Parental perspectives of home-schooling of children with special educational needs and disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic: a review

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The purpose of this paper is to review recent literature on parental perspectives of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the home-schooling of children with special educational needs and disabilities, as well as to consider implications for their education and well-being. Eleven papers were reviewed, published between 2020 and 2021, selected according to a systematic protocol from three widely used online databases. Analysis of the reviewed papers found that transitioning to home-schooling during the pandemic had negative consequences for most of the children, as well as for their parents, though a small but significant number reported positive consequences. Three key areas of concern were identified in the analysis: balancing home-schooling with parent work activities; parent relationships with schools and support services and agencies; and home-schooling effects on the well-being and mental health of parents and children.

Introduction

School closings due to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during lockdowns, created challenges for all participants in education – teachers, students and parents (Bates et al., 2021). Students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) found themselves in a complicated situation because they require more support with learning and therefore may have had more significant difficulties during the remote learning process enforced by the pandemic than other children (O’Connor Bones et al., 2021). Children with SEND were faced with additional challenges in adapting to this form of distance learning (UNICEF, 2022).

In this paper, home-schooling is used to specifically refer to the phenomenon necessitated by the COVID-19 outbreak. Whilst this term has been commonly used prior to the recent pandemic, here it is used in the context of the abrupt transfer of learning from the school classroom to the home environment, still mainly carried out by teachers but in a type of partnership with parents.

Special educational needs are here defined as the learning difficulties of children that make it necessary to create additional special educational provision for them (Gordon-Gould and Hornby, 2023). Children have learning difficulties if they have significantly greater learning difficulties than most children of the same age or have a disability that makes it impossible or difficult to access the types of education that are usually intended for children of the same age (Hornby, 2014). Many children with special educational needs, due to their emotional, mental, physical or social condition, require therapeutic intervention from qualified specialists following an appropriate diagnosis. However, the terms ‘disability’ and ‘special educational needs’ are not synonymous because not every child with special educational needs is a young person with a disability (e.g., a student with ADHD). Also, some young people with disabilities do not have learning difficulties, including many of those who have sensory or physical disabilities (Gordon-Gould and Hornby, 2023). There are also those that are not recognised as having a disability or permanent learning difficulty in the education system, such as those experiencing social neglect that is causing academic deficits, for whom there is a need to organise and provide psychological as well as pedagogical help, so may be considered to have special educational needs (Bartnikowska and Antoszewska, 2017). This review focuses on the impact of the pandemic on home-schooling for children with special educational needs and those with disabilities.

Home-schooling and special education needs

When lockdowns came into effect during the COVID-19 pandemic, parents of school-age children became more responsible for their children’s academic learning. However, most parents were not prepared for this responsibility, as the vast majority of them lack the training or higher education that is a necessary component in the creation of specialised learning plans that are used in schools (Brandenburg et al., 2020). Home-schooling, whilst an existing phenomenon prior to the pandemic, took on new dimensions as many parents were thrust into the role.
This paper specifically refers to the form of home-schooling that was necessitated due to the pandemic. The majority of learning took place in students’ homes, with some online support being given by teachers from their schools, many of whom entered into a new partnership with parents. In many cases, home-schooling necessitated a greater level of parental involvement than before the pandemic. Parents took on roles previously held by teachers, for example, ensuring mastery of new concepts and subjects. This increased involvement was especially true for parents of children who were just beginning their school careers, as well as children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (Lee et al., 2021).

Method
The aim of this paper is to review recent literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the home-schooling of children with SEND. The following questions guided the review:

- What methodological approaches have been used to study parents’ experiences related to the home-schooling of their children with SEND?
- What was the impact on parents’ of home-schooling their children with SEND during the pandemic?
- How did the pandemic affect parents’ relationships with schools and the support provided by teachers?
- What were parents’ concerns in relation to home-schooling during the pandemic?

Review protocol
This systematic review of literature was conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021).

Eligibility criteria. Eligible studies were limited to scholarly, peer-reviewed papers reporting empirical research published in English between 2020 and 2021.

Data sources. Data sources were three electronic databases covering the area of education. The specific databases used were ProQuest, PubMed and SAGE Journals Online.

Search. In each database, an initial search was performed against paper abstracts using the Boolean search terms ‘COVID’ AND ‘Special educational needs’ AND ‘home-schooling’ AND ‘disability’ AND ‘children’. The search concluded in September 2021. Initial search results are summarised in Table 1.

Selection process. The selection process is diagrammed in Figure 1. Of the 430 papers identified from the databases, 50 were removed because of duplication and 280 removed for other reasons including: Reason 1 – the paper was not based on the COVID-19 situation; Reason 2 – the paper was not available; Reason 3 – age, the paper referred to adults; Reason 4 – ultimately not referring to the analysed phenomenon and Reason 5 – poor quality. Eighty-seven were removed by exclusion criteria and two by the quality evaluation noted below. This left 11 papers for review. All included studies were published in international journals in English.

The inclusion screening criteria, presented in Table 2, guided selection of papers from the initial list of studies for possible inclusion:

Evaluation. Evaluation of the quality of the included papers was judged on six of the nine quality criteria designated by Mullet, Rinn and Kettler (2017, pp. 259–260): I purpose, II Participants, III methods, IV Results, V conclusions and VI Significance. Only two studies were excluded on the basis of poor quality.

Data collection and analyses. Study details: authors, country, purpose, methods and participants were summarised and presented in Table 3. Key results and conclusions were extracted and stored in an Excel database for the purpose of conducting further in-depth analysis.

Study variables. in a review of empirical research conducted between 2020 and 2021, we discovered 11
empirical studies examining parental perspectives of home-schooling of children with special educational needs and disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 3). The research samples ranged between 5500 parents (quantitative approach) and 7 parents (qualitative approach). It is interesting to note that most of the reviewed research on this topic was conducted in Europe, although studies were also included from India and the USA.

Results
All papers were found to focus mainly on parental experiences and specific impacts of the pandemic on home-schooling of children with SEND. The results are reported for each of the research questions listed above.

Methodological approaches used
Five papers reported on qualitative studies and six on quantitative studies. The qualitative studies made it possible to gain access to data on the parents’ experiences in the context of complex environmental, situational and structural conditions, resulting in some valuable insights (Vissak, 2010). Qualitative studies employed various approaches, for example, Canning and Robinson (2021) used an ethnographic narrative design and Vincent et al. (2021) used a case study approach. The quantitative

![Figure 1: Paper selection flow diagram](image_url)
| Author/Date | Country | Research Purpose                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Methods  | Participants                                                                 |
|------------|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| O’Connor Bones et al. (2021) | Northern Ireland | Exploration of experiences and perspectives of parents in Northern Ireland during their adjustment and implementation of at-home education                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Quantitative | 198 parents of children attending primary, post-primary and special schools |
| Vincent et al. (2021) | India | Increasing information on positive familial aspects that occurred during lockdown in families of children with special needs                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Qualitative | 12 parents (11 mothers and one father) of children with special needs          |
| Greenway and Eaton-Thomas (2020) | UK | Examining parental experiences of home-schooling children with SEND during the pandemic and lockdowns. Exploring support received from schools and local authorities, as well as parental satisfaction with these resources  | Quantitative | 238 parents of children with SEND                                          |
| Averett (2021) | USA | Examines the relationship between families and schools through the lens of the pandemic and the narratives of parents of children with disabilities, regarding experiences with the coronavirus and home-schooling | Qualitative | 31 parents of children with disabilities                                      |
| Rogers et al. (2021) | UK | Examining coping methods of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities during the first 2020 lockdown                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Qualitative | 8 mothers of children with intellectual disabilities                        |
| Asbury et al. (2021) | UK | Examining the impact COVID-19 had on parental and child mental health                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Quantitative | 241 parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities      |
| Pozas et al. (2021) | Mexico and Germany | Examining home-schooling in Mexico and Germany during the pandemic                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Qualitative | Seven parents (one male, six female) of children with special educational needs and disabilities |
| Canning and Robinson (2021) | UK | Examining experiences of children with special educational needs and disabilities as well as their families                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Qualitative | Eight families of children with SEND/Autism                                |
| Thorell et al. (2021) | Sweden, Spain, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Italy | Examining families who undertook home-schooling with children who have or do not have a mental health condition and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic                                                                                                                                                                         | Quantitative | 2002 parents with a child with a mental health condition, and 4718 without |
| Abdelfattah et al. (2021) | USA | Increasing understanding of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on parents of children with disabilities, resulting in better understanding of support strategies, special education centres and specialists in the future                                                                                                                                   | Quantitative | 623 parents of children with disabilities                                     |
| O’Hagan and Kingdom (2020) | UK | Outlining the experiences of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and their families during the coronavirus pandemic                                                                                                                                                                                             | Quantitative | 5500 parents/carers of children with SEND                                    |
studies employed various questionnaires, for example, Greenway and Eaton-Thomas (2020) used questions posed by Parsons and Lewis (2010). In the research conducted by Abdelfattah et al. (2021), the questionnaire used was based on a self-report type measure consisting of 24 statements related to parents’ worries, feelings, sources of stress and satisfaction with services.

Impact on parents’ of home-schooling their children with SEND during the pandemic
In three of the reviewed studies (Greenway and Eaton-Thomas, 2020; O’Connor Bones et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2021), surveyed parents pointed out the difficulties of combining professional work with home education for children during the pandemic. During the lockdown, some parents cut down their hours worked or took unpaid leave, others were worried about losing their jobs. Parents complained of overload, the need to reorganise schedules and a lack of support, especially for families with more children. The O’Connor Bones et al. (2021) study, which involved parents of children attending special schools, found that some parents decreased their occupational workload so as to better support their children’s needs, whilst others felt a lack of support from their employer. Many parents reported that the pandemic resulted in a change from passive to more engaged parental participation in terms of their children’s education. Some parents reported that, before the pandemic, work was seen as providing an opportunity to take a break and respite from caring responsibilities. The transition to remote employment in conjunction with home education made some parents feel physically and mentally exhausted (Rogers et al., 2021). One study found that mothers of children with disabilities reported difficulty providing the level of support their children received during in-person education; mothers also reported that they lost access to external resources, such as social services, family and friends (Rogers et al., 2021).

However, in the study by Vincent et al. (2021), which focused mainly on the positive aspects of homeschooling, respondents stated that the transition to home education, combined with the transition of parents to remote work, increased the time they could devote to their children. Consequently, in this study, respondents perceived the changes related to education caused by COVID-19 positively. This was especially true of fathers, who saw a significant increase in the number of hours spent with their children. The respondents pointed to the positive changes in relations with children and attention to their well-being during home education. However, this study also found that when parents indicated a lack of adequate contact with teachers, the online learning process suffered. Another study found that interconnected pressures between home-schooling, relationships with their other children and work commitments, created unrealistic expectations of parents. Some parents reported that their families responded by attempting to remove some pressure by making judgements of what is appropriate and creating learning environments that focused on meaningfulness and engagement (Canning and Robinson, 2021).

Parents relationships with schools and support provided by teachers
All reviewed papers evaluated relations between parents and schools and the quality of support provided during remote education. Several studies reported that the lockdowns and transition to home-schooling cut off external resources that were previously provided by schools, social services, other carers and family and friends (Abdelfattah et al., 2021; O’Hagan and Kingdom, 2020; Thorell et al., 2021; Vincent et al., 2021). In the O’Hagan and Kingdom (2020) study, three surveys were analysed to identify common themes. These were found to be: a collapse of external support for parents and children; reduction or withdrawal of support caused by the exacerbation of previously existing stressors; difficulties establishing home learning or receiving adequate school support and little government acknowledgement of the need for family support. Paradoxically, a small minority of parents and children reporting increased well-being (O’Hagan and Kingdom, 2020).

Most studies reported that parents did not feel adequately prepared for home-schooling (Canning and Robinson, 2021; Greenway and Eaton-Thomas, 2020; Pozas et al., 2021) and that they were unable to provide their children with an adequate level of support, similar to that which had been previously provided by the school (Vincent et al., 2021). Other studies found that parents were dissatisfied with resources received during the pandemic, feeling a lack of support for their children’s educational and psychological needs and reported feeling inadequate and unprepared. There was a general negative parental opinion of home-schooling and its effects on family well-being. Although, some positive aspects were noted, for example, parents being able to increase children’s autonomy by including them in the decision-making process through a variety of self-initiated processes (Greenway and Eaton-Thomas, 2020).

Generally, parents rated contact with teachers as insufficient (Vincent et al., 2021). In Abdelfattah et al.’s research (2021), parents expressed feeling a lack of support from schools and limited parent-teacher contact, resulting in stress, anxiety, domestic conflict and social isolation. The study by Averett (2021) also found that a majority of families struggled with home-schooling, notably when children’s needs at home differed from needs at school, as well as when schools did not provide adequate accommodations and remote services (Averett, 2021).

Apart from parents’ organisational and logistical challenges of combining remote working with home education, many parents reported that they struggled with the
problem of motivating and engaging their children in learning and that children were easily distracted during online lessons (Canning and Robinson, 2021; Greenway and Eaton-Thomas, 2020). Parents also viewed online learning as low quality in these two studies. However, O’Connor Bones et al. (2021) found that changes caused by the pandemic led to an increased awareness of and engagement in the educational role played by parents. In several studies, parents expressed positive opinions about their relationships with teachers, considered the school support to be significant, as well as noted that online classes were less distracting for some students than in-person learning (Averett, 2021; Pozas et al., 2021).

Parents’ concerns in relation to home-schooling during the pandemic
Most of the reviewed papers focused on the impact of the transition to home-schooling and on relations between parents and children, as well as children’s mental wellbeing. Stress, fear of losing a job, insecurity, loss of sources of support and fear of health challenges were seen as a heavy burden for parents. Many parents declared that isolation from school, peers and other environments negatively affected the mental health of their children (Greenway and Eaton-Thomas, 2020; Thorell et al., 2021). Although children maintained contact with their peers via the internet, in the opinion of their parents, these interactions did not replace normal interpersonal interactions. Moreover, children missed involvement in extracurricular activities and games with their peers (Pozas et al., 2021).

Furthermore, in the study conducted by Pozas et al., (2021) which focused on Germany and Mexico, parents faced difficulties due to lack of pedagogical education or knowledge of the new learning environment. Social distancing proved to be a substantial challenge for students in both countries, though interestingly, Mexican students and parents experienced more opportunities for this than German participants. All participants in both countries reported issues of inequality, especially for families of lower socio-economic backgrounds. However, one study found that those parents whose children felt safer at home reported positive emotions regarding the lockdown (Asbury et al., 2021). Likewise, the caregivers of restless children claimed that home education helped in calming them down and improving their functioning (Rogers et al., 2021). In contrast with this small positive minority, other research found that some parents reported disturbing behaviours in their children such as shouting, tantrums or nervous breakdowns (Averett, 2021; Greenway and Eaton-Thomas, 2020). Parents explained their children’s problematic behaviour by stating that they could not understand the sudden changes that occurred with the spread of COVID-19, so children expressed this confusion through the aforementioned problematic behaviour (Asbury et al., 2021). Parental worries also included a lack of children’s appropriate emotional and mental development, and a fear of who would take care of their children in the event of a COVID-19-related death.

However, a substantial minority of families experienced minimal negative or even positive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Asbury et al., 2021). For example, in the Vincent et al. (2021) study parents reported being able to devote more time to children. This resulted in happier children and an improvement in child development. Work-from-home mandates caused an increase in time spent with children, notably for fathers. This led to a re-evaluation of work and career ambitions for some parents. However, when parents indicated a lack of adequate contact with teachers, the online learning process suffered. Moreover, positive impacts of COVID-19 were reported by parents of children who felt safer at home. For children for whom school was a stressor, self-isolation and social distancing were a period of calm and respite, and their parents reported positive emotions related to the pandemic (Asbury et al., 2021).

In contrast, according to other parents, some children were also negatively affected by the lack of in-person school routines, and parents were afraid that children would fall behind with home-schooling (Averett, 2021; O’Hagan and Kingdom, 2020). Overload, anxiety and stress also affected some parents, who reported loss of interest, withdrawal, hopelessness and increased anti-anxiety medication use (Asbury et al., 2021), and a small group of parents reported increased alcohol or drug use (Thorell et al., 2021). In fact, a majority of parental respondents in the reviewed studies reported increased levels of worry, stress, social isolation and domestic conflict (Thorell et al., 2021).

Discussion
The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the mental health and wellbeing of parents across the world (Holmes et al., 2020) with children being affected as well (Mantovani et al., 2021). Additionally, the pandemic and related lockdowns have forced a change in educational systems worldwide, as was shown in the analyses of studies reported in this paper. Children with SEND were faced with additional challenges in adapting to the form of home-schooling necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is worth underscoring that parents play an integral role in ensuring the scholastic success of their children, including those with SEND (Hornby, 2011). Unfortunately, modern reality involves parents having long work days, multiple jobs or additional responsibilities outside of the home that limit the time they can spend supporting their children’s education (Brandon et al., 2021). For parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities, school closures were an additional stressor. From the beginning, significant struggles were noted by parents during their attempts to support their children’s home learning (O’Hagan and Kingdom, 2020).
It is clear that, during the pandemic, remote learning involved a gap in services and additional challenges were experienced by children with SEND and their families (Valicenti-McDermott et al., 2021). Given the relationship between parental stress and child behaviour, the increase in difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic may have adversely affected parents’ ability to cope with the stress of parenting children with SEND. Moreover, temporarily restricting access to professional services for children with SEND as a result of the pandemic may have had detrimental short-term and long-term consequences (Fontanesi et al., 2020). However, many parents reported that the increased amount of time they could spend with their children with SEND, and being together as a family, was a positive aspect of the pandemic (Neece et al., 2020).

More research is needed to identify how effective educational principles can be utilised during emergencies related to school closings and the implementation of various forms of distance learning (Couper-Kenney and Riddell, 2021), as well as on the quality and relevance of post-lockdown support (Neece et al., 2020).

In the reviewed papers, parents noted some children’s lack of motivation to learn. They also pointed out that they often had to play the role of their child’s teacher, for which they did not have the time or the necessary knowledge to instruct their children. In the context of distance learning, parents are a key resource, therefore building a harmonious family–school relationship is particularly important. Two-way communication between families and schools should be a priority (Hornby, 2011).

It is worth noting that the issue of motivation to learn online is one of the most important problems of distance learning. Research has shown that online learning requires increased intrinsic motivation and that frustration with technical problems may reduce it (Keller and Suzuki, 2004). A high level of motivation, interest and activity of students during remote lessons can ensure that the use of innovative digital tools can make lessons more attractive for students (Huett et al., 2008). At the same time, these tools must be adapted to the special needs of the child.

Innovative solutions are necessary for providing students with SEND additional educational and therapeutic support during times of remote learning. However, the pandemic situation and the forced transition to home-schooling, have shown that it is worth investigating the use of remote education opportunities in working with students with SEND, when direct participation in school activities is impossible, or is associated with additional psychological or social difficulties (e.g., students experiencing anxiety disorders). Therefore, guidelines for children with SEND and their parents on effective home-schooling should be developed in preparation for any future circumstances when they may be needed.

Limitations
It should be noted the participants involved in the 11 reviewed studies were not representative of any whole population, so generalisation of their findings more widely must be considered tentatively. The paper search only included three databases, so there is a possibility of further research papers, published elsewhere, that were not included. Only papers in English were included, which limited the number of studies that were reviewed and reduced the possibility of a truly global perspective. The studies only addressed the points of view of parents, and further studies including children’s and teachers’ perspectives may result in somewhat different findings.

Conclusion
This review analysed 11 papers published in English in peer-reviewed journals from 2020 to 2021 on perceptions of home-schooling from the perspectives of parents of children with SEND during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is noteworthy that the papers were from various countries around the world and therefore provided somewhat of an international perspective. Several studies reported that a substantial minority of parents found that the pandemic yielded positive effects, whereas, a majority of parents of children with SEND reported being negatively impacted by the pandemic. To mitigate the struggles expressed by parents of children with SEND, a future goal must be to create better relationships between parents, teachers and schools, so that home-schooling can be implemented more effectively and with less stress in the future (Brandon et al., 2021). Upon the return of students with SEND to school, teachers will need to take into account the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and focus on teaching effective coping skills for children who were negatively impacted by it (Lee et al., 2021).

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