How COVID-19 made inequalities visible: A chronicle of parental struggles in securing educational support and opportunities for children amid a pandemic

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the educational inequalities heightened by the pandemic, as experienced by children aged 0 – 11 years from their parents' perspective within their homes. Two online questionnaires were held that addressed the shift to remote teaching during school closure in Malta. Findings show that the parents' level of education, their financial ability, and the time they could dedicate to assisting their children, affected the children's learning opportunities. The study recommends the need for policymakers to address the still-existing digital, social and economic inequities to continue working towards a socially just education system post-pandemic.

Keywords: inequalities, pandemic, perspectives, parents

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Introduction

In March 2020, responding to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Maltese government, following a trend observed in various nations worldwide (Beckova, et al., 2021), mandated the closure of educational institutions. This necessitated educators to swiftly adapt their teaching methodologies to online formats, prioritising the safety of educators, students, and their families while ensuring continuous educational provision (World Bank Group, 2020). Notably, all educational institutions in Malta, from childcare facilities to higher education institutions experienced two distinct closures throughout the pandemic: the first school lockdown transpired between March and June 2020, followed by a second lockdown between March and April 2021 (Bartolo, et al., 2022; Cefai, et al., 2021; Public Health Act, Cap. 465, L.N. 97, 2021).

School closures prompted unanticipated changes and adaptations in the teaching and learning processes. While schools were expected to shift teaching to online modes, not all schools and teachers were adequately equipped, had the requisite skills, or were willing to facilitate this abrupt transition, particularly in the first school lockdown. Families sought to follow the lead of the schools and tried to adapt to the situation with those who could afford it, creating study areas in their homes for their children, buying technological equipment, and familiarising themselves with online platforms; however, not all parents were able to do so. In contrast, the second lockdown, which occurred precisely a year later, witnessed better preparation. Educators and families were more informed about the expectations placed upon them, and had more skills, strategies, and technological devices for effective online instructions, thereby facilitating a smoother transition to online modes.

The sudden transitions to remote modes of teaching and learning during the pandemic introduced many challenges and inequities in the education system and families. Some schools struggled to maintain consistent and high-quality online learning experiences (Borg, 2022a) primarily due to certain teachers lacking proficiency in the use of digital technology. Additionally, the lack of technical support from schools to educators and parents who lacked the necessary technological skills, coupled with a lack of communication, further exacerbated the difficulties. Moreover, inequalities arose from variations in the social and cultural background of families, socioeconomic disparities, limited access to digital equipment, and the lower educational levels of some parents (Bol, 2020), which included deficiencies in literacy and digital literacy skills (Haelermans, et al., 2022). Consequently, the pandemic amplified the pre-

existing "socio-scholastic gap" (Borg, 2022a, p. 4), exposing significant disparities in digital literacy among teachers, students, and parents (Human Rights Watch, 2021). These inequalities were "reproduced, extended and legitimized" (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, p. 1) while "rationing education" (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, p. 1). As a result, school closures led to social disruption, educational losses, setbacks, and distress (Haelermans et al., 2022) for children in Malta (Farrugia, 2021), and worldwide (see for example, Blainey, et al., 2020; Pier, et al., 2021; Skar et al., 2021).

In a previous paper (Deguara, et al., 2023), we discussed the different levels of responsiveness, support and quality education provided by the different school sectors during the pandemic, and as a result, the educational inequalities experienced by children and their parents. This paper aims to bring to the fore the perspective of parents[1] by exploring the struggles and challenges they had to overcome within their homes, and the invisible inequalities they and their children experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of the parents' level of education, their financial ability, and the time they could dedicate to assisting their children. The focus is on addressing these inequalities to foster more equitable educational opportunities for all learners. The selected data forms part of a larger study by the same authors (Deguara, et al., 2022).

Educational inequality

Every child should have equal access to quality education, irrespective of their gender, race, or socio-economic background (OECD, 2017). However, education systems often exhibit high levels of selectivity, discrimination, and divisiveness, resulting in disparities and inequalities within schools. These inequities manifest in variations in the quality of educational institutions, unequal provision, discrepancies in the effectiveness of educators, differences in available technology, and disparities in the economic and social standing of families or society. Acknowledging the educational gaps between social groups, Gillborn and Mirza (2000) contend that educational inequality begets disparities and inequality in educational attainment, placing students from low socio-economic backgrounds at risk of underachievement.

Examining four different facets of educational inequality, Gillborn and Youdell (2000, p. 1) propose four corresponding descriptions. These include "inequality of access or provision" wherein access to education is restricted based on factors like gender, religion or specific social or ethnic groups; "inequality of

circumstance" which limits participation due to lack of resources, making it difficult for those in poverty to afford the necessary materials; "inequity of participation" driven by biased curricula, such as prejudiced examinations; and "inequity of outcome" which concerns the result of educational processes. The uneven distribution of schooling heightens the likelihood of children not succeeding in education.

Blanden, et al., (2022) and Yilmazince, et al., (2022) argue that greater inequality in educational opportunities may lead to disparate learning possibilities, contributing to a broader academic achievement gap between children from higher and lower socio-economic backgrounds. As highlighted by Bruckauf and Chzhen (2016), this frequently culminates in inequitable educational outcomes. Consequently, educational inequality often manifests in children from disadvantaged families, placing them at an academic and learning disadvantage, resulting in a loss of learning and a lack of skills (Bruckauf & Chzhen, 2016). This, in turn, exacerbates existing economic inequalities and diminishes social mobility (Bladen et al., 2022). Conversely, Gillborn (2001 p. 109) hold that achieving "equity of outcome" leads to more "equality of attainment" (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000, p. 11) for children.

Intensified educational inequalities

During the COVID-19 pandemic, inequality of circumstance (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000), specifically digital inequalities, intensified due to limited access to digital equipment or poor connectivity. This predominantly impacted children in low and middle-income countries residing in both urban and rural areas, as well as those who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Henderson, et al., 2022a; Murat & Luca, 2020; Srinivasan, et al., 2021). Furthermore, Darmody, et al., (2021) contend that affluent families, particularly those with at least one parent possessing a higher level of education, were more likely to receive support from schools. These parents dedicated more daily hours to home learning with their children (Darmody et al., 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021), thereby intensifying educational inequalities between families with educated parents and those with parents of lower educational attainment.

Sefton-Green (UNESCO, 2020a) asserts that the pandemic has laid bare numerous educational inequalities that societies had previously sought to conceal and ignore. The shift to online modes of teaching and learning during the pandemic underscored the inequalities in access (UNESCO, 2020c) to

digital equipment and strong internet connectivity, as well as inequalities between various school systems and their capacity to transition to online modes swiftly and seamlessly. This, as noted by Azevedo, et al., (2022), not only resulted in "inequalities of attainment", leading to diminished academic achievement and "'lifelong' learning losses" (Thorn & Vincent-Lancrin, 2022, p. 400), but also heightened levels of learning inequalities that scrutinise and challenge the roles of both school and family in ensuring equality. The pandemic and the subsequent school closures have intensified inequality both within and across schools (Soudien, et al., 2022).

While the primary goal of education is to ensure equal opportunities for all children, the effectiveness of learning depends on the resources, contributions, motivation, efficacy, and abilities of the school, the family, and the child. Disparities in the availability of these factors can lead to "educational inequalities" and "inequality of attainment" as emphasised by Bormann, et al., (2021, p. 617), who underscore the pivotal role of the socio-economic and educational background of families in the learning and development of children. Research findings (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020; Pensiero, et al., 2020) claim that children from high socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to excel academically and navigate new situations adeptly, such as those arising during the pandemic.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent global closure of schools, the role of parents in supporting their children's learning became more pronounced (Brossard, et al., 2020). Unexpectedly, parents found themselves not only responsible for their children's round-the-clock care and recreational needs but also adapting to remote work while undertaking "key pedagogical roles" (O'Connor, et al., 2021, p. 1), to support their children's learning. This created unprecedented challenges, particularly for parents working from home, those with multiple children, and those with lower levels of education (Parker & Alfaro, 2021). Several factors further exacerbated inequalities, including differences in students' opportunities to learn at home, such as the educational level of parents, the difference in the infrastructure and the availability of technological equipment, and disparities in digital literacy among students and their parents (Özer & Suna, 2020). Consequently, to proactively address future challenges, governments should implement education policies that support school leaders and teachers in providing equitable opportunities for all learners. Additionally, targeted assistance should be extended to families, especially those from disadvantaged groups,

to facilitate access to education at home through stronger internet connectivity, the provision of technological equipment, and other essential learning resources (Azvedo, et al., 2022).

Turning the home into a school: Acquiring digital devices and creating learning spaces at home

At the onset of the school lockdown, parents faced the challenge of equipping their children with the necessary digital equipment and securing reliable internet connection as well as create a conducive learning space for their children to enable online learning from the confines of their home (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021). This demand posed great difficulties for lower-income families, lacking the financial means to purchase adequate technological equipment and internet access for their children, thereby, highlighting disparities in accessibility (Andrew, et al., 2020; Beckova et al., 2021; Bol, 2020; Brossard et al., 2020; Garbe, et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). Some students had to study in crowded dwellings where parents and children were working or studying simultaneously sharing technological devices among family members (World Bank Group, 2020). Furthermore, certain children experienced "digital poverty" (Barrantes Cáceres, 2007, p. 1), lacking access to digital equipment and/or strong internet connectivity. This situation was exacerbated when both parents and children lacked digital literacy. Inability to access the school's online platform, resulted in these children being marginalised from the educational system (Parker & Alfaro, 2021), placing them at an immediate disadvantage. This gave rise to substantial social, emotional, and economic implications and burdens with long-lasting effects on parents and children alike (Grech & Bartolo, 2020; UNESCO, 2020a), contributing to the persistence of "digital inequalities" (UNICEF, 2022. p. 3) among children from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in a consistent and systematic manner.

The social and economic circumstances of families played a pivotal role in influencing children's engagement and learning during remote online teaching (Daniela, et al., 2021), leading to a notable disparity between children from different social backgrounds (Bonal & González, 2020). The OECD Policy Response to Coronavirus (COVID-19) (2020), and the World Bank Group (2021) reports, both asserted that, across almost all countries, students from low socio-economic backgrounds had less access to and utilised digital equipment to a lesser extent compared to their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, who enjoyed greared access to technological resources and, consequently,

more frequence use of online platforms (Andrew et al., 2020). Additional studies (Bol, 2020; Darmody et al., 2021; Munir, 2021) further affirm that insufficient support from families and unequal access to online platforms and resources within households contributed to disparities and inequalities between countries and families, which became particularly pronounced during the lockdown. For many parents from low socio-economic backgrounds, grappling with remote work challenges or even experiencing loss of income, the rapid shift to digital learning accentuated pre-existing digital inequalities (UNICEF, 2022). These disparities were reflected in significant learning loss (Darmody et al., 2021; Engzell, Frey & Venhagen, 2021; Skar et al., 2021), and increased stress and anxiety levels in both children and their families (Jiao, et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2022).

Parents' level of education and their influence on children's learning

The parents' level of education is a key predictor of their children's learning and academic achievement (Davis-Kean, 2005; Dubow, Boxer & Huesmann, 2009; Kalil, Ryan & Corey, 2012; Marangu, et al., 2002). Kalil et al., (2012) state that college-educated parents tend to support their children's education more and involve themselves more in the children's activities at home when compared to parents with less educational qualifications (Guryan, et al., 2008), which positively affects their children's attainment (Idris, Hussain &Ahmad, 2020). Moreover, parents with a higher level of education have more skills, are frequently more digitally literate and therefore, may find it easier to adapt to new technologies and be better able to guide and support their children for academic success (Davis-Kean, 2005; OECD, 2022). Better-educated parents are also more able to support their children with their schoolwork and provide an enabling home environment, when compared to uneducated parents (Bonal & González, 2020; Idris, et al., 2020). A study conducted by Domina et al., (2021), shows that highly educated parents logged-on for remote instruction more often, and were more able to support their children in successfully submitting their work online. Findings from a study by Andrew et al., (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 that 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 (2020c), 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.

Parental support has always been considered a crucial and contributing factor to sustaining better learning outcomes for children (Hendersen & Mapp, 2002; Woofter, 2019; Novianti & Garzia, 2020); with remote online learning, such support became even more crucial as children did not have the guidance of their teachers. Some parents found it difficult to understand the new role they had to take, and while some lacked the confidence to support their children, others lacked the knowledge, or technological skills (Garbe, et al., 2020). Moreover, some parents found it challenging to balance work and home life while supporting their children's educational and emotional needs (O'Connor et al., 2021). Nonetheless, studies (see for example, Cachia, et al., 2021; Garbe et al., 2020; Hafidz, et al., 2020; Novianti & Garzia, 2020) show that most parents spent an average of two to three hours daily helping, explaining, and supporting their children with their schoolwork.

The guiding theoretical principles

This study is anchored in four prominent theories: Bronfenbrenner's (1978) ecological theory, Siemens' (2005; 2008) connectivism theory, Bourdieu's (1990) capital theory and Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) theory of equality.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory elucidates the instructional transformations experienced by students, parents and teachers within their micro and mesosystems during the "ecological transition" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 6) induced by the global COVID-19 pandemic, within the context of their chronosystem. This transition entailed a shift from traditional face-to-face teaching (the child's mesosystem) to online modes, blurring the lines between the school (the child's mesosystem) and the home (the child's microsystem).

Siemens' (2005, p. 1) connectivism theory, characterised as "a learning theory for the digital age" offers a conceptual framework for leveraging new technologies in virtual learning environments. As the pandemic prompted a rapid transformation into online teaching, this theory underscores the need for

both teachers and students to adapt swiftly to new online learning modes, and navigate diverse online platforms, while personalising learning experiences in virtual spaces (Korkmaz & Torman, 2020).

Bourdieu's (1990) capital theory underscores the relevance of both economic (economic resources) and cultural capital (the possession of knowledge and skills) in the learning process. Economic background played a pivotal role during the pandemic, with parents possessing the means to provide technolgical equipment and ensure reliable connectivity, facilitating access to learning. Additionally, those parents with a rich cultural capital, who had the knowledge and the digital skills, provided comprehensive support for their children's educational pursuits.

Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) theory of equality emphasises the importance of fostering an equitable educational system. This theory advocates for a fair distribution of time and resources to enhance teaching and learning, addressing inequalities within schools through effective educators, resource availability and support for vulnerable families.

Informed by this theoretical framework, the primary aim of this study is to investigate the inequalities experienced by children aged 0 – 11 years[2] in their homes, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this study seeks to present the perspectives of parents on any encountered inequalities by addressing the main research question: *What were the inequalities children, and their parents experienced in their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Methods and methodology

The data for this study were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malta. An online, self-administered survey was chosen as the data collection tool, as it was considered safe and efficient during a period when human contact was limited, if not prohibited.

The study was conducted in two phases. Survey 1, conducted in September 2020, focused on experiences during the first school lockdown in Malta, which lasted 15 weeks, from March to June 2020. Survey 2 conducted a year later, in September 2021, explored the children's experiences during the second school lockdown, which occurred between March and April 2021 and lasted 2 weeks. Targeting parents of children aged 0 – 11 years, the surveys were disseminated through various social media platforms.

The survey primarily consisted of multiple-choice items on a 5-point Likert scale, complemented by open-ended questions to solicit deeper insights. For this paper, six closed questions and two open-ended ones from each survey were selected based on their relevance to the research question. Survey 1 garnered a total of 815 responses, whereas Survey 2 received 411 responses. In both surveys, the majority of participants were Maltese females aged 35 to 44 years. In Survey 1 50% of the parents reported having attained tertiary level education, predominantly at either an undergraduate or a postgraduate level compared to 65% in Survey 2. Additionally, in Survey 1, 40% of the parents sent their children to state schools, 40% to church schools and 20% to independent schools.

The six close-ended questions addressed key aspects such as the parents' educational level, the availability of dedicated physical space at homes for online learning, accessibility of technological equipment, perceived capability in supporting children's online learning, nature, and frequency of parental support in teaching and learning, and challenges faced during remote learning. These challenges included issues related to physical space at home, balancing home-work-school dynamics, and adapting to sudden changes. The two open-ended questions sought comments on organising a learning space at home and invited parents to share additional remarks.

A limitation of the study is the exclusion of parents who were either illiterate, digitally illiterate, lacked access to technological equipment or adequate internet connectivity, or did not use social media, as they were unable to participate in the online survyes. Ethical clearance was obtained from relevant research ethics committees, and participant anonymity was rigorously maintained throughout the entire research process, including data collection, analysis and the reporting stages.

Results

Results from both surveys show that educational inequalities as experienced in the children's homes, were exacerbated during the pandemic in Malta. Findings show that the socio-economic background of parents, as well as their level of education, and the level of support they could provide their children with, contributed towards a negative educational predicament and the widening of educational inequalities.

Parental support and its effect on online teaching and learning

The socio-economic background of parents affects the children's level of academic attainment (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020; Pensiero et al., 2020). The lack of space within the home, the lack of technological equipment, or the parents' inability to support their children during remote teaching, affected the children's learning process, with some experiencing learning loss (Darmody et al., 2021; Engzell, et al., 2021; Skar et al., 2021). Most parents (55.5%) claimed that their children shared a designated learning space either with a sibling or a parent working from home. In the open-ended replies, seven parents identified the kitchen as the child's learning space, another three parents, the living room, while six other parents identified an allocated study room with one parent-teacher specifying that, "We transformed our office room into a classroom from where I taught my students, and my son followed online lessons." Four other parents commented on the lack of space within the home for their children to follow online learning comfortably, simultaneously and without distractions. Only 7.5% of the parents claimed that their child/ren had a personal learning space with a desk in their bedroom, where the child could follow online lessons or activities on his/her own and without distractions. Contrastingly, 37% of parents claimed that their child did not have a specific space from where to follow remote learning.

The availability of technological equipment is crucial for access to online learning. Figure 1 shows that the majority of children had access to a technological device that enabled them to follow online teaching. The largest number of respondents in both surveys (69% and 54.8% respectively), stated that they only had access to a shared technological device. The percentage of children sharing a technological device decreased by 14.2% from 2020 (69%) to 2021 (54.8%), indicating that those parents who could afford it, might have invested in buying new technological equipment for their children. In support of this, the percentage of children who could make use of a personal laptop between 2020 and 2021 increased, from 20.6% in 2020 to 28.9% in 2021. Contrastingly, while 23.4% of the parents stated that their children used the tablet provided by the government through the One Tablet per Child (OTPC) scheme (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2016), the percentage decreased to 21.2% in 2021. Moreover, the use of a personal desktop (6.3% in 2020; 5.8% in 2021) and the use of a mobile device (15.9% in 2020; 15.4% in 2021) also decreased slightly. On the other hand, it is noteworthy to point out that the percentage of children who did not have access to a

technological device increased slightly from 2.8% in 2020 to 3.7% in 2021. While this percentage is relatively low, it indicates that there were children who could not access remote teaching due to a lack of access to technology. Moreover, while the great majority of the parents claimed that their children had access to shared technological equipment, at times, some children might not have been able to access online lessons as the same device was being used by other family members.
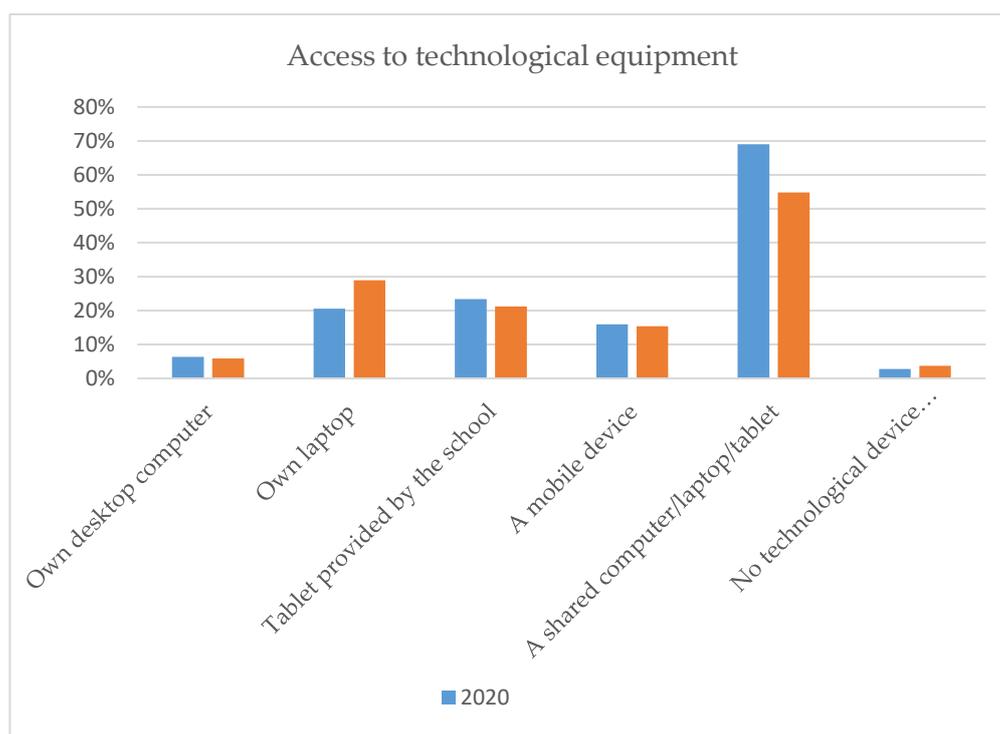

Figure 1: Access to technological equipment

The need to invest in technological equipment was reiterated by a number of parents in the open-ended answers, with four parents suggesting that their children should have been provided with adequate digital tools while another parent suggested that the government should subside the buying of technological equipment for children who come from low socio-economic backgrounds. Another parent claimed that the government should fund laptops for education purposes, as, "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." Conversely, a parent claimed that school closure was devastating for her child as they did not have the means to buy him/her a laptop, resulting in the child not being able to follow online

teaching. These anecdotes amplify and confirm the existing digital divide in homes: those who could afford or could not afford to buy digital equipment.

As argued above, research (see for example, Davis-Kean, 2005; Dubow, et al., 2009; Guryan, et al., 2008) shows that educated parents tend to support their children's education more because they are more skilful and knowledgeable to do so, resulting in academic achievement for children. Results from Survey 1 show that the majority of parents felt capable of using online modes. Figure 2 below shows that 73.8% (30.5% a lot and 43.3% quite) of the parents felt confident in supporting their child with using technology, while another 75.1% (33.6% a lot; 41.5% quite) felt capable of supporting their child with learning while the same percentage of parents (75.1%) felt capable of communicating with their child's teacher through remote modes (32.7% a lot; 42.4% quite).
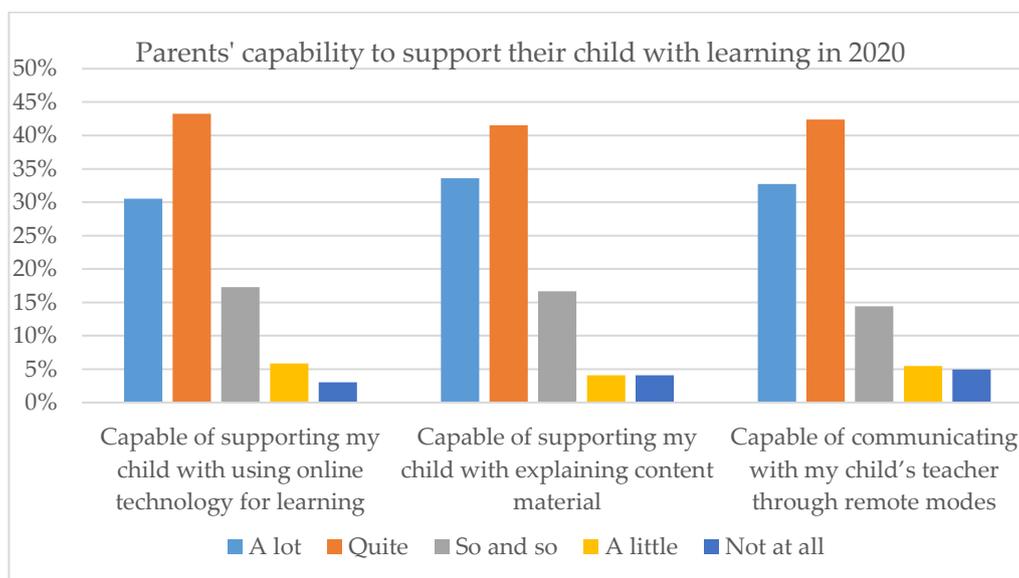
Figure 2: Parents' capability to support their child with learning in 2020

The level of help provided by parents in 2020 was also illustrated and confirmed in Figure 3. An astounding 84.5% (59% a lot; 25.5% quite) of the parents indicated that they helped their child when working on activities or tasks, while another 76.3% (43.5% a lot; 32.8% quite) claimed that they explained difficult concepts to their child. Moreover, 66.4% (38% a lot; 28.4% quite) followed online lessons with their child. 73.8% (44.3% a lot; 29.5% quite) of the parents asserted that they adapted activities when their child did not understand a concept well. Additionally, 55.5% (29% a lot; 26.5% quite) of the parents indicated that they corrected their child's work. However, one must

not ignore that 8% helped their child with their activities a little (6.1%) or not at all (1.9%). Another 8.9% of the children were not supported by their parents when they came across difficult concepts, presumably, because their parents did not have the knowledge and skills to do so. Moreover, there were 21.1% of the children who followed online lessons alone (11.7%) or were supported by their parents a little (9.4%). Furthermore, another 4.5% of the parents never adapted activities for the children if they did not understand the concept, while 7% did so a little. 18.8% of the parents claimed that they either did not correct their child's work (9%) or did so rarely (9.8%).
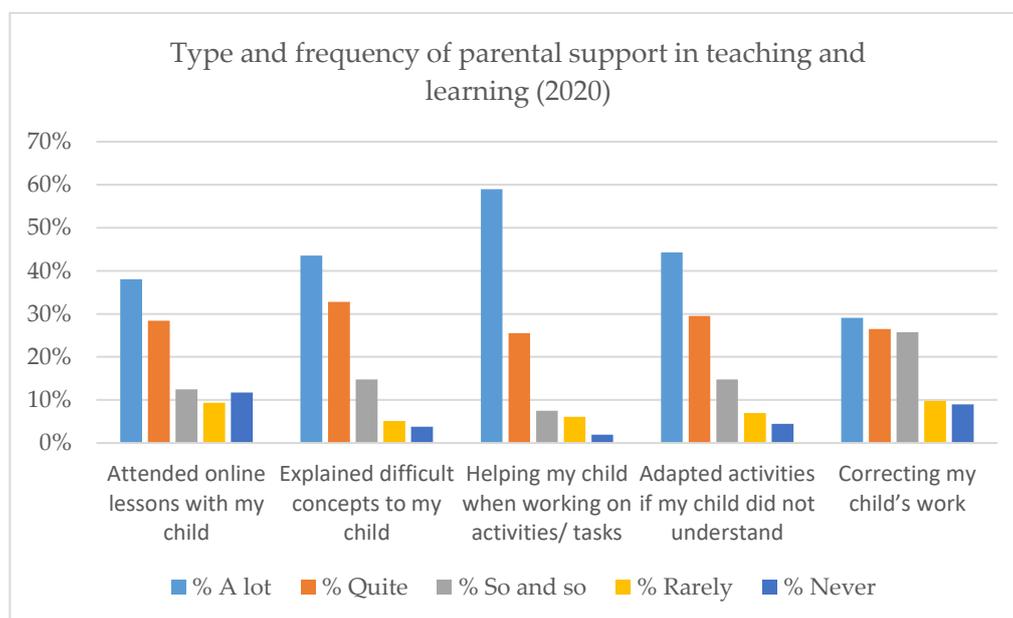
Figure 3: Type and frequency of parental support in online learning (Survey 1)

One parent clearly communicated her frustration and dissatisfaction with the school system, asserting that she was:

> *Disappointed with schools. Teachers taught only for the high achievers. Those who struggled had to be helped by their parents. Unfortunately, those parents who cannot support their children due to work or lack of a good level of education were the most disadvantaged.*

These children and families should not be forgotten. A just education system should meet the needs of all learners and should ensure that all are learning.

The ability of the majority of parents to support their children reflected their level of education. In fact, 29.2% of the parents claimed that someone in the family is qualified with a post-graduate degree, while 22% claimed that they

have a bachelor's degree qualification. Another 22.8% of the parents stated that someone in the family at least has a vocational qualification. This means that 74% of the parents continued studying at the tertiary level. Only 26% of the parents claimed that they only had up to secondary (24%) or primary (2%) level of education. In view of this, a parent suggested that schools should shoulder more responsibility and be supportive of parents by briefing and preparing them for the oncoming lessons and sending printouts and materials in advance to allow for some preparation by parents.
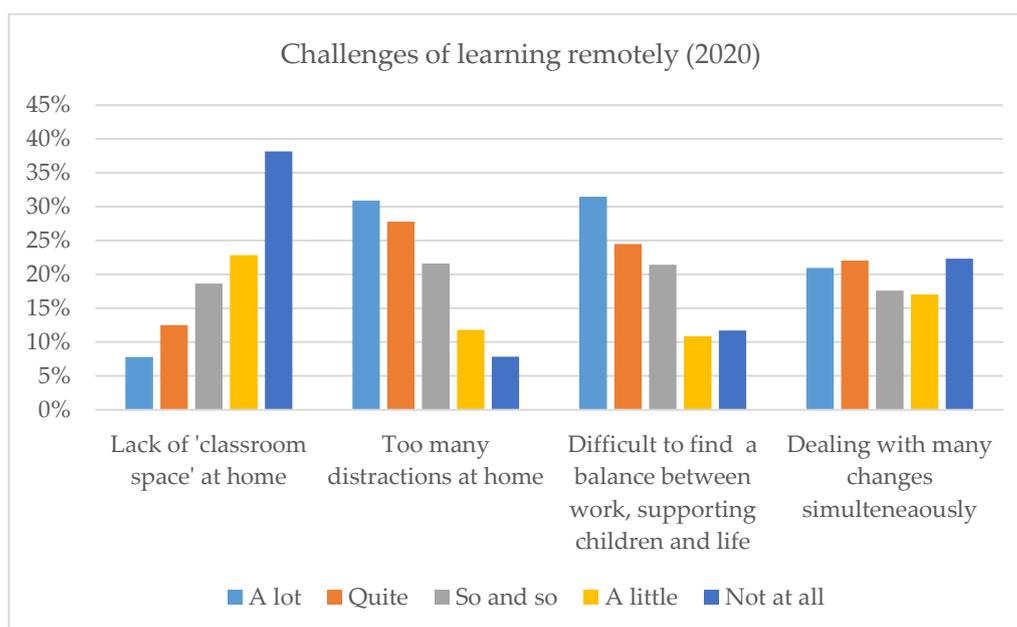
Figure 4: Challenges of learning remotely (Survey 1)

Referring to the challenges parents faced due to the shift to remote learning, 56% (31.5% a lot; 24.5% quite) of the parents identified the difficulty in finding a balance between work, supporting their children's learning and life as the most challenging (Figure 4) that "put a lot of pressure on parents". Having too many distractions at home was also considered difficult by 58.7% (30.9% a lot; 27.8% quite) while dealing with the simultaneous changes experienced during the pandemic was considered as challenging by 43% (20.9% a lot; 22.1% quite) of the parents. The least challenging was the lack of learning space which only 20.3% (7.8% a lot; 12.5% quite) finding it difficult to deal with.

In the open-ended responses, parents were more forthcoming and wrote about the stressful situation created by the pandemic. Sixty-two parents in Survey 1, argued that the closure of schools brought a lot of stress, which affected the

well-being and mental health of their family in a negative way. Thirteen parents held that online learning including trying to manage the volume of work sent by teachers and learning how to use technology caused stress and anxiety for them. Four other parents claimed that due to long hours engaged in online learning, their children were demotivated and were mentally very tired, making it difficult for them to remain interested in online lessons. Thirty-one of the parents in Survey 1 and twelve parents in Survey 2, were more specific, claiming that juggling between working online, supporting their children with their online learning, and meeting family needs was challenging. The socio-economic background of parents was a contributing factor when it came to managing challenges during the pandemic. A father stated that because both he and his wife worked full-time and they could afford it, they paid a helper to be with their child and support him with online learning during the day. Contrastingly, another parent stated that because they could not afford at-home help for their child, the mother had to change her job to one that allowed her more flexibility to stay with her child at home. Another parent found the experience especially challenging, which was reflected in the following comment:

> *They were challenging months, especially mentally… it was very difficult for us. Initially, I worked through teleworking from home, and it was difficult to balance work with family needs and helping my children with their school work. Then things got worse. Having the children at home hindered me from doing my work efficiently, and I ended up doing less work than before, and I ended up unemployed.*

The lack of space and lack of technological equipment in the home, not to mention a lack of employment and health issues caused a lot of pressure on families, especially those with multiple children and those who were not yet old enough to follow online lessons independently.

Discussion
The way forward: Addressing invisible inequalities

The above findings made the invisible inequalities visible and indicate that inequalities were heightened during the pandemic. The lack of support from schools and teachers, the lack of technological equipment, together with the lack of support from parents for the reasons indicated above, created considerable disruption to the children's learning and academic achievement (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Some children "disappeared off the radar"

(Minister of Education, as cited in Costa, 2020, para. 2) and did not have access to educational provision for months. The long-lasting effect of this on children and their development and learning cannot be underestimated. Governments worldwide should address the deep structural issues in education systems to ensure access to education and the distribution of equitable resources to all (Henderson, et al., 2022b). Governments can do this by investing heavily and continually in education systems, including granting access to digital technology and providing the necessary technical support, training teachers and parents in the use of technology and related pedagogy, and being sensitive to family issues and financial means through addressing policies that increase inequalities (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Inequalities in homes and families: A sense of helplessness, chaos and anxiety

Parent participation in the teaching and learning process was crucial during school closure (Martin, et al., 2022a). However, some parents in this study, claimed that the onus of teaching was shifted too quickly onto them without any adequate preparation or training, and without them having the knowledge and skills to support their children academically. Parents who had to take on the teachers' role struggled to keep their children motivated as the "nature of teachers' authority differs from that of parents" (Stelmach, 2021, para. 23). Parents experienced such a situation worldwide (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021; Sharma, 2020). This often created a sense of helplessness, chaos, and anxiety among parents. While well-educated parents were able to meet the challenge and help their children, other parents such as illiterate or less-knowledgeable parents, or parents who did not have the technology or reliable access to the internet, felt challenged. This is supported by Marangu et al., (2022) who suggest that the higher the level of education of parents, the more they can support their children when learning from home. Consistently, in their study held with Dutch children, Haelermans et al., (2022) show that because 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 skilful or knowledgeable enough to help them with their schoolwork, giving rise to inequalities in learning provision, ensuing in learning losses during and following the pandemic.

Parents in this study considered that teachers in Malta shifted onto them several teaching responsibilities, expecting them to support their children constantly, irrespective of their work commitments, financial difficulties, and

the availability (or lack thereof) of technological equipment; a finding also supported by Hagenaars, et al., (2021). Parents also held that they were expected to assume the full role of teachers and explain concepts, monitor their children, provide support and communicate with the educator; a long list that overwhelmed parents. Parents also claimed that they were not skilled in the use of digital technologies and online platforms. They also noted that some of the teachers were assigning too much homework, making it difficult for them to keep up. Teachers should have been more sensitised to familial issues and their socioeconomic background, in order to level their expectations according to the needs of the children and their parents, a position also suggested by Hagenaars et al., (2021). This situation was also experienced by parents worldwide, including Canadian (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021) and Pakistani (Bhamani, et al., 2020) parents. This, in turn, created a very stressful environment in some households, impelling some parents to stay offline.

Most parents claimed that they had the necessary digital devices; however, some admitted that they struggled to provide digital equipment to each one of their children, especially when they had multiple children who had to follow online lessons simultaneously. Some parents also highlighted poor internet connection claiming that their children were not able to follow online lessons. This finding was validated by the European Commission (2020), stating that one-tenth of children in Europe had poor internet connection during the pandemic, putting them at a disadvantage with their peers. The European Commission (2020) also claimed that having 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 socioeconomic inequalities hindered remote learning (World Bank Group, 2021), increased inequality in access to technology and accentuated the digital divide between those who could afford to buy technological equipment and pay for strong internet connections and those who could not; a finding supported by Kardefelt-Winther, et al., (2020) and UNESCO (2020b). This was also echoed by Borg and Mayo (2022), who noted that the pandemic exacerbated the differences in home environments while highlighting the disparities in socioeconomic backgrounds.

Although the Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta has been steadily investing in digital technology and infrastructure for decades, these efforts were primarily aimed at supporting face-to-face teaching and learning, rather than being designed for use as an online platform. Consequently,

schools and teachers were not prepared for such a quick shift in the use of technology for learning (Vassallo, et al., 2021). Aware of the digital divide in families, on the 15th of May 2020, the Maltese Ministry of Education distributed 123 tablets and 132 free internet access services to vulnerable children coming from low-income families (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020), to ease the problem. This is 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 (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2016). Even if the Ministry of Education tried its utmost to reach out to children and their parents who did not log online, yet some children still fell through the net and could not be reached. Busuttil and Farrugia (2020) argue that reaching out to these learners was not easy while indicating cracks in the system and asking for more accountability from school leaders to ensure that all learners have access to their right to education.

One of the main challenges that parents were faced with as soon as schools shifted to remote teaching, was to set up a learning space within the home where their children could connect to follow online activities or lessons. Findings from this study show that most families (over 60%) managed to secure a learning space for their children. However, while just over half of the participants claimed that their child had a designated space, this was shared with a sibling or a parent working from home, and only 7.5% of the children had their own quiet space in their own bedroom. On the other hand, 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. Moreover, more than one-third of the parents indicated that their children experienced some form of disturbance occasionally. These findings reflect the living reality that most children in Malta live in apartments or maisonettes where space is limited. Results from this study also reflect those of the European Commission (2020) which affirms that parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds found it more difficult to identify a quiet place for their children to study during the lockdown. Even if Malta is one of the seven European countries where this difference was less felt. However, findings from this study, emphasise the consistent inequalities children experience in their home environment when learning. Borg and Mayo (2022) assert that the differences in Maltese households were unequivocal, with some parents being able to secure a quiet space, quality technology, strong internet connection and other resources as they had the economic capital. They were also able to assist

their children through their presence, engagement, and guidance, while other parents were not. This was reflected in our study, when some parents reported being able to afford to buy new computer hardware for their children, as well as strengthening their internet connection, and staying at home to support their children. In contrast, the study revealed that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds lacked access to technological equipment, an adequate internet connection, and a quiet space from for participating in online teaching. Moreover, their parents were less likely to support them as they were either illiterate or digitally illiterate and/or could not afford to stay at home and may not have the opportunity to work remotely. Highlighting this divide, Borg and Mayo (2022) asserted that children from low socio-economic backgrounds were socially isolated and marginalised while frequently experiencing dysfunctional contexts such as some form of poverty, abuse, and mental health issues. Consequently, these children were the most affected by the pandemic and experienced disengagement from learning and considerable learning loss, together with a level of social, emotional, and psychological distress.

Tackling educational inequalities to ensure equal opportunities for all learners

The pandemic created new injustices that impacted children and their learning (UNESCO, 2020a). Learning depends on the support provided by the school and families, their abilities, commitment and motivation (Azevedo et al., 2022). Some children had good support systems within their families, while others did not; they never accessed online means of learning and simply disappeared from the system (Costa, 2020). More effort should have been made to reach out to vulnerable children, ensuring that they had basic care and adequate academic and technological support. Beyond the pandemic, vulnerable children and their families should be provided with assistance to improve their learning spaces at home, including supporting them with technological devices, connectivity and other learning materials (Azevedo et al., 2022; Bonacini & Murat, 2022). They also should be taught coping skills and strategies in order to help them get back on track and achieve better outcomes. Governments should reinvest in students, and re-imagine an education for the future, to ensure that inequities will decrease (McLaughlin, as cited by Gooch, 2022). Moreover, they should provide more support to schools and educators through training in digital skills and new pedagogies, as well as provide them with new digital equipment and other learning materials (Azevedo et al., 2022; Bonacini & Murat, 2022). Furthermore, educators should be trained in being sensitive to family issues and their socioeconomic and cultural background, to understand them and their needs better. Throughout the year, schools should

strive towards developing shared partnerships with parents, actively involving them in the teaching-learning process. On the other hand, parents should take more initiative and support their children, as necessary. Thus, parents should be provided with training sessions to help them familiarise themselves with the content, stay aligned with what their children are learning at school, and be able to support them and explain the material to them. Moreover, schools should provide training for those parents who lack basic literacy skills to enable them to communicate with educators and others, access the internet, participate in society and employment, and be able to support their children. School leaders, policymakers, and other involved stakeholders should ensure that all learners have access to education by providing those children from deprived homes with the necessary and suitable technology and/or an internet connection through financial aid. In addition, support should be provided to children who may have experienced learning losses during the pandemic through recovery programmes and support systems designed help them overcome these challenges (Azevedo et al., 2022). Governments should commit to strengthening and reimagining education systems, re-think education equity and reconsider the potential use of technology (Gooch, 2022).

Conclusion

This study investigated the inequalities in educational provision as experienced by Maltese children during the pandemic from the parents' perspectives. With the closure of schools, most parents attempted to meet the challenges brought about by the pandemic, with some providing their children with new technological equipment and reliable internet connectivity, and supporting them by explaining content material, while others were unable to do so. Some parents did not know or did not have the means or the knowledge to support their children in learning from home. Findings from the study indicate increased inequalities in the provision of teaching and learning which resulted in some parents feeling disappointed in the system, overwhelmed and helpless with the quantity and type of work reverted to them, which resulted in some children experiencing learning loss. Governments and schools need to address the still-existing digital, social and economic inequities and aim for a just education system that thrives through the provision of persistent quality teaching and learning (Borg, 2022a). This can only be achieved if all those involved including global digital and telecommunications companies, economic and educational policymakers, communities, schools, teachers and parents, are equally invested in addressing educational and digital inequalities

to provide fair, equal and quality education for all learners to reach their full potential.

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[1] For the scope of this paper, the term "parents" refers to legally responsible persons (LRPs).

[2] In Malta, children aged 0 – 3 years attend Childcare settings, those aged 3 – 5 years attend Kindergarten settings and those aged 5 – 11 years attend Primary schools.