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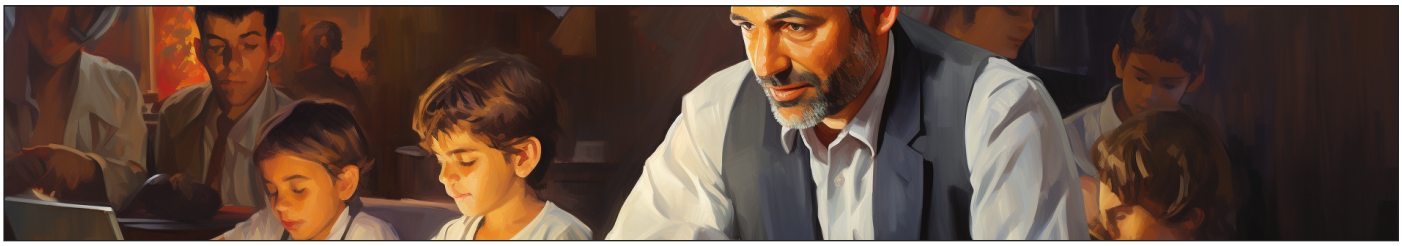

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The experience of a parent of distance learners during Covid-19: An autoethnography

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Abstract

At the outbreak of Covid-19, my children's school shifted to online distance learning, an unprecedented experience for me and a situation that I never prepared for. The potential for replicability is the main driver behind this study, i.e., to bring this experience to the attention of concerned stakeholders to assist in similar future possibilities. Recent literature addressed the subject from outsider positions where the researchers were not part of the experience. This study addresses it from a different perspective, specifically following an autoethnographic approach through my insider lenses as a parent of three children who attended online distance learning during that period. Findings presented challenges I faced due to the abrupt transition to online learning without adequate planning; these include home-related issues, school-related issues, added roles and responsibilities, and other challenges. Moreover, I highlighted some opportunities that emerged from the experience, including distance learning takeaways, more time with the family, and preparedness for similar future situations. The findings also revealed some insights I gained, including the importance of school-parent cooperation, closer awareness of my children's education processes and learning styles, and informal evaluation of my children's education.

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1. Introduction

I am the father of four children, three of whom are school students in elementary and middle stages, aged eight, twelve, and fourteen at the time of writing this paper. My children go to an international school in Saudi Arabia that offers an English curriculum, which is viewed as an advantaged type of education in my context, being a non-governmental paid school offering quality education and providing better preparation for universities where English is the medium of instruction. After the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, my children started attending online classes from home, which lasted for one full academic year, from September 2020 to May 2021, and about half of the following academic year, from August to December 2021 (schools were suspended from Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020 till the end of the academic year in May 2020, so practically there was no schooling), a situation that I had never experienced or taken the time to prepare well for. This situation had imposed multiple challenges on me, especially at the beginning of the distance learning period. However, a few opportunities emerged as well.

My research topic is my experience as a parent of distance learners during the pandemic lockdown period. In this study, I explored the challenges I faced, my approaches to address them, the opportunities I found, and the insights I gained throughout this experience. Sharing my story and putting it in the social context I lived in during that period will hopefully be useful for parents who may go through similar experiences. It may also draw the attention of decision makers to consider parents' readiness for online distance learning before such decisions are made in similar future contexts.

2. Literature review

My literature review consists of three themes that cover my research topic. These themes are homeschooling, parents' experiences with distance learning, and distance learning under Covid-19.

2.1 Homeschooling

Although the emergency remote instruction, which is the context of this study, is not homeschooling by the classical sense of the term, I found homeschooling to be the nearest area in literature that pertains to my experience during the lockdown period. Homeschooling refers to educating school-aged children at home rather than in a public or private school, a decision made by parents for reasons that vary from one case to another; these reasons could be related to religious or cultural beliefs, behavioural issues, special educational needs, dissatisfaction with school systems, health, or other reasons (Gaither, 2017; Griffith, 2004; Jeynes, 2016; Lippincott, 2014; McKeon, 2007; Miser, 2005; Ray, 2017; UK Department for Education, 2019).

Literature also identifies multiple classifications of homeschooling. A common classification uses a dichotomy of 'structured' and 'unstructured' homeschooling (Guterman & Neuman, 2017). Other classifications include unschooling (McKeon, 2007; Molz, 2017; O'Hare & Coyne, 2020; Ripperger-Suhler, 2016; Taylor-Hough, 2010), school-at-home (McKeon, 2007; O'Hare & Coyne, 2020; Ripperger-Suhler, 2016; Taylor-Hough, 2010), Charlotte Mason homeschooling (McKeon, 2007; Ripperger-Suhler, 2016; Taylor-Hough, 2010), Montessori homeschooling (Ripperger-Suhler, 2016; von Duyke, 2003), eclectic homeschooling (McKeon, 2007; Ripperger-Suhler, 2016), relaxed homeschooling (McKeon, 2007), and world-schooling (Molz, 2017). The school-at-home model (McKeon, 2007; O'Hare & Coyne, 2020; Ripperger-Suhler, 2016; Taylor-Hough, 2010), which is the closest to my children's distance learning experience, depends on organization by grade and subject, following a structured schedule, whereby each subject has its standalone instructional materials.

Given the importance of homeschooling and the increasing number of families adopting it, numerous manuals were created to guide informed decisions regarding the different aspects of homeschooling. These were developed by government authorities, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, or individual contributors (Davidson Institute, 2018; Dobson, 2002; Florida Parent-Educators Association, 2014; Griffith, 2004; Lippincott, 2014; UK Department for Education, 2019) to prescribe the arrangements parents need to consider when applying homeschooling to their children. These manuals also include useful advice on relevant topics to support families throughout the homeschooling journey.

2.2 Parents' experiences with distance learning

Parents have always played a fundamental role in the distance learning of their children even before Covid-19, and the subject of parents' experiences in such contexts was addressed extensively in educational literature. For example, Borup et al. (2015) identified five primary types of parental engagement in online learning: nurturing relationships and interactions; advising and mentoring; organizing; monitoring and motivating student engagement; and instructing.

Moreover, parents had added responsibilities that did not exist under traditional schooling such as the necessary accommodations to enrol the children in distance learning (Burdette & Greer, 2014; Sorensen, 2012).

Research also shows parents' varying opinions on distance learning as an alternative to traditional schooling. While the parents who participated in the study of Dong et al. (2020) had negative beliefs about the values and benefits of online learning, Chowkase et al. (2022) found that parents rated online classes as motivating and of high quality. According to Sorensen (2012), parents had a positive perception of online learning for being able to interact with their children's online teachers and for allowing children to work at their own pace, but they had reservations about the lack of socialization. Burdette and Greer (2014) concluded that parents liked their children's outcomes in online learning but had concerns about educating students with disabilities in this environment as some of them were confused and unable to socialize. These varied opinions indicate the need for further research to explore distance learning from a different perspective, and this is a contribution this study is aiming to make.

Assisting children in distance learning has customarily constituted a challenge for parents. In the study of Dong et al. (2020), parents tended to resist online learning for three key reasons: the shortcomings of online learning, young children's inadequate self-regulation, and their lack of time and professional knowledge in supporting children's online learning. According to Burdette and Greer (2014), parents were concerned about not having time to learn the content, oversee their children's studies, and support them with technology. Sorensen (2012) found that the most challenging aspect for online students' parents was trying to keep their children on schedule with their coursework.

In the next section, I zoom in a little to focus on the experiences of parents with distance learning during the Covid-19 period.

2.3 Distance learning under Covid-19

Since the start of Covid-19, many studies investigated different aspects of the new reality. One aspect is the experiences of distance learners' parents, particularly the challenges imposed on them. Lack of sufficient support from school was a recurrent challenge (Abu Moghli & Shuayb, 2020; Drvodelić & Domović, 2021). Limited time to support their children was another challenge (Dong et al., 2020; Efriana, 2021; Logan et al., 2021; Sonnenschein & Stites, 2021). Assuming multiple roles, some of which were new to them, was an additional challenge (Alipasa et al., 2021; Drvodelić & Domović, 2021; Solekhah, 2020). Moreover, Nyanamba et al. (2021) stated that parents experienced varying levels of burnout and were exhausted as they supported their children's learning. Lack of skill in using technology to support the children was also a concern (Abu Moghli & Shuayb, 2020; Solekhah, 2020; Sonnenschein & Stites, 2021). Some parents complained that online learning, namely internet costs, added to their expenses (Agaton & Cueto, 2021; Efriana, 2021). These studies provide context and relevance for the current study as they highlight the importance of investigating the challenges faced by parents, which the current study does from a different perspective and using different methodology (i.e., experience narrated by me, as a parent, using autoethnography).

Research also demonstrates that Covid-19 had negative impacts on the parents' psychological well-being as they made many changes in their lives to support their children's learning (Cui et al., 2021; Logan et al., 2021; Maggio et al., 2021; Seabra et al., 2021). Families had difficult times organizing home workspaces, setting up computing equipment, and managing parents' own remote working (Häkkilä et al., 2020), whereas children's lack of interest in learning despite these efforts was an added challenge (Drvodelić & Domović, 2021).

Conversely, a few studies noted positive aspects of distance learning during the lockdown period. Parents in Drvodelić and Domović's (2021) study emphasised positive outcomes that developed through opportunities for parents to learn jointly with their children, including self-regulated learning, development of ICT competences, and improved quality of family relationships. Misirli and Ergulec (2021) also noted that children acquired self-regulated learning skills and digital socialization habits.

Based on the above literature review, the next section spots the gap in the literature where the current study sits.

2.4 Gaps in the literature

While reviewing the literature, I noticed that several researchers who addressed the subject of parents' experiences with distance learning during Covid-19 were not themselves part of the experience. In other words, these studies investigated the subject from an outsider's perspective. Only a few studies addressed it from an insider's standpoint following autoethnographic approaches (e.g., Abdellatif and Gatto, 2020; Couch et al., 2021). Additionally, most studies focused on negative aspects in terms of the stresses imposed on parents by the new reality; only a few hinted to positive

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observations, as explained in the review above, which could be due to handling the subject from an outsider's viewpoint. This suggests a need for further autoethnographic research to identify positive and negative aspects of the lockdown period in relation to distance learning through insider lenses.

3. Research questions

Based on the gaps in literature identified above, the current study aims to answer the following main question:

- How did I, as a parent of school students, experience the sudden transition to distance learning at the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic?

To provide a comprehensive answer to this main question, I branched it down into three sub-questions:

- RQ1: What challenges did I face while involved in homeschooling during the distance learning period?
- RQ2: What opportunities emerged as I was addressing these challenges?
- RQ3: What insights did I gain from this experience?

4. Methodology and methods

I used autoethnography to answer the research questions. The reason is that I was trying to explore my personal experience as a parent and my vulnerabilities and emotions during the distance learning period with the purpose of making audible the voice of parents with similar experiences. This is specifically the main endeavour of autoethnography, namely "to learn about the general—the social, cultural and political—through an exploration of the personal" (Douglas & Charles, 2013, pp. 84-85).

4.1 Autoethnography

I selected autoethnography as a way to respond to the research question. This method allowed me to explore my experience with my children's distance learning during the Covid-19 period because it is "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). According to Doloriert and Sambrook (2009), autoethnography has been practiced by social scientists for several decades; however, its explicit use as a recognized research method in academic fields is more recent (Adams et al., 2014). Anderson (2006) stated that in autoethnography the researcher is a complete member of the social world under study, and this role permits the provision of an insider knowledge by facilitating accessibility to data that would be otherwise inaccessible. Similarly, Ellis and Bochner (2006) asserted that autoethnography enables the researcher's full involvement in the social phenomenon being studied rather than the detachment of an outside observer. Adams et al. (2014) added that this involvement enables qualitative researchers to represent themselves and the others they research in a more responsible and careful manner than experimenting and prediction approaches can do.

Lee (2020) stated that autoethnography starts by exploring one's emotional struggles, through collecting and investigating personal stories, and ends by writing a research report and sharing it with others to figure out what to do to make life better. Adams et al. (2014) affirmed that telling stories is a way of bringing people together by showing how researchers behave in certain situations, which could be useful to other people in similar contexts.

4.2 Data collection and analysis

To collect data for this autoethnographic study, I relied basically on my personal memories, which I recalled and recorded for use in this study, and the memories of my family (wife and children) because they were heavily involved in the distance learning experience. I ensured ethical standards were followed when handling the data. Cascio and Racine (2018) mention that "official research ethics guidelines are by no means the be-all and end-all of ethics in the practice of research" (p. 171). Ellis (2007) adds that "autoethnography itself is an ethical practice" (p. 26) and that "autoethnographers must resolve how and what to tell intimate others about how they have been included in our stories" (p. 17). The intimate others in this study were my wife and children. I did not include any data that would cause harm to them, and the nature of the subject did not call for sensitive data. Moreover, I got them involved from the first thoughts about the research subject to the final stages of the study. They knew they were a central part of the study; they were proud of this, my wife told me. Additionally, my wife and elder daughter read what was written and were active contributors to the data collection and validation, as detailed below.

I started by recalling and writing down anecdotes about prominent experiences during the distance learning period from August 2020 to May 2021. Then, I sat with my family, several times over about ten days, whereby we discussed what I drafted. Using their recollections and communication exchanges with the school, mainly via WhatsApp, they offered additional items, added more details, or helped me correct certain points.

I applied thematic analysis (TA) to the data I collected. Clarke and Braun (2017) define TA as a "method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data… not simply to summarize the data content, but to identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question[s]" (p. 297). Nowell et al. (2017) commended the flexibility and accessibility of TA but cautioned that this flexibility can lead to inconsistency and lack of coherence. To avoid this impact and to ensure data credibility, I used two techniques: member-checking and critical friend.

Given (2008) states that member-checking is used to "optimize the validity of qualitative research findings… whereby data are played back to participants to ensure that researchers get it right" (p. 502). I applied member-checking at two levels. First, I shared the findings with my wife and elder daughter to review and provide feedback. Second, I shared the findings with two parents who had similar experiences to mine (i.e., like me, both were expatriate English teachers with children at international/private schools who attended distance learning during Covid-19). Each time, I revised the data based on feedback.

Lammasniemi (2018) defines a critical friend as "someone you trust and who is in a position to give constructive but honest feedback" (p. 175). Costa and Kallick (1993) add that a critical friend examines data through another lens, asks provocative questions, and offers critique of someone's work as a friend. I shared the paper draft for review by a friend who is a PhD holder and researcher in education. Then I revised it based on his feedback.

Guided by the three main themes entailed in my research questions (challenges, opportunities, and insights), I coded the data (manually) into entries that revealed the headings and sub-headings under the main themes (see Appendix).

5. Findings and discussion

In this study, I explored my experience as a parent of distance learners during the Covid-19 lockdown period. The model my children followed is close to the school-at-home type of homeschooling and encompasses its advantages like following formal schooling standards and its drawbacks like inflexibility and burnout (Conradie, 2016; Whitlow-Spurlock, 2019). A key difference between homeschooling in normal situations and my experience is that, unlike parents who make homeschooling decisions based on their own choice and reasons (Baidi, 2019; Gaither, 2017; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Jeynes, 2016; McKeon, 2007; Miser, 2005; Ray, 2017), the implementation of distance learning to my children was not my decision; it was mandated by educational authorities as a Covid-19 precautionary measure. I was not prepared for this sudden move and had to handle distance learning requirements without appropriate planning, and this imposed multiple challenges on me. However, a few opportunities emerged, and I gained some useful insights through the experience.

The Appendix summarizes the findings of the study. In the following lines, I elaborate on these findings and position them within current research.

5.1 Challenges

Challenges include home-related issues, school-related issues, and added roles and responsibilities.

5.1.1 Home-related issues

Before the start of distance learning, I had one computer for family day-to-day use. To participate effectively in online classes, each of my three school children needed a computer. I tried to buy two more computers, but only very expensive ones were available due to high demand when supply chains were impacted by global lockdown procedures. For a few weeks, my elder daughter used the computer, my younger daughter used the iPad, and my son used his mother's mobile telephone to attend online classes. While the iPad was not ideal for class assignments, the mobile telephone was not useful given its small screen size, limited typing capacity, and the inconvenience of receiving calls or messages during classes. Finally, I managed to buy a laptop from an online store, which was a useful improvement. A few weeks later, the school implemented two shifts, so my elderly daughter attended morning classes while my younger daughter and my son attended afternoon classes. This helped overcome the device problem, but not fully, as each child still needed the computer for homework outside class time. I was lucky that my children went to different grades at the same school, so we benefited from the two-shift solution. This might not have been the case had they gone to different schools or attended the same shift. In this context, Putri et al. (2020) found that devices for accessing online materials and fast internet access were both problematic.

Related to this was the need for a stable internet connection. I previously had a reasonably-priced pre-paid internet package, which was quite sufficient for normal home use before Covid-19. As online classes started, it became inadequate, so I had to subscribe to an unlimited package. Although I purchased an expensive top package, the band-

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width was not always ideal for classes and lags occurred when almost all family members were online. Gilbert (2015) confirmed that the most frequent challenge was the lack of reliable internet at home, and Mabeya (2020) concluded that most learners have not benefited much from online classes due to network-related issues.

Another challenge was related to physical study space. I live in a two-bedroom apartment with a sitting room and a guestroom. This design did not afford a suitable distance learning area (i.e., separate, equipped, and quiet) for each child when I was also working from home and needed a work area. I established my work area in the guestroom, my elderly daughter used the sitting room, my second daughter used the children's bedroom, and my son used the main bedroom until the shift system was implemented. A concurrent challenge was my fourth preschool-aged son who was constantly attended to by my wife while playing, normally in corridors, to eliminate disruptions to his siblings' classes. Häkkilä et al. (2020) identified similar challenges to families, including arranging home workspaces and setting up computing equipment for the children.

5.1.2 School-related issues

Prior to distance learning, my children's school had an online platform called 'SchoolGap' that was used solely for sharing prefinal examination revision packages. Upon starting distance learning, the school tried using this platform for sharing Zoom meeting links. This did not work due to difficulties logging into the platform and locating the links, some of which were broken. Therefore, the school started sharing the links via WhatsApp by creating a group for each school subject (i.e., for each teacher). As it was inconvenient for small children to move between classes, and teachers frequently missed class timings, one Zoom meeting was created for each class and teachers moved between meetings. Next, the school introduced the ClassLight learning management system, which was used for a few days only, then aborted, due to limitless technical issues. Then Microsoft Teams was tried, and eventually the decision was to return to Zoom and share links via ClassLight.

Furthermore, I learned through this experience that not only parents but also schoolteachers were not prepared for the sudden shift. For example, when a child faced difficulties with the learning platform, no ready answer was available. The best the teacher could do is search for a YouTube video and share it with us. Also, when a child had a question about the curriculum, it took the teacher a long while to respond with an answer, seemingly due to unfamiliarity with the new reality. Parents in the study of Abu Moghli and Shuayb (2020) indicated that they had to do their own research to support their children, something that many parents were unable to do due to lack of knowledge and other responsibilities.

Additional demands from the school was another issue. Before the pandemic, the school handed out printed materials (e.g., assignments, worksheets, weekly plans) to children. Under distance learning, the teachers sent soft copies of materials via WhatsApp for us to print. Sometimes, these came late at night, and the required number of pages was too many for a home-use printer, so I had to look for a printshop to do the job. The children did not have sufficient time to work on these materials; sometimes they had already fallen asleep by the time the materials arrived. The teachers also asked us to purchase teaching aids normally provided by the school (e.g., geography maps, wall boards). One time, the teacher asked the students to buy chemical substance samples and a test tube to do a science experiment at home; this did not materialize as it was faced by objections from angry parents. In this same context, lack of support from school was identified as a negative aspect of distance learning by Gilbert (2015) and Drvodelić and Domović (2021). Fontenelle-Tereshchuk (2021) added that parents viewed schools' demands from them during remote learning as unreasonable.

5.1.3 Added roles and responsibilities

My wife and I had to assume additional roles and responsibilities related to distance learning. During that period, my children did not have the chance to ask the teachers for clarification or reexplanation in the same way as in traditional classes. Moreover, the teachers sometimes forgot to record the online sessions. Therefore, learning gaps normally landed with me or my wife. As neither of us had sufficient knowledge in all subject areas, we frequently had to study lessons over and over (yes, some lessons are that tough) to be able to answer questions.

Also, while my elder children needed minimal supervision during their online classes, my younger son required continuous observation to ensure he was always on track with teachers. Customarily, we could hear the teacher calling for him, and sometimes for his classmates, repeatedly. In most cases, he was physically there near the screen, scraping the desk with his pencil or scratching the keyboard with his nails. More than once, my wife looked frustrated as she told me she found him sleeping during class when she got busy with housework.

Providing timely technical support was another role brought by distance learning. Oftentimes while at work, my wife would tell me that my daughter's computer screen froze during class, that the speakers stopped working, or that she could not hear the teacher because the connection quality dropped. My wife did not have sufficient experience to deal with such issues, and the only solution she could think of was to restart the computer, sometimes more than once, resulting in the loss of class time. Occasionally, she had to use her telephone when the situation prolonged.

Challenges imposed by parents' added roles were highlighted in many studies. Parents described having to make many adaptations in their lives to support their children's learning as overwhelming (Logan et al., 2021), and undertaking the double role of guardian and teacher as a negative aspect of online learning (Drvodelić & Domović, 2021). Parents' struggles with multiple tasks were also a main finding of Alipasa et al.'s (2021) study, and Putri et al. (2020) added that challenges were even higher with lower grade children. Furthermore, parents reported experiencing varying levels of burnout and exhaustion (Nyanamba et al., 2021), and living greater physical and emotional workloads as they supported their children's distance learning (Seabra et al., 2021).

5.1.4 Other challenges

Multiple factors impacted the quality of online classes. For example, there were often noises from students' homes that distracted the class attention. Also, some children tried to cheat during quizzes, which was almost impossible to stop. Moreover, teachers sometimes skipped substantial portions of the lessons due to time and communication limitations. Additionally, large amounts of lessons were assigned to children as homework without being sufficiently taught by the teachers.

Unlike spacious school facilities and physical education exercises, my children were trapped at their desks almost all day long, either attending online classes or doing homework, with minimal physical activity. Fatigue was noticeable, besides gaining weight and general feelings of laziness. Gazing at screens for extended hours was also an unpleasant experience. My daughter and my son already started using eyeglasses.

In addition to disconnection from school friends, no home visits were possible during the lockdown period. Even during lesson breaks, the teachers muted the classes, so the children had no opportunity for socialization. Also, my children were not able to see their friends in weekly social gatherings like before Covid-19. As expatriates, we could not spend the summer vacation in our home country for about two years. As a result of this state of continuous isolation, my children started becoming more attached to their electronic devices and the virtual world. Nowadays, despite returning to normal conditions, my children prefer staying home and socializing with their friends online to going out for a picnic during the weekend.

Additional costs were another concern. During the lockdown, and as every family member was staying continually at home either working or studying, multiple home gadgets were running around the clock, particularly computer machines and air conditioners. This incurred substantial increases in electricity bills. The new computer and the high-speed internet package purchased for online classes also added extra burden to my budget. It is worth noting, however, that some expenses were avoided such as the cost of transportation to and from school and eating out costs.

Issues like the ones above were documented in related literature. Parents in Yu et al.'s (2021) study expressed concerns about the quality of children's distance learning including unsatisfactory delivery, reduced subjects, shortened class time, and easy assignments. Parents in Fontenelle-Tereshchuk's (2021) study were doubtful about the reliability of online education to promote independent learning among young children. Gilbert (2015) mentioned academic rigor, lack of genuine communication, and feelings of isolation as frequent issues. Spending increased amounts of time on electronic devices was identified as a major concern by Al Rawashdeh et al. (2020), Misirli and Ergulec (2021), Putri et al. (2020), and Sadeghi (2019). Moreover, Agaton and Cueto (2021) and Maggio et al. (2021) concluded that parents of distance learners encountered problems related to health, stress, and psychological well-being. Issues with technology and internet cost, access, and stability were highlighted in the studies of Agaton and Cueto (2021), Basar et al. (2021), Efriana (2021), and Putri et al. (2020).

5.2 Opportunities

The distance learning experience was not all negative. Despite the challenges, I noted some opportunities, including distance learning takeaways, more time with the family, and preparedness for similar future situations, which I summarize below.

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5.2.1 Distance learning takeaways

My children acquired new study skills and habits which, I believe, were mainly due to the disconnect from teachers that was replaced with continuous access to digital devices and the internet. My elder daughter would browse the internet to look for more information about a topic or figure out a hard homework concept. My younger daughter would use Google Translate to look up a difficult word, search online for a picture to enhance a project, or visit YouTube for a video of a lesson. Overall, my children gradually developed the habit of looking for help by themselves, using available technologies, before resorting to their mother or to me. I believe my children became also more responsible for their learning. I often noticed my first grader looking for the weekly schedule to prepare his books for the following day before going to bed. My younger daughter asked me to buy her an alarm clock to wake up on time and finish homework before online classes. My elder daughter told her mother she faced difficulties with Physics lessons and decided to allocate more time to that subject. Each of them took note of coming quizzes and worked towards these dates. These findings are concurrent with previous research. Morse et al. (2022) reported that homeschooling created chances for broader learning as children became more self-sufficient, maintained their learning progress, and completed their work at their own pace. Also, parents who participated in Misirli and Ergulec's (2021) study believed that their children's self-regulated learning skills have increased during remote teaching.

In addition, the technology knowledge of all the family improved during that period. We became familiar with learning management systems. We had to use communication platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams like never before. We became heavier users of social media, mainly WhatsApp to keep connected with the school, and YouTube to look for educational videos. Skills such as using web dictionaries, web searches, and Wikipedia improved substantially. Other skills like typing, preparing homework assignments in digital rather than written format, and troubleshooting technical computer issues were also boosted notably. Drvodelić and Domović (2021) also noted positive changes caused by distance online teaching like self-regulated learning and development of ICT competences.

Distance learning was convenient in other ways. At the start of the school year, my family were unable to return from their home country due to travel restrictions. This lasted for about three weeks during which my children attended classes online, hence avoiding losing instructional time and being marked absent. Moreover, staying home for online classes was generally safer. Furthermore, my children saved about two hours of daily commuting, hence exhaustion, which enabled them to start their homework immediately after a short lunch break. The ability to attend classes from anywhere is an additional convenience highlighted repeatedly in pertinent literature (see, for example, Al Rawashdeh et al., 2021; Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2020).

5.2.2 More time with family

More opportunity for quality family time came from two factors. First, I had to work from home during the lockdown period, too. Second, the new roles I had to undertake due to distance learning made me stay longer with my family. For example, I frequently spent time with my wife studying specific lessons to help one of the children. Also, we had time to play some indoor games, something we did not normally do before the pandemic. Drvodelić and Domović (2021) found that distance online teaching improved quality family relationships and parental support in the learning process. Cahapay (2021) also concluded that parents became more involved with the education of their children, which fostered physical and emotional connection between them, and Morse et al. (2022) reported similar benefits of online homeschooling.

5.2.3 Preparedness for similar future situations

As we progressed through distance learning, the situation became less challenging for me and my family as we became familiar with it. This denotes that with the skills we gained we will be prepared to respond more effectively if we are put in similar circumstances in the future. The equipment I purchased for distance learning will also be useful if kept maintained. Participants in the study of Morse et al. (2022) indicated being more prepared for future home schooling by acquiring updated technology, managing physical space at home better, accessing more online learning resources, and making sure they understand the content of their children's schoolwork.

5.3 Insights

Going through distance learning, experiencing with its challenges and opportunities, I gained some insights, including the importance of school-parent cooperation, closer awareness of my children's education processes and learning styles, and the informal evaluation of my children's education, which I summarize in this section.

5.3.1 Importance of school-parent cooperation

This experience brought me closer to my children's education. Conversations with the teachers made me aware of areas where my children needed more help. For example, while my son was doing well in most school subjects, his level dropped noticeably in English. Speaking with the school administration, I knew that his teacher was not a specialized English teacher; the school had to hire her as the original teacher was locked down abroad and unable to teach from there. To fill this gap, my wife had to speak to the teacher frequently for matters related to my son's study.

In this context, according to Giannakopoulou (2021), teachers and parents worked together to engage children in experiences that enhanced their learning and nurtured their social and emotional well-being. Sonnenschein et al. (2021) found that parents were involved in teaching their children, monitoring their work, and providing technology support. Alharthi (2001) highlighted another type of cooperation by which parents were encouraged to look for e-sources that supported the national curriculum as an alternative to the schools' lack of readiness.

5.3.2 Closer awareness of my children's education processes and learning styles

When my children came to ask questions, I sat with them to study together until they understood. Consequently, I became more involved with their day-to-day school activities, and I got to know how each of them approaches school subjects and study problems. This gave me a better understanding of their learning styles, progress levels, academic strengths and weaknesses, and specific areas they needed support with. Lase et al. (2021) stressed the importance of such involvement and its positive impact on children's education. Ceka and Murati (2016) added that offering educational support to children from their parents creates and strengthens better communication between them.

5.3.3 Informal evaluation of my children's education

Seeing my children attending classes is something that never happened during face-to-face education. I became aware of the kind of teachers assigned to them, the teaching methods used, how they behaved during lessons, and how they compared to other children in the class. This helped me know about the quality of education the school delivered, which would guide my future schooling decisions. This was a unique experience because in the context of my children's schooling parents are never part of the evaluation of education; communication between the school and the parents is basically to share homework assignments the children are required to complete, which are then reviewed and scored by the teachers without further involvement from the parents. Additionally, remote teaching decisions were made by the school, and parents' reactions were not ascertained (e.g., despite a certain degree of improvement during the second remote teaching period, no survey was conducted to assess parents' feedback between the two periods). This is unlike the case in other contexts. For example, parents in Brown et al.'s (2020) study were involved in the school inspection process through participation in questionnaires and meeting with inspectors during school evaluations. Likewise, Morse et al. (2022) concluded that home schooling allowed parents to see what and how their children were learning at school, and those parents appreciated knowing more about their children's academic progress, strengths, and weaknesses. Jinnah and Walters (2008) underscored the importance of considering parental satisfaction ratings in program evaluation despite some subjective bias.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This study is a reflection on my recent experience as a parent of distance learners during Covid-19 lockdown. Following an autoethnographic approach, the study represents the voices of people who lived the experience and saw it from inside, namely the parents. I highlighted not only the challenges I faced, but also the opportunities I found and insights I gained throughout this unprecedented experience. Many points that I raised were addressed in recent studies but by researchers who were not part of the experience. Therefore, what this study introduces is an insider's perspective that was not adequately covered in previous research.

My study suggests that careful planning by both schools and parents is crucial before shifting to online learning. The decision should not be based merely on what schools are able to afford. Since parents play a fundamental role in the distance learning of their children, what these parents can and cannot do, the challenges they may face, and the skills they require are all factors to be considered. The study also underscores collaboration between schools and families to ensure appropriate support is provided, and that curriculum is adapted for remote learning in ways that avoid placing unrealistic demands on families. This should be within the eyesight of educators and policy makers in similar future situations and in endeavours to take distance learning forward.

The current study indicates that further research is still needed to cover this important subject more thoroughly. The experiences of parents without an educational background like mine are worth exploring. Also, more autoethnographic studies are still needed of parents whose children attended government rather than private schools during the distance learning period. Parents with less advantaged circumstances are also encouraged to share their experiences through autoethnographic research.

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Appendix: A Summary of findings

Challenges	• Home-related Issues
	  • Computer for Each Child
	  • Physical Space for Each Child
	  • Stable Internet Connection
	• School-related Issues
	  • Struggling with Learning Platforms
	  • Minimal Support
	  • Additional Demands
	• Added Roles and Responsibilities
	  • Extra Tutoring
	  • Monitoring During Classes
	  • Timely Troubleshooting Support
	• Other Challenges
	  • Health Concerns
	  • Quality of Online Instruction
	  • Lack of Social Activities
	  • Additional Costs

Opportunities	• Distance Learning Takeaways
	  • Improved Study Skills and Habits
	  • Increased Sense of Responsibility for Own Learning
	  • Better Technology Knowledge and Abilities
	  • General Convenience
	• More Time with the Family
	• Preparedness for Similar Future Situations

Insights	• Importance of School-Parent Cooperation • Closer Awareness of my Children's Education Processes & Learning Styles • Informal Evaluation of my Children's Education