Parenting in the time of COVID-19: Insights and lessons from parents of international school children

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Abstract
The closure of school buildings due to COVID-19 and the resulting rapid transition to online education dramatically altered the lives of educators, students and parents. While previous literature demonstrates the vital role of parents in effective online education (Hattie, 2020; Liu et al, 2010), pre-pandemic literature focuses on parents and students who have opted in to online education. As such, the outbreak of COVID-19 has presented new challenges for understanding the relationship between parents and their child/ren’s online learning. Since the start of the pandemic, studies have emerged exploring parental experience adjusting to their child/ren’s online remote learning (Bhamani et al, 2020; Brom et al, 2020; Dong et al, 2020; Garbe et al, 2020; Lee et al, 2021). However, less is known about the online learning experiences during COVID-19 of families with children enrolled within international schools. Accordingly, the present study draws upon insights from 44 parents of children attending international schools who took part in 22 focus groups, across three countries and in three languages. The study investigates the parental experience with online education and unpacks four themes that emerged from the data: challenges faced by parents, parental perception of their child/ren’s wellbeing, impressions of the learning quality and parental suggestions for consideration by

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school leadership. With these findings, school leaders have a unique opportunity to leverage lessons learned and support parental growth so that families, educators and students may all contribute to the promise of a brighter educational future.

Keywords
Online education, COVID-19, parent experience, international schools

Introduction
The onset of COVID-19 in early 2020 sent shockwaves through education systems worldwide. Approximately 1.2 billion children from 186 countries experienced school closures due to the pandemic (Li and Lalani, 2020), drastically changing the education system for these students, their families and associated educators who rapidly transitioned to remote, online education (Fullan et al, 2020). This sudden shift to online education, coupled with the jarring shifts in general daily life, had immediate and dramatic impacts on how parents engaged with their child/ren's learning and their relationship with K-12 education, writ large.

In literature produced prior to COVID-19 the relationship between parental involvement and K-12 student learning in face-to-face environments is well-documented (Hattie, 2009; Liu et al, 2010). As the number of students enrolled in online education has grown in the last two decades (Dong et al, 2020; Khurana, 2016; Martin et al, 2020; Werth et al, 2013), more research has emerged about the role of parents in K-12 online education (Archambault et al, 2013). However, pre-COVID literature focuses on parents and students who have opted into online education. As such, the outbreak of COVID-19 – which led to online education becoming a necessity rather than an option – has presented new challenges for our understanding of the relationship between parents and their child/ren's online learning.

In response to this historic pandemic, a growing body of literature has emerged since early 2020, outlining the challenges faced by parents adjusting to their child/ren's online remote learning during COVID-19 (Bhamani et al, 2020; Brom et al, 2020; Dong et al, 2020; Garbe et al, 2020; Lee et al, 2021). However, less is known about the online learning experiences of families with children enrolled within international schools during COVID-19. International schools constitute novel learning environments, with many nuances that distinguish them from other forms of schooling (ISC Research, 2020). Accordingly, we believe this study is the first to examine the experiences of parents of K-12 international school students during the outbreak of COVID-19.

This paper first provides an orientation to terminology and offers context on international schools. Then, we outline the importance of parental involvement in children's learning within traditional environments, the roles parents historically play in online education, and preliminary findings from recent studies on parental experiences during COVID-induced online learning.

From there, we share insights from 44 parents within Education in Motion (formerly Dulwich College International), a group of twelve schools in Korea, China and Southeast Asia, who took part in 22 focus groups, across three countries and in three languages. This study leverages parental voice with the hope of contributing to the empirical literature base about the role of international school parents in online education during COVID-19. Four themes emerged from the data: challenges faced by parents, parental perception of their child/ren’s wellbeing, impressions of the learning quality, and parental suggestions for school leadership. Overall, this study illustrates that the rapid transition to online education during COVID-19 posed tremendous challenges to
families, while also using parent commentary to provide direction and inspiration for a reimagining of a more promising future for education.

**Familial Support for K-12 Learners**

We recognize the many ways in which adult family and community members support student learning and are a source of familial capital (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, we acknowledge there is ample literature that problematizes the dominant structure of a ‘traditional’ family (i.e., two heterosexual parents) when it comes to involvement in education (Hopkins et al., 2013; Zhang and Chen, 2020). The present paper, nevertheless, includes the experiences of both mothers and fathers, without addressing other types of familial support for K-12 learners.

**Online International Education**

In the past two decades, the number of international schools has tripled; by 2020 there were more than 12,000 across the world, 132 of which opened in 2020 (ISC Research, 2020). These schools serve approximately 5.6 million students globally and generate $49.9 billion annually in tuition fees (ISC Research, 2020). In addition to their rapidly growing market share, the international school sector constitutes a novel context, boasting tremendous diversity in curriculum options, languages of instruction, class sizes and demographics—all of which vary considerably from school to school. Hayden and Thompson (2013) identify three main subgroups within the realm of international schools: ‘traditional’ (established to cater to globally mobile expatriates), ‘ideological’ (established to bring together young people from across the world in order to break down barriers arising from ignorance of others), and ‘non-traditional’ (established to cater to affluent nationals who seek what they perceive as a higher quality education for their children than the national education system can provide).

Relevant to this study, the parent body associated with international schools is also unique. Originally conceptualized as a provision for expatriate families, the international school sector was until relatively recently approximately 80% filled by expatriate children (ISC Research, 2020). However, as international schools are also now sought out by wealthier local parents seeking an alternative to their country’s state education, local private education or foreign boarding, it is now the case that local children account for approximately 80% of international school intake (ISC Research, 2020). International schools serve a constituency of parents who in many cases have explicitly sought out this alternative approach to learning for their child/ren and are often able and willing to pay a premium for it.

**Importance of Parental Involvement in Student Learning**

Parental involvement is a critical factor that significantly influences a child’s learning experience (Borup et al., 2020). From the very beginning of a child’s life, parents are foundational to the child’s immediate environment, influencing their learning and development (Dong et al., 2020). Central to parental involvement is their beliefs and attitudes about education. Perceptions about the role of education may influence the quality and quantity of educational opportunities and learning experiences children receive at home, even before formal schooling begins (Erdogan et al., 2019). For example, previous research demonstrates that parental aspirations and expectations directly affect child/ren’s learning (Hattie, 2009). Hattie (2009) posits that, across all at-home variables, parental aspirations and expectations for their child/ren’s
educational achievement are the most strongly associated with scholastic achievement, while variables related to parent behaviors, such as communication and parental home supervision, have weaker correlations with children’s learning outcomes.

Although behavioral variables such as communication and parental supervision have the weakest relationships with children’s academic performance, they still carry significant implications for children’s learning, especially within online learning environments. In fact, parental engagement with their child/ren’s learning, in both traditional school settings and online learning, is associated with improved course outcomes and scholastic achievement (Boulton, 2008; Litke, 1998; Liu et al, 2010).

Moreover, parental involvement in their child/ren’s education helps promote positive child development. Parental participation in a child’s learning in traditional schooling environments has a positive relationship with pro-social behaviors (Cotton and Reed-Wikelund, 1989; Edwards, 2004). Accordingly, some researchers contend that children who do not have at-home support may struggle to develop self-regulation strategies and thus are at a disadvantage compared to children with parents who consistently monitor and offer feedback on academic progress and skills (Blaine, 2019; Zimmerman, 2000).

While research in this context primarily investigates the role of parental involvement in children’s outcomes, evidence suggests this engagement has benefits for parents as well. For example, Klein (2006) reports that parents found it rewarding to work closely with their child/ren on schoolwork, especially when they observed their child/ren making connections between the course content and their daily life.

The Role of Parents in Online Education: Before and During COVID-19

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, literature identified four parental responsibilities that were helpful for children learning virtually: (a) organizing and managing children’s schedules, (b) nurturing relationships and interactions, (c) monitoring and motivating child engagement and (d) instructing children when needed (Borup, 2016). Additional research highlights that parents with child/ren in online learning settings assume the roles of: regulator of their child/ren’s online activities (ie, setting up and monitoring technology use; Nouwen and Zaman, 2018), learning coach or co-educator (Waters et al, 2014; Rice and Dawley, 2009) and provider of caring relationships (Borup et al, 2015). Furthermore, Liu and colleagues (2010) suggest that parents who support their child/ren in online courses aid in the development of perseverance, an internal locus of control, organizational skills and time management. Preliminary research demonstrates that, during COVID-19, parents adopted two major roles during this time of crisis: co-educators and emotional support providers. These roles mirror the research on parental roles prior to the pandemic.

Co-educators. Although limited, the emerging research on parent experience during COVID-19 demonstrates parents adopted more robust roles as co-educators. One study of 122 parents in the United States found that 62.3% of parents spent more than one hour per day supporting their child/ren’s learning at home during the initial month of school closures (Garbe et al, 2020). Similarly, additional research found that parents reported attending to their child/ren’s homework more frequently than prior to COVID-19, including explaining worksheets and other tasks (Bhamani et al, 2020). Furthermore, parents said their child/ren sometimes shied away from asking questions on-screen or experienced significant internet disruption that created barriers to asking questions during instruction. As a result, parents fielded more inquiries from their child/ren than prior to the onset of the pandemic-induced online learning, despite often having their own work to complete from home (Bhamani et al, 2020).
For many, COVID-19 forced an integration of home education and school education, demonstrating the tremendous influence that both schools and families have on healthy child development. Additional research on parent experience with online education during COVID-19 cites the benefit of building a harmonious home-school relationship and forming patterns of cooperative education to promote positive learning experiences for children (Zhou et al., 2020). Research on China’s ‘School’s Out, But Class’s On’ initiative during COVID-19 illustrates that providing time and space to foster teacher-student and parent-child relationships resulted in closer links between schools, families and students (Zhou et al., 2020). As such, parents who serve as co-educators have an opportunity to work in partnership with schools to understand appropriate challenges and standards for their child/ren.

**Emotional Support Providers.** Online learning during COVID-19 also resulted in closer parent-child collaboration related to learning activities. For some, parents and child/ren strengthened their bonds as they spent more time together (Bhamani et al., 2020). In such instances, parents reported becoming a source of comfort in easing their child/ren’s pain and worry, as well as engaging in conversations with their child/ren to help alleviate their anxiety (Bhamani et al., 2020). Since the pandemic began, Wang and colleagues (2020) noted similar phenomena, thus recommending that parents should be provided with guidance on how to emotionally support their child/ren in times of uncertainty. This uncertainty, though, was not limited to children.

**Parental Experience During COVID-19**

As parents transitioned alongside their child/ren to online education, many found themselves unfamiliar with their new roles and responsibilities as co-educators and emotional supports (Garbe et al., 2020). Parents initially reported that they struggled to adapt, citing a tendency to ‘first survive and then thrive’ (Clark et al., 2020). Furthermore, some parents reported that the closure of schools was extremely disturbing (Bhamani et al., 2020). For many parents, the closure of their child/ren’s school and the subsequent transition to online education presented a struggle to balance priorities that were competing for limited resources of time and energy. Parents were faced with juggling their own employment demands and their child/ren’s learning needs; a struggle exacerbated for parents with multiple children in the home (Garbe et al., 2020). However, parental challenges with transitioning to online education extended beyond the mere adoption of their new roles, attempts to balance these responsibilities and the task of assimilating to the shocking new reality. The limited extant literature on parental experience with online education during COVID-19 indicates that parental challenges with the transition spanned four additional categories: (1) accessing technology, (2) attending to the social and emotional wellbeing of their child/ren, (3) ensuring their child/ren’s learning was high quality, and (4) acquiring appropriate communication from school leadership about frequently changing policies.

**Accessing Technology.** Not only did parents face challenges accessing the necessary technologies (hardware, software and learning management systems); they also struggled to use the technologies themselves (Brom et al., 2020) let alone help their child/ren adequately leverage the technologies. In many cases, parents were unaware of which technology platforms should be used, struggled to navigate the myriad websites and applications, and faced difficulty deciphering how to help their child/ren access and submit assignments (Clausen et al., 2020; Garbe et al., 2020). Further, technological access was hindered by systemic inequities. Research indicates that many vulnerable families struggle to engage in online learning because they cannot afford to access the learning devices or the internet (EEF, 2020). In one national study, The Education Endowment Foundation found
that 15% of Australians were without access to the internet (EEF, 2020). Equity barriers such as this are a grave threat to effective online education.

**Child Wellbeing.** Preliminary research suggests that a large number of parents were worried for their child/ren’s social, emotional and physical health. In terms of social health, parents expressed deep concern that in the wake of the pandemic and the associated decrease in peer interaction, the social development of their child/ren would be affected (Dong et al, 2020). Especially for younger children, there was concern that the loss of interaction with peers and the deviation from a normal learning environment would influence their social health (Bhamani et al, 2020). Unfortunately, some parents had already begun to notice behavior changes in their child/ren, citing indications of sadness, depression, and loneliness (Lee et al, 2021).

With respect to their child/ren’s emotional wellbeing, parents reported concerns about increased levels of irritability (Grover at al, 2021) and anxiety in their child/ren from the social isolation, lack of interactivity and delay in substantive feedback from teachers on their schoolwork (Dong et al, 2020). Parents also believed that without the formal learning structure and routines of traditional learning environments, their child/ren would fail to develop appropriate self-regulation skills and work habits (Bhamani et al, 2020). Furthermore, some parents reported that their child/ren spent three to four hours each day using a computer in their at-home online learning environment (Christensen and Alexander, 2020; Zhao et al, 2020), thus raising concerns among parents about the negative effect on young children’s eyesight (Dong et al, 2020; Zhao et al, 2020).

**Learning Quality.** Parents also reported ample concerns with respect to the quality of their child/ren’s learning at the onset of COVID-19-induced online education. For one, studies cite that many parents felt they personally lacked the content knowledge or understanding of pedagogy to properly educate their child/ren (Bhamani et al, 2020; Dong et al, 2020; Garbe et al, 2020). In addition, parents with more than one child identified more barriers to their younger children’s online learning (Bhamani et al, 2020; Dong et al, 2020) compared to that of their older siblings. Moreover, parents not only questioned their ability to instruct their child/ren but also were critical of the quality, quantity of content, and rigor of the online educational lessons their child/ren received (Garbe et al, 2020; Grover et al, 2021). As Bhamani and colleagues outline (2020), parents perceived that online learning is problematic when teachers are themselves not trained for it. This reflects an overall impression that teaching quality, in an online domain, was low.

With these perspectives in mind, preliminary literature on parent impressions of online education at the onset of COVID-19 indicates that parents expressed concern about whether their child/ren were making adequate academic progress or being fully prepared for the future (Garbe et al, 2020). Accordingly, parents reported an overarching belief that traditional educational settings were better than online learning at creating a learning atmosphere and producing better learning outcomes for their child/ren (Dong et al, 2020).

**Communication from school leadership.** Finally, parents identified challenges in receiving adequate communication about the constantly evolving online education policies. For example, literature on the parent experience adapting to online education highlights a parental desire for communication regarding the use of online resources and clarification on procedures (Daniel, 2020; Garbe et al, 2020). Parents were challenged by the lack of a comprehensive communication strategy between schools and families, and felt overwhelmed by the disarray of communication apps, class websites, email, texts and social media (Clausen et al, 2020). Bhamani and colleagues (2020) suggest that engaging with families via messaging applications that allow for communication via videos, graphics and online guides may be a future best practice for seamless communication with parents.
Additionally, updating families at a consistent frequency cadence (Daniel, 2020) and providing a document of frequently asked questions that addresses where to find assignments, what to do for technology problems, how to log in and what parents need to do to support their children, may be key to mitigating parental challenges with online education (Morgan, 2020).

**Study Purpose**

This study expands upon the limited extant empirical literature regarding online education during COVID-19 within international schools, particularly as it relates to parental experience. It offers unique and actionable insight that schools can use to support students, teachers and parents as they deliver and engage with virtual (exclusively remote/online) or blended (combination of virtual and in-person) schooling. The initial wave of research related to parental experiences with their child/ren’s online education during COVID-19 leverages fairly small sample sizes and occurs in homogenous settings (Bhamani et al, 2020; Brom et al, 2020; Dong et al, 2020; Garbe et al, 2020; Lee et al, 2021). The present study expands this growing body of literature by offering rich qualitative insights from an array of parents across three countries, with experiences and children across a wide range of grade-levels. Additionally, this study identifies insights that may improve the future of online and blended education for students, families, educators and school leaders. As such, we explore one primary research question: What lessons might we learn from the parent experience at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that may enable us to reimagine a future of higher quality online and blended education?

**Methodology**

We employed a series of focus groups as the primary means to explore this question. Focus groups were selected for their ability to provide insights about the similarities and differences in parental opinions and experiences with online education during COVID-19. Focus groups also allowed parents to share experiences across school sites, dually serving as a space for discussion and learning opportunity for participants. Additionally, focus groups afforded the research team an opportunity to observe a large number of interactions on a topic in a limited period of time (as suggested by Morgan, 1997).

**Context**

Based on prior researcher relationships, the Education in Motion group expressed an interest in finding out more about parent experience during the pandemic. Education in Motion is an education company that at the time of writing operates twelve schools in Korea, China and Southeast Asia. The EIM group’s education vision maintains that ‘students come first’ in a ‘family of schools’ that nurture ‘a pioneering spirit’. The group began as Dulwich College International in 2003 when a partnership was formed by Dulwich College, London to establish the first international college in Pudong, Shanghai. Over the next decade, more K-12 schools were added in the Chinese cities of Shanghai, Beijing and Suzhou; then later Seoul, Korea; Yangon, Myanmar; and Singapore. All of the schools are green field new-build rather than acquisitions of pre-existing schools. Historically, these colleges educated the children of expatriates with over 50 nationalities following an internationalized version of the English National Curriculum, and the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme. In China, EiM operate four Dulwich College International schools, two Dulwich International High Schools and three K-12 bilingual schools known as Dehong International. The high schools were established to offer British-style
international education to local Chinese parents who intend to send their children overseas for tertiary study, and are therefore granted permission to leave the Chinese National Curriculum after sitting the compulsory Zhongkao examination in grade 9.

Participants

We selected a convenience sample of seven DCI schools in three countries (China, Myanmar, Singapore). At our request, Heads of School issued an open call to recruit parents (both mothers and fathers) to participate in a series of virtual focus groups, based on parents’ perceived willingness to engage and their interest in the study (ie, convenience sampling). There was no incentive provided for parents to participate. Over the course of the data collection period, we continued to recruit parents to engage in the focus groups and analyzed the transcripts on an ongoing basis, until we reached saturation (the point at which new focus groups yielded no new codes or information; Small, 2009). In total, forty-four parents agreed to participate from seven schools across the three countries, representing both the colleges (early years, junior, middle and senior) and high schools. In an effort to build trust and ease participant burden, the research team did not collect demographic data from the participants. Thus, a limitation of the study is that it is unknown how many children each parent had, their children’s ages, or the household income of these families.

Data Collection

We conducted twenty-two semi-structured focus groups, using a protocol that was co-created by the research and EIM leadership teams. The purpose was to obtain parent insights on their experiences of transitioning to online education during the initial outbreak of COVID-19 (January-July 2020). Questions explored challenges faced by parents, successful strategies that emerged, perceptions of child wellbeing and satisfaction with the support provided by school leaders.

Members of the research team virtually conducted the focus groups between June and August 2020 via Zoom, an online video conferencing platform. Focus groups were conducted entirely by the research team in either English, Korean or Mandarin, depending on the parents’ preferred language. The focus groups lasted approximately 45 minutes and contained a cross-section of parents from multiple schools within the same country. Due to last minute participant cancellations, the number of participants in each ranged from one to four parents. In the case where only one parent showed up, a 1:1 interview was conducted. The sessions were recorded, with participant consent, as video/audio and saved on the researchers’ password-protected Box account, a HIPAA-compliant cloud data storage management service. Korean and Mandarin focus groups’ digital audio files were manually translated and transcribed into English by the team member who facilitated the focus group. When the focus groups were conducted in English, the research team transcribed the audio file using Rev, a human-powered transcription service. We removed participant names prior to analysis and collected consent forms to ensure participation was voluntary.

Data Analysis

We utilized Directed Content Analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), a flexible method for analyzing qualitative data that involves subjective interpretation through a systematic coding process. This qualitative analysis approach is well-suited for studies intending to describe a phenomenon where existing literature exists but would benefit from deeper exploration. The approach is more structured than Conventional Content Analysis since it simultaneously uses prior research and emergent themes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). There are several steps to this approach: we first read through
the entirety of the English translated transcripts to obtain a sense of the whole, and then re-read line-by-line to identify codes. Through these two steps, we developed themes and subthemes that emerged from across the data and were rooted in previous literature. Then we read the data a final time and coded specific excerpts. We made use of MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, to sort each theme to obtain a quantitative count to determine the prominence of each theme (i.e., thematic saliency). For the remainder of the paper, quantitative counts are provided to illustrate how many times a theme was mentioned across the twenty-two focus groups.

There are limitations of this study. For one, our sample only contains perspectives from EIM schools, thus it cannot claim to be representative of all international schools. However, our goal was not to provide representative, generalizable findings; rather we sought to obtain an initial understanding of the parental experience transitioning to online education in a pandemic. Similarly, schools and parents were not randomly selected, and it is not claimed that their commentary is representative of all parental experiences across the Dulwich Colleges. Further, as parents volunteered to participate in the survey, the data are subject to self-selection bias. Lastly, since some of the transcripts were translated and transcribed into English before analysis, it is possible that some commentary may have lost its original meaning in translation.

Findings

Findings from the conversations with forty-four parents offer vivid insights into trends in parental engagement with their child/ren’s education at the onset of COVID-19. To expand on these involvement patterns, we will focus on five ‘lessons-learned’ that emerged from the data related to: (1) parental engagement levels in their child/ren’s online learning, (2) technological challenges faced by parents, (3) parental perception of their child/ren’s wellbeing, (4) parental impressions of the learning quality, and (5) parental suggestions for school leadership.

Parent Engagement Varied and Stress Levels were High

Parents engaged in the focus groups with a great deal of candor in relation to their varied levels of involvement with their child/ren’s online education during COVID-19. Parent commentary demonstrates there was a continuum of parental involvement levels in their child/ren’s education. While some parents were highly engaged with their child/ren’s online education or enlisted the assistance of tutors or extended family members (n=49), other parents revealed low levels of engagement in their child/ren’s learning (n=30). One highly engaged parent explains why they felt compelled to be involved in their child’s learning: ‘[T]he problem is that, I need to stay at home nearly every day because my daughter, she is focused and she is well organized but she can’t have the class by herself. She still has some problem habits. For example, the internet. She always calls, “Mum, the Wi-Fi is poor. I cannot see the video. Can you help me? Mum, the printer is out of paper.”’

The extent to which parents were engaged with their child/ren’s online education during COVID-19 was influenced by a myriad reasons, such as the demanding nature of their jobs, having multiple children, feeling as though they did not possess the knowledge to assist their child/ren or being unclear of their role in their child/ren’s online education (discussed later in this paper). In addition to these rationales, two facets—the child/ren’s age (n=17) and perceived child/ren’s autonomy levels (n=11)—were the most commonly cited as further impacting parents’ level of involvement. For example, one parent explained that their child’s sense of independence did not necessitate a high degree of parental involvement: ‘My child knows that if they need me I am here, but he doesn’t need any special type of support from me. Especially when it comes to his studies,
he doesn't need my help. I'm an English teacher, as well, and when I try to help, my child makes me leave. My child is still very independent in regard to his studies.’

Conversely, another parent remarked that the young age of their child prompted them to take a more engaged role: ‘We still have to help our son out a lot . . . As a first-year student [age 6], he needed a lot of help, especially in keeping up with his course schedule . . . As a first-year student, he still really depends on his parents to remind him to start class, discuss the content and review with him after each class and other things of this sort. We have to make sure he does it all.’

Regardless of their level of involvement, an overwhelming parent response was that they found the experience tremendously stressful (n=54). Adjusting to their new roles in their child/ren’s education, attempting to balance their other commitments, handling the general uncertainty of the unfolding pandemic and coping with fears about not adequately addressing their child/ren’s educational needs were all sources of increased parental stress. As one parent reported: ‘I tried not to start pouring myself a vodka at 10:00 in the morning because I was honestly very stressed in the first two weeks because I felt a huge need that I must do this. And if I don’t do it, I’m failing my child. I just had to relax because it was really impossible for me to achieve what I was trying to do with the children because my middle child has some learning challenges and he will not sit at his desk unless I’m sitting with him. So unfortunately, my other two [children] missed out.’

Technological Challenges were Exacerbated

In alignment with the extant literature on parental experience with online education during COVID-19, parents who participated in the focus groups encountered tremendous challenges when transitioning to online education at the onset of the COVID-19 global health crisis. These challenges were mostly related to accessing technology/materials and juggling multiple online learning platforms/apps. For one, parents reported struggling to access the necessary technology (n=41), including suitable, age-appropriate devices, internet bandwidth and virtual private networks (VPNs). Additionally, some parents had trouble getting access to materials, like graph paper and printers. As one parent recounts, ‘The other issue was the internet access. When they started uploading things on the platform, the Firefly, we couldn’t download any of the videos, any of the content. So, it took me hours, I’m not joking, hours to download a PDF, a presentation and then hours to print it. I have three kids, so I had to print every child’s things, materials.’

Parents also noted that there was a lack of consistency in the technology and learning tools being used (n=22). Some parents reported that different platforms were being utilized across teachers within the same grade, as well as across grades within the same school. Parents struggled to navigate the various systems and determine how to support their child/ren amidst the inconsistencies in technology. One parent illustrates this phenomenon: ‘Each foreign teacher has different teaching software. For example, some teachers have classes in Microsoft Teams, some use Zoom, some use WeChat enterprise version and some use Tencent video. Anyway, it feels that there are all kinds of different apps so that students need to take classes in different systems.’

Parents Shared Ample Concerns About Their Child/ren’s Wellbeing

Parents highlighted an array of concerns with their child/ren’s social and emotional wellbeing, including heightened exhaustion levels, increased anxiety, troublesome social isolation and reduced motivation. First, parents uniformly reported that the experience was exhausting for their child/ren (n=28). By and large, parents felt that the volume of work assigned to their child/ren was greater than what was previously assigned in traditional schooling environments. As one parent commented: ‘In sum, I think the time spent studying and doing homework for online courses has been
more time consuming than in-person courses overall. The amount of time spent on self-study is increased, especially if teachers focus on this type of self-guided learning by sending PowerPoints, pre-recorded lectures, etc.’

Relatedly, parents remarked that there were noticeable increases in their child/ren’s anxiety levels ($n=53$). The higher volume of work, struggle to learn new technologies and the general stress of a pandemic all contributed to parents observing increased anxiety in their child/ren. For example, one parent shared: ‘I think the anxiety [was] caused in my daughter because she was panicking about having to load things and not understanding things. And we couldn't quite get the Zoom to work on her computer and all that created a bit of stress for her and me to try and get it up and running.’

Parents also attributed the increased anxiety levels to a decrease in social interaction ($n=32$). As children learned from the confine of their homes, opportunities for necessary peer socialization dwindled. Accordingly, parents expressed deep concern about their child/ren’s lack of social engagement: ‘I was worried a little bit more because once she is in her room, she never comes out. Only for food time she is coming out or toilets, but she is not coming out. So that was the main problem that I felt. It's not because she's mentally going crazy, but this whole thing is pushing her into that solitary situation more.’ Accordingly, parents reported that they spent more time than usual providing emotional support for their child/ren ($n=17$). Aligned with the previous literature related to parents providing emotional support, one parent noted: ‘I had a lot of communication with my child regarding his anxiety or confusion of what to do. I tried to calm him down first. We were exploring this process slowly and letting him adapt to this new learning method gradually.’

Furthermore, parents reported that their child/ren demonstrated lower levels of motivation during the online education experience at the onset of COVID-19 ($n=57$). Despite parents’ best efforts to motivate their child/ren, parents shared that their child/ren often seemed disengaged. One parent articulated their daughter’s reduced drive to engage in class: ‘I found that there was a lesser degree of engagement from my daughter because it was out of my hands. And although the teacher put in a fantastic job, trying to recreate a classroom situation on Zoom, it is actually very difficult . . . My daughter couldn't really or wouldn't concentrate for long periods . . . When my daughter was on her own, I think she had a problem sometimes engaging when it wasn't her turn to speak.’

However, parents also noted that online education harbors significant promise for elevating children’s agency, which is associated with improved health and wellbeing outcomes for children (Montreuil and Carnevale, 2016). Specifically, parents of high- and middle-school children witnessed increases in their child/ren’s sense of independence ($n=34$). Devising practices to scaffold the development of children’s autonomy in online environments may ensure this benefit is more widespread across ages. As one parent remarked: ‘My child seems much more confident in asking questions and participating now that the courses have gone online. This may be because the teacher is not standing in front of her. It may also have to do with my child's personal development in her level of confidence. This may also be a factor affecting her productivity and excitement for school.’

**Parents Felt Online Education was Less Effective than Traditional Schooling**

Parent participants also cited concerns about the quality of their child/ren’s online education. Specifically, parents reported that educator quality was highly variable, lesson quality was underwhelming at the start of the online experience, there was a lack of transparency and clarity regarding assessment/grading, and educator feedback was not timely. Parents reported that teacher quality and the ability of the teachers to effectively use technology for online education varied widely, illustrating a continuum of quality ($n=93$). While numerous parents shared praise for their
children’s educator(s) (n=44), many also cited tremendous frustration (n=49). As one parent highlighted, ‘I think different subjects, different teachers also play a key role in this. Some of the teachers, they can immediately pick up the kid’s attention and make the Zoom session much more interactive and successful. And some teachers, it’s not that they're not trying hard, but they have a different personality.’

Additionally, parents discussed how they perceived the quality of the online lessons to be underwhelming, particularly during the start of COVID-19 (n=40). Again, these perceptions may be related to teachers’ technological skills and knowledge related to providing instruction in online environments. One parent noted, ‘Many teachers didn’t teach new lessons. I felt that they were not very well prepared for a variety of reasons. For instance, we haven’t got any new lessons for a long time for some classes and the teachers just [do] review. I think it’s a bit of a waste of time.’

Furthermore, there was a concern among parents about the types of assessment used and how they would know if their child/ren were making ‘normal progress’ during this time (n=33). Parents reported a lack of transparent assessment protocols and clear procedures for evaluating student learning. One parent shared: ‘As for the online classes, I hope they can share assessment or grading measures transparently. I’m not saying that they should share whether a student submitted an assignment or not. I think there should be clear assessment rubrics that students can understand how they will be assessed and measured.’

Similarly, parents were concerned about the timeliness in which educators were answering their child/ren’s questions and providing feedback (n=13). Parents wanted more consistency in the channels in which this feedback was provided (eg, via email, LMS) as well as the quality of the feedback. To illustrate this, one parent remarked: ‘My child has mentioned that sometimes she doesn’t receive any feedback on homework after completing an assignment. I ask her every day how everything is going, what she is doing, but she has mentioned that two weeks may have passed and she still won’t have received feedback from a teacher.’

However, parents were pleased when their child/ren received personalized feedback, commenting how timely educator feedback triggered excitement and engagement in their child/ren during these times with reduced interaction (n=13): ‘But her [the educator’s] enthusiastic reaction and giving him amazing feedback for being creative . . . I’ve never had a happier kid. He's normally like, ‘Oh my god I don’t want to do e-learning.’ He was sitting and waiting for her feedback, literally refreshing Seesaw and then when he got it at seven in the morning he comes bouncing into my room, ‘She read it, she liked it, Mom!’’ Accordingly, ensuring educators prioritize the delivery of meaningful feedback to students may be one simple tactic to widely encourage student engagement in online forums.

Overall, parents believed their child/ren’s learning was less effective online versus in-person instruction (n=48). Parents shared fears that their child/ren were not making as much, or as quick, academic progress in the home environment. One parent shared: ‘My sense is that I feel that [my child] has missed a little bit of just the reading and writing . . . And I just feel that it got to the point where there’s only so much we can do at home . . . I feel like if she had been with all of her peers in her class, learning all of this stuff, it would have just soaked in a lot more and they would probably have moved them along a bit quicker.’

Parents Desired Improved Communication from School Leadership

The majority of parents felt the school and teaching staff lacked timely communication (n=71). Parents desired more prompt communication related to three areas: expectations for their child/ren, parent roles and expectations, and explanations of policies. To begin, parents lacked a clear understanding of how long their child/ren should actually be spending on tasks and felt educators were
assigning too much work \((n=16)\). However, as time went on, parents were appreciative that timetables were devised \((n=48)\). In one parent’s experience: ‘So, it took them a few months, but they had it down pat. They had a timetable in place for each time zone. They had teachers available for subjects and specialist subjects. It was a very smooth transition.’

Similarly, parents wanted guidance on expectations for their child/ren’s behavioral conduct during online education \((n=16)\). One parent described the lack of etiquette demonstrated by some children during the online lesson, noting how it created a distracting environment for other children who were eager to learn: ‘Some of the children were turning up to calls, they wouldn’t put their cameras on, they’d be eating food, some of them were quite rude, some of them would have their phone on the screen. And I personally was quite surprised that there wasn’t a bit more . . . I mean, the teachers would send messages saying, ‘Please can you turn up, please put your camera on’ but still some kids would not. And I just think that if we do it again, there should be some clearer ground rules around behavior and what’s expected.’

Additionally, parents requested clear communication about what roles they should be assuming and expectations for how to support their child/ren \((n=10)\). As one parent mentioned: ‘It might be helpful to have a bit more clarity on what the parent role is, if there is one. Are you expected to know what’s happened in the day or not?’ Relatedly, parents requested that school leadership offer a rationale when new policies are enacted \((n=10)\). Parents believed offering parent visibility into changes related to topics, such as changes to school schedules or the technology being used, would reinforce parental trust in the school. As one parent expressed: ‘I’m not the expert, so I don’t know what the latest technologies are in educating children in different ways . . . So, I’m relying on them, that’s why I’m paying this much money for my children to go to the school . . . But what I feel a little bit lacking from [the] school end is, the explanation why they are implementing certain things. When there’s big changes, I think it’s very necessary.’

Despite this constructive feedback, parents remarked that they better understood and felt more connected to their child/ren’s education and hoped to be more involved in their child/ren’s education in the future \((n=10)\): ‘It was pretty positive to see how much they were learning, the depth of the learning, and also the style. I really learnt a few things too in terms of how maybe I can better support as a parent. But, it would be nice if we can somehow get a chance once a term or whatever to go into the classroom to see what the children have been learning, and to see their workbooks and things.’ School leadership may be able to harness this desire for parental participation and devise efforts to further engage parents in their child/ren’s learning.

**Discussion and Implications**

The role of parents in student/child development and learning outcomes, particularly during a time of upheaval such as the global COVID-19 pandemic, is under-researched. Much of the research has focused on the student learner, the teacher, and school leadership. This paper provides a vehicle for parent voice to deepen our understanding of the issues and challenges they faced, and which need to be addressed at the school level as we move beyond the period of disruption into a renewed and revitalized educational landscape.

To some extent, the disruption to traditional schooling experienced during this time highlighted and exacerbated the fault lines that already exist in educational settings. Parents in this study reported concerns about student wellbeing, the quality of learning and uncertainty about their role in the educative process. Parents expressed real concerns about access to technology and how it is deployed in learning, as well as concerns about technology tools and infrastructure. Lack of clarity about what technologies were essential, how much time was to be devoted to learning online, and relatively easy access to an efficient infrastructure, added to parental anxiety. Assuming new roles
as ‘co-partners’, ‘co-educators’ or ‘managers of learning’ added to their anxiety, particularly if they were also trying to manage their own work commitments at home.

Importantly, parents reported increased levels of stress and anxiety in their child/ren during this time, largely attributed to increased isolation, uncertainty about learning tasks, low levels of motivation and engagement, as well as lack of feedback about their learning progress. Parents highlighted, therefore, the importance of wellbeing as a precondition for learning and identified this as a key concern for schools and school leaders to anticipate and support proactively.

Parents also noted increased visibility into their child/ren’s learning and, in particular, the quality of teaching. The variable quality of teaching observed by parents constituted an elevated concern and was highlighted by examples of those teachers who successfully negotiated the move to online learning and those for whom the challenges were significant. Parents clearly identified this as a major issue, and expressed worry about the quality of instructional practices and the lack of appropriate and timely feedback. Additionally, parents raised issues about the curriculum being offered. This is of particular relevance to school systems that rely on fees from parents.

Most importantly, however, this research brought into focus the lack of confidence, and sometimes ambivalence, that parents felt about their role in their child/ren’s learning. Parents struggled to find a balance between assuming the role of the ‘educator’ or ‘facilitator’ and that of emotional support. Parents were clear that they sought greater guidance from the school about appropriate guidelines for balancing screen time and physical health, options for promoting engagement, clarity about school expectations and appropriate technologies, as well as insight on managing feedback to teachers and communication with the school.

For school leaders, this research highlights some opportunities and challenges. The move to online learning did provide parents with greater visibility into their child/ren’s learning, the nature of the curriculum and the quality of teaching. It also increased their opportunities to contribute to both dimensions of their role: as co-educators and as providers of emotional support. However, this study finds that the enhanced visibility increased the stress levels for parents and their child/ren. Leaders and educators, therefore, have a number of opportunities to leverage parent engagement and address some of the challenges identified.

The key challenges that schools face are to provide parents with greater guidance and support in their role. While many parents reported increased stress, much of this was due to the lack of appropriate technology support, absence of clarity around their role, and inadequate two-way communication with teachers and school leaders. The implications for school leaders are that they need to consider equitable access to technology, a consistent platform for online learning across the school, and increased professional development for teachers in the effective use of appropriate teaching and learning strategies. Further, schools can leverage parent engagement in their role by defining the sorts of academic and emotional support that are most effective and age appropriate. By opening up a feedback loop or implementing reciprocal communication strategies, schools may mitigate some of the anxieties experienced by parents in the home learning environment.

Of note, school leaders have an imperative to engage in a communication approach that is culturally responsive. Especially within the international school context, there are an array of culturally-informed roles parents expect to play in their children’s education. School leaders and teachers are charged with understanding how parental roles vary widely across cultures, and devising approaches that honor these differences.

A challenge for schools and school leaders as they emerge from the pandemic and return to face-to-face teaching and learning is how to maximize the partnership with parents as co-educators and providers of emotional support. Indeed, today’s reality of teaching and learning is a drastic departure from the educational methods remembered by most parents. Since the landscape of education has changed so dramatically, school leaders have a role to play in bringing parents up to speed.
Policy options will include definitions of home learning, opportunities for parents to support child learning, equity of access to technologies, and tracking student progress and development. Overall, the parent voice amplified in this study provides school leaders with a deeper understanding of the challenges and issues identified by parents which can be translated into improved school polices, operational procedures and professional learning opportunities for teachers.

Conclusions and Future Directions

In this paper, we explored parent experiences with the transition to online learning as a means to identify lessons about how school communities might better support students and families while facilitating high-quality online education. Our findings suggest a number of lessons learned relevant to educators, school leaders and educational researchers as our various communities seek to reimagine the future of education.

In particular, our study highlights the need for further research—and practical supports—that clarify and support parents’ roles as co-educators. Parents in our study described challenges relating to their own anxiety, their child/ren’s wellbeing and uncertainty about the role(s) they are meant to play in an online environment. Consequently, greater clarity and guidance on topics such as (1) parent roles and responsibilities, (2) strategies for supporting student wellbeing, (3) feedback and assessment strategies that work well in an online environment, and (4) expectations regarding communication and behavior may help alleviate parental anxiety connected to the online environment.

This study further suggests the role of parents in supporting student/child is an under-researched phenomenon; as such, there is an ongoing need for future research in this domain. Looking forward, school communities and educational researchers have a unique opportunity to leverage what has been learned during the COVID-19 pandemic—and to re-envision and reimagine the nature of educational systems, as well as the role parents embody within these systems. Research that assists in clarifying and supporting the critical role of parents—and helps school systems to respond to disparities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic—will contribute to efforts that ensure all students can realize their potential.

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