Parents’ experiences of home-schooling amid COVID-19 school closures, in London, England

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Abstract
Upon COVID-19 being declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, parent-carers worldwide faced major challenges in how to adapt, become resilient, and to continue educating their children at all levels amid school closures. Home-schooling, with parent-carers becoming the substitute teachers, had become the new ‘norm’ during the first and third lockdowns in England. This paper reports on qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews with 35 participants comprised of parents with children aged between 5 and 8 years old in South London, England. Thematical analysis is used to capture parents’ well-being experiences of home-schooling amid COVID-19 compulsory school closures. This paper explores how the pressure on parent-carers to provide education at home akin to a school setting is physically and emotionally challenging. The paper also addresses how parents’ stress levels intensified in the second (January 2021) home-schooling period. A post-structural feminist framework is deployed to unpick gender socio-cultural inequalities relating to the distribution of work/labour/childcare duties at home during lockdown. Existing research has focussed on the impact on low-income families and children’s well-being during the pandemic. This research contributes to existing research by addressing an under-researched area relating to the impact on well-belling for middle-income maternal caregivers. Findings of this research show how financial privilege does not provide an escape from additional stress and how parents’ well-being was affected.

Keywords
caregivers, COVID-19, home-schooling, lockdown, parents, school closures, well-being

Introduction
England endured its first lockdown in March 2020. This coincided with the announcement of the first school closures. The second lockdown occurred in November 2020, schools in England remained open during this period. The third lockdown commenced in January 2021 and saw the second round of school closures. The four governments that make up the United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) all adopted different strategies to managing the Covid-19
crisis through lockdowns and school closures. This paper focusses on the approach taken by the English (Westminster) government.

This research aimed to capture and compare parents’ experiences of home-schooling amid the two school closures, March 2020 and January 2021, which lasted a total of 6 months. The research focussed on the home-schooling of primary school children aged between 5 and 8. The participants had never home-schooled prior to the lockdowns that were associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Most research (Davison et al., 2021) and Westminster government support has focussed on low-income families, and helping them financially through the pandemic (Weale, 2020). Middle-income households may not have required financial assistance. However, this study revealed how middle-income families experienced emotional and well-being challenges, which emerged through gendered and socio-cultural inequalities. This research uncovered how these challenges intensified with each lockdown for middle-income families who were going unnoticed. This research contributes to existing research by spotlighting an under-researched area of how the pandemic has impacted on the well-being of middle-income households, in particular, the maternal caregiver. This research highlighted how COVID-19 has presented challenges to well-being across financial boundaries. However, it is accepted that deprived families and individuals have suffered the most, financially and emotionally, amid the pandemic (Davison et al., 2021).

This paper commences with a chronology of how the pandemic has unfolded in the UK and contextualises the impact of this on schooling. A synopsis of home-schooling laws and policy is presented, followed by a review of the literature surrounding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parents and home-schooling. A brief explanation of the methodology is stated and precedes the thematic data analysis and presentation of the findings. This is followed by the discussion underpinned by the findings, initial comments and existing literature, before concluding.

Chronology of the pandemic in England relating to school closures: March 2020 to March 2021

The first UK confirmed death from COVID-19 was reported on 5th March 2020 (Public Health England, 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the UK, the Westminster government came under increased pressure to close schools. Roberts (2020) reported that keeping schools closed had little impact on stopping the spread of COVID-19. This raised concerns as to whether the cost of school closures outweighed the benefits, as it potentially impacted harmfully on the well-being of learners and parents.

On 18th March 2020 the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced the closure of all educational institutions in England from Friday 20th March 2020 until further notice (the first lockdown). This undoubtedly would have a major impact on teaching, learning and caring for children. Schools were asked to remain open as a ‘childminding’ service for ‘keyworkers’ (listed in the Department for Education, 2020). Meanwhile, parents were given little or no guidance from the Westminster government, and from their child(ren)’s school, on how to home-school.

Concerns were raised about child-poverty and health (Musgrave and Payler, 2021) safeguarding issues (Khan and Mikuska, 2021) and the effects on well-being and nutriment (Davison et al., 2021). Some children were not getting the only square meal a day, which they would receive if they were still at school. Extraordinary measures were taken by the Westminster government and schools, to ensure that schools’ vulnerable learners from families on a low-income were still able to benefit from these free school meals (Weale, 2020). Britto et al. (2021) argued that children were the hidden victims of COVID-19, resulting from school closures, a negative impact on their cognitive and socio-emotional development, changes to their nutritional status and access to basic health services. Primary and nursery schools reopened in June 2020.
Schools remained open through the second lockdown in November 2020. However, as the ‘R’ (reproductive) rate of the COVID-19 pandemic rose in England, the Westminster government took the decision to impose a third lockdown in England, which included a second closure of all schools from 5th January 2021. The Westminster government’s medical advisors reported multiple strains of the coronavirus spreading fast amongst children, which led to the second closure of schools. Following school closures, again at short notice, parent-carers had no choice but to return to home-schooling in January 2021. All schools in England re-opened on 8th March 2021.

**England’s (Westminster’s) government policy on schooling**

Schools in England follow the national curriculum from Year 1 (children aged 5–6). Section 7 of the Education Act 1996 requires parent-carers to undertake that their child, of compulsory school age, attain appropriate education to their age, ability and aptitude, through attending school or otherwise. Hence, home-schooling has always been an alternative to attendance at school in England. Approximately, 48,000 children were home-schooled in 2016–17 in the UK, which was an increase of 40% from 34,000 in 2014–15 (Issimdar, 2018). Before the Westminster government forced school closures, home-schooling was not always a choice. Issimdar (2018) reported that the two leading reasons, given by parent-carers, for home-schooling was to avoid pupils being excluded due to poor attendance, and mental health issues that are not catered for appropriately at school. Therefore, many parent-carers were forced to home-school even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The quality of education, monitoring safeguarding issues and protecting children from abuse and maltreatment (Davison et al., 2021; Hannon et al., 2020; Musgrave and Payler, 2021), whilst being home-schooled, has always been a challenge faced by local authorities. This was heightened amid COVID-19 school closures (Khan and Mikuska, 2021).

The Westminster government released guidance for local authorities and parent-carers, for those who elect to home-school their children (Department for Education, 2019a). However, amid COVID-19 school closures, further guidance (Department for Education, 2019b) was released for parent-carers on supporting children through remote education during COVID-19. This guidance appeared in the form of a webpage and a short video (Department for Education, 2019b). There was a strong emphasis on children’s mental health and well-being throughout the material. Very little was mentioned about the well-being of parent-carers.

**Review of the impact of home-schooling in a wider context**

The literature reviewed for this research drew upon three strands. Firstly, the discourses surrounding mental health and well-being; secondly, the economic impact of home-schooling on caregivers, in particular the maternal carers; and thirdly, the notion of the ‘good teacher’ being (re)shaped and adapted to the caregiver’s contribution.

**Mental health and well-being**

The Mental Health Foundation was established 70 years ago, in the UK. Mental health issues and well-being have been taboo subjects for many years. People have shied away from the topic and denied themselves from seeking much needed help, in fear of being stigmatised (Bharadwaj et al., 2017). Association with mental health problems was thought to represent a ‘spoiled identity’ (Goffman, 1963), which deviated from social norms and led to an individual being discredited, or undesirable, by society (Mahajan et al., 2008). Bharadwaj et al. (2017) argued that the fear of stigma did not change behaviour, but instead created a smokescreen that hid certain behaviours and actions.
The launch of the World Mental Health Day in 1992, followed by the Mental Health Awareness Week in 2001, signified a shift in the discourses surrounding mental health. These annual events encouraged individuals to talk openly about mental health issues and understand it as a disorder/disease, seek a diagnosis and access treatment (Prince et al., 2007). In the last 20 years, slogans like ‘no health without mental health’ (World Health Organization, 2005) have attempted to deconstruct the damaging portrayal of mental health and overcome harmful associated barriers. One method expanded the discourses surrounding mental health and reconstructed this as ‘well-being’, which appeared to be more acceptable within society, such as techniques of mindfulness. Well-being encompassed many dimensions, comprising several multi-disciplines, such as, fitness of the body, mind and spirit (Dodge et al., 2012). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic the emphasis was to monitor the well-being status of children (Britto et al., 2021) and their nutritional health (Davison et al., 2021; Musgrave and Payler, 2021).

**Economic impact of home-schooling on maternal caregivers**

A review of the literature revealed a steady stream of research relating to children’s well-being (Britto et al., 2021; Davison et al., 2021) and the struggles of teachers adapting their delivery methods to online teaching through securing home-school partnerships (Kidd and Murray, 2020).

The Collins et al. (2021) study entailed a comparison across the United States of America of the impact of school closures. Collins et al. (2021) argued the sporadic nature of school closures and re-openings affected the well-being of mothers more than fathers, as mothers were the main caregivers. Other literature (Killewald and Xiaolin, 2019) concentrated on parent’s challenges of working from home and the financial impact amid the pandemic. Killewald and Xiaolin (2019) suggested that COVID-19 had impacted the maternal employment sector, hence, women’s psychological well-being. The consequences of having to stay at home to care for their children had led to a loss of economic independence, possible lifetime occupational attainment and earnings for women. This sacrifice had negatively impacted on maternal-caregivers’ well-being.

**Notion of the good educator**

Students’ pastoral care enhanced teachers’ reputation as a good educator and complemented teachers’ professional identities (Khan, 2019). Amid COVID-19, a good teacher was constructed as one who moved their teaching to remote delivery efficiently and effectively, along with monitoring safeguarding issues (Khan and Mikuska, 2021). The absence of a smooth transition and handover between teacher to parent-carers, where parent-carers stepped into the teachers’ roles, had resulted in a strained relationship between teachers and parents (Wrigley, 2020). Some remote teaching delivery methods did not consider the number of devices that a family could access, or the number of people who had to share the same devices (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020). Cullinane and Montacute (2020) concluded that children from deprived families were the least likely to have access to the devices needed and to internet access at home to facilitate home-schooling. This led to fears of the effects on pupils’ progression, with concerns of the attainment gap between children from deprived homes and those from more affluent backgrounds widening (Bubb and Jones, 2020).

The literature surrounding home-schooling, well-being and COVID-19 had focussed on either the financial impact or the state of children’s well-being (Britto et al., 2021), the impact on their cogitative development (Nutbrown et al., 2017) and their nutritional health (Musgrave and Payler, 2021). Therefore, a gap exists in the literature relating to the well-being of parent-carers, in particular, from middle-income households, amid the two school closures in England, which this research attempted to address.
Methodological approach

The methodology for this paper combined a review and analysis of secondary data (namely policy documents, literature, legislation and statistics) and empirical qualitative data once ethical approval was gained. Data for this paper were collected within the first 8 weeks of the second school closure in England (between 6th January 2021 and 2nd March 2021).

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore parent’s well-being. Data collection took place over the telephone to ensure COVID-19 safety compliance and to abide by lockdown rules. These qualitative interviews centred around two open ended questions: One was designed to draw out parents’ experiences of home-schooling and the second question was aimed to investigate the impact of ‘becoming the teacher’ on parent’s well-being.

The sample

Participants were recruited using snowballing technique targeting parents with children aged between 5 and 8 years old in South London, England. For this research, a total of 100 invitations were sent out to a targeted audience, through Whatsapp group messages recruited from the researcher’s personal contacts as well as using snowballing techniques. A total of 29 mothers and 6 fathers agreed to be interviewed for this research. These parents were a mixture of keyworkers still working away from home, homemakers and parents working from home. All parents had two children aged between 5 and 8 that they were home-schooling. The parent-carers who engaged in this research identified themselves as families with a comfortable financial background (middle-income).

Ethical issues

Participants were emailed with information on consent and an information sheet on well-being. The consent information explained that by taking part in the interview, participants were consenting to their responses being anonymously used in this study. However, consent could be withdrawn up until the paper was published. Participants completed and returned the consent form to the author. The information sheet contained the details of organisations who offered advice and support in relation to Covid-19, such as Mental Health UK and Improving Access to Psychological Therapies. Each interview was approximately 30 minutes long.

It would have been preferable to interview an equal number of female and male parent-carers, along with single parenting families and same-sex parents. However, the majority of primary carers for children are heterosexual and female, and this was reflective of the data sample for this small-scale research. In addition, data from parent-carers representative of both affluent and deprived backgrounds would have been valuable. These limitations are acknowledged, but not viewed as detrimental, nor did they devalue the findings. However, it is acknowledged that findings from this study cannot be generalised and can only be applied to these participants.

Theoretical approach to data analysis and why it works for this study

Feminist post-structural epistemology claims that personal and political knowledge is guided and based upon individual experiences (Hughes and Cohen, 2010; Oakley, 1981). This study is occupied with capturing experiences that are formulated through the individual’s gender, wealth and socio-cultures experiences, from which the individual constructed knowledge. Post-structural
feminist theory rejects objectivity, validity and a single definitive truth. Hence positive notions of truth obtained through objective methods such as tick-box questionnaires are dismissed. Feminist post-structuralism embraces multiple truths with the unquestionable acceptance of all the individual’s experiences as the truth, upon which knowledge is formed (Butler, 2011; Weedon and Hallak, 2021). This study is informed by a post-structural feminist perspective and does not claim to seek or determine a truth or the truth.

The notion of liberal feminism is associated with political and social inequalities, and achieving equality by abolishing barriers, such as educational barriers, whilst accepting and supporting differences. Initially, feminist theory considered gender inequalities. However, subsequent waves and strands of feminism, such as black and lesbian feminism, have been extended to address other marginalised groups based upon race, sexuality and class (Davis, 2008).

This study deliberated on how subjects’ (parents’) views were regulated by wider discourses relating to gender, wealth, socio-cultures and equality. This theoretical approach appropriately highlighted inequalities that emerged amid home-schooling.

Qualitative data analysis

The thematic analysis applied to the data involved five-steps. Step 1 – data familiarisation through self-transcribing, then reading and re-reading the transcripts. Step 2 – constant comparison of the data. This enabled data similarities and differences to be identified and coded, which led to emerging themes, such as excitement, anxiety and stress. Step 3 – the codes were organised into themes, shared ideas, concepts and meanings that emerged through the data, for example, emotional experiences. The codes were clustered within a central concept, such as well-being, maternal care-givers and economic impact. Step 4 – refined and defined the themes, in order to marry the empirical data with the feminist post-structural framework. This was achieved through identifying a central organising concept as part of the richness of the theme, which constituted the dominant discourses. Step 5 – telling the participants’ stories using examples and quotes to contextualise the information and applying the data to answer the research questions.

Hence, the data lends itself to be viewed through a post-structural feminist lens (Butler, 2011; Weedon and Hallak, 2021). This focussed on the gender and socio-cultural inequalities, which emerged from the intensive labour requirements of managing a home and the childcare arrangements, during the pandemic, which impacted on the well-being of the parents in a household.

The novelty of home-schooling

The themes that emerged relating to the first school closure in March 2020 conceptualised parent’s responses into three discourses; excitement of trying something new; pragmatic, I have no choice I need to get on with it; and troubled, how am I going to manage this?

Excitement

For the first school closure in March 2020, 50% of parents in this study reported being excited by the prospect of having their children at home for the extended period, and having the opportunity of home-schooling. They had often wondered what it would be like to home-school. The concept of home-schooling being a novelty was a common thread throughout the narratives.

During this period, some parents chose to teach their children life skills such as cooking and sewing. Things they could not always find the time to fit in normally, but were more comfortable teaching.
‘In March 2020. . .it was all so new. . .home-schooling. It was exciting the novelty of having the children at home for so long. There was not much coming through from the schools, they were so dis-organised. . .I taught them other life-skills like sewing up a hole in their sock, hoovering and making cheese on toast. The weather was good so it was more relaxing’.

(Participant 1, female, homemaker).

Approximately 20% of parents did not attempt to take on the role of a mainstream schoolteacher. Whilst little or no direction was provided by schools, these parents took control and created their own curriculum. They chose to spend more time on other complimentary life-skills which were more aligned to parental teaching. This approach was explored by Hannon et al. (2020). When comparing socio-cultural factors, Hannon et al.’s (2020) study highlighted how teacher-family interaction increased gains in children’s literacy. Hannon et al. (2020) further reported that children with less educated mothers had greater, and longer lasting, gains. This was supported by the data collected in this study, as Participant 1 was a mother with no formal qualifications, who concentrated on teaching life-skills.

**Being pragmatic**

Around 20% of parents in this study took a pragmatic approach to home-schooling, and accepted it was a situation that they had no control over. Therefore, their approach was to tackle the issue head on, with the attitude of all ‘being in this together’. This position entailed stepping into the role of teachers.

‘I have a responsibility to teach the children. . .You don’t just drop the kids off to school and expect just the teacher to teach them, parents have a role too. For me it wasn’t a shock, just something that you need to do’.

(Participant 22, female, furloughed).

‘. . .Need to find your feet. Once you get into it, it wasn’t easy, you just get on with it’.

(Participant 23, female, working from home).

These parents took on the responsibility to fulfil the role of a schoolteacher, at home. They continued the teaching and learning regime for their children at home akin to school. The intention was to make the process seamless and minimise disruption to learning and progression.

**Feeling troubled**

Approximately 30% of parents revealed that they were petrified by the announcement of home-schooling.

‘Terrified. Really difficult when you are trying to understand what home-schooling. . .means and then trying to do that on top of working full-time and how we were going to juggle that. . .The first two weeks were a challenge, a steep learning curve. It was terrifying’.

(Participant 3, female, working from home).
‘Concerned. Wondering whether I was competent to be doing that. . .I didn’t know what resources were available, so I thought I would have to make it up on the hoof. That compounded the feeling of inadequacy’.

(Participant 14, male, homemaker).

The shift in position from a full-time worker and full-time parent, to now include a full-time teacher, was overwhelming for some parents and triggered their insecurities. This materialised in several forms, from having doubts to whether appropriate resources were available, to questioning their ability and competence to teach children aged eight and under. The prospects of home-schooling and simultaneously working full-time from home became a burden, which coincided with the notion of perfecting both parent and teacher roles without compromise.

The experiences of all the participating parents in the January 2021 school closures were almost identical to one another. Parents reported being overcome with fear upon the announcement of the second school closures in January 2021. Parents struggled with their raw emotions of having to return to this involuntary situation.

All parents agreed that their respective children’s schools were much more organised in this school closure. Therefore, the days were more structured with some interactive online school lessons. However, this brought with it, its own challenges, such as fitting in home-schooling around parents working from home (meetings) and sharing devices, laptops and tablets. Parents explained how difficult it was to juggle work or running a home, with home-schooling.

‘This lockdown [January 2021] has been so different. A fear came over me when I heard we would have to go back to home-schooling. It’s been much more difficult this time around. The novelty definitely wore off. . .Also, the weather has been so dreary. . .The school is bombarding us with online work. I can’t keep on top of my work too and the daily chores’.

(Participant 6, female, keyworker).

Parents enthusiasm, previously held for home-schooling, appeared faded. The novelty had worn off amid the second school closures in January 2021. In accordance with the data collected for this study, the consequence of schools providing a structure and routine for home-schooling meant that parents could not retain control of the timetable. Hence, parents lost authority over the home-schooling process. In the absence of lesson plans and structure, amid the first school closures in March 2020, home-schooling was more fluid and less regimented.

Interestingly, the weather also shaped the home-schooling experience. Participant 1 commented on the spring/summer weather in the first school closures being ‘good’ and so it was a more relaxed environment. In comparison, the winter January 2021 weather in the second school closure made the experience ‘miserable’.

**When the novelty wore off**

All parents reported a decline in well-being resulting from home-schooling amid school closures. The challenges that impacted on their well-being comprised of the following three themes; the ability to teach the way children are taught in school; the lack of equipment; and balancing home/work life with home-schooling.

**Teaching like the teachers**

Almost 80% of parents reported struggling to grasp the teaching methods which varied from their childhood. These three parents shared how teaching their children basic concepts was stressful.
‘Learning vocabulary, phonics, diagraphs and trigraphs, teaching in the same way that the teachers do. This all added another level of confusion’.

(Participant 3, female, working from home).

‘With maths, I did not learn these particular formulas. I need to teach the same way as the teachers, so the boys don’t get confused’.

(Participant 8, female, working from home).

‘I know the subject, it’s just the frustration in teaching them the right way’.

(Participant 2, female, furloughed).

Parents were confident in the subject matter, yet lacked confidence when transferring their knowledge to their children, using the pedagogical methods prescribed through their own schooling. Even though parents had successfully learnt through earlier methods, they did not think that their children should learn in the same way that they had, despite the end results being identical. This discourse surrounding learning and teaching the ‘right way’ (Participant 2) and ‘the same as the teachers’ (Participant 3 and 8) produced unnecessary pressure on parents for simple tasks connected to teaching and learning.

Nutbrown et al. (2017) argued the importance of families’ roles in developing children’s literacy, and highlighted the failures between the home-school partnership to ensure a successful relationship in developing literacy. This research also unearthed the troubled parent-teacher relationship. It was evident that the parents were concerned about the detrimental, long-term, effect their teaching techniques may have on their children. Parents worried that their teaching techniques may result in unnecessary confusion and hinder their children’s educational development.

**Lacking equipment**

Nearly 60% of parents reported that the lack of resources, such as laptops, to facilitate home-schooling alongside working from home, unsettled the prospect for both activities running concurrently and smoothly. These three accounts highlighted the strains such circumstances caused, including damaging the relationships between family members.

‘I was sharing a laptop with my son in the beginning of lockdown. That was very stressful. You could not immerse yourself into work, because you knew you had to stop in an hour and hand your laptop over. Or their live lessons conflicted with my meetings. Very tricky, a struggle to commit to work or schooling properly’.

(Participant 8, female, working from home).

‘We did not have a printer in the first lockdown. Just before the second lockdown for schools, we got a printer. But then it was impossible to get the ink carriages, they were sold out everywhere. It was one thing after another’.

(Participant 1, female, homemaker).
'In this [January 2021] lockdown, the teachers have introduced live lessons, this has actually been quite disruptive. Sometimes the live sessions run at the same time for different children. Then there will be a fight between the siblings to who should have the laptop. This puts me in an awkward position as I feel like I am favouring one child’s education over the others'.

( Participant 5, female, homemaker).

The data revealed not just parents competing with their children in the use of equipment, but also siblings competing amongst each other. This fuelled another layer of complication to an already challenging situation for parents, whereby they now also had to show preference for one child’s learning over others. Panic buying during the lockdowns resulted in shortages of many products including laptops, printers and other supplies for weeks on end. Therefore, being able to afford to purchase items to make home-schooling manageable was not an advantage, during this extended period of shortages, until such time when stocks became readily available again.

The balancing act

The most challenging aspect of home-schooling, expressed by 85% of parents, was maintaining the work-teaching balance.

‘It was difficult when you are working, and I don’t think the schools appreciated that. Especially with the amount of work that the kids had to do. Then the deadlines they had. Not appreciating that parents are working around the clock to get this all done. It kind of felt that you were being burnt-out. That was most difficult’.

( Participant 13, female, working from home).

Whether it was running a home or working from home, the additional pressure of home-schooling tipped the balance for parents. Parents grappled with clawing back the equilibrium to maintain some stability in these unstable (pandemic) times.

These challenges resulted in 85% of parents feeling stressed, which impacted on their well-being.

‘It was really stressful. Mentally draining. Feeling you were burnt-out. Stress was the main thing; levels went up really high. . ’

( Participant 26, female, working from home).

‘Home-schooling has really, really affected me. I feel like I’m just about keeping my head above water. There is too much to cope with. . ’

( Participant 10, female, working from home).

The data reflected how parents’ well-being, both mental and physical, were impacted by home-schooling. Mainly in the form of rising stress levels, feeling lost and even feeling a loss of identity.

‘. . .you lose your normal sense of identity. . .you have got no choice but to prioritise your children’s learning all day. Which is fine and I am happy to prioritise that as a parent, but I did not sign up to be a teacher. I didn’t sign up to home-school them, so I do find it quite difficult. Really stressful working full-time and home-schooling’.

( Participant 6, female, keyworker).
All parents recognised this as a global issue and did not seek professional help.

‘In March 2020 I was on autopilot. I did not even have the chance to think about what we were going through and the magnitude of it at all. It was fight or flight reaction. I was overwhelmed. ... It felt like it was a time to decompress and that’s when I felt completely burnt-out because of it’.

(Participant 8, female, working from home).

Around 30% of the parents tapped into other parental support networks, or used coping mechanisms they had used in the past to combat stress.

‘I feel like this has affected my relationship with my children. I cry myself to sleep a couple of times a week. I know we are all in the same boat and it’s not just me. Other mum’s I talk to are stressed too’.

(Participant 9, female, homemaker).

Seventy percent of parents in this study accepted the situation and trooped on.

The discussion in the next section is underpinned by the findings, initial comments and existing literature.

**Discussion**

This research highlighted how parent-carers faced unprecedented challenges resulting from the COVID-19 virus pandemic. School closures at short notice created severe disruption for these parent-carers.

Parents in this study were comfortable expressing that their well-being was affected by home-schooling, with the increase of stress levels. However, parents reframed from defining this as a mental health issue and seeking help, which reflected the position illustrated in the literature (Mahajan et al., 2008). It was as though parents in this study were creating their own smokescreen to mask their insecurities as discussed by Bharadwaj et al. (2017).

Approximately 20% of the participants revealed that this interview had acted as therapy for them, as it gave them the opportunity to evaluate their behaviour, vent their anger, fears and concerns of home-schooling.

‘It has really helped speaking to you. You see other parents just getting on with it, and feel, is it just me who is struggling?’

(Participant 9, female, homemaker).

‘Thanks for interviewing me. I feel like I have just had free therapy. It all just gets on top of you’.

(Participant 7, female, working from home).

These interviews gave these parents a sense of self-acceptance and validation that the quality, quantity and method of home-schooling they provided was acceptable and appropriate. Also, that they were not failures, and their children were not being damaged or falling behind by being home-schooled by them, as discussed in the literature (Davison et al., 2021; Hannon et al., 2020; Musgrave and Payler, 2021).
Parents engaged with learning through an adult lens, instead of tailoring the process to their children’s ability. This added a further layer of anxiety, stress and pressure to ensure that the child is achieving outside of the school setting, which has now shifted to the home setting.

This research supported the view, argued by Collins et al. (2021), that maternal carers were impacted more by the home-school experience than paternal carers. In this study, all the participant mothers took on home-schooling in addition to their existing roles. The rationale provided by some mothers included the lack of confidence that they had in the children’s father to engage and complete home-schooling properly.

‘I cannot leave home-schooling to him [the father]. Nothing would ever get done. If he did attempt it, it would all be wrong and I would have to step in anyway’.

(Participant 29, female, working from home).

Other mothers felt the teacher role ‘naturally’ fell upon them to fulfil.

‘It’s down to me to get the home-schooling done. I might as well, I teach them everything else. Mums are better teachers’.

(Participant 1, female, homemaker).

Parents may be perceived as natural teachers, with the ability to teach their own young, and for young to learn from their parents, through a bond embedded within this unique relationship. Parent-carers could be perceived as teacher-educators at home, equipping children in their care with basic numerical, literacy and life-skills. However, most academic teaching and learning processes and practices falls upon teachers within an educational institutional setting.

The literature (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020) suggested that children from deprived families were least likely to have the equipment for home-schooling, widening the attainment gap (Bubb and Jones, 2020). This research highlighted that even affluent families struggled with obtaining equipment for home-schooling, not so much because of financial reasons, but due to a lack of supply for long periods. Whilst the Westminster government and charities focussed upon providing help and support to deprived families to address such challenges, middle-income families became invisible, unsupported and fell through the cracks with regards to support for well-being. This contributed to their stress. Schools are complete levellers from both an economic and social perspective, and need to be responsible for educating children. Some children cannot be home-schooled, because they do not have the equipment or help, they need at home.

A strong emotion felt by all parents, even more then teaching a child, was the fear of failure. Sixty-six percent of parents over-compensated for their child’s lack of school attendance, by teaching through the weekend, because they felt guilty. This left both parents and children overwhelmed and stressed. Home-schooling placed further undue pressure and stress on parent-carers who were already financially and educationally challenged. This exposed and deepened their sense of failure.

**Conclusion**

This small-scale research explored the impact that home-schooling had on parents’ well-being from middle-income households, in particular the maternal carer. Through a feminist poststructuralist lens the research highlighted domestic inequalities, and challenged the perception that
middle-income families are unlikely to require support for well-being amid school closures. The Westminster government demanded that schools moved to remote learning and online teaching without a thought to whether parent-carers were mentally, physically and financially able to cope with home-schooling.

Stress factors were heightened for parents, in particular the maternal caregiver, during the second (January 2021) school closures. Lessons learnt from the first set of school closures (March 2020) focussed on how to support teachers amid further closures. The impact of the closures on parents’ well-being was given less importance. The focus remained on vulnerable families and how to support them financially. Middle-income families did not necessarily need financial support. However, the data revealed that middle-income families, in particular the maternal caregiver, required emotional support to help them maintain their well-being.

The data for this study suggested that school organisational skills for moving to online platforms for learning and teaching had improved from the first school closures in March 2020 to the second school closures in January 2021. However, pressures and stresses had shifted from teachers to parent-carers. This research presented a snapshot of parents’ well-being and perceptions during the March 2020 and January 2021 school closures in the UK. A deeper understand is required of the impact of school closures on parent-carers and the potential of parental burnout, which merits further research.

Author's note
The author entered the world of academia in 2004 and currently works at the University of Surrey. She is also a qualified solicitor (lawyer, not-practising). Her research interests include gender and race inequalities, forced marriage, teachers’ identities, generally addressing teaching and learning practices in education and responses to government policy in these areas.

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