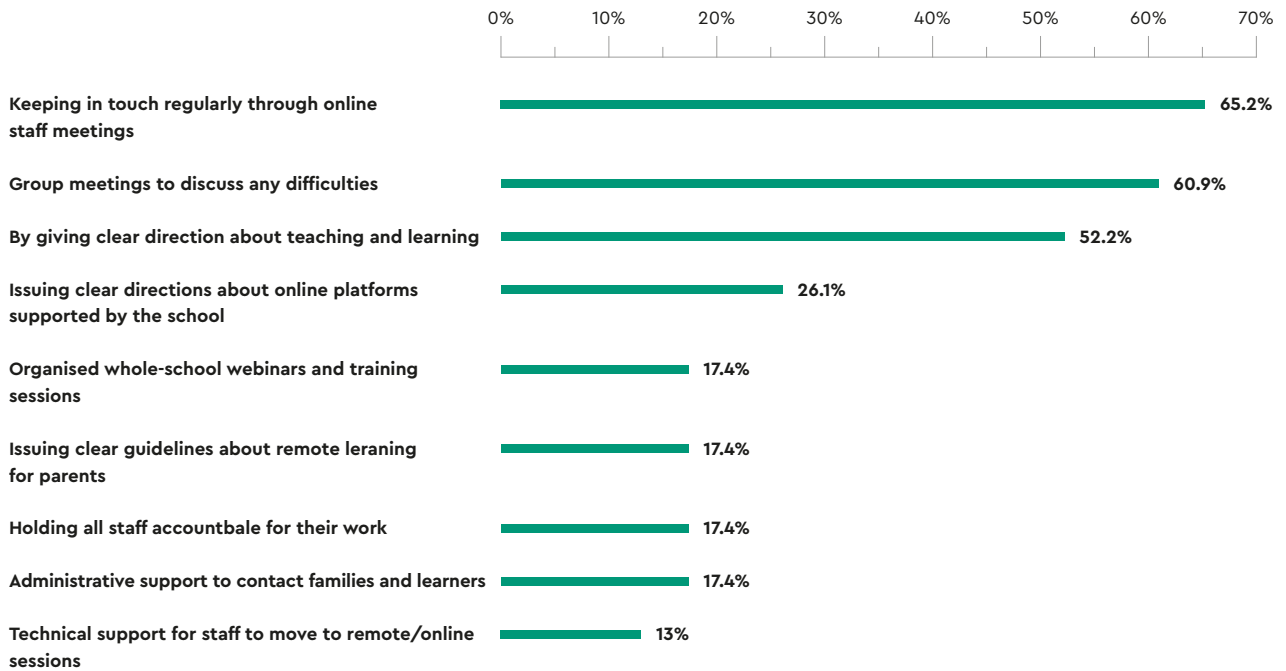


Figure 5.45: The areas which school leaders provided support to their teaching staff in 2020–2021

The leaders were also asked to indicate the three main aspects on how they felt about after working through the pandemic in scholastic year 2020-2021 (Figure 5.46). It was noted that the great majority of the school leaders (78.3%) agreed that the most important feeling was that they managed to survive the year despite all the challenges that they had to face. This is positive as it indicates that leaders were satisfied with how they worked despite all the limitations and restrictions due to the pandemic. A little less than half (43.5%) of the respondents stated that they felt that they had learnt a lot. This is also important as it implies that the circumstances led to a degree of capacity building among school leaders. One third (30.4%) of the leaders also indicated that they felt that they did a good job while another quarter felt that were empowered. Only one quarter (26.1%) mainly felt exhausted, but this is understandable in view of all the changes and restrictions that leaders had to deal with. It is also positive that less than 10% indicated suffering from mental health as one of their three main feelings at the end of the scholastic year.

After working through the pandemic in scholastic year 2020–2021, which statements best express how you felt/are feeling?

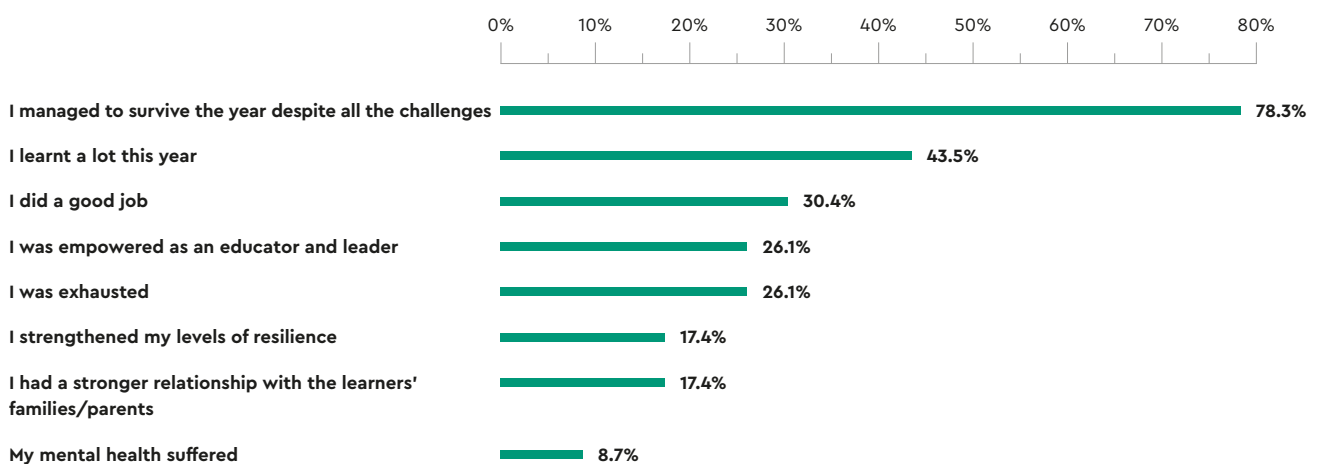


Figure 5.46: How school leaders felt during the 2020–2021 scholastic year

At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were also asked to write any comments or points they may wish to share. Overall 4 responses were received (n=4) as given below demonstrate how some leaders acknowledge the difficulty with planning when one does not know what is coming next. One also questioned whether it was worth having vulnerable children at home.

"Real vulnerable pupils should have stayed at home/online during the academic year 20-21 and not all those who decided not to come as this left a havoc especially amongst low-achievers!"

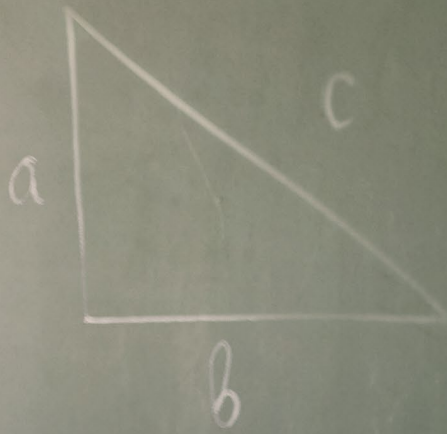
"The reality is, that it is not a one-size fits all for students, but this also applies for schools/colleges too. We need to be aware that institutions need to adapt themselves according to their own cohorts, staff, parents, etc."

"School at primary level is meant to be physical, not online. Children that lost contact with school are suffering and teachers are finding the situation extremely challenging due to the huge gaps in the academic ability."

"I felt that 2020/2021 was more stressful than the previous year - reason being that there was so much more uncertainty in the past scholastic year. Every weekend I wondered what the following week had in store, if we would be physically at school or move to online lessons due to increased numbers in COVID cases or due to mandatory isolation. The year before we were all safe at home and that's the way it was. Albeit frustrating at times. All the uncertainty in 20/21 brought about a lot of anxiety which had a negative impact on our mental well-being."

The analysis of the second questionnaire shows how, despite schools re-opening in the scholastic year 2020-2021, leaders had to face many challenges which the COVID-19 restrictions created in the way that learning could take place. The leaders, respondents to this questionnaire have also showed resilience and great commitment to their work, and most importantly to the children entrusted to them. They also demonstrated a large degree of collegiality within their school as well as with other leaders in their sector. At the end of it all, they are mainly satisfied with the year's outcomes. The challenges have also served as good learning experiences which helped them grow further as leaders.





$$c = \sqrt{a^2 + b^2}$$

$$a = \sqrt{c^2 - b^2}$$

$$b = \sqrt{c^2 - a^2}$$



CHAPTER 6

Discussion of Results

6.1 Teaching and Learning

During COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures, school leaders in Malta encouraged their educators to use various online platforms and tools to teach and communicate with students and parents/caregivers. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, leaders mostly recommended using emails to send content material and homework (44.3%). On the other hand, only 25% of the leaders recommended this approach during school closures in the 2020-2021 scholastic year. Also, surveys indicate an increase in the leaders' recommendation of schools' VLE to share educational content during the 2020-2021 scholastic year (55%) compared to the 2019-2020 scholastic year (41%).

VLE platforms enable a collaborative and measurable mode of online teaching and learning when compared to using emails and social media to communicate with children and their parents/caregivers. Based on the survey findings, it is possible to say that school leaders in Malta had implemented a successful strategy in increasing the usage of school VLE to establish some form of accountability during remote teaching/learning between educators, learners, parents/caregivers, and school management. Higher usage of emails and social media as a tool for sharing educational content at the beginning of the pandemic (as stipulated in the survey run 1) can be explained as a result of teachers/learners being less familiar with the VLE platforms prior to the pandemic. These findings are also in line with the existing pre-pandemic literature on the characteristics of digital leadership in primary schools in Malta. Teachers' continuous professional development initiatives on using digital technologies were not being promoted enough during pre-pandemic times (Scicluna, 2020).

Another important finding of the first survey was that the majority of the school leaders (80%) recommended their educators conduct more live synchronous lessons compared to the sharing of recorded lessons during school closures in the 2019-2020 scholastic year. It is possible to say that conducting live synchronous lessons requires relatively less technical compatibility, skills, and working time when compared to the production of recorded educational content. Leaders' response in this matter can be interpreted as a strategic decision not to exert further stress on their educators during the pandemic conditions and to provide more feasible alternatives. Run 2 of the survey yielded compatible results with the run 1; as the majority of the respondents stated that synchronous teaching/learning (live sessions) was the most effective mode of online learning during the 2020-2021 scholastic year. There may be other valid reasons apart from a reduction on time spent preparing recorded sessions – synchronous lessons gave educators, students and their families more possibilities to interact socially with others, albeit from behind a screen. It also increased the likelihood that teachers in their schools would be able to reach the immediate needs of those learners who participated in the online live sessions, whereas through asynchronous modes, it was more difficult for schools to keep track of students' participation and learning. This is in line with findings in Research Report 3 (Camilleri et al., 2022) – primary school educators also indicated a preference for synchronous modes of remote online learning as a more productive and effective pedagogical strategy during the lockdown periods, an indication that school leaders' perceptions tally with those of educators working more directly with students and families.

In this unprecedented pandemic scenario, findings also indicate that school leaders strove hard to maintain some form of routine that allowed teachers to re-adjust lesson timetables, where students could follow activities and lessons in a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous modes. In fact, as stipulated in the findings of the survey run 1, 60% of the leaders recommended a better schedule of regularly planned online lessons during the third term of the 2019-2020 academic year.

In both surveys, the majority of the leaders stated that their educators were able to teach through a digital platform, cover the curricular content as planned, collaborate with parents, prepare online lessons and digital resources, and conduct synchronous 'live' lessons. However, the new non-traditional modalities used for teaching and learning during the pandemic presented major shifts in assessment culture regarding reach, coverage, and accessibility. According to survey run 1, during the pandemic-related

school closures in the 2019-2020 scholastic year, students' assessment was the most problematic component of teaching and learning. Only 31.8% of the survey participants were satisfied with students' assessments in their school/setting. During the 2020-2021 scholastic year, students' assessment remained relatively problematic when compared to other teaching/learning tasks however the satisfaction rates increased when compared to the previous year (57.1% of senior primary school leaders were satisfied with students' assessment). The increase can be interpreted as a result of a shorter period of pandemic-related school closures and the betterment of online teaching/learning practices during the 2020-2021 scholastic year.

As presented in the findings of the survey run 1, leaders spent a significant portion of their time supporting teachers with online resources (80%), attending webinars to improve digital literacy skills (79.6%), and providing or supporting opportunities for professional development courses (75%) and technical support related to online teaching (66.7%) during the 2019-2020 scholastic year. These findings indicate that the school leaders in Malta provided digital leadership in their school/setting during the pandemic to increase the adoption of new online/digital teaching tools. Other findings from the survey run 2 corroborate these findings; leaders stated that during the 2020-2021 scholastic year, online/offline methods used in teaching/learning were more effective (66.7%) when compared to the previous scholastic year, and the VLE platforms were the most recommended online teaching/learning tool (55%).

During the pandemic, maintaining routine was imperative as leaders were aware that parents needed to plan their support around work commitments. According to the survey run 1, during the first year of the pandemic, leaders' main focus was sustaining "performance and productivity" in terms of keeping task-oriented days going as much as possible. Leaders encouraged their educators toward product-driven tasks such as sending content material and homework via email or VLE (85.3%), a school-wide policy for recorded and synchronous (live) online lessons (75.4%), or communicating with parents via social media (42.6%). Less energy spent/time dedicated to buffers such as sending links/videos for children to watch (18%), singing songs live online with children (16.4%), reading stories to children online (14.8%), or communicating with parents to give them advice about their children (14.8%).

Despite school leaders' confidence in their educators' performance and the online teaching and learning conducted in their schools, their perception of the children's learning experience during the pandemic was less favourable. It is possible to say that school leaders were aware that teaching and learning experiences during the pandemic were diverse. For most students, their learning suffered, albeit to varying degrees. In survey run 1, when leaders were asked how they would rate the children's overall educational experience during lock-down, 36.2% disclosed a negative perception while 29.8% remained neutral. Moreover, according to the survey run 2, the majority of the leaders (89.6%) think that the children/students in their school/setting did not gain social and emotional skills while learning from home during the 2020 – 2021 scholastic year. It was also noted that 66.7% of the school leaders think that children have 'lost' a substantial amount of learning/learning experiences during these COVID-19 times. On the other hand, 41.7% of the leaders indicated that children in their setting/school academically benefited through learning at home.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the shortcomings, fragilities, risks, and inequalities in the education of learners with disabilities within and across countries. According to the United Nations (2020), 1 billion persons with disabilities in the world were among the hardest hit by COVID-19. This problem was also highlighted in the guidelines published by the Maltese Ministry of Health (2021) as "additional efforts are required to consider those who were already disadvantaged and socially vulnerable such as those with additional learning needs". However, according to the survey findings, only 22% of the school leaders in Malta spent more time communicating with parents of learners with a statement of need during the 2019-2020 scholastic year. Further research on the experiences of learners with additional needs during the COVID-19 pandemic is required to fully assess the possible short-comings of school policies set for catering to the needs of LSEs in Malta in times of crisis.

6.2 Learning Spaces

Due to the sudden shift to online teaching/learning during the pandemic, leaders had to acquire new technical skills to adapt and lead online learning environments for their organizations/schools. According to the survey run 1, most of the school leaders had to learn new skills to work with MS Teams and VLE platforms (88.2%). As VLE and MS Teams were among the most recommended teaching/learning platforms by the leaders during the pandemic, it is possible to say that leaders dedicated the necessary time and effort to set an example and guide their teams on the practical usage of these learning environments. School leaders are most effective when they dedicate time to instructional leadership and create a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility (Pont et al., 2008; The Education Commission, 2021). The surveys indicate that this was a priority for most of the participating leaders, who saw their role as instrumental in ensuring continued learning for the students in their schools.

Despite the opportunities for professional development and adaptation of new technologies in schools during the pandemic, both survey findings show that most of the school leaders were willing to keep exclusively face-to-face education in classrooms when returning to post-pandemic times. In the survey run 1, 32% of the leaders were positive in their willingness to keep a blended approach (part online and part face-to-face in classrooms) as a modality after returning to normality whereas, in the survey run 2, only 16.7% of leaders stated that they are willing to keep a blended approach. Understandably, leaders of primary schools and early childhood centres have legitimate concerns about children's overall learning experience through online modalities, especially concerning their social and emotional development. However, following the insights that emerged through the pandemic experience and the likelihood that leaders will need to act proactively in unforeseen events or emergencies in the near or distant future, it is felt that leaders acting as agents of change and exploring the possibilities of new learning technologies should form a more prominent aspect of leaders' work in this new era. Integrating online learning modalities into the school curriculum and after school can benefit teachers, learners, and leaders towards a more flexible, versatile, and personalized teaching/learning experience.

6.3 Relationships and Well-being

According to the findings of both surveys, "stressed" was the most often used word to describe how school leaders felt throughout the pandemic. Compared to pre-pandemic times, leaders reported having higher stress in their life (1st 72%, 2nd 56.5%). Even though being stressed was the most frequently selected response in both surveys, the lower percentage in the survey run 2 can be attributed to leaders' capacity to adapt to the pandemic conditions and change, their resilience and use of prior experience to effectively face and overcome the challenges and hurdles along the way.

Spending less time preparing and commuting for work and having more family time was the most advantageous aspect of working remotely during the pandemic for the school leaders in Malta, a finding that echoes the voices of other stakeholders in the Cov-EM study (Bonello et al.; Camilleri et al., 2022; Deguara et al., 2022; Milton et al., 2022). On the other hand, missing interaction, support, and collaboration of their colleagues, dealing with many changes at once, and difficulties in finding a work/life balance were among the most disadvantageous aspects of remote working. According to the findings of the first and second run of the surveys, during the pandemic school leaders spent much more time corresponding with staff, solving problems, and talking to parents and students when compared to pre-pandemic times. It is possible to say that during the pandemic, most school leaders acted as the glue for the school community, maintaining connectivity between students, teachers, administrators, and families (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school communities relied on its leadership to provide certainty, redirect focus, and build resilience (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). According to survey findings, school leaders in Malta expressed high confidence in adapting to the new situations in their work environment due to COVID-19. A great majority of the respondents in survey run 1 were confident in working well with colleagues online (92.9%), following continuous professional development (86%), in their capacity to communicate with parents and learners (83.7%), in adapting their teaching/care to online platforms (75.6%) and in adapting to work remotely through the use of technology (74.4%). Although these findings might be initially read as "overconfidence", one must also consider that meditating on confidence and resilience is a component of successful leadership in a time of crisis.

Both survey findings show that a great majority of the school leaders in Malta felt supported during the pandemic through their relationships with their colleagues, their own family and friends, and other SLT/managers. Because school leaders were at the forefront of managing the emotional responses of other team members, including anxiety, frustration, loss, and anger, having a support network and self-care should be a priority for the leaders in times of crises (Harris & Jones, 2020). Thus, the strong support network at the grassroots level/bottom hierarchy might be a factor behind the overall confidence and positive outlook of Maltese school leaders, as depicted in both survey findings.

In light of this finding, one can posit that (some or the majority of) leaders felt more confident to operate in a levelled-out field with no hierarchy. Indeed, some leaders together with their staff could generate more collaboration and creativity in this radical/unprecedented more equitable setting brought about by the COVID-19 crisis.



CHAPTER 7

Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of this chapter is to bring together the significant findings of the study while posing some recommendations in light of the findings. A summary of conclusions for each of the three main aspects investigated in this research study, i.e. teaching and learning, learning spaces, and relationships and well-being is presented first, followed by one or more recommendations that stem from a particular result or insight.

7.1 Recommendations

Findings from this study show that the COVID-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on Leaders in Primary Schools, Kindergartens and Childcare Centres in relation to teaching and learning, learning spaces and well-being and relationships. We hereby provide a number of recommendations to the respective stakeholders to be proactive and prepare for the eventuality of another emergency, as well as to provide equitable services to all educators while ensuring quality of provision across all sectors.

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7.1.1 Teaching and Learning

- Over the course of the two years surveyed in run 1 and run 2, school leaders felt the need to provide suggestions to educators regarding the means of communication to use between the school and the home, as well as the modes of remote online learning to adopt, particularly when schools were physically closed. Whereas email and social media seemed to take precedence during the first year, probably due to teachers' familiarity with both means of communication, it was observed that the use of online platforms became more prevalent eventually, with leaders promoting it as a more effective means of communication to reach as many learners as possible (reduced to 25% in terms of the number of leaders recommending their use when compared to 44% in the first run). The inconsistent and haphazard way in which the link between the home and the school was maintained for different groups of learners necessitates a thorough analysis of what worked and what was lacking over the pandemic years for an honest and pre-emptive assessment of the efficacy of the choices made by individual schools or sectors in this regard – hopefully leading to more informed future decision-making to happen in the event of another emergency.
- Moreover 60% of leaders also encouraged teachers to create and maintain better scheduled online sessions during the third term of the 2019-2020 scholastic year, which continued to be preferred during the second run. Similarly to findings in Research Report 3 (Camilleri et al., 2022), synchronous modes of online learning were deemed to be more desirable, mostly for their effectiveness in directly engaging and interacting with learners, as opposed to asynchronous modes. School leaders may have also attempted to reduce the time spent preparing recorded sessions through their promotion of live online sessions. The lengthy process that transpired between the shift to remote online learning and a more regular and accessible educational experience for all learners demands that school leaders are equipped with more skills and competencies to deal

with emergencies in a timely and effective fashion. This can only occur through specific training and regular professional development that does not only focus on knowledge-building but also on the continued development and upskilling of leadership skills.

- According to survey run 1, during the pandemic-related school closures in the 2019-2020 scholastic year, students' assessment was the most problematic component of teaching and learning. Only 32% of the survey participants were satisfied with students' assessments in their school/setting, a finding which is also echoed by primary school educators in Research Report 3 (Camilleri et al., 2022). This poses some questions and concerns on the way the pandemic, and more specifically the reshaped educational scenario, may have relegated assessment to its more traditional positioning as separate and detached from curriculum and pedagogy. One is called to rethink the place of assessment in learners' educational trajectories – to ensure it is always regarded and treated as an integral part of the teaching and learning process rather than as independent or disconnected, irrespective of the context or mode in which learning happens.
- It was also noted that 67% of the school leaders think that children have 'lost' a substantial amount of learning/learning experiences during these COVID-19 times. This concern cannot be ignored nor disregarded, considering the pandemic lasted for a relatively long time when compared to learners' educational lifespan. This calls for a thorough evaluation of the extent of the learning losses that occurred for different groups of learners across the age and ability spectrum. As a nation, we need to adopt a pro-active stance to identify the gaps in learning and provide remedial or enriched opportunities that will support learners in building on their current levels of attainment for a paced, scaffolded and effective learning journey that takes into account the gains and losses brought by the pandemic. The significant role of school leaders in supporting, leading, and guiding educators and families in this endeavour cannot be stressed enough.
- During the pandemic, the core subjects were given more importance while other subject areas, traditionally considered less important in the hierarchical structure of subject content such as religion, social studies and the creative arts, were not seen as a priority. Less time was dedicated to the teaching of the latter subject areas, in proportion to the importance and priority given to them as areas of learning. It seems that in times of emergency and scarcity, decision-making in terms of educational priorities still upholds certain key areas of learning in higher esteem than other subject areas. This pushes us to further analyse the core values, beliefs and attitudes regarding what is crucial and fundamental, and what is trivial and less central to a child's education in terms of national priorities for the education of our citizens. Considering the 21st century skills promote so much more than the simple acquisition of literacy and numeracy, one needs to reconsider what the aims of education should be and how to ensure that a more holistic and all-encompassing education is ensured at all times and levels.
- Moreover, leaders were not satisfied with the assessment and learning of what are considered the 'softer' subjects. Having said this, one is compelled to challenge and question this expressed dissatisfaction of school leaders with the way decisions regarding time spent teaching and assessing different subject areas was done. This frustration seems to allude to a sense of learned helplessness on the part of leaders who would be expected to provide the right guidance and support that educators in Maltese schools would have needed in dire circumstances such as a pandemic. One instantly thinks of the proverbial 'kaptan tal-bnazzi' – a fair weather kind of leader. Yet, it is also true that things are not always that simple and that school leaders differ in the resources available as well as their leadership styles, not only due to own personal and professional values, but also built on the contextual and sectorial factors in which their leadership is embedded.
- Leaders were also preoccupied with the social and emotional impact of online learning for a whole generation of learners. According to the second run of the questionnaire, 90% of school leaders believed that children gained no social and emotional skills while learning from home during the 2020 – 2021 scholastic year, implying that when schools were physically closed, learners could not develop holistically due to the restrictions of the new online learning scenario and the isolation they experienced when they only interacted with their teachers and classmates online from behind a screen. This finding links with a previous one highlighting the tendency to focus on core subject matter when teaching online. One is required to contest such a constrained view of the role of education whereby academic skills in terms of literacy and numeracy seem to be prioritised, even though leaders and educators could see that children were suffering in terms of their social and emotional development.

7.1.2 Learning Spaces

- Technology is rapidly evolving and changing. Findings from this study show that not all leaders had the necessary digital skills. Most school leaders, had to invest time in acquiring new skills to upgrade themselves, and be able to access learning platforms such as MS Teams and school VLE. Therefore, education leaders need to be provided with continuous training, to leverage their existing skillsets in becoming “leaders of digital change” (US Department of Education, 2017, p. 1). Education leaders should not only be well-versed in digital literacy, to be confident to access digital platform themselves, but they should be knowledgeable and skilful enough to support their staff. Such continuous and upgraded training should provide education leaders with the ability and skills to lead teachers in their setting to develop technology-driven classrooms.
- This study, and more particularly the second survey showed that leaders assisted their educators in improving their online/ remote teachings through encouraging collaboration between staff (83.3%), providing professional development courses related to online teaching (75%), and providing technical support (66.7%). Through continuous training both in the use of technology as well in acquiring new and innovative instructional leadership skills, school leaders should be able to create a culture of collaboration, shared responsibility and a shared learning vision where all members of their setting can feel part of. This will help the whole school to take full advantage of technology and manage their school setting more effectively, in ways that best meet the needs of the learners in their school (Pont et al., 2008; The Education Commission, 2021). Thus, through such training, education leaders should be skillful to develop a plan that translates their vision into action (US Department of Education, 2017). This will help them create a culture and conditions for innovation and change, and hence, be proactive in challenging times and in times of change.
- Findings from the study show that the majority of EC and primary school teachers were willing to keep face-to-face education exclusively in the classroom upon returning to post-pandemic conditions (1st 66%, 2nd 79.2%). While it is true that face-to-face education can never be replaced with online modes, yet, this finding might also reflect hesitancy in using technology by teachers. Training education leaders and teachers does not suffice if we would like to have educators who are proficient and feel confident using technology. Education leaders and hence, schools, should be provided with in-school qualified technical support staff that are well-versed in the increasing use of technology to be able to support the daily use of technology in schools.
- A robust technology infrastructure is essential in the current digital era, to transform the digital learning environment. Schools should be provided with the latest technology and should have to access age- appropriate remote learning platforms devices and infrastructure. Leaders should also be allowed to take ownership of infrastructure development and maintenance (US Department of Education, 2017).
- When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Malta, most institutions, like other institutions abroad, were unprepared because severe conditions and crisis, are uncommon. Given the possibility that climate change might cause new force major conditions in the future, as well as the possibility of other pandemics, schools should be more prepared with significant adaptation strategies. Thus, in order for schools to be proactive in times of crisis, the Directorate for Education should develop a set of new initiatives, guidelines, action plans and policies needed for supporting school leaders in managing crises effectively. This would entail embracing the use of ICT, not only for curricular enhancement but also for continuous professional development, innovation and creativity. This will help school leaders in becoming confident technology leaders when implementing the use of educational technologies in their school/setting immediately at the onset of a crisis and to promote it within their school community.
- In line with findings from Research Report 4 (Deguara et al., 2022), this study indicates that while most pupils attending Maltese schools are among the most digitally equipped in the EU, yet, a digital divide between those who could afford to buy technological equipment and good internet connection and those who could not is still very evident. Investments in this area should be maintained to ensure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as those who have individual educational needs are included.

7.1.3 Relationships and Well-being

- This study revealed that most school leaders felt supported and confident to operate in a non-hierarchical manner. Nevertheless, the word 'stress' overshadowed leaders' voices in both surveys. Educators look up to their leaders, and learners' achievements depend on effective leadership; hence, leaders' relational, social, and emotional needs are not to be overlooked. We recommend that school leaders receive the necessary well-being and mental health support during this post-pandemic era. For example, continuous professional development for leaders may tap into the areas of leadership styles for crisis management and how to navigate teacher well-being challenges as well as learner well-being (Kwatubana & Molaodi, 2021).
- This study is helpful to policymakers of early and primary education to address the urgent need for leaders' job-related stress from the stories of leaders' pandemic lives. Evidence-based key findings may guide policy development to support leaders' wellness and reduce their stress through sustained effective leadership and job satisfaction (Woo & Steiner, 2022). In this light, we recommend that the development of socially just policy documents that are relevant to school leaders should be based on ground-up research (i.e., in this case, grounded in leaders' voices). Valuing and recognising school leaders' perspectives is key to strengthening the links between research, policy and practice in educational leadership – and improving the well-being and relationships in early years settings and primary schools.

7.2 Concluding thoughts

The study set out to explore the perspectives of Leaders in Primary Schools, Kindergarten and Childcare Centres about the overall impact of COVID-19 on education and the opportunities and challenges the schools they lead experienced during these unprecedented pandemic times. Results from this study point to the significant role that leaders had in the adaptation process and smooth running of educational settings for the early childhood and primary school population in Malta. Both successes and challenges were evident in school leaders' responses, although the frequent use of the word 'stress' throughout the surveys brings to the fore the emotional impact that the high demands and expectations for continued learning and educational provision inevitably had on educational professionals, including those in leadership positions.

The valuable insights gained from the study reinforce the need to provide more opportunities for different educational stakeholders to share their experiences and perspectives on critical issues in a national effort to continually improve pedagogy and practice for all learners, guarantee job satisfaction and attend to the overall well-being of the adults who lead, teach and work with them, irrespective of the contextual factors surrounding educational provision. The instrumental role of digital technologies and the confidence needed to maximise their use for the benefit of the teaching and learning processes in schools cannot be disregarded – enabling school leaders to develop their professional skills to empower others in this respect is being recommended. Through appropriate training, support systems and a positive mindset, school leaders thus become agents of change that are able to inspire, lead effectively, support and engage in crisis management when and as required.



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Appendix

Appendix A

Respondent Demographics

Characteristic	Survey 1 2020 (N=126)	Survey 2 2021 (N=40)
	% (n)	% (n)
Gender		
Female	90.4 (114)	90 (36)
Male	8.7 (11)	10 (4)
Other	0.9 (1)	0
Age range in years		
Under 18	0	0
18-24	0	0
25-34	19 (24)	15 (6)
34-44	35.7(45)	35 (14)
45-54	32.5 (41)	42.5 (17)
55-64	12.7(16)	7.5 (3)
65+	0	0
Missing data	0	0
Nationality		
Maltese	96.8(122)	97.5 (39)
Other	3.2 (4)	2.5 (1)
Missing data	0	0
Role in education		
Head of Primary School	30.1 (22)	0
Assistant Head of Primary School	28.8 (21)	0
Childcare Center Manager	20.5 (15)	30 (12)
Other Leadership Roles	20.5 (15)	0
Assistant Head of Primary School in a Church School	0	12.5 (5)
Assistant Head of Primary School in a State School	0	32.5 (13)
Head of Primary School in a Church School	0	5 (2)
Head of Primary School in a State School	0	7.5 (3)
Head of Primary Sch. in an Independent School	0	5 (2)
Missing data	53	0

Highest level of education		
Postgraduate Degree	68.3 (56)	67.5 (27)
Bachelor's Degree	14.6 (12)	17.5 (7)
Vocational Qualification	13.4 (11)	15 (6)
Secondary Level	2.4 (2)	0
Primary Level	1.2 (1)	0
Missing data	44	0

Type of residence		
Flat/Apartment	28.6 (24)	0
Terraced House	28.6 (24)	0
Maisonette	23.8 (20)	0
Semi-detached Villa/House	11.9 (10)	0
Detached Villa/House	3.6 (3)	0
Other	3.6 (3)	0
Missing Data	42	0

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; Ғaḏ-Ḑabbar; 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; Ґejtun; Ґurrieq.

4. Western

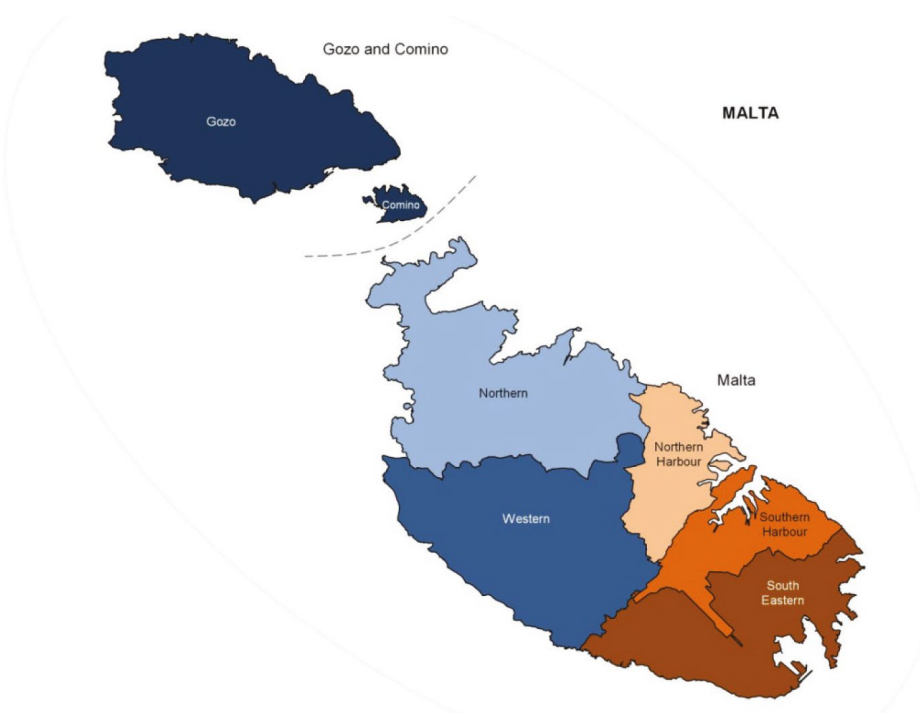
Ғad-Dingli; Ғal Balzan; Ғal Lija; ҒAttard; Ғaḏ-Ḑebbuġ; Iklin; Mdina; Mtarfa; Rabat; Siġġiewi.

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; Ḑebbuġ.



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







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Early Childhood &
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RESEARCH GROUP

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