

## COVID-19 and Remote Learning: Experiences of Parents with Children during the Pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

*In the spring of 2020, schools across the globe closed their doors to decrease the spread of the viral outbreak during the COVID -19 pandemic. This physical closure led to a rapid shift to remote learning which placed more responsibility for learning on parents and guardians. As one of the major stakeholders in the education process, experiences of parents with their children during remote learning are worth examining to inform future policy decision making. This study aimed to investigate parents' experiences and struggles during school closure using an online survey. Thematic coding was conducted to analyze parental responses regarding their greatest educational struggle experienced during the COVID school closure. The results indicate parents agreed with the school closure policy and were generally satisfied with the level of support provided by school districts whilst describing some areas of struggle. Parents described having difficulties with balancing responsibilities, learner motivation, accessibility, and learning outcomes. The results of the study suggest some important implications and recommendations for educators and policymakers.*

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, Remote Learning, Pandemic, Parents.

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### Introduction

An overwhelming majority of the world's enrolled students have experienced the temporary closing of school during the COVID-19 pandemic in an attempt to encourage social distancing and therefore decelerate the transmission of the virus (Viner et al., 2020). Nearly 200 countries shut down schools with over 90% of these learners ranging from early years through higher education facing some sort of disruption to their education (UNESCO, 2020). Many countries around the world, including Britain, China, Taiwan, and the U.S. have temporarily closed schools. School closures have been found effective in transmission reduction during previous influenza outbreaks, including the Swine Flu and MRSA (Cowling et al., 2020; Nafisah et al., 2018; Rashid et al., 2015). School closures have unprecedentedly altered the daily lives of the student learners, their families, and their educators. Incredibly, more than half a billion children (Cohen & Kupferschmidt, 2020) have been forced to become virtual-school learners as they shelter in their homes, while parents, siblings, and other family members have taken on the new role of learning facilitators, pseudo-teachers, and coaches. Many teachers, families, and learners have been unprepared for this sudden

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shift, bringing some of the hardships and issues of increased parental involvement to the surface while engaging and trying to assist their children in various levels and types of distance learning. Even though different terminologies have been used in the field, for the purposes of this research the terms remote education and remote learning are synonymous with online, virtual, and e-education and e-learning

Parental involvement is an important factor for student achievement in traditional school settings. Parent support has demonstrated significant contributions to the success of learners in a virtual learning environment (Borup et al., 2014; Feng & Cavanaugh, 2011; Lee & Figueroa, 2012; Makrooni, 2019; Woofter, 2019). However, parents must take on new and unfamiliar roles and responsibilities as their children participate in online education while experiencing increasing instructional responsibility for their child's learning (Liu et al., 2010). As a result, parents often struggle with understanding the role they should play in their children's online learning (Boulton, 2008; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009).

Feelings of parents towards remote learning are mixed. Some parents feel more connected to their child's schoolwork while others see this as an additional burden (Selwyn et al., 2011). Sorensen's (2012) study revealed the most challenging and favorable aspects of online learning for parents, keeping their children on schedule while completing their coursework as the former and interactions with the child's online teachers as the latter. In addition, schools and teachers simply do not have enough guidance to improve the parental engagement experience, especially with the effective use of technology (Goodall, 2016).

Challenges that may impact parental involvement in remote learning settings include economic resources (Hohlfeld et al., 2010); lack of internet access (Hollingworth et al., 2011); lack of interest of in using technology (Beckman et al., 2019); and having low digital self-efficacy (Povey et al., 2016). From research done on virtual school learning environments, pre-pandemic, we learn that parents become a learning coach for students who spend a significant amount of their day in an online setting (Hasler Waters & Leong, 2014). When surveyed, teachers have identified the following parental scaffolds as helpful to the virtual learner: organizing and managing students' schedules, (b) nurturing relationships and interactions, (c) monitoring and motivating student engagement, and (d) instructing students as necessary (Borup, 2016).

The current literature base and empirical research concerning parental involvement and the problems in their children's learning experiences focus mainly on the traditional school site-based setting while suggesting parental involvement may drastically differ in an online environment (Liu et al., 2010). There have been multiple calls for additional research to better understand parental involvement in remote learning (Black, 2009; Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Rice, 2009). As clear stakeholders of their children's academic achievement, parents' skills, struggles, and needs in remote learning environments must be thoroughly investigated. The worldwide and rapid shift to remote learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic calls for examining parents' experiences and needs in the remote learning environment. Over the past decade and apart from this pandemic, online education has been identified as one of the fastest-growing educational trends (Watson et al., 2011). To our knowledge, this study provides the first explicit analysis of school closure impacts on parents. A study on experiences and struggles of parents may yield useful data and identify trends to inform the development of programs and policies targeting parental needs in this online learning environment. In light of these documented needs, this study aims to reveal self-identified issues and struggles parents have encountered while engaging in their children's remote learning during the Spring-2020 COVID-19 school transitions from traditional classroom learning environments.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Data were collected from a sampling of parents having at least one child who attended a physical school traditional learning environment prior to school closures in the spring of 2020 due to the pandemic and transitions to remote learning formats. The sample used in this study consisted of 122 parents. From this sample, 116 self-identified as mothers and six as fathers. Requested respondent demographic information included: education level, income, and the number of children in the household. Fifty-five parents reported having a graduate degree (Master's or above), 46 held a Bachelor's degree, 22 reported an Associate or lower degree. Sixty-five reported having a household annual income over \$100,000 U.S, 40 had annual incomes lower than \$80,000 U.S. Seventeen parents described having only one child, 61 parents had two children, and 44 had three or more children. Parents identified that a total of 66 children were attending pre-K and Kindergarten, 70 were attending early elementary (1-3 grades), 47 were attending upper elementary (4-6 grades), 29 were attending middle level (7-9 grades), 26 were attending high school (10-12 grades) and 8 were attending college. Only two households reported not having internet access. Overall, this study's sample may be described as primarily upper-middle-class, well-educated mothers, who had more than 1 child with most attending middle schools and lower. The survey was issued on April 15, 2020, and ended on April 30, 2020. At the completion of the open-ended survey questions, schools had been physically closed and remote learning environments established for one month.

### **Data Collection**

This study employed an online survey using an open ended questionnaire developed by the researchers with the informed consent of all participants. The study obtained institutional review board (IRB) approval from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. The survey included some socio-demographic information and various questions designed to reveal parental opinions about school closures. One open-ended question queried parents regarding their greatest educational struggle while children were being educated remotely during the COVID-19 school closures.

### **Procedure**

The researchers used thematic coding, which involves identifying passages of text linked by a common theme (Gibbs, 2007). This coding process allows for the categorization of codes, ultimately enabling thematic analysis of ideas. We utilized descriptive and simultaneous first cycle open coding and second cycle pattern coding to analyze parental responses regarding their greatest educational struggle experienced during the COVID school closure.

To begin the process, the researchers read the responses several times to decrease possible researcher bias. This intense immersion process helped with familiarization of the content and identification of themes within the data. Second, responses were systematically and manually coded independently by researchers. We employed an open coding method by examining participant responses word by word in order to identify open codes. As summarized by Bryant and Charmaz (2010), open coding is the process of reviewing data with the goal of developing descriptors, or open codes. Descriptive coding is a type of elemental coding method where data analysts determine topics of similar data sets (Saldaña, 2016). In order to develop reliability, one

researcher began with descriptive open coding where he grouped like ideas and assigned a phrase that captured the essence of the data set. He passed the data and initial codes onto two other researchers who questioned and/or agreed with the codes assigned by the first researcher and developed a codebook by writing definitions of the codes and refining the wording of the codes. The next step was a fourth researcher completing a blind review of the data and assigning codes written by the first three researchers to the existing data and therefore establishing an interrater reliability score of 71%. Upon identifying similarities between three like codes and combining those into one code, the interrater reliability score increased to 76%. This step was the first of many to recategorize and refine the initial codes. We began the recoding process by jointly reviewing the initial codes so as to eliminate codes as necessary, relabel codes, and subsume codes with significant overlap into more comprehensive categories. Within this collaboration, we determined the subsequent step of the data analysis phase would be to engage in simultaneous data coding.

Simultaneous coding is described as applying more than one code to each data set based on the exact wording and inferred meaning in a data set (Saldaña, 2016). It is noteworthy to explain that we chose this additional coding method in order to capture the rich and complex responses participants provided in response to our research question, not because of indecisiveness regarding which code best suited the data. We felt that it would have been a significant oversight to attempt to determine the most salient code of a data set when many responses indicated several seemingly equally weighted codes. During this final phase of the first cycle coding process, two researchers independently assigned additional codes to the data set and then met to collaboratively determine which codes to ultimately assign to each data. An interrater reliability score of 86% was calculated by determining how many of the final codes the researchers assigned to each data set were identified by the researchers independently before the collaboration began. After this stage, researchers updated the codebook and then began second cycle coding.

Elliot (2018) describes pattern coding, a second cycle coding method, as grouping similar codes together in order to create larger, but fewer categories. Naturally embedded within this process is another review of the first cycle codes. Ultimately, one researcher grouped first cycle codes into what turned out to be groups of 2-5 within four categories and a second researcher reviewed the categories and associated codes and agreed with the four and added one. All researchers reconvened to discuss the codes and categories that were determined during the second cycle coding process and refine the wording to capture the true spirit of a few codes. The lists of themes were ultimately jointly reviewed by researchers. This discussion helped us clarify and refine the specific themes. In case of contradiction to any of the themes, researchers re-evaluated those themes and redefined them, as appropriate. What follows this section is a summary of the results and subsequently a discussion of the results.

## **Results**

The descriptive questions are provided first and then parents' struggles were analyzed by using thematic analysis under five themes in the following section. Results of survey answer analysis indicated nearly 89.3% of parents either strongly agreed or agreed with the school closure policy at that time. Only 5% (4.9%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the decision to close schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 1 demonstrates how parents feel about the decision to close schools.

Parents were asked as to how much time they spared to support their children's learning at home. Data displayed in Table 2 indicates 62.3% of parents reported devoting more than one hour per day supporting their child's learning while schools are closed.

**Table 1***How Do You Feel About the Decision to Close Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic?*

Feelings	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	77	63.1	63.1	63.1
Agree	32	26.2	26.2	89.3
Neither agree nor disagree	7	5.7	5.7	95.1
Disagree	4	3.3	3.3	98.4
Strongly disagree	2	1.6	1.6	100.0
Total	122	100.0	100.0	

**Table 2***How Much Total Time per Day Do You Support Your Child(Ren) With Learning While Schools Are Closed?*

Time a day	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Less than 60 min	28	23.0	23.0	23.0
61-120 min	48	39.3	39.3	62.3
121- 180 min	26	21.3	21.3	83.6
more than 180 min	19	15.6	15.6	99.2
Other	1	.8	.8	100.0
Total	122	100.0	100.0	

During the school closure, finding educational resources for remote learning is crucial. Parents needed resources to use with their children’s learning at home. Thus, the survey included a question whether parents had enough resources or not while they were doing remote learning. Table 3 shows that 60.7 % of parents expressed having just the right number of resources available. On the other hand, 27% of parents expressed having too many resources available during school closure.

**Table 3***How Would You Describe the Educational Resources You Have Available to You During the School Closure?*

Resource availability	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
I have too many resources available	33	27.0	27.0	27.0
I have just the right number of resources available.	74	60.7	60.7	87.7
I have too few resources available	15	12.3	12.3	100.0
Total	122	100.0	100.0	

Since the school closure was unexpected, parents would need support from their schools. Parents were asked whether they were satisfied with support their schools were providing during COVID closure. According to Table 4, a large majority (82.8%) of the parents surveyed were satisfied or very satisfied with the amount of support their child’s school provided during the COVID-19 closure.

**Table 4**

*How Do You Feel About the Amount of Support Your School Is Providing During COVID-19 Closure?*

Feelings	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very Satisfied	54	44.3	44.3	44.3
Satisfied	47	38.5	38.5	82.8
Neutral	15	12.3	12.3	95.1
Dissatisfied	5	4.1	4.1	99.2
Very Dissatisfied	1	0.8	0.8	100.0
Total	122	100.0	100.0	

Researchers asked parents about their biggest struggles while teaching their children during the school closure with an open-ended question. Responses were analyzed by researchers using thematic analysis methodologies. Results were grouped into the following five themes: Balancing Responsibilities, Non- positive Learner Motivation, Accessibility, Learning Outcomes, and Outliers. Later, sub-themes within each of the themes were also identified. Table 5 shows the frequencies and percentages of each theme with subcategories. These themes are explained below.

**Table 5**

*Parents Struggles With Remote Learning*

What is your biggest challenge?	Frequency	Percentages
<b>Balancing Responsibilities</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>41.1</b>
Balancing parent employment demands and learner needs	44	25.1
Balancing multiple levels of learners in home	12	6.8
Personal balance	7	4
Parent feels overwhelmed	9	5.1
<b>Non-positive Learner Motivation</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>17.7</b>
Lack of learner motivation specifically related to remote learning	17	9.7
Lack of learner motivation not specifically related to remote learning	14	8
<b>Accessibility</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>22.2</b>
Learner special needs	13	7.4
Lack of access to technology hardware or internet quality	7	4
Lack of online resource organization	2	1.1
Lack of parent content knowledge or pedagogy	9	5.1
Need for teacher communication	8	4.5
<b>Learning Outcomes</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>16.5</b>
Academic progress	7	4
Curriculum concern of parents	14	8
Socio-emotional development concern	8	4.5
<b>Outliers</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2.8</b>
No Struggle	3	1.7
Significant Toll	2	1.1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>100</b>

## **Theme 1: Balancing Responsibilities**

For many participant respondents, the occurrence of school closure and remote schooling presented a struggle to balance responsibilities. The concern for various responsibilities competing for the limited resources of time and energy was frequently expressed by respondents. Researchers noted four distinct struggles: Struggle to balance parent employment demands and learner needs, struggle assisting multiple children in the home with learning, lack of personal balance and parent feels overwhelmed.

### ***Balancing Parent Employment Demands and Learner Needs***

The struggle to balance parent employment demands and learner needs was the single-most commonly reported struggle. Forty-four respondents noted difficulty with completing job-related tasks and supporting their child(ren) in completing schoolwork during the COVID school closures. Some comments elaborated on the emotions that were felt as a result of the struggle to balance employment and learning. One respondent wrote, “having to make the decision between work and helping/spending time with my children. . . lots of guilt.” Two respondents mentioned essential worker status and its impact on the struggle to assist their child(ren) with learning. One participant stated, “My husband and I are both essential workers and struggle to provide the attention/interaction my children need along with our own work.” Another participant noted her biggest educational struggle as, “working in the hospital setting and maintaining a household while trying to maintain normalcy.”

### ***Balancing Multiple Levels of Learners in Home***

A second scenario that presented a struggle for balancing responsibilities was assisting multiple children in the home with learning. “Try to help 2 kids at once with different subjects,” was how one respondent described this struggle. Another respondent stated her biggest struggle was, “Three children at different skill levels with a different motivation and ability to focus on tasks at hand.” A total of twelve respondents noted that meeting the needs of multiple children in the home was a struggle. This included the struggle of meeting the needs of preschool-age children while supporting schooling.

### ***Personal Balance***

The struggle to find personal balance was reported by seven respondents. These respondents described having insufficient time to meet all their responsibilities, including supporting children’s schooling, while maintaining personal time for self-care. One participant simply responded, “Not a lot of ‘me time.’”

### ***Parent Feels Overwhelmed***

The last category of comments that falls under balancing responsibilities is parent feels overwhelmed. Nine participants noted they, as adults, were feeling overwhelmed due to a factor or circumstance. One respondent cited the number of resources to be an overwhelming factor: “Feeling overwhelmed as a parent with the number of resources offered. They aren’t all expected, but it’s overwhelming to sift through.” Other comments reflect the cumulative impact of

responsibilities. “Finding balance has been my biggest struggle. Trying to manage working, quality time with my kids, housework, getting my master's degree online, and keeping my own mental health strong.”

## **Theme 2: Non-positive Learner Motivation**

Theme two is non-positive learner motivation. It is defined as, expressing a lack of learner motivation to the learning tasks, either specifically attributed to the remote learning platform or not. Lack of learner motivation specifically related to remote learning and lack of learner motivation not specifically-related to remote learning are the subthemes, each identified 17 and 14 times, respectively.

### ***Lack of Learner Motivation Specifically Related to Remote Learning***

The first, lack of learner motivation specifically related to remote learning, was applied to a response if it met the following inclusion criteria: the response indicated the struggle was related to the shift to remote learning. This may have included a struggle with lack of social interaction, figuring out how to learn in this way (how to be a “good” e-learner), and/or the student feeling like remote learning did not match learning style. The respondent had to mention remote learning or a related term/theme (including the home learning environment) in order to be considered specific to remote learning. An example of this category is “Motivating my oldest child to do his best work. He is plenty capable but doesn't put forth as much effort as he would when at school” and “My children don't mind learning, but they hate having Mom as a teacher. They want their own teacher back.”

### ***Lack of Learner Motivation Not Specifically Related to Remote Learning***

The second of the two non-positive learner motivation themes is the lack of learner motivation not specifically-related to remote learning. Researchers defined this subtheme as a struggle related to motivation/cooperation (not associated with remote). Some responses in this subtheme include references to boredom, motivation, attention span, engagement, attitude, behavior, cooperation, and focus. One parent described her greatest struggle as “just keeping them engaged in the schoolwork and not distracted or unmotivated to learn.” Another response provided insight into the challenge of motivating a reluctant learner while balancing the needs of other children in the home: “Having the time to motivate my high schooler while still providing much-needed one on one attention to my 5th grader and properly caring for my 3 year old.”

## **Theme 3: Accessibility**

The third identified theme is accessibility. Barriers preventing students from fully engaging with the remote learning opportunities were described by many respondents. These concerns were grouped under the theme of accessibility. Five subthemes were identified that impacted accessibility: learner special needs, lack of parent content knowledge or pedagogy, need for teacher communication, lack of access to technology hardware or internet quality, and lack of online resource organization.



### ***Learner Special Needs***

The most common barrier cited by participants was learner special needs. Thirteen participants described the struggle to meet the disability-related needs or the gifted and talented needs of their children during COVID school closure. A parent of students with learning disabilities shared the following:

*My biggest struggles have been in working with my daughters (grades 3 and 5) who struggle with learning disabilities (dyslexia and ADD respectively). I am not equipped to try to teach them material and both struggle with organization and focus. This has resulted in several long days when the guidance from their elementary school has been that work should take approximately 1 hour to complete daily. In reality a normal day is 3-4 hour and some are 7-8.*

One respondent noted her child's special needs in the area of math and described the remote learning opportunities as having less differentiated support than instruction in the traditional school setting:

*The activities for math being sent home for my son's class are FAR too easy for him and it's being left up to me to differentiate his instruction and find him more challenging concepts to learn, whereas if he were in school, that would be the teacher's responsibility.*

### ***Lack of Parent Content Knowledge or Pedagogy***

Lack of parent content knowledge or pedagogy was a barrier described by nine participants. Survey respondents that identified their predominant struggles as content knowledge or pedagogy discussed their lack of training to become an educator. Of the nine comments from survey participants that were coded as lack of parent content knowledge or pedagogy, three comments specifically noted the respondent's self-identification of a lack of capital to help students in the area of mathematics. "Math is not mom's long [*sic*] suit," one respondent vented. Three comments reflected the lack of training or pedagogical knowledge to meet the needs of students identified with special education needs. The following comment illustrates one respondent's feeling of a lack of pedagogical knowledge to assist a son in special education programming: "Our son is in special learning programs for a reason. We do not feel comfortable as we struggle trying to compensate for his learning abilities as we are not teaching professionals." One comment described the struggle with a lack of understanding of the reading curriculum. Two comments noted a lack of general pedagogical knowledge or teacher training as one participant simply responded, "My biggest struggle is that I am not an educator."

The compounding of multiple struggles was noted by the following response that describes a lack of pedagogical knowledge for special learner needs layered with the need to balance other responsibilities, "I have no special education, speech or aba [applied behavioral analysis] training and now must do all of that while also taking care of a 18-month-old." The other example is: "I don't have a degree in education and most of the instruction expected of me assumes an understanding of reading curriculum, and none of it makes any sense whatsoever to me."

### ***Need for Teacher Communication***

Another barrier existed for some in that they experienced a need for teacher communication. The eight participants that reported this need articulated a variety of underlying scenarios that spawned the need for communication. One respondent simply noted the struggle of “unclear expectations.” Another comment implied the need for teacher communication that stemmed from the desire for guidance on using the online resources and clarification on procedures: “. . . figuring out what they are supposed to do, how to use the many, many different websites, and how to submit to the teacher.”

### ***Lack of Technology Hardware or Internet Quality***

Seven participants cited a lack of technology hardware or internet quality that created a learning barrier. Lack of devices, internet, broadband, and other technology-related issues that create a barrier to remote learning were grouped in this category. An example of this struggle was described as follows: “The internet isn't the best so it's hard for them to do assignments when it doesn't load and only have 2 devices and only one works better than the other.” The other parent stated that “The need for every family member to use the internet, with limited bandwidth in our rural area. We also do not have regular internet and are running devices off our phones' mobile hot spots”

### ***Lack of Online Resource Organization***

Two participants described a specific need for online resource organization. These participants articulated a struggle to access online resources due to having too many resources or uncertainty of how to access the online resources. One response explained, “All of the online resources are in different places, very spread out and hard to keep track of having multiple platforms of receiving and doing school work all on different sites.”

## **Theme 4: Learning Outcomes**

A concern for learning outcomes is the fourth identified theme. Comments under this theme describe a concern about one of three main areas: the curriculum, a child's academic progress, or a child's socio-emotional development.

### ***The Curriculum***

Parents critiqued the remote curriculum on 13 occasions on the survey. Comments that revealed a concern for quality or quantity of content and/or general concern about the rigor of the curriculum were coded as a curriculum concern. One respondent stated:

*I don't feel that they are getting enough or everything they should be. Not everything is at their level so it is not challenging enough. They aren't getting enough in one day. I am worried about making a year progress or any at all.*

Another critique of the curriculum suggested, “Some assignments could be structured so that they hit cross-curricular standards.” Some participants shared they believed the curriculum delivered in an online platform to be inferior: “Both [children are] very active and are not getting enough physical activity. I also don't believe all the screen time is helping basic skills like writing and communication.”

### ***Academic Progress***

Concern about a student making adequate academic progress or being fully prepared for the future was described by seven participants. One parent wrote, “I do not want to see my oldest slide when she's an average student at best while at school.”

### ***Socio-emotional Development***

An equal number of parents described concern for the socio-emotional development as those that described an academic progress concern. Seven parent participants described general concerns about their child's social and emotional development as a result of the decreased level of interactions with peers. The parent of a young learner explained, “So much of 4k curriculum is play and social based. We are missing out on a lot having my daughter at home and missing 4k.”

## **Theme 5: Outliers**

The fifth and final theme, Outliers, is defined as a response not captured by other themes, but yet noteworthy enough to code. There are six participant responses included in the Outlier theme and two subthemes: No Struggle and Significant Emotional Toll.

### ***No Struggle***

As defined in our study, No Struggle indicates that the respondent stated they were not experiencing any struggles, or the researcher inferred that the respondent was not experiencing any struggles. Out of the two no struggles identified, two respondents provided a simple, straightforward response, “I don't currently have any struggles in this area” and “NA.” Another survey respondent wrote the following detailed answer when asked what his/her biggest struggle is:

*I am fortunate that my children are in 7th and 9th grade, and are self-motivated students who work independently. I have to do very little for them except have the expectation that they do their work. Their schools communicate if they aren't getting work done, so there haven't been any issues with that. The only struggle we had was getting the routine started after having a week off for spring break, but that was minor. We are in a school district that is forward-thinking with technology, so both my children already had a school-issued computer and were familiar with google classroom. Additionally, my husband and I are also working from home, so we can support and monitor as needed. Families with younger children, children with special needs, or families with fewer resources are likely struggling more than we are.*

Also falling within the outliers theme is a response that does not clearly indicate if the described situation is that which the respondent is experiencing or a hypothetical situation:

*They are trying to recreate a school day, complete with work from every subject as if the parent had hours available during the day to devote to that education. And every child in a family adds to the time needed. So even if each child could do all their work in 2 hours, if you have 3 kids, that's 6 hours a day. If mom and dad are lucky enough to have jobs, they are not able to give this time to the kids AND do their job AND have all this quality time that we're supposed to be having. Oh, and cook, clean and maintain supplies without making too many trips to the stores.*

Because the researchers were unsure if this comment represents the struggles of the survey participant or were meant to be representative of typical struggles during remote learning, researchers coded the comment as an outlier. However, the response highlights the struggles that the data shows many families are experiencing. Besides assuming their normal responsibilities of work and family, parents now have been placed in a primary teacher role, which has created additional hardships on most parents.

### ***Significant Emotional Toll***

The significant emotional toll that parents reported as a result of supporting students during remote was coded into a subtheme within the Outliers theme. Researchers defined this subtheme as a strong emotional response implying the emotional hardships parents are going through during school closures. Here is one response that captures the gist of this theme:

*Both of my kids have special needs & eLearning has to be 1:1 with each of them, which isn't practical or possible. My son acts differently at school than at home (he's easygoing & cooperative at school, oppositional and inflexible at home). Last but definitely not least, I can't stand being around my kids all day every day.*

Another such response demonstrating the significant emotional toll remote learning is taking on parents is evident in this quote:

*My son has dyslexia. I find that his district is taking a very privileged and neurotypical stance on nearly everything. While my household has the financial and intellectual means to care for and educate my child, not every child is so fortunate. The stresses I feel as a wife and mother who works (ordinarily) outside the home and is under normal circumstances, pushed to my limit every week. . . this is absolute hell for me. I wake up every day and dread what awaits me. I can't sleep at night, even though I am desperately tired. I don't know how I'll get through this. I know I must, but I am beyond exhausted.*

All five themes identified as a result of data analysis paint the picture of the stressors and concerns of parents for their children and themselves. What follows is a discussion of the results.

## **Discussion**

This study was an effort to investigate the experiences and struggles of parents with remote learning during school closure due to COVID-19. In response to ‘flatten the curve’, states have enforced school closures until further notice. To explore parents’ experiences, they were first asked as to how they were feeling about the school closure and then what their main struggles were while they were helping their children with schoolwork at home. It is noteworthy that this study was one of the first studies about the immediate impact of the pandemic on education. The survey was given to parents during the school year while remote learning was occurring. Thus, this study revealed significant preliminary findings on the impact of the pandemic on one of the stakeholders of education which is parents.

Almost all of the parents in the study supported the school closure policy. Parents seemed to have a tendency to first “survive and then thrive” (Clark et al., 2020). As noted in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, individuals’ most basic needs must be met to achieve higher level needs (Steere, 1988). Safety and health are basic needs in the hierarchy (Maslow, 1943). That is why parents may have thought about the safety and health of their kids as a priority. At the time this study was conducted, the pandemic was still spreading fast. This initial and chaotic stage also could affect parents’ sentiments on school closure.

School closures put more responsibilities on the shoulders of parents. Most of the parents in the study shared that they thought that they had enough resources available. In addition, a large majority of the parents surveyed were satisfied with the amount of support their child’s school provided during the COVID-19 closure. In line with this result, recent research by Pew Research Center (2020) also revealed that 83 % of the parents were somewhat satisfied with the way their children’s school has been handling instruction during the closures. One of the plausible explanations of this result would be that parents would not be ready to process and utilize those resources and would feel that they should be dependent on what school districts provide them. This result also may indicate that schools were able to support parents in terms of resources for remote learning at home.

Although parents thought they had enough resources, according to the survey, 62.3% of parents stated they spent more than one hour per day supporting their child’s learning at home. This result indicates that parents were aware of the importance of dedicating some time to children. It is worthwhile to mention that parents indicated that the quality of the devoted time is more significant than the quantity of time.

Based on responses parents shared about their struggles, researchers categorized struggles with balancing responsibilities, non- positive learner motivation, accessibility, and learning outcomes.

### **Balancing Responsibilities**

It is obvious these concerns may stem from the parents’ readiness levels. Since the pandemic was so sudden and unsuspected, parents were unprepared for this shift. That’s why they would have difficulties balancing their work, home, and teaching responsibilities. Their workplaces were not prepared as well. Parents were attempting to work remotely or unable to work, while caring for children and trying to help them with their education, with no clarity on how long this closure would last. Just keeping children on task and safe at home was recognized as a

disconcerting duty. This challenging and uncertain situation could increase the stress and fear level and decrease the capacity for time management and planning. In a society where 64 percent of families have two adults working outside the home (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), most families do not have someone to take on the full-time role of supporting remote education. It is not surprising that shouldering additional responsibilities directly resulted in struggles for adults.

### **Non-positive Learner Motivation**

A quick shift from traditional learning to remote learning made most learners worried about daily life. Uncertainties about when life will get back to “normal” bring about anxiety (Daniel, 2020). Thus, uncertainty about the future may negatively affect learners’ motivation related to remote learning. Non-positive motivation leads parents to worry about their children’s academic progress and achievement at home. While parents are anxious about the future, supporting the schooling of children with low motivation can be challenging (Daniel, 2020).

It is comprehensible that the shift to a home learning environment and having a parent as a teacher impacts motivation. Besides the typical household rules, structures for learning needed to be established, and cooperation in this new task could be unenticing. An increased amount of non-educational based distractions exists in most homes. Gaining student cooperation for tasks beyond typical chores may lead to more negotiations.

Parents surveyed wrote that their children were uncomfortable with the “screens,” recording themselves and sending videos, and generally preferred the social learning that occurs face-to-face at school. Remote learning will only be motivating and engaging if student preferences, comfort levels, and learning styles are accounted for, just as best practices do in the physical classroom.

When parents noted a lack of motivation, more than half (55%) attributed the lack of motivation specifically to remote learning. Some parents directly pointed to modified grading systems as a reason for waning motivation. Many students have become accustomed to “doing school” as a “check off” for the purpose of earning good grades. Data showed that some parents accept responsibility as a motivator for their children while others expect their children or their schools to be the motivating factors, as with this response, “[school] give too little incentives to work hard to the end.” As an equity practice, many school districts suspended grading which would negatively impact the motivation of some learners. Students’ disregard for learning with the goal of gaining knowledge and understanding, rather than a process to earn a grade and pass a class could be another factor to weaken their motivation

Also evident in this theme is a lack of student cooperation. Some lack of cooperation is due to distractions at home; for example, “Getting kids to focus and complete work. There are so many distractions.” and “My younger son is uncooperative and lacks the attention span/ability to focus on schoolwork when he has other options at home.” Another lack of cooperation can be attributed to the parent as a teacher, “My child listens way better to his teacher than he does to me, which makes eLearning difficult.” Not only are parents stepping in to serve as teachers, but they also have to help their children navigate the mode of instruction, which is not ideal for all learners.

### **Accessibility**

The most predominant issue impacting accessibility was the learner’s special needs. The Individual Education Programs (IEPs) co-created by district staff and parents are legally binding and districts are responsible for executing the plans regardless of learning mode (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Prior to COVID school closures, extended school closure was not a common

occurrence and only rarely occurred due to natural disasters (Wong, et. al, 2014). The capacity of teachers and the infrastructure of resources, including teacher full-time equivalent (FTE) to provide the instruction outlined in IEPs was yet to be built during the first wave of COVID school closures. Many students' special learning needs were left unmet by teachers due to the lack of capacity of schools, internet access, and diverse students' special needs and also left unmet by parents because of a lack of time, content knowledge or pedagogy, communication, and/or resources.

In the traditional school setting, teachers are masters of content, pedagogy, and communication. However, the real-time delivery of concepts, clarification of procedures, and support for deepening understanding appears to be largely absent during the emergency shift to remote learning (Hawkins, 2020). Due to the sudden shift to remote learning, many teachers' time was likely devoted to building content and providing feedback on submitted learning tasks, representing the initiation of the learning task and feedback for task completion. The time and skillset to support the process of completing the activity or providing real-time support through an online mode, such as meeting virtually with individuals and groups, and using questioning techniques to assist students in grappling with concepts and understandings to reach proficiency, was likely new to many teachers and appeared as a struggle noted by survey participants. As a result, parents and other adults within the physical proximity of the learner provided this responsive, on-the-fly learning support.

Internet coverage and availability of computers or smartphones are essential needs for remote learning, and thus lack of reliable infrastructure and devices increased parents' struggles with remote learning. The discrepancy in access to high-speed internet between rural and urban areas and among socio-economic classes often referred to as the Digital Divide, has been widely documented (Dolan, 2016; Hale, et al., 2010). These discrepancies already occurred and impacted learning in the traditional school setting but were amplified during the pandemic when all learning occurred at home. Although districts worked to provide access to technology through a variety of techniques, including providing devices and hot spots, the underlying inadequacy of infrastructure remained (Wheeler Report, 2020).

## **Learning Outcomes**

Educators and parents alike are regularly devoted to ensuring students reach certain socio-emotional and academic learning outcomes during the academic year. Some would say that during the pandemic prioritizing student and staff health and attempting to support students in accessing some type of instruction detracted from the quality of education and thus, concerned some parents.

Academic progress was one of the concerns overlapping with learner special needs and curriculum concerns of parents. Ultimately, parents did not want their children to fall behind. Parents want a high quality education for their children. They expect instructional level material and appropriate pacing because the students' academic progress will not be as great if these factors are not present.

Parents stated their concerns about the curriculum as well. Responses in this category indicate dissatisfaction with the amount of work being assigned. Parents submitted responses indicating the teachers were assigning both too much work and not enough work. Parents who are tasked with an overwhelming amount of other responsibilities might interpret the work sent home as too much or the teacher could simply be sending too many assignments home. If the state limits the number of standards teachers cover, this could provide a more appropriate amount of work. Having optional enrichment work may appease families who struggle to complete remote learning activities while balancing other responsibilities, but also meet the needs of students who believe

there is too little work being assigned. Some parents had a socio-emotional development concern. These parents cited worries about a lack of personal connection, social/emotional engagement with peers, peer collaboration, and learning that typically occur in social settings with same-age peers. For parents who have young children; most of the education at this age level occurs through play-based methods with a focus on academic readiness skills and peer interactions, which is extremely difficult to teach via remote learning. Special considerations need to be made when the learning outcomes are socio-emotional ones. These simply cannot take place via only teacher-student instruction online or worksheets sent home.

## **Outliers**

A final theme, outliers, was created out of a need to categorize several responses that did not naturally fit into other themes and did not have more than a few responses. It is noteworthy to bring to light that a few respondents identified that they did not experience any struggles related to remote learning. Reasons for no struggle, as identified in the study at hand and others, can include having older children who are able to self-manage (motivation, academic learning, and technology accessibility) and the parent's ability to balance household and professional responsibilities. This also may be a result of flexible work situations and significant others working at home and/or with flexible work situations, as well. Parents who experience no struggles during remote learning are rare. Our research shows that 98% of parents have at least one concern, if not multiple concerns.

A discussion of the data obtained from the survey asking parents what their biggest educational struggle while children are home during the COVID-19 school closure would not be complete without bringing to light the emotional toll remote learning (and other factors, most likely) has taken on them. The byproduct of remote learning, paired with a stay at home orders, is increased time with family members, which has the potential to be stressful. The angst this parent is feeling is almost palpable, “. . .Last but definitely not least, I can't stand being around my kids all day every day.” Many parents may have experienced a similar level of angst. Wearing the many hats of teacher, parent, chef, employee, and so on is difficult on any given day; taking on said roles for two children with special needs is arguably even more difficult.

## **Limitations**

Since our survey was conducted by inviting volunteer participants through social media, our sample may not be representative of the technology struggles experienced by families during COVID school closure. It is likely that the volunteer participants had access to the Internet at home in order to take the survey. Thus, future studies would take into account the use of other methods, including face to face interview techniques, to reveal the struggles of parents. As previously reported, data shows that survey respondents were predominately mothers (95%) from middle to middle-upper class socioeconomic background. In order to capture more diverse perspectives, attention would need to focus on obtaining fathers as participants and participants representing a variety of income levels. Furthermore, researchers and school districts alike would benefit from obtaining data from parents with one child and those with children in a middle school or higher grade level. Special consideration would need to be taken to ensure the inclusion or exclusion of children enrolled in college, as demands placed on parents of adult children are different in nature. This study was conducted just after the first school closure to analyze the immediate effect of the pandemic among parents. The long-term impact on education is yet to be seen. Research needs to investigate the long-term effects of the pandemic on parents. Additional research could add to the



understanding of how the additional responsibility of supporting remote learning impacted parental mental health during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Recommendations**

The following are recommendations for school districts, teachers, and policymakers, based on our analysis and interpretation of the data. Successfully moving forward with remote learning will require that districts and teachers understand the continuum of home lives and concerns (or lack thereof) that parents are experiencing and work to meet the needs of each family. While this is not an easy feat, it is similar to the best practice of building relationships with each student. Recent research in a virtual high school underscored the importance of intentionally building online learning communities, just as teachers do in physical classrooms. The researchers concluded that interactive, flexible, and supportive online learning environments had the capacity to fight social isolation and increase social presence, however, teachers needed continued support to learning how to do this and maintain the practice (Linton, 2016). The practice of building relationships with students needs to continue, as does building relationships with parents, so as to understand their current trials.

Likewise, educators should continue to differentiate their practices for families; some of which are experiencing significant struggles, while others report no struggles. This practice parallels differentiating instruction for students, a practice that has been shown to increase student success (Rasmitadila, 2020; Tomlinson, 2000). Teachers seek to differentiate instruction on a daily basis, often building certain supports into the classroom and lesson plans. Attention, at the district level, must be paid to the wide variety of family situations. Families that are struggling to make it through the day need different types of supports and resources than families who are thriving and report no struggles.

Prior to COVID school closures, many districts engaged in implementing a guaranteed and viable curriculum to reduce the risk of learning failure for students. During the shift to remote, online, and blended learning, districts will need to review the defined guaranteed and viable curriculum and develop a plan to implement a guaranteed and viable curriculum through alternative modes. A guaranteed and viable curriculum gets at the heart of accessibility. It is recommended that districts consider ways to mitigate the known issues of accessibility, including special learner needs, lack of technology access, support with learning tasks and resource navigation, and the need for the presence of a learning coach. Specifically, a guaranteed and viable curriculum should address the need for a learning coach, a person present in the remote learning location—family member or other--or a school district employee, that can support the learning process throughout the school day.

Increasing parent pedagogical and content knowledge is one approach to increasing accessibility. Providing district-assigned learning coaches to support students throughout the process of learning and completing assigned tasks has the potential to mitigate this accessibility issue. Similarly, districts may reallocate staff so that some teachers focus on building the online content while others support students in navigating content, clarifying learning tasks, responding to learning struggles, providing feedback, and problem-solving issues that arise for learners. This approach in which a district employee would provide supports to help learners organize and manage schedules, motivate learners, and provide responsive instruction as necessary would align with Borup's (2016) findings of scaffolds that were helpful to virtual learners. In addition, there is a need to address the lack of supports for students with special learning needs. More frequent and regular virtual check-ups and check-ins with the IEP team and parents would be worthwhile to provide needed support.

Additionally, schools may need to account for students' interpretation of remote learning and pass/fail grading systems when considering how to plan remote learning in the future. Students are less concerned with learning and more concerned with a pass/fail grade. If the goal of learning is truly to learn (and not earn a particular grade), then additional support and education need to be provided to students so they do not lose sight of the importance and the true goal of remote learning activities.

Special attention must be paid to learning outcomes that are based on socialization, interpersonal relationships, and interpersonal problem-solving. Young learners, especially, engage in play-based learning and learn skills such as turn-taking, group work, and developing positive relationships with peers. These types of interactions and learning activities require interaction with classmates and are unique to the lower grades.

Parents need the right kind of support from teachers and schools. They need teachers and schools who realize they are barely able to make it through each day and are doing their best to support students. Without support and even acknowledgment of their feelings, they will not be able to maintain a healthy mental and emotional status or support their children to do the same.

The results of this study call for some future training programs for parents. Educators and policymakers should organize some training programs on effective remote learning at home for parents considering their struggles indicated in this study. Many districts required teachers and other school personnel to contact families for the purpose of discovering what supports each needed. The efforts to provide supportive resources and tools to parents were predominantly reactionary. Educating parents about the system and platforms for remote learning, including the tools, key pedagogical concepts, and teacher-student-parents communication options, is essential for future remote learning efforts.

In conclusion, school closures caused some issues regarding remote learning at home among parents even though parents supported the school closure policy. This preliminary study highlighted the need for scrutinizing parents' concerns on remote learning. We need to equip parents with effective strategies to care and protect the future of the world. Research and discussions considering the voices of parents on the impact of a pandemic would help educators and policymakers with future academic planning.

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