



# Parents' New Role and Needs During the COVID-19 Educational Emergency

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## Abstract

This article contributes to the on-going discussion of parental involvement in the education of children, with emphasis on new and unfamiliar roles of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The case study undertaken focuses on parents of first graders who belong to non-vulnerable and vulnerable social groups, and the first-grade teachers of a public primary school in the north of Greece. Research questions address the experience of 'parents–teachers', the need for technological tools and the required digital literacy, as well as the impact of homeschooling on the wellbeing of the family unit. Data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews. The data analysis shows that parents of both social groups took on the role of the teacher to accommodate the learning challenges of first graders. Mothers from vulnerable groups, in particular, encountered various challenges when attempting to support their children mainly in language lessons. Regarding the use of new technologies, the pandemic found parents of both groups unprepared and unfamiliar with the process of distance education. Stress and worry were the dominant emotions from the very start of homeschooling during the early stages of the pandemic while towards the end of the first lockdown, exhaustion overwhelmed parents and pupils. The article concludes with emphasizing the importance of active parental involvement and coaching that enables parents to contribute substantially to their children's education in emergency situations.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Parental involvement · Home-learning · Family wellbeing · Parent coaching · Distance emergency education

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted education at all levels in all disciplines. Students of all age groups have been forced to respond to an unexpected emergency transition where they had to move from face-to-face to remote teaching. Within these new educational environments, students were also expected to work on online learning environments without receiving any digital coaching. Particularly, younger age groups depended on their parents in order to address the challenges of their new teaching normal. However, parents, students and teachers were unprepared for this sudden shift, and, while assisting children in various levels and modes of distance learning, hardships difficulties of increased Parental Involvement (PI) were brought to the surface. Specifically, parents were forced to take on new and unfamiliar responsibilities as their children participated in emergency remote education, while experiencing increasing instructional responsibilities (Liu et al., 2020).

The purpose of the present study was to investigate parents' experiences and challenges during school closures. More specifically, it examined PI in relation to their self-efficacy, beliefs and contribution to their children's emergency remote education. The paper addressed the following research questions:

1. How did parents experience the role of the teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Did parents have the necessary technological means and digital literacy levels to accommodate the learning needs of their children?
3. What were the psychological effects of home-learning on the wellbeing of the family?

In order to respond to these questions, semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers of primary school children based in northern Greece were undertaken. The results presented in this paper contributes new aspects of PI and raise issues that need to be addressed by stakeholders and policymakers in the field of education. The findings have important policy and pedagogical implications for delivering distance learning and working with families during school suspensions.

## Literature Review

Parental Involvement (PI) is a core issue in the field of education (Koutrouba et al., 2009) due to the fact that effective communication and combining mechanisms between parents and teachers could ensure positive learning outcomes (Kraft & Doherty, 2013). In fact, Barge and Loges (2003), who studied the meaning of PI for teachers, children and their parents, concluded that the term 'Parental Involvement' evolves around (1) proper and regular supervision of assignments by parents, (2) close personal connection with teachers, and (3) having extra-curricular school programs. PI has been associated with children's academic achievement, academic

success, improved school attendance and behavior, positive perceptions of the classroom and school environment, strong work orientation, and high educational aspirations (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Steinberg et al., 1989; Zellman & Waterman 1998).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, research showed that PI is consistent, positive and convincing. Parents have a major impact on children's achievement in school, and through life. When schools, families and community groups collaborate, learning is supported and children tend to do better, stay in school longer and enjoy the learning process more (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Wilder, 2014) argues that the effect of PI on students' academic achievement has been widely recognized as an integral part of new educational reforms and initiatives. However, it is not always possible for a teacher to develop a positive relationship with the parents, and many either avoid contact (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999), indicate parents' unwillingness to be involved in their children's schooling (Dauber & Epstein, 1989) or feel it is not necessary to communicate with parents as their students grow older (Tozer et al., 2006). Furthermore, while empirical evidence has shown that practitioners often encourage PI when it comes to children's well-being and homework support, teachers have been recorded to provide parents with little or no guidelines to help their children at home (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Giannikas & Nikitaki, in print). Goodall's research (2016) indicates that schools and teachers do not have enough guidance to improve PI experience, especially when it comes to the effective use of technology. This can be a significant loss as parents have been reported to appreciate teacher guidance. Such experience can potentially increase efficacy for helping their children learn when teachers offer specific suggestions for involvement (Epstein, 1986). This resurfaced during the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. In conclusion it can be said that the issues that were identified in empirical studies regarding PI in traditional school site-based settings follow the education system well into the COVID-19 era.

PI during the COVID-19 lockdowns has taken on an entirely new meaning. While mobility restrictions and social isolation associated with lockdown may have proved to be successful in reducing the COVID-19 spread, they seem to bring about serious concerns regarding families' psychological wellbeing; the lockdown has been observed to create excess stress and negative emotions on parents with the potential on affecting their children's mental health and wellbeing (Sprang & Silman, 2013). Brooks' et al. (2020) research indicates that a lockdown can cause severe damage on adults' well-being, increasing depression, stress, and irritability whereas post-traumatic stress symptoms can linger years after the quarantine. According to Spinelli et al. (2020), in prolonged quarantine periods the ability to fulfill the parenting role is impaired, which could lead to an exacerbation of the pandemic on children. The researchers also stressed that dyadic parenting stress, which refers to the relationship between the resources available to fulfill parenting roles and the demands of parenting (Abidin, 1992), has increased children's emotional and behavioral difficulties. In their research Kim & Padilla (2020) found that despite having a baseline level of access to technology, students and parents faced significant barriers on having adequate access to the appropriate tools and internet. Furthermore, parents are expected to take on new and unfamiliar roles due to their children's online education, while

also experiencing increasing instructional responsibilities for their child's learning (Liu et al., 2020).

As a result, parents often struggle with understanding and delivering within the role they are expected to play in their children's online learning (Boulton, 2008). In addition, lack of time to prepare, as well as mental health concerns, worries, and parenting stress seem to interfere with parents' ability to support their children's educational needs and demands. During the pandemic, parents have reported higher levels of stress when compared to adults without children (American Psychological Association, 2020) and mental health struggles overall (Patrick et al., 2020). More than 7 in 10 parents claimed that managing their children's online learning and routine disruptions and adjusting to new routines were extremely stressful (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Although the current situation may include some positive factors for parents and children, such as the ability to spend more time with each other, several features of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) may increase the risk of trauma, including the loss of immobility, detachment or distancing, a lost sense of time and security. Especially for low-income parents and those suffering with pre-existing mental health problems, these issues are likely to escalate (Fontanessi et al., 2020).

## The Context

In Greece, research data concerning PI is not extensive and mainly concentrates on primary education. Poulou & Matsagouras (2007) investigations show that Greek parents adopt a different role to that of their child's teacher; more specifically, teachers are very often regarded as an indisputable authority as far as knowledge-transmission, classroom management and administration are concerned. On the other hand, parents are self-entrusted with their children's out-of-school activity, socio-emotional development and assistance of homework, where they would follow teacher's advice and guidance. According to Mastagouras (2008), this distinction of roles strengthens the authority of school and the dominant role of teacher, where parents generally do not intervene in their children's in-school academic development. Moreover, these roles could probably explain why PI in Greece is so noticeably low and limited exclusively to parents' rare scheduled visits to school (Morgan et al., 1992; Mylonakou-Keke, 2006; Giannikas & Nikitaki, in print). It could also explain why Greek parents believe that only the provision of help during homework can be advantageous, while other parental engagement in school life activities is to produce insignificant outcomes or even cause damage (Pnevmatikos et al., 2008; Giannikas & Nikitaki, in print).

According to Anastasiou & Papagianni (2020), initiatives to improve PI in Greek schools in the past were chaotic. However, recently PI was officially emphasized by the educational authorities in the country (Xanthacou et al., 2013). Parents' participation has been formalized with the establishment of a Parents' Association in every school unit (Lazaridou & Kassida, 2015). Nevertheless, the Greek law concentrates on the formal and legal dimension of the PI in the school unit, while there is less interest in an essential pedagogic relationship between the family and the school

(Xanthakou et al., 2013). Unfortunately, efforts to improve parents-school communication and PI in general have been halted by the country's economic crisis, teachers' relocations after school closures due to the country's finances, extended employment freezes, rising number of teachers' retirements, decrease in the number of seasonally employed teachers (Filippidis et al., 2014), and the overall reduction in the teaching workforce. Under such conditions, teachers have been working with increased workload and have limited time for collaborating or guiding parents (Anastasiou & Pappagianni, 2020). There is little information in the literature regarding Greek school administrators' attitudes towards PI, and how the administrators go about meeting the new mandate to increase participation by parents and communities (Lazaridou & Kassida, 2015). Therefore, it is a necessary to research the role of PI in the school systematically so as to be able to draw valuable conclusions concerning the real picture of the Greek educational system (Xanthakou et al., 2013; Giannikas & Nikitaki, in print).

The following section will elaborate on the research methodology of the current study that aimed to collect data on this neglected issue, in light of the family and school needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings will display the first phase of COVID-19 pandemic and the parents' new role as they became responsible for their children's education.

## Research Methodology

The aim of the current study was to understand the difficulties faced in PI during the period of compulsory home-learning due to March-June 2020 lockdown and the consequent limited communication of pupils with their teachers. This is not a large-scale research. It is a case study (for the use of term 'case study' see Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021a, p. 80; see also Yin, 2014) that investigates the realities and challenges faced by ten parents of first-grade children and their teachers, based in a public primary school in the center of Thessaloniki, Greece, during the March-June 2020 school closure and first national lockdown.

The research conducted was qualitative. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with individual participants. The study sample consisted of ten mothers (mothers are usually those who monitor the children's progress in school in the current context). Their children were enrolled in the first grade of the same public primary school (divided in two groups) in the center of Thessaloniki, and the two classroom teachers (see Fig. 1). Participants were asked a series of 21 open-ended questions (regarding the way parents managed their children's education) and eight closed-ended questions (demographic data) (see Appendix). The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

It is important to mention that the interviewees belong to 'non-vulnerable' and 'vulnerable social' groups. The term 'vulnerable social' groups in the present study

refers to migrant and refugee families whose children attend school in Greece. Specifically, 60% of the parents were of a non-vulnerable groups and 40% of a vulnerable groups, as is quite often the case in urban Greek schools<sup>1</sup> (Ventouris et al., 2022). In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants in the current research, parents' names were replaced by the letter P (Parent) and a number, e.g. P1, P2, etc. while teachers are referred to as T1 and T2. The extracts have been translated in English by the researchers.

After the transcription, the data analysis followed a qualitative content analysis scheme of Creswell (2012). The data was organized using thematic content analysis and a database was created with the participants' responses. Related text segments were color-coded and after the initial coding process, the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was applied to develop categories of analysis. In this process, the researchers compared codes and themes to reduce redundancy.

## Research setting and participants

The study took place from June 2020 to October 2020. Parents were invited through personal contacts and networks. The two teachers were approached individually and took part in the study enthusiastically. Each interview lasted from 20 to 40 min, depending on parents' availability and willingness to share their experience. Parents were interviewed at a convenient time in physical presence in closed or open spaces. The same process was adopted for the two class teachers. The interviews were conducted with sensitivity and parents admitted they felt more comfortable in private face-to-face interviews with the researcher. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer and interviewee spoke for 5–10 min to help interviewees feel more comfortable. As the interviews progressed, parents embraced the safe environment and were more willing to share. The interviewees gave their consent in writing where they agreed to record the interviews and that the data collected would be handled using the European Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (De Groot, 2020).

## Profile of the participants

Schools closed suddenly in the spring of 2020 (March–June 2020). In Greece, home-schooling is allowed only in exceptional cases (*Law 1566/1985 – GG 167/30.09.1985*). Initially, an attempt was made by teachers to provide the education material via an e-educational platform called “e-me”. However, this procedure proved to be

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<sup>1</sup> While around 6.2% of the Greek population in 2013 had been born abroad, setting Greece among OECD countries with the smallest foreign-born population, there has been a massive increase in refugees. In 2015 nearly one million refugees entered Greece. Although many intended to move on to other European countries, around 50,000 applications for asylum were made by refugees, while many of them had the intention of staying in Greece. As of September 2017, nearly 50,000 refugees were in Greece, most of them residing in Refugee Accommodation Sites. More than 40% of them were children (UNHCR, 2017).

dysfunctional and time consuming. Many teachers, after uploading the course material to the education platform, had to send it by e-mail to the students' parents because of inability to access the materials on the platform.

This also transferred the role of the teacher to the parents without any coaching or preparation. In particular, the families who participated in the study were obliged to conduct homeschooling with their children for about a month in the middle of the lockdown, e.g. from mid-April until early June 2020. When schools opened, students, first graders included, were introduced to teleconferencing via Web-EX (the platform used in Greece, as assigned by the Ministry of Education) and worked with their teacher online for one hour twice a week. (The school year had been extended for two weeks in June to make up for the loss of school time).

The majority of parents who participated in this research were not working during lockdown with the exception of a mother who was a doctor, but she was working outside home, and a mother who was a teacher, but she was working from home. Six out of ten families also had an older child at home. One family had one older and one younger child. One family had 3 younger children, while 2 families had only one child. The children reported in this study were those attending the first grade of the primary school under study, and were around 6+ years old, not yet fully developed their basic literacy in reading, writing or digital skills.

The following tables (Tables 1 and 2) display parents' and teachers' key demographics based on their answers to the interview questions. In Table 1 the first 6 columns refer to parents from non-vulnerable social groups and the remaining four refer to parents from vulnerable social groups.

Both teachers of the two classes who participated in the research had 35 years of experience in Greek public education each and were willing to help the researchers by providing them with additional information. The answers they gave were meant to be used for cross checking purposes, e.g. parents' replies.

## Research Results

The wellbeing of an educational community is jeopardized when the educational progress of its members is hindered. The present study explored three areas of the families' wellbeing during the first lockdown period in Greece (March–June 2021):

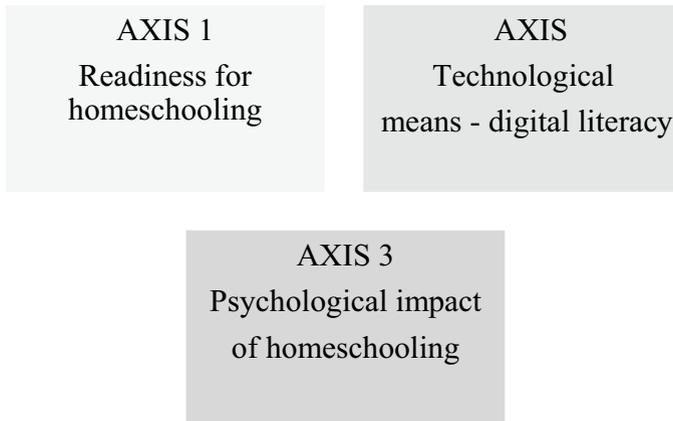
- the readiness of parents to take on new roles, e.g. the role of the teacher,
- the availability of infrastructure and the level of digital literacy in order to act as e-supporters for their children and.
- the psychological impact that the process of homeschooling would have on themselves and their children.

**Table 1** Parents' demographics

Demographics	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
Gender (F: Female)	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Age	30–40	40–50	40–50	30–40	30–40	40–50	30–40	30–40	30–40	30–40
Marital status (M)	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Education	BA	PhD	BA	HSG	HSG	BA	HSG	HSG	HSG	HSG
BA(chelor)										
H(igher) S(chool) G(raduate)										
Employment	E	E	E	E	UN	UN	UN	PT	UN	PT
E(mployed)										
P(art) T(ime)										
UN (employed)										
Work Schedule/										
Working Hours	MH	MH	MH	MH				Rolling program		MH
M(orning) H(ours)										
Experience in distance education as a learner or as a teacher	NO	NO	NO							
Familiarity with distance learning platforms	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO

**Table 2** Teachers' demographics

Demographics 3	T1	T2
Gender	Female	Female
Age group	50–60	50–60
Marital status	Married	Married
Education	BA	BA
Employment	Employed	Employed
Work Schedule/ Working Hours	Morning hours	Morning hours
Experience in distance education as a learner or as a teacher	No	No
Familiarity with distance learning platforms	No	No

**Fig. 1** The three axes of the interview

## RQ1. Readiness for Home-Learning

### PI -Parents as teachers

Due to the COVID-19 lockdown, parents of the primary school pupils were suddenly forced to take on additional roles, that is the role of the teacher (Letzel et al., 2020). However, as the data indicates, parents were not prepared for this role. Many of the participants did not have the necessary knowledge nor did they know how to manage their children as pupils. Educating their children under the new pandemic realities was a great challenge.

Extract 1: "... I would spend all day long teaching my children. Having two children at home, my program was really heavy. That is, I had to help them with the school lessons, to print the exercises the teacher sent, to support them during the web-ex and all that. We, the parents I mean, took on the role of the

teacher. But let me tell you ... I just think ... I do not know ... I'm concerned about my youngest daughter's progress at school. She is not so good at language lessons as she was at school." P8

Nonetheless, some cases were recorded to be more successful than others. According to the data, the educational process was based on: (1) parents' free time, (2) the parents' ability to substitute the teacher, (3) the willingness to be self-taught, and (4) to apply teaching methods that would stimulate their children's interest in learning. The following extracts shed more light in the PI situation and challenges:

Extract 2: "They learn words and maths playing monopoly [...] we combined learning maths and language together [...]. We read the information on the cards, the name of the streets and at the same time we bought houses with fake money and ... we did calculations". P4

On the other hand, parents of children of vulnerable groups stated that they were unable to help their children, especially in terms of language lessons (also in Fontanelle-Tereshchuk, 2021a). According to P9:

Extract 3: "My children needed help. I am a foreigner. I do not speak or write the language well. I can not explain everything that is written in their books as the teacher does in the class. I had a hard time too. I tried to do it a couple of times but my children got more confused [...] This was the most difficult thing when I tried to help them with the lessons". P9

The variety of parents' responses regarding their role as teachers and their children's attitudes are confirmed by the answer to the relevant question of the T1, as seen in Extract 3:

Extract 4: "There were parents who complained to me that their children did not want to study. I would say that the percentage was quite low, about 40% according to what I had estimated. There were also parents who told me that their children studied with great pleasure". T1

According to the above excerpts, parents took on the role of teacher without any preparation or training. They started to act as each of them could or considered better and this process had an impact on the behavior of their children as pupils. They had to work really hard to meet the demands of their children. Many times they even devoted all their free time to this process but the results often were not as expected. On the other hand, parents of children from vulnerable groups, no matter how much they had the mood and the time, could not help their children, especially in language courses. They were not able to teach language. Greek for them was a language they had learned without going to school themselves. This situation caused them great sadness and frustration.

### Changes in Daily Routine

The participants' daily routine changed radically, since in most cases parents did not work or had to work from home (see Table 1) and children were not physically

attending school (Parczewska, 2020, p. 10). All participants stated that they woke up later than usual, nonetheless, parents often tried to implement their pre-COVID family schedule. However, these attempts were unsuccessful while 75% of parents from vulnerable families and 60% of parents from non-vulnerable families stated that they themselves had set a bad example for their children.

Data showed that parents put pressure on their children to follow their daily schedule, despite the fact that due to lockdown their daily routine and responsibilities had been paused. Mothers of the non-vulnerable families managed to maintain the daily schedule/rhythm of the family life giving up sometimes their personal program. This schedule does not refer to student's study hours. Extracts 5 and 6 illustrate these points, e.g.

Extract 5: "Since we were obligated to stay at home, we had to apply a schedule to make our every day life easier, as we were four people locked in a very small apartment. From the first day of the lockdown, me, my husband and my two children agreed on a daily program. We wrote down what we would do with the children every one or two hours..." P2

On the contrary, as seen in Extract 6, the parent from the vulnerable group had a different experience:

Extract 6: " I could not follow any program. We couldn't follow a program like the others kids of the class [...] we did not have access to internet and I had to find access to internet or another mother to tell me what our children had to study [...]. We were waking up about 12.00 p.m. each day, we slept at 12.00 or 1.00 am [...] everything changed [...]. And now we still cannot return to our previous routines. I wake my son up and he cries. He does not want to go to school at all. He says "I do not like it. I do not want to attend school classes". P7

The teachers also confirmed the difficulties faced by the parents with the adoption of a stable daily study program, e.g.

Extract 7: "By contrast to the pre-Covid situation, what particularly upset parents was that they could not set times limits for their children. [...] In other words, the children did not do the activities set by their teacher and their excuse was .... "why do I have to do it now, since my teacher is not here to check them right away? I will do it later " [...]. This is what parents told me during our telephone conversations and my advice was that there has to be a schedule". T2

The pandemic disrupted the daily routine of parents and children. Parents stopped going to work in most cases, children stopped going to school. The benefits of following a daily routine have been lost and some parents have sought to adhere to it by all means. On the other hand, parents from the vulnerable groups found it more difficult to act this way, because, as they say, the issue of self-regulation was raised in adverse conditions.

## The Quality of the e-Lessons

Researchers stress that the following areas are important for student satisfaction with online instruction: (1) interaction among pupils, (2) quality and timely interaction between student and teacher, (3) consistent course design across courses, (4) technical support availability, and (5) flexibility of online courses (Young & Norgard, 2006; Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008). The conditions under which classes at elementary level took place in the study, changed dramatically. For example, at the beginning of the lockdown, pupils communicated with their teacher only via the Web-Ex platform.

In terms of teaching and learning, COVID had a strong impact. The teaching process at school was abruptly interrupted and transitioned to distance education (Nikiforos et al., 2020). Learning took place at home with the participation of the parents, especially for the young pupils. In many cases teachers in Greece decided not to proceed further in the curriculum and to repeat only what had already been taught before the first phase of the lockdown. Teaching classes lasted one hour twice a week for the first grade of the primary school. Teaching and homework was done at home with the help of parents following the instructions sent by the teacher usually by e-mail. The teachers also emailed their feedback to the pupils. Feedback was mostly supportive rather than corrective. Hence, distance education was piloted under pressure conditions. For example:

Extract 8: “First of all, the tasks for homework had to be written. So, I had to print the exercises the teacher sent, because I wanted my child to answer them as he did at school. So, I printed them, my eldest daughter answered them on paper and then I typed them and sent the answers back to the teacher. I wanted to send them to the teacher via the e-Me platform, but my younger daughter is in the first grade of the primary school. I wanted her to do exactly what she had learned at school, to write on the notebook. Because [...] as I have already said to her teacher, the way she writes on notebook is awkward [...]”. P5

The emergency remote teaching situation due to COVID-19 seems to have transformed the role of the parents turning them into teachers themselves and support their children’s learning. Feedback provided by the teachers was also very supportive for pupils. A parent from the vulnerable group explained the parent-teacher collaboration as follows:

Extract 9: “We would send my son’s answers to the teacher day after day and she would check how much of the homework my son had done, what kind of problems he was facing, what exercises he had done [...]. Our teacher would usually reply: “Great job! You made a few mistakes here! Be careful there!” The teacher would then circle my son’s mistakes and then we asked him to do the same exercises one more time”. P10

Unfortunately, teachers had no experience or training in distance education. One of the teachers (T1) noted:

Extract 10: “My need is to be trained as a distance learning teacher, first and foremost in the role of technology in distance education. Even in my attitude [...] that is, what I need to change as a teacher, what I need to learn as a teacher to accomplish the best possible communication with pupils through such a process. I know how to behave in the classroom, because I have many years of experience. But I have no experience with this way of teaching”. T1

Under COVID-19 educational condition, the process of teaching in the classroom was replaced by teaching at home with the support of parents, while the work of teachers in the first phase of the pandemic was supportive of the learning process. During the first phase of the pandemic there was very little interaction among pupils, but also among the teacher and the pupils, mainly through the web-ex platform. The teaching material was not designed for distance education. Teachers and pupils were not accustomed to this form of education either. Therefore the pilot implementation of distance education affected the quality of the e-lessons.

## RQ2. Technological Equipment

### Inadequacy of Infrastructure

The lack of technological equipment was quite common during the first period of the lockdown along with the slow internet connection (Greenhow et al., 2020). All parents reported the need to access technology for learning reasons at home or to meet the requirements of distance learning at the beginning of the interviews. However, during the interviews respondents revealed that 100% of parents from vulnerable families and 30% of parents from non-vulnerable families were faced with shortages of technological equipment. The lack of the required number of laptops or printer per household and cameras and/or microphones that did not work effectively constituted major challenges in supporting learning at home. Parents were not able to purchase the aforementioned equipment due to lockdown (they tried to order some of the above-mentioned equipment online but very often equipment of this kind was out of stock). It seemed that it had been taken for granted that every child had access to the proper technological equipment to follow learning through e-school platforms. According to participant P3:

Extract 11: “My two children had to take classes online at the same time. The situation became difficult. We only had one laptop at home. My younger daughter attended her classes via my mobile phone. We did not have a printer, we could not print the handouts the teacher would send like other parents”.

‘Parent-teachers’ from vulnerable social groups faced many problems with technological equipment. According to participant P9 from the vulnerable group:

Extract 12: “I had a computer but neither the camera nor the microphone worked, so my child had to attend the class on my mobile phone. A friend of mine who had a printer helped me with printing out copies of the exer-

cises the teacher was sending. For example, each time I went to the supermarket, I would call her, ask her to print the exercises for my child and meet her in the supermarket to give me the photocopies”.

It is extremely interesting how resourceful parents had to be in terms of technological infrastructure in order to meet the learning needs of their children.

## Digital Literacy

During the first COVID-19 lockdown in Greece, parents were abruptly assigned the role of the teacher in the e-school platform without having the necessary digital literacy. As mentioned above, the Ministry of Education proposed the use of three educational platforms: e-class, e-me and Webex (Manousou et al., 2021). Parents, mainly those from vulnerable groups, stressed that they were unfamiliar with (1) word, (2) how to register in educational platforms and (3) the usage of e-mail or Viber to communicate with the teachers and email them their children's homework. All three components were needed so that the pupils could participate in distance education from home. The current data demonstrate that in reality parents could not help their children, as they were suddenly called to do something completely unfamiliar to them without being trained in it. Teachers, on the other hand, were more familiar with new technologies than parents but they did not know how to use them properly for educational purposes (also see Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021b). Finally, according to parents', pupils were unfamiliar with the new means of communication, e.g. participating in a synchronous sessions with their teacher via the Webex platform.

Furthermore, the medium used for teaching influenced participants' behavior and reactions as well as the way the lesson was conducted.

Extract 13: “At first my son was stressed. He did not want to talk to the teacher via Webex. He felt fear, anxiety [...]. I told him “You do not need to talk to your teacher, just listen to her. She is your teacher. Your friends are also online [...] but he answered, “I do not want to talk, mom”. P8

Teachers very often referred to their self-training in teaching with new technologies and the complete lack of training in distance learning. T2 explained:

Extract 14: " [...] I have had some training in the use of Office and Internet. It has helped me find various websites and things to read. I also watched videos via internet and used them all for my job. I have not been trained to be an online teacher. It's quite different". T2

According to the excerpts from the interviews, students, parents and teachers were completely unprepared for the transition to distance education and they felt uncomfortable being exposed to unknown methods of teaching and learning.

### RQ3. The Psychological Impact of Home-Learning

#### School as a Motivation for Learning and Socialization

Previous research has also highlighted the importance of school in the socialization of young pupils (Flack et al., 2020; Pozas et al., 2021). In the current study, interview respondents stressed that school attendance had an additional positive impact in that it promoted the learning process and increased the external motivations for learning (also see Ferreira et al., 2011). The positive role of and good communication with the teacher emerged as very important factor for the young primary school pupils. In several cases, the teachers reported that they provided, through personal telephone communication, psychological support to both parents and children. Specifically, participant P7 of the vulnerable group stressed the following:

Extract 15: " Our teacher communicated with the children by phone. She called them once a week and told us to come in contact with her in case the children needed anything. I knew that if I had a problem, she would accept to call me. That is ... a day when my child was shouting "I want to go back to school, I want to go back to school"... I made a call to our teacher and she immediately called back and talked to my daughter ... Her words calmed her down right away. It seemed that our teacher was next to our children and their parents too.". P7

Participant P6 from the non-vulnerable group refers to learning difficulties pupils faced due to school closure and the role of the teacher in the learning process which cannot be easily replaced by untrained parents.

Extract 16: "It was really hard for the first grades of primary school ... for the beginners it was difficult. She was a good pupil, but when they returned to school after the lockdown, she faced difficulties in reading. During home-schooling, she did not always do what the teacher said. She set her limits "Now I will only do maths. In the afternoon I will do ... ". We were trying to find a way to communicate [...]. That's why I say that sometimes it's different with the teacher. Children have a different kind of relationship with their teacher". P6

Both groups of parents, vulnerable and non-vulnerable, referred to the school as a place that plays an important role in the mental health and socialization of children. The school, when it was open, served as a place which motivated children not only to learn but also to socialize. T2 stated:

Extract 17: "Our pupils lacked contact with the teacher and contact with each other. They were different after [...]. They realized the value the school has. They stopped complaining about other kids saying things such "he is teasing me, he makes fun of me ...". They all played together, enjoyed the break and the game very much. They became mature abruptly and socialized. They realized that when at school you get in touch with classmates even though it is somewhat tedious. For example, when they are in class for too many hours

they do things they find them a little indifferent and boring sometimes [...]. This was evident after the end of the lockdown. They felt the need to hug each other, they missed their classmates, they missed them very much". T2

## Stress and Worry

The process of teaching and supervising their children's learning was very stressful for parents (also see Thorell et al., 2021). However, an additional challenge was to convince young students in particular, that they were still obliged to do their homework. According to the interviews, 90% of parents (and their children) stated that they felt exhaustion (also in Brooks' et al., 2020; Spinelli et al., 2020). This was stressed by vulnerable groups, in particular, who were feeling helpless due to lack of knowledge and lack of technological means to support their children. The following extracts from parents of the non-vulnerable and vulnerable groups and their teacher respectively highlight this situation.

Extract 18: "When it all started, I said that I would not be involved in the education process ... Of course, after a while I understood that somehow we had to do so. It is not only that the learning process was not moving forward. It was moving backwards... our children had learned some things at the beginning of the year and then, little by little they forgot them. So we had to step in and rectify the situation ... we had to be involved in their education". P1

The unexpected closure of schools and the teaching at home by an untrained parent-teacher caused stress and worry to the children who then did not want to return to school.

Extract 19: "My son was under a lot of pressure. He could not understand the lessons and I could not explain them to him. He did not want to study, he cried a lot. Now he does not want to go to school at all. He thought that homeschooling was a creation of my imagination. For him it was not true that the teacher wanted them to study at home while the school remained closed". P7

The stress that the teaching process caused to both parents and students was increased by the fact that the parents were attending to the learning process and somehow controlled both.

Extract 20: "Distance education caused me stress because I knew I was not alone with the pupils. I knew there were parents behind the computer screen, because the children were young and needed their help. [...] Because I knew that some children, while we were in the classroom, were ready to answer immediately each time I asked a question. Now they were looking at their parents trying to say something in their presence and many times they hesitated to answer my questions. [...] Therefore, this process caused me stress. It was so because the stress was mainly due to the choice of what I had to teach. I wanted to find texts that would help children, especially psychologically, to deal with the situation we had to face". T1

## Children's Mental Health

The most challenging issue parents had to cope with during lockdown and school closures was the mental health and well-being of their children. Relevant literature stresses that lack of contact and social interaction with classmates was likely to negatively affect the psychology and social development of young pupils (also see Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2020, American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020). Participants in the interviews from both groups of parents and teachers confirmed this state of affairs.

Extract 21: "He was really happy when he saw his classmates on the video conference. He became excited and was anxiously waiting to attend the teleconference meeting. He wanted to see his friends again and could not wait". P10

Extract 22: "She also missed her classmates and interacting with them but she accepted it because the conditions were like that. It was easier before the lockdown to do her homework. After schools closed, she was more reluctant to study". P1

Extract 23: "During the first teleconference meeting, I saw my pupils "frozen". I think it was due to the presence of their parents. They could not be spontaneous because their parents were next to them. Perhaps before the online lessons started, some instructions could have been given from parents to their children. They had a special attitude ... I realized that there were parents next to them .... but they were also very young to handle the teleconference session alone. Those who had their parents nearby behaved very differently compared to how they were in the classroom". T2

The mental health of the children was greatly affected by the closure of the school, the isolation children were feeling and the transition to the new distance education reality.

## Discussion

PI is undoubtedly important in pupils' academic success (Amaral, 2007; Chen & Harris, 2009; Koutrouba et al., 2009; Sedibe & Fourie, 2018). This article sheds light on how families from vulnerable and non-vulnerable groups experienced the first period of primary distance education due to the COVID-19 lockdown. Various points for discussion regarding the application of digital education emerged during the interviews and in some cases challenges that the parents themselves had not realized came to light.

### RQ1. How Did Parents Experience the Role of the Teacher?

According to the data, for the first time in Greece and all over the world, because of the pandemic, parents had to take on the role of the teacher due to the complex

situation of distance education where families (Liu et al., 2020) and educators were not prepared for the swift transfer to online teaching/learning (Brom et al., 2020). Distance education, according to what parents said, is not suitable for primary school-aged children, especially for those attending the first grade of the primary school who learn to the basics of reading and writing (Fontanelle-Tereshchuk, 2021a). Furthermore, distance education that took place under the emergency conditions due to the pandemic invited a great amount of experimentation, poor or no training of teachers, and unprepared families who struggled to maintain the daily routine of the family due to the lockdown. Parents, during this unexpected situation, have formed shifting identities, e.g. balancing between being a parent and a teacher with one prevailing over the other depending on the occasion. As for the teacher-student relationship, parents also took on the role of the teacher and through this dual role they increased the level of empathy towards their children. In many cases the same happened with teachers who were also parents (Kell, 2020).

In the Greek context, as in many similar contexts worldwide, under normal circumstances parents have a supportive role in their children's education (Barge & Loges, 2003). PI has a positive effect on the child's school development (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Steinberg et al., 1989; Zellman & Waterman 1998) when applied under normal learning conditions. Greek parents claim that parental involvement is beneficial only during homework but insignificant in other aspects of school life and activities of their children (Pnevmatikos et al., 2008; Giannikas & Nikitaki, in print). The aforementioned positive effect is maximized when teachers guide parents in a specific way (Epstein, 1986). On the other hand, the need to support parents in the role of the teacher, including training, on the part of the ministry of education with the support of the institution of Educational Policy and academic teachers in related scientific fields.

During the initial period of the pandemic the situation was reversed. Parents from vulnerable groups stated their inability to support their children mainly in Greek language lessons, since they were not fluent Greek speakers themselves. On the contrary one would expect that Parents should have at their disposal language support teachers from the Ministry of Education trained for educational emergencies. However, this was not the case. Parents struggled by themselves to meet the learning needs of their children with very little in their disposal.

## **RQ2. Did Parents Have the Necessary Technological Means and the Required Digital Literacy?**

Regarding the use of new technologies, the pandemic found parents of vulnerable and non-vulnerable groups unprepared. It was assumed by the Greek Ministry of Education that all parents are fully acquainted with new technologies and can use them without problems. It was also assumed that every family has access to internet connection, at least two (relatively new) laptops and a printer at home. These requirements were excessive, especially for parents who belonged to the vulnerable groups as their children had to attend classes over the phone or could not print the exercise handouts prepared by the teacher. During the first phase of the pandemic,

30% of the pupils whose parents participated in this research attended classes from a mobile phone, while 10% from a landline. Based on this data, issues of digital inequalities arise between pupils in homeschooling during the COVID-19 (Pozas et al., 2021).

On the other hand, teachers who were not familiar with online teaching and assessment (Tian et al., 2021) did their best on their own, very often limiting themselves to the repetition of lessons as a tool for improving teaching efficiency, providing little or no feedback at all, although it is important in the learning process (Huber & Helm, 2020).

Teachers' training in the management of new technologies for educational purposes is considered important. Using technology for teaching purposes is a broad topic that includes the use of media tools integrated within Learning Management Systems (LMS) and/or those who run over the internet and also the creation of e-material. In addition, in the Greek school, teachers do not have time to collaborate with or guide parents. In the present case, however, this situation was reversed (Anastasiou & Papagianni, 2020). Even though most parents of the non-vulnerable groups were able to support their children, some could not provide the pre-requisite technological means during a lockdown period, because they were not prepared for homeschooling which was unexpectedly imposed on them.

On the other hand, young pupils, in the first grade of the primary school, could not manage homeschooling on their own, because of their young age; they were only 6 years old and needed relevant training. This situation created additional anxiety and worry (Fontanesi et al., 2020). Finally, it turned out that young learners, their parents and teachers did not have very high digital literacy in using technology as a tool for learning (Beyerbach et al., 2001). Furthermore, family well-being takes place when all members of the family are safe, healthy and able to make progress in education and economic development. (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). Parents of the young pupils often feel responsible for the wellbeing of their children. Staying at home and learning online negatively affected the whole wellbeing of the family.

### **RQ3. What Were the Psychological Effects of Homeschooling on the Wellbeing of the Family?**

During the first period of the lockdown, data showed that families of both groups of vulnerability were in distress, adding to the complexity of the emergency situation. Despite the efforts made to form and abide by a new 'COVID' schedule, anxiety regarding the children's education interfered leading to feelings of helplessness and despair (also in Adams et al., 2021). Stress and worry were the dominant emotions for parents at the beginning of homeschooling due to the pandemic (American Psychological Association, 2020), while exhaustion overwhelmed both parents and pupils towards the end of the lockdown period.

Moreover, children were isolated and physically removed from schools, which indicated signs of demotivation and frustration. As far as it concerns their relationship with their classmates, social interaction is important, because this way

students learn from their classmates and have fun playing. Social interaction also allows teachers to detect students' personality and interests.

During school's lockdown not only children's mental but also physical health was in danger because of this abrupt change in their lives. According to the data, participants argued that children lost touch with their teachers and classmates who were sources of socialization (also see Flack et al., 2020; Pozas et al., 2021) and at the same time had to do the homework assigned to them by an 'invisible' teacher; a teacher with whom they had no more daily contact, although he/she did not stop sending homework using their parents' e-mail, at least at the beginning of the lockdown.

The new reality of COVID-19 revealed that the education of pupils requires the close cooperation of all three important stakeholders: teachers, pupils and parents, although teachers do not always provide parents with the proper guidance to support their children at home (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Giannikas & Nikitaki, in print), as this action is beyond their role and their responsibilities. During the current research, it has also become apparent (see "[School as a Motivation for Learning and Socialization](#)" section) that the role of the school and a well-prepared teacher can not be replaced by distance education, especially for young pupils. School creates external motivation in students making them interested in grades and social acceptance among their peers (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The close contact with the teacher and their classmates is vital factor for children's socialization and mental health. More than ever, the important role of parents in the education of their children has emerged, for which they were solely responsible during the pandemic.

This study also highlights the issue of parental accountability. "*Parental accountability* refers to the sensemaking, experiences, and consequences that are related to decision-making in a school choice environment, where parents' feelings about their child's schooling may be intense, emotionally stressful, malleable, cyclical, and ongoing - not static" (Potterton, 2020, p. 167). However, before parents are held accountable for the quality of their children's education during a lockdown period, the educational and political leadership should set up the necessary framework to train all parents, as well as teachers, to be prepared for emergency situations to support their children. Unless parents face knowledge gaps, the lack of training parents in the use of new technologies and in supporting them to educate their children is considered particularly important.

Parents are an important component of the educational process and should be treated by the state in such a way that they are ready to contribute substantially and whenever there is a need in the educational process. The role of PI in the school can contribute to an in-depth understanding of the Greek educational system (Xanthakou et al., 2013, Giannikas & Nikitaki, in print).

The school is an integral part of society and should embrace the pupils and their parents. During the first phase of the pandemic parents were called upon to take on a new role (ECML, 2021), the role of parent-teacher for which they were completely unprepared. The Ministry of Education in collaboration with educational institutions such as the institute of Educational Policy and academic teachers in pedagogical schools should consider to train the latter in order to support their children, in

the context of emergencies and beyond, whether they come from vulnerable social groups or not, creating conditions for equal treatment for all.

## Conclusions

The impact of social isolation, school closures and remote learning on children can influence their learning engagement, routine and their family wellbeing. During the time of the COVID-19 crisis, more PI was necessary. Nonetheless, it was summoned in a manner that risked the entity of the family unit and the educational community. The UNESCO Education 2030 agenda urges for a more resilient delivery of educational experiences (UNESCO, 2021), even at times of emergency quality education, must not fail. However, the findings of the present study reveal that this has not been the case and raises questions on how prepared and safe families and the education community are when an emergency occurs.

Specifically, the study's findings and how they corroborate with the existing literature is a steppingstone when investigating PI in the context of emergency remote instruction. This paper contributes to the theoretical knowledge about how involvement in the remote learning of young children is experienced by parents, specifically mothers, in a European country, and amid a disruptive period. Insights from this article and/or similar ones can be used as 'lessons learned' for future crisis planning in the wide field of education. These 'lessons' must include the development of relevant intervention programs that address parents' needs, methods and behavior management strategies that can be used at home in a time of crisis, the promotion of emergency preparedness among the parents; and the establishment of effective communication among the parents, pupils, teachers, school administrators, and other concerned stakeholders.

Nonetheless, some limitations should also be carefully observed when interpreting the results of this work. First, while the number of participants was adequate in terms of a case study, the authors of this article believe that the data saturation has not been completely reached. Second, as all participating parents were mothers, it would be interesting to obtain the viewpoint of fathers and how they experience emergency remote education. Finally, as interviews offered feasible means to gather the needed data for this paper amid the COVID-19 lockdown of March–June 2020, it would have been useful if the children's perspective was also included. A follow-up study, a year or so later could also shed more light on the importance of PI. Despite these limitations, the findings displayed in this paper are useful as ERT is an emerging educational research landscape and needs to be seriously considered to lead to effective teaching and learning.

## Appendix

*Interview guide* (translated from Greek into English).

1. What problems did you face with your children's education when schools were closed because of the pandemic? How did things go?
2. With all the changes in your daily life during the pandemic, have you managed to establish a daily routine regarding your children's education? If so, how did you do it? If not, why not? Can you give any examples?
3. Did your children face any difficulties completing the activities assigned to them by their schoolteachers? If so, what were their difficulties?
4. Were your children willing to do their homework? If so, could you give me an example? If not, why do you think this was the case?
5. How well and how much time do you think your children took on average to complete the tasks assigned to them by their teachers? Did they work successfully on the tasks? Did they take any breaks in the process?
6. Did you systematically check your children's homework before you sent it to their teachers? Did you have the required time to do so?
7. How did the teachers send you feedback on your children's homework? Were you able to receive online feedback? Did you take any steps to help your children improve their performance after receiving feedback?
8. Was the process of teaching and monitoring your children's progress stressful? If so, why? If not, why? Why do you think this was so?
9. Did you have internet connection at home? If not, how did you meet the teacher's requirements?
10. Do you know how to use computers and office programs (word, ppt, internet, etc.)? Have you received training in these before the pandemic started?
11. Have you attended distance learning training programs before the pandemic started?
12. Did you have any problems with the teaching material that the teachers sent to your children? Could you download and open the files and the related links? Did you face any problems trying to connect to an online educational platform? Why do you think this happened?
13. Did you have the necessary equipment at home, e.g. computers, printers, etc.? Did you need to purchase new equipment?
14. How did the teachers send you the activities/tasks the children were to do at home? Was this process easy, difficult or inconvenient?
15. Did you notice any change in your children's attitude during distance education compared to their attitude when they were in class at school? Yes or No? If so, what do you think was the reason?
16. Was there enough time to support your children's educational progress (teleconferencing, sending and controlling assigned activities?) Yes or No? And why?
17. Did anyone else help you with the distance education of your children? Yes or no? And why?
18. How did you decide what each parent would do in terms of providing education to your children?
19. Did the time needed to support your children in their homework decrease or increase during the first phase of the pandemic? Why do you think this happened?
20. Is there anything else you would like to add?

21. Would you like more support from the education system in this phase or in a next phase if we face a similar situation? What would you like this support to be?

### Demographics

#### 1. Gender

Man  Woman  Other.....

#### 2. Education

High school Graduate  Bachelor  MA  PhD

#### 3. Experience in distance education

Previous experience in distance education

As a trainee  As a teacher  In both roles

#### 4. In case they answer 'Yes' to the above question: Which learning platform did you have experience with?

Moodle  Web-Ex  Zoom  Microsoft teams  Other.....

#### 5. Age

20-30  30-40  40-50  50 and above

#### 6. Marital Status

Married  Divorced  Single parent family

#### 7. Working Status

Employed  Unemployed  Part-time

#### 8. Working Schedule/Working hours

Morning  Afternoon  Rolling

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