

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN IRELAND

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INTRODUCTION

On the 28th of February 2020, the first reported case of the coronavirus, or COVID-19, was reported on the Isle of Ireland (Murray & Duffy, 2020). On the 11th of March, the World Health Organisation (WHO), declared the coronavirus as a pandemic - the next day Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced that all third level institutions, schools and childcare centres would remain closed. Over 18 months later, the impact of the closure of Special Needs Education (SNE) schools is apparent.

Education is one of the most important contributing elements for child social and cognitive development. Education and the learning environment provided by the schooling system enable successful development of social and cognitive development in children (Adey, Shayer & Shayer, 2006). For children with special needs, these experiences and this environment further provide social and academic advantages that can positively impact the child for life. However, over the past 18 months, SNE schools across Ireland have periodically closed and reopened, with Ireland being one of the only countries in the world to close Special Education schools.

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study was to analyse how the closure of SNE schools impacted the affected children and their families

METHODOLOGY

The research conducted for this project was done in a qualitative manner. Participants were asked to complete a survey. Each participant was given a survey to complete. Instructions were given at the beginning of the survey of how to complete the questionnaire. Results of this research were analysed through content analysis.

RESULTS

Results from this study found that the pandemic brought on as a result on COVID-19 impacted not only the children but the wider family unit as well.

Results further showed the lack of support these children and their families received from their schools and the Irish government.

A worrying trend was also found regarding the deterioration of both the child and the caregiver's mental health.

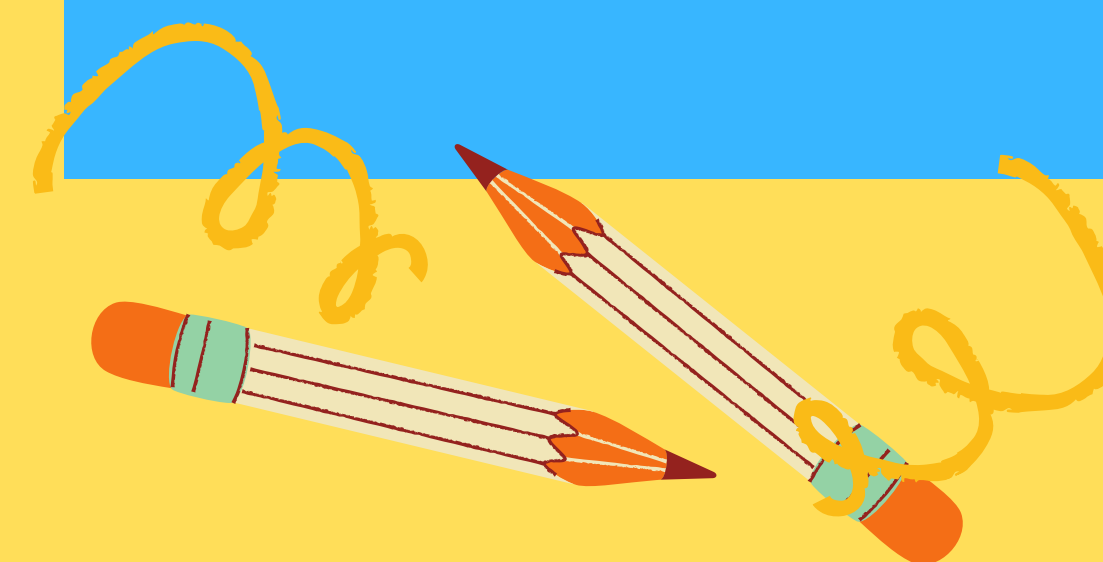
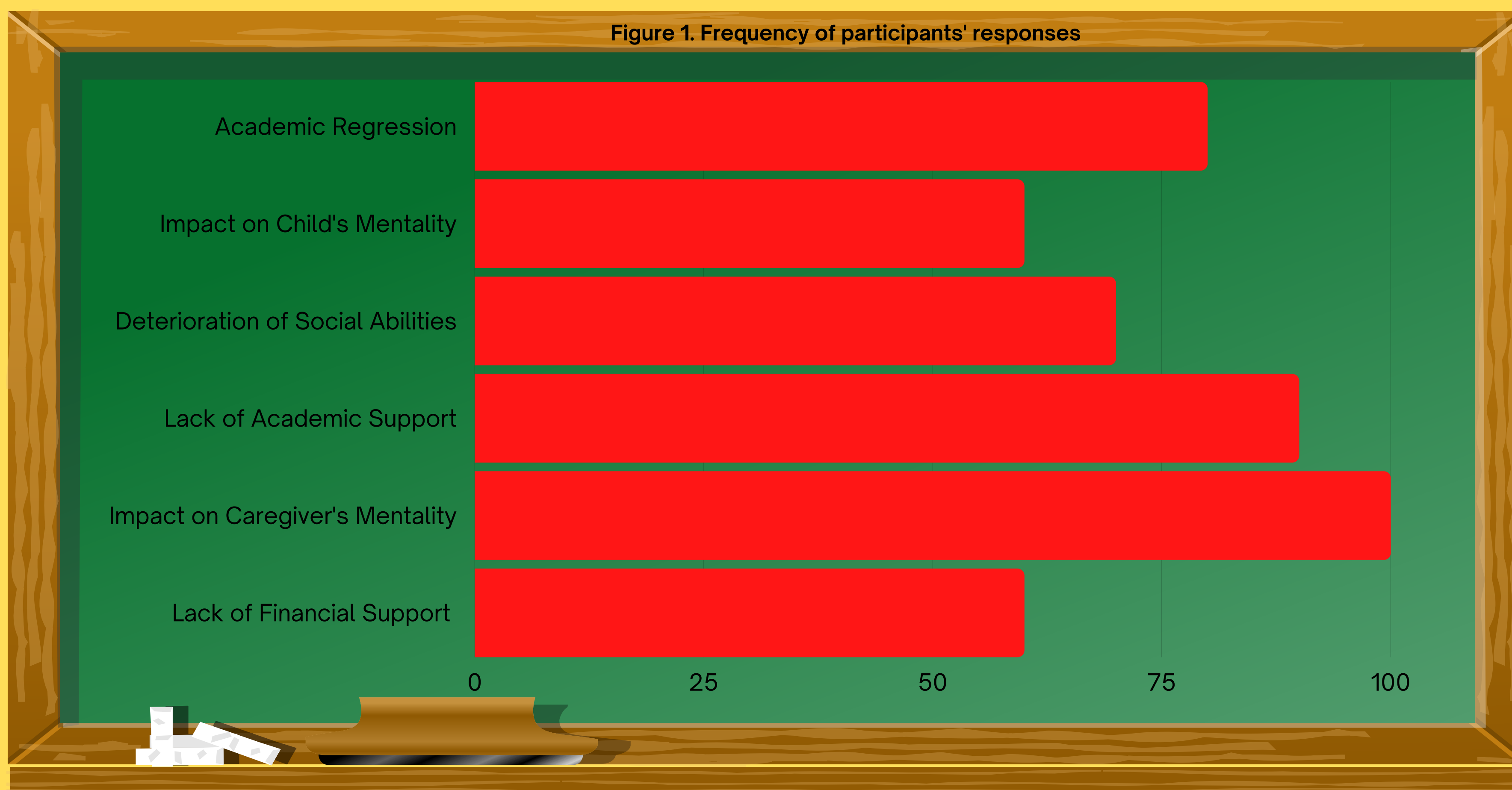


Figure 1. Frequency of participants' responses



ANALYSIS

- Only half of participants were offered support by their school and/or the government.
- 100% of participants believe their child/children suffered socially as a result of the closure of SNE schools.
- Half of the participants had another child who required special assistance living in the home.
- More than half of the children received treatment, such as therapeutic intervention, in school.
- 100% of participants believed their child/children would have benefited from additional assistance from the school and/or government during the lockdown period.

“SCHOOL PROVIDES SUCH A HUGE CHUNK OF ROUTINE FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS, AND WHEN YOU TAKE THAT AWAY LIFE BECOMES SO MUCH HARDER”

Sarah Ledwige, MSc in Psychology & residential carer for children with intellectual disabilities

CONCLUSION

Already, a number of issues exist within the special education system; for example, lack of places in special education schools and units in mainstream schools.

However, this is an issue that must be addressed. The Irish government and education system must implement and develop a plan so that if we were to enter a lockdown again, for whatever reason, these children and their families will be appropriately and adequately looked after.

The results from this study have shown the stark reality faced by approximately one in four families in Ireland (National Council for Special Education, 2021).

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