The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in primary schools in the Czech Republic: Parental perspectives

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Abstract
The article presents results of a survey among parents of primary-school pupils, in which they commented on education during school closures due to the COVID-19 disease pandemic in the spring of 2020. The questionnaire mapped family arrangements, parents' competencies, parenting practices concerning learning, and communication with the school. It was administered to more than 2,500 respondents at the end of the period of school closures (May–June 2020). The analysis focused on the question of whether the parents of pupils in primary schools assessed the home-based distance learning as well handled and whether they felt concerned about their child's future school results. We understand parents' satisfaction as a result of the interaction between family arrangements on one hand, and requirements formulated by the schools on the other. The analysis showed that most parents rated home education positively. However, the socio-economic status (SES) and cultural status of parents was a significant factor. Among the low-SES parents, 47% reported concerns, while among the high-SES parents, only 30% did. The strongest moderators of the link between SES and concerns about the school results of children were: school-family communication during closures, adequacy of curriculum, parental practices supporting child's concentration and motivation, perceived school success of a child and parents' educational aspirations for the child.
1 | INTRODUCTION

The transition to home-based distance learning necessitated by the COVID-19 outbreak has been a new experience for all education systems. It highlighted the importance of the family environment for children’s school success. The outbreak thus underscored the importance of long-term characteristics such as the role of parents, family background or material standard of living in the context of individual education systems. It also highlighted the importance of patterns of communication between teachers and parents and the comprehensibility of school instruction for parents. With this in mind, we conducted a survey to assess parental experiences of distance learning in the Czech Republic after the government shut down schools due to the pandemic in the Spring of 2020.

1.1 | Distance learning in the context of Czech educational inequalities

The Czech education system is highly selective and produces large educational inequalities: “All comparative studies have shown that the Czech education system appears to be one of the most selective among OECD countries” (Mateju & Strakova, 2005, p. 5). Educational inequalities become most apparent after the transition to the lower secondary level (ISCED 2), but they exist also at the primary and pre-primary levels (ISCED 0 and 1) showing patterns of systematic inequalities based on socio-economic status (SES; Greger et al., 2015).

In the study on which this article reports, we focused on the primary education level and the first period of school closures. We expected that the first wave of the pandemic might act as a magnifying glass revealing the roots of education inequalities at the beginning of the education career. Neither schools nor families were prepared for this kind of situation, and they did not have the competencies to deal with risks associated with distance learning. Subsequent school closures in the autumn of 2020 and spring of 2021 were probably different in this respect. The schools had by then received methodological and material support from the Ministry of Education and from municipalities, warning of the danger of growing educational inequalities.

Our main interest was how parents evaluated distance learning; concretely, the level of parental concerns about the future school success of their children. From a cultural and psychological point of view, concerns are not an isolated emotion or personality trait of an individual. They are a result of interaction between subjectively perceived conditions for a certain activity and the requirements imposed by the social environment. Therefore, we mainly focused on how parents’ concerns are related to their SES. The relationship between SES and parental concerns was studied through mediating factors, including family circumstances, parents’ expectations concerning school success, and parental self-confidence regarding the competence to assist in learning. On the other end of the interaction, there were specific demands placed on pupils and their parents by teachers during distance learning; or more precisely, parental perceptions of demands.

1.2 | Structural and process-based sources of educational inequalities

Research on the impacts of the family environment on children’s school success typically focuses on four areas: (1) structural characteristics of the family, such as its SES, (2) moderating process-based variables (parental educational practices and their school-affirming support), (3) aspirations (ambitions) of parents for their children’s education, and (4) factors impeding their fulfilment.

The first tradition is represented by research on the reproduction of inequalities based on classical works (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970) and research on childhood (Lareau, 2011; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). These works show that the level of parents’ education, their professions and material conditions of the family correlate with the level of school success of their children. The lower education of parents leads to a lesser
understanding of school requirements, in particular their cognitive structure. At the same time, however, it turns out that the strongest predictor of children's school success is not the SES of parents as such, but the level and form of parents' activities supporting children to learn in the home environment (Buerkle et al., 2009; Lareau, 2011).

In the second tradition, the importance of SES is therefore combined with stress on process-based characteristics. These include specific forms of parental participation in school education such as helping with homework, encouragement, supervising the child's learning progress, and other forms of involvement mentioned above (Leithwood & Patrician, 2015; Watkins & Howard, 2015). In contrast to parents with higher SES, parents with low SES tend to understand supporting their children's learning mainly in terms of stressing formal and organisational requirements—they emphasise the duration of home preparation and external compliance with teachers' requirements (e.g., Epstein, 2001; Watkins & Howard, 2015). Research on parental support at home is often based on a model introduced by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997; cf. also Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). These authors argue that parental control, support and interventions in children's learning process depend on (1) how parents perceive their parental role, (2) on their self-confidence about their competence to assist children during distance learning, and (3) on how teachers encourage parental participation in education.

In line with these findings, the third tradition focuses on the self-efficacy of parents, which inhibits or facilitates the use of effective forms of specific and non-specific support to children. Parents with higher self-confidence with respect to their competencies to assist the child effectively in the learning process tend to be proactive. They also try to understand the concrete learning situations and adopt suitable methods. Leithwood and Patrician (2015) mention family educational culture which includes: "parenting style, parental expectations for children's work at school, direct instructional support for school learning, active parent interest in the school's curriculum, and the monitoring of children's engagement with their schoolwork" (Leithwood & Patrician, 2015, p. 664). They found a positive impact on decreasing educational inequalities when specific school interventions aiming at parent engagement were systematically used in the mentioned areas. They also described the building of productive educational culture as a promising strategy for overcoming the gap in the school success of socially advantaged as well as disadvantaged students. This conclusion is supported by an overview study of Watkins and Howard (2015), which looked at parenting of successful pupils from families with low SES.

1.3 | Relationship between families and schools in the Czech Republic

The relationship between schools and families as fundamental institutions of socialisation is characterised by a number of power asymmetries favouring schools, whose uniformity and structure have eroded in the recent decades, but they are still evident (Buerkle et al., 2009; Lareau, 2011). Changes brought about by neoliberal pressures and technological developments took a different shape in the post-communist Czech Republic compared to the Western European countries. The Czech Republic had traditionally a high percentage of children in the pre-school education (ISCED 0). This was followed by a uniform school system composed of the primary or elementary level and the lower secondary level. The primary level consists of five grades; all classes are usually tough by the same teacher (96% of teachers are women) and other teachers teach some of the classes only in the final grades. The teachers must have a university degree in primary school instruction. The instruction is governed by the School Educational Programme developed by the school based on the national Framework Educational Programme.

Before 1989, the education system produced a number of social inequalities. However, due to political factors, patterns of inequality were different from those in Western countries where parental SES exclusively played a key role. In the 1990s, a new type of institution, a classical grammar school, gymnasium, was introduced in the Czech
Republic. It has two levels—lower secondary and high school. The overwhelming majority of children who enter the lower secondary level get their high school degree in the same gymnasium.

Currently, approximately one quarter of children continue their education in gymnasiums, after completing the primary level. The rest of the children continue their education in the same elementary school, in lower secondary education. The external selection is highly competitive and the chances of admission are approximately 30%. Many pupils take special courses organised by private agencies to prepare for the admission tests. Research shows that children from higher SES families that support their children with specific and non-specific activities continue their education in gymnasiums more often than children from lower SES families (Greger et al., 2015).

Supporting activities correspond to the classification according to Christenson and Buerkle (1999). They distinguish four categories of parenting activities supporting children’s learning success: (1) structuring of activities (emphasis on the importance of homework over other activities and strict control over how the child spends time); (2) direct support (parents assist their child by going through assignments or homework tasks with them and by providing encouragement); (3) setting expectations (defining what level of effort is expected from the child, avoiding negative evaluations of the child’s abilities, expressing interest in learning quality standards set by the school); and (4) a stimulating home environment (frequent discussions with the child, creating opportunities for expressing oneself correctly, reading with the child).

In a study involving 1,227 parents of primary school pupils, Deslandes and Bertrand (2004) identified two predictors of parental participation in the child’s school learning. The first predictor was parents’ self-perception of educational competence. Parents are motivated to actively participate in home learning if they are confident that they have sufficient knowledge and skills to provide adequate support and that their interventions can lead to improved learning outcomes. The second predictor was the quality of teachers’ communication with parents, i.e., especially the requirements expressed by teachers and stimuli and support which teachers provide to parents. If teachers focused more on individual communication with the parents and offered specific guidance on how the child can be assisted, the parents spent more time reading with the children or helping them with homework. An important factor strengthening parental involvement was their understanding that their assistance was desirable, i.e., welcomed by the teacher (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2004).

Buchanan and Buchanan (2017) also emphasise the importance of developing mutual trust and showing that parental help is welcomed. They point out that communication with parents should lead to an understanding that both the teacher and the parents are sharing the same goal: ensuring maximum school success of the child.

These conclusions have been also confirmed in the Czech context. Focusing on causes of school failure, the Czech School Inspectorate (CSI) (2013) noted that children from socio-economically disadvantaged families achieved good results if parents showed strong interest in education. With the support from teachers, such interest results in parents’ ability to provide learning support to the children at home. While majority of respondents were satisfied with how the school communicated with parents, approximately 40% of them were informed about their child’s school progress only approximately once in three months or even less often. CSI concluded that it was necessary to strengthen communication between schools and parents as it is one of the key factors that can help improve equity in education (CSI, 2013).

Subsequently, CSI concluded that this general feature of the Czech education system, insufficient family-school communication, became even more pronounced during the school closures in the spring of 2020. Up to 10% of pupils did not participate in distance learning and the extent of communication between schools and parents also decreased (CSI, 2020). Another study (Prokop et al., 2020) showed that 13% of parents were dissatisfied with the quality of distance learning and another 27% expressed mixed feelings. The level of parents’ satisfaction closely correlated with the form and frequency of schools’ communication with pupils and parents. The similar results have been showed also by another Czech study of family-school relationships during the pandemia (Svaricek et al., 2020).
2 | RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 | Research objectives and questions

The closing of schools after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 was an extraordinary measure that may have exposed some characteristic features of the education system and the school-family relationship. One of the main characteristics of the existing education system is a strong reproduction of social inequalities and lack of systemic measures to prevent them. In an effort to map school closures and to evaluate distance learning, but also to analyse the impact of distance learning on the Czech education system, we conducted a survey among parents of pupils in primary school. We assumed that parental (dis)satisfaction stemming from the interaction between the conditions in the family and school requirements was a significant factor contributing to the functional cooperation between the school and the family. We also assumed that the structural and procedural characteristics of families dealing with school requirements could differ depending on their SES. Based on these assumptions, we formulated three research questions: (1) What were family and work circumstances for distance learning in families with high and low SES? (2) How was distance learning organised by the schools according to parents with high and low SES? (3) What was the level of dissatisfaction with distance learning and what were concerns about the child’s school development among parents with high and low SES?

2.2 | Research instruments

The data was collected using a questionnaire consisting of 80 items. Most of them were closed or semi-open questions (with the possibility to add one’s own answer if none of the offered answers suited the respondent). The questionnaire was divided into nine sections: (1) respondents’ background (age, education, occupation, etc.); (2) family characteristics (household composition, size of the municipality, size of the dwelling, etc.); (3) family arrangements during the school closure (parents’ work obligations, number of computers, internet connection, etc.); (4) characteristics of the pupil (age, gender, education level, school success, etc.); (5) conditions and requirements for distance learning imposed by the school (number of tasks, frequency of contact, time spent for learning, etc.); (6) parental practices during distance learning (supervision, control, support, etc.); (7) self-perceived parental competences and barriers to home learning (lack of knowledge in individual subjects, etc.); (8) parents’ feelings related to distance learning (feelings evoked by communication with the school, intelligibility of information, etc.); (9) expectations for the period when in-school learning is resumed (attitude towards reopening of schools, concerns of failure, etc.).

The questionnaire was peer-reviewed and tested in a qualitative pilot study. It was then converted to an online version in Survey Monkey. Information about the ongoing research was distributed to all primary and secondary schools in the Czech Republic, whose principals were asked to forward the request to fill in the questionnaire to parents.

Data collection took place over a period of four weeks during May and June 2020. This was a period when in-school teaching had just been resumed and pandemic response measures were eased up. The climate in society became slightly positive and optimistic, which was certainly reflected in the parents’ perception of distance learning.

2.3 | Sampling

Valid responses from 5,016 parents of children in primary, lower-secondary and high-school level education were collected over a four-week period. In this study, we present results of analysis involving 2,528 parents of children.
in primary-level education. These represented 50% of all respondents, which means that parents of pupils attending lower primary school grades felt comparatively more, than the parents of pupils attending lower secondary and higher secondary school levels, that the topic of the survey was relevant. Parents of children attending individual grades were evenly distributed.

Almost 90% of respondents were women. This is not surprising given that they play a role as primary care takers. In terms of family structure, two-parent families predominated (77%). Only twelve percent of parents reported a single-parent family. The average household consisted of four members. Most respondents (43%) lived in municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants.

Compared to the target population, there was higher share of parents with a university degree (47%) in the sample (15% had primary education or vocational training, 38% had secondary education with a school-leaving exam). The high representation of university-educated parents is due to their lower age(in the target population, the share of university graduates is constantly growing), but also due to the fact that they appreciate more the importance of education, and thus they were more interested in the research topic.

Parental occupational structures were probed using thirteen categories including type of economic activity, the hierarchy of position, and public versus private sector. Finally, five occupational categories were constructed: unemployed parents (1%), parents out of the labour market, such as parental leave, pensioners and stay-at-home parents (14%), employees and small tradesmen (62%), middle management employees and those employed in small businesses (16%), as well as top management employees and businessmen (7%).

A key variable, SES, was constructed from four variables—parental education, parental occupation, cultural activities and the quality of accommodation (rate of family members and rooms). For each variable, a 4- or 5-point ascending scale was created. The combination of these four variables resulted in the SES index. Participants were sorted by the family SES with a minimum of 4 points and a maximum of 18 points. The scale was divided into quarters. The low-SES quarter was reported by 19% of participants; the high-SES quarter was reported by 20%. The middle level of SES was reported by 61% of participants. The analyses were designed as comparative focusing on the high-SES and the low-SES parents.

### 2.4 Data analysis

The collected data were adjusted for respondents who did not provide answers in the primary description section (especially the educational level of the child whose remote learning from home the parents assessed) and/or who did not provide answers to 25% or more of all items in the questionnaire. The data were subjected to statistical analysis. The participants with low and high SES were compared using t-test and ANOVA. Linear regression was used to determine the predictive power of each parameter.

Our presentation of results is structured according to our research questions. First, we show the profile of families both in terms of structural conditions of parents by SES (information technology equipment available in the household, etc.) and in terms of psychological circumstances (ambition to educate the child, relationships with the child, the parents’ sense of competence in the field of information technology (IT) and ability to provide support in individual subjects, etc.). Second, we focus on the parents’ perception of the school’s performance. We pay attention not only to the frequency that teachers communicated with the child and parents and how instruction was organised by teachers, but also the time-burden imposed on the child and parents by distance learning. Next, we focus on the interactions between family-related factors and school practices. We investigate whether the schools’ requirements and expectations reflect what the family can do to support the child. We propose that a greater balance between school requirements and parent capacities should translate to a higher parental satisfaction with distance learning over time and less concerns about the future school results of children.
3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Family context and parental approach

The family and work circumstances for distance learning can be divided into technical-organisational characteristics and emotional-relational characteristics. They differ with respect to the factor of time—some are long-term, others are limited to the school closure.

Most parents worked outside the home before school closures. During the school closure, when it was possible to collect childcare benefit or to work from home, the most frequent working arrangements were full-time workplace attendance (27%) and a combination of workplace attendance and work from home (28%). Some nineteen percent of parents worked exclusively from home and 26% of parents did not work at all (received the childcare benefit or lost their jobs). During the school closure, therefore, only about half of the respondents were fully present at home. This contradicts the common notion that most parents were at home with their children and could constantly assist in their learning.

There was a significant difference between parents with respect to the occupational structure depending on the family SES ($p < .001$). Parents from lower-SES families were more likely to lose their jobs or depend on nursing benefits. If they worked, they had to go to the workplace. This could make caring for children during the school closure difficult. In contrast, parents from higher-SES families enjoyed more flexibility in their working arrangements. They could feel more at ease and have space to support their children’s education.

Distance learning requires an internet connection. Low-SES parents indicated that they had a perfectly good connection (54%) or rather good connection (38%). Only 8% reported a bad connection or no connection. High-SES parents frequently reported a perfect connection (70%) or rather good connection (28%) (only 2% reported a bad connection). However, this difference was significant ($p < .001$).

Nevertheless, it is not important only whether the family has a computer and internet. Parents were, therefore, asked to express their agreement with two statements referring to IT: (1) Our access to the Internet or IT materials is not sufficient or proportionate to educational needs; (2) Some distance learning applications for distance education are unavailable to us. The low-SES parents agreed with both statements significantly more often than the high-SES parents ($p < .001$). Even if there are computers and internet connections in the families, the low-SES parents experienced more difficulties in using them for educational purposes.

Naturally, it is also crucial whether parents feel competent to help children with IT. While 78% of the low-SES parents felt competent enough to assist their children with computers and the internet in distance education, of high-SES parents 97% did ($p < .001$). The parents were also asked about their competencies to help children specifically with learning school subjects. Three crucial school domains—first language, second language, and mathematics—were probed and showed a significant gap between the low-SES and high-SES parents. Comparatively more high-SES parents felt competent to assist their children (see Table 1). This was true especially for foreign language—almost twice as many high-SES parents felt competent. However, SES did not play a key role in supporting effective parental learning attitudes and strategies.

Parental support to learning is connected to the view parents have of their child as a pupil in terms of school success, and what educational aspirations parents have for their child. If parents have high expectations, they tend to be more willing to motivate and practically support their child in school learning. In our study, 80% of parents considered their child to be an excellent or good pupil and as many of them had high educational aspirations for their children. Strong correlation was found between parents’ aspirations and their ideas about their children as pupils ($r = 0.48, p < .001$). Table 2 shows the comparison based on SES. The high-SES parents reported significantly higher expectations and a more optimistic view of their child’s school achievements than the low-SES parents.

Although the parental perspective may not exactly correspond to the child’s school results and teachers’ perception, this subjective perception is crucial in terms of parental investment in school education and support. Based on the literature review, thirteen statements referring to parental practices in distance...
learning were formulated. The respondents were asked to score each statement on five-point scales from 1 (always) to 5 (never). Factor analysis identified a structure of three factors—direct supervision, indirect support, and remote supervision. The results are shown in Table 3. Low-SES parents reported that they used significantly more often practices of direct supervision—explicit control, presence and support in certain tasks and learning situations ($p < .001$). On the contrary, the high-SES parents indicated that they used more often remote supervision which involved recalling and structuring task situations while accepting the student’s independence and the student’s own responsibility for learning ($p < .001$). The high-SES parents also preferred some practices of unspecific support and personal development which is not connected only to school achievement.

### Table 1 | Self-reported competencies of parents in particular domains

|                     | 1/5 low SES (%) | 1/5 high SES (%) | $p$   |
|---------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------|
| Czech language      | 80              | 90               | .001  |
| Mathematics         | 80              | 89               | .001  |
| Foreign language    | 45              | 82               | .001  |
| Learning strategies | 76              | 85               | .034  |
| Concentration and motivation | 66       | 74               | .129  |

Source: Authors.

### Table 2 | Idea of the child’s school success and educational aspirations by parents (based on SES)

|                              | 1/5 low SES (%) | 1/5 high SES (%) |
|------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Parental view of school achievements |                 |                  |
| Excellent student            | 28              | 51               |
| Good student                 | 36              | 39               |
| Average or weaker student    | 36              | 10               |
| Expectations for education   |                 |                  |
| Basic or vocational education| 11              | 0.6              |
| High school education        | 40              | 9                |
| Higher and university education | 21           | 66               |
| No expectation               | 28              | 24               |

Source: Authors.

It is important not only what schools and teachers actually demanded from children and parents, but also—and rather—what parents noticed and perceived as important. According to the majority of parents (92%), their children received school assignments electronically. However, the share of online teaching and electronically assigned off-line individual tasks varied greatly. Teaching with a predominance of online meetings was mentioned by 11% of parents, teaching with a balanced ratio of online meetings and assigned tasks was mentioned by 31% of parents and teaching with a predominance of assigned tasks was mentioned by 58% of parents. As many as 80% of parents whose children have attended online lessons considered it a good or fairly good alternative to normal schooling. This is confirmed by the above fact that almost everyone had internet and basic equipment.

### 3.2 | Organisation of distance learning and teacher-parent communication
In addition to the form of teaching, we consider it important to monitor the contact of teachers with children. It can take place directly during teaching or assignment, during the evaluation of completed student assignments, or other occasions. Ordinary full-time teaching combines two types of pedagogical communication on the part of teachers—one is aimed at the class as a whole group, the other is aimed at individual students. Group communication is important for facilitating the organisation of teaching, but also for student comparison and awareness of their own position. Individual communication is a tool for the individualisation of teaching. It allows to respond sensitively to the educational needs of specific students and to provide detailed feedback. During the school closure, when communication channels available to teachers were limited, overall reduction in communication between teachers and pupils was imminent, especially the individual forms of communication.

According to parents, 50% of teachers used group communication every day or several times a week, 21% used it three to four times a month, and 29% communicated almost never or never. With respect to individual communication, it was indicated in 23% as happening daily or several times a week, in 26% as happening three to four times a month, and in 52% as almost non-existent or non-existent. Teachers communicated with children at least once a week or more often in 69% of cases using group communication and in 41% of cases individually.

### TABLE 3 Parental practices for supporting school learning, mean and standard deviation

| Factor                                      | 1/5 low SES | 1/5 high SES | p      | Factor                          |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------|--------------|--------|---------------------------------|
| (1) Direct supervision                      |             |              |        |                                 |
| I sit next to the child all the time and help him/her | 2.28 (1.08) | 2.81 (1.12) | .001   |                                 |
| I make sure that the child devotes him/herself to learning at the right time and long enough | 1.74 (0.89) | 2.00 (0.99) | .001   |                                 |
| I help the child with the tasks assigned to him/her by the teacher | 2.14 (0.96) | 2.66 (1.03) | .001   |                                 |
| I explain the subject to the child          | 1.78 (0.92) | 2.26 (0.95) | .001   |                                 |
| I test the child on what she/he has learned | 2.07 (1.10) | 2.61 (1.15) | .001   |                                 |
| I want the child to tell me what they did and learned during school time | 2.46 (1.24) | 2.46 (1.14) | .965   |                                 |
| I give the child various exercises and tasks from a certain subject beyond what the teachers give him | 3.22 (1.24) | 3.26 (1.16) | .691   | (2) Support of non-specific cognitive development |
| I give the child more complex tasks that require connecting knowledge from different subjects | 3.93 (1.16) | 3.58 (1.12) | .001   |                                 |
| I make sure that the child makes progress in various areas of knowledge | 2.59 (1.18) | 2.43 (1.02) | .031   |                                 |
| I lead the child to activities not directly related to school, but which can be useful for her/his school success | 2.62 (1.16) | 2.19 (0.99) | .001   |                                 |
| I look at the tasks that the child will do independently | 1.31 (0.73) | 1.53 (0.88) | .001   | (3) Remote control               |
| I check and correct tasks that the child does independently | 1.56 (0.97) | 1.73 (1.07) | .024   |                                 |
| I check that the child will complete and, if necessary, send the tasks assigned by the teachers | 1.22 (0.66) | 1.40 (0.86) | .001   |                                 |

Source: Authors.
However, this would mean that almost 1/3 of the children were not in contact with their teachers on a weekly basis, i.e., their education was fully dependent on their parents.

If we look at communication between teachers and pupils through the lens of SES, we can see that the low-SES parents reported the same experience with individual communication ($M = 3.9$) as the high-SES parents ($M = 4.1$). However, low-SES parents reported significantly less group communication ($M = 3.5$) than high-SES parents ($M = 2.8$). The high-SES parents indicated more frequent contacts between teachers and children than the low-SES parents ($p < .001$). This can be related to worse technical conditions of the low-SES families (poorer internet connection, weaker competence of parents to assist with technical support, less space in the household, etc.). The other reason can be stronger involvement of the high-SES parents in education and thus their subjective estimation of time spent learning may be higher. It may also be the result of the fact that the parents underestimate contact (in the case of the low-SES parents) or overestimate (in the case of the high-SES parents) because the two groups have different expectations. The last reason, which we can think of, is that teachers put less effort in communication with low-SES children (possibly due to some resignation to successful performance of children).

### 3.3 | Parents' perspective on school practices and requirements

The parental view of how the schools performed during distance learning was rather positive. Most parents perceived the curriculum as reasonably demanding (87%), the instructions from the teachers as understandable (83%) and the communication as sufficient and clear (78%). However, in all three aspects, the parents with high and low SES significantly differed. Only 16% of the high-SES parents, but 22% of the low-SES parents agreed with the statement *Instructions and assignments from teachers are not always clear enough* ($p = .012$). Similarly, only 8% of the high-SES parents, but a full 22% of the low-SES parents agreed with the statement *The curriculum that needs to be learned is often too difficult* ($p < .001$). We can conclude that more of the low-SES parents considered the approach of schools to distance learning as unsatisfactory. However, this attitude was not very strong or conscious. Most parents (79%) perceived the procedures and measures on the part of the school and the family to be sufficient to ensure the child’s good school results. No difference between low- and high-SES parents was found.

Despite this, a relatively large proportion of parents (33%) feared a worsening of their child’s school results. In terms of parental SES, the parents’ responses differed significantly ($p < .001$). While 47% of the low-SES parents reported concerns about the worsening of the child’s school results, 30% of the high-SES parents did.

Psychologically, parents’ concerns can be considered as the strongest indicator of parental satisfaction. Assuming that parents strive for the best possible school education for their children (whether this means above all the development of knowledge and skills, formal success in further education or the fulfilment of the child’s personal potential), the presence of concerns about further school results is a signal that parents do not consider the current form of school education to be satisfactory in view of their child’s needs. In this sense, we consider concern to be a negation of parental satisfaction with a great impact on future collaboration between family and school.

In order to determine which variable shows a higher degree of parents’ concerns, multiple linear regression was conducted using SPSS software. In a model with the parental concerns as a dependent variable, all variables presented above were tested in a regression equation as independent variables. The variables included were: SES, IT equipment and connection, perceived school success of child, educational aspirations, effectiveness of instructions from school, adequacy of the curriculum, intelligibility of school-family communication, teacher-student communication, teacher-group communication, perceived competencies in different school subjects and IT, direct supervision, nonspecific support, and remote supervision. All details are presented in Table 4.

The results of the hierarchical regression analysis showed that five variables in the model were significantly related to parental concerns about school achievements. The concerns level increased by 0.07 point for each
standard score of total school-family communication, by 0.08 point for each standard score of total adequacy of curriculum, by 0.04 point of each standard score of total educational aspirations, while the parental concerns increased by 0.08 point for each standard score of perceived school success of child and by 0.11 point for each standard score of concentration and motivation practices.

The concerns were more often experienced by parents who considered their children as unsuccessful at school, but at the same time had higher educational aspirations for them. So, they felt threatened because they wanted a better education for the child, but at the same time they perceived that the child had certain weaknesses that could prevent him or her from achieving it. It is particularly important for these parents to assist their children. However, parents with low-SES were more likely to have doubts about their competencies, which was reflected in their concerns.

4 | DISCUSSION

Two features are characteristic of the Czech education system. The first is high selectivity (Mateju & Strakova, 2005), which is associated with potential pupil failure during the educational career. The second is the strong dependence of school success on the socio-cultural background of the family (Katrnak & Simonova, 2011). Education inequalities are usually studied with respect to the transition between lower secondary and upper secondary schools or between primary and lower secondary schools. However, the beginning of schooling is absolutely essential for the child's overall educational career. At this period, children form cognitive tools that are essential for
their success in further levels of education. At the same time, they build attitudes towards school and education, which determine their educational ambitions and situational learning motivation. According to an OECD survey, the first years of education are critical for reducing educational and social inequalities (for pre-school education, cf. García & Weiss, 2017). That is why we decided to focus on the role of primary education in forming or mitigating inequalities.

The transition to distance learning during the school closure in the spring of 2020 was a very challenging situation for both the families and the schools. During this time, tendencies to deepen educational inequalities may have been strengthened or weakened. In our study, we focused on parents' perception of distance learning during the closure. We wanted to know whether they considered it as well handled and what circumstances contributed to this perception.

Specifically, we wanted to know if parents with different SES (high or low) perceived distance learning differently. We compared these two groups of parents in terms of their family and work arrangements and their perceptions of school practices. Our assumption was that parental assessment of distance learning would reflect the relationship between family arrangements and school requirements. We assumed that a positive assessment would not result exclusively from family arrangements or only from the school's approach, but from the relationship between them. Some school requirements may be perceived as uncomplicated by some families, while the same requirements can be problematic for other families. We consider the absence of parental concerns about the child's further school results as the main indicator of coping. The presence of concerns signals a problem with the compatibility between school requirements and family arrangements. It should be remembered that this is a subjective feeling of parents, not an objective evaluation of their activities. However, from the point of view of the parent-school relationship, which should be based on trust, clarified competencies, commitment and belief in the effectiveness of one's own efforts (see also, Epstein, 2001), this subjective view is crucial.

Our results showed that most parents did not feel concerned about the worsening of school results (for more details see Smetackova & Stech, 2021). Subjectively, most parents managed their home education well enough (albeit often with subjective strain) not to be concerned about their children's future education. The family SES turned out to be a significant factor. As many as half of the low-SES parents were worried about the child's future school results, while only 30% of the high-SES parents. We expected as much. It makes sense that parents with lower SES also considered teacher instructions more often less comprehensible and the curriculum too demanding. They also had slightly more often problems with the technical equipment. The subjective readiness to support the child's school learning proved to be a key factor; in particular, the belief in one's own competencies in solving school tasks (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The low-SES Parents felt less competent in supporting their children in learning, both with respect to individual school subjects (most strongly in a foreign language), and appropriate motivation and task structure. However, the low-SES parents tried quite hard to support their children in learning. They used direct supervision more often than the high-SES parents. They sat with the child during distance learning, explained the subject matter, did tasks with him or her. On the other hand, the high-SES parents used more often an indirect and remote support. This tends to instil greater independence and confidence in the child's own responsibility for the learning process. Independence can be strengthened by the parents just by giving the child space. If parents believe that their child is successful in school it is easier to provide him or her with room for independence.

Many studies have confirmed that family SES correlates with the intensity and quality of parental support (e.g., Lareau & Weininger, 2003). In turn, parental support tends to be linked to school success in two ways: (1) it can stimulate the child, but also (2) the idea that parents have about the child's school success can motivate them to provide more support. From the parents' point of view, how they think about the child is important. The high-SES parents more often considered their children to be successful at school and they had higher educational aspirations for them than the low-SES parents.

Low-SES parents showed more concerns, but at the same time, they considered their child to be a rather good pupil and they had high educational aspirations for him or her. So, they tried to work with the child, by
giving tasks beyond the school assignments, and searched for various supplementary materials. At the same time, however, they felt uncertain as to whether they were doing the right thing and whether they benefitted the child. They also felt that they did not receive precise enough instructions and sufficient assurances from the teachers.

The above results were internally consistent. However, it was surprising to learn that low-SES parents assessed the procedures in the family and at school as sufficient. Thus, in spite of the fact that they expressed more concerns and indicated more doubts about their approach they still considered the procedures as adequate. It is probably due to the strong internalisation of the asymmetric position between the school and the family in the case of the low-SES parents. As a result, they tended to perceive the child's potential failure as their own fault and they saw it as almost inevitable.

Our research thus supports the so-called reproductive hypothesis, according to which the child's school success depends on the family background, and specifically on the education of parents (Lareau, 2011; Mateju & Strakova, 2006). We also found strong (and even stronger) differences in the learning conditions of children based on the family SES. The high-SES families provided more suitable technical and organisational conditions for their children, but they also and especially provided greater support for learning itself.

The research results can be used to formulate several recommendations for education policy. The main conclusion is that the influence of SES on children's school performance has been demonstrated again, and it is therefore necessary to continue to perceive equality as a fundamental value and principle of educational policy. Given the high selectivity of the Czech education system, the topic of equality is particularly important. Most low-SES parents have tried to support and help their child in learning, but they do so through less effective procedures. Parents' actions miss out on what the school expects and demands. This has long been confirmed by a number of other studies (e.g., Lareau, 2011).

It is therefore important that schools are encouraged to work effectively with low-SES parents. This means, on one hand, that they are informed about the specifics of the educational process that dominates in these families (without unnecessary stereotyping and stigmatisation). On the other hand, it means that low-SES families need to be supported both methodically and organisationally (and financially) in the use of appropriate communication and cooperation strategies. The transparency of school requirements and the opportunities available for consultation should be emphasised. Also important is the offer of schools to work directly with children from families with low SES and thus replace the unavailability of parental support. To do all this, schools need to have suitable personnel, time and financial conditions in place.

However, appeals to equality in education can go beyond education policy. As some socio-critical authors show (e.g., Downey & Condron, 2016), when formulating policies to increase equality between pupils from different SES families, the causes of inequalities outside school should be raised. This would lead to a situation where, instead of seeking school reforms for equalising the treatment of pupils from low-SES and high-SES families, an overall change in the economic and political establishment would be sought for mitigating inequalities even before children enter schools. Similar to Downey and Condron (2016), we also hold the opinion that education policy does not operate separately from other policies (employment, housing, health, social policies), but on the contrary together with them. Thus, interventions in these areas as well are necessary to consolidate the positive effects of measures against educational inequalities. However, this is a topic beyond the focus of our text.

Our study has several methodological limits. The main one concerns sampling. The questionnaire was distributed through various channels and it was filled in by parents who were interested in the topic. In other words, we did not carry out random sampling and the sample is not representative. The parents involved had to be sufficiently motivated because the questionnaire was quite long. This may have skewed the results because strong motivations can come either from anger, or from positive feelings elicited by a child's success. The questionnaire was distributed online and therefore, it also required internet access and sufficient IT skills. Socially disadvantaged parents with the lowest education were thus certainly underrepresented in the research.
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