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Uncovering and Tackling Educational Inequalities Caused by the Pandemic: Parents' Perspectives for Equitable Education in Malta

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic enforced the immediate closure of schools, demanding schools to offer remote teaching to children who were isolated in their homes. However, not all schools and educators were ready, skillful and motivated to meet the challenges of the shift to online modes of teaching and learning. As a result, families were affected unequally, and existing educational inequalities became wider and more pervasive. Children from lower-educated and socio-economic backgrounds were the most affected as they had less access to technological resources and less support from their parents. In this regard, the aim of this study was to explore the educational inequalities that were amplified by the pandemic as experienced by children aged 0 – 11 years, from their parents' perspective. Quantitative data was gathered through two questionnaires which were conducted in September 2020 and 2021 about school closure. This study analyses the different inequalities experienced by children when schools shifted to remote teaching, including the different levels of responsiveness and support provided by schools. Data shows that children and their families experienced inequalities in the provision of online teaching and support provided by schools, which resulted in disengagement and learning loss.
Keywords: educational inequality, equitable education, parents' perspectives, remote teaching, pandemic
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1. Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 brought about the closure of schools in nearly 200 countries worldwide (UNESCO, 2020) to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. Governments worldwide demanded continuity of learning, calling for schools to find alternative ways and modes of teaching (Bekova, Terentev & Maloshonok, 2021). Educators had to quickly shift from teaching face-to-face in schools to teaching through remote modes (Bekova et al., 2021) with the goal of reaching children within the confinements of their homes (O'Sullivan, McGrane, Clark, & Marshall., 2020; United Nations, 2020).

Malta was no exception. Similarly, the Maltese government closed all educational institutions within the state, church, and independent school[1] sectors; from childcare to higher education institutions. This occurred twice: from 13th March to the end of the scholastic year in June, 2020 (Bartolo, Grech & Grech, 2022; Cefai, Skryzypiec & Galea, 2021) and again a year later, between 15th March to 11th April 2021 (Public Health Act, Cap. 465, L.N. 97, 2021). During both school closures, educators tried to maintain some form of routine, where they planned and presented activities using synchronous and asynchronous modes. While all schools were compelled to shift teaching to online modes, not all institutions and educators were prepared for this sudden transition, especially in the first school lockdown. In the second school closure, the transition to online modes was smoother as schools and educators were better equipped and prepared to teach online. Various studies (Blainey, Hiorns & Hannay, 2020; Bol, 2020; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Haelermans, Korthals, Jacobs, De Leeuw, Vermeulen, Van Vugt, et

[1] State-run schools account for 58.8% of total enrollments and are free for all; church schools account for 27.6% and parents are asked to pay an indicative donation (c. €450/year); independent schools account for 13.6% of the total enrollments and are fully paid by parents (c. €4,000/year) (National Statistics Office, NSO, 2021).

al., 2022), bring out the "sociological realisation" (Borg, 2022a), that during the pandemic, governments failed "the test of equity" (Borg, 2022a), with families being affected unequally (Borg & Mayo, 2022).

This paper examines the perspective of parents[1] of children in early childhood and primary education, about the educational inequalities experienced by their children during the COVID-19 pandemic in Maltese schools, and discusses how these can be narrowed to create more positive and equal opportunities for all learners (refer to Deguara, Bonello, Camilleri, Milton & Muscat, 2022, for a copy of the extended study).

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Educational inequality

The concept of equal opportunity for all advocates that all students should have the educational opportunity to learn and reach their full potential (OECD, 2017). Defining educational inequality as the unequal distribution of academic resources in a fair way, Gillborn and Youndell, (2000) argue that, in schools, this is evidenced through the quality of educational institutions, the efficiency and experience of educators and technology (Law Insider, n.d.). Considering four different definitions of educational inequality, Gillborn and Youdell (2000, p. 1) describe it as "inequality of access or provision" where a particular social or ethnic group is denied access to a particular school on the basis of their identity; "inequality of circumstance" that excludes certain groups from participating due to, for example, lack in the provision of resources or support, and/or poverty as they might not be able to pay their way in the system; "inequity of participation" that is the hidden and formal curriculum which may include biased testing and tracking, hence, creating inequality of race, gender or class; and "equity of outcome" occurring if resources are equally distributed, resulting in the likelihood that children are more successful in their education. The higher the inequality, the greater the gap in learning and educational achievements between children from higher and lower socio-economic backgrounds (Blanden, Doepke, & Stuhler, 2022), where inequality of educational opportunity, that is the lack in the provision of the necessary resources and opportunities to all, that allows unequal possibilities to learn (Yilmazince, Kabul, & Kabul, 2022), is likely to result in inequity of educational outcomes (Bruckauf & Chzhen, 2016).

2.2 Educational inequalities exacerbated by schools during the pandemic

The pandemic has amplified the already existing inequalities across and within countries, intensified hierarchies of power and brought up inequitable access to resources (Henderson, Bussey & Ebrahim, 2022a). As is argued by Schweiger (2023), the social position and socio-economic background of families, was a significant factor in managing successfully or otherwise the pandemic. Job security, space in the home, access to quality digital equipment and a strong internet connection, as well as the financial means to do so, made a critical difference for families to manage the pandemic. However, while the socio-economic status of parents affects the children's academic achievement and success, schools too can have a negative educational predicament and can be key in reproducing inequality (Darmody, Smyth & Russell, 2022; Stuhler, 2023). A contributing factor to educational inequality during the COVID-19 pandemic was the provision of remote teaching: not all schools were able to provide equitable consistent quality online learning and support (Borg, 2022a). Schools tend to persistently lack support in providing students from low-income backgrounds to access technology (Reinhart, Thomas, and Toiskiev, 2011). Different from traditional teaching, the effectiveness of online learning rests on the ability of schools to provide online teaching and on the children's possibilities to attend online classes (Murat & Luca, 2020). However, this exacerbated the gaps and persistent inequalities in education even within the same countries where disparities were evident across societies (Darmody, et al., 2021). While some children were provided with synchronous modes of teaching and learning, others could only access academic resources through asynchronous modes, which were often less effective. Moreover, children who did not have access to adequate technological equipment or good connectivity, either had limited provisions or were unable to access any form of education (Human Rights Watch, 2021), resulting in some governments organising classes to be delivered over television or radio (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Evidently, this put some children, especially those who come from low socio-economic backgrounds, children with special educational needs and vulnerable children, at an academic disadvantage as they did not have the same access to teaching and learning or the same support as others (Darmody, et al., 2021).

2.3 The input of educators

Another factor that affects educational inequality is the input of educators, which is crucial for the educational success of children (Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2005). With the closure of schools, educators could not provide direct support to children: they were not able to explain new material, provide encouragement or conducive feedback (Grewenig, Lergetporer, Werner, Woessmann & Zierrow, 2021; Andrew et al., 2020). However, educators used an array of modes to reach their children from sending emails and online messaging to them and

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

their parents, to providing them with academic resources via remote platforms in asynchronous modes, as well as holding synchronous activities in real-time, and even distributing material by hand (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Many educators and schools were able to shift their teaching to online modes; however, for others, this was challenging, either because they did not have access to adequate devices or connectivity, were not digitally skillful, or were not ready for the change (Blainey, et al., 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2021). Those countries or schools that were not well-equipped with digital technology and that did not previously teach digital literacy to teachers and students, struggled to make the transition to online education (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The Human Rights Watch (2021) report, identified that those countries which had under-resourced schools prior to the pandemic struggled to reach children remotely, with the result that the digital divide between children was heightened, creating further inequalities in learning. The same report (Human Rights Watch, 2021) claims that effective use of online platforms requires one to be digitally literate, and have the skills to access online resources and platforms critically and meaningfully. Those teachers who lacked training, familiarity, and confidence in using technology and access to an array of digital platforms and other online resources to create new learning content and activities, were faced with practical difficulties and struggled to modify their teaching to online modes (Srinivasan, Jishnu, & Shamala, 2021). Thus, online teaching was challenging for those teachers who were not trained for it (Bhamani, Makhdoom, Bharuchi, Ali, Kaleem, & Ahmed, 2020; Dong, Cao & Li, 2020). The pressure on teachers who were not used to using technology in the class and/or who were not used to teaching online, was immense. Some teachers were not ready or skillful enough to embrace this change and use online tools effectively to teach through digital and remote modes (Skar, Graham, Huebner, 2021), with some opting not to go online (Srinivasan, et al., 2021). Moreover, even if during the pandemic teachers worked harder and invested time to learn new digital skills, and found innovative ways to teach, not all schools had the same access to, or availability of resources, technology, connectivity and support and not all governments were able to offer guidance and training to teachers on distance learning (OECD, 2022). As a result, some teachers shifted most of the teaching burden onto parents, who were not always able to support their children, thus leading to the segregation of a category of children who depended on knowledgeable caregivers or adults to learn. The lack of engagement in online learning resulted in a lack of social interaction for young children, regression in development, demotivation to learn, and dependency on others (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Furthermore, while some teachers managed to develop a routine for their online teaching schedule, where they asked children to submit work, sent them daily reminders or communications, and involved parents in the teaching-learning process while reinforcing the importance of play (Bhamani et al., 2020), others were less available to communicate and explain things to parents which were needed when teaching hours and contact time with students decreased drastically (Grewenig et al., 2021; Skar et al., 2021). As is argued by the OECD (2017), a positive and productive home-school link is significant to equity in education. This "inequality of circumstance" (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000, p. 1) put some students at a disadvantage, creating an unequal provision. Furthermore, the lack of ability of some teachers to shift to remote teaching also reflected the lack of investment in teacher training and in digital literacy prior to the pandemic (OECD, 2022).

2.4 The underpinning theoretical framework and the aim of the study

Several theories including Bronfenbrenner (1978), Siemens (2004; 2008), and Gillborn and Youdell, (2000), provided a theoretical framework for this study. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory was useful in providing insights into examining the instructional changes (proximal processes) teachers, parents, and students experienced as a result of the "ecological transition" (Bronfennbrenner, 1979, p.6) induced by the COVID-19 pandemic (chronosystem). During the pandemic, an ecological transition occurred when schools shifted teaching and learning to online modes which children had to access from their homes (microsystem context). Teachers, parents and students (persons), experienced a change in their roles. Teachers had to change their pedagogical practice and methods, re-design activities and find new ways of engaging students. Parents had to take the role of teachers by explaining content knowledge to their children, helping them access online platforms, and supporting them with their homework while maintaining close communication with teachers (mesosystem). Students not only needed to adjust to new modes of learning, and find new ways of interacting with their teachers and friends, but they also had to take more responsibility for their own learning (Brigandi, Spillane, Rambo-Hernandez & Stone, 2022).

Given the sudden shift to online learning experienced by the pandemic, this study's theoretical framework also extends to Siemen's (2004) connectivism theory. Siemens, (2008) suggested that innovative learning occurs through the use of new technologies in virtual learning environments, that connect people together through synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning. This demands a shift in the role of educators and learners a virtual space for the co-construction of knowledge is created through the integration of technology and social interaction (Dunaway, 2011). Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) theory of equality, that is, the importance of the equitable distribution of the resources and benefits of educational opportunities for academic learning and achievement, engagement and motivation, also informs this study. This notion moves beyond "individualistic notions of conscious intent and focuses on concrete questions concerning those defined as 'winner' and losers' by the system" (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, p. 3), to "identify the discriminatory effects of institutional practices"

(Dorn, 1985, p.21).

Guided by this theoretical framework, the aim of this study is to explore notions of inequalities in schools as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and as perceived by parents of children aged 0 – 11 years in Malta. Children in this age group in Malta attend childcare (0-3 years), kindergarten (3-5 years) and primary (5 – 11 years) settings. Thus, this study aims to bring out the voices of parents from a culture of silence and highlight their perspectives about educational inequalities experienced. The main research question that guides this paper is, *What are the perspectives of parents about the educational inequalities experienced by children during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

3. The Study

3.1 Methodology

An online questionnaire was selected as a safe, effective and efficient manner to collect data from participant parents during the pandemic. The study was conducted over two phases: Run 1 of the study was conducted in September, 2020 and Run 2 was conducted a year later, in September, 2021. The questions of the first questionnaire related to the school lockdown that occurred between March and June 2020 (15 weeks), and the questions of the second questionnaire related to the school lockdown that occurred between March and April 2021 (2 weeks) in Malta. When the first questionnaire was drafted, there was no plan to conduct the second one; thus the former was planned in response to the ongoing and changing situation of the pandemic in 2020. Consequently, the second questionnaire was designed in line with the evolving situation of the pandemic in 2021. The questionnaire was uploaded to a number of social media platforms and was intended to be filled-in by parents of children aged 0 – 11 years in early and primary education. The questionnaires were composed of mainly multiple-choice items and 5-point Likert scale. A few open-ended questions were included to elicit any additional comments they wished to share. When conducting the questionnaire, we were aware, of the limitation that illiterate or digitally illiterate parents, or those who lacked adequate technological equipment or internet connection, or did not access social media, could not take part in the survey.

The first questionnaire yielded 815 responses, whilst the second yielded 411. In both questionnaires, the large majority of participants were Maltese females aged between 35 and 44 years. 50% of the parents in Survey 1 and 65% of Survey 2 claimed that they had either an undergraduate or a postgraduate degree. Moreover, 40% of the parents in Survey 1 sent their children to state schools, 40% to church schools and 20% to independent schools. For the purpose of this paper, only three close-ended questions and two open-ended questionnaire items from each questionnaire are being presented and discussed due to their relevance to the research question posed in this paper. The selected questions shed light on parents' perspectives about the use of remote modes of teaching and learning in their children's schools, the modalities used as well as the type and level of support offered by schools (see Figures 1, 2, and 3.). The two open-ended questions add some deeper insights into the parents' perspectives and experiences of their children's online teaching and learning during the pandemic. The items chosen to be included in this paper were selected through a process of multiple iterations and categorisation of the themes that emerged.

The study was given ethical clearance by the required research ethics committees. Responses were kept anonymous throughout the data collection, analyses, and reporting process.

4. Results

Results from both surveys show that educational inequalities were exacerbated during the pandemic in Malta. Findings show that the level of preparedness and type of school as well as the socio-economic background of parents contributed towards a negative educational predicament and the widening of educational inequalities.

4.1 The schools' responsiveness to the abrupt shift to remote teaching

One of the first questions that parents were asked in both questionnaires was about whether schools shifted teaching and learning to remote modes after school closure. Figure 1 below shows that in the first school lockdown of March 2020, almost a quarter (22.3%) of the parents indicated that the teacher either rarely (14%) or never (8.3%) went online to communicate with parents and/or hold asynchronous or synchronous sessions. This was supported by a reply to an open-ended question, where twenty parents specifically voiced their disappointment that their child was not provided with online lessons. However, it was encouraging to note that the percentages quoted above, decreased in the second questionnaire of 2021, where the said percentages were almost halved with only 13.5% of the parents indicating that the teacher either rarely (9.8%) or never (3.7%) went online. On the other hand, while in the first questionnaire (2020), 33% of the parents indicated that the teacher went online very frequently, 25.8% indicated that s/he went online frequently, while another 18.8% claimed that s/he only does so sometimes, these percentages increased in the second questionnaire. In fact, in the latter, 40% of the parents indicated that the teacher went online very frequently, 31.7% indicated that s/he went online frequently and 14.8% indicated that s/he went online sometimes. This implies that teachers went online more in the second school lockdown.

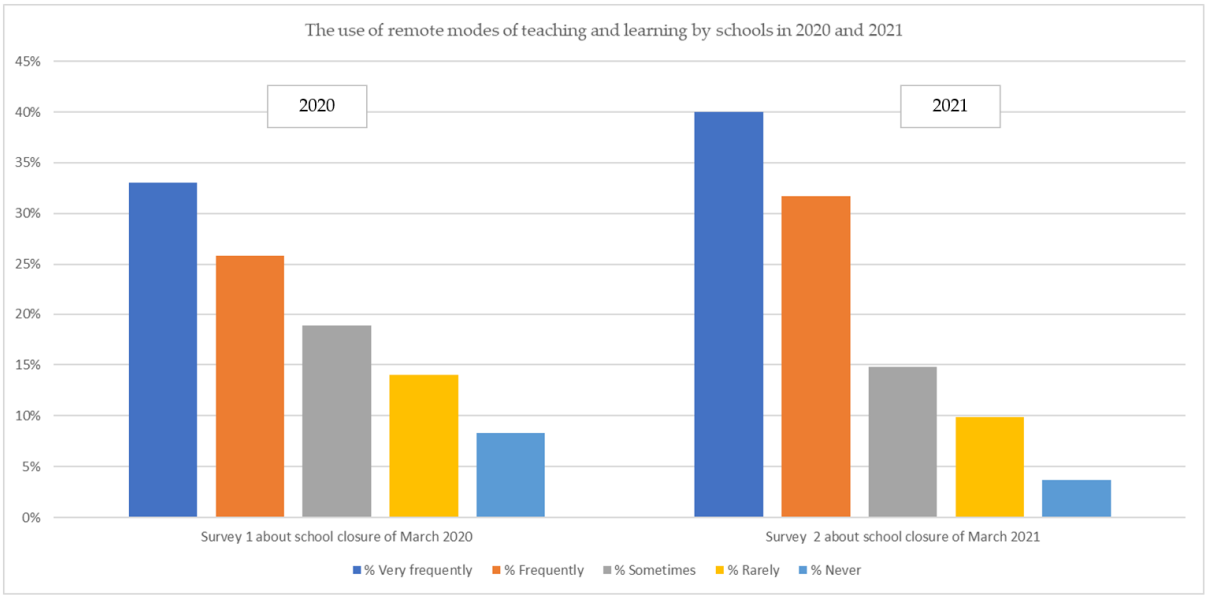

Figure 1: The use of remote modes of teaching and learning by schools

In support of the above findings, in one of the open-ended questions in the first questionnaire, eleven parents praised the teacher (n=8) and/or the school (n=3), for adapting to online modes so quickly in March 2020, with one parent writing:

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

Contrastingly, a larger number of parents (n=34) were more critical, claiming that teachers (n=17) and schools (n=17) were not prepared for such an abrupt shift to remote modes. Referring to her child's teacher, one parent stated:

> *I was very disappointed that the teacher never sent us any work. When the school closed, we didn't hear from her at all.*

This statement echoes the replies of 8.3% of parents in the first questionnaire and 3.7% of the parents in the second questionnaire (Figure 1) who indicated that their child's teacher never went online, neither in synchronous nor in asynchronous modes.

4.2 The level of support provided by schools

Many parents acknowledged the type and level of support provided by schools (Figure 2). In the first questionnaire (2020), the majority of parents (66.8%) stated that schools communicated with them very/frequently; on the other hand, one-fifth (21%) of the parents, claimed that the school rarely (12.3%) or never (8.7%) communicated with them. Conversely, 65.1% claimed that schools provided them with clear explanations about the content material with 19.8% of the parents claiming that the teacher rarely (8.9%) or never (10.9%) did so. In support of this, in an open-ended reply, one parent complained that the teacher never replied to her queries. This plea was supported by other parents who suggested that communication between parents and teachers is crucial in such circumstances. They argued that not only communication should be continuous, but that parents should be informed about the content material and briefed way ahead of what is happening and the decisions that are being taken.

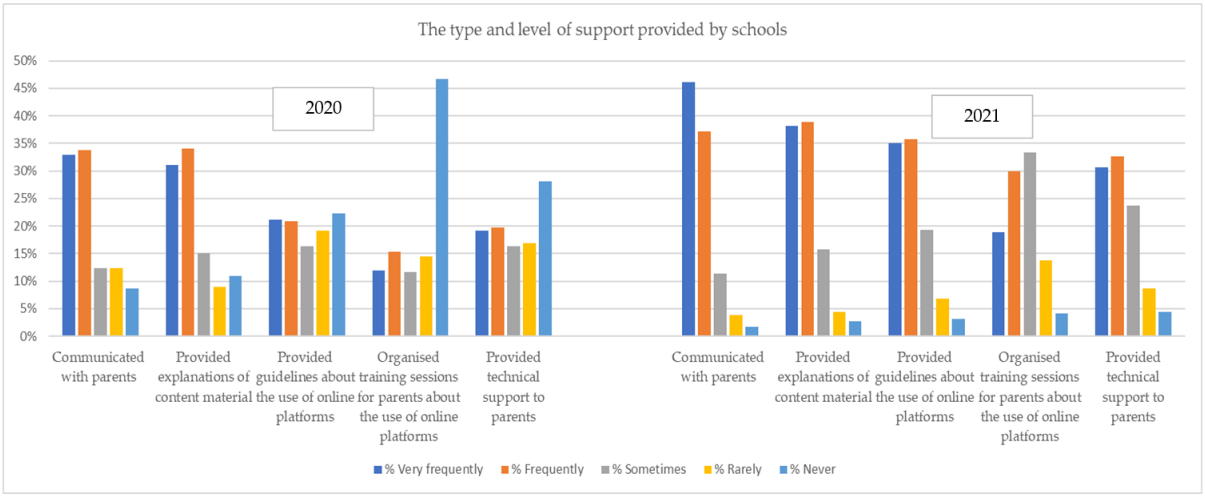

Figure 2: Type and level of support provided by schools in 2020 and 2021

In one of the open-ended questions in the first questionnaire, thirteen parents confirmed the lack of support provided. Eight parents reiterated that they either experienced a lack of communication or no communication at all from the school or the teacher of their child. In support of this, two parents wrote about the challenges they encountered while helping their children, arguing that their children deserved more time and support to get used to online learning. In support of this, another parent blamed the school and teachers for not providing enough help and support:

> *The school should provide more help and teachers should show more interest in the children's work and make sure that it is being done. They should also acknowledge the efforts that parents do to facilitate learning for their children.*

Only 42.1% of the parents in the first questionnaire (2020) claimed that schools very/frequently provided them with guidelines about the use of online platforms, and only 38.8% of the parents claimed that schools very/frequently provided them with training sessions about the use of online modes (Figure 2). Even fewer parents (27.2%) claimed that the school very/frequently organised training sessions for them about the use of online platforms in the same year. Contrastingly, it is noteworthy to point out that 46.7% of the parents claimed that the school never organised such training sessions while another 14.4% claimed that schools only rarely did so. When parents were questioned about the level of support provided by schools in the second questionnaire (2021), it was noted that most parents indicated an increased level of support. As can be easily concluded from Figure 2, data from the second questionnaire shows that schools were more prepared for school lockdown, as communication, the provision of explanations and guidelines as well as technical support, were intensified overall. In fact, the absolute majority of parents (83.1%) claimed that schools communicated with them very/frequently in the second lockdown, an increase of 16.3% over the first, while another 76.9% of the parents agreed that their child's teacher very/frequently provided clear explanations of the content material (an increase of 11.8% from the first questionnaire). Another 70.8% claimed that schools very/frequently provided adequate guidelines about the use of online platforms (an increase of 28.7% over the first questionnaire). More than half of the participants (63.2%) indicated that the school very/frequently provided technical support to access online platforms, while another 48.8% claimed that the school very/frequently organised training sessions about the use of online platforms in the second questionnaire (2021).

4.3 The Modalities used by teachers

In a question that was only included in the first questionnaire (2020) parents were asked about the modalities used by the teacher. Figure 3 shows that the majority of teachers used asynchronous modes of teaching with 63.2% of the parents claiming that every day the teacher either sent a list of exercises from textbooks (34.7%) or sent a list of worksheets (28.5%) for their children to work. Another 64.5% of the parents stated that this is done often (26% for the list of exercises from textbooks and 38.5% for the list of worksheets) while another 25.3% (12.1% and 13.2% respectively), stated that this is done sometimes. Arguably, teachers resorted to traditional ways of teaching and provided children with an array of worksheets or exercises to fill in without any explanation, aimed at keeping children busy with written work. Understandably, this indicates that teachers were still trying to learn how to navigate and teach through online modes. Some teachers went a step further and sent recorded video clips with explanations. However, only 17.8% of the parents claimed that this was done on a daily basis, while 21.7% claimed that this was done often, and 17.3% stated that this was done sometimes. It is remarkable to note that 31.6% of the parents maintained that the teacher never sent recorded video clips. Figure 3 also shows that teachers used synchronous modes of teaching less. 59.1% of the parents claimed that the teacher of their child provided

interactive online real-time sessions with only 21.3% of the parents indicating that this was done every day, 17.2% indicating that this was done often, and 20.6% indicating that this was done sometimes. It is significant that 40.9% of the parents indicated that the teacher never (27.7%) or rarely (13.2%) taught using this mode. Real-time sessions with small groups of children at a time were less popular, with only 4% of the parents claiming that this was done on a daily basis, while another 6.9% claiming that this was done often and 11.2% claimed that this was done sometimes. 70.2% of the parents claimed that their child never had small-group real-time sessions.

In an open-ended related reply to the same question, parents complained about the use of worksheets sent by teachers with one parent specifying that her son's teacher only "*sent some crafts downloaded from Pininterest once a week, but nothing else, unfortunately*". Furthermore, several parents complained about the lack of interesting and engaging activities their children were subject to, with one parent asserting that online lessons were so boring that her child used to sleep. Another parent also showed her disappointment in having to subject her children to asynchronous modes of teaching which were not motivating, arguing, "*We struggled greatly as my children had zero interest in following the lessons without being able to physically interact with their teachers and friends*." Another parent attributed the lack of children's engagement as a result of the lack of digital skills of teachers, who were not able to teach interactively.

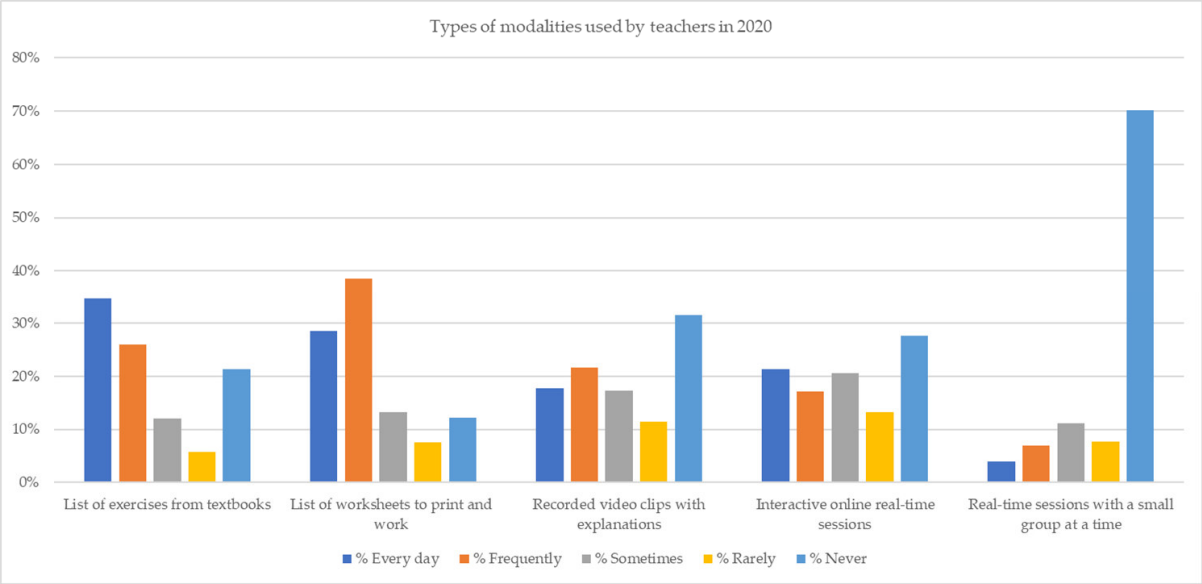

Figure 3: Types of modalities used by teachers in 2020

Five parents in the first questionnaire suggested that teachers should shift from asynchronous to synchronous modes, using real-time live sessions that allow for interaction between the teacher and students and students themselves. However, even parents of children whose teacher shifted to synchronous modes, were disappointed with the quality of teaching, arguing that the teacher was not able to adapt teaching to suit online modes and resorted to traditional, teacher-centred pedagogies such as teaching through the use of PowerPoint Presentations, which frequently were not developmentally appropriate for their children. In view of this, one respondent claimed, "*It was extremely hard to get a 4-year old to sit still and look at the screen (looking at PowerPoint Presentations), for more than a few minutes at a time*." On the other hand, two parents claimed that while online learning might be beneficial for some children, for others it was not; they contend that some children are simply unable to learn through online means. Likewise, another parent argued that because frequently, online activities were not motivating or engaging, there were too disturbances from other children and households, which did not help her children to remain focused and learn, claiming that "O*nline experience was inadequate for a 7/8 year old child. Children were restless. There was no control over who spoke in class. Certain children were constantly interfering and parents had their volume on, thus disturbing the whole class".* Similarly, another parent stated that online activities were disorganised and full of, "*noise, chaos, bad internet connection, tears, and loss of interest in learning*".

4.4 Unequal provision between school sectors

The difference in the level of teacher preparation between school sectors became apparent in the open-ended questions. Three parents praised the church school of their children as being very well-prepared and supportive, with one parent emphasising that:

> *My son's church school was well prepared and continued supporting my child remotely. My niece, however, who attends state school, was left on her own and didn't have support from school. She stayed home for the whole year and did not follow any online lessons nor was the parent provided with material*

/ guidance. Thus, the child, who is in Year 5, missed a lot academically.

Another parent compared the independent school of her son with that of his cousin who attended a state school, claiming:

> *Remote learning was an excellent option to have, and my child's school, which is an independent school, did a wonderful job implementing it. As soon as schools closed, his school immediately shifted to online live lessons, which were interactive and highly interesting. When I compare my child's experience at his independent school with that of his cousin, who attends a state school, I consider my child privileged. This is because his cousin did not have any recorded or live lessons as my son did. Her teacher just sent her an outline of work to be done every week, without any other form of contact with the children. For a nine-year old girl, this was highly disappointing and after a few weeks, she completely lost interest in school and learning.*

These claims were supported by eight other respondents who sent their children to a state school. They claimed that they were disappointed with the school and the way online teaching was managed. These parents asserted that they felt "*abandoned*" and "*ignored*" by the education system with their children experiencing considerable learning loss. These claims of a difference in the teaching provision between schools in the different sectors was also reiterated by another parent who stated that, "*There were teachers in state schools who did very little, whereas church schools prompt their teachers more. The difference is evident."*

The above complaints were in high contrast with what another participant whose child attended a state school claimed. She stated, that the teacher of her child was innovative and experimented with different online modes:

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

It is noteworthy that in their open-ended responses, parents were much more critical of state schools and the inequalities created. While some parents were balanced in their feedback, others were more critical, supposedly reflecting the level of support they were provided with.

5. Discussion

5.1 What can we learn from the parents' voices on educational inequalities uncovered during the pandemic?

The findings show that inequalities in schools intensified during the pandemic. The lack of technological skills and adequate support from educators created a massive disruption to children's education (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Governments need to urgently address deep structural issues to rebuild education systems that provide access to quality education and equal distribution of resources to all and in a fair way to improve the immediate and long-term inequalities (Henderson Henderson, Bussey, & Ebrahim, 2022b) that children experienced during the pandemic. This can be done through continuous investment in the education system, training of teachers and the reversal of policies that inflate inequalities (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

5.2 Inequalities in the provision of online teaching by schools

In support of a previous study by Busuttil and Farrugia (2020), findings from this study show that while some parents in Malta praised schools and educators who were able to adapt their teaching pedagogies very quickly and embrace online modes, other parents were highly critical of remote teaching and the way it was implemented. Parents complained that not all schools and teachers were prepared to make the abrupt shift to online teaching. They argued that some teachers were ill-prepared and did not have the necessary technological skills nor were they familiar with online platforms or had the aptitude to teach online. This resulted in some teachers not logging online at all or doing so haphazardly and in asynchronous ways. Most teachers, especially in the first school lockdown, adopted very traditional ways of teaching where they sent children lists of internet links, worksheets, PowerPoint Presentations or uploaded videos without real explanation, support, monitoring and/or the correction of their work. Synchronous teaching was a challenge for most educators, especially during the first school closure (2020). Understandably so, the focus was not on being innovative or on learning new skills to adapt to the new form of teaching, but it was on surviving an unprecedented and unpredictable situation, where teachers focused on providing some basic form of teaching and learning provision. In fact, the work distributed to Maltese children was more considered as a way to keep children busy and parents satisfied that their children were occupied "learning" something. This finding is sustained by the Eurochild Report (2020), which stated that most teachers in Malta resorted to asynchronous and traditional ways of teaching because they were left on their own. The lack of support from the national education system impelled educators to find their own ways of how to deal with the situation, where shifting to remote modes of teaching proved to be very challenging for some. This is sustained by a study by OECD (2020), which claimed that only 49.1% of Maltese participant teachers felt adequately

equipped to use digital technologies during the pandemic. However, the lack of support and training for teachers was not only problematic in Malta. Bhamani et al. (2020) and Dong et al., (2020), also reported that many teachers worldwide found online learning challenging which resulted in ineffective ways of teaching.

Some parents in this study considered the teachers' lack of initiative, skill, preparedness and motivation to make the necessary transition, as unbecoming of schools and educators. Conversely, Fontenelle-Tereshchuk (2021) contends that it is highly unfair to expect that only educators should learn new skills, and argues that likewise, parents should be motivated and willing to learn and equip themselves with new competencies in order to support their children. Educators, parents and children seemed more prepared for the second school closure. According to parents responding to the second questionnaire of the study, synchronous modes of online learning became more popular. This was corroborated by Napier (as cited in Berger, 2021) who claimed that in the second school closure, local educators progressed from "emergency education to education in times of emergency", where they managed online teaching better. The previous year's school closure provided them with the experience and knowledge to use synchronous learning, and in between, they had the time to plan, prepare and adjust accordingly, indicating that some teachers are willing to change and learn new skills.

The inequity in the support provided to teachers in transitioning to online teaching between the school sectors was evident. While the majority of parents were very critical of how schools managed the shift to online modes of teaching, and of some of the teachers' attitude to adapting and adopting to new modes of teaching and learning, other parents claimed that the school of their child was very well-prepared and shifted to remote teaching quickly and smoothly. Conclusions from this study indicate that the difference in the parents' appraisal did not mainly depend on the phase of the study, that is, first school closure (2020) vis-à-vis the second school closure (2021), but rather on the sector, the school and the motivation, attitude and willingness of the school leadership team and the educators. Findings from this study show that parents clearly considered church and independent schools as more prepared than state schools, claiming that they were more able to transition to online teaching easily and rapidly while providing continued support to children. Results from Vassallo, Doublet Meagher, Zammit, Grech, Refalo and German (2021), attest that children attending state schools were more likely to be offered asynchronous modes of learning. This is supported by the findings of this study, where parents claimed that state schools were more hesitant to shift to online modes of teaching. Parents suggested that state schools did not encourage, train and support teachers enough to help them shift to online modes of teaching. They also claimed that state schools did not provide children with adequate provision, guidance and online material, which resulted in poor levels of learning and even learning loss. Contrastingly, this study also showed that independent schools were more likely to teach through synchronous modes. Consistently, it also seemed a common perspective among parents, that church and independent schools, had more provisions in place, supported and prompted their teachers more to make the shift to online teaching. The reason for this could be three-fold:

i) parents with children in church and even more in independent schools pay (a donation or a fee) for their children's education therefore, obliging schools to provide high-quality education;
ii) the number of church and private schools is smaller; each school is autonomous and self-governing, making it easier to manage, equip and support its teachers during such an unpredictable change;
iii) the lack of guidance from the responsible authorities in relation to the teaching pedagogies to be used, left state schools in particular, which tend to be less autonomous, to their own devices, which frequently resulted in a chaotic provision in these schools.

This implies that those children who come from a low socio-economic background, who are likely to need the most help, therefore whose parents cannot afford to pay for their education in church and independent schools, and as a result who frequently attend state schools, were the least likely to find support. Having said this, we do not mean to imply that state schools are only attended by children from low socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, it must be noted that the difference in the quality of teaching not only resulted in the differences between the school sectors but also between teachers in the same schools. Some state schools, guided by a strong leadership team, were able to shift quickly to online modes and managed to support teachers, parents and children very well; others did not. Referring to how Germany managed teaching and learning during the pandemic, Gunzenhauser, Enke, Johann, Karbacy & Saalbach, (2021), maintain that because the school closure was very sudden, there was no time for adequate planning and the organisation of remote schooling including logistical issues, training and support' was poor, leaving teachers to manage the shift on their own. We argue that the onus to shift to online teaching successfully, and frequently, rested on the teacher, her professionalism, initiative, motivation, commitment and agency. Irrespective of the sector they came from, some teachers rose to the challenge to shift to online modes and were more motivated to learn and try new things, more than others. Perhaps, they were also more knowledgeable and skillful to do so. It must be highlighted that the lack of specific guidelines for schools was also experienced by other countries.

These findings are supported by Borg and Mayo (2021) who claim that the pandemic exposed the inconsistency in the services provided by the different school sectors. They state that parents indicated that different schools provided unequal preparation and quality teaching. They contend that the level of online teaching

by different schools and school sectors, delineated the extent of learning loss for children. Borg (2022a) argues that Malta can provide a socially just education system if all those working in the sector are motivated and empowered to reconsider, rethink and reconstruct an education system that embraces democratic involvement, inclusivity, collective responsibility as well as respect and validity of all stakeholders, including children.

5.3 Narrowing educational inequalities

In view of the main findings highlighted above it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on parents and their children's learning. Findings from this study show that there was inequality of provision across the early and primary years between the three sectors. As argued by Stuhler (2023), "educational inequality is key in reproducing inequality from one generation to the next.". In order to limit the inequalities both during challenging and 'normal' times, a number of measures can be taken. Governments should seek to invest in education to hinder inequality. It is crucial to have knowledgeable and skillful teachers who not only have the skills to access digital platforms and resources but are able to continuously upgrade their pedagogy and practice, to ensure the engagement of all children (Stuhler, 2023; World Bank Group, 2021). Moreover, educators are constantly working in highly challenging and fluid environments, and therefore, they should be prepared to meet the demands of the profession brought by rapid societal and technological changes (OECD, 2022). This can be only achieved if educators are provided with continuous and up-to-date training (Martin, Ebrahim & Excell, 2022) to develop a broader and more complex set of skills and competencies to meet the ever-changing teaching requirements (Boeskens, Nusche & Yurita, 2020; Révai, 2020; Viac & Fraser, 2020). Investment in the education system should also be reflected in equitable resources, and training and support systems for all teachers in all three sectors of the state, church and independent schools in Malta throughout the year. Moreover, it must be pointed out that some schools which are struggling and which have a concentration of children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds should "target extra resources (and) increase teachers' capacity to detect students' needs and manage diverse classrooms" (Borg, 2022b, p. 14).

6. Concluding thoughts

This study explored the inequalities in provision in the Maltese education system as experienced by children and their parents during the pandemic. While the shift from face-to-face teaching to online modes began as "emergency education" this shifted to "education in times of an emergency" (Napier, as cited in Berger, 2021), where most parents tried to meet the challenges brought by the pandemic and the subsequent closure of schools. However, the evident and heightened inequities in the provision of teaching and learning resulted in children experiencing disengagement and learning loss, a finding supported by Stuhler (2023). Schools need to overcome digital exclusion that during the pandemic amplified existing social and economic inequalities, and aim for "digital inclusion ... to dismantle existing structural social inequalities" (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2022). This can be achieved if all involved stakeholders, from global digital companies and standards bodies to policymakers, community centres, schools, teachers, parents and children, are equally involved in holistically addressing digital inequalities while recognising that resolutions to digital inequalities are not always digital. This is where policy matters (Stuhler, 2023).

In view of the findings in this paper, it would be interesting to explore the inequalities heightened by the pandemic as experienced by children and their parents in their homes, where the families' socio-economic background, their level of education, and the time they could dedicate to support their children, could have affected the children's learning experiences. Moreover, further research could also analyse the extent of the learning losses suffered by learners as a result of these inequalities and how or whether this is addressed in the coming years by the relevant authorities. Following the recommendation by Schweiger (2023), where he suggested the ethical need to take adolescents' views on the effect of the pandemic seriously, and as an extension to this study, another study could be held with younger, early and primary children where through conversations with them and/or use other modes of communication suitable for them, such as drawings, children will be provided with the opportunity to voice their thoughts about their experience of the pandemic and how it affected their learning, relationships and mental health: it is an ethical requirement to take children's voices seriously. Other future research can also explore other losses experienced by learners during the pandemic due to inequalities in education, that go beyond academic achievement to include social and emotional well-being.

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