



L-Università ta' Malta
Faculty of Education



Early Childhood &
Primary Education
RESEARCH GROUP

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

Perspectives of Parents with Children in Early and Primary Education

RESEARCH REPORT 4

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NOVEMBER 2022



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Published in 2022

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Please cite this publication as:

Deguara, J., Bonello, C., Camilleri, R., Milton, J., & Muscat, T. (2022). *The COVID-19 and Education in Malta (Cov-EM) Study: Perspectives of Parents with Children in Early and Primary Education. Research Report 4*. Malta University Publishing.

ISBN: 978-9918-0-0333-4 (electronic)

ISBN: 978-9918-0-0250-4 (paperback)

Design and layout: Marketing, Communications and Alumni Office, University of Malta

Cover design: Marketing, Communications and Alumni Office, University of Malta

Foreword

COVID-19 brought with it new realities for families in Malta. This study sheds light on the challenges faced by parents in navigating the complex and multifaceted craft of parenting during the pandemic. As with other international studies, this research confirmed a fundamental sociological realisation that while the virus has infected all sectors of a given population, the pandemic failed in the test of equity (Borg, 2022a). As argued elsewhere, the virus affected families asymmetrically (Borg & Mayo, 2022), with recent local research confirming that the pandemic intersected with the families' economic and socio-cultural capital as well as with the individual school's ability to provide quality online education, in reproducing the socio-scholastic gap (Cocker, 2022; Salerno, 2022) that was evident before the pandemic struck globally (Borg, 2022b).

In the context of the foregoing, evidence-based sociological insights, one can better understand why parents' perceptions and reactions differed in the present study. The inter-sectorial divisions were laid bare in this study when parents complained that there was inequity of provision between the three education sectors. Once again, in the eyes of the informed parents, church and independent schools were more prepared than their state counterparts in shifting to online modes of learning and in providing support. Concrete observations that stem from parents' lived experiences, confirm that while socio-economic status plays a noticeable part in Malta's differentiated scholastic results, schools have a lot to answer for the negative educational predicament that the country is burdened with. The lack of pupil engagement and motivation reported by the researchers can be partially traced to inconsistent support and care, mentioned by parents in the same study.

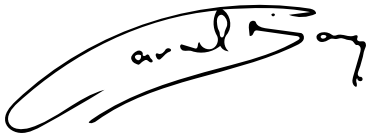
Positive and productive home-school links are recognised as key to equity in education (OECD, 2017). As indicated in the study, schools had improved their overall performance in the second year of the pandemic. Parents were progressively happier with the schools' performance in areas ranging from management of online learning to communication and technical support. However, the second survey continued to report limitations to home-school communication. Reliable internet access remained an issue all through the study, compounded by a feeling of helplessness and abandonment that grew from Survey 1 to Survey 2. Effective communication is positively correlated to building home-school relationships and strong support systems that help children develop holistically. Based on evidence generated by the study, the authors are right in advocating for an improved home-school dialogue across the local educational board.

COVID-19 laid bare some of the difficulties that families face on a daily basis in their attempt to juggle personal, family and work-related tasks at once. With the private sphere of the family seriously challenged by the general expectation that families are permanently connected, the authors of this study threw further light on the impact of diminishing private space and time on the families' mental wellbeing. Of significance is the statistic that more than 50% of the participating parents felt 'stressed-out' and 'out-of-control'. This is a worrying datum, given that children's holistic development is heavily dependent on emotionally positive contexts. International research analysing the state of mental health of parents during the pandemic correlates parental stress and anxiety with an array of issues, ranging from children's psychological problems to harsh parenting (Chung et. al., 2020).

In general, parental voice is what makes this study special. Having dedicated the past twenty-five years to advocating for parent-focused research and professional development, I consider this study as another opportunity to decentre parents from the culture of silence they are often locked in, to then recentre them as protagonists of educational change. The number of recommendations that emerge from parental quotidianity confirm that parental presence and the normalisation of parental engagement are inescapable features of educational change and social possibility.

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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
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
LSE	Learning Support Educator
MTL	Master in Teaching and Learning
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.



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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we are thankful to the parents of children in early childhood and primary education, who participated in this study. Without their generous collaboration, this study would not have been possible. We thank them for their time in filling-in the questionnaires.

We also wish to express our appreciation to:

The research support officers who collaborated on this report: Mr Luke Spiteri for his excellent work related to data preparation and statistical analysis; and Ms Maria Caruana for her contribution to the compilation of parts of this report.

The prior members of the Early Childhood and Primary Research Group, Prof. Suzanne Gatt, Dr Lara Said and Dr Jane Spiteri, for their contribution during the first phase of the Cov-EM Study.

Prof. Carmel Borg, who very willingly accepted to write the Forward of this report.

The Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education and the Faculty of Education for their support.

The University of Malta for its support in the award of partial funding for this study through the Research Support Services Directorate (Seed Fund).

The Marketing, Communications & Alumni Office for their contribution to the layout and design of the report.

Our families and loved ones for their patience, constant support and encouragement to persevere in our academic and research endeavours.

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

Executive Summary

In March 2020, as part of the COVID-19 restriction measures, schools in Malta, like many schools worldwide, had to close their doors and shift face-to-face teaching and learning to online modes. During this time of disruption, challenges and uncertainty, the *Early Childhood and Primary Education (ECPE) Research Group*, within the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Faculty of Education, sought to develop a study on the impact of the pandemic on five groups of stakeholders in education (ITE University Students, Early Childhood Educators, Primary School Educators, Parents of Children in Early and Primary Education and Leaders in Childcare Settings and Primary Schools). As a result, the COVID-19 and Education Malta (Cov-EM) research was created.

Perspectives of Parents with Children in Early and Primary Education

The purpose of Research Report 4 was: (i) to explore parents' perspectives about the impact of COVID-19 on *teaching and learning* on their children in early childhood and primary schools in Malta in view of the pedagogies and strategies adopted by their educators during the COVID-19 pandemic; (ii) to examine issues of availability, accessibility and affordability of online and offline *learning spaces* found at home and how these influenced the children's experiences during the pandemic; (iii) to investigate how the rapid shift to online learning and adhering to COVID-19 mitigation measures have affected their lives and their *well-being and relationships*.

Methods

An online survey was selected as a safe, effective and efficient manner to collect data during the pandemic, when restrictions were in place. The study was conducted over two phases: Run 1 of the study was conducted in September, 2020 and Run 2 was conducted a year later, in September, 2021. In each Run, an online questionnaire addressing the three key concepts of teaching and learning, learning spaces and well-being and relationships was sent to each of the identified stakeholders. The questionnaires were designed to measure the respondents' attitudes, opinions or perceptions and were composed of mainly multiple-choice items with a few open-ended ones. The data was extracted and imported into SPSS for analysis. The participants were parents of children in early and primary education, and therefore aged 0 – 11 years. This survey got the highest number of respondents among the five Cov-EM studies. The first survey totalled 815 participants, whilst the second yielded 411 participants. In both surveys, the large majority of participants were Maltese females aged between 35 and 44 years.

Main Findings

Findings from both surveys will be presented in three sections. Each section is headed by one of the subsidiary research questions as these reflect the three main concepts that frame the study: teaching and learning, learning spaces, well-being and relationships. Some questions were only included in the first survey and some others are new additions to the second survey. Where the same question item is referred to for both surveys the percentages are rounded-up and many follow in a bracket for the first and second survey respectively (1st survey % and 2nd survey %).

The perspectives of parents on the overall impact the pandemic on teaching and learning

1. The majority of parents were generally satisfied with the way schools communicated guidelines about the changing modes of teaching and learning: 90% in the first survey and 80% in the second.
2. Most parents were satisfied with the way schools shifted teaching and learning to remote modes. From 58.8% of the parents showing satisfaction in Survey 1, this increased to 70.4% in Survey 2.
3. Teachers used a variety of online modes for teaching and learning and ways of communicating with parents. Asynchronous modes were preferred in the first school closure while synchronous methods were more preferred in the second school closure.
4. Parents claimed that synchronous activities or lessons allowed their children to interact with their friends and their educators, something which they really enjoyed.

5. More than half of the parents (55.7% and 62.5%) claimed that their children preferred real-time, synchronous online sessions.
6. Parents complained that there was inequity of provision between the three education sectors. Parents considered that church and independent schools were more prepared than state schools to shift to online modes of learning and to provide support to children.
7. The majority of parents did not agree with the children having had their education halted when schools closed.
8. 80.2% (in 2020) and 89.6% (in 2021) of the parents claimed that Maths was the most taught subjects in primary classes, while 67.1% and 71.9% claimed that PSCD together with foreign languages (96.5%) was the least taught. Language lessons were also very frequent with English being taught more than Maltese in both surveys.
9. In Survey 1, childcare and kindergarten educators did not go online frequently when compared to teachers in the primary years, with parents of children in the early years indicating that educators seldom did online activities. Evidently in Survey 2 early years educators were more prepared and held more activities remotely. Developing a children's web (81.9% and 91.4% in each respective year) and eating lunch together (78.3% and 82.7%) were the two activities that were the least practiced in both surveys by early years educators. While circle time was yet another activity which 74.6% of the parents claimed that it was rarely done in Survey 1, this percentage decreased to 42.6% in Survey 2. On the other hand, in both surveys parents indicated that educators strongly resorted to traditional activities such as the numeracy (68.9% and 58% in each respective year), the teaching of letters (36.7% and 59.9%). However, there was a shift in the type of the most practiced activities in early years settings in Survey 2, where, according to parents, singing nursery rhymes or songs (72.2%), and storytelling (69.8%) were the most favoured activities done online.
10. Lack of face-to-face interaction, lack of children's engagement, lack of motivation reduced contact time and lack of support for children were amongst the main concerns of parents during online teaching.
11. Parents were generally more positive in the second survey about the way schools and educators prepared for remote modes of teaching, the way they managed online learning, and the level of support they provided.

The perspectives of parents on strategies and learning spaces which young children made use of during the pandemic

1. Most parents had to make changes to their home environment in order to create a learning space for their children to follow online activities.
2. The majority of parents claimed that their children had to share their learning space with their sibling or a parent working from home; however, most of these parents stated that in their view, their children had enough personal, undisturbed space to follow online activities or lessons.
3. 69% of the parents in Survey 1 claimed that their children had to share a computer or laptop; this percentage decreased considerably to 54.8% in Survey 2. This shows that some parents were more prepared for the second lockdown and had invested in buying technological equipment for the children to follow online learning.
4. The use of reliable internet access increased slightly from 60.2% in Survey 1 to 61.2% in Survey 2, once again, reflecting the parent's initiative to invest in good internet connection.
5. The pandemic also pushed parents to learn how to access online platforms, Powerpoints and Apps.
6. Children worked with different virtual spaces during online learning. They mainly were exposed to the use of Apps for quizzes, Powerpoints programmes and video-conferencing to learn. Parents mentioned MS Teams and Teleskola as the most common platforms used by children.
7. The majority of parents in Survey 2, indicated that they preferred to have their children to be in school and learn through the traditional, face-to-face interaction rather than through online means. It was interesting to note that in Survey 1, which was still early days in the pandemic, 43% of the parents at the time, preferred a blended approach, where they suggested for learning to be partly carried online and partly face-to-face while 35.8% indicated that they would opt for online learning.

The perspective of parents on the impact of the pandemic on their and their children's overall well-being and relationships

1. While in Survey 1, 67.9% of the parents felt confident with supporting their children with the use of online technology, even if as indicated above, most parents had to learn how to navigate online domains, in Survey 2 this dropped considerably down to 36.1%. The reason for this could be that in the second lockdown, schools were using more varied online modes of online teaching than before.
2. Feedback by parents in relation to support from schools was conflicting, while reflecting the inequities between the sectors. While 57.2% of the parents in Survey 1 claimed that they found support from the school with respect to their child's learning, this decreased to just 2.1% in Run 2, reflecting the level of helplessness and abandonment parents repeatedly highlighted in 2021. On the other hand, parents also commented that in the second school lockdown schools provided more technical support and gave clearer directions about learning and online platforms, which made them feel more at ease.

3. 58.7% of the parents in Survey 1 were not very happy with the many distractions at home which were not helping their children to focus. This percentage decreased to 37.8% in Survey 2, possibly showing that some parents tried to address this issue.
4. A positive finding was that the absolute majority of parents stated that they supported their children during their online activities / lessons with 66.4% and 78% in each respective year, stating that they attended online activities with their children, while 76.3% in Survey 1 and 84.5% in Survey 2 claimed that they spent more time helping their children with their work and explaining concepts to their children.
5. On the negative side, in Survey 1, 54.5% of the parents claimed that they 'felt stressed and out-of-control'; which increased to 69.8% in Survey 2. The reason for such an increase could be that parents were feeling tired and stressed with continuously supporting their children with online teaching and over a long time. At the time of the second survey, the novelty of online learning had worn out and keeping children engaged for long hours in front of a screen was having its toll on parents.
6. In Survey 1, 66.5% of the parents claimed that their relationship with their children improved during COVID-19 as they spent more time together, when compared to their relationship prior to the pandemic. For many this either remained the same or improved in Survey 2. It is worth mentioning that 12.7% of the parents reported that in the second school lockdown their relationship with their children got worse.
7. The thread of negative feelings was constant in Run 2. While in Run 1 many parents (66.5%) managed to remain meaningfully connected to relatives and friends, in Run 2 this decreased considerably to 21.3%.
8. The level of happiness and satisfaction decreased from 2020 to 2021. While 34.6% of the parents maintained that they felt happier and 37.1% felt more satisfied in Survey 1, these percentages decreased to 28.9% and 22.3% respectively in Survey 2. In fact, in Survey 2, 44.7% claimed that they felt much less happy and 41.2% less satisfied.
9. In 2020, 31.8% of the parents claimed that they felt negative towards their work, which decreased to 26.5% in Survey 2.
10. As a result of school lockdowns, in Survey 1, the majority of parents (72.5%) valued the lack of stress in getting ready for school every morning, and 72.4% valued not having to think what to wear while 69.3% liked spending less time commuting to and from schools. Other parents (61.9%) appreciated not having to worry about going to work if their child was ill while 63.2% appreciated the increase in family time. However, in Survey 2, 58.4% of the parents claimed that they were more stressed during the scholastic year 2020-2021 than in the previous year.
11. While some parents reported that, likewise, their children felt less stressed to get ready for school and enjoyed more family time, as well as learned to be more independent, on the other hand in Survey 2, there were also parents who claimed that children found it difficult to understand what was expected of them, and demanded more support from the educators.
12. In 2020, some parents complained that they were struggling more with finding balance between helping their children with school work and life (56%), a concern that was also voiced in 2021, where however, some parents highlighted their struggle to meet their work commitments while supporting their children.
13. The findings consistently showed that one of the major downfalls of the pandemic was that children missed interacting with their friends considerably.
14. In 2020 some parents commented about the stressful situations they were going through and argued that the well-being and mental health of their family members were negatively affected during the pandemic. Some parents were more specific, and claimed that they found it stressful to juggle between working online, meeting family needs and supporting their children during online learning.
15. In the 2021, 20.6% of the parents experienced mental health issues as a result of the new demands and changes. While in 2020, only 6.2% of the parents reported that they were able to make time for themselves to rest, in 2021 this increased to 37.5%, perhaps reflecting the need of parents to destress from feeling overwhelmed and stressed with work, helping their children to follow online learning and family.

Recommendations

In view of the main findings highlighted above it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on parents and their children in the spheres of teaching and learning, learning spaces, and well-being and relationships. The following are a few recommendations from the study:

- Beyond COVID-19, all schools should get equitable resources and training in digital skills, continuous professional development and support for all educators in all the three sectors of the state, church and independent, that will provide educators with the necessary skills and confidence they need.
- Going forward to post-pandemic times, educators should be provided with the necessary training that will not only help them implement the emergent curriculum or an active pedagogy in class but also, to be able to do so remotely.

- Most parents complained that online learning was not engaging enough for children. Thus, online learning should be used the least time possible and only if and as necessary with young children.
- Provisions should be made for children to meet their friends remotely in a social way in order to make up for lost time. Beyond the pandemic, educators and parents should remember the importance of play for children to socially interact with their peers, and provide them with more time and space to play with each other in order to make up for the play lost during the pandemic. Moreover, play-based activities and experiences should be introduced in schools as well as in after school programmes, with immediate effect.
- More effort should have been made to reach out vulnerable children. These children should have been contacted and provided with adequate online support, while ensuring that they had basic care. Vulnerable children and their families should be provided with coping strategies in order to help them get back on track and achieve better outcomes. Furthermore, educators need to be trained in being sensitive to family issues and their socio-economic and cultural background, in order to understand them and pandemic their pandemic needs better.
- Beyond the pandemic, parents should be provided with adequate training in content knowledge to be in-tune with what their children are learning at school, and be able to successfully support them and explain content to them.
- Schools should provide training for those parents who lack basic literacy skills in order to be able for them to navigate the internet, communicate with educators, participate in society and employment, as a source of personal enrichment and to be able to support their children.
- School leaders together with policy makers and other involved stakeholders, should ensure that all learners have access to their right to education by providing those children who come from deprived homes, with the necessary and suitable technology and/or internet connection through financial aid. Moreover, these children and their parents should be supported with the necessary technical support to be able to access and use online platforms.
- Schools should prioritise and develop shared partnership with parents by actively involving and engaging them in the learning process. On the other hand, parents should be willing to take more lead in the teaching-learning process and support their children as necessary.
- Support should be provided to (mainly to primary school) children who may have suffered learning losses during the pandemic by creating recovery programmes and support systems to help them overcome these limitations.
- The mental health of children, of their parents and of their educators should be taken seriously. All the involved stakeholders should create awareness and develop education programmes that will help all involved stakeholders become aware of their mental health needs.
- The recruitment of mental health workers including counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists should be increased to provide children and their parents with the needed emotional and psychological support.
- Teachers and parents should be trained to identify mental health symptoms, including signs of stress and anxiety, and be able to refer children to mental health workers when needed.



CHAPTER 1

The Cov-EM Study

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, nearly 200 countries worldwide, enforced worldwide school closures (UNESCO, 2020c). This resulted in 1.58 billion children staying out of school and confined to their homes with the aim to control the spread of the virus. Ensuring continuity of learning became a priority for many governments all over the world, where they demanded of teachers to find alternative ways of teaching. Overnight, school leaders, educators, parents and children, had to quickly shift from face-to-face learning to remote online learning, and therefore, become accustomed to new ways of teaching, learning and living (O’Sullivan, McGrane, Clark, & Marshall., 2020; United Nations, 2020).

Such a drastic change in the modes of teaching and learning was also experienced by all education institutions in Malta; from childcare centres to the university campus. Amidst a pervading sense of fear of the unknown across all sectors, lecturers and educators were faced with the challenge of educating children and students remotely using digital resources and tools available to them by their institutions or their homes.

1.1 The ECPE Research Group and the Cov-EM Study

Following the disruptions and challenges brought by the unforeseen periods of school and university closures in March 2020, two academics from the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education (DECPE) at the University of Malta felt the need to react to the challenges being faced and investigate the impact of what was happening on the involved stakeholders. This led to the inception of the Early Childhood and Primary Education (ECPE) Research Group: a group of eight female academics from DECPE who embarked on a project of online collaborative research work. The inception of the ECPE Research Group was created as a result of the need:

- i. to interact and support each other while maintaining physical distance and
- ii. to fill in a gap in local research on COVID-19 and education at early, primary and Higher Education levels in Malta.

In 2020, the eight members of the ECPE Research Group published their first research paper that discusses the beginning of the ECPE Research Group, entitled, *Tracking the birth and growth of an online collaborative research team during Covid-19: A narrative inquiry of eight female academics in Malta* (Bonello, Farrugia, Gatt, Deguara, Milton, Muscat, Said, & Spiteri, 2020). Subsequently, the Research Group published two other papers that related to COVID-19 and education with the first entitled, *Exploring the influence of COVID-19 on initial teacher education in Malta: Student participation in higher education*, (Bonello, Deguara, Farrugia, Gatt, Muscat, Milton, Said, & Spiteri, 2021), followed by, *The impact of COVID-19 on children’s learning: a rapid review* (Spiteri, Deguara, Muscat, Bonello, Farrugia, Milton, Gatt, & Said, 2022).

In 2021, five members of the ECPE Research Group continued to develop and extend the team’s initial research work on the impact of COVID-19 on Education in Malta through the Cov-EM Study. The Cov-EM study is composed of five research reports that explore the impact of COVID-19 on identified five key stakeholders in Maltese Education which will be presented in five separate Research Reports titled (Figure 1.1):

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 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 4.

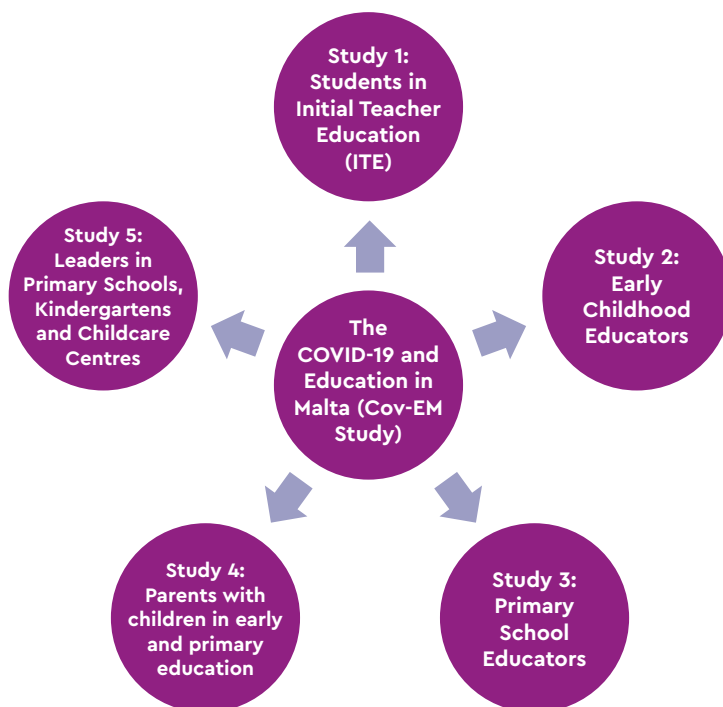


Figure 1.1: The cluster of five studies within the overarching Cov-EM study

The Cov-EM study was conducted over two phases during the pandemic. The first phase (Run 1), which consisted of sharing online questionnaires to the five different stakeholders (university students, early childhood educators, primary educators, parents and education leaders) via social media platforms, was conducted in September 2020. The second phase (Run 2), was held a year later, in September, 2021 and consisted of sharing adapted online questionnaires amongst the same five stakeholders (albeit, different participants).

1.2 The overarching research aims, objectives, and research question and conceptual framework of the Cov-EM Study

While initially it was thought that the COVID-19 emergency and the subsequent closure of schools, would span over a matter of a few weeks, as things unfolded, countries and education systems worldwide, realised that the pandemic was going to last for longer. The COVID-19 pandemic lasted around two years where, as reported in the Times of Malta, of the 10th January 2022, as children returned to school from the Christmas recess, “several classrooms had to resort to online schooling because many students and teachers are stuck in quarantine” (Calleja, 2022). Figure 1.2 below represents a timeline of how COVID-19 affected the physical attendance and online teaching and learning in Maltese early and primary schools.

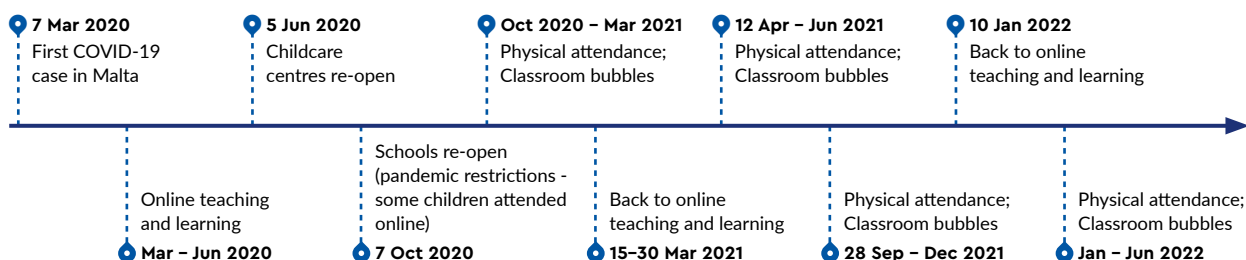


Figure 1.2: Timeline indicating school closure and the shift to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Maltese early and primary schools (2020–2022)

We continued to witness the change educators brought to the teaching-learning process. Education at all levels was forced to be shaped and reshaped to meet the challenges of an evolving situation, where educators had to rely on innovative and remote methods of learning.

As a research group, we were continuously concerned with how this new reality and changing educational scenario would undoubtedly impact all the involved stakeholders in early, primary and higher education. Ongoing dialogue, permeated through online meetings (during the first lockdown period), assisted us in identifying the key concepts we wanted to unpack to create new understandings about the impact of COVID-19 on the different stakeholders. We realised that the uncertainty that this period presented, created challenges and opportunities for innovations in how 'teaching and learning' take place, and how this was continually reshaping education in Malta. The use of technology and online learning and its gradual uptake was becoming integral to compulsory and Higher Education.

We inevitably extended our dialogue from 'teaching and learning' to the new 'learning spaces' stakeholders in early and primary settings and schools were experiencing. We also questioned the impact of the pandemic on the stakeholders' 'well-being and relationships' between the key players in the learning process: *How is the reshaped teaching and learning within new 'learning spaces' created during the pandemic, impacting the overall 'well-being and relationships' of the different stakeholders?*

We were then able to identify and agree upon 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 of teaching and learning, learning spaces and well-being and relationships.

The overarching research question posed for the five studies is:

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

This was followed by another two subsidiary questions for each phase of the study:

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 question 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 collaborative dialogue, through online meetings amongst the research group, allowed us to identify a conceptual research framework and theoretical background (Figure 1.3) in which to couch our main research question for our research study, together with subsidiary questions specific to each of the five studies.

1.3 The conceptual framework and theoretical background

1.3.1 The conceptual Framework

The ongoing collaborative research process and the identified research question, assisted the ECPE research group to develop a conceptual framework based on three key concepts of 'teaching and learning', 'learning spaces' and 'well-being and relationships' (Figure 1.3), which guided the research design, provided a theoretical lens and helped us develop research questions across the five research reports.

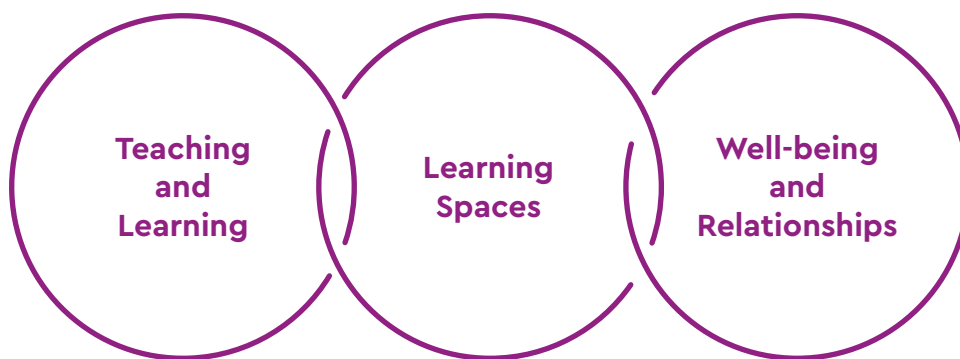


Figure 1.3: The three concepts that thread through the Cov-EM study

Teaching and Learning: For the purpose of this study, the term ‘teaching and learning’ refers to the sudden shifts brought about by the pandemic restrictions where educators had to quickly change their mode of instruction, from physical teaching in the class to remote, online teaching and learning at home. This includes the pedagogy used, the channels of communication between the educators, parents and children, the teaching-learning mode preferred, and the type of lessons and activities delivered. It also implies that terms such as hybrid, synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning, blended approach, and other new pedagogical discourse are prominent in the way the concept of ‘teaching and learning’ is unpacked throughout the present study.

Learning Spaces: For the purposes of this study, the term ‘learning spaces’ refers to those spaces where different stakeholders in early, primary or Higher Education (HE) used to teach and learn via remote online modes during the pandemic. These include new learning spaces and preferred location within the home environment created and/or designed for such purpose, the use of technological equipment and online platforms functioning within both online and offline zones.

Well-being and Relationships: For the purposes of this study, the term ‘well-being and relationships’ refers to the following aspects as experienced by the different stakeholders during the pandemic:

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

The overall aims and objectives of the Cov-EM study that are grounded in the three concepts include (Figure 1.4):



Figure 1.4: The main aims and objectives of the Cov-EM cluster of research studies that are grounded in the three concepts

1.3.2 The theoretical framework

The COVID-19 pandemic-related disruptions influenced the three key concepts that frame the Cov-EM study (Figure 1.4). Thus, relevant literature brought to the fore several classic and emerging theories that assisted in meeting the demands of:

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

This study is framed in four main theories including Vygotsky (1978), Siemens, (2004), Maslow (1987), and Bronfenbrenner (1978).

As it taps into the concepts of new pedagogical approaches and learning spaces, this research study mirrors Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. 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 such as educators, peers, family and friends. 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 on 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 framework also extends to Siemen's (2004) contemporary learning theory. Siemen's 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 during COVID-19, taking us back to the foundations of Maslow's hierarchy. The fourth theory that frames this work is Bronfenbrenner's (1917-2005) ecological systems theory. In line with his view, the Cov-EM study sees the interaction of different stakeholders and environmental factors (for example, the unprecedented pandemic) as having a major influence on the learners' development, well-being and learning. With such a theoretical frame of mind we opted to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on different stakeholders in Maltese education over time.

1.4 Research Report 4: Perspectives of parents with children in early and primary education

The study presented in this research report, is guided and framed within the triad conceptual framework (Figure 1.3 above) to obtain a clearer understanding on effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the teaching and learning, learning spaces and wellbeing and relationships from the perspective of parents of children in early childhood and care. For the scope of this study, the term 'parents', refers to parents, guardians and carers of children in childcare, kindergarten and primary education (of children ages 0-11 years). Consequently, the study aims to capture the perspectives of parents and how the shift to remote online learning may have impacted, positively or adversely, their children's learning, their learning spaces and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malta.

The objectives of this research study were:

- i. to explore parents' perspectives about the impact of COVID-19 on *teaching and learning* on their children in early childhood and primary schools in Malta in view of the pedagogies and strategies adopted by their educators during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- ii. to examine issues of availability, accessibility and affordability of online and offline *learning spaces* found at home and how these influenced the children's experiences during the pandemic;
- iii. to investigate how the rapid shift to online learning and adhering to COVID-19 mitigation measures have affected their lives and their *well-being and relationships*.

1.4.1 The research questions for the Research Reports about the parents' perspectives

As discussed above, the study presented in this research report is guided by the framework provided by three key concepts of teaching and learning, learning spaces, well-being and relationships to obtain a clearer understanding of the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on young children. Most importantly, it focused on capturing the perspectives of parents, about their experience to shifting to remote online learning which may have, positively or adversely, impacted their lives and those of their children.

The main research question that specifically guided this study (Research Report 4) was:

What lessons can be learned from the perspectives of parents of children aged 0 – 11 years, about their experience of the rapid shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malta?

This was then addressed in three sub-research questions:

- i. What are the perspectives of parents on the overall impact of the pandemic on **teaching and learning**?
- ii. Which strategies and **learning spaces** did young children make use of during the pandemic?
- iii. In what ways, if any, did the pandemic impact on the overall **well-being and relationships** of children and their parents?



CHAPTER 2

COVID-19 and the Maltese Education Context

2.1 The local education context

For this study, it is important to provide a context through an 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). Children aged 3 months up to 2 years and 9 months attend childcare centres run by both the state and independent entities, while 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). Following, students can follow a 2-year course at vocational post-secondary education that will allow them the opportunity to follow tertiary undergraduate and post-graduate education programmes at the University of Malta, MCAST University College or the Institute for Tourism Studies (Eurydice, 2022).

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. From 13th March, 2020 to the end of the scholastic year in June, all school settings, from childcare to tertiary institutions were forced to close (Bartolo, Grech & Grech, 2022; Cefai, Skrzyzypiec & Galea, 2021;). 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 and platforms such as Microsoft TEAMS and Class Dojo, to teach their students, and simultaneously communicate with and provide support to parents (Grech & Bartolo, 2020). This resulted in considerable change in the children's learning environment: from teaching and learning physically being done at school, to being held remotely within the confinements of the children's homes (Cefai et al., 2021). Social interaction was completely interrupted. Teachers tried to maintain some form of routine, where they planned, modified timetables for students 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. Moreover, Health Authorities recommended that children are 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 learning, and experienced academic and emotional struggles. Some schools even offered training for parents, students and teachers to learn how to navigate the school's online platform and provided them with webinars that helped them address struggles and anxieties posed 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. Some teachers, with the support of their schools, were able to make an overnight shift to synchronous online teaching where children could follow activities and lessons from home, and they could 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 remote means such as through emails, with attached powerpoint presentation 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 for the academic year 2020-2021. These guidelines focused on providing a protocol for schools to follow in order to mitigate the transmission of the virus. Each school was expected to adapt the guidelines according to the specific needs of the school, however, 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 the 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 at 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 Minister of Education stated that almost half of 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 counter-measure, the Ministry of Education prepared more than 400 recorded lessons that were available remotely for children who could not attend schools 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 onset of the pandemic, the government held a press conference and subsequently issued Legal Notice, 97 of 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 the 12th April, 2021 (Farrugia & Borg, 2021). This time round, schools and educators were more prepared to teach online and transition was smoother than in the 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 parents to adapt and adopt 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 have 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 were also able to plan and adjust accordingly. However, attendance was not regular during the academic year 2020-2021. In fact, the Ministry for Education (as cited by 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 for Health, 2021). As a result, on the 28th September, 2021, schools opened their doors for the 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, as before, expected to physically attend school, following the necessary protocols such as the use of masks, social distance and the bubble concept. In a set of guidelines published by the Ministry for Health, (2021), for the scholastic year 2021- 2022, the aim was to, “enable the physical presence of children in school whilst protecting the health of children and the school community” (Ministry for Health, 2021, p.6). In January 2022, schools were meant to open on the 7th January for 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 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 academic year followed normally without any closures, up till June 2022.



CHAPTER 3

Review of Literature

3.1 Parental partnerships in schools

The involvement and engagement of parents in the education of their children have long been acknowledged as beneficial for the teaching and learning process (Epstein, 2011). More specifically, it has been reported, that parental engagement in their children's learning in the home, makes a big difference to children's learning and achievement (Harris & Goodall, 2007). Its importance has been emphasised worldwide, and such discourse has dominated policy-making arenas (OECD, 2001; 2006). Educators acknowledge the significant role parents have in their child's life and the importance to develop partnerships with them. Such partnerships should be based on mutual collaboration, trust and reciprocity, together with shared decision-making and goals, to ensure that learning is meaningful to each child (Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). Parents and educators should communicate freely and respectfully with each other and share perspectives, insights and concerns about each child (Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations, Australia, 2009). To effectively develop meaningful partnerships with parents, educators, with the help of policymakers, need to move beyond their role of providing knowledge, information and expertise to parents and adopt the role of collaborators who, consider parents as equal and necessary partners in the teaching-learning process, and together with them, develop a shared understanding of the child (Page, 2011). While we have moved from a discourse of parental involvement to parental partnership (OECD, 2001; Nichols & Jurvansuu, 2008; Alasuutari, 2010), reflecting a premise of meaningful and positive relationships between educators and parents, as is expected and necessary, such partnerships can vary in different contexts, and/or are not always coherent or evident in schools (Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). The Ontario Centre for Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, (2021) advocates for parents as partners and the engagement of families in active decision-making in the teaching-learning process, both at organisational and system levels. Embracing Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, they claim that meaningful parental engagement should go beyond negative involvement such as manipulation, decoration and tokenism or apparent engagement such as through considering them as superficial consultants and informants, and should move to engaging parents to the "highest forms of engagement, co-development and partnership" in developing and implementing curricula, be involved in decisions that affect their children, writing policies and conducting research and evaluation (Campbell, 2011; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Levinthal & Kuusisto, 2019; Ontario Centre for Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2021).

3.1.1 Parental level of education and their influence on children's learning

Parental level of education is a significant predictor of their children's learning, development and achievement (Davis-Kean, 2005; Dubow, Boxer and Huesmann, 2009; Kalil, Ryan & Corey, 2012; Marangu, Angwenyi, Mabrouk, Too, Kabue & Abubakar, 2002). More specifically, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997), found that the mother's education level significantly influences the children's intellectual outcomes. Kalil et al., (2012) state that college-educated parents tend to invest more time in being involved in their children's education and in providing their children with support when compared to parents who have less educational qualifications (Guryan, Hurst & Kearney, 2008). This is supported by Idris, Hussain and Ahmad (2020), who claim that more educated parents tend to involve themselves in their children's activities at home, which in turn positively affects their children's attainment. They suggest that the way educated parents communicate with their children through rational and logical arguments, strong vocabulary and articulated language contribute to the children's language development and thinking skills. Moreover, as Davis-Kean (2005) claims, parents with a higher level of education are more able to guide their children and have higher expectations for success for their children and subsequently, actively encourage and support their children to develop their own high expectations for their success. They also provide a more conducive and enabling home environment, when compared to uneducated parents who often lack the skills to provide a learning-friendly environment at home (Idris, et al., 2020). Haelermans, Korthals, Jacobs, De Leeuw, Vermeulen, Van Vugt, et al., (2022), and others (see for example, Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Davis-Kean, 2005; Dubow et al., 2009) also claim that parental education is a significant indicator of the parents' socioeconomic status, which in turn, influences the children's educational, developmental and behavioural outcomes.

3.2 Parental engagement and its effect on children's learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of schools worldwide, many children were not able to attend school, and learning was shifted to the home, where the role of parents in supporting their children's learning has been amplified (Brossard, Cardoso, Kamei, Mishra, Mizunoya & Reuge, 2020). UNESCO (2020c) reports that having the children at home after school closures, resulted in a lot of disruptions for families. The pandemic not only deprived children of their education, and parents of their work but also deprived families of their play and sports activities, socialisation, and relational interactions with their friends. Unexpectedly, many parents had to take care of their children round the clock, and meet their educational and leisure needs, while simultaneously adapting to working remotely. Suddenly, parents became the factotum of their children, and their only point of reference, since other supporting figures, including their teachers, were no longer available face-to-face (Morelli, Cattelino, Balocco, Trumello, Babore, Candelori & Chirumbolo, 2020). Parents were required to take "key pedagogical roles" (O'Connor, Bates, Finlay & Campbell, 2021, p. 1), among other roles, to support their children's learning. The shift towards learning from home through the use of remote, online modes, created myriad challenges for parents, even more so for those who were also working from home, those who had multiple children and those with poor literacy skills and academic knowledge. Some parents had to quit their jobs mainly in countries with poor leave policies, while others, following pandemic restrictions worldwide, were requested to work from home in order to hinder the spread of the disease. Other parents had to continue working, and therefore, had to find alternative care for their children. School closure and the demands of (un)employment placed extra burdens on parents who had to cope with the stress brought about by the pandemic while attending to their children's needs. Some parents had to provide support to multiple children of different ages and with various needs (Parker & Alfaro, 2021). Parents had to learn how to adjust to home education, working from home, and dealing with the threat of an infection or the death of a loved one at the same time. This change brought radical adjustments to the lives of parents and children alike, who had to adapt to alternative ways of living and working. Parents not only had to adapt, facilitate and support their children with the new ways of teaching and learning remotely, they also had to create spaces in the home as well as provide their children with digital equipment and reliable internet connection to be able to following online lessons from the confinement of their home. This resulted in some students having to study in crowded houses, where multiple people were simultaneously working or studying from home. This problem could have been augmented by inadequate working or studying space for each family member, lack of access to good technological devices such as a computer, laptop or even mobile phone, that could also be combined with weak broadband connection (World Bank Group Education, 2020) This resented huge social, emotional and economic implications and burdens that had long-lasting effects on parents and children alike (Grech & Barolo, 2020; United Nations, 2020) including increased stress and anxiety on children and their families (Jiao, Wang, Liu, Fang, Jiao, Pettello-Mantovani, et al., 2020).

The pandemic and the restrictions it brought, affected mainly those coming from low socio-economic status. Children whose families experienced economic stress, had parents with low education levels including poor digital skills, lived in deprived conditions including lack of space in the home, lack of digital equipment and poor internet access, experienced learning loss. The United Nations (2020) *Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond*, reports that in high income countries, 80 – 85% of the children had access to distance learning; however, this dropped to 50% in low-income countries, highlighting the digital divide. Disadvantaged children sometimes do not even have access to electricity, not to mention good technology infrastructure or availability of the necessary hardware for remote learning.

3.3 Parents' perspectives on the impact of online learning on teaching and learning during COVID-19

Some parents, who consider themselves to have the pedagogical skills, resources and time, may opt to home-school their children throughout the year. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, imposed home-schooling on parents of 1.6 billion students from 191 countries worldwide, leaving them without a choice. Face-to-face teaching in schools was abruptly replaced by online teaching through various virtual platforms at home, in an attempt to continue learning despite school closures (OECD, 2020; Pokharel & Chhetri, 2021). Most parents were not ready or knowledgeable enough, nor did they have the time, to home-school and support their children's online learning activities through digital technologies (Brossard, Cardoso, Maei, Mishra, Mizunoya & Reuge, 2020; Novianti & Garzia, 2020; Vuorikari, Velicu, Chaudron, Cachia & Gioia, 2020). Both children and parents needed time to organise themselves and become familiar with online platforms and the new pedagogical methods introduced by the respective schools. On the other hand, it was crucial for schools to find ways to keep learners engaged and motivated through remote ways of teaching and learning. Teachers had to adjust their ways of teaching, adopt alternative ones and train themselves in the use of online technologies (Haller & Novita, 2021). All the involved stakeholders, teachers, parents or guardians had to have the ability and willingness to learn new skills and support children during this transition (Fontenelle-Tereschuk, 2021).

3.3.1 Support provided by parents

Parental support is a significant and contributing factor is crucial to sustain better learning outcomes for children (Hendersen & Mapp, 2002; Woofter, 2019; Novianti & Garzia, 2020), and it becomes even more critical in remote online learning, where children do not have the guidance of their teachers. When teaching was shifted to online during the pandemic, parents had to step up and take on new and unfamiliar roles and responsibilities in their children's learning (Liu, Black, Algina, Cavanaugh & Dawson, 2010). In a study by Garbe, Ogurlu, Logan and Cook (2020), some parents struggled to understand what role they had to take, and while some doubted their abilities, others actually lacked the knowledge, skills and competences to support their children. Selwyn, Banaji, Hadjithoma-Garstka and Clark (2011), claim that parents in their study, had mixed feelings towards online learning. While some parents felt more connected to the children's learning experiences, others saw the demand to support their children as an additional burden to their already busy lives. This is supported by O'Connor et al., (2021) who reporting on their study with parents of children with special needs, claim that parents found it difficult to support their children's online learning and had to scale back on work to support their child's individual needs especially as they lacked confidence in home-schooling. Parents found it challenging to balance between home life, work, and family well-being while navigating their child's educational, emotional and therapeutic needs. Contrastingly, most of the parents in their study reported a positive level of interaction with the educators who developed new ways of communication, kept regular contact, and were available and committed to keeping in touch with their children.

Several studies show that despite the challenges, the majority of parents supported their children's online learning during the pandemic. Findings from a study by Hafidz, Nurhasan, Muzakki, Syaful, and Sholeh (2020) indicate that most parents in Indonesia supported their children by encouraging them to develop and maintain interest in online learning. More specifically, results from the study by Novianti and Garzia (2020) which was conducted with 148 parents of first and second grade children in Indonesia, show that 81.7% of parents supervised and supported their children during online learning. This is somewhat consistent with research findings from a study by Garbe et al. (2020) conducted with parents in the USA, and that from a study by Cachia, Velicu, Chaudron, Di Gioia, and Vuorikari, (2021) held with parents from thirteen European countries. Garbe et al., (2020) reported that 62.3% of parents stated that they spent more than an hour a day helping their children during online learning, while the parents in the study conducted by Cachia et al., (2021), reported that they spent an average of two to three hours daily helping, explaining and supporting their children with their school work. What is interesting to note is that in the majority of the cases, it was the mother who took the role of supporting and supervising children in online learning. This is confirmed in the study by Novianti and Garzia (2020), where 87.84% of the parents who took this role were mothers. Similarly, in a study by Bonal and González (2020), 79% of the parents who helped their children were mothers.

Bonal and González (2020) investigated whether the level of parental education attainment effected the level of support they provided their children with. In fact, findings from their study show that those mothers who had only completed compulsory education supported their primary school children in the same way as did mothers with higher levels of education. However, the same study (Bonal & González, 2020), shows that social differences had an effect on the levels of support parents provided their children with, since reading accompaniment was much more common in families with high cultural capital. More than half of parents (59%) with a college degree read with their children aged 3 to 8 years everyday whilst for families with one adult who completed compulsory education, this dropped to 37% (Bonal & González, 2020). Consistent with this research is the study conducted by Domina et al. (2021), which shows that children with highly-educated parents had supported their children more in successfully submitting their work online and logged on for remote instruction more often. Findings from a study by Andrew, Cattán, Costa Dias, Farquharson, Kraftman, Krutikova, Ohimister and Sevilla (2020) corroborate this. They show that parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds accessed online lessons more and their children spent 30% more time in online learning when compared to those children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Another factor which contributed to the duration of the support provided by parents to their children in online learning activities was familiarity with the school curriculum. This was evident in a study held by UNESCO (2020d), with parents in Northern Ireland. Results from this study show that the biggest proportion of parents (79%) claimed that they were somewhat familiar, familiar or very familiar with the school curriculum whilst only 20% reported that they were not at all familiar. This was reflected in another result within the same study which illustrates that 84% of the parents were somewhat confident, confident or very confident to monitor, supervise and therefore support, their children's learning.

3.3.2 Challenges faced by parents during school closure

During school closure, children were restricted to staying at home and learning remotely, while parents were expected to act as their children's tutors in supporting and helping them learn and simultaneously doing their regular work from home (Brossard et al., 2020; Haller & Novita, 2021; Novianti & Garzia, 2020). This, in itself, became a very demanding and tough routine for parents, that involved a balancing act between working, teaching their children, engaging them in leisure activities and caring for the family (Bhamani, Makhdoom, Bharuchi, Ali, Kaleem & Ahmed, 2020). While some parents gladly took up this role and adapted quickly to help their children, others found it difficult to engage in their children's online lessons, while meeting their work obligations and other family commitments (Garbe et al., 2020; OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2020d). A study carried with Canadian parents of children aged 4 to 11 years concluded that parents were concerned about having to support their child's education while simultaneously maintaining a job (Statistics Canada, 2020). This was voiced by Garbe et al., (2020) and Cachia et al., (2021) who maintain that parents generally claimed that they had difficulties with balancing responsibilities between work demands, family commitments and their children's learning needs, which became more complex when there were different levels of learners within the same home. This is corroborated by findings from the study by UNESCO (2020d), where 77% of the parents who worked from home reported that they had difficulties organising their own work when they had to support their children's learning. However, different studies yielded different results. For example, findings from the study by Bhamani et al., (2020) with Pakistani parents, show that the majority of parents who worked from home managed to support their children in their online learning sessions.

Some parents felt incapable of supporting their children due to lack of digital skills, lack of familiarity with the online content being taught or even suffered from negative attitudes towards technology and/or teaching and learning in general (Cachia, et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). This inability of parents to help their children was also identified in a study by Hafidz et al., (2020) who found that some parents worldwide experienced lack of confidence or inability to support their children in online learning, they had lack of adequate technological equipment, lack of the required digital skills, insufficient time to help their children learn, or had lack of content knowledge. It was challenging for these parents to explain to their children the content and the tasks assigned by the teacher, to ensure that their children have done the tasks and to submit homework to the teacher on time (Cachia et al., 2020). Moreover, differences in the educational levels of parents could have contributed towards lower educational attainments for children who come from low socio-economic backgrounds (OECD, 2020). In fact, recent studies carried by Bol (2020) in the Netherlands and another by Andrew, et al., (2020) in the United Kingdom illustrate that more educated parents who came from high socio-economic backgrounds felt more able to support their children than less educated ones who came from low and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Lack of internet access and digital devices, especially when there were a number of siblings in the same home, lack of quality internet connection, poor digital skills, parents' lack of knowledge, as well as poor self-management and lack of interest by the children due to long periods of seated screen time, made home-schooling a challenging endeavour for some parents (Novianti and Garzia, 2020; Garbe, et al., 2020). These findings were supported by Hafidz, et al., (2020), who in their study, with 246 parents from Indonesia, found that most parents felt that they did not have sufficient knowledge of the subject and did not feel successful in their efforts to help their child. These challenges made parents feel overwhelmed (Garbe et al., 2020). Similarly, in a study by Andrew et al., (2020), revealed that 60% of parents of primary school children in the United Kingdom, found it very difficult to support their children's during remote online learning at home. Consequently, one of the main concerns of parents during the pandemic lockdown was that due to their inability to support their children, the latter might not understand the content and concepts being taught, and as a consequence, they may fall behind in schoolwork or even fail their exams and as a result may experience learning loss (Bhamani, et al., 2020; Vuorikari et al.; 2020; UNICEF, 2021a).

A challenge that parents were faced with was, that schools and teachers were not knowledgeable enough to guide parents in supporting their children and improving their parental experience especially where technology is involved (Goodall, 2016). As argued above, the shift to online learning was a major challenge for parents who had to help their children navigate the abrupt transition from physical classes in a school, to an online class at home (Bhamani et al., 2020). The lack of teachers' physical presence in online teaching, hampered learning (Bhamani et al., 2020). Moreover, the OECD (2020) and Cachia et al., (2021) report that many teachers lacked the necessary digital skills to teach remotely and struggled to adapt to online teaching so abruptly. Parents in a study by Bhamani et al., (2020), complained that online teaching can be problematic when teachers are not trained for it. The transition from teaching through textbooks and interactive whiteboards to online platforms, proved to be challenging for some teachers, which compromised their learning. In fact, parents (Cachia et al., 2021), claimed that teachers' digital competences were a determining factor for effective online teaching.

Another challenge reported by parents worldwide included motivating children to learn (UNESCO, 2020c), and helping them reach the identified learning outcomes (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021). Some parents complained that they found it challenging to organise motivating, learning activities at home as children frequently considered the home as a place to rest and play rather than a place to learn (Novianti & Garzia, 2020). In a study by Bhamani et al., (2020), results show, that some parents were concerned that the lack of routine children experienced during lockdown did not help them to understand the importance of time, scheduling and doing work on time; skills, which according to parents, help them become responsible, disciplined, socially acceptable and task-oriented while shaping their future work ethic and habits. Furthermore, most parents worked and could only help their children in the afternoon or evening, by which time their children would be tired and lacking motivation (Novianti & Garzia, 2020). To overcome this, some parents created daily schedules listing particular activities, study-time, break time and playtime (Novianti & Garzia, 2020).

Some parents complained that as a result of online teaching, homework became more demanding and more time-consuming than before. Besides ensuring that the children were doing their homework, parents had to explain the work in detail, even more so, because, some children found it even more difficult to ask questions when online, thus, relying more on parents for explanations (Bhamani et al., 2020). In support of this, Fontenelle-Tereshchuk (2021) found that Canadian parents complained that schools shifted a lot of the teaching responsibilities onto parents, adding strain to families who already were experiencing stress from the lockdown, quarantine job losses and full-time work household responsibilities. In support of this, parents from eight European countries, voiced their need to have better guidelines on how to support their children during online teaching and learning activities and homework (Vuorikari, et al., 2020).

3.3.3 Parents' perspectives of remote learning: Benefits or shortcomings?

Perspectives of parents about remote learning vary considerably, frequently depending on the context, accessibility, teacher's digital skills and ability to teach remotely, the quality of the interaction between the teacher and children, the organisation of the family as well as the age of the children. The World Bank (2021) reports that emerging evidence from their study about the effectiveness of remote learning is mixed, at best. However, generally speaking, online learning has been less effective than in-person learning.

In a number of studies, remote learning was well received by parents and their children. Indonesian parents claimed that they considered remote learning as beneficial for their children as it helped them to engage in the learning process, remain motivated to learn, become more independent and develop their digital skills further (Novianti and Garzia, 2020). Moreover, according to these parents, such an experience helped to develop the relationship with their children. In line with this, findings from the study by Bhamani et al., (2020) shows that some schools managed to develop a routine even through online teaching where they asked children to submit work, sent them daily reminders to prepare things for the following day, involve parents in the teaching-learning process while reinforcing the importance of play and assigning children physical activities outdoors. Bubb and Jones (2020) reported that parents from their study believed that teachers provided more helpful feedback, learning was more creative, students made more progress and learned to be more independent during remote online learning. Correspondingly, in the study by Garbe et al. (2020), most parents (82.8%) reported that they were satisfied with the amount of support provided by the school during the COVID-19 closure. These contradict the results from various studies. Cachia et al., (2021), found that some parents questioned the effectiveness of online learning, especially with younger children. In the study held by Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, (2021), which was held with Canadian parents of elementary school children, parents claimed that remote learning is not an adequate medium to use for teaching elementary school children and does not promote independent learning. Bhamani et al., (2020) and Dong, Cao, and Li, (2020), also reported that online learning was challenging when teachers themselves were not trained for it. The latter study examined the beliefs and attitudes of 3,275 Chinese parents regarding their children's online learning experiences. Parents generally showed a negative attitude towards the value and benefits of remote learning and claimed they preferred traditional learning. They disapproved of online learning due to their lack of time and expertise to support children, children's inadequate self-regulation and shortcomings of remote learning. Saavedra, Rapapaort and Silver (2021) also suggest that for most children online learning does not work. They claim that in-person education is higher in quality than online teaching, with the latter having negative effects on academic progress and the children's mental health. This is because, according to them, school systems were not prepared to offer high-quality online teaching. Cachia et al., (2021) support this. They confirm that many schools were ill-prepared for such an abrupt shift from physical to online teaching; a finding also supported by Alharthi (2022) in a study conducted with parents from Saudi Arabia. Even if schools were using technology before the pandemic, they did not know what technology, online platforms, software and methodology were most effective, secure and accessible. Moreover, even if during the pandemic teachers worked harder and invested time to learn new digital skills, and found innovative ways to teach and stay in touch with their students, this did not necessarily result in better learning experiences or learning outcomes for the children (Cachia et al., 2021; Saavedra et al., 2021).

3.4 Creating a conducive learning space for online learning

The closure of schools during the pandemic, brought a change in the learning environment. Learning conditions at home including the amount of physical space and access to technological devices have an impact on the children's learning (Bonal & González, 2020). Parents were expected to support teachers and their children in the implementation of the curriculum through remote learning and therefore, had to create conducive learning spaces with adequate digital equipment and connectivity for their children to be able to learn at home (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021). These proved to be challenging for lower-income families who were faced with lack of economic means to buy adequate technological equipment and internet access for their children, highlighting disparities of accessibility (Brossard et al., 2020; Garbe et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). Children from advantaged, higher socio-economic backgrounds had more access to technological and individualised resources when compared to their counterparts who came from poorer backgrounds and who made less frequent use of digital technologies. This is supported by the OECD (2020) who claims that many countries do not have fixed broadband services and especially those children who live in rural and remote areas were frequently underserved. Thus, socio-economic gaps were likely a source to increase inequalities in online teaching and learning (Andrew et al., 2020; Bol, 2020).

3.4.1 Learning spaces for children at home: Availability, accessibility and affordability

A significant learning gap between children from different social backgrounds was identified during the school lockdown (Bonal & González, 2020). The amount and quality of the physical space at home impacts the children's learning condition and hence, achievement (Bonal & González, 2020). Children need a comfortable, safe and equipped learning environment (Mascheroni, Saeed, Valenza, Cino, Dreesen, Zaffaroni & Kardefelt-Winther, 2021). The social and economic situation of families, that is, whether the child was provided with their own learning space as well as with the necessary digital devices had an impact on children's engagement and learning during remote online teaching (Daniela, Rubene & Arta, 2021). Literature on inequalities in education commonly recognises that there are differences in home environments which can contribute to lower academic performance in children coming from disadvantages and lower socio-economic backgrounds (European Commission, 2020). Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to have a quiet place to study during lockdown, albeit, Malta is one of the seven European countries where this difference is less likely. The quality of the learning space, is likely to abet or hamper learning (European Commission, 2020). A study by Munir (2021), which investigated the impact of school closures on children in South Africa, which is a country that struggles with high unemployment, poor educational system and poverty shows that the majority of children lived in overcrowded spaces and most of the families struggled with providing their children with a space to study, which added pressure on parents while hindered the children's learning process. Contrastingly, a study by Bol (2020), shows that the majority of primary school children in the Netherlands, a country that is considered as wealthy, have their own bedroom (91%) as well as their own workspace (68%). Such studies confirm the disparities and inequality that exist between countries and families from different socio-economic backgrounds, which became more evident during the lockdown.

3.4.2 The importance of access to technological devices for successful engagement during remote instruction

Children's access to technological resources and strong internet connectivity are key factors that can contribute to educational inequalities especially during physical closures. Such factors influence student engagement in digital remote education (Bonal & González, 2020; Domina et al. 2021; Mascheroni et al. 2021). Young children are the most vulnerable as they depend more on parental support, who, as argued above, might be less able to help or to adapt if they lack home resources and equipment (European Commission, 2020). The lack of digital equipment, strong internet connection or other technical issues, experienced mainly by children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, resulted in children missing out on learning. This was heightened in families with more than one child due to the probability of classes clashing where different children would need different digital equipment to connect with the school platform, and would also require the help of their parents simultaneously (Bhamani, et al., 2020). Moreover, children who did not have access to digital equipment or a strong internet connection were instantly placed at a disadvantage where they could not access the school's online platform and hence, could not follow the learning process. These children were completely left out of the system (Parker & Alfaro, 2021).

Cachia et al., (2021) claim that parents considered digital devices as an essential tool for online learning during the lockdown, where they emphasised the importance of being digital literate. They claim that some parents bought or borrowed additional devices to ensure that all their children will have access to online learning. Needless to say, larger families and families from low

socio-economic backgrounds found it more challenging to secure enough digital devices for their children to learn. A study by Bonal and González, (2020), which was conducted in Spain, showed that inequality in the family's capital affected the learning opportunities for students in a variety of ways, including in access to digital technology; students had unequal and disparate opportunities to access technological devices and different broadband connectivity conditions. While the majority of the families in their study had access to high-speed internet connection, 3.5% of the children in their study only had a mobile phone internet connection or no connection at all. Other disparities in the use of technology showed that 15.3% of the parents declared that they only had access to a single device that had to be shared. Their findings show that 56% of the households had less than one device per person. Even when students were able to connect, remote online learning have widened and made more visible the attainment gap that exists between students from socio-economic backgrounds (Coe, Weidmann, Coleman & Kay, 2020). Evidence from a study conducted by Andrew et al., (2020) in England (United Kingdom) shows that children who come from high socio-economic background spent 30% more time learning online when compared to those children who came from lower socio-economic background during the lockdown due to lack of digital devices. In line with this, Mascheroni et al. (2021) reported that the costs associated with gaining access to and connecting to devices can be a major barrier to online learning. Inequalities in access to devices and internet among households was also a challenge faced by parents in United States (Garbe et al., 2020), in Italy (Mascheroni et al., 2021) and in Northern Ireland (UNESCO, 2020d). Domina et al., (2021) reported that 29% of primary school children in the United States lived in households with fewer than one internet-enabled device available per child. In Italy about half of the families received new digital devices from their child's school, and 25% were provided with a paid internet connection to enable remote learning (Mascheroni et al., 2021). In his study, Bol (2020), found that 66% of children in primary school in the Netherlands have their own laptop or tablet and therefore, were able to follow online classes easily. However, this also meant, that a third of children in the Netherlands do not have their own technological device, and hence, could have struggled to follow online teaching due to having to share a technological device with other siblings or parents. Discrepancies in internet access among socio-economic classes which already occurred and impacted learning in the traditional school setting (Dolan, 2016; Hale, Cotten, Drentea, & Goldner, 2010) were amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic since all learning occurred at home. Domina et al., (2021), found a significant association between student engagement in remote instruction and access to technological devices. This is supported by the OECD Policy Response to Coronavirus (COVID-19) (2020) report and the World Bank (2021) report which both concluded that in almost all countries, students from low socio-economic made less use of digital equipment compared to their peers from high socio-economic background. On the other hand, children who came from higher socio-economic backgrounds had more access to technological equipment and hence accessed online platforms more (Andrew et al., 2020).

3.5 Parents and the impact of COVID-19 on the well-being of children and their families

In this novel home-schooling scenario, parents suddenly and unprecedentedly became the only point of reference (Morelli et al.) as children lost access to other significant adults who cared for them such as teachers, coaches and social workers (Sacks & Jones, 2020). As a result of this shift, many parents, especially mothers of young and/or primary school-aged children were more likely to work remotely (Yamamura & Tsutsui, 2021), and inevitably spent longer periods of time with their children (Alhas, 2020; Roshgadol, 2020).

3.5.1 Positive effects of the pandemic on children's and their parents' mental well-being

There is an agreement that the pandemic brought some positive effects on children and their parents. There have been reports (Bhamani et al., 2020; Caldwell, Hancock Friesen & Kirk, 2021; UNESCO, 2020d; Wang, Zhang, Zhao, Zhang & Jiang, 2020) that assert that parents and children benefited from spending time with each other during pandemic lockdown. When parents collaborated with their children and helped them with their online learning, they spent more time in each other's company and as a result engaged in more meaningful conversations with their children, where they became a source of comfort for them, and helped ease worry, anxiety and pain. Moreover, parents and children did more leisure activities and tried out new things such as crafts, cooking and dancing, which helped to increase family bonding. As a result, the time parents spent with their children was more enjoyable and hence, had a positive effect on their relationship. While agreeing with this, Canzi, Danioni, Parise, Lopez, Ferrari, Ranieri, Lafrate, Lanz, Regalia and Rosnati (2021), added that because families had more time to spend together during the lockdown, they became more aware of their values and needs as a family. Moreover, most families used the lockdown to revive or initiate new family traditions such baking and playing board games, which were aimed to address boredom and add some highlights to the day. She also claimed that children became better problem solvers and more creative as they had to learn how to occupy themselves during long days spent at home. Families also became more aware of their mental health and emotional well-being and learned how to handle and communicate their feelings better. They sought to prioritise it in order to ease the children's fear and anxiety during the uncertainty of the pandemic.

Parental support was crucial and beneficial during the pandemic (OECD, 2020; Ribeiro, Cunha, Andrade e Silva, Carvalho & Vital, 2021), when parents ensured that their children were following online teaching, they provided their children with emotional support, sustained their motivation to learn, and helped them address the main challenges posed by remote online learning. Children's attitudes and dispositions towards change and new ways of learning were impacted by the support they received from their families and teachers. Those children who found emotional support including encouragement to be confident, appreciation of their educational efforts and achievement, and who experienced enthusiasm by parents and teachers to embrace change and adopt to the new ways of teaching and learning, developed positive attitudes and dispositions towards online learning and the learning process (OECD, 2020).

3.5.2 Negative effects of the pandemic on children's and their parents' mental well-being

Despite the positive outcomes mentioned above, the lockdown proved to be a stressful time for both parents and children. The pandemic's impact on the children's and their parents' mental health and well-being weighs heavily leading to short term and long term psychosocial and mental health issues (Singh, Roy, Sinha, Parveen, Sharma & Joshi, 2020; UNICEF, 2021a). Parents experienced stressful phases when, as claimed above, they not only had to meet the learning needs of their children, but they also had to manage the home space and meet their work commitments and deadlines. Having to create a space for their children to learn and acquire the necessary technological equipment in a very short time, as well being expected to know the content being communicated and as able to explain it to the children, caused undue stress and anxiety on parents. Besides, they had to communicate with teachers and others on a daily basis, procure other resources, as well as, support the physical and mental well-being of their children (UNESCO, 2020b). Moreover, the lack of space in the home, limited outdoor access, and more screen time in playing video games and watching television, resulted in children spending more time on their own, engaged in sedentary activities which posed a threat to the children's social, educational and physical development (Bhamani et al., 2020) which increased the parents' stress levels. Spinelli, Lionetti, Pastore and Fasolo (2020) showed that having to abruptly shift from face-to-face instruction at school to online learning, combined with meeting health emergency and the family's economic issues, especially those resulting from unemployment, increased the parents' as well as the children's psychological, emotional and behavioural problems and possibly brought long lasting effects on the families' well-being, a concern also highlighted by UNICEF (2021b). Data from a study conducted with children in Italy and Spain shows that 85.7% of parents identified changes in their children's emotional and behavioural interactions due to the restrictions of the pandemic, and observed symptoms such as irritability, difficulties with concentration, loneliness and boredom, uneasiness and a state of anxiety and concern (Bhatia, 2020). Evidence from a study conducted in Oslo, identified a significant regression in children's life satisfaction. These challenges were more acute for those parents who came from single and/or divorced families and/or disadvantaged backgrounds (Domina et al. 2021). This is supported by Singh et al., (2020) who claim that the magnitude of the impact of the pandemic on children and their families was determined by vulnerability factors such as the children's developmental age, the level of education of parents, their economic stability, and pre-existing mental health issues. The reality of the pandemic, the disruption to routines, education, leisure activities, concerns about family income and health stressed children and made them fearful, uncertain, isolation, frustrated, anxious and worried about the future (Singh, et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2021b). This was manifested in children's disrupted sleep and nightmares, a state of agitation, inattention, separation anxiety and lack of appetite (Jiao et al., 2020).

This lack of well-being amongst parents and their children was experienced by parents worldwide. Consequently, Wang et al., (2020) suggest that parents should be taught how to provide emotional support to their children at times of emergency, uncertainty and tragedies. This was also the plea of parents in a study conducted by Vuorikari et al., (2021), who asked for the need for more guidelines on how to support their children psychologically during lockdown and confinement, as well as for more counselling and psychological support for themselves. Drawing upon recent trends in coping with school closures, Lyu, Xu, Cheng, and Li, (2021), noted that in the case of parents in China, intergenerational solidarity seems to have been what enabled them to manage their mental health and well-being favourably in this emergency situation. Findings showed that grandparents not only helped with household tasks and child rearing duties, but also supervised online learning and provided academic support to their grandchildren.

Learning to learn through a new medium and pedagogy, the disruptions to learning and routines, lack of pedagogical continuity and hence, the risking of missing learning, and lack of social interactions, all impacted the children's and their parents' well-being (OECD, 2021). Parents were also concerned about the overuse of technology during the pandemic that could have brought digital tiredness. Moreover, some teachers demanded too much work from the children, causing extra pressure and anxiety on them (UNESCO, 2020d). This way of learning for children brought a negative impact on the children's physical and mental health, which was undesirable (Cachia, Velicu, Chaudron, Di Gioia & Vuorikari, 2021; OECD, 2021; WHO, 2019).

The children's social life suffered during the pandemic. The lack of a physical class meant that children could not meet and interact with each other, hence the possibilities for socialisation, peer-collaboration and peer-learning opportunities decreased considerably during the pandemic. This was augmented with the closing down of extra-curricular activities and public places like parks and playgrounds, that are meeting places for children (Bhamani et al., 2020). Children not only missed on interacting with other children during and in after school activities but they also missed meeting relatives and celebrating important life events such as birthdays, frequently resulting in boredom and disappointments (Caldwell et al., 2021; Walsh, Purdy, Dunn, Jones, Harris & Ballentine, 2020). In the study by Bhamani et al., (2020), parents voiced their concern about this lack of social interaction, which in their view, had a negative psychological impact on the children's social-emotional skills, development and self-confidence, and as a consequence, their mental well-being and that of their families, suffered; a finding supported by Cachia et al., (2021) and Walsh et al., (2020).

3.6 Conclusion

The literature discussed above identifies the need to research how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted parents of young children over time. Research is urgently needed to inform policy, future research and early years practice. The Cov-EM study presented in this report sought to fill in this research gap by unfolding the concepts of 'teaching and learning', 'learning spaces' and 'well-being and relationships' and exploring the impact of COVID-19 on parents of children in early and primary education in Malta from the former's perspectives. In particular, it focused on the transition to online teaching and learning as experienced by children, how parents managed the home environment to meet the demands of their children and the effect of pandemic restrictions on the well-being of families as perceived by parents. The understanding of how we can cope with emergencies in the early and primary sector, the more equipped policymakers, professionals, leaders, early childhood educators and families become to help young learners meet their needs as well as progress successfully. As a result, this study sought to give voice to parents to share their experiences and perspectives as lived during the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020 - 2021.





CHAPTER 4

Research Design and Methodology

Given that this large-scale study was conducted in unexpected and fluid circumstances, with the rising and urgent need for valid, reliable and representative data, it aimed at capturing, the reality experienced by parents, in an objective way. Thus, a quantitative research approach was employed, that allowed the researchers to adopt a positivist epistemological stance in using evidence-based knowledge and facts. A structured questionnaire was designed and disseminated to parents nationwide, as important stakeholders in the education system to explore their perspectives during COVID-19 times. It analyses the shift from face-to-face to online teaching parents and their children experienced and the impact this had on their educational and personal lives. Initially, the intention was for this quantitative study to be carried out once in September 2020 (Run 1) to analyse the impact of the first school closure that occurred in March, 2020. 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 in September 2021 (Run 2), to capture the effects of the pandemic and the new challenges it posed, during the academic year 2020-2021.

4.1 Respondent demographics

The participants of the study were parents of children aged 0-11 years, attending childcare, kindergarten and primary years in church, independent and state schools in Malta. Recruitment of participants took place through the dissemination of the online survey mainly via several social media platforms. It is crucial to point out, that the sample was not randomly selected, that is, not every subject of the population had the same exact and equal probability of being chosen (Dudovskiy, n.d.). While the questionnaires were made available through various social media sites, where we tried to ensure an equal chance for all parents nationwide to participate in the study, it became evident that illiterate or digitally illiterate parents, or parents who did not have the technological equipment or internet access, or who did not access the social media sites we made use of, did not have the opportunity to reply to the survey. Therefore, those parents from this stratum of the population who are probably from low-income households, and who might likewise have experienced difficulties with communicating with the school and with supporting their children and helping them connect to online learning, may not have participated in the study as much as other parents who are literate, more attuned to social media and who may have had more time available to participate by completing the questionnaire; hence, we acknowledge that some perspectives may have been lost or not represented very much.

Table 4.1 below presents the participants according to gender and year of survey.

	Survey 1: Scholastic Year 2019/2020		Survey 2: Scholastic Year 2020/2021	
	N (n=815)	%	N (n=815)	%
Female	775	95.1%	364	88.6%
Male	37	4.5%	47	11.4%
Missing system	3	0.4%	0	0%
Total	815	100	411	100

Table 4.1: Number of participants according to gender and year of survey

This survey with parents was the one that got the highest number of respondents among the five Cov-EM studies. During the first survey (Run 1) conducted in September 2020, a total of 815 respondents, who were parents of children aged 0 to 11 years, completed the online questionnaire. Data from the introductory demographics and background section reveals that the majority of parents were Maltese (96.2%, n=782). 95.1% (n=775) of the respondents who answered the question were female, while only 4.5% (n=37) were male. The majority of the parents (48.9%) were aged between 35 and 44 years.

For the second phase of the survey (Run 2), which was conducted a year after, in September 2021, the response from parents was considerably lower. A total of 411 responses were registered. Once again, the majority were Maltese (85.6%, n=352), where 88.6% (n=364) were female while 11.4% (n=47) were male. Similar to the first survey, the majority of parents (60.6%) were aged between 35 and 44 years.

Thus, participants of both surveys were similar in terms of the distribution of nationality and gender where the great majority of the participants were female, Maltese nationals. However, the average age group of the participants was slightly different between the first and second survey, where, the average age of the respondents of Survey 1 was 35.2 years old while that of Survey 2 was slightly higher at 37.9 years old. It is good to note that the first survey yielded a higher response rate and this can be seen as a result of higher rates of social media usage when the pandemic was declared for the first time. Parents increased their use of technology and social media channels during the pandemic to share and collect information, to connect with others and to seek information (Drouin, McDaniel, Pater and Toscos, 2020).

In both phases of the survey, the large majority of the respondents who replied to the questionnaire were females. Whilst this can be considered as a limitation because the perspectives of the male parents are significantly under-represented in this study, this might also be an indication that female parents tend to carry the main responsibility of caring and supporting their children in their learning process.

Figure 4.1 describes the regions from which the participants were drawn. In Survey 1, the participants were more or less equally distributed (16% – 24%) among all regions (Northern Harbour, South Eastern, Southern Harbour, Northern and Western), except for the regions of Gozo and Comino (3%) and missing (3%). In both surveys, the highest percentage of the respondents hailed from the Northern Harbour (24.4% Survey 1; 31% Survey 2), the lowest percentage of participants came from Gozo and Comino (Survey 1, 2.9%; Survey 2, 2%). There was a considerable increase in participants from the Northern Harbour (from 24% to 31%) and the Western region (from 16% to 25%) in Survey 2. Contrastingly, in Survey 2, there was a decrease in the percentage of the respondents in the other regions: South Eastern (from 19% to 13%), Southern Harbour (from 17% to 14%) and Northern region (from 17% to 15%). The percentage of participants from Gozo and Comino decreased slightly, from 3% in Survey 1 to 2% in Survey 2. The list of geographical regions with details about the towns and villages as categorised by NSO is available as Appendix B.

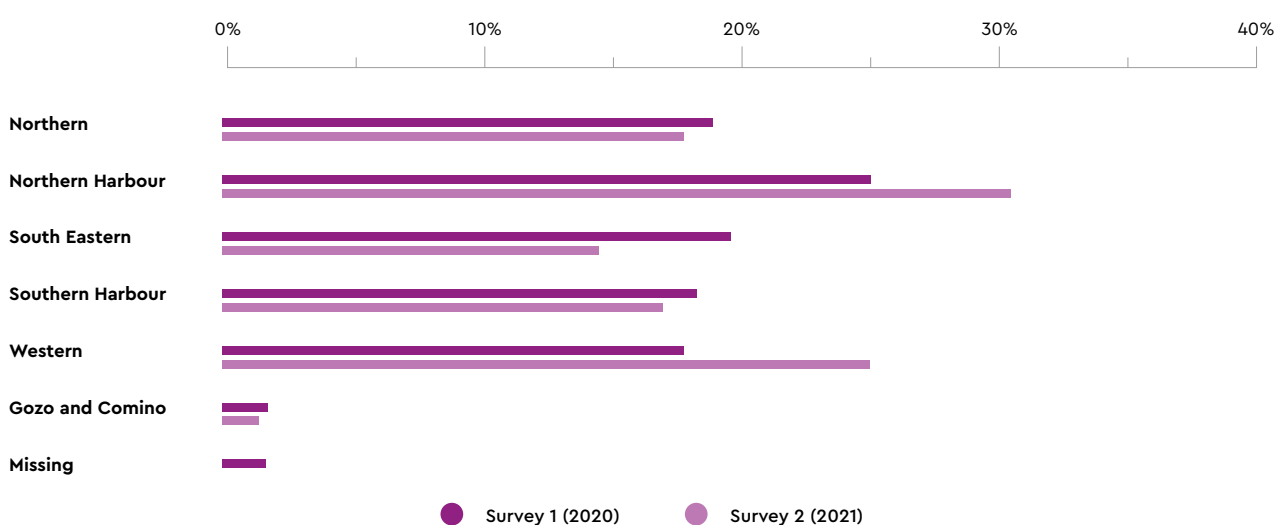


Figure 4.1: Geographic demographics of participants

The highest level of education in each household, besides that of the respondent parent varied (Figure 4.2). In the main, the majority of households in both surveys, had a family member with a post-graduate degree (29.2% Survey 1; 40.1% Survey 2). The percentage of households with members with a first degree was considerably lower, with 22% in Survey 1 and 25.1% in Survey 2, while those with a vocational qualification were 22.8% in Survey 1 and 8.5% in Survey 2. It was interesting to note that 26% of the households (besides the parent filling-in the questionnaire) in Survey 1 and 26.1% in Survey 2 had a maximum level of secondary level of education 24% and 25.3%, and that of primary education of 2% and 1% respectively.

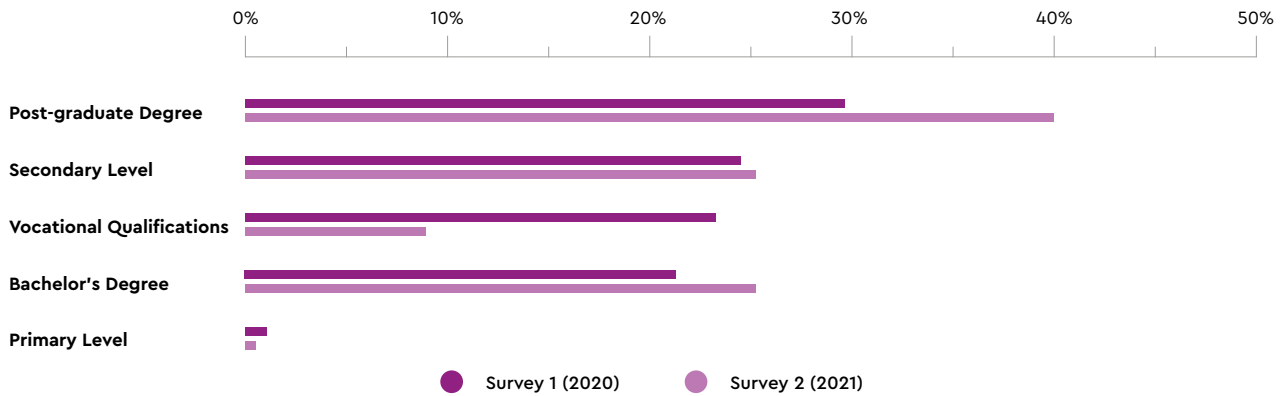


Figure 4.2: The highest level of education in each household

There is a considerable difference between the percentage of respondents who stated that they were working from home on a full-time basis between the two surveys (Figure 4.3). In Survey 1 (2020), the percentage of parents who were working from home on a full-time basis was of 35.1% which decreased to 20% in Survey 2. Correspondingly, those who were working outside the home increased, from 10.4% in Survey 1 to 26% in Survey 2 for those who were working full-time and from 5% in Survey 1 to 10.7% in Survey 2 for those who were working on a part-time basis. The percentage of parents who worked from home on reduced hours remained relatively the same, at 18.4% in Survey 1 and 18% in Survey 2. Similarly, the percentage of respondents who claimed that they were full-time parents did not fluctuate much, from 26.2% in Survey 1 to 22.9% in Survey 2. There were 3.7% of respondents who claimed that they were currently unemployed in Survey 1 and this decreased to 1.9% in Survey 2. A lower percentage of respondents stated that they were made redundant due to the COVID-19 situation, which was relatively similar in both surveys (1.2% Survey 1; 1% Survey 2).

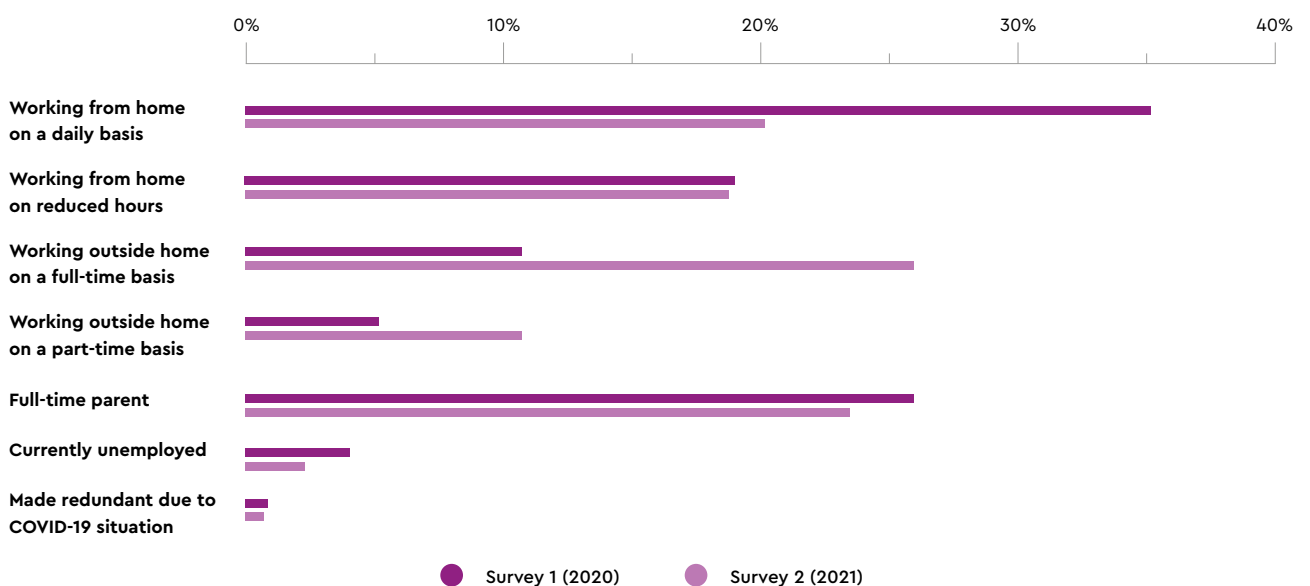


Figure 4.3: Respondents' type of work in both surveys

Figure 4.4 shows that the majority of respondents in Survey 1 sent their children to a church school or childcare (40.3%). This was closely followed by those respondents who sent their children to a state school or childcare (39.7%), while only 20% of the respondents in Survey 1 sent their children to an independent school or childcare. Contrastingly, the majority of parents in Survey 2 sent their children to an independent school or childcare (49.1%), which was closely followed by respondents who sent their children to a state school or childcare (46.5%). Only 10.7% of the respondents of Survey 2 sent their children to a church school or childcare.

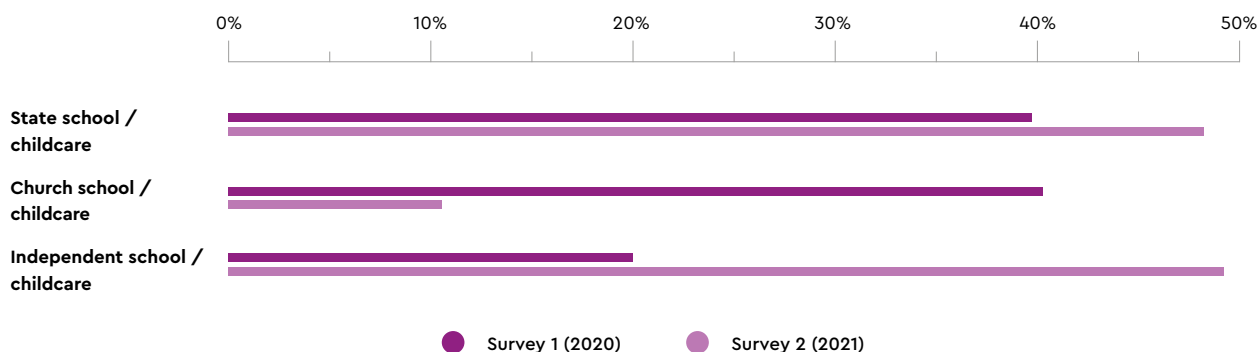


Figure 4.4: Type of school the respondents' children attended

Figure 4.5 provides information about the level of education of the children in every household. The majority of children attended primary school. The percentage of children that attended Years 1 – 3 in Survey 1 was of 40.5% while that in Survey 2 was of 41.4%, while the percentage of those children who attended Years 4 – 6 was of 38.1% in Survey 1 and 33.9% in Survey 2. The percentage of children attending in kindergarten was also high (34.6% Survey 1; 39.9% Survey 2). The percentage of children attending childcare was of 15.3% and 10.5% in Survey 1 and 2 respectively.

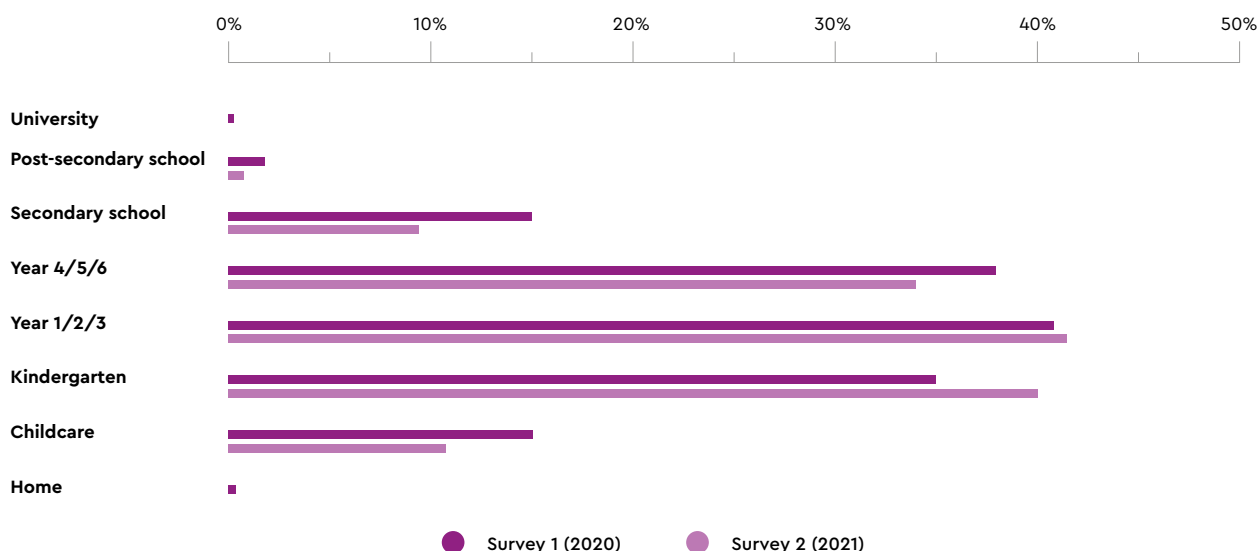


Figure 4.5: Level of education of the children in every household

The majority of the children of the respondents did not need the assistance of an LSE (84.6% Survey 1; 86.4% Survey 2) (Figure 4.6). Conversely, there were 15.3% of the respondents in Survey 1 who claimed that their children had the assistance of an LSE, with 8.2% who had a shared LSE, 4.2% who had one-to-one assistance of an LSE, and 2.9% who had the help of a complementary teacher. The percentages were less in Survey 2 where 13.6% of the respondents claimed that their children had the assistance of an LSE, with 5.8% claiming that their children had a shared LSE, 5.6% had one-to-one assistance of an LSE while 2.2% claimed that their children had the help of a complementary teacher.

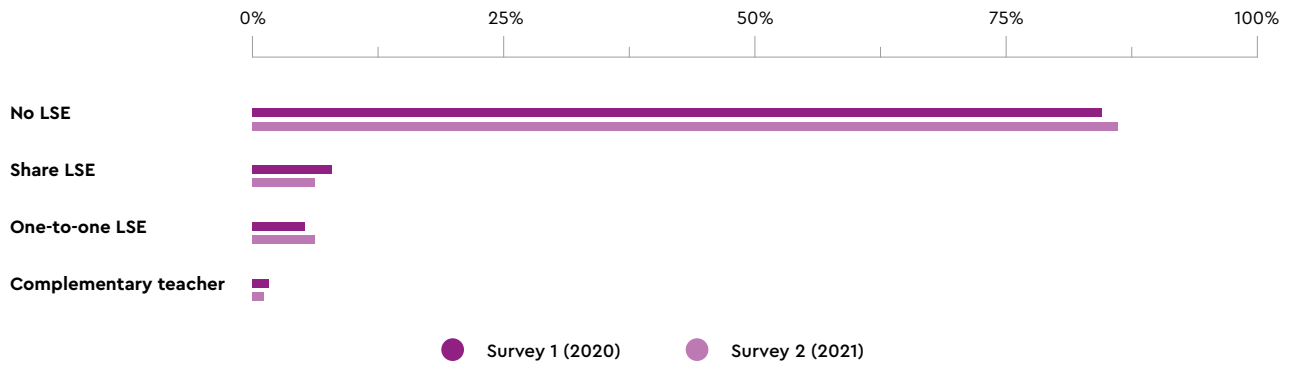


Figure 4.6: Children requiring the assistance of an LSE

More information pertaining to the participants of both surveys is available in a detailed table in Appendix A.

4.2 The survey

4.2.1 The Online Survey

The use of an online survey offered the opportunity to conduct this quantitative research study in an effective and efficient manner as data was immediately available (Sumi, 2019). The online nature of the survey afforded the facility to work remotely and collect data while in isolation or at a physical distance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The online nature of the survey afforded us with flexibility, convenience and ease of data entry, providing participants with a relatively easy way to fill-in the questionnaire, at a time that was convenient for them (Evans & Mathur, 2005). Moreover, it also avoided the unsustainable use of a paper-based survey at a time when the use of disposables had increased. Despite the advantages of an online survey, according to Evans and Mathur, (2005) and Wright (2005), online surveys can also be problematic as data could be skewed in that, it might not provide a true representation of the general population. When conducting this survey, the authors were aware that those parents who were either illiterate, digital illiterate or lacked the technological equipment or adequate internet connection, could not take part in the survey.

Data was collected through an online survey using Survey Monkey in September 2020 (Run 1) and September 2021 (Run 2). Both surveys were designed by the ECPE Research Group. The surveys were disseminated on social media through various Facebook groups and pages. E-mails were also sent to state and church schools via the Ministry for Education and the Secretariat for Catholic Education respectively. We also forwarded the online survey to several school leaders of independent schools via email and to colleagues in the sector via personal communication.

4.2.2 The questionnaires

The questionnaires focused on the perspectives of parents and their children during COVID-19 times in relation to *teaching and learning, learning spaces and well-being and relationships*. This first questionnaire, which was conducted in September 2020, about the first COVID-19 school closure that was experienced between March and June 2020, consisted of 44 items, of which 2 were open-ended questions. The close-ended questions were mainly multiple-choice and 5-point Likert scales. Open-ended questions were included to elicit any additional thoughts and comments from the participants. The second questionnaire which was conducted in September 2021, about the pandemic experience of children between September 2020 and June 2021 consisted of 28 items, of which 3 were open-ended questions. A number of 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 in number to encourage more participants to complete the questionnaire and therefore, to decrease the incidence of partial or missing data. Both questionnaires were made available to participants in both Maltese and English.

The design of the first survey allowed respondents to skip any questions they did not feel like answering. This led to missing data for a number of question items that resulted in a substantial amount of missing data and fewer complete data sets per participant. Aware of this limitation, in the second questionnaire, this was countered by the design of the survey, and participants were only allowed to proceed to the next question (excluding the open-ended items) once they have completed the previous one. When designing the first survey, there was no plan to conduct a second survey; thus, this was planned quite unexpectedly in response to the ongoing and changing nature and restrictions of the pandemic. If it was known on the outset that the survey would be conducted twice, the items in the first questionnaire may have been planned differently to enable better comparisons between the first and second runs. Also, the same participants from the first survey, could have potentially been followed up in the second run allowing for a longitudinal study.

The questionnaires were designed in sections identified in the three overall aims of the Cov-EM study, of teaching and learning, learning spaces and well-being and relationships. Table 4.2 below provides a summary of how the questionnaires were organised:

		Run 2: Questionnaire 1	Run 2: Questionnaire 2
Questionnaire Sections	n	Description of questions	n Description of questions
1 Demographics & Background	13	Age, gender, nationality, region, role in education, type of residence, highest level of education, type of residence, sector, type and level which children attend, requiring the help of LSE, occupation of parents, mode of work during COVID-19	11 Age, gender, nationality, region, role in education, number of occupants, highest level of education, type of school children attend, sector and level which children attend, requiring the help of LSE, mode of work during COVID-19
2 Pedagogy & Curriculum	15	Responsibility for the child's education before and during COVID-19, mode of learning by child, space and equipment used for learning before and during COVID-19, level of satisfaction with how school managed COVID-19, channels of communication with teacher, modes of teaching used by teacher, teaching-learning mode preferred by parents and children, type of lessons and activities delivered, concern of parents.	7 Responsibility for the child's education before and during COVID-19, mode of learning by child, space and equipment used, level of satisfaction with how school managed COVID-19, channels of communication with teacher, modes of teaching used by teacher, teaching-learning mode preferred by parents and children, type of lessons and activities delivered, experience that motivated children
3 Learning Spaces	6	Preferred location for online learning, the use of online platforms by parents and children, the learning of new skills as experienced by parents and children, the use of online spaces after the pandemic.	1 The effect of mitigation measures on children, suggestions for improvement.
4 Well-being & Relationships	8	How parents felt during the pandemic, time spent doing different activities, level of confidence experienced, advantages and disadvantages of learning remotely, level of support provided by parents, level of support provided by the school.	4 How parents felt during the pandemic, level of confidence experienced, child's experiences of remote learning, level of support provided by the school.
5 Any comments	2	An open-ended question inviting any comments participants wished to share, one relating to mentioning an online experience that motivated your child, and the other was a generic one.	3 An open-ended question inviting any comments participants wished to share, one relating to mentioning an online experience that motivated your child, the second asked for suggestions for improvement should schools require to close down again, and the last was a generic one.
Number of items	44		26

Table 4.2: Brief description of the questions in each section of the first and second questionnaires

Both versions of the questionnaire were piloted with a number of parents who volunteered to test them before they were disseminated. The feedback obtained ensured that the questions were clear to the reader, answerable and that any potential technical difficulties with the online format were resolved.

4.3 Data Collection and analysis

The data collected through SurveyMonkey were disseminated on social media through various Facebook groups between August and September 2020 for the first survey and then again in September 2021, for the second. The data were later extracted and imported into SPSS for analysis.

For the purpose of this study, the participants were analysed as one group, that is, they were not split according to gender, geographical region, income or age of their children. Further analyses for the Second Survey were conducted, however, these are beyond the scope of this study and the Research Group intends to explore these in more depth in the future. The Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test was conducted to explore whether there were significant differences between the responses of participants who were parents of children who attended an early years' or a primary setting and in general the responses were very similar. Another comparative analysis split the responses by school sector, that is whether the results vary according to whether the children attended a church, independent or a state school, and here some different responses were found on 4 questionnaire items.

Parents who opted to fill-in a questionnaire in Maltese answered the open-ended questions in Maltese, whereas those who opted to fill-in a questionnaire in English, answered the open-ended questions in English. The replies in Maltese were retained to remain truthful to the participants' replies. Spelling mistakes were adjusted for smoother reading. When, reference is made to Maltese quotes in Chapter 5 below, these were translated in English and presented in brackets following the quote in Maltese to make the report accessible to non-Maltese readers.

4.4 Ethical Procedures

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

4.5 Limitations

The participants were invited to complete the surveys through self-reporting. While self-reporting is an efficient way of collecting data quickly from a large sample of people without much effort or monetary cost, this mode of data collection still carry some limitations (Demetriou, Ozer & Essau, 2015). The main limitation of self-reporting, as highlighted by Ferrando, Lorenz-Seva and Chico (2009) and Demetriou et al. (2015), is that at times, participants may unwittingly provide inaccurate information or invalid answers. Others, may opt to not answer truthfully, frequently adopting social desirability bias and choose to answer questions in what they perceive as a socially acceptable way or by trying to give the 'correct answer' in an acquiescent response bias.

A limitation pertaining to the sample of this study is that findings cannot be generalised for all parents. This is because, as argued above, in online surveys sampling can be limited to or excluding of certain populations, and hence, can affect respondent availability. Parents from low socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to respond to this online survey. This is because, as indicated by Andrade (2020) and Pederson, Vingilis, Wickens, Koval and Mann (2020), an online questionnaire could not be completed by those parents who were illiterate or digitally illiterate, and/or who did not have access to a digital device and to a reliable internet connection as well as by those who were sufficiently interested in the subject.

Another limitation of this study is that at times, parents were reacting to questionnaire items that related to their children's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore they could be considered as third-party sources of secondary data (Pederson, et al., 2020). In such questions, parents could have provided irrelevant, inaccurate or exaggerated information as they replied from their own perspective rather than their children's.



CHAPTER 5

Results

This chapter is organised into two main sections: Section 5.1 presents results from the first survey (Run 1), while Section 5.2 from the second survey (Run 2). Both sections present frequency and percentage figures for the study's three elements of teaching and learning, learning spaces and well-being and relationships as illustrated in Figure 1.3. Results from both surveys are presented sequentially, starting from the data collected in September 2020 during the first round of the Cov-EM study, followed by that collected in September 2021. The results illustrated any similarities and/or differences in the results of both surveys.

It is worth noting that the figures used to illustrate the results refer to data from responses on a 5-point scale. This 5-point scale has been retained in the figures, so that the reader may appreciate the range of responses. However, for ease of reference when writing about the results, the 5-point is frequently collapsed. This means that results for the 'very often' and 'often' ends of the scale are combined and results are presented as a cumulative percentage. For example, a response yielding: 'very often, 25% and often, 50%' is presented as 75%. Conversely, this also applies to results at the opposite end of the scale. However, there are also times when separate percentages for specific parts of the 5-point scales are identified too.

Both Survey 1 and Survey 2 contain a few optional open-ended questions (refer to Table 4.2 above). The aim was to allow respondents to communicate their feelings, thoughts and experiences without being totally restricted to predetermined answers and with as much elaboration and depth as they wished. As indicated in Table 2 above, in the parents' Survey 1, there are 2 open-ended items, while in Survey 2, this increased to 3. In Survey 1, this includes an open-ended questionnaire item where respondents are invited to write about one online experience that in their opinion motivated and engaged their children more than usual, and a final question item inviting respondents to write 'Any additional comments'. In Survey 2, another open-ended question was added the two mentioned items, where respondents were also asked to provide suggestions for improvement should schools close again. Generally, respondents wrote a phrase or a sentence or two. However, there were instances where respondents opted to elaborate further with longer responses of two sentences or even a short paragraph. Such questions may yield answers that may highlight more personal experiences that were not captured through the closed questions and answers in the questionnaire. Moreover, these would be expressed in the language and style of the specific respondent.

While we appreciate the value of such responses, we acknowledge that statistically interpreting and writing-up qualitative findings would take up a considerable amount of time. Therefore, for the purpose of this report, the main focus is on the close-ended survey items of both questionnaires, while the open-ended responses will be featured to add some qualitative insight to the findings. These will be illustrated through the use of word clouds. Word clouds are used to generate a visual depiction or display of open-ended results, by highlighting the most frequently featured words in the selection of responses. The ECPE Research Group intends to focus on the open-ended responses (that yielded a satisfactory number of responses) in more detail and depth at a later stage of the Cov-EM research study.

The second source of 'open-ended responses' considered in the surveys refers to the opportunities built into the questionnaire to allow some optional short-form custom responses in the field listed as 'other', at the end of a number of statements given in a multiple-choice questionnaire item. This latter instance can be illustrated through a question item where the option to add an additional response afforded the participant through a write-in response. There are 9 multiple-choice questionnaire items in Survey 1 that allow the respondents to write a comment, other than those listed, while in Survey 2 there are 4.

5.1 Results of Survey 1

The results of the first survey held in September 2020 are presented through a selection of figures that capture the frequencies of responses to each questionnaire item. These are clustered into the three sections as indicated in the conceptual framework model (Figure 1.3) and are presented in the following order: Teaching and learning, learning spaces, and wellbeing and relationships.

5.1.1 Teaching and Learning

This section describes the modes of learning as experienced by participant parents. In the first question about teaching and learning, parents were asked about who was responsible for their child’s education before the pandemic (Figure 5.1). Over half the participant parents (53%) claimed that, prior to the closure of schools in March 2020, they took sole responsibility of their child’s education, whilst 41.4% claimed that both parents participated in supporting their child with school tasks. On the other hand, 1.2% of the parents relied on an older sibling or relative to help with supporting their child’s education. This could be because an older sibling or relative can be taking care of the child while the parent/s would be working. Very few parents, (1.9%) reported that their child worked independently. 0.6% of the parents reported that their child attended private tuition before schools closed. In the field ‘other’ 1.8% of the participants wanted to be more specific in their replies. Four participants stated that their child was in childcare and hence, was not subject to homework; as a result, they did not provide them with support. While two male participants claimed that it was their wife who took responsibility of their child’s education, two female participants claimed that they were mainly responsible of their child’s education with some minor help from their husbands. Another participant clarified that while she mainly supported her child, she also found help from her mother. Three participants indicated that their child was exclusively supported by their mother or their friend, while another claimed that her child is supported by a teacher who comes to their home and helps him with his homework, “as I do not know how to help him”. Another female participant reported that while she took the main responsibility of their child’s learning because she has a background in education, she clarified that both her husband and herself are actively involved in contributing to their children’s education as they view education more than literacy and numeracy. They make it a point to expose their child to “a wide variety of enriching experiences, speak with our children at length, explain various processes to them, involve them in day-to-day activities/chores/projects.”

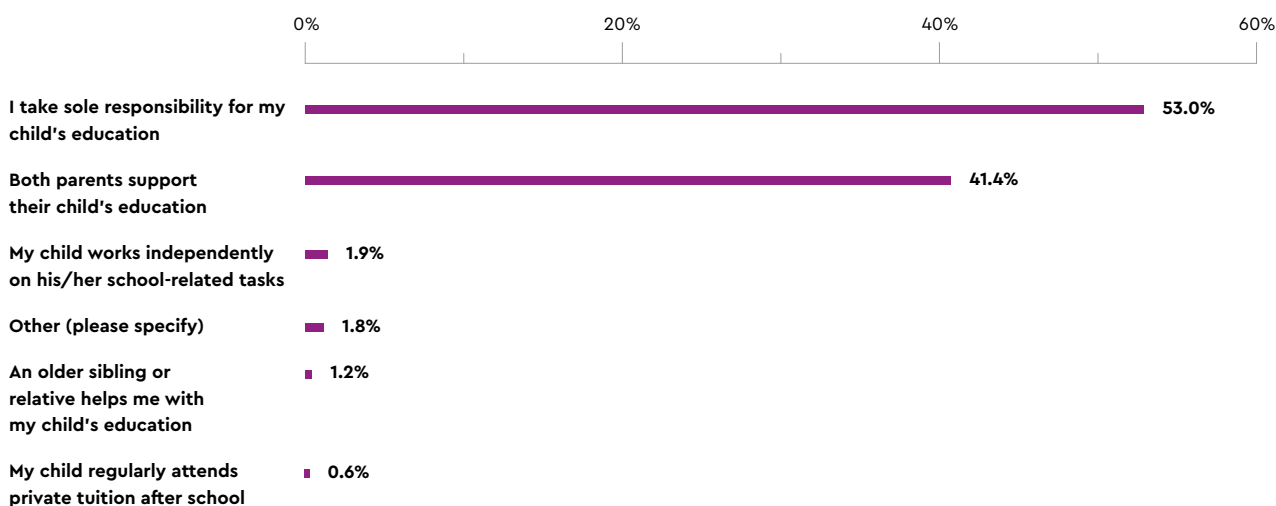


Figure 5.1: Individuals responsible for child's education before school closure

When asked if there was any change in those responsible for their child's education after school closure, 32.4% marked in the affirmative whilst 64.7% indicated that there was no change. In the section dedicated for 'other' comments some parents clarified, that while they still remained mainly responsible for their child's education, they claimed that they needed to dedicate more time to support their child both during online lessons (when these were provided) and in their homework, with some stating that they had to seek help from other relatives to manage. Another parent complained that her time was so taken with her work and supporting her child that she did not have time for herself. Other parents claimed that because they were working from home, the time they usually allocated to help their child with their homework decreased. For other families, the dynamics changed completely as parents had to switch their roles, either because the other parent was working from home and therefore could give more attention to their child, or because s/he had lost work.

Figure 5.2 shows that after school closure less parents (44.2%) reported that they took sole care of their child's education when compared to before school closure (53% - Figure 5.1). Also, less parents (32.8%) claimed that both parents, participated in supporting their child when compared to 41.4% of parents who claimed that they supported their child. On the other hand, there was increase in online private tuition from 0.6% (Figure 5.1) to 6.3% (Figure 5.2), with parents claiming that more "professional help was needed" because, "my child found it difficult to follow learning from the computer". Another increase was recorded in the number of children helped by an older sibling or relative, where the percentage almost doubled; from 1.2% (Figure 5.1) to 2.3% (Figure 5.2). There was also increase in the number of children who took responsibility for their own learning and worked independently on school tasks; from 1.9% (Figure 5.1) to 4.6% (Figure 5.2). 9.9% of parents chose to add their own comments in the field 'other responses'. Some parents (n=3) complained that their child was not having online lessons while others (n=1) claimed that they were receiving work from their teacher; therefore, they had to "look for activities that seemed suitable for her [daughter's] age" to do. In support of this, another parent (n=1) complained that, "If online learning system was implemented ... things would have been a bit less stressful. All of a sudden, besides doing my work I ended up being a full-time teacher and housewife." This was echoed by another parent (n=1) who likewise claimed that she "was mentally exhausted as [I] couldn't cope between online learning, work and housework" (n=1). Similarly, other parents (n=2) claimed that they had to support their child more (n=2) as work increased, "all of a sudden we had all books and copybooks at home, and had to file handouts in different files, etc." including correcting homework after receiving answers from teachers (n=1). It was interesting to note that one parent (n=1) stated that they did not follow what the teacher was sending them, but adapted learning to their "reality".

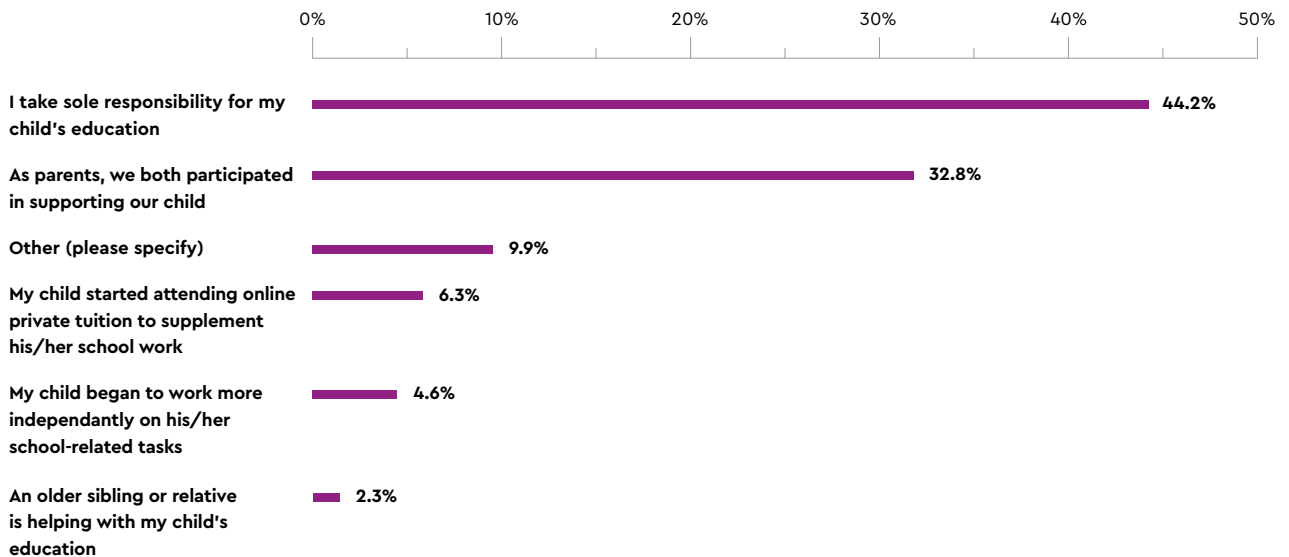


Figure 5.2: Individuals responsible for child's education after school closure

As indicated in Figure 5.3 below, the respondents had the possibility to identify the learning space their child used when working on school-related work at home during the pandemic. Over half the participants (55.5%) claimed that their child shared space with either a sibling or a parent working from home. On the other hand, 7.5% of the parents reported that their child had their own designated space and mostly worked alone in their bedroom. Contrastingly, 9.2% of the parents indicated that their child did not have a specific work/study space. It was interesting to note that 17.2% described how their child alternated between working indoors and outdoors. 10.6% of parents chose to add their own comments in the field for 'other' comments. While some parents claimed that either their children were too young for schoolwork (n=17) or they did not have online lessons (n=3) and therefore did not need to create a learning space, other parents (n= 27) had to identify or even set up a particular space in the house where their child could work or follow online lessons. Some parents claimed that their children worked in the kitchen (n=8), while they kept an eye on them, while other parents created “a classroom environment” in other rooms such as the living room (n = 4), the washroom (n = 1), the office or study room (n=11), while others (n=3) did not identify a particular room where their child followed online lessons. A parent who is also a teacher claimed that her child followed online lessons from her office room; “We partially transformed the office into a classroom. On one side I used to teach my students, and my son used to follow online lessons on the other side of the room. We worked well in this way.” Another parent stated that while her children used to follow lessons online from the study room on their own, this room was close to the kitchen and they used to call her to assist them whenever they encountered a problem.

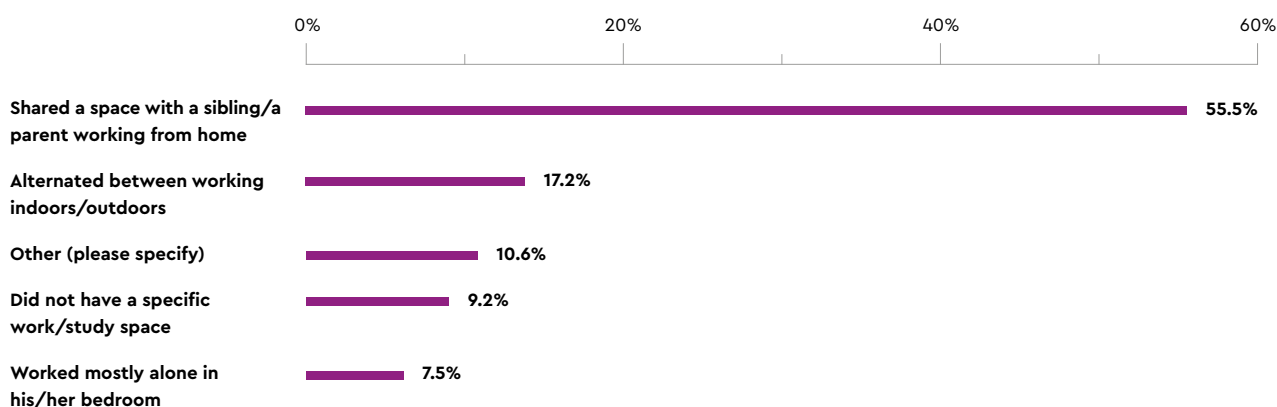


Figure 5.3: Learning spaces used while working on school-related work

Figure 5.4 shows that the majority of children had access to a technological device to follow online teaching. The largest number of respondents (69%) claimed that they had access to a shared technological device such as a computer, a personal laptop or tablet. A fifth (20.6%) of the respondents indicated that their child had their own laptop, 6.3% stated that their children had their own desktop computer, while 15.9% followed online lessons from a mobile device. About a quarter of the respondents (23.4%) stated that their children used the tablet provided by the school. On the other hand, 2.8% of the parents reported that their children did not have access to a technological device. While this percentage is relatively low, it is important to point out, that this means that there were children who could not follow online lessons because they did not have access to technology. Moreover, while, as stated above, the great majority of the respondents claimed that they had access to shared technological equipment, this could have meant that the same children, at times, might not have been able to access online lessons as the same device was being used by an older sibling or an adult. 60.2% of the parents reported that they had internet access.

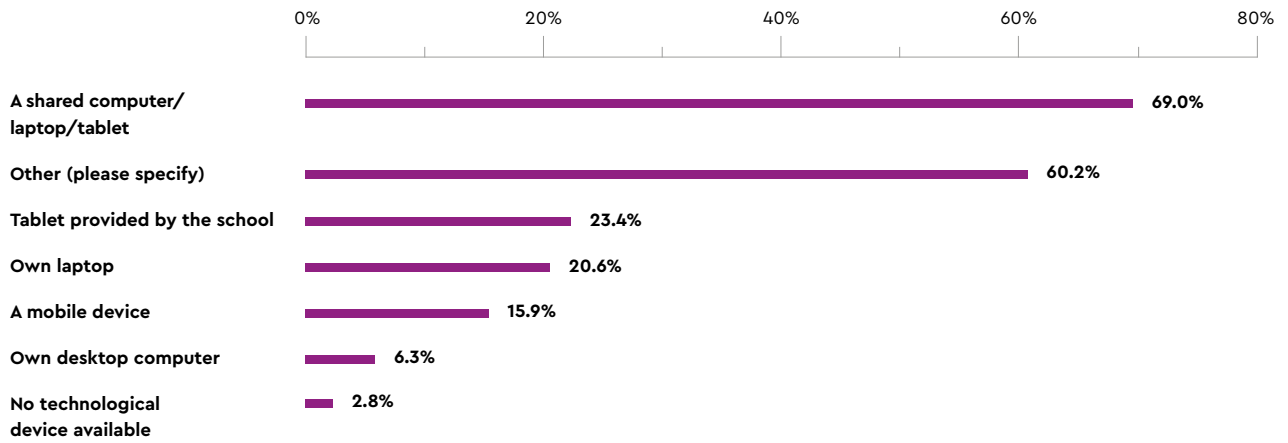


Figure 5.4: Access to technological devices that supported children in learning from home

Comparing Figure 5.5 and Figure 5.6 below, that shows the frequency of using technological devices by children before school closure (Figure 5.5) and after school closure (Figure 5.6), it is immediately evident that while the use of technological devices for leisure, more or less remained the same (from 50.3% who often used devices prior to school closure to 50.5% after school closure), the frequency in the use of technological devices increased considerably after school closure. The figures show that there was a considerable increase in the use of technological devices to play digital games, from 44.5% before school closure to 50.8% after school closure. Likewise, there was an increase in the use of technological devices to watch programmes, from 36.5% before school closure to 45.9% after school closure. A significant increase was also recorded in the use of technological devices to communicate with friends; from 21.5% before school closure to 30% after school closure. The use of technological devices for home-school communication and to do school-related work also noted an increase. Prior to school closure, 42% of the parents stated that their children used technological devices for school-home communication; this increased to 55.2% after school closure. Likewise, while 45.8% of the parents claimed that their children used technological devices to do school-related work before school closure, this drastically increased to 62.2% after school closure.

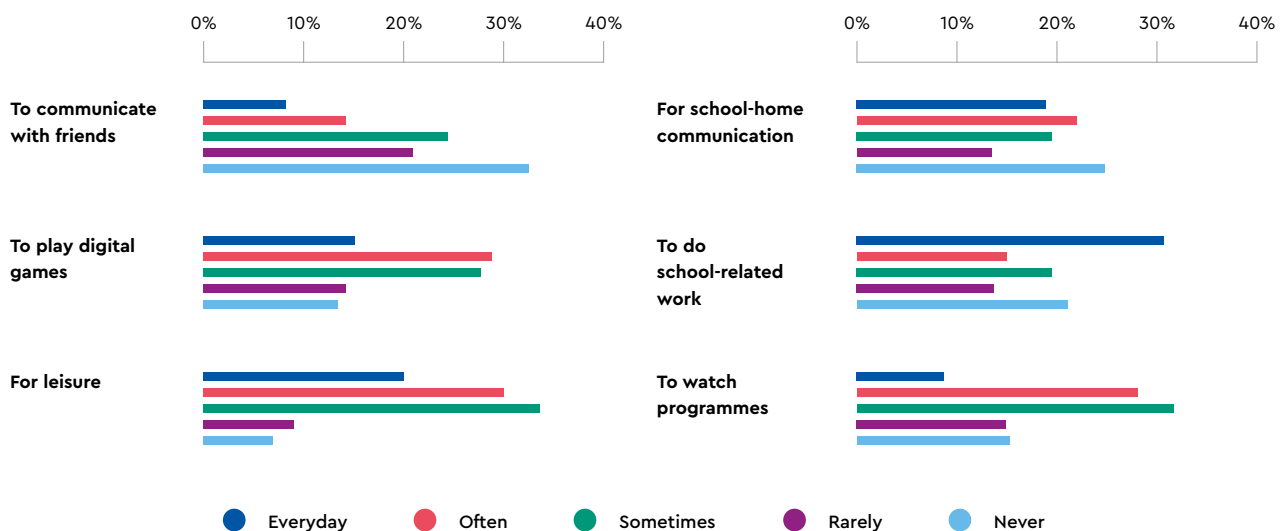


Figure 5.5: Frequency of using technological devices by children before school closure

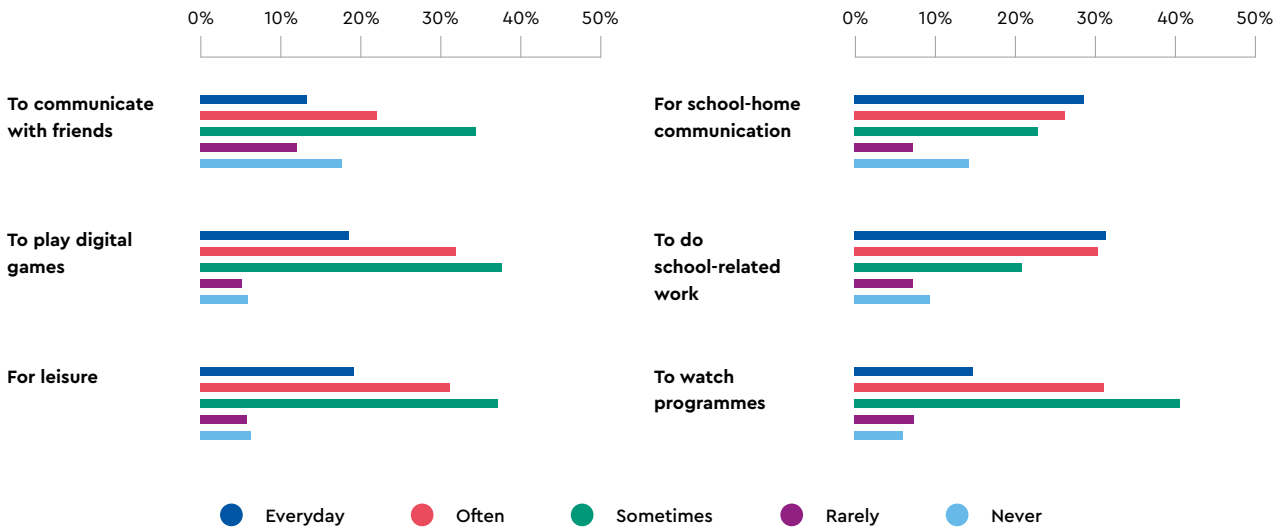


Figure 5.6: Frequency of using technological devices by children after school closure

The absolute majority of parents (90%) were generally satisfied with the way schools communicated guidelines about the changing modes of teaching and learning (Figure 5.7). Likewise, the majority of parents (58.8%) were satisfied with the way the school shifted teaching and learning to remote modes after school closure. However, it is important to point out that around a quarter of the respondents (24.6% and 22.3%) reported dissatisfaction with the way schools communicated guidelines and shifted to remote modes of teaching and learning respectively.

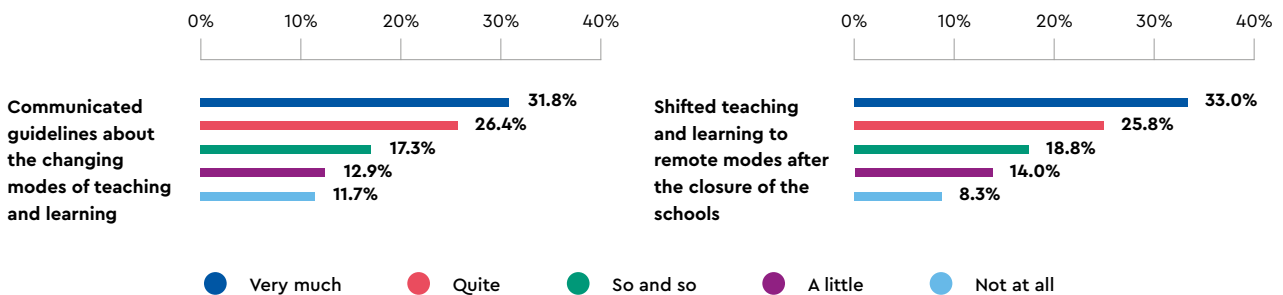


Figure 5.7: Satisfaction with how schools handled guidelines communication and shifting of learning to remote modes

Figure 5.8 shows that teachers used a variety of online modes for teaching and learning and ways of communication with parents, albeit, asynchronous modes were preferred in the first school closure. The figure shows that most teachers adopted a remote approach and relied on a traditional method to teaching where the focus was on doing written exercises. 46.4% of the parents claimed that teachers sent numerous links to websites, while another 37% stated that teachers sent emails with resources and details about schoolwork and homework. Conversely, 37.6% of the parents claimed that teachers sent them emails with details about schoolwork and homework once a week, while 36.6% of the parents claimed that teachers sent them recordings of their own explanations. Only 42.2% of the parents claimed that teachers did daily real-time online sessions, with 23.9% of the respondents stating that teachers also uploaded recordings of their real-time sessions for parents and children who could not make it during the scheduled time slot. 24.9% of the parents claimed that teachers used a mixed approach. According to 36.6% of the parents, teachers used social media to communicate with them. Allowed to write comments under this question, a parent described the communication, with the teacher as “truly disappointing” while another complained that, “kellna naqdfu ghal rasna” [“completely left to our own devices”]. More specifically some parents (n=8) stated that the teacher did not communicate at all with them or that s/he communicated up to two or three times throughout the whole school closure period (n=7). Other parents reported more frequent communication with some parents (n=21) stating that the teacher communicated with them once a week (n=21), while others (n=4) indicated up to twice or thrice a week (n=4) to daily (n=8). Other parents (n=7) complained that teachers, “faqghuna bil-homework bla spejgazzjoni. Ma bdejniex inlaħħqu (max-xogħol mibgħut) u nikkoreġu”

[sent a considerable amount of homework without an explanation. We were not keeping up (with doing all the work sent) and correct it] highlighting the teachers' preference for a traditional approach where prominence was given to the teaching of the "alphabet, numbers, plus and minus and writing her name" and the filling-in of exercises and worksheets.

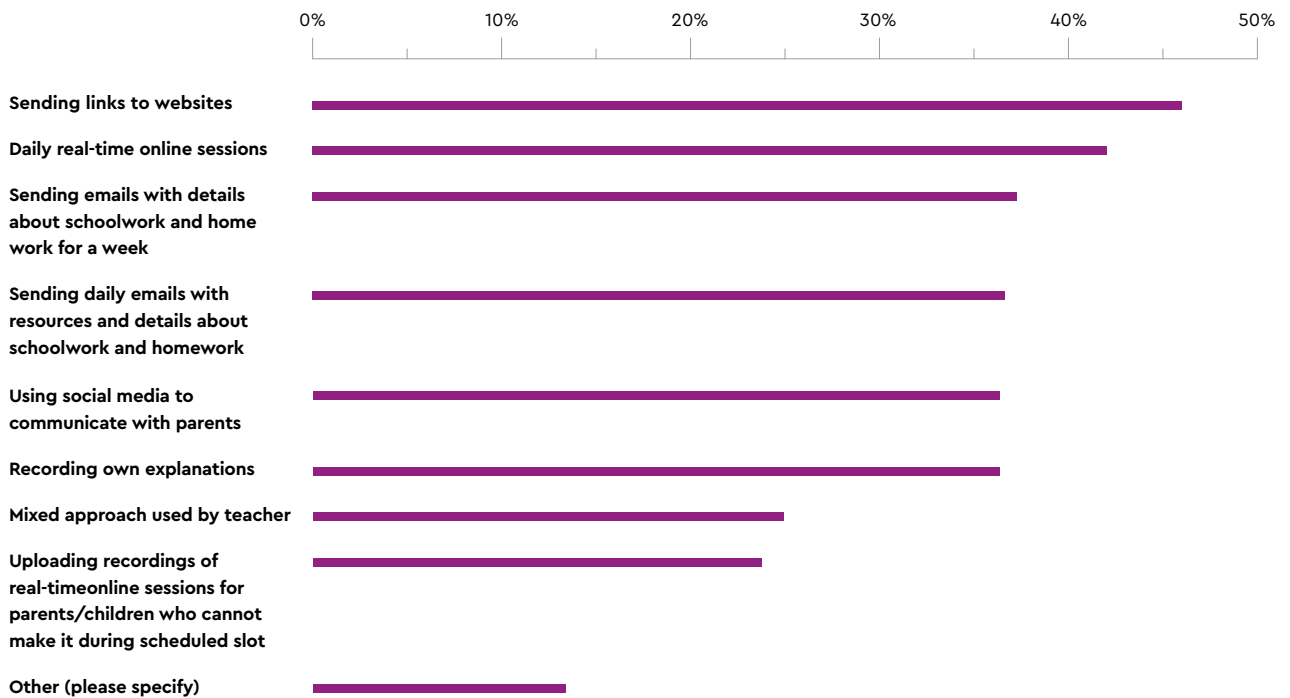


Figure 5.8: Modes of teaching and learning and ways of communication used by teachers during school closure

In line with the data represented in Figure 5.8 above, Figure 5.9 shows that the majority of parents claimed that, in the main, teachers preferred asynchronous modes to teaching and learning where they relied heavily on traditional approaches. 67% and 60.7% of parents respectively claimed that teachers sent them lists of worksheets and exercises for their children to work. Contrastingly, according to parents, online sessions were less favoured by teachers with 61.71% of parents claiming that teachers rarely conducted live sessions on a daily basis while, 40.9% of the parents claiming that teachers rarely conducted interactive online real-time sessions. Conducting online activities with a small number of children rather than the whole class, was the least used, where 77.9% of the parents stating that this rarely or never occurred, while more than half the respondents (55.6%) stating they rarely had online time for children to interact amongst themselves, with only 22.2% indicating that this occurred often. The use of recorded video clips with explanations had a more mixed response with 43.1% of the parents claiming that this rarely or never occurred while 39.5% of the parents stating that this happened often.

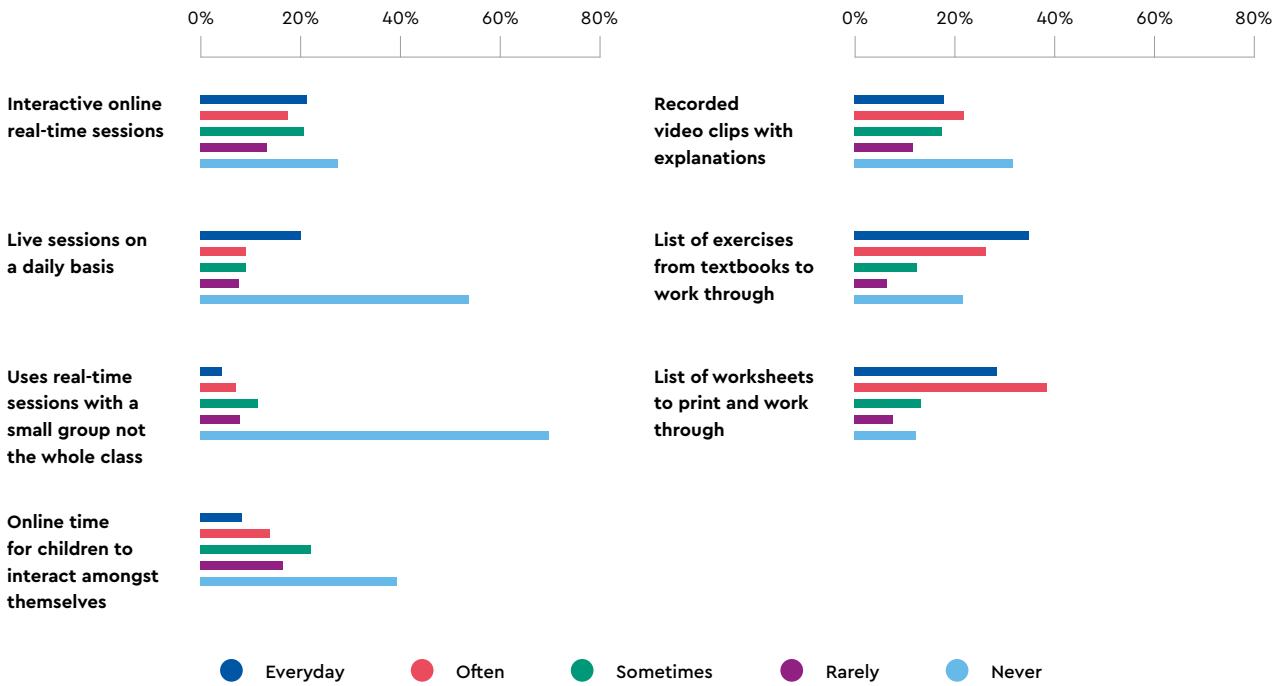


Figure 5.9: Learning modalities used by teachers

In their responses about their perspectives on the quality of learning during school closure, the majority of the respondents (91.6%) were in disagreement that children should have stopped their education when schools closed (Figure 5.10). In line with the data presented in Figures 5.8 and 5.9 above, where the majority of parents indicated that traditional and asynchronous modes were the preferred modes used by teachers, Figure 5.10 below shows that most parents (67.3%) agreed with more real-time face-to-face online sessions while 46.9% of the parents did not agree that the teacher should have given more homework. 64.2% of the parents agreed that the teacher was fully committed to teaching. On the other hand, parents were divided on their level of satisfaction that online learning took place, with 42.3% of the parents indicating that they were satisfied while a third of participant parents (34.7%) indicating that they were not satisfied. Different views emerged with regards to whether online learning should remain after COVID-19 with 44.4% agreeing and 29.1% disagreeing.

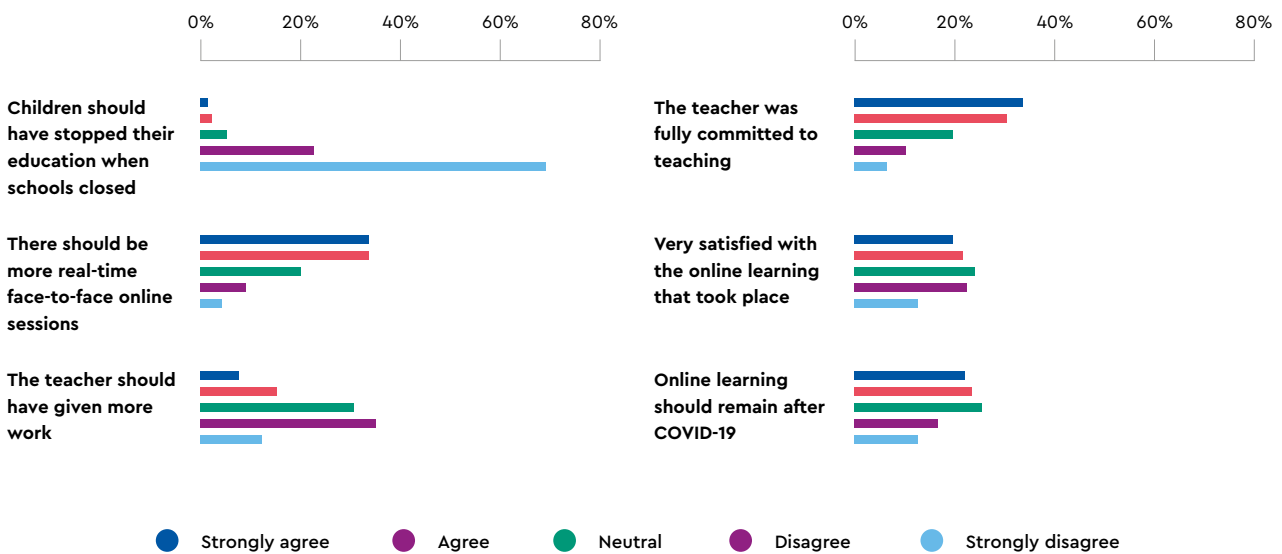


Figure 5.10: Perspectives of parents on the quality of learning during school closure

When parents were asked about their child's preferences regarding learning during school closure, more than half of the respondents (55.7%) claimed that their children preferred to have real-time, face-to-face online sessions with the teacher (Figure 5.11), while only 30.3% of parents indicated that their child preferred online learning to remain the same. The results also show that 42.30% of the parents stated that their children did not like how online learning was being conducted. When parents were asked whether their child would have preferred more work to be given by the teacher, 33.7% of the respondents replied in the negative while 27.6% replied in the affirmative. There was a staggering 38.7% who stated that their child would at times have preferred more work to be given by the teacher. The results also show that most children (44.4%) would have preferred attending school and only 32.6% preferred not to attend whilst schools were closed. When asked to elaborate in their answers, parents communicated divergent preferences. While some parents (n=3) claimed that children should be “back to school and get on with life”, others (n=11) were more cautious and claimed that their child, “would prefer to attend school and play with peers”, once it would be safe to do so. Contrastingly, other parents (n=2) stated that their child would prefer to stay at home during the pandemic but with regular face-to-face online interaction with the teacher and classmates. Another parent (n=1) claimed that their child would prefer a mixture of real-time and independent work.

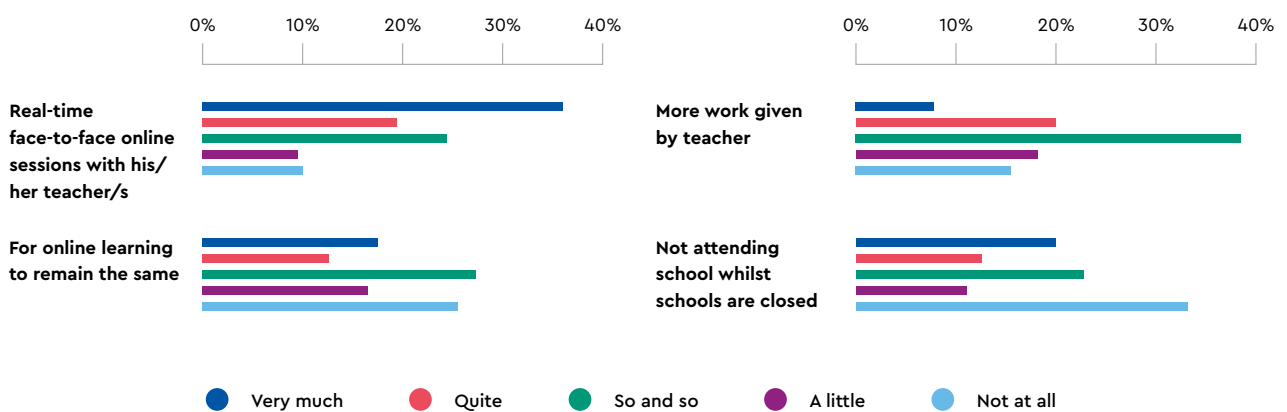


Figure 5.11: Children's preferences regarding learning during school closure

The majority of parents (80.2%) stated that Maths was the most taught subject, while the least taught subject was PSCD, with 67.1% of the parents claiming that their child either never had PSCD lessons, or did so only once every two weeks (Figure 5.12). The teaching of English and Maltese was also done very frequently, with English being taught more frequently than Maltese. 59.2% of the parents indicated that their child had English writing lessons twice a week or more, while 48.9% of the parents stated that their children had English speaking lessons more than twice weekly. English reading and English listening lessons followed with 47% and 43.7% more than twice weekly respectively. Like in the case of English, writing lessons in Maltese were more popular with 52.8% of the parents claiming that they had such lessons more than twice a week. This was followed by Maltese speaking (46.5%) and Maltese reading lessons (39.3%). Only 35.5% of the parents stated that their children had Maltese listening lessons more than twice weekly. This was in contrast with lessons in science (47.8%), social studies (40.3%), religion (40.2%) and expressive arts (39.3%) which were done only once a week. When asked to elaborate, some parents (n=10) stated that their children had physical education (PE) once a week, while one parent mentioned that her child had two Spanish lessons and an ICT lesson per week.

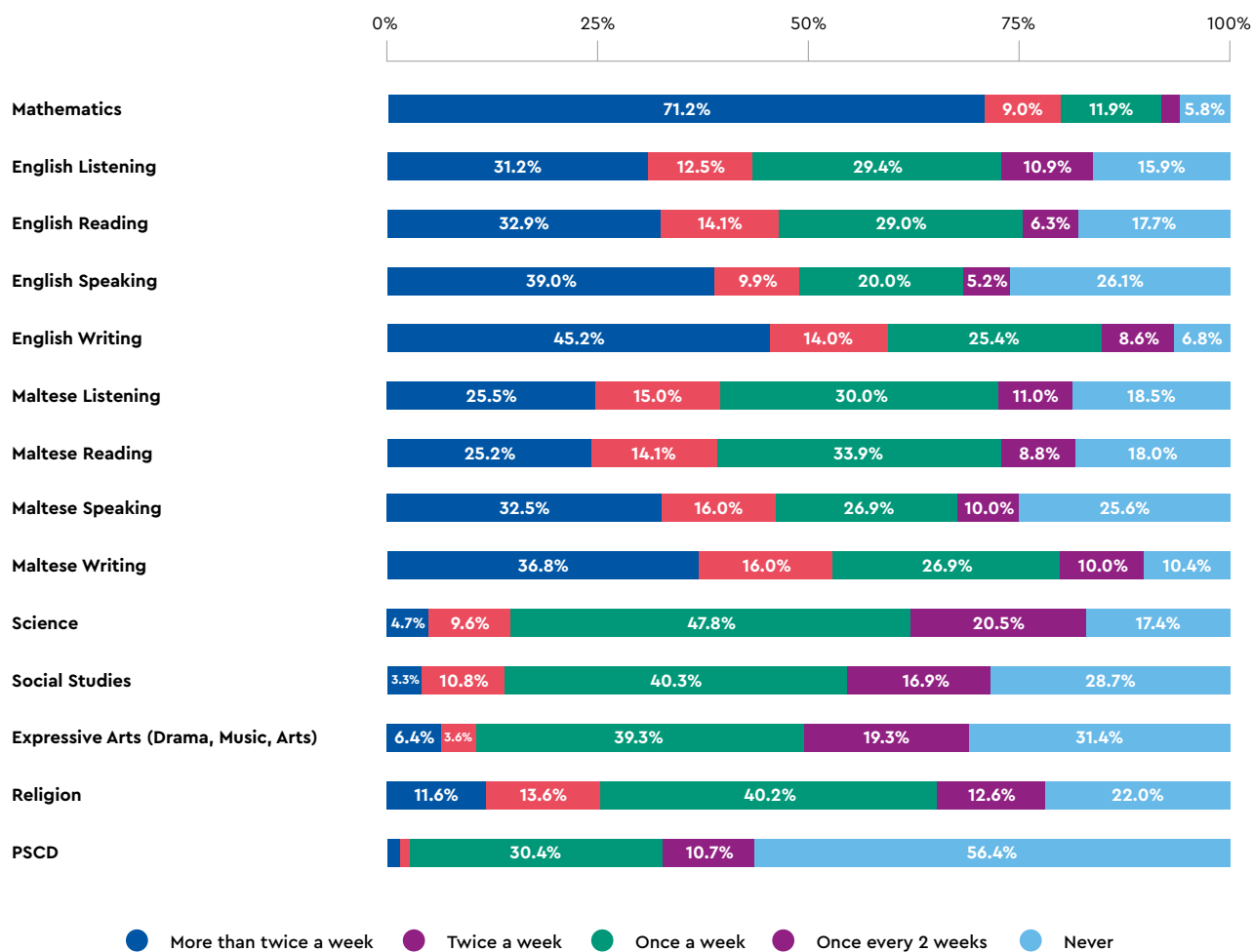


Figure 5.12: Frequency of online learning lessons in the different subjects in the primary

Figure 5.13 illustrates the frequency of online activities in the different areas for children attending childcare and kindergarten. Parents of children in childcare or kindergarten indicated that almost all activities were predominantly never done, with developing a children’s web (81.9%), eating lunch together (78.3%) and circle time (74.6%) being the three main activities that were registered by an absolute majority of parents as never done. On the other hand, parents indicated that traditional activities such as the teaching of numbers (38.2%), mathematical activities (30.7%), the teaching of letters (36.7%), the sharing of online resources (33.5%) and the filling of worksheets (29.5%) were done twice a week or more. Like in the case of primary school children, maths was also the subject most taught in childcare and kindergarten. Physical education, science experimentation and the creative arts were registered by almost one-third of the parents as being done once a week: 30.4%, 29% and 27.2% respectively.



Figure 5.13: Frequency of online activities in the different areas for children in childcare and kindergarten

Figure 5.14 shows the parents' main concerns about remote teaching and learning. Three-quarters of respondents (75.9%) claimed that their main concern about remote teaching and learning was the lack of face-to-face interaction. Lack of children's engagement in the learning process was also a major concern (71%). Parents reported that they were less concerned about reduced contact time (43.3%), lack of support for children (42.4%) and lack of support for families (26.5%). When asked to specify other concerns, parents mainly mentioned their child's lack of concentration during online lessons, largely due to long hours of teaching that were frequently repetitive, boring and abstract content was delivered (n=7), while others (n=2) complained that online activities were very tiring. The fact that children were missing out on school/learning content was a matter of concern for some parents (n=3), while others (n=10) worried about the lack of social interaction with their friends.

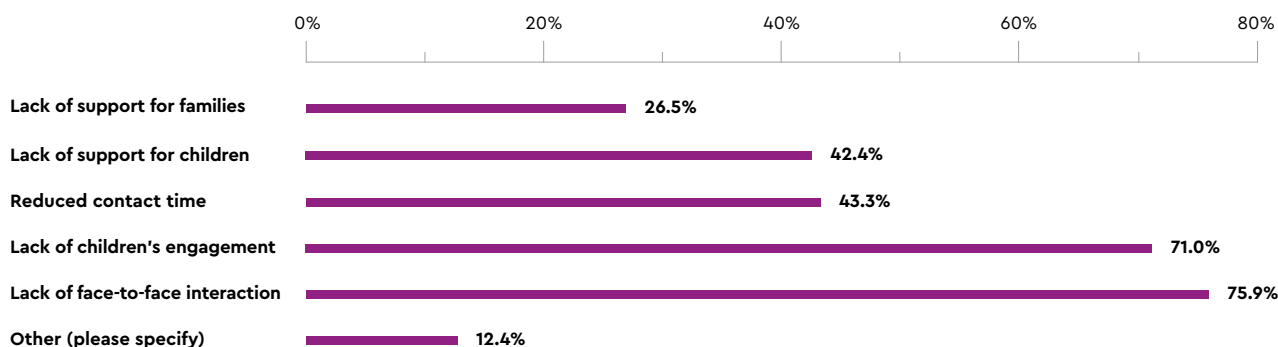


Figure 5.14: Parents' main concerns about remote teaching and learning

The last question in the teaching and learning section of the questionnaire was an open-ended one, where parents had to mention an online experience where their child seemed more motivated and engaged than usual. This generated 300 responses. Many parents (n=33) stated that, online activities were not motivating or engaging for their children. These are some of the replies provided by some parents in this regard:

It-tfal kienu bla motivazzjoni. [Children were unmotivated.]

Veru kien jiddejjaq bit-tagħlim online. [He really used to get bored with online learning.]

Ġenn kien ikollha biex teħles. [She used to be impatient to get done with online lessons.]

Another parent described online teaching as an “absolute disaster”. Contrastingly, other parents (n=14) stated that their children were always motivated to learn online, with many contributing this success to the teacher, who according to one parent was:

Super-efficient and made them enjoy the lessons as much as they would have in class.

Other parents were specific in naming particular activities that motivated their children to learn online. Some of the activities mentioned included participating in online games such as quizzes, bingo games and other interactive games accessed from game-based learning platforms such as Kahoot (n=38), having live online sessions (n=35) where children had the opportunity to talk with friends and their teacher, doing creative arts and craft, music, dance and drama activities (n=22), science experiment (n=16), show and tell (n=13), and hands-on activities such as treasure hunts and cooking activities (n=12), while some children were motivated when the teacher read and/or animated a story (n=7). Figure 5.15 represents the most frequent words used by the parents in their open-ended replies in relation to online activities which reflect the answers above. The words *interactive, games, live, sessions, engaged, learning, enjoyed, reading*, clearly dominate the Word Cloud below, and which reflect their frequent use in the parents' replies above.





Figure 5.15: Word cloud that reflects the most words mentioned by the respondents in relation to online activities

5.1.2 Learning Spaces

In this section, the questions asked to parents were about the physical spaces they had within their homes for their children to follow online teaching, and the availability of the digital equipment their children had and could make use of. Figure 5.16 shows the access to facilities children had to support their online learning.

The majority of parents reported that their children had the necessary digital devices (80.5%), and access to good internet connection (82.9%). Contrastingly, this means that 8.5% of the children did not have access to the necessary technological devices or rarely, while 10.9% only had access at times. Moreover, 7.6% of parents claimed that their children did not have good internet connection or rarely did, while another 9.5% stated that they only sometimes had internet connection. This confirms the digital divide between children; where children from different socio-economic backgrounds do not have the same access to education.

When asked about the learning spaces their children had for their perusal, 82.9% of the respondents claimed that their children had enough personal space from where to follow online activities, while 38.1% claimed that their children had access to an outdoor space where they could follow lessons online. Comparably, this means that 61.9% of the children had to follow online lessons from an indoor space. Moreover, 67.1% of the parents claimed that their children had an undisturbed learning space at home from where to follow online lessons; while another 25.4% of the parents stated that their children had access to an undisturbed learning space at another residence. This means that 33% and 74.5% of the children, sometimes to always, had to follow online learning from disturbed spaces either from their home or another residence respectively. This reflects the living reality of children where according to data from this survey, 41.4% of the children (n=328) lived in apartments, and 26.4 (n=209) lived in maisonettes, where space is limited, and therefore, children were less probable to have access to personal and undisturbed space from where to learn. This highlights the persistent inequalities children are exposed to, to learn.



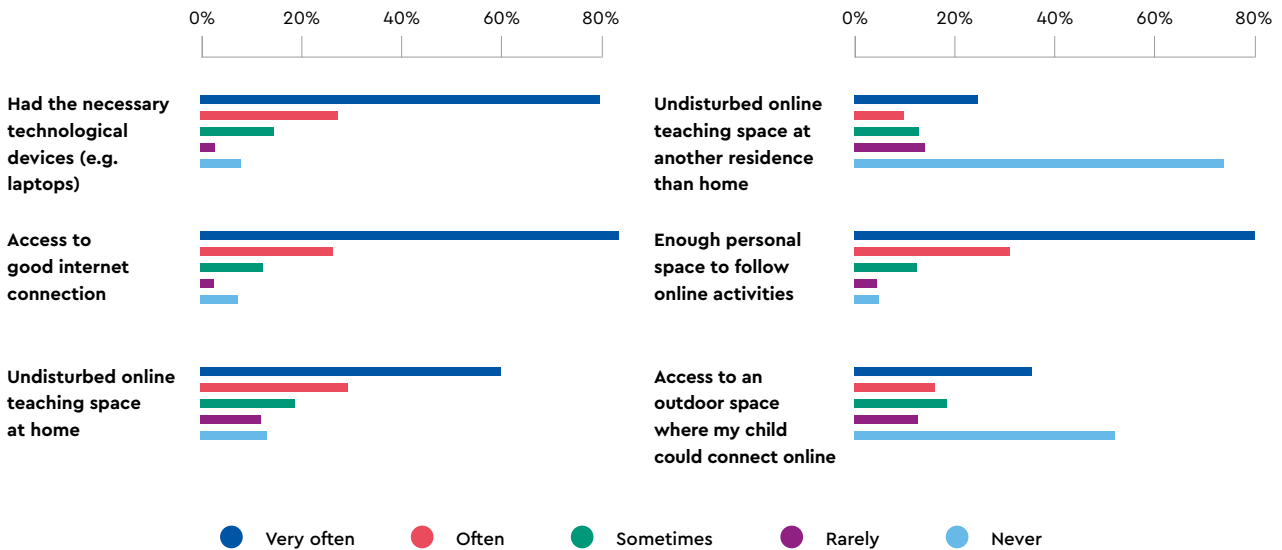


Figure 5.16: Access to facilities that support online learning

Shifting to online teaching and learning, demanded of parents to access virtual websites and portals to support their child in the teaching-learning process. This provided parents with the opportunity to learn new skills that enabled them to access virtual learning domains (Figure 5.17). Predominantly parents learned how to access and navigate video-conferencing portals (73.9%), while another staggering 73.8% learned to access other learning platforms. A high percentage of parents (61.9% and 53.7%) stated that they learned new skills while accessing PowerPoints with notes and written explanations, and PowerPoints with voice-over respectively. Learning to use apps for quizzes and writing on the tablet, as well as accessing websites and portals for learning (such as Teleskola, Storytime), had a more mixed response with parents (51.9% and 48.5% respectively) claiming that this was an opportunity for them to learn new skills. Data also shows that the majority of parents (72.8%) learned how to access a personal Facebook page or blog.

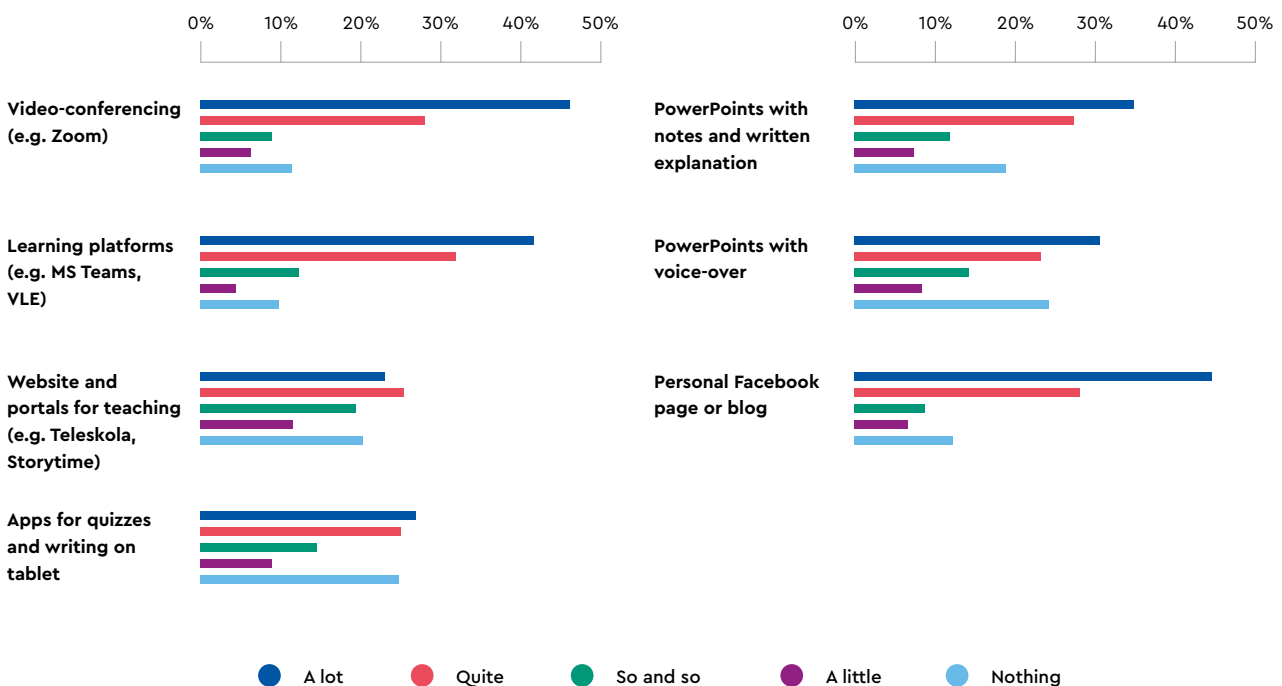


Figure 5.17: The degree to which parents learned new skills to access virtual learning domains

Figure 5.18 illustrates how often children worked with different virtual learning spaces during the pandemic. Learning platforms such as MS Teams (49.9%) and video-conferencing (46.4%) were the most used by about half the participants each. Contrastingly, the use of blogs (81.2%), personal Facebook page (72.6%), were predominantly marked as rarely to never used. The use of Apps for quizzes and writing on tablet (56%), Powerpoint with notes and written explanation (53.6%), PowerPoint with voice-over (48.6%), and platforms and portals for teaching and learning such as Teleskola (42.5%) had a more mixed response.

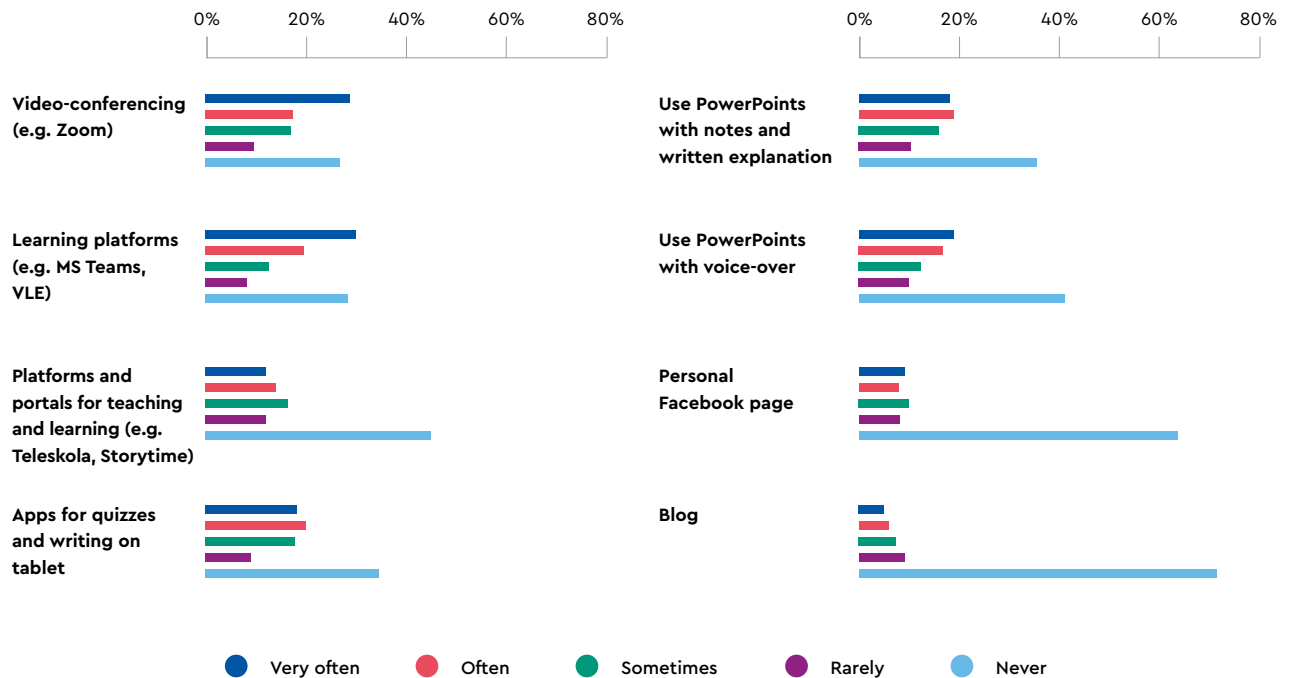


Figure 5.18: Modalities used by children to work with during COVID-19 times

Varied responses were given by participants in view of the learning spaces they would like to retain after the pandemic (Figure 5.19). The majority of parents (62.8%) indicated that they preferred reverting to exclusively face-to-face learning within the classroom (always 44.6%; quite 18.2%) or exclusively face-to-face (59.6%) both in class and outdoors beyond school premises (always 38.2%; quite 21.6%). It is interesting to note that 43% would prefer to keep a blended approach where part of the learning would be carried online and part face-to-face; whilst less respondents (35.8%) indicated that they would opt to retain online learning.

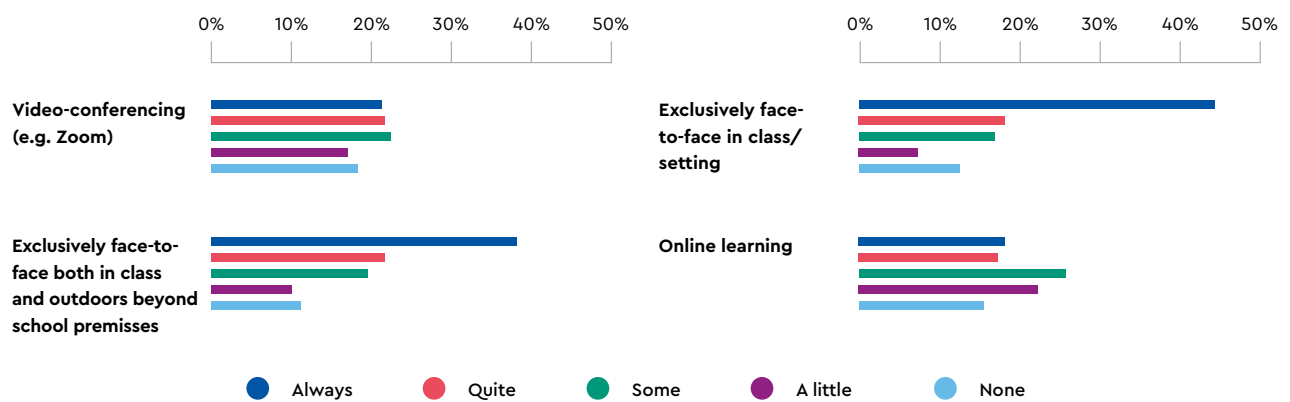


Figure 5.19: Learning spaces to retain after the pandemic

5.1.3 Well-being and Relationships

Results in this section illustrate data about issues of well-being and relationships and therefore how parents felt during the COVID-19 lockdown. Figure 5.20 shows that the majority of parents (67.9%), claimed that they felt confident supporting their child with the use of online technology. This is quite a positive result when Figure 5.17 above, illustrates that the majority of parents had to learn how to navigate new online virtual domains. Perhaps this was brought up by the fact that over half the parents (57.2%) found support from their school with respect to their child's learning. Contrastingly, it is of concern to note that only some parents (31.2%) found support from the school in relation to their child's mental well-being. Once again this highlights the traditional approach schools adopted where rather than meeting the holistic needs of children, including their mental well-being, most of them favoured focusing on the teaching and learning process. Many parents (66.5%) felt that they managed to find meaningful ways to stay connected with family and friends, with 66.5% claiming that their relationship with their child improved as they spent more time with him/her learning. Responses show different views on whether parents believe that their child's friendships were better than before with 38.2% who agreed, 26.8% who did not, and 34.7% who opted to remain neutral to this question. While over half the participants (55.6%) felt more productive, only a few parents were able to switch off and rest (27.5%). Parents also communicated negative feelings, where 31.8% of parents stated that they felt negative towards their work, and more than half the respondents (54.5%) claimed that they felt 'stressed and out-of-control'. This is of concern because it shows that parents also experienced poor mental health during the pandemic.

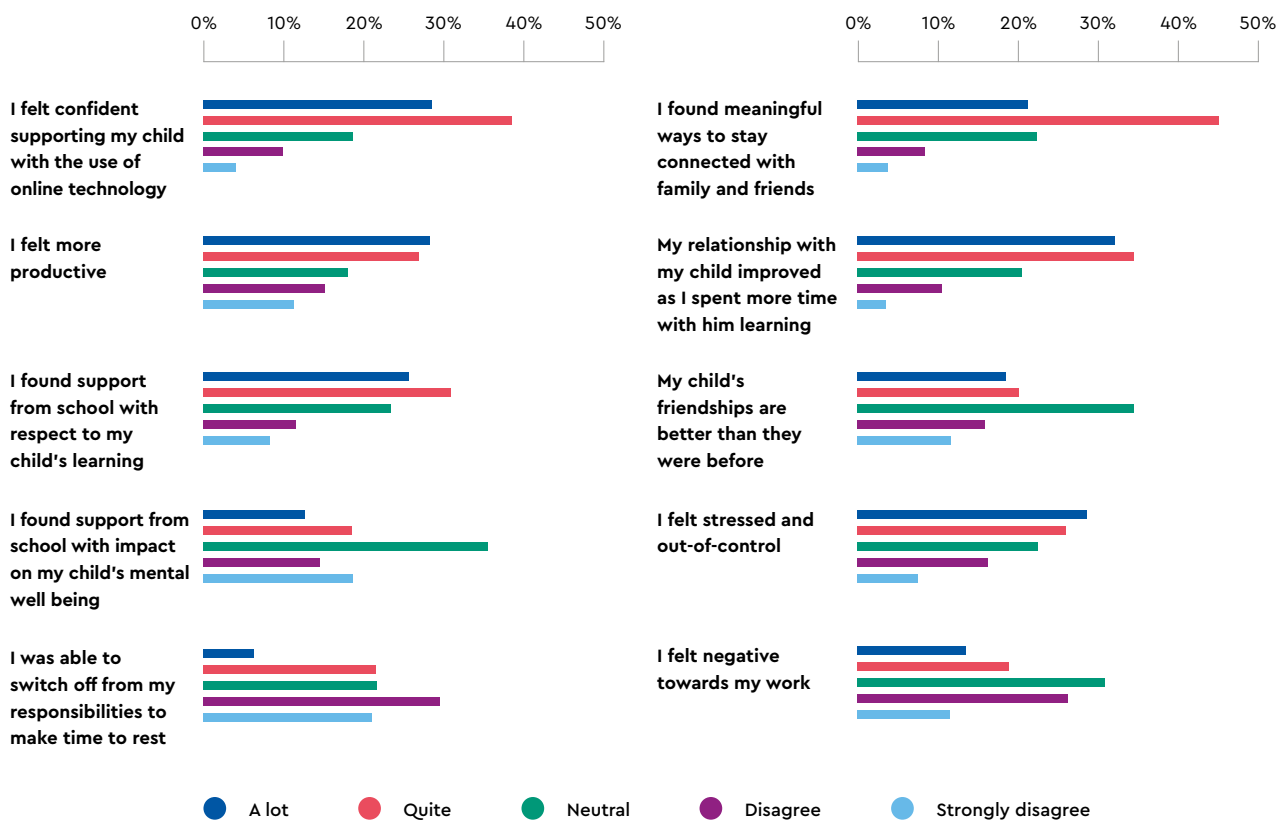


Figure 5.20: Parents' well-being during COVID-19 times

Figure 5.21 shows the frequency of the featured activities parents spent daily as compared to pre-pandemic times. The majority of respondents claimed that they spent more time supporting their child and engaged in school-related activities during the pandemic when compared to pre-pandemic times. 66.4% of the parents claimed that they attended (online) lessons with their child while 76.3% of the parents stated that they spent more time explaining to their child during the pandemic. 55.5% of the parents claimed that they spent more time correcting their child's work (55.5%) while 60% claimed that they corresponded more with their child's teacher during the pandemic when compared to before the pandemic. This evidently entailed more work for parents, and therefore, it comes as no surprise that 54.5% parents claimed that they felt 'stressed and out-of-control' in Figure 5.20. Contrastingly, parents reported that they had less time to dedicate to their hobbies and socialise with others. For example, 58.9% of respondents stated that during the pandemic they spent less time doing leisure activities compared to before the pandemic, 47.3% claimed that they exercised less, while 40.4% of the respondents claimed that they spent less time enjoying the outdoors. One must point out that probably this was the result of the national lockdown that was imposed during this time, where sports and other leisure venues were closed and people were allowed a very limited time to stay outdoors (Public Health Act, Cap. 465, L.N. 76 & 87, 2021). Due to the lockdown, evidently, parents had fewer possibilities for exercise, other leisure activities, and to pursue their hobbies while they were confined to their homes and restricted to spend more time with their families (41.5%) and chatting and socialising with friends online (47.5%).

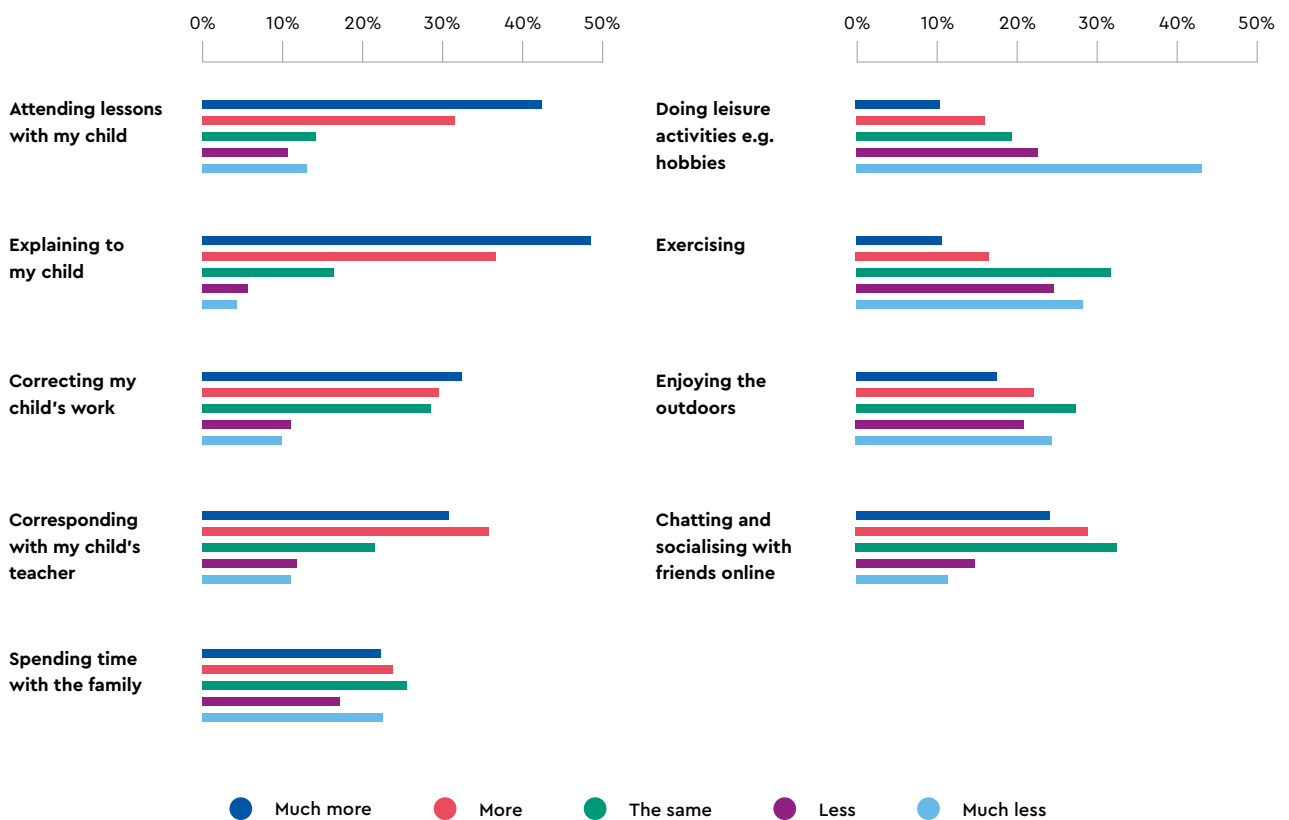


Figure 5.21: Frequency of daily activities during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic

The pandemic had its toll on parents' and their children's happiness and satisfaction. Figure 5.22 shows that all items have a very symmetric distribution with similar positive and negative sentiments, which in a generic way, reflect mixed feelings of respondents. It is worth noting, that the majority of the respondents felt "neutral" (so and so) when comparing their happiness and satisfaction to pre-pandemic times. While 34.6% of the parents claimed that they felt happier and 37.1% felt more satisfied during the pandemic when compared to pre-pandemic times, others were affected negatively with 33.3% stating that they felt less happy and 28.4% of the parents stating that they felt less satisfied. On the other hand, some parents reported that the pandemic did not really change their sense of happiness (32.1%) or level of satisfaction (34.5%). When participants were asked about their child's levels of happiness and satisfaction different responses were given. While 39.9% of the parents stated that their child was happier during the pandemic, 26.6% stated that their child was less happy. The percentage of parents who stated that their child was satisfied with the mode of learning adopted during the pandemic, was greater than those who claimed that their child was less satisfied: 38% of parents replied in the affirmative while 30% replied in the negative.

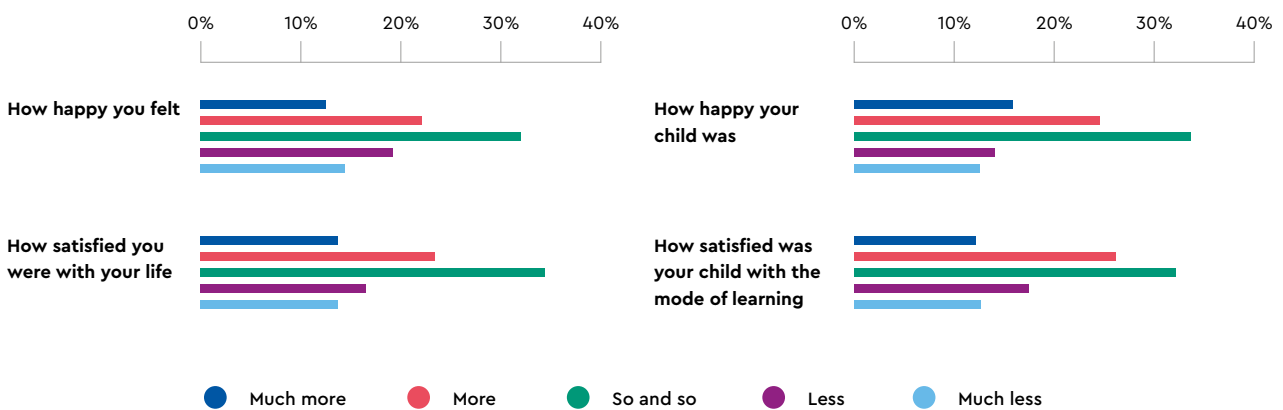


Figure 5.22: Happiness and satisfaction compared to pre-pandemic times

Figure 5.23 presents data about the level of confidence of parents after experiencing rapid changes in teaching and learning due to the physical closure of schools where, the majority of parents felt confident in using online modes and supporting their child. The figure below also shows that 75.1% of the parents felt confident in supporting their child with learning while a similar majority of 73.8% of the parents felt confident in supporting their child with using technology for learning. Correspondingly, 75.1% of the parents felt confident in communicating with their child's teacher through remote modes, while a slightly lower percentage of parents (62%) felt confident in working well with other parents online. Equivalently, 62.5% of the parents claimed that they felt confident to cope with their work and responsibilities.

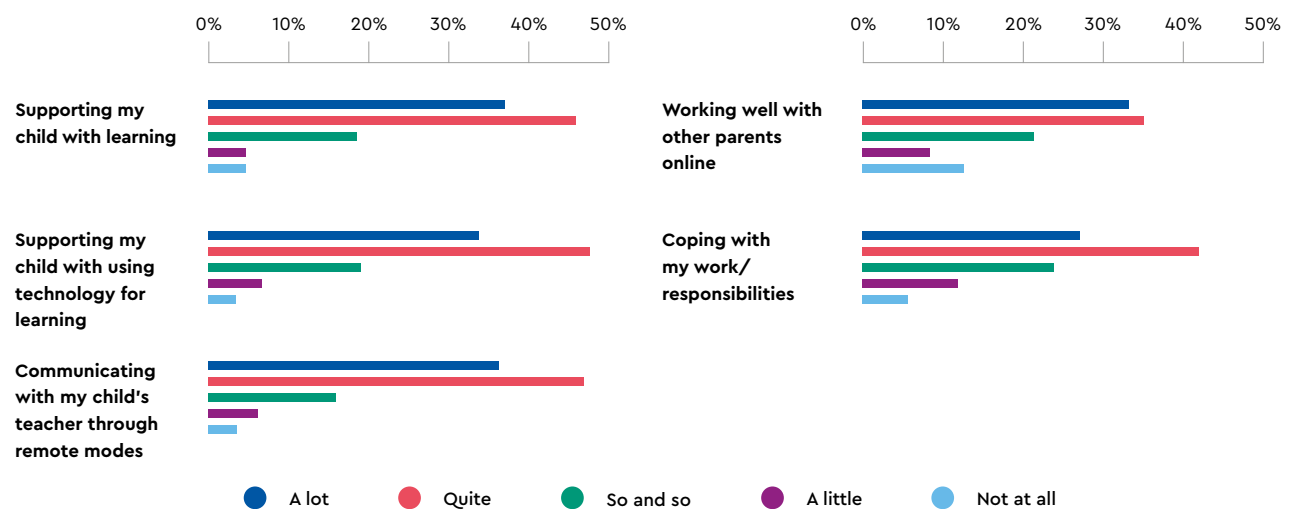


Figure 5.23: Level of confidence of parents when using online modes

Learning and working remotely brought a number of advantages to parents (Figure 5.24). The absolute majority of parents valued the lack of stress in getting ready (72.5%), in not having to think about what to wear (72.4%), and in spending less time commuting to and from school (69.3%). Another 61.9% of the parents appreciated not having to worry about going to work if their child was ill, while 63.2% valued the increase in family time. 51.8% of the parents saw online learning as advantageous as it allowed them the possibility to get to know their child's teacher more, while 42.4% of the parents valued the increase in communication and interaction with the school. For 49.8% of the parents, remote learning has helped their child in eating more regularly and healthily, while 40.7% of the parents, valued remote learning as it made their child learn how to work independently.

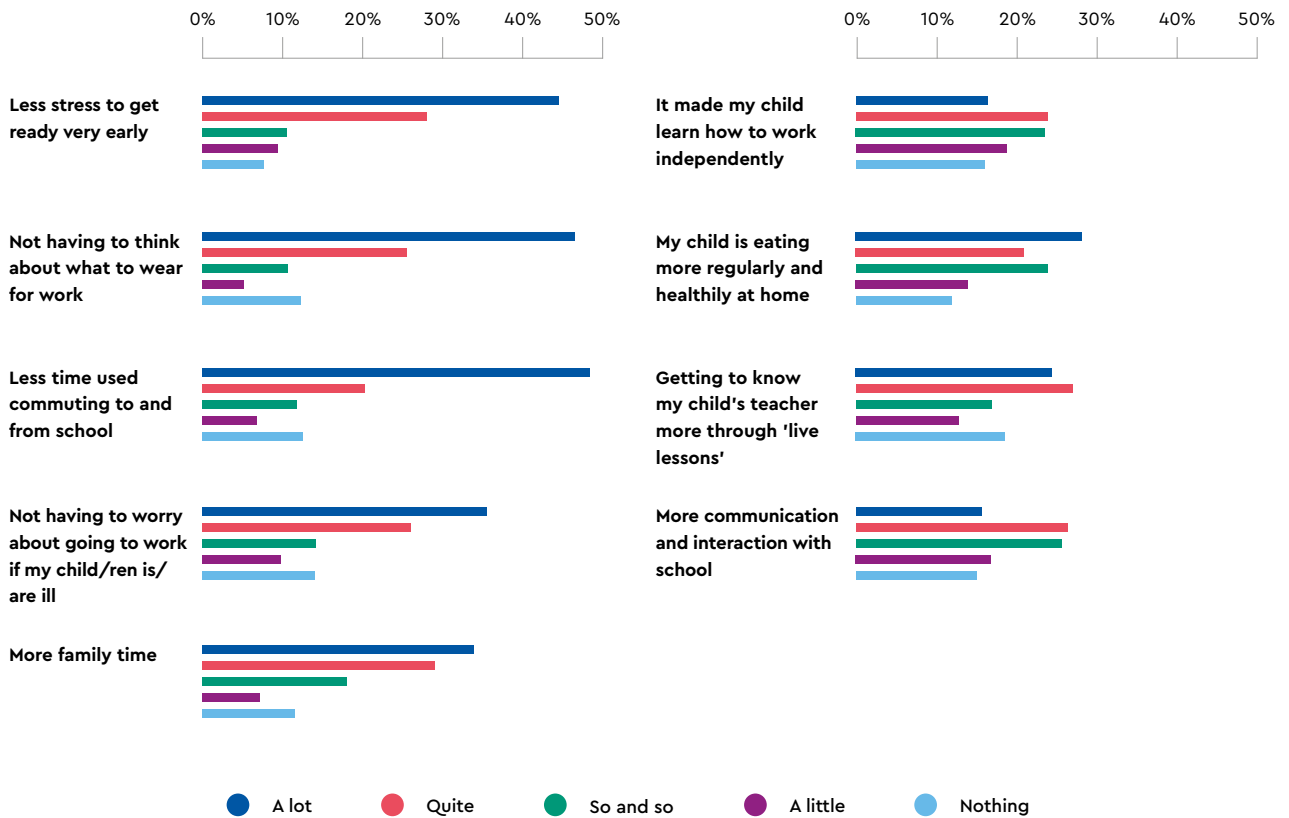


Figure 5.24: Advantages of learning and working remotely

Contrastingly, the pandemic also brought some disadvantages (Figure 5.25). The majority of respondents (56%) indicated that they experienced difficulty in finding a balance between study and life while another 43% claimed to have experienced more stress in dealing with multiple changes simultaneously. However, one of the main disadvantages, as identified by parents, was the fact that children had too many distractions at home; this was recognised by 58.7% of the parents. This somehow is in contrast with the parents' replies above (Figure 5.16), where only 33% of the parents claimed that their child had to follow learning from a disturbed space at home. Having said that, in the same question, 74.5% of the parents stated that their child had to follow online learning from a disturbed space from another residence. A high percentage of the parents (50.3%) identified the fact that their child missed interacting with their friends as a disadvantage of remote learning. However, the majority of parents (59.4%), did not mind their child's classmates accessing their personal space virtually, through online live sessions, with only 29% considering it as a disadvantage. In alignment with Figure 5.16 above, 61% of the parents claimed that their children did not experience a lack of space for learning, while another 68.9% did not experience a lack of space to store papers and resources. Contrastingly, 62.5% saw it as a disadvantage the fact that at home they lacked the physical movement children experience at school.

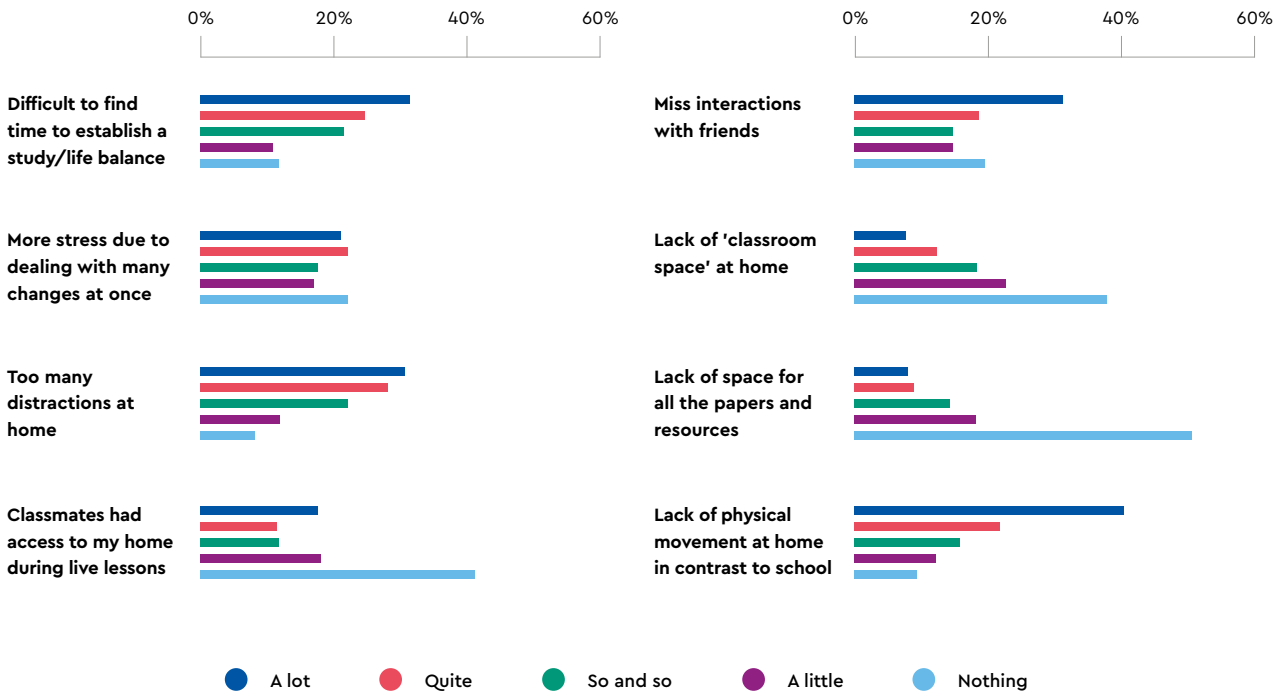


Figure 5.25: Disadvantages of learning and working remotely

As shown in Figure 5.26, parents were very supportive of their child's learning at home. A staggering 84.5% of the parents helped their children when working on activities or tasks, while another 78% dedicated time to staying with their child during online lessons. Another 75.1% made sure that they provided all the required resources (75.1%), and another 73.8% adapted activities for their children if they did not understand. Parents were divided in their responses when asked whether they asked for clarification of concepts from the teacher so they can explain better to their children. Less than half the respondents (45.1%) did so while 36.7% indicated that they did not usually ask for clarification.

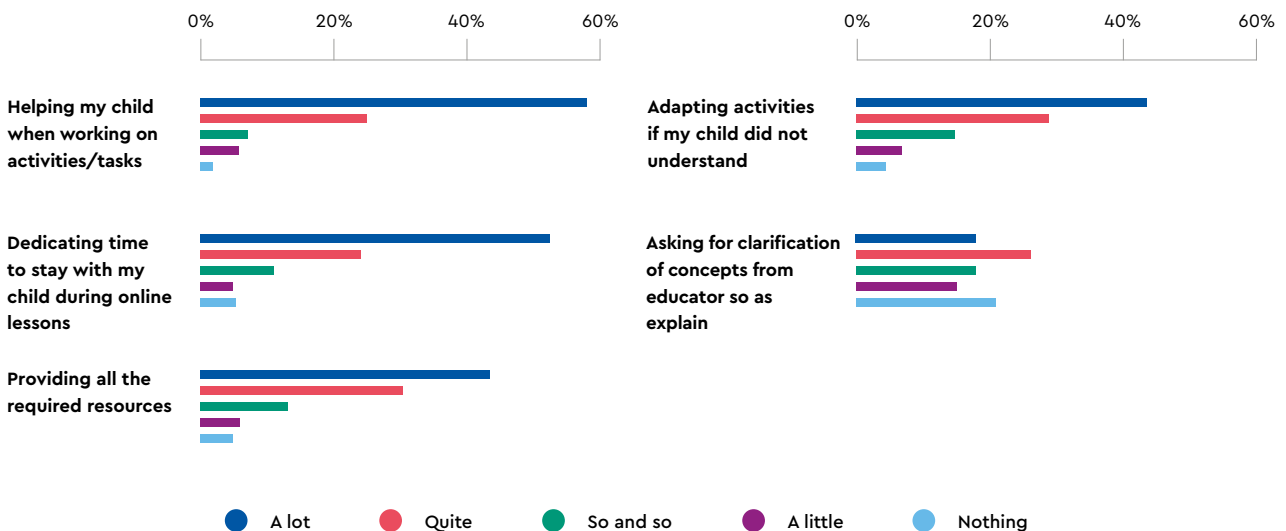


Figure 5.26: The level of support provided by parents to their children while learning at home

Many parents acknowledged the support given by their child's school, albeit, the level and type of support provided were different. The majority of parents (65.1%) claimed that they were given clear direction about learning while another 66.8% stated that schools kept in touch regularly (Figure 5.27). However, parents were more divided on the direction provided by schools about the use of online platforms; while 42.1% stated that they were provided support another 41.5% claimed that they did not, while 16.4% stated that this did not happen regularly. Contrastingly, parents indicated that schools were considerably much less supportive in organising year group meetings for them (60.7%), in organising training sessions about remote teaching and learning (61.1%), and in providing technical support when shifting to online modes of teaching and learning (45%).

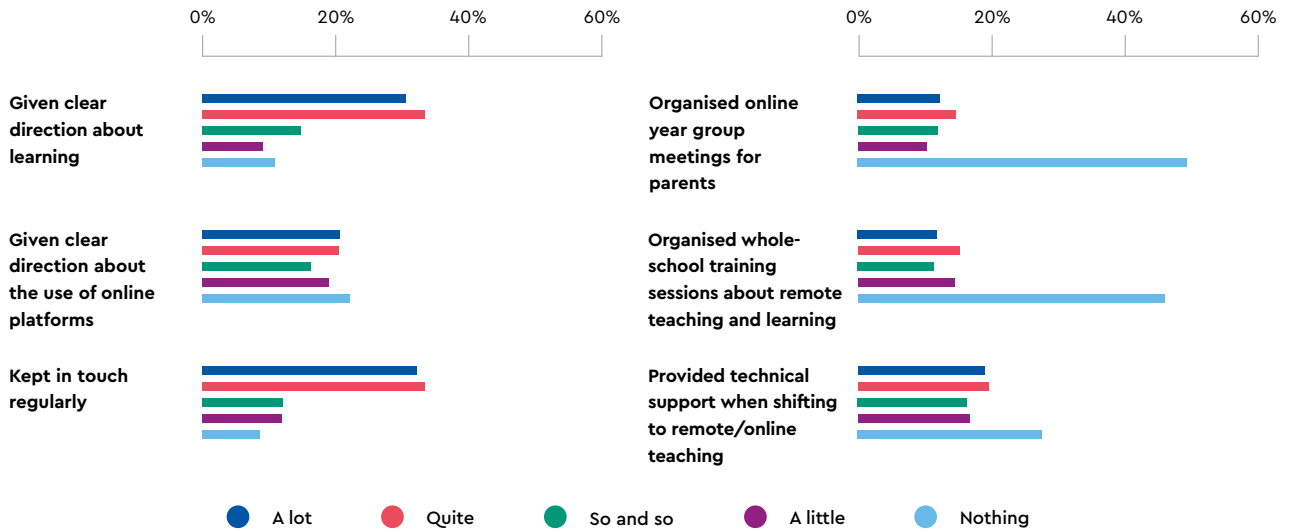


Figure 5.27: Level of support provided by schools

The last question of the first survey was open-ended to allow parents space to write any other comments they deemed necessary. It is important to remind the reader, that the data from the first survey was about the first school closure, which occurred between March and June 2020 (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020b), where most schools were still adjusting to the pandemic and shifting to online platforms. While the responses (n=152) of the open-ended question, in the main, support the results represented in the graphs, yet, they also shed light on new insights on the parents' experiences during the school closure and suggestions. The respondents' replies were mixed, and at times even opposing in relation to the benefits of remote and online learning.

The World Cloud below (Figure 5.28) represents the words most used by parents in these open-ended questions. The words *kids*, *home*, *work*, *learning* and *time* also reflect the main concerns parents had, mainly the parents' concerns whether children were learning, the amount of work being given and the long hours children were spending doing it. The parents also voiced their concern about their ability to juggle between the home environment and their work. The children remained the parents' top priority throughout.



Figure 5.28: Word cloud representing the most words used by parents when answering an open-ended question

Some parents (n=18) considered the shift to online learning as a positive experience, while others (n=8) felt very satisfied. As one parent claimed, they experienced benefits such as:

It-tagħlim remot naħseb li kien tajjeb ħafna. Hassejtni li pjuttost il-ħajja tagħna kienet aħjar. It-tifla tghallmet iżjed u naħseb li anki jekk jgħaddi kollox, it-tagħlim remot għandu jibqa'. [Remote learning was a good option. I felt that our lives were better. My daughter learned more and once the pandemic is over, I think that remote learning should remain.]

Contrastingly, other parents (n=13), considered the shift to online learning, "as a very bad experience" with another number of respondents (n=17) claiming that their child experienced learning loss. As one parent explained:

Jien rajtha marret ħafna lura fl-iskola u biex tagħmel il-ħowmwerk konna nieħdu ħafna u ħafna ħin għax kienet taħseb li ma għandhiex għalfejn tagħmlu la mhux qiegħda tmur skola. [She slackened in school, and to do her homework, we used to take a lot of time, because she used to think that she didn't need to do it {homework}, as she was not going to school.

Similarly, another parent complained that,

Pre-COVID, my eldest was an independent learner, but once we switched to online learning, he became dependent on me being around.

Moreover, four participants believed that online learning simply does not work for young children. Parents appeared to be mixed up on whether their children should go back to school after the pandemic or continue with online learning. Probably, their replies reflected whether online learning was implemented and effective. Some parents (n=12) wanted their children to go back to school while others (n=13) believed that they should continue with online learning (n=13), while others (n=3) felt that sending children to school should be an option (n=3) but suggested that online lessons should still be provided.

A good number of parents (n=11) praised the teacher (n=8) and/or the school (n=3), for adapting so quickly, and:

In view of the sudden disruption brought about by the closure of schools, I genuinely believe that the teaching profession adapted really well to changes asked of it ... I take my hat off to all those involved for admirable way with which they went about doing what they do best.

Contrastingly, a larger number of respondents (n=34) claimed that teachers (n=17) and schools (n=17) were not prepared for such an abrupt shift to online learning. Referring to her child's teacher, one parent was:

Iddiżappuntata ħafna li l-għalliema lanqas qatt baġħtitilna l-ebda xogħol. Kif għalqet l-iskola ma smajna xejn aktar. [I was very disappointed that the teacher never sent us any work. When the school closed, we didn't hear from her at all.]

Another parent blamed both teachers and schools arguing:

L-iskejjel imisshom jagħtu aktar importanza lill-online learning u lill-ġenituri li veru jixtiequ jgħallmu lil uliedhom filwaqt li nzommuwhom safe id-dar. L-iskola għandha tipprovdi aktar għajnuna u l-għalliema għandhom juru interess li jaraw li x-xogħol qed isir u jirrikonoxxu l-isforz tal-ġenituri biex it-tfal ikomplu jgħallmu. [Schools should give more importance to online learning and to those parents who really wish to teacher their children while keeping them safe at home. The school should provide more help and teachers should show more interest in the children's work and make sure that it is being done. They should also acknowledge the parents' effort who facilitate learning for their children.]

Many parents were disappointed since no online lessons were provided (n=20), while others reported that there was lack of communication (n=2) or no communication from schools/teachers (n=6) at all. Five parents claimed that more online, live sessions should be held even for kinder children while another three parents suggested that online lessons should be recorded (n=3), so that parents who work will be able to watch them at their own convenience. Other comments that related to the improvement of online learning included access to an online platform to upload the children's homework, rather than through scanning and sending through email (n=1), and more support should be provided to children who require LSE support (n=1).

Some parents (n=3) complained from the lack of technological equipment and internet access, with one parent claiming:

Kellna nħallsu biex jinxtara laptop biex it-tifel ikun jista' jsegwi l-lezzjonijiet aħjar online u kellna nħallsu pagament extra biex insaħħaħ l-internet. [We had to pay for a new laptop so that our son could follow his lessons better online and we had to make an extra payment to strengthen the internet.]

Another parent asked for subsidised equipment, and another complained of poor internet connection. Other parents (n=4) complained from lack of space at home in order for their children to follow online learning comfortably and simultaneously.

School closure brought also some challenges to the well-being and relationships in families. Thirteen parents considered school closures as beneficial in that it helped their child and/or their family develop a closer bond due to parents spending more quality time with their children (n=4), gave their children more attention, played with them and involved themselves more with the learning process. Another advantage which two parents mentioned was that because their children had to stay at home, they were more rested as they did not have to leave home at 6.00am in the morning. Other parents claimed that their child was more efficient and productive as she didn't waste time in commuting to and from school (n=3), while other parents claimed that online learning provided their children with more structure and routine (n=2), while others claimed that their children had less disruptions (n=1) and were exposed to less bullying (n=1).

Other parents (n=60) were not so positive and underlined the negative effects of school closure on the mental health of children and families. Sixty-two parents provided comments about the stressful situation they were going through and argued that the well-being and mental health of their family members were negatively affected. Thirty-one of the parents claimed that this phase was very stressful for them to juggle between working online, meeting family needs and supporting their children with their online learning, especially when there were lack of technological equipment around the house. A parent, claimed that:

Veru kienu xhur tal-biża' speċjalment mentliment...kienet diffiċli ħafna għax jien ħdmit bit-teleworking mid-dar. Imma imbagħad spiċċajt bla xogħol għax bit-tfal id-dar ma bdejtx nagħmel l-istess ammont ta' xogħol bħal qabel. [They were challenging months especially mentally... it was very difficult for us, because initially I worked through teleworking from home. But then I ended up unemployed because having the children at home hindered me from doing my work, and I ended up in doing less work than before.]

The first months of the pandemic also resulted in additional stress on parents, with eight parents stating that they were concerned and afraid of the virus and of the unknown. Things were changing daily and this created a sense of uncertainty in them. A few other parents (n=13) complained about the stress created by online learning including trying to manage the volume of work sent by teachers (n=4), learning how to use technology (n=1), and dealing with having to let their children use a screen for such a long time when they were in principle against it (n=2). This also echoed the complaints of two other parents who were worried about their children's sedentary lives in front of a screen and therefore, the lack of exercise they had to endure. Four other parents claimed that due to long hours engaged in online learning, their children were demotivated and were mentally, very tired. Other parents (n=19) were more concerned about their children's mental well-being. Thirteen parents were concerned about their children's lack of social interaction with their friends and also with their teachers, with some (n=8) claiming that their children either cried or asked for their friends.

5.2 Results of Survey 2

This section illustrates data collected in Survey 2, which was carried in September 2021. Similar to the results of the first survey, these are also categorised according to the three themes as indicated in the conceptual framework model: teaching and learning, learning spaces and well-being and relationships.

5.2.1 Teaching and Learning

The first question of the section teaching and learning, asked parents to indicate who was usually responsible for their child's education when schools were physically open. Participants could choose more than one option. As shown in Figure 5.29, about half of the respondents (47.9%) claimed that both parents supported the child's education with one parent helping out more than the other. On the other hand, 39.1% reported that both parents supported their child with school-related tasks whilst about a fifth of participants (19.5%) claimed that they took sole responsibility of their child's education. 4.8% of the respondents claimed that their children were able to work independently on their school-related tasks prior to school closure. Some children needed the support of others. 4.5% of the respondent parents claimed that they used to send their child to private tuition after school, while 2.8% of the respondents indicated that an older sibling, relative or another adult, helped them with their child's education.

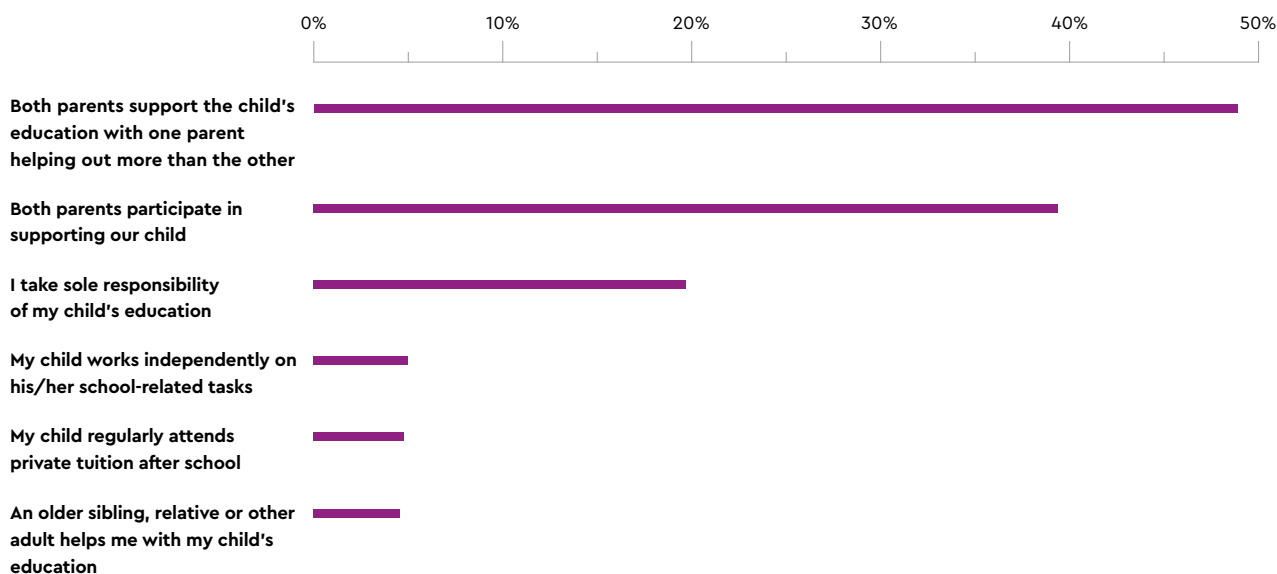


Figure 5.29: Individuals responsible for child's education after school closure

When parents were asked if there was any change in those responsible for their child's education when schools closed or when they opted for their child to follow lessons remotely using online modes, over half the participants (57%) indicated that there was no change, while 41.3% replied in the affirmative (Figure 5.30). 1.5% of the respondent parents claimed that their children did not attend school nor followed online learning when schools closed. Another 0.2% of the respondents (n=1) claimed that at the time, they did not have custody of their child.

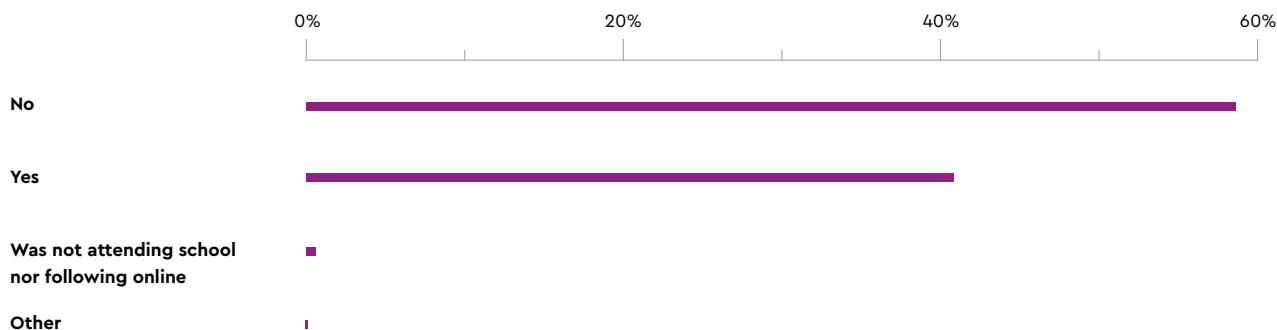


Figure 5.30: Changes in the role of individuals responsible from assisting children with their school tasks during school closure

The availability of technological equipment was crucial for access of online learning. As shown in Figure 5.31, the majority of respondents (61.2%) reported that their child had access to an internet connection. However, the majority of children (54.8%) had access to a shared computer/laptop/tablet. Another 28.9% had their own laptop, while less than a quarter of the respondents (21.2%) reported that their children made use of the tablet provided by the school. Another 15.4% of the children followed online learning from a mobile device while 5.8% did so from their own desktop. It is interesting to note that 3.7% of the respondents claimed that their children did not have access to a technological device, highlighting the digital divide.

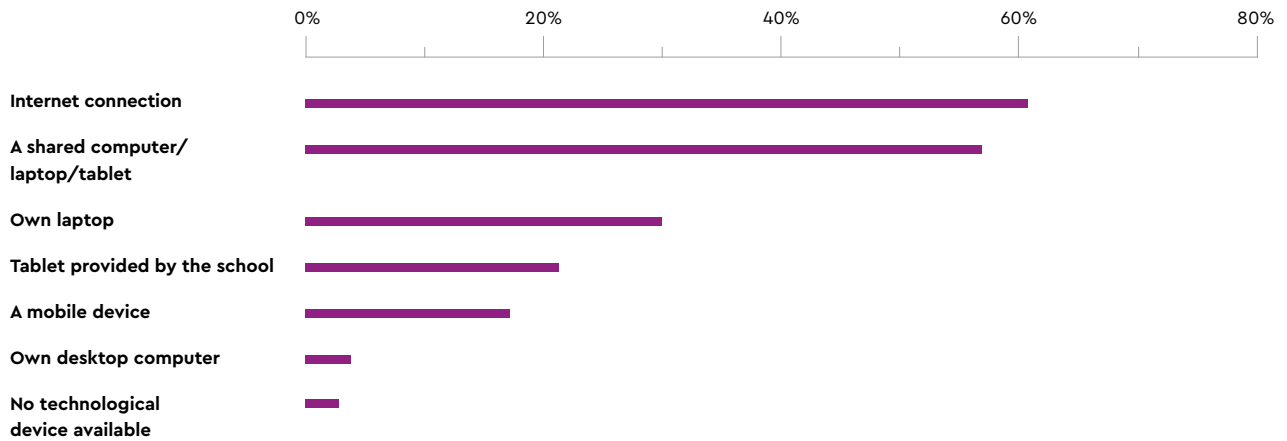


Figure 5.31: Availability of technological equipment

In Figure 5.32, parents were asked about their level of satisfaction with the way schools responded to the school closure of 2020-2021. Overall, parents were satisfied with how schools managed the shift to online learning. When they were asked to rate their satisfaction with the way the school supported them in ensuring continuity of learning experiences for their child, most (70.4%) felt satisfied. The majority (71.7%) were also satisfied with the way the school shifted to remote modes of teaching and learning. However, the highest percentage in the level of parental satisfaction was registered in the way schools communicated guidelines about the changing modes of teaching and learning with 80% indicating their satisfaction. Less satisfaction was reported with regards to the way assessment methods were adapted to match the changing modes of learning with 62.2% indicating that they were very satisfied or satisfied, 27.1% who opted to indicate neutral and 10.8% who were not satisfied.

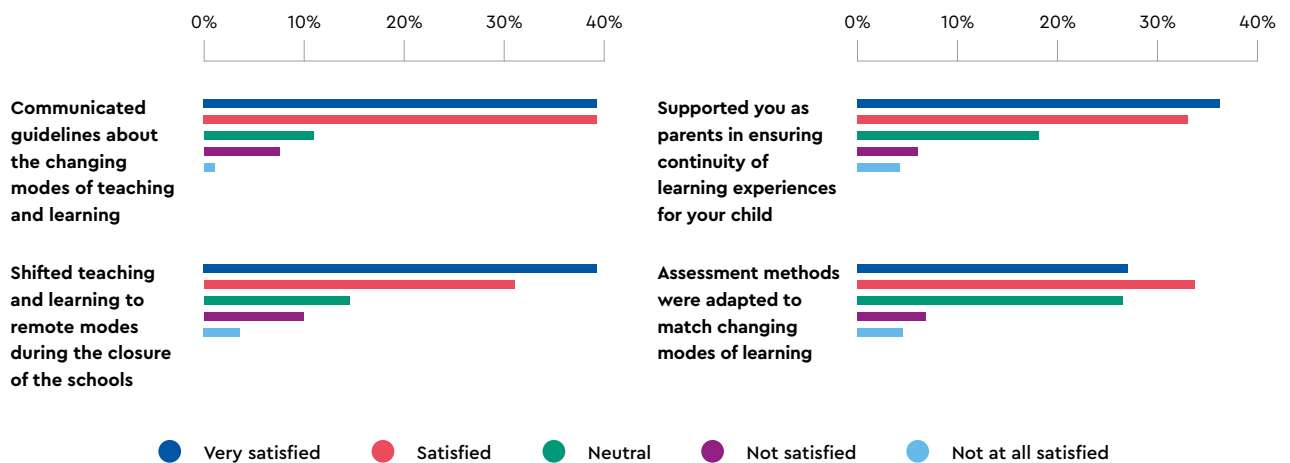


Figure 5.32: Satisfaction of parents with how the school managed the shift to online learning

When asked about their view on online learning, parents were generally more positive in 2020-2021 than in the previous year. Many respondents (69.9%) claimed that monitoring of children's learning by their teacher was adequate while another 68.6% were satisfied with the amount of work and support provided by the schools when they closed (Figure 5.33). In addition, more than half the respondents (58.5%) suggested that there should be more real-time online sessions during school closure. Different views emerged with regards to whether a blended approach to learning should be provided as an educational option for families after the pandemic with 44% agreeing, 32% disagreeing and 24% opting to remain neutral. On the other hand, almost all respondents (93.3%) agreed that outdoor spaces in schools and the community should be used more frequently as part of their education.

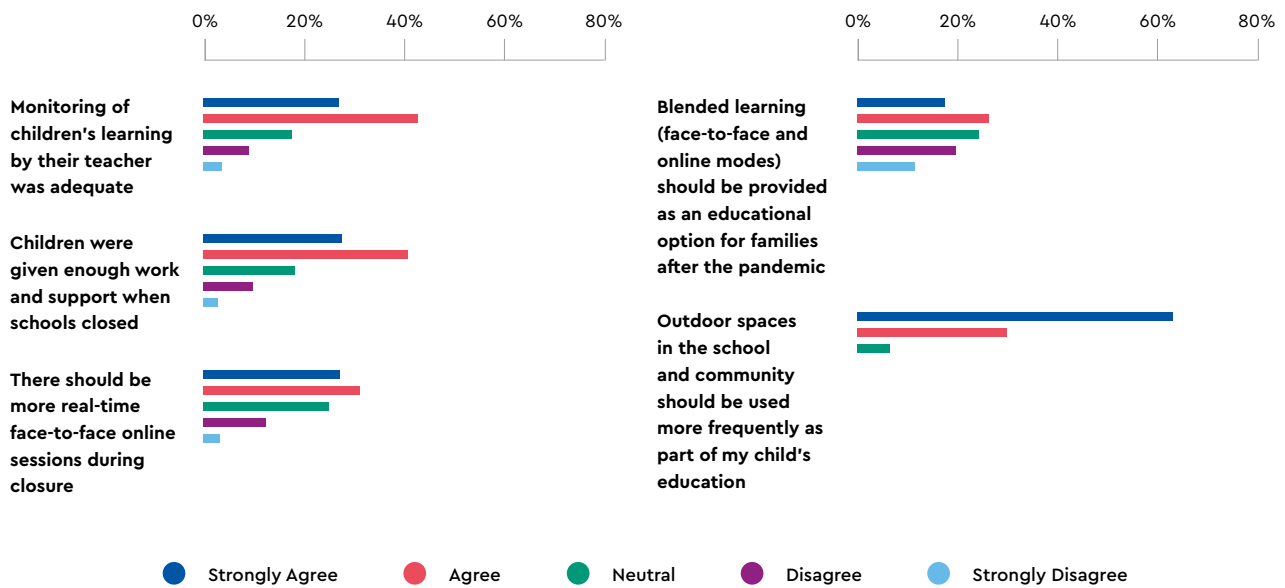


Figure 5.33: Parents' views about the support provided by schools in relation to online learning

Parents were asked to identify the statement/s that best describe their child/ren's preferences in terms of modes of learning during school closure (Figure 5.34). The largest number of respondents indicated that their children preferred real-time online sessions with their teachers (62.5%). Interacting with their teacher and peers during online sessions was another preferred way of learning for children (56.6%). A fifth of respondents (19.4%) claimed their children preferred to follow their own interests. Only 13.8% reported that their children preferred to study independently at their own pace following the teacher's instructions. Few parents (4.3%) stated that their children did not attend school but followed remotely when schools reopened.

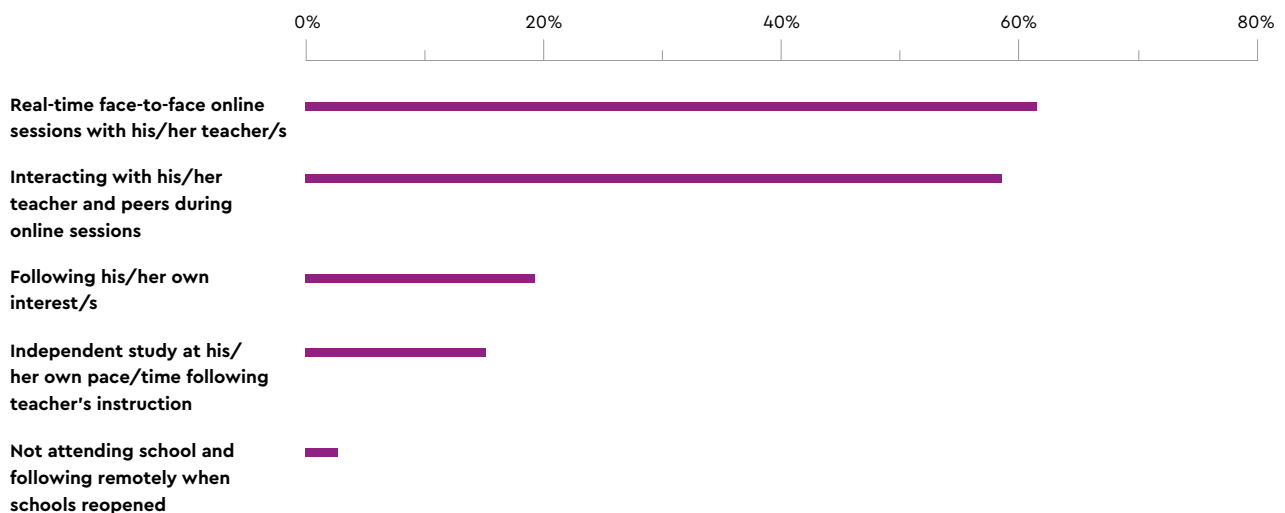


Figure 5.34: Children's preferences of ways of learning

When shifting to online modes, primary teachers had to make adjustments to their daily timetable in order to accommodate new modes of teaching and learning. Figure 5.35 shows that these changes were minimal in relation to the choice and frequency of subjects. Like in Survey 1, the core subjects of Maths (89.6%), English (89.6%) and Maltese (87%), remained the most taught subjects at primary level, even during online, live sessions. These were equally followed by Science (66.2%), and Religion (66.2%) and at a slightly lower percentage, Physical Education (64.1%), Social Studies (46.8%) and the Expressive Arts (46.8%). Online lessons in PSCD (28.1%) and foreign languages (3.5%) were the least popular. In the 'other' field (12.6%), respondents referred to other activities or lessons including circle time (n=3), crafts (n=3), organizational skills (n=2), ethics (n=2), citizen education (n=1), cooking (n=1), digital literacy (n=1) and one-to-one sessions with LSE (n=1).

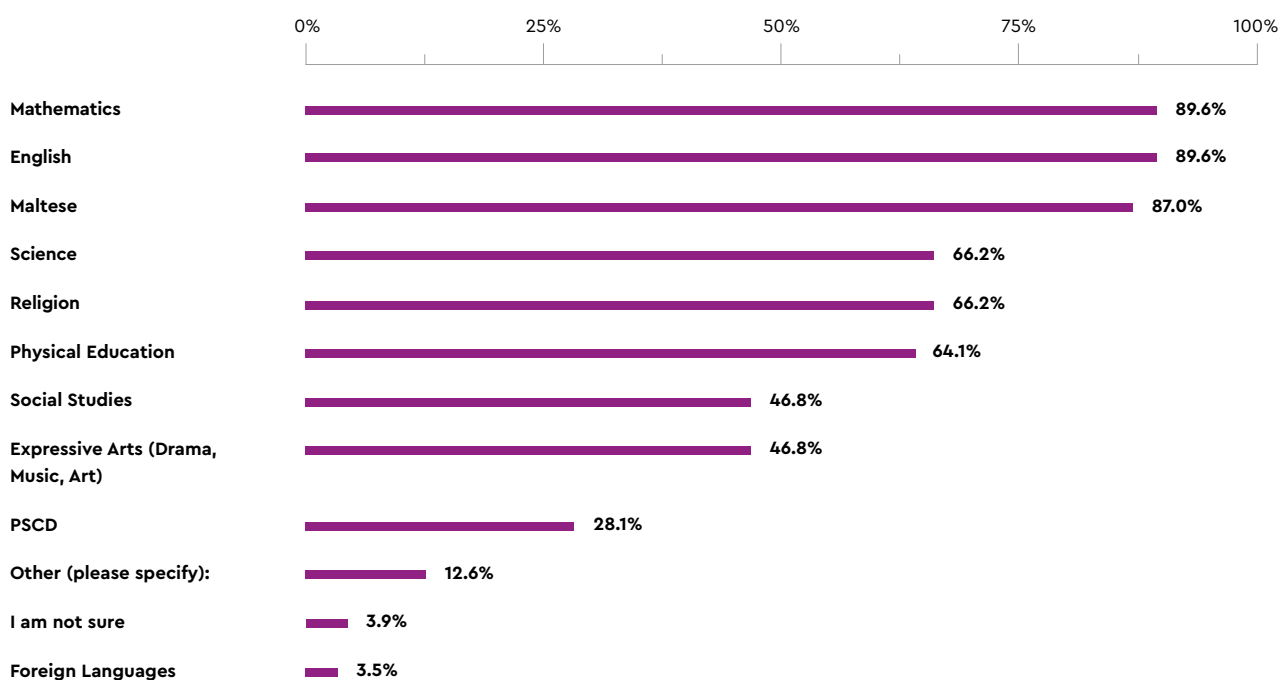


Figure 5.35: Subjects delivered through live, online platforms for primary school children

A similar question was asked of parents of kindergarten children about the type of online, play and learning experiences their children were offered through online platforms during school closure in 2020 - 2021. Referring to Figure 5.36, the most common activities offered to children online during this time, as identified by parents were singing nursery rhymes or songs (72.2%), followed by storytelling (69.8%), practicing letter recognition (59.9%), numeracy (58%) and circle time (57.4%). The least common activities were developing a web (8.6%), role play (16.7%), eating lunch together (17.3%), indoor and outdoor play activities within the home (17.3%) and early science (27.2%).

These findings slightly contrast with findings from the first survey (Figure 5.13). While in Survey 1, the most common activities were the traditional areas of numeracy and literacy, in Survey 2, these were slightly overpassed by singing nursery rhymes and storytelling, which in Survey 1, still scored high. Having said that, numeracy and literacy skills still featured as being popular activities during the second school lockdown. Similarly, circle time, which scored very low in Survey 1 and was identified by 74.6% of the parents as never done, was, on the other hand, identified by parents in Survey 2, as quite a common activity (57.4%). Eating lunch together and doing the children's web scored low in both surveys. It is also worth noting, that while in Survey 1, only 27.1% of the parents claimed that their children had a show and tell session once a week or more, 51.2% of the parents identified circle time as a regular activity.

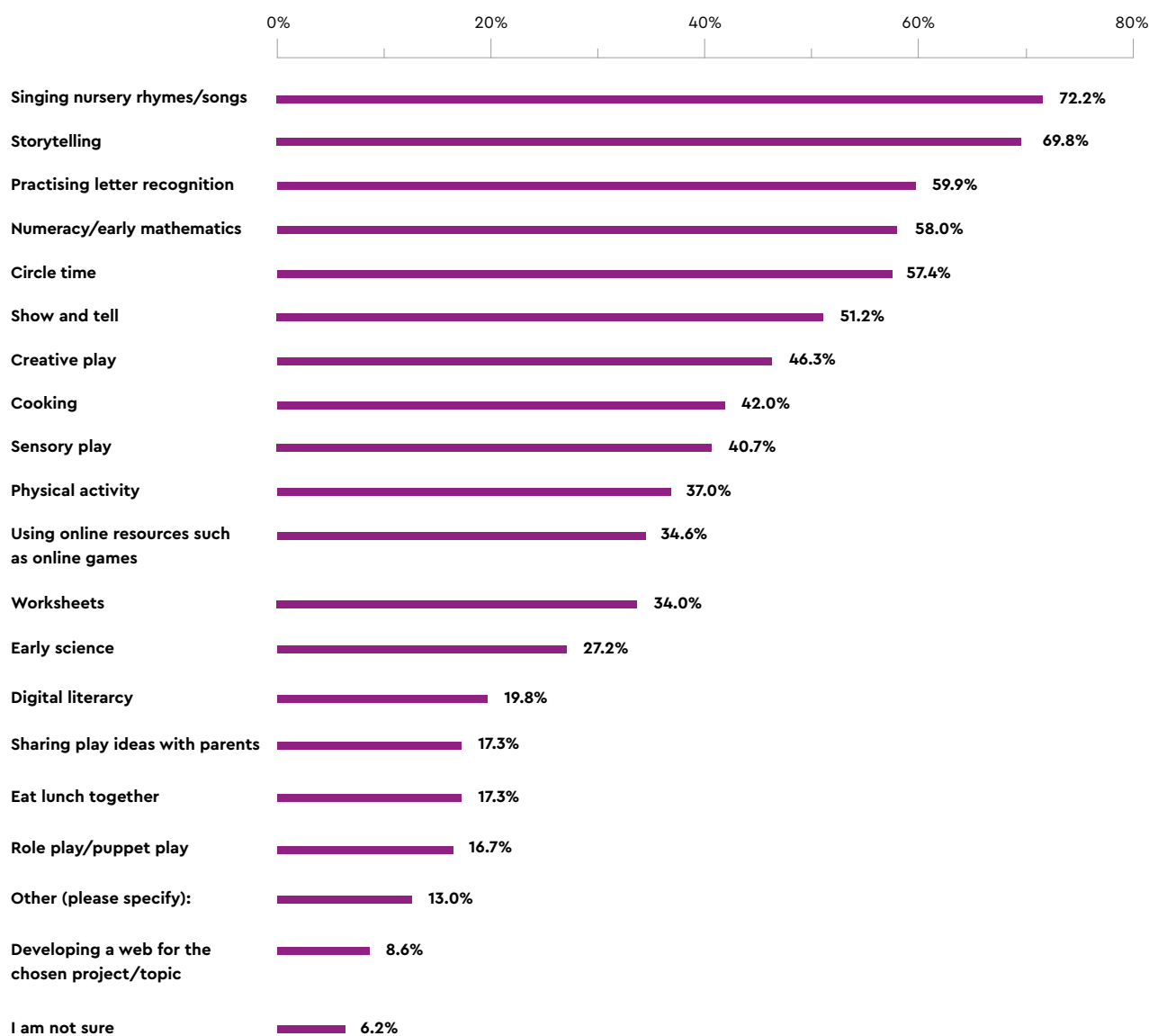


Figure 5.36: Experiences offered through live, online platforms for childcare and kindergarten children

In this question, parents had the possibility to write open-ended answers, with 13% of the respondents providing suggestions. Other online experiences mentioned by parents included art and crafts (n=5), with one parent specifying that the educator “once a week sent some crafts downloaded from Pinterest, but nothing else, unfortunately”. One participant claimed that at times:

The children even went on virtual outings to places of significance to certain class themes by watching pre-recorded ones on YouTube (e.g. a visit to a dinosaur museum) and even one that the teacher had recorded for them herself while visiting a construction site during the Construction theme. During the latter theme the children even engaged in simple construction, hammering small nails into styrofoam as part of a numeracy activity for example, among other wonderful activities. My daughter's teacher truly achieved the impossible through her distance learning class!

Four other parents complained about the online pedagogy used. One respondent claimed that:

It was extremely hard to get a 4-year old to sit still and look at the screen (looking at powerpoint presentations), for more than a few minutes at a time.

Another parent showed her disappointed that the educator was not able to adapt for online learning stating that:

Circle time did not work online, or at least, it did not work the way she did it.

Similarly, another parent stated that online activities were disorganised and full of:

Noise, chaos, bad internet connection, tears and loss of interest in learning.

One participant claimed that she:

Refused to attempt online learning for a child who was 3 years old. I sent him to school at such a young age to learn social skills, friendship and discipline, not academics. I believe at this age he can gain nothing remotely.

The last question in the teaching and learning section of the questionnaire was an open-ended one, where, like in Survey 1, parents had to mention an online experience where their child seemed more motivated and engaged than usual. This generated 209 responses (91 less responses than in Survey 1). Like in Survey 1, most parents (n=36) in the open-ended question of Survey 2, stated that online activities were not motivating or engaging for their children, while others complained from a lot of disturbances, making it difficult for their children to focus. As one parent stated:

We struggled greatly during the school closures as my kids had zero interest in following the lessons without being able to physically interact with their teachers and friends.

Another parent complained:

Online experience was inadequate for a 7/8 year old child. They were restless. There was no control over who spoke in class. Certain kids were constantly interfering and parents had their volume on, thus disturbing the whole class.

Another parent described online activities as “terrible” while another as “putting a lot of pressure on parents”. Contrastingly some parents (n=7) claimed that their children were motivated during all activities. A good number of parents (n=34) stated that their children were motivated during arts and crafts activities, while others (n=21) indicated physical education activities as the most motivating for their children. Singing and dancing (n=18), interacting with their friends or the teacher (n=15), and cooking (n=14) were other activities that were identified by parents as motivating for their children. The word cloud presented in Figure 5.37 provides a graphic representation of the most common words used by the parents’ in their replies that clearly confirm that art and crafts, physical education, as well as singing (song) and dancing, interacting with others, and cooking were amongst the activities which they considered as most motivating for their children.



Figure 5.37: Word Cloud that represents the most motivating activities as mentioned by parents

5.2.2 Learning Spaces

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted children's learning in different ways. A large majority of parents (58%) reported that they think that their child/ren's learning was negatively impacted by the pandemic (Figure 5.38). Only 15.1% of the respondents believed that this period affected positively their child/ren's learning whilst 26.8% were unsure about this.

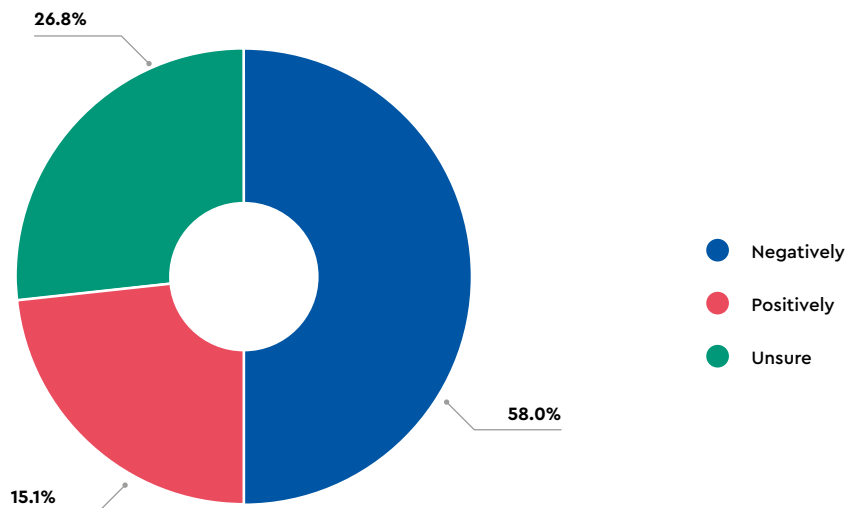


Figure 5.38: The way COVID-19 impacted children's learning

In another open-ended question, the participants were invited to share any suggestions should the schools close down again in the future. This generated 161 responses. It was evident that many parents ($n=27$) expressed their wish that school closures should be avoided at all costs as online teaching is a poor substitute for physical teaching. In some of the parents' views, school closure should be considered a last resort. Reasons provided included that parents need to work and cannot leave their children on their own at home. However, some parents claimed ($n=8$), that if ever in the future, the need to close schools arises again, these should be better prepared, better organised, with clear policies and better communication between the school and parents. Contrastingly, two parents ($n=2$) suggested that during a pandemic all schools should be kept close and teaching should only be held online.

Some parents ($n=16$), provided suggestions that were related to pedagogical aspects including that educators should present well-prepared lessons and activities where children are actively involved rather than passively following what the educator is saying. Moreover, they suggested that the class should be split into smaller groups ($n=7$), to allow more one-to-one interaction between children as well as with teachers ($n=15$). Another parent ($n=1$) even suggested that on such occasions, the syllabus should be modified with more emphasis on the core subjects and creativity, as otherwise it will be too overwhelming for the children. Other parents ($n=6$) expressed their wish for less homework since they would have already spent a lot of time in front of a screen. Moreover, it was also suggested ($n=1$), that homework is submitted online and corrected remotely by the teacher rather than by the children. Some parents also suggested ($n=11$) that older primary children should be asked to follow a regular timetable with some parents even providing a time indication/duration, with shorter online sessions (of a max of 30 minutes each) and longer and more frequent breaks ($n=29$). Supporting this, some parents ($n=5$) specifically suggested that children should spend less time in-front of a laptop as they tend to lose interest easily. Contrastingly, two other parents ($n=2$) suggested longer hours (depending on the number of hours their children were asked to be online) so that children can have lunch together and interact with each other online. Communication between the school and parents was considered by some ($n=5$) as an important aspect of online learning where they suggested that parents should be given a brief update on what is being taught in class. Some parents focused more on educators, with two parents ($n=2$) suggesting that educators should have a more positive attitude towards change, should be provided with more resources ($n=3$) and should be trained in the use of digital media ($n=3$) in order to be able to provide children with engaging activities.

Other parents focused on the technological aspect with some parents (n=4) suggesting that children should be provided with adequate digital tools such as a free laptop and good internet connection, while another parent (n=1) asked for better audio quality. Four parents (n=4) suggested that lessons should be recorded to enable their children to watch them on their own time. While two parents (n=2) suggested that teachers should be taught how to use technological tools well, others (n=5) suggested that parents and grandparents should be provided with continuous technological and pedagogical support in order for them to adequately help their children. Four parents (n=4) suggested that teachers should use the mute function more, in order to control disruptive children.

The mental health and well-being of children and their families were also considered, with one parent suggesting that:

Ahjar tmur l-iskola milli toqgħod qisha zombie u timmolla u tħabbat rasha ma' xi ħaġa bl-istress u n-nuqqas ta' human interaction, speċjalment ma' tfal daqsha fl-età. [It would be better if she goes to school rather than stay at home acting like a zombie and jumping all over the place, hitting her head against something as a result of stress and lack of human interaction especially with children of her age].

Other parents (n=4) suggested that both children and their families should be provided with emotional support. Some other respondents recommended that children should be motivated to meet physically (n=2) in order to socialise, while two other parents (n=2), suggested the introduction of cross-curricular activities such as engaging in free play and the setting up of book clubs where children are provided with time to read. Outdoor activities were also suggested by some of the parents (n=5) as a way to address boredom and promote activity and interaction.

Suggestions by individual participants included that stay-at-home parents, should be provided with financial support, and that all parents should be given the possibility of staying at home or working with reduced hours during a possible lockdown.

5.2.3 Well-being and Relationships

Like in Run 1 of the study, Run 2 included data about issues of well-being and relationships and therefore how parents felt during the COVID-19 lockdown. In this question, participants could choose to tick up to three options.

While in Run 1, the majority of parents (67.9%) claimed that they felt confident supporting their child with the use of online technology, this dropped considerably down to 36.1% in Run 2 (Figure 5.39). The reason for this could be that in Run 2, more schools were using online modes of teaching and therefore, more parents felt less confident. Contrastingly, in Run 2, the majority of parents (69.8%) claimed that they felt stressed; a significantly higher percentage than that of Run 1 (54.5%). The reason could be that during Run 2, parents were feeling tired and stressed with continuously supporting their children at home with online teaching. The novelty of online teaching and learning, at the time had worn out, and the reality of keeping children engaged for long hours interacting through a screen was having its toll on parents and children alike. Moreover, only 30.6% of the parents felt that they were able to adapt to the new situation quickly. The thread of negative feelings was constant in Run 2. For example, only 21.3% found ways to stay connected with family and friends which is considerably lower than that of Run 1 where 66.5% of the respondents claimed this. A fifth of participants (20.6%) experienced mental health issues as a result of the new demands and changes, with only 6.2% reporting that they were able to make time for themselves to rest in Run 2. This was once again, considerably low when compared to Run 1, where 37.5% of the parents were able to make time for themselves and rest, reflecting the parents's need to destress from the overwhelming feeling of balancing between work, supporting their children with online work and family.

About a quarter of respondents (26.5%) also reported a negative feeling towards their work in this period. However, this improved from Run 1, where 31.8% of parents stated that they felt negative towards their work. Another negative response was reported in Run 2, where only 14.4% of the parents felt productive during this time. This highly contrasts with that of Run 1, where over half of the participants (55.6%) felt more productive. Moreover, only 2.1% of the parents stated that they found support from the school with respect to their children's learning in Run 2, which highly contrasted with the 57.2% reported in Run 1. This once again communicates the level of helplessness and abandonment parents felt in Run 2.

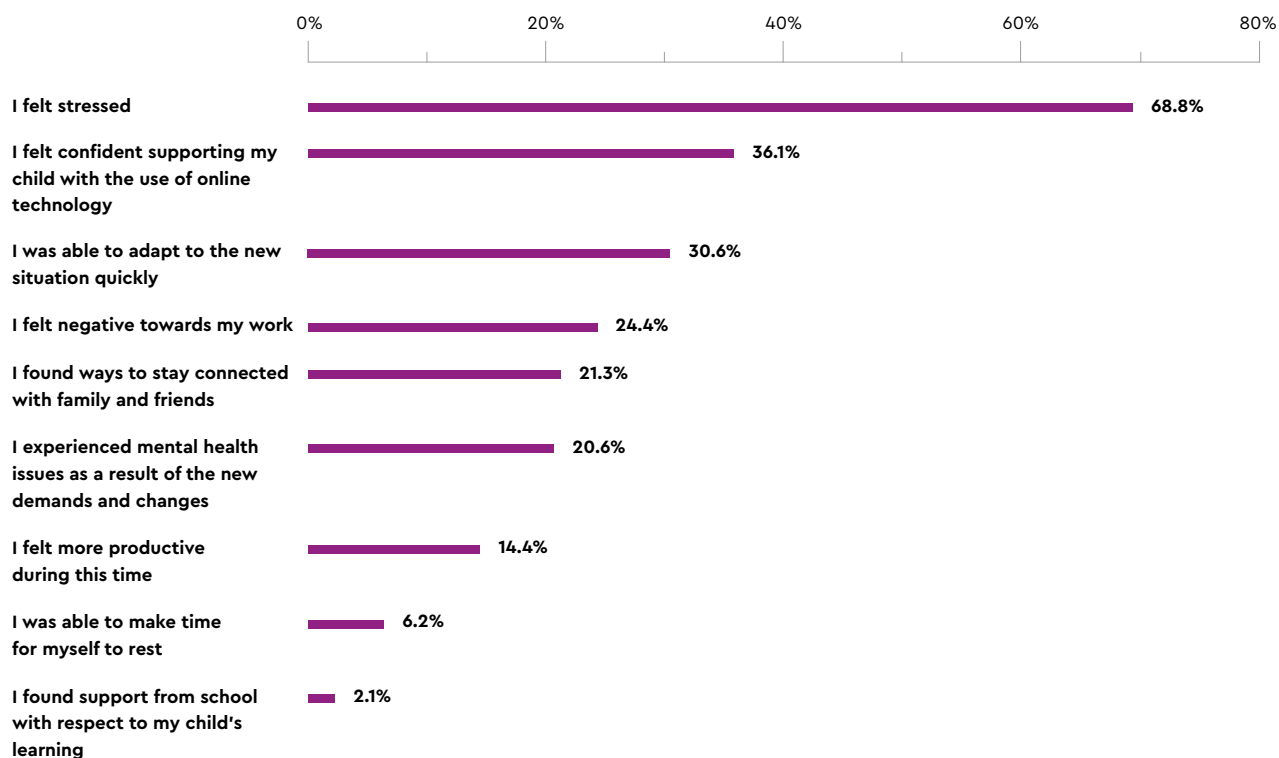
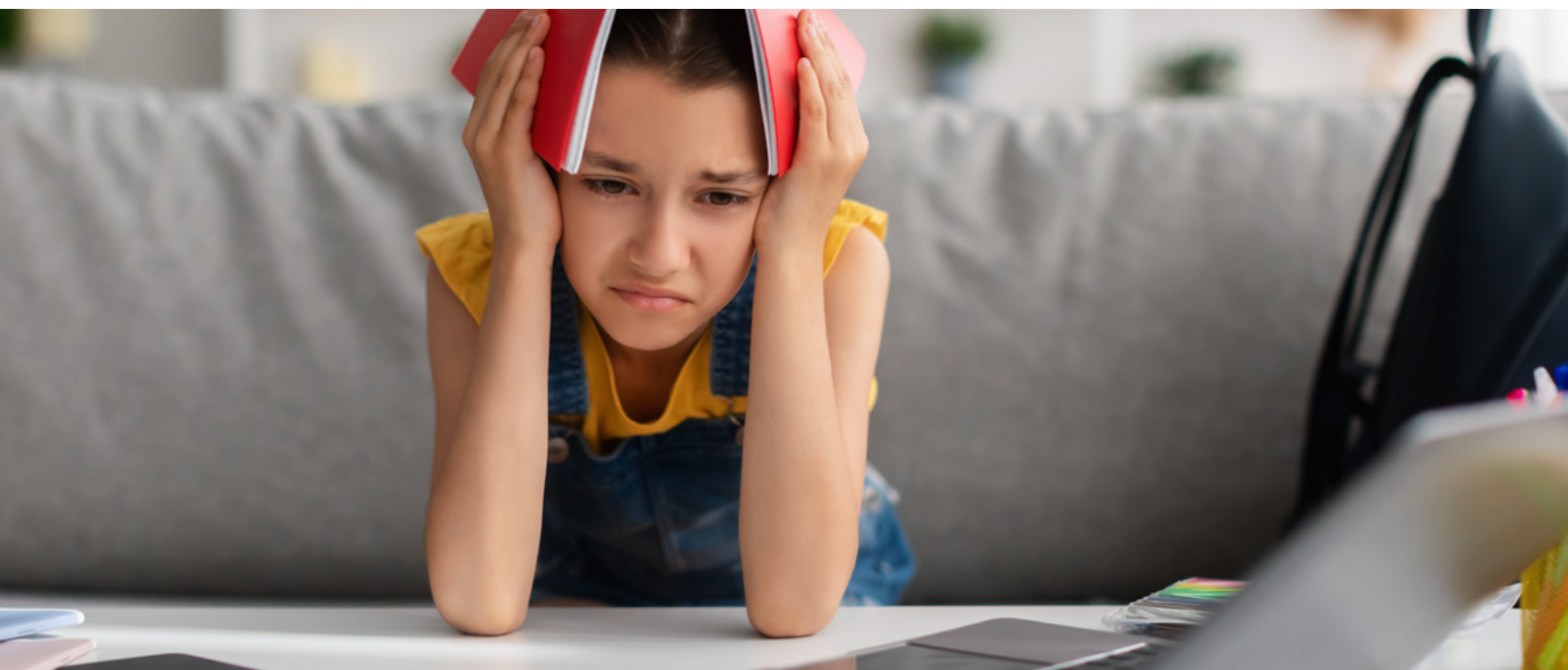


Figure 5.39: Well-being during COVID

The COVID-19 lockdown also had an effect on families (Figure 5.40). While the relationship between children and their parents did not change in either way for the largest number of respondents (44%) but many (43.3%) reported that it has improved compared to before the lockdown while few respondents (12.7%) reported that their relationship got worse or much worse. Negative effect was reported for other aspects. For example, half of the parents (50.9%) claimed that their child was less satisfied with the new modes of learning during the COVID-19 lockdown whilst for 30.9% it did not make a difference, and for almost a fifth (18.2%) it was more satisfactory. Moreover, according to some parents (37.1%), the COVID-19 lockdown negatively affected how happy and well-adjusted their child generally was, and although 40.5% reported that this did not change, 22.3% of the parents claimed that their child felt even better. With some of the statements specifically directed towards parents, 44.7% of the parents claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected their happiness, with 28.9% claiming that they felt happier during 2020-2021. 41.2% of the parents also reported less satisfaction with life which is significant when compared to the 28.4% of parents who claimed that in 2020-2021 they felt more satisfied with life. It is noteworthy that more than half the respondents (58.4%) felt more stressed during the scholastic year 2020-2021.



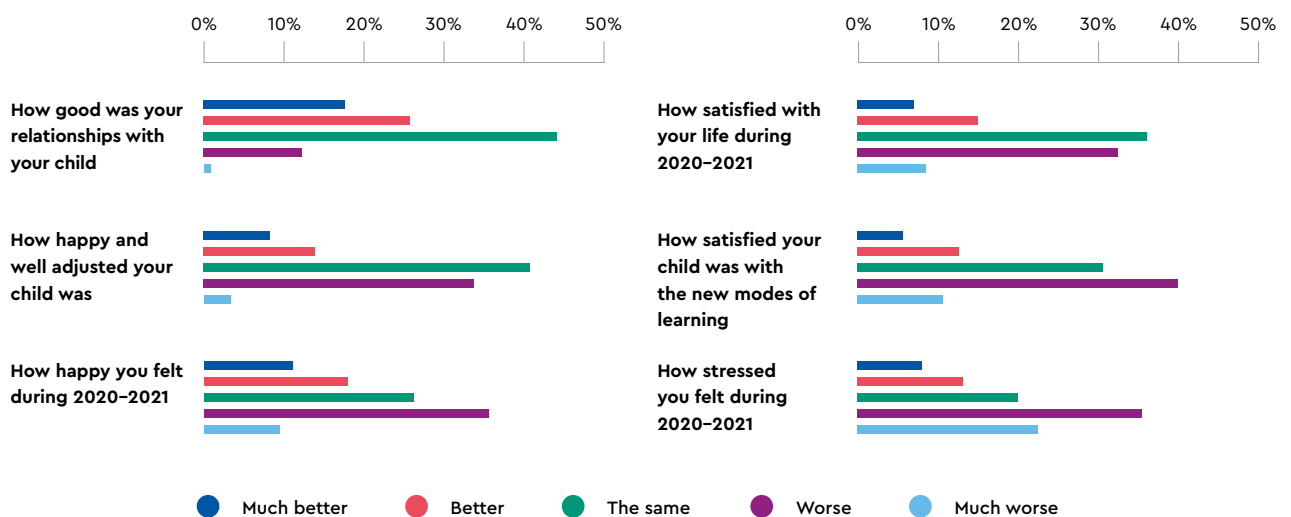


Figure 5.40: The relationship between parents and children and their level of happiness, satisfaction and stress as compared to pre-pandemic times

When parents were asked to choose three statements from a list of twelve, that best describe how they and their child experienced remote learning during the COVID-19 school closures, the replies were overall, negative, and at times contrasting (Figure 5.41). The majority of respondents (68%) claimed that their child missed face-to-face interactions with friends. This was followed by 37.8% who believed that too many distractions at home affected the children's concentration and focus while 32.6% reported a loss in routine and structure. A quarter of parents (25.4%) reported that there were times when their child found it difficult to understand what was expected of him/her, with only 15.5% of the respondents claiming that they felt that their teacher was able to adapt the work to suit their child's level. Moreover, 5.2% of the parents claimed that their child required more support from his/her teacher than was possible, while a tenth of participants (10%) felt that their child needed more challenging work than that provided.

Some advantages of remote learning were also experienced as almost a third of respondents (31.3%) claimed that their child enjoyed having more family time while 22.7% reported that their child felt less stressed to get ready early in the morning. Another positive experience chosen by 14.4% of the parents was that through online teaching, they got to know their child's teacher more. More positive statements chosen by parents included that remote learning helped their child to work more independently (7.2%) and that their child was eating more regularly and healthily at home (3.4%).

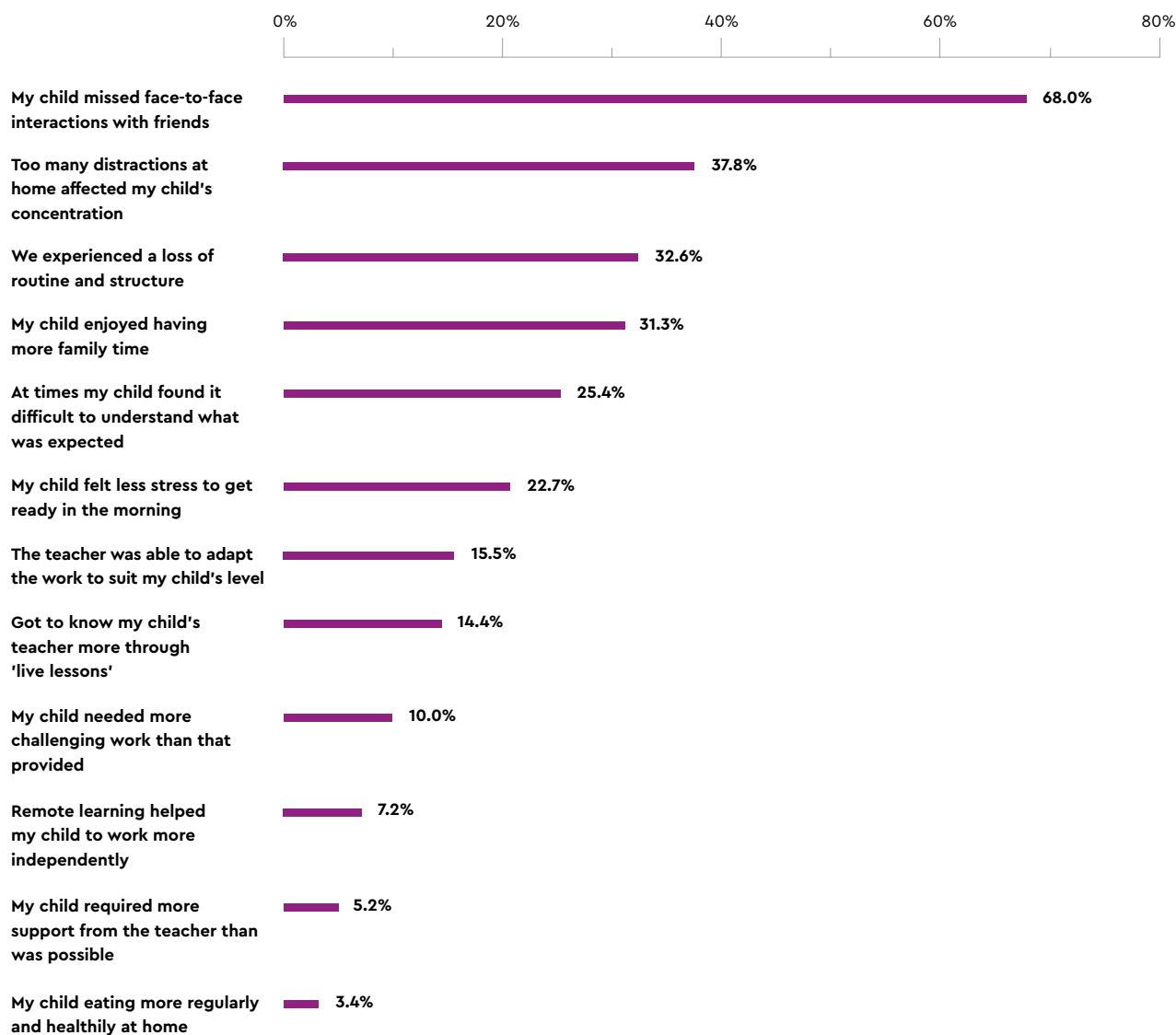


Figure 5.41: Statements that best describe how children and their parents experienced remote learning during the COVID-19 school closure

When parents were questioned about the areas in which schools were supportive during the 2020-2021 scholastic year, it was noted that most parents were overall satisfied with the support they received from schools in Run 2 of the study (Figure 5.42). The majority of the parents agreed that their child's school gave clear directions about learning (76.9%) and about online platforms supported by the school (70.8%). Also, 83.3% were satisfied that the school kept in touch regularly. More than half of the participants (63.2%) strongly agreed/agreed that the school provided technical support to move to remote learning but 23.7% indicated 'neutral' to this statement and 13.1% disagreed/strongly disagreed. 59.1% of the parents reported support by schools in the organisation of online year group meetings for parents, while 48.8% claimed that the school supported them by providing whole-school webinars and training sessions for remote learning.

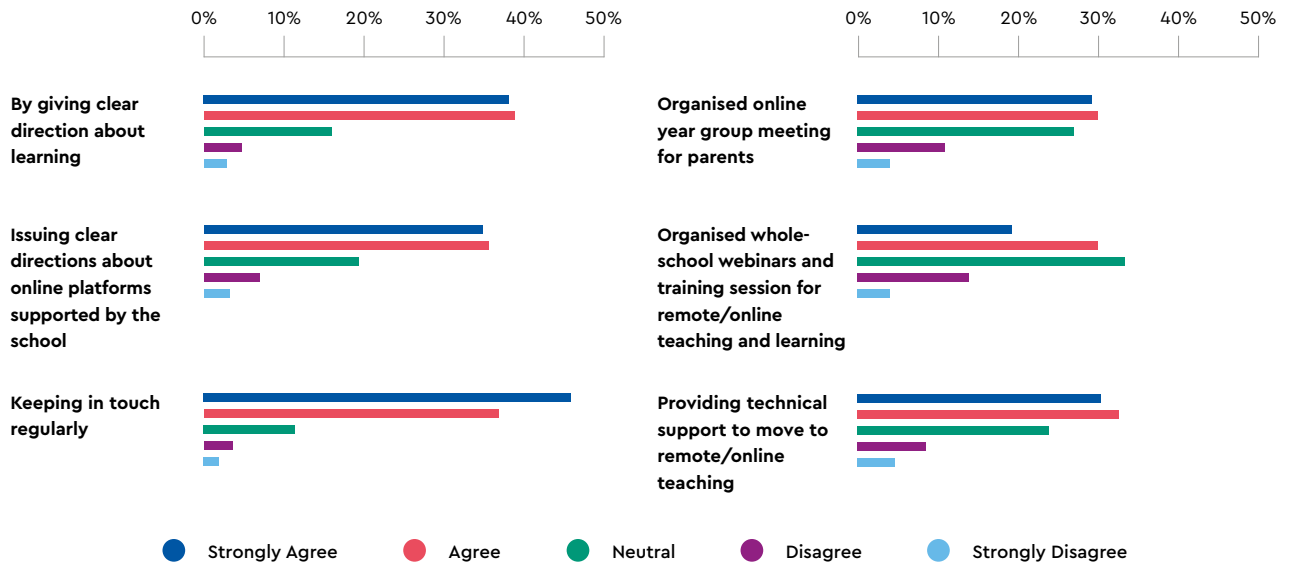


Figure 5.42: Areas in which schools supported children during 2020–2021 scholastic year

The last question of the survey, which was open-ended, invited parents to write any comments they wished to share. Ninety-four parents chose to submit their comments. Divergent views with regard to the teaching and learning experience of children and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic were evident. Whilst for some, shifting to online modes was a positive experience, others were disappointed, stressed and felt that this affected children negatively in various ways. Evidently, some of the answers parents wrote in this question were an echo of the ones they replied to in previous questions.

Work concerns and the struggle experienced by most working parents between meeting work commitments and helping their children with their online learning sessions were brought up by some parents (n=12). This is also evident in Figure 5.43, where the word ‘work’ dominates the Word Cloud. While some parents were appreciative of being provided with flexible hours (n=2) others (n=3) described their difficulties, with juggling both work and supporting their child. Parents provided various practical recommendations that could help them balance between work and supporting their children. One parent (n=1) claimed, that it was highly unrealistic of schools and society to expect her to help her 4-year-old while simultaneously working from home. Feeling responsible toward her employer, she chose to put her child in a separate room by herself to follow online lessons; however, her child struggled to follow. This brought a lot of complaints from the school. This lack of understanding and unrealistic expectations by schools was also felt by a parent-educator (n=1), who claimed that she found it difficult to teach online to her class of children while simultaneously supporting her son at home. Other parents (n=2) complained that those parents who could not support their children during online teaching either due to work commitments or due to a lack of knowledge or skills were the most disadvantaged. A parent (n=1) suggested that schools should shoulder more responsibility and be supportive by briefing and preparing parents for the oncoming lessons and ask for printouts and materials way in advance rather than on the day. Another parent (n=1) asked for more compassion and suggested a compromise between employers and employees that allow parents with a level of flexibility to enable them to help their children during school hours, while attending to work commitment afterward. While this recommendation was embraced and valued by other parents (n=2) as it offered them with ways to meet both work commitment and support her child, other parents (n=6) claimed that keeping up with their job obligations and starting her work after a day helping their children with online learning was very tiring and stressful. Another male parent (n=1) stated that because both him and his wife worked full-time they had to pay for a helper to be with their child during the day, besides the school fees; while another parent (n=1) stated that because they could not afford at-home help for their child, she had to change her job for one that allowed more flexibility.

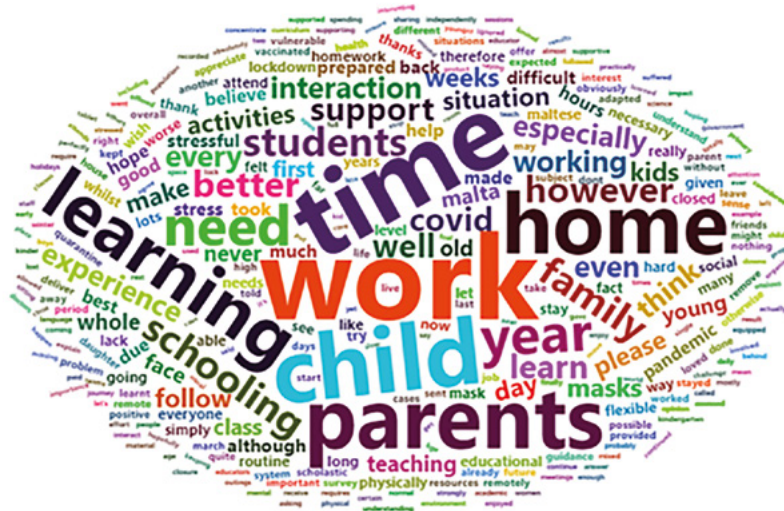


Figure 5.43: Word Cloud that represents the general feedback provided by parents

The difference between schools in the level of preparation was evident. Several parents (n=3) stated that their children’s school was very well-prepared and supportive, with one parent who clarified that her son attended church school claimed that the school provided her son with continued support. On the other hand, she stated that her niece, who attends a Year 5 class in a state school, was not provided with adequate support from her school, did not follow any online lessons, and was not provided with any guidance or material; hence she missed a lot academically. This was supported by eight other respondents who similarly claimed that they were disappointed with the school and their management of online learning, and they felt “abandoned” and “ignored” by the education system. As a result, they felt that their children did not learn much during this academic year. The difference between the different school sectors was clearly highlighted by one of the parents who stated that:

There were teachers in state schools who did very little, whereas church schools prompt their teachers more. The difference is evident.

Referring to the phase where schools re-opened but parents were allowed to keep their children at home, one parent stated that when she asked for information about what the educator was doing in class in order to do the same activities with her child, she was ignored, with the reason provided being that the educator was not obliged to brief parents about what she is doing in class. This parent argued that:

It is unheard of that when parents and children are yearning to be included and involved they are literally shown the door simply because the parents chose to keep the children home, as they were legally and allowed to do. Then we are told, that we do not want to lose children to the system.

“I hope we would never ever return to online learning. We hate it!” This was a parent’s additional comment to our open-ended suggestion. This position against school closure was maintained by a number of parents (n=34) who reiterated that schools should not close down during a pandemic as nothing replaces face-to-face teaching. A number of respondents (n=5) claimed that online learning is “an absolute disaster” as one parent asserted that it is not an appropriate mode of learning for young children. Other parents also claimed that online teaching had negative repercussions on the children’s learning and development. Three parents (n=3) claimed that online learning was very stressful for parents, especially for those with multiple children who are not yet old enough to follow online lessons on their own. Another parent explained that the impact of school closure was devastating for her child as they did not manage to buy him/her a laptop/tablet and did not have an internet connection, so her child could not follow online teaching; highlighting once again the digital divide. Other parents also claimed that school closure not only meant that children were not learning the core subjects well, but they were also being deprived of interacting socially and of experiential activities such as cooking activities and outings. Five respondents (n=5) claimed that lack of social interaction negatively affected their children, who from very outgoing and social persons, became anxious and were having difficulties concentrating. Three other respondents (n=3) stated that, even if teachers did their utmost to provide interesting lessons, some children were easily distracted, while others suffered from mental health issues including lack of self-esteem. Two parents (n=2) claimed that while online learning was beneficial for some children, for others it was not; some children are simply unable to learn through online means. On the other hand, few parents (n=2) were in favour of partial school closure and blended forms of learning throughout the year, to reduce traffic

and pollution as well as promote better family measures. Two other parents (n=2) claimed that online learning can be a good option for children who suffer from school phobia and anxiety, are vulnerable or sick and/or are undergoing long-term treatment and/or recovering at home.

Other parents (n=2) focused on writing about the challenges they encountered while helping their children, where they stated that children needed more time and support to get used to online learning. They also claimed that activities should have been more engaging. One parent (n=1) in fact complained that the lessons were so boring that one of her children used to sleep during online classes. Another parent (n=1) found the correction of homework challenging and time-consuming. One parent complained about their teachers, stating that they were not able to teach via online modes. A number of parents (n=5) suggested the removal of masks (during the pandemic) at school claiming that it interferes with language learning, socialising, and concentration. Three parents (n=3) called attention to the mental and emotional well-being of their children, with one parent asking for the availability of psychological help.

Respondents who identified themselves as parents of children with special needs (n=3) also complained that online learning was very challenging for their children. A parent of a child with autism stated that the lack of interaction with their friends and lack of routine did not facilitate things for her child. Another parent of two deaf children claimed that in order to facilitate things for children with special needs, lessons should be recorded so that they will be able to watch the lessons and do the work at their own time and pace. Moreover, she suggested that children should then have short sessions where the teacher explains any difficulties.

Some parents (n=1) chose to mention the positive aspects they experienced as a result of school closure. Other respondents (n=3) retained that while at times, helping their children with online learning was stressful, yet, they also appreciated the time they spent together as a family. Some parents (n=8) claimed that the school was very well-prepared and their children adapted very well to school closure and online learning, even more than adults. Another adult (n=1) stated that online learning helped children to become more independent learners and open to different and new modes of learning. This was however contradicted by another respondent (n=1) who stated, "I don't think my son can work independently by himself with on-line schooling at 7 years old."

Some respondents were more balanced in their feedback. They appreciated distance learning where one parent (n=1) claimed that if the right support is provided both at home and at school, and screen time is balanced with outdoor play, then s/he argued, online learning can be beneficial. However, she acknowledged that some parents might not be in a position to support their children, while some educators also might lack the skills to teach children from a distance; thus questioning whether such a provision can be equitable. This was supported by other respondent, who was a parent-educator with an M.Ed in literacy development. She claimed that they enjoyed the time when schools were closed, as they adopted a flexible learning approach with a daily list of tasks to do where they did not follow any online lessons. However, she too acknowledged that this might not work for everyone, especially for those parents who might not have the knowledge, skills or experience in teaching and may find such an arrangement overwhelming.



CHAPTER 6

Discussion of Results Across Surveys

"Finally, someone is asking what parents really think." This sentence, which was written by one of the parents who took part in the study, encapsulates the aim of this study, that of bringing the perspectives of parents about the overall impact of COVID-19. In this chapter we discuss the impact of school closure on children and the challenges they and their parents experienced with the aim to answer the research questions of the Cov-EM study, by analysing the data gathered from parents of children in early childhood and primary education (aged 0 – 11 years).

The main findings of both Survey 1 and Survey 2, as presented in Chapter 5 above, will be discussed cross-thematically to address the main research question and the three sub-research questions for this study:

The main research question:

What lesson can be learned from the perspectives of parents of children aged 0 - 11 years old, about their experience of the rapid shift to online learning the COVID-19 pandemic in Malta

The main research question:

- i. What are the perspectives of parents on the overall impact of the pandemic on **teaching and learning**?
- ii. Which strategies and **learning spaces** did young children make use of during the pandemic?
- iii. In what ways, if any, did the pandemic impact on the overall **well-being and relationships** of children and their parents?

The main findings that emerged from the parents' responses to both surveys are synthesised and discussed below in sections 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3. The discussion strengthens the theoretical foundations of the Cov-EM study, presented under three key themes (Table 5.1), and offers new understandings of the identified triad of concepts outlined within the conceptual framework of this study, that is, Teaching and Learning, Learning Spaces and Well-being and Relationships from the parents' perspectives, to offer new understandings of these concepts within the COVID-19 scenario of school closure.

Main themes based on the conceptual framework	Emerging sub-themes
Teaching and Learning	Schools' responsiveness to the abrupt shift from face-to-face to remote learning: An efficient or chaotic transition?
	Shifting the onus of teaching onto parents
	Collaboration for teaching and learning between educators, parents and children
	A pedagogy lost? Resorting to traditional modes of teaching?
	Teaching and learning online post-COVID-19: Mixed reactions by parents
Learning Spaces	Organising the home environment into a learning space
	The use of digital technology for learning: accessibility or inequality?
Well-being and relationships	The positive and challenging effects of the pandemic on the well-being of children and families
	Missing others in isolation: The development of relationships during the pandemic
	The need for good mental health provision

Table 5.1: The main themes guided by the conceptual framework of the study as the baseline for discussion

It is opportune to remind the reader, that this study, which was conducted with parents was the one that got the highest number of respondents among the five Cov-EM studies, where a total of 815 parents replied to the questionnaire in Run 1, conducted in September 2020. The number of participants decreased to 411 in Run 2 (September 2021), albeit, it was still the one with the highest number of participants in the second phase.

We find it fitting to remind the reader, that as has been claimed in Chapter 4, not all parents had the same exact and equal probability of being chosen (Dudovskiy, n.d.). The questionnaires were disseminated through popular social media sites. Those parents who either did not access these social media sites, were illiterate or digitally illiterate, or who did not have the technological equipment or internet access, did not have the possibility to reply to the survey. Therefore, the perspectives of such parents could not be considered for this study. Maybe, if were able to reach such parents, the results would have been different.

Findings from this study show that parents had divergent views in relation to the schools' responsiveness to online teaching. While some of the questions were able to capture the parents' general impressions, it was in the open-ended questions that parents managed to fully communicate their perspectives.

6.1 Teaching and Learning

6.1.1 Schools' responsiveness to the abrupt shift from face-to-face teaching to remote learning: An efficient or chaotic transition?

Some parents were full of praise for schools and educators who, according to them, adapted well to the changes and very quickly learned new skills, adapted their teaching pedagogies and were very efficient in finding ways to motivate and engage children through innovative activities; a finding supported by Busuttill and Farrugia (2020). However, other parents were highly critical of remote teaching and the way it was implemented. While, according to Pellicano (2020), as soon as schools were closed, teachers began to discuss and find new ways of teaching and learning in order to ensure continuous education, parents from this study claimed that not all schools and teachers were prepared to make the abrupt shift from traditional face-to-face teaching to remote online teaching, even more so, in the first school closure (March – June 2020), when some schools and/or teachers did not shift to remote teaching by June, 2020. Some parents were highly critical of educators, claiming that some of them were ill-prepared and ill-equipped and did not have the necessary IT skills nor were they familiar with online platforms or had the aptitude to teach online, and therefore, struggled to teach via online modes. This finding is sustained by the Eurochild Report (2020) about Malta, which stated that homeschooling proved to be very complicated where educators were left on their own and had to find their own ways of teaching online. by This lack of training for teachers was also highlighted by Bhamani et al. (2020) and Dong et al., (2020), who reported that many teachers found online learning as challenging frequently resulting in ineffective ways of teaching. This

frequently urged parents to show lack of trust in remote learning. The president of the Malta Union of Teachers (Bonnici as cited in Costa, 2020) confirmed that teachers experienced “teething problems” until they found their feet. A survey conducted by OECD (2020), agrees with parents, and claims that only slightly less than half of the Maltese participant teachers (49.1%) felt adequately equipped to use digital technologies in their teaching. Moreover, the study by Busuttill and Farrugia, (2020), indicates that 90% of the participating teachers stated that this was the first time they had to shift their teaching to online modes in a pedagogically effective way, with only 40% of educators stating that they felt prepared for this transition and agreed that they had the required digital competences, as well the confidence and self-efficacy to face the challenge brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants in this study highlighted the lack of adequate training, support and therefore the lack of preparedness of teachers. This view is supported by Martin, Xie and Bolliger (2022b), who argue that, even at an international level, while most teacher education programs do prepare teachers for the use of technology during face-to-face teaching, they do not prepare student-teachers explicitly for remote online teaching and learning; a statement also supported by Busuttill and Farrugia (2020) and by the findings of Research Report 1 of the Cov-EM study (Milton et al., 2022), held with Maltese University ITE students who likewise commented on a lack of readiness in this field. This argument is also supported by the World Bank (2021) which states that one of the key features for effective remote learning is to have knowledgeable teachers who have the skills to teach remotely not only by having the skills to use digital platforms and resources, but they also have to be able to modify their pedagogy and practice in order to ensure the engagement of children. Likewise, Martin et al., (2022b) claim that educators have to be provided with continuous training in how to use digital technology for online learning and how to engage learners through online modes. Educators were simply not ready for emergency online learning, and found engaging students through online modes as very challenging (Martin, et al., 2022b). Thus, the OECD (2022), acknowledging that educators are constantly working in highly challenging and fluid environments, suggests that they should be prepared to meet the demands of the profession brought by rapid societal and technological changes, and therefore, should develop a broader and more complex set of skills and competencies to meet the ever-changing teaching requirements (Boeskens, Nusche & Yurita, 2020; OECD, 2018; Révai, 2020; Viac & Fraser, 2020). However, Fontenelle-Tereshchuk (2021) contends, that it is highly unfair to expect that only educators should learn new skills, and argues that parents should have the motivation, willingness and ability to embrace changes and equip themselves with new competences in order to support their children.

Parents also maintained that, especially, albeit not exclusively, during the first school closure, some educators were hesitant to opt for a synchronous mode of teaching. Subsequently, they either did not go online at all and/or did not send any work to children, or did so haphazardly and in asynchronous ways, where they simply provided children with lists of internet links of resources, worksheets and powerpoint presentations for them to follow, without real explanation, support, monitoring and/or the correction of their work. Previous research also indicates that asynchronous sessions were used more frequently during the first school closures (Foti, 2020; Steed & Leech, 2021). As claimed by Bhamani et al., (2020), the lack of the teacher’s physical presence in asynchronous teaching, hampered learning. This upset parents who considered this a lack of initiative, skill, preparedness and motivation to make the necessary transition, as unbecoming of schools and educators. Parents in this study were also concerned about their children’s learning loss, as a result of asynchronous remote teaching. However, this seems a problem experienced by many parents worldwide. Gunzenhauser, Enke, Johann, Karbach and Saalbach (2021), stated that parents complained that remoting teaching focused on having students complete tasks on their own, rather than educators actually explaining content knowledge through innovative ways, that were comparable to how they used to learn in classrooms.

Classifying the shift to online teaching as problematic, especially in Survey 1, some parents communicated their disappointment in online teaching and how it was managed. The transition to online teaching was abrupt and challenging for children, educators and parents in Malta (Dimech as cited in Costa, 2020) and across the world (Martin, et al., 2022b). A number of parents suggested that children needed more time and support to get used to online learning. Empathising with educators, some parents argued that it was very difficult for educators to manage online teaching, due to a lot of disturbances from the children’s homes, and poor control over who spoke. As a result, some parents were against school closure during the pandemic, claiming that nothing replaces face-to-face teaching, a viewpoint supported by Cachia, Director General for Curriculum, Lifelong Learning and Employability (as cited in Berger, 2020). However, it must be mentioned that most parents took this position during the second phase of the study (2021), when the initial panic of the COVID-19 pandemic was diminishing and parents were weighing the impact of school closure on the mental health of their children versus the risk for their children getting seriously sick.

While online learning was beneficial for some children, it was a struggle for others: some children found it very difficult to follow and engage in the learning process through online means; a position supported by Martin et al., (2022b) who claim that the physical separation between educators and children made it very challenging for the former to keep children engaged during remote learning. Some parents in our study complained that online teaching had negative repercussions on their children’s learning and development. Other parents were critical of the fact that online learning did not serve the purpose to teach children (especially



young children); a viewpoint also shared by German parents in a study conducted by Gunzenhauser, et al., (2021). Like their Maltese counterparts, German parents generally considered online teaching as an inadequate form of teaching for young children, as children generally found it difficult to concentrate for a long time in front of a screen. As a result, parents of primary-aged children who participated in our study complained that online learning was not effective and children were losing on learning. Parents continued to argue, that if teachers provided enough interesting lessons, their children would not have been distracted easily, and therefore, would not have experienced learning loss. As argued above, this shows that schools and educators were at a loss in how to present learning to children.

Educators, parents and children seemed more prepared for the second school closure. According to parents responding to Run 2 of the study, their children were exposed to more synchronous modes of online learning. This is corroborated by Napier (as cited in Berger, 2021) who claims that in the second school closure, educators had moved from “emergency education to education in times of emergency”, resulting in better management of online teaching as they had more time to plan, prepare and adjust accordingly to a situation, which at that stage, they had already experienced and had knowledge about. Synchronous modes of teaching helped children to engage in the learning process more and create a sense of stability and assurance for children and their parents alike. This helped parents, educators and children to interact more with each other facilitating the teaching-learning process. Moreover, this experience shows that educators not only need to have a positive attitude and aptitude towards adopting new changes, but they need to be trained and supported to such extreme changes in the pedagogy and in such a short time.

The difference in the level of preparation in transitioning to online teaching between schools was evident. While as argued above, in the main, parents were very critical of how the shift was implemented, and of the teachers’ attitude to adopting online modes of learning, other parents were highly appreciative of schools, claiming that the school of their child was very well-prepared and supportive, and as a result, their children adapted very well to school closure and were very able to make the quick shift to online learning. From our conclusions, the difference in the parents’ appraisal did not depend on the phase of the study, that is, first school closure (2020 - Run 1) or second school closure (2021 – Run 2), but rather on the school and the motivation, attitude and willingness of the school leadership team and the individual educator. While the study shows that, generally speaking, in the second school closure more educators were using synchronous rather than asynchronous modes of teaching when compared to the first phase, yet from some of the responses, it seems that parents considered church and independent schools as more prepared than state schools, who were more able to quickly shift to online teaching and provided continued support to children. Inequity between the different sectors in the provision, and the preparation and following of protocols was also highlighted by Research Report 2 of the Cov-EM study (Bonello, Camilleri, Deguara, Milton & Muscat, 2022). Results from Vassallo, Doublet Meagher, Zammit, Grech, Refalo and German (2021), attest that children attending state schools were more likely to be offered asynchronous modes of learning; contrastingly, the study also showed that children attending independent schools were more likely to be offered synchronous learning.

Highlighting the difference between sectors even more, parents in this study claimed that state schools were more hesitant to shift to online modes of teaching. Parents claimed that state schools did very little to encourage teachers to shift to online modes of teaching. Correspondingly, it also seemed a common perspective among parents, that church and independent schools, made more effort, had more provisions in place and prompted and supported their teachers more to make the shift to online teaching. This is supported by Borg and Mayo (2021) who claim that the pandemic brought to the surface the inconsistency in the services offered across the different school sectors. Echoing findings from this study, they report that parents claimed that different schools provided unequal preparation, quality teaching and engagement. They argue that while parental support positively influences student engagement, yet the level of quality of online teaching as presented by different schools and school sectors, defined the extent of learning loss. Borg (2022), argues that having a socially just education system is doable if the Ministry and all those working in the sector are willing and empowered to rethink, reconsider, and reconstruct an education that embraces inclusivity, democratic involvement, collective responsibility as well as validity of all stakeholders, including children.

Parents in this study suggested that state schools did not provide children with adequate support, including not enough guidance and/or materials, resulting in poor levels of learning. This perhaps reflects the lack of guidelines from the responsible authorities in relation to the teaching and learning pedagogies to be used, leaving state schools in particular, on their own, that frequently resulted in inequality of provision. Those children who needed the most guidance and help, and who frequently attended state schools, were the least to find support. The press release issued by the Ministry for Education and Employment Working Group (2020b), on 19th March, 2020, a week after the first school closure, and which had the aim to provide “*further guidelines on online teaching and learning*” did not really offer specific-enough recommendations and strategies for educators. It generically stated that:

educators are encouraged to find the best way which works for them to communicate with their students ... to collaborate together and with their school to enable the pooling of resources for the benefit of all ... [to] disseminat[ion of] educational material in a manner which

is realistic for themselves and also for their students. They should attempt to cover the most important parts of their relevant syllabi ... are encouraged to continue pacing the material provided gradually so as not to overwhelm students with too much material at one time and ensuring a realistic mode of working in exceptional circumstances from home ... give feedback to students.

This lack of clear guidelines, left schools to their own devices and were expected to take their own decisions, where often, it was the responsibility of the schools to manage the pandemic, decide how best to abide by the necessary protocols, provide support to their staff and reach out to parents. This was experienced by other countries as well. Bringing the example of Germany, Gunzenhauser, et al., (2021), state that because the closure of schools was very sudden, there was no time for any forward planning and the organisation of remote schooling including logistical issues, training and support. This was also limited by the lack of specific guidelines by school authorities which not only resulted in differences between schools but also between teachers in the same schools. Some local schools managed to provide a good service and quickly shift to online modes; others did not. However, we argue that in the end, the onus rested on the teacher, her professionalism, initiative, motivation, commitment and agency. Irrespective of the sector they came from, some teachers rose to the challenge to shift to online modes more than others, were more motivated to learn and were more able to try new things. Perhaps, they were also more knowledgeable and skillful to do so.

6.1.2 Shifting the onus of teaching onto parents?

Parent participation in the teaching and learning process was critical during the COVID-19 pandemic (Martin, Ebrahim and Excell, 2022a). However, some parents who participated in this study, felt that the onus of teaching was shifted too quickly on them from the onset of the pandemic without any preparation or training, and without them having the skills and knowledge to support their children academically. While parents had to take on the teachers' role, they realised that they were unable to motivate and support their children like teachers do as the "nature of teachers' authority differs from that of parents" (Stelmach, 2021). Neither educators nor parents or children were prepared for an emergency shift to remote teaching and learning (Martin et al., 2022b). Such a situation was experienced by parents worldwide (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021; Sharma, 2020). This created a sense of helplessness, confusion and anxiety amongst parents. While well-educated parents were frequently able to meet the challenge, other parents including illiterate or less-knowledgeable parents, or parents who did not have the technology or access to the internet, felt challenged, especially in the first school closure of 2020. This is in parallel with findings from Marangu et al.,s, (2022) and Haelermans et al.,s, (2022) studies which suggest that the higher the level of education of parents, the more they participated in the teaching-learning process and therefore, the more they supported their children. Consistently, in their study held with Dutch children, Haelermans et al., (2022) show that as a result of their parent's low level of education, children from lower-educated and poorer families had less access to resources at home, and their parents might not have been skilfull enough or knowledgeable enough to help them with their schoolwork, giving rise to inequalities in learning provision which ensued in learning loss, more specifically in reading, spelling and math. Whereas some parents were able to support their children during online lessons, even while working from home, other parents struggled to balance work and homeschooling, while doing the daily house chores and having some time for themselves.

Parents felt that teachers had high expectations of them and shifted a number of teaching responsibilities, expecting them to support their children constantly throughout the day, every day, not considering their needs including financial difficulties, work commitment and the availability of technological equipment (Hagenaars, Stevens, Avermaet & D'hondt, 2021). Moreover, most parents were not skilled in the use of digital technologies and online platforms. While parents complained that teachers were assigning too much homework, making it difficult to keep up, they also complained that they were expected to take up the full role of teachers where they also had to explain concepts, monitor their children, provide support and correspond with the educator; a long list which overwhelmed parents. As Hagenaars et al., (2021) suggest, teachers should have been more sensitised to familial issues and their socio-economic background, in order to adapt their expectations in accordance with the needs of the children and their parents. Reports by parents about excessive homework reached the Ministry for Education (Farrugia, 2020a). As a result, the Ministry for Education (2020c) stated that while it is "very much aware that it is not realistic to expect educators to correct all the work which students may carry out at home during this period", teachers should find a balance that allows them to provide feedback to students in a realistic manner. It is worth noting that such a situation was also experienced by parents worldwide, including for example, Canadian (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021) and Pakistani (Bhamani et al., 2020) parents. This, in turn, created a very stressful environment in some households, pushing some parents to stay offline and others, especially those coming from disadvantaged contexts, distanced themselves, and either provided poor support or simply did not log in to follow remote teaching. In fact, this was a concern of the Minister of Education of the day, who said that despite the efforts made by teachers to communicate with students, some children "disappeared off the radar" (as cited in Costa, 2020) and did not respond to the contact requests made by their teachers; a finding confirmed by Research Report 2 of the Cov-EM study (Bonello et al., 2022). Subsequently, some asked for the help of relatives, friends, or private tuition teachers to support their children; a phenomenon also featuring in the study by

Alharthi (2022). Parents in our study also pointed out that some children became more independent in the second school closure and took more responsibility of their own learning, presumably to make up for the lack of time and lack of skills of their parents. Correspondingly, results from Run 2, show that there was a considerable increase in parents seeking such help. This relates to findings from studies by Martin et al., (2022a), and Garbe et al., (2020) who show that while some parents assisted their children, developed routines for working with them and made their utmost to motivate them while developing meaningful and engaging activities to ensure continuity, others struggled to balance between work and provide for their family financially and supporting their children.

6.1.3 Collaboration for teaching and learning between educators, parents and children

Parental involvement and engagement in the education of their children are beneficial for children's learning and achievement (Durisic & Bunijeva, 2017; Epstein, 2011; Harris & Goodall, 2007). Learning should be considered a collaborative endeavour between educators, parents and children in order to provide continuity for learning between the home and school (Education Policy Institute, n.d.). Moving teaching, learning and communication to remote modes, as well as the shifting of the responsibility of teaching onto parents during the pandemic, changed the dynamics and relationships between schools and homes (Education Policy Institute, n.d.). During school closure, the relationships between parents and educators were both "strained and strengthened" (Stelmach, 2021); a finding also supported by Research Report 2 of the Cov-EM study (Bonello, et al., 2022). In order to make online learning work, both educators and parents realised that they needed to support and collaborate with each other. Findings from this study show that during school closure, parents relied more on the educators' help and collaborated with them more. This in turn, enhanced the communication channels between educators and parents, and allowed the former to get to know the latter better. Conversely, parents increased their level of support for their children's education when compared to before school closure. Findings from this study show, that in the second school closure, parents increased their involvement and demanded for more parental engagement, in tandem with more guidance on how to support their child. Furthermore, the findings also show that when parents were able to support their children, the children's level of participation increased. Findings from Research Report 2 of the Cov-EM study (Bonello, et al., 2022), corroborate this and indicate that educators noted that when parents supported their children, the latter's level of participation increased. This is supported by Hart's (1992) ladder of family participation and engagement, which suggests that the more parents are involved in the education of their children, the more they are engaged, and the more they contribute towards the learning process, the more their children benefit and learn. The benefits of involving parents were also highlighted by Wang et al., (2022) who concluded that the more parents were engaged, the more students were engaged effectively. Likewise, they found that the more teachers supported their children, the more they developed close relationships with them and motivated children to engage in the learning process more. However, findings from this study also show that some parents complained that not all educators and parents were willing to collaborate and keep close contact with each other; some educators and even some parents were absent and did not go online at all, especially during the first school closure. This is confirmed by other Cov-EM research studies (Bonello, et al., 2022; Camilleri, Bonello, Deguara, Milton & Muscat, 2022).

Another finding that emerged from this study is that the majority of participant parents were satisfied with the way schools and educators communicated with them in providing clear guidelines about the shift to online learning. While the majority of the participants preferred more synchronous lessons and activities and less homework, in the main, they were satisfied with the educators' commitment towards learning, albeit, this was more evident in Run 2 rather than Run 1, where complaints of abandonment, feeling overwhelmed with work and lack of good planning and communication were more pronounced in the first run. Conversely, there were also parents who claimed that some teachers were out of reach and did not reply to their queries. In such cases, the interaction between parents and educators decreased or was completely halted, if there was one at all. Some participant parents suggested that educators should be prepared to create better channels of communication with them, where they keep daily contact with parents to brief them on what is being taught in class. Good communication between parents and educators as well as parental engagement in the children's learning process, benefits children's learning, development and attainment; a practice which should be experienced even beyond the pandemic (Education Policy Institute, n.d.). This is supported by Yang et al., (2022) who claim that parent involvement is critical for the effective engagement of children.

6.1.4 A pedagogy lost? Resorting to traditional modes of teaching during times of emergency

In their effort to provide continuity in education, and to offer children the security of a routine, many educators made a drastic change to their pedagogy and shifted their teaching to online modes to try to keep children involved in the teaching-learning process and to meet the expectations of parents and society at large to keep up with curriculum (Pellicano, 2020). Educators

were expected to change their pedagogy, and adopt new ones while learning how to use online technologies (Haller & Novita, 2021). However, according to parents who participated in this study, many teachers were not prepared for teaching online, a finding supported by Cachia et al., (2021) and Saavedra, et al., (2021). Consequently, using asynchronous modes of teaching, which felt less challenging and safer than synchronous ones as educators did not have to face children and their parents in real time, most educators went for a whole class approach, and old ways of teacher-led activities, where they uploaded videos, sent worksheets and links to websites with work for children to fill-in, without being assessed. It was evident that when faced with a new situation, educators went for what they knew, what is practical, basic and traditional. The focus was not on being innovative or on learning new skills, but the focus was on surviving; on providing some basic form of teaching and learning provision. In fact, the work distributed was more considered to keep children busy and parents satisfied that their children were occupied. Moreover, parents of primary school children complained that educators gave more importance to the core subjects of Maltese, English and Mathematics, at the expense of soft subjects and hands-on and experiential activities such as the arts, music, drama, investigation, when they most needed it, as children were restricted to their homes for a long time seated at their screen without any involvement in experiential activities and/or social interactions. This is maintained by Cachia et al., (2021) and Saavedra et al., (2021), whose findings indicate that even if during the pandemic teachers could have worked harder and invested more time in learning new digital skills, and adopting a new pedagogy to teach and communicate with children and their parents, this did not essentially mean that children had more engaging learning experiences or that they learned more. However, parents felt overwhelmed with all the work, to the extent that some complained that they were not managing to keep up with the work sent and correct it. In Run 2, where schools experienced the second school closure, educators knew more what was expected of them, had more time to prepare, and were able to experiment with more hands-on activities. It was evident that they were more in control of the situation. As a result of this, children were more engaged.

Early years' educators struggled with adopting open or an emergent philosophy, as they should have been implementing as a result of the curriculum reform launched in 2018. However, activities that are usually developed when adopting an emergent curriculum, such as creating a children's web, circle and eating lunch together were claimed by the absolute majority of parents as never done during school closure; a finding also supported by the second research report of the Cov-EM study, that by Bonello et al., (2022) where educators claimed that they found it challenging to maintain a child-centred approach when they shifted to online modes. Contrastingly, the teaching of academic subjects including the teaching of mathematical concepts, letters and the filling of worksheets with Powerpoint instructions were predominantly done, while physical education, inquiry and playful sensory experiences, were rarely done. Thus it seems that the emergent curriculum philosophy guided by the National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 2012) and Learning Outcomes Framework (Ministry of Education, 2015) that was introduced in 2018, and that was being implemented at the time, was disrupted. Related CoPE sessions were halted and according to the participant parents, traditional modes, of filling endless worksheets and templates were adopted even in the early years' classes. Thus, the abrupt shift to online modes of teaching and learning, did not allow educators to experiment with a new pedagogy, pushing them to re-adopt the prescriptive, traditional curriculum they were used to prior to curriculum reform. Thus, the pandemic seems to have fuelled a formal approach while jeopardising play-based and open learning, where as Panesi, Bocconi and Ferlino (2021) concluded, the lack of physical presence and a lack of shared, physical space limited the learning experiences.

6.1.5 Teaching and learning online post-COVID-19: Mixed reactions by parents

Findings from this study about teaching and learning during the pandemic were varied, with some parents in favour and others fervently against remote modes of learning. Those in favour of online learning, claimed that remote learning provided them with more family time, and less stress to get ready for school. Moreover, they claimed that remote learning helped their child to become an independent learner. However, there were also parents who were against online modes of learning, claiming that it was not an appropriate mode for young children to learn, where most parents complained that their children found it difficult to concentrate and follow online activities. Furthermore, most parents asserted that their children missed meeting their friends and socially interact with them. They also claimed that the home environment was not conducive to learning. The mixed reactions expressed by local parents were also voiced by parents worldwide. Novianti and Garzia (2020), found that Indonesian, parents, in the main, were in favour of remote learning as they considered it beneficial for their children. They claimed that remote learning helped their children to engage in the learning process, motivated them to learn, and helped them become more independent learners while developing their digital skills. Like some of the Maltese parent participants, Indian parents also experienced an improvement in their relationship with their children as they were spending more time with them. Similarly, Bubb and Jones (2020) and Garbe et al., (2020) found that most parents claimed that teachers were more supportive, presented children with learning that was more creative, and children learned to be more independent. Contrastingly, Cachia et al., (2021), Dong et al., (2020) and Saavedra, et al., (2021) maintained that some parents doubted the effectiveness of online learning while Fontenelle-Tereshchuk (2021), suggested that remote learning is not an appropriate tool for children's learning. The parents of these studies claimed that online teaching does not abet learning but rather it hinders it.

This study shows that parents are willing to adopt to online means of learning if the need arises, as long as there is good preparation and training for it. They maintain, if all the involved stakeholders are trained, then, online learning can be beneficial for young children, a finding also supported by other studies (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020).

6.2 Learning Spaces

6.2.1 Organising the home environment into a learning space

One of the main challenges that parents were faced with as soon as schools shifted to remote teaching, was to identify and set up a learning space within the home where their children could connect following online activities or lessons throughout the day. Findings from this study show that most families (over 60%) had managed to secure a quiet learning space away from everyday disturbances for their children either at their homes or at relatives' homes. However, while just over half of the participants claimed that their child had a designated space to study which was shared with a sibling or a parent working from home, only 7.5% of the parents confirmed that their child had their own designated and quiet space to learn in their own bedroom. Almost one-tenth of the parents claimed that they did not manage to secure an adequate space for their child to study, especially when they had more than one child, while more than one-third of the parents stated that their children experienced some form of disturbance every now and then. These findings reflect the living reality that most children live in apartments or maisonettes where space is limited. Moreover, one must remind the reader that parents who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and therefore are less likely to have the digital equipment to participate and/or are illiterate or digital illiterate, were less likely to participate in the study, and hence, their data is missing. Results from this study also reflect those of the European Commission (2020) which stated that parents who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds found it more difficult to identify a quiet place for their children to study during the lockdown. The same report also states that Malta was one of the seven European countries where this difference was less felt. Findings from this study, highlight the consistent inequalities children experience when learning. Borg and Mayo, (2022) assert that the differences in Maltese home environments were unambiguous, with some parents being able to secure a quiet space, quality technology, and internet connection, and were able to provide other resources as they had the economic capital. They were also able to support their children through their presence and engagement, while other parents were not. This was reflected in our study when for example, some parents claimed that they could afford to buy new computer hardware for their children as well as an additional amount to strengthen internet connection to ensure that their children could follow online teaching. Moreover, they were more able to stay at home to support their children. On the other hand, this study revealed that children coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds lacked technological equipment and an internet connection, as well as a quiet space where to follow online teaching. Moreover, their parents were less likely to support them as they frequently were either illiterate or digitally illiterate and/or could not stay at home and work remotely. As a result, as the Minister of Education (Minister of Education, as cited in Costa, 2020) of the time retorted, some children disappeared from the system. Highlighting this divide, Borg and Mayo, (2022) claimed that children from a low socio-economic background were marginalised, and as a result, they were socially isolated and frequently experienced dysfunctional contexts such as some form of poverty, abuse, and mental health issues. These children were the most affected by the pandemic, and experienced disengagement not only from learning but also from the system while experiencing considerable learning loss.

The quality of the learning space affects the learning process; hence, those children who had a quality learning space were at an advantage to learn when compared to those who did not. The European Commission, (2020) maintains that not having an adequate and quiet place to study, when all the family was at home, likely hampered the learning process and put children from lower socio-economic backgrounds at more disadvantage. This same report (European Commission Report, 2020), which claimed that children with lower educated parents or those coming from low socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to have their own space/room to study, indicated that an average of 25% of European children missed out on having a quiet learning environment. Similarly, Engzell, Frey and Verhagen, (2022) claim that children from disadvantaged backgrounds, experienced learning loss, highlighting the uneven effect the pandemic and school closure had on children. However, the same report of the European Commission (2020) claims that in Malta (together with other European countries), the percentage of children who had their own learning space was higher; a statement confirmed by the findings of this study.

Participant parents claimed that even if they tried hard to identify quiet places in the home for their children to follow online activities and lessons, distractions at home were considerable. Children were distracted by TV, video games and other leisure activities; a finding also supported by Stelmach (2021). This created the blurring between the home and school environments, where parents, at times felt that their private home space was being intruded through online learning.

6.2.2 The use of digital technology for learning: accessibility or inequality?

The majority of participants claimed that they had the necessary digital devices and good internet connection; however, some admitted that they struggled to provide digital equipment to each one of the children, especially when they had multiple children who had to follow online lessons simultaneously. Some parents also complained of poor internet connection claiming that some children, were not able to follow online lessons. This finding was validated by the European Commission (2020), which states that one-tenth of children in Europe did not have a quality internet connection during the pandemic, putting them at a disadvantage with their peers. The report by the European Commission (2020) also claims that having at least one technological device in the home does not necessarily mean that that device is being used by children for homeschooling. This confirms that pre-existing socio-economic inequalities hampered remote learning (World Bank Group, 2021), accentuating a digital divide between those who could afford to buy technological equipment and pay for good internet connections and those who could not. Kardefelt-Winther, Rees and Livingstone (2020) as well as UNESCO (2020a) substantiate this, stating that the COVID-19 pandemic widened the digital divide as it increased inequality in access to technology and internet networks for those who could not afford to pay. In fact, Engzell et al., (2022) claim that children from countries and homes with weaker technological infrastructure, experienced bigger learning losses. This was also echoed by Borg and Mayo, (2022), who claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic, exposed the differences in home environments reflecting the disparities in socio-economic backgrounds.

Even if, Malta's Ministry for Education and Employment has been consistently investing in digital technology and infrastructure, this was always aimed to support traditional teaching and learning and was never designed as an online platform, and hence, was not prepared to such a quick shift in the use of technology for learning (Vassallo et al., 2021). The Maltese Ministry of Education was aware of the digital divide within the local context, and on the 15th of May, 2020 launched a scheme for low-income families and distributed 123 tablets and 132 free internet access services to vulnerable children (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020c), to try to ease the problem. This, not to mention that children in Years 4, 5 and 6 were provided with a tablet, as part of the "one tablet per child scheme" which was established in 2014 to ensure that all children will be given equal opportunities here they were given a tablet as a learning tool (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015).

Even if the Ministry of Education, tried its utmost to reach out to children and their parents who "disappeared off the radar" (Minister of Education, as cited in Costa, 2020), yet some children, especially those coming from deprived homes, still fell through the net and could not be reached. Findings from the study by Busuttill and Farrugia (2020) show that reaching out to these learners was not easy, and indicated cracks in the system and ask for more accountability from school leaders to ensure that all learners have access to their right to education. This demonstrates that the effectiveness of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic is mixed. Moreover, Martin et al., (2022b) assert that schools should go beyond ensuring access to digital devices and strong internet connection to all children, and should also support them and their parents with the necessary training and technical support to be able to access and use online platforms.

Results from this study also show that parents became learners during the pandemic. While, in the main, schools provided support for learning and kept in touch, they failed in meeting parents regularly, holding training sessions and providing technical support. This is not to shift the blame onto schools or point fingers, as it has been acknowledged that schools were dealing with uncertainty in a complex situation. Schools were trying to adapt new pedagogies while shifting to online modes and settling to online platforms, when they did not have the knowledge to do so. Support and training for educators and SLT were not forthcoming, not to mention the difficult management of the pandemic. The onus of managing the pandemic was completely on the schools. Rather than being considered as partners in the learning process, sharing tasks and responsibilities with educators (Epstein, Sanders, Simons, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis 2002), parents had to survive on their own. Some found support from each other, while others found support from teachers; however, the type and extent of support varied from school to school. As schools were left on their own to deal with the pandemic, there were a lot of differences in the provision; some were more able to adapt to online learning than others, while some provided more support to others. This chaotic situation highlights the importance for schools to keep close contact with parents, acknowledge and address their concerns, and actively involve and engage them in the educational process of their children (Wilder, 2013; Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu & Yuan, 2016). Involving parents within a family-school partnership (Fox & Olsen, 2014) will promote learning and the development of social and emotional skills, well being and mental health of children (Smit & Driessen, 2009). Conversely, school closures brought new affordances of digital literacy for children and their parents. Parents had to learn new skills in order to be able to help their children access online platforms and other resources in order to learn. It was evident that by Run 2, educators and parents were more knowledgeable and confident in the use of online platforms and digital technologies, which facilitated communication between the two, and were more able at supporting children in the learning process. Positive participation and support from parents translated itself in children progressing better than others (Napier, 2021, as cited by Berger, 2021).



The pandemic experience and the quick shift to online modes, made educators aware of the value and use of technology, to connect people and to foster and communicate knowledge. This ties to Siemens's (2004), theory of connectivism, which recognises technology as a medium of learning. Defining connectivism as "a learning theory for the digital age" Siemens (2004), concedes that the use of new (digital) learning tools and an online environment impact the learning process. Therefore, as has been argued above, educators need to have the skills, be up-to-date with the latest digital programmes and technologies, and develop a pedagogy that embraces digital modes of learning that are necessary in a digital era.

6.3 Well-being and relationships

6.3.1 The positive and challenging aspects of the pandemic on the well-being of children and families

One of the aims of this report was to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on the well-being of children and families. Cefai et al., (2021) claim that the pandemic had the "best and worst parts" (p. 18) on the well-being of children and families. In line with their findings, this study shows that the majority of parents perceived the lockdown from a positive way, in that they enjoyed a less stressful life to get their children ready for school early, not having to commute daily to and from school and not worrying with whom to leave the children if they are sick. They also appreciated more family time, getting to know their children's educator, helping their children with their homework, and being more productive as they had more time on their hands. Moreover, most parents felt confident in supporting their children through online modes, while the majority also confirmed that their children were satisfied with this mode of learning.

Conversely, and again in line with Cefai et al., (2021), parents also faced some challenges during the pandemic. Identifying a quiet space in the home for all children, managing homeschooling and all the work sent at home caused stress and anxiety to parents, even more so, for those who had more than one child and who also had to juggle with work responsibilities. Moreover, some parents were genuinely afraid of the virus, which caused additional stress on them. Especially in the second lockdown, parents clearly communicated that they felt overwhelmed, overburdened as well as psychologically anxious and pressured to keep up with things, and establish a balance between helping their children with their online learning, meeting their work responsibilities and taking care of their family, while staying all the time at home. Simultaneously, they also missed interacting face-to-face with family and friends; a finding also was supported by the Eurochild (2020) report for Malta which similarly reported that during the pandemic Maltese children claimed that they felt isolated and missed their friends, as well as their educators and extended family members, creating even more stress for children and parents alike. These results show that some parents lacked the ability to deal with stress, anxiety and fluidity.

Brown, Doom, Lechuga-Peña, Watamura and Koppels (2020), and Lawrence and Fakuade (2021) claim that while older students may have been able to adapt and learn independently without parental support, young children needed constant help from their parents, which in turn, turned out to be very stressful. A study by Garbe et al., (2020) came up with similar findings. They reported that parents experienced difficulties with balancing responsibilities, learning to access online platforms, keeping their children motivated, making sure that their children are keeping up with the work assigned. A study by Lau and Lee, (2021) concluded that children experienced difficulties with distance learning as they were not motivated enough to pay attention and were not independent enough to learn on their own. They also reported a lack of space at home, and a lack of an adequate area for learning as well as home distractions; none of which facilitated learning. These findings echo those from this study which confirm that the lack of physical space and movement within the home, the distractions at home did not help with the learning process and frequently resulted in learning loss. In fact, many parents in this study communicated this concern, that their children could experience learning loss as a result of their inability to help them in accessing online resources and in explaining the content well; a finding also indicated by other research (Bhamani et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2021a; Vuorikari et al., 2020).

6.3.2 Missing others in isolation: the development of relationships during the pandemic

Another aspect under discussion, which has already been mentioned above is that some parents and children missed not being able to meet and interact with their extended families during the pandemic. Moreover, children seriously missed not interacting socially with others especially playing with their peers; a finding also supported by Cefai et al., (2021). This was one of the main concerns voiced by the parents of this study, especially during the second lockdown. While interacting with others virtually was beneficial for some children, for most, it did not prove to be enough. It fell short of providing authentic interactions where distance proved to be a real barrier. This shows that online modes of interaction had a negative impact on relationships. Moreover, a study by Azmat and

Ahmad (2022), shows that lack of social interaction affected children's level of satisfaction, can create psychological issues such as depression, fear of loneliness, and boredom, and can also hinder the learning process and prevent learners from being successful learners; negative affects which were also noticed by the parents of this study.

Findings from this study also show that the majority of parents appreciated that during the pandemic they managed to build a closer relationship with their children, a finding supported by Novianti and Garzia (2020). Conversely, while some parents acknowledged that online learning facilitated the development of new interactions that allowed them to bond more with educators and develop a relationship with them, others claimed that they struggled to do so, even more so when the educator's presence online was not consistent. Some parents felt isolated and abandoned by the system, annihilating any motivation they and their children had towards learning. However, one must point out that educators in Research Report 2 of this Cov-EM study (Bonello et al., 2022), complained that at times they found it difficult to reach out to some of the parents and develop relationships with them because they were not available either because they did not have a digital device available, were not able to cope with various responsibilities bestowed on them, or being online proved to be overwhelming to them due to lack of digital literacy. Evidence from this study supports and confirms other research (Kwatubana and Thabo, 2015), which states that partnering with parents and involving them in their children's education, creates opportunities for interaction which in turn, enhances the children's education performance and their overall well-being.

6.3.3 The need for an adequate mental health provision

As argued above, and as supported by Alharthi, (2022), the COVID-19 pandemic limited the children's social interaction and confined them to the indoors. Findings from this study also indicated that the shift to online learning, and hence the postponement of face-to-face learning affected the children's social development; a finding also supported by Alharthi (2022). Moreover, the lack of routine and structure made things more difficult for most children to cope (Eurochild, 2020). This impacted the children's health and mental well-being, with some, experiencing anxiety, stress, tension, loneliness, and depression, which according to Camilleri (as cited in The Malta Independent, 2021) and Unicef (2021a), were externalised through difficult behaviours such as anger, fear, and concern. This study shows that in Run 2 and therefore, in the second lockdown, children missed their friends more and they were more stressed than the first lockdown. To an extent, this is supported by Cefai et al., (2021) who report, that in the first lockdown, most of the children coped well with the challenges posed by the locked and enjoyed positive mental health. However, even in the first lockdown they claim that some children were exhibiting difficulties in their well-being.

Parents also communicated that they felt overworked, stressed, overwhelmed, and communicated negative feelings towards their work. Moreover, confinement measures limited parents and children even more by having to live in overcrowded homes for a long time, which likely had serious implications for the mental health of children and their parents (UNESCO 2020a). Fears of the virus, worry and concern, and the fluidity of the situation, created even more stress to parents. This was heightened in the second Run, when parents began to feel tired from the pandemic. Poor mental health became an issue, where adults, children and educators worldwide were faced with a mental health crisis (American Psychological Association, 2022). Acknowledging that stressful or traumatic experiences can create a greater risk for poor mental health, the Minister of Health (n.d.) issued a health promotion document to help people take care of their mental health during the pandemic.

While one-third of the parents of the study claimed that their children's mental well-being was taken into consideration by their educators, others complained that schools were more focused on the teaching and learning process, and on passing content knowledge to children rather than meeting their holistic needs, including their mental well-being. In fact, some parents complained that soft subjects such as the arts, physical education, drama, and music, amongst others were sidelined by educators during the pandemic, when children needed them most. The American Psychological Association (2022), suggests that not only soft skills should not be sidelined but social and emotional learning and trauma-prevention practices should be integrated with the curriculum. As Theberath, Bauer, Chen, Salinas, Mohabbat, Yang, Chon, Bauer and Wahner-Roedler, (2022) state, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of children is multifaceted and considerable.



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.

7.1 Recommendations

This study has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on young children aged 0 – 11 years, as well as their parents 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 an equitable education to all children to ensure quality provision in the early and primary years in normal times.

- Findings from this study show that there was inequality of provision across the early and primary years during school closures. Schools should get equitable resources and training in digital skills throughout the year. Schools which are struggling and which have concentrate of children who come from disadvantaged households should be “target(ed) extra resources (and) increase teachers’ capacity to detect students’ needs and manage diverse classrooms” (Borg, p. 14). Moreover, there should be increased training, continuous professional development and support for all educators in all the three sectors of the state, church and independent, that will provide educators with the necessary skills and confidence not only to use online platforms, but to also develop an offline and online pedagogies that engage children and meet their holistic development.
- Some educators found it very challenging to adopt and implement an emergent approach (early years) or an active pedagogy (primary) online. Educators should be constantly provided with the necessary training that will not only help them implement the emergent curriculum or an active pedagogy in class but also, to be able to do so remotely. Educators across board need to ensure that children are provided with activities that are more hands-on, age-appropriate and based on authentic experiences. Moreover, considering that we are still in the process of curriculum reform, an ongoing dialogue between educators, parents, policy-makers and other professionals in the field should be regularly held to discuss the implementation of an emergent and/or an active pedagogy, how this can be implemented in practice and how can parents ensure continuity with the home. This could be empowered through a shared understanding of the curriculum and collaboration between the respective stakeholders.
- Parents were in agreement that the passivity of online learning, that of sitting in front of a screen for a long time without authentic interaction, is not adequate for children, especially young ones. Thus, online and remote learning should be used the least time possible and only if and as necessary with young children. Most parents complained that online learning was not engaging enough for children. Thus online learning should be used the least time possible and only if and as necessary with young children.

- One of the main concerns of parents during school closure was the lack of social interaction their children had with their peers. Provisions for children to meet their friends remotely in a social way should have been made. Beyond the pandemic, educators should remember the importance of play for children and for them to socially interact with their peers, and provide them with more time and space to play with each other in order to make up for the play lost during the pandemic. Moreover, play-based activities and experiences should be introduced in schools as well as in after school programmes, with immediate affect. Besides, it being the right of every child (United Nations, 1989), play provides a number of benefits for children to help with the development of their physical and cognitive development, dexterity, imagination, and emotional strength as well as the development of the brain (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000); development which was hampered during the pandemic.
- The pandemic created new injustices that impacted children and their learning. Some children had good support systems within their families, while others did not and they simply disappeared and never accessed online means of learning. More effort should have been made to reach out to these children, who were listed on school lists. These children should have been contacted and provided with adequate online support, while ensuring that they had basic care. Educators need to be trained in being sensitive to family issues and their socio-economic and cultural background, in order to understand them and meet their needs better.
- The majority of parents felt that a lot of responsibility was shifted from schools onto them during the pandemic, making them feel overwhelmed and helpless because they lacked the skills to help their children. Therefore, parents should be provided with adequate training in content knowledge to be in-tune with what their children are learning at school, and able to successfully support them.
- COVID-19 highlighted the pre-existing digital divide between those who could afford to buy technological equipment and a good internet connection and those who could not. While the Ministry for Education provided tablets and internet access services to vulnerable children (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020), this, evidently, was not enough. In today's digital era, the "definition of literacy has widened and progressed" (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014, p. 18) to include digital literacy. Therefore, schools should provide training for those parents who lack basic literacy skills in order to be able for them to navigate the internet, communicate with educators, participate in society and employment, as a source of personal enrichment (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014) and to be able to support their children. This is supported by the *National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo, 2014-2019* (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014, p.55) which recommends that, "strong home-school links are established so that children are supported in their use of digital literacy for educational purposes". School leaders together with policy makers and other involved stakeholders, should ensure that all learners have access to their right to education by providing those children who come from deprived homes, with the necessary and suitable technology and/or internet connection through financial aid in order to keep up with such expenses. Moreover, these children and their parents should be supported with the necessary training and technical support to be able to access and use online platforms.
- Findings from this study show that in the main, parents would like to be involved more in the education of their children. As Hart (1992) suggests, listening to parents, having them as partners and active participants in the learning process, results in more engaged children and hence, in more learning. Therefore, schools should prioritise and develop a shared partnership with parents by actively involving and engaging them in the learning process. On the other hand, parents should be willing to take more lead in the teaching-learning process and support their children as necessary.
- Support should be provided to (mainly primary school) children who may have suffered learning losses during the pandemic for example, due to lack of access, by providing recovery programmes and support systems to help them overcome these limitations.
- The pandemic also brought to the surface the need to take mental health seriously. The Ministry for Education together with the Ministry for Health, should ensure quality mental health provision even beyond the pandemic. This could be done through several incentives:
 - Create mental health awareness and develop education programmes that will help children, their parents and educators, become aware of their mental health needs, enhance their social and emotional skills, learn how to destress, and teach them how to become more resilient;
 - Recruiting more mental health workers including counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists in schools to provide children and their parents with the needed emotional and psychological support;

- Train teachers and parents to identify mental healthy symptoms, including signs of stress and anxiety, and be able to refer children to mental health workers when needed.

7.2 Concluding thoughts

This study set out to explore the perspectives of parents about the affects of COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed, on their children's learning experiences, learning spaces and well-being and relationships over two academic years. While the shift from face-to-face teaching to online modes, began as “emergency education” (Napier, as cited in Berger, 2021) in Survey 1, this shifted to, “education in times of an emergency” in Survey 2. Most parents tried to meet the challenges COVID-19 brought with it. The results showed that parents around the country experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways: some in very positive ways; others much less so. Most parents juggled between work, simultaneously supporting their children in their learning experiences, and providing for their families. While some parents felt inadequate to help their children with their online learning experiences, others did their utmost to support their children. Findings from the study show that the majority of parents learned new digital skills and how to maneuver their way around new software and online platforms, as well as content knowledge. The pandemic taught us that for remote learning to be effective, it necessitates three critical components: “effective teachers, suitable technology and engaged learners” (World Bank Group, 2021, p. 4), key elements that are crucial for learning in the current digital era. Beyond the pandemic, we should not forget the challenges of the pandemic and the lessons it has taught us. Moreover, we need to ensure that those skills, attitudes and competencies that were learned by parents and children are retained through training, shared thinking and reflection.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Respondent Demographics

Variable/Characteristic	Survey 1 2020 (N=815)	Survey 2 2021 (N=411)
	% (n)	% (n)
Gender		
Female	95.1 (755)	88.6 (364)
Male	4.5 (37)	11.4 (47)
Other	0.4 (3)	0
Age range in years		
Under 18	0	1.7 (7)
18–24	3.2 (26)	1 (4)
25–34	42.2 (339)	23.8 (98)
35–44	48.9 (393)	60.6 (249)
45–54	5.4 (43)	12.7 (52)
55–64	0.2 (2)	0
65+	0	0.2 (1)
Missing data	1.5 (12)	0
Region/Location of residence		
Southern Harbour, Malta	17.4 (139)	14.4 (59)
Northern Harbour, Malta	24. (195)	30.9 (127)
South Eastern Malta	19.4 (155)	13.4 (55)
Western Malta	15.9 (127)	24.6 (101)
Northern Malta	17 (136)	14.8 (61)
Gozo	2.9 (23)	1.7 (7)
Other	0	0.2 (1)
Missing data	3 (23)	0
Nationality		
Maltese	96.2 (782)	85.6 (352)
Other	3.8 (31)	14.4 (59)
Missing data	0.2 (2)	0
Role in education		
Parent of a child in Primary School	67.6% (551)	64.2% (264)
Parent of a child in Kindergarten	24.9% (203)	35.8% (147)
Parent of a child in Childcare	7.5% (61)	0%
Highest level of education		
Primary Level	2 (16)	1 (4)
Secondary Level	24 (191)	25.3 (104)
Vocational Qualifications	22.8 (181)	8.5 (35)

Bachelor's Degree	22 (175)	25.1 (103)
Post-graduate degree	29.2 (232)	40.1 (165)
Missing data	2.5 (20)	0
Type of residence		
Maisonette	26.4 (209)	0
Flat/apartment	41.4 (328)	0
Terraced house	22.1 (175)	0
Semi-detached Villa/house	3.4 (27)	0
Detached Villa/House	1 (8)	0
Other	5.7 (45)	0
Missing data	2.8 (23)	0
Type of educational setting child/ren attend		
Church School/childcare	40.3 (310)	10.7 (44)
State School/childcare	39.7 (306)	46.5 (191)
Independent School/childcare	13.8 (106)	49.1 (202)
Private Childcare	6.2 (48)	0
Missing data	5.5 (45)	0
Level of education child/ren are in		
Childcare	15.3 (118)	10.5 (43)
Kindergarten	34.6 (267)	39.9 (164)
Year 1/2/3	40.1 (309)	41.4 (170)
Year 4/5/6	37.7 (291)	33.3 (137)
Secondary school	14.8 (114)	9.2 (38)
Post-secondary school	2.9 (22)	1 (4)
Other	1.9 (15)	1 (4)
Missing data	5.4 (44)	0
Child/ren usually require/s the assistance of an LSE		
No LSE	84.6 (637)	86.4 (355)
Shared LSE	8.2 (62)	5.8 (24)
One-to-one LSE	4.2 (32)	5.6 (23)
Complementary Teacher	2.9 (22)	2.2 (9)
Missing data	7.6 (62)	0
Work of parent		
Full-time basis	55.8 (433)	0
Part-time basis	18.4 (143)	0
Full-time parent	14.7 (114)	0
Currently unemployed	5.9 (46)	0
Self-employed	5.2 (40)	0
Missing data	4.8 (39)	0
Work of parent		
Working from home on a full-time basis	35.1 (272)	19.5 (80)
Full-time parent	26.2 (203)	22.9 (94)
Working from home on reduced hours	18.4 (143)	18 (74)
Working outside home on a full-time basis	10.4 (81)	26 (107)
Working outside home on a part-time basis	5 (39)	10.7 (44)
Unemployed	3.7 (29)	1.9 (8)
Lost my job due to COVID-19	1.2 (9)	1 (4)
Missing data	4.8 (39)	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; Ғaž-Żabbar; Kalkara; Marsa; Paola; Santa Luċija; Senglea; Ғal Tarxien; Valletta; Vittoriosa; Xgħajra.

2. Northern Harbour

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

3. South Eastern

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

4. Western

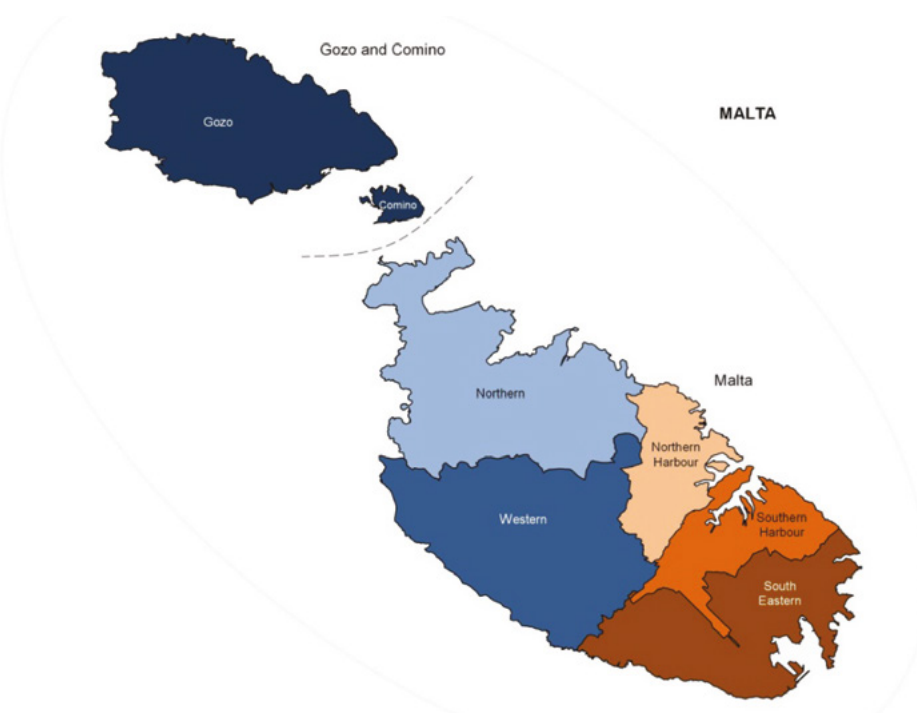
Ғad-Dingli; Ғal Balzan; Ғal Lija; ҒAttard; Ғaž-Żebbuġ; Iklin; Mdina; Mtarfa; Rabat; Siġġiewi.

5. Northern

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

6. Gozo & Comino

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



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







L-Università ta' Malta
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Early Childhood &
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RESEARCH GROUP

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