

Article

Parents' Perspectives on Remote Learning in the Pandemic Context

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Abstract: In the spring of 2020, when the entire education system worldwide switched to distance learning, parents became key learning agents, helping students to understand how to continue learning, how to use digital solutions and how to support students in this process. This article summarizes parents' views on the distance learning process and the challenges they faced. This is part of a larger study carried out within the project "Life with COVID-19: Evaluation of the overcoming coronavirus crisis in Latvia and recommendations for social resilience in the future" (CoLife), which was launched in Latvia in the summer of 2020 and analyzed what digital learning tools schools can use to support students in their learning. Parents' views on 738 school-age children (313 responses about 1st–4th graders; 362 responses for 5th–9th graders and 63 responses for 10th–12th graders) were obtained, and the main conclusions were that after parents became learning agents, they would have liked more support from educators to understand how to support their children in the learning process. Parents would also have liked schools to be interested in how their children are doing and whether everything necessary is available. Overall, it can be concluded that in this crisis, parents tried to support their children, and in most cases, it was the mothers of the students who provided this support, but it was primarily based on the need to use digital technologies, which means that children whose parents do not use digital technologies may be more exposed to the danger of falling into a risk group with larger educational gaps.

Keywords: remote learning; homeschooling; parent support; parent voice; COVID-19; pandemic discourse; general education



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1. Introduction and Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a large number of educational institutions were closed, and education was transposed to remote learning, reaching the level of the complete closure of schools in 130 countries (out of 193) on 31 March 2020; educational institutions were partially open in four countries, fully open in two countries (Turkmenistan and Belarus), and in all other countries, an academic break started [1]. There was a shock in general education, where until now learning had traditionally been organized as a face-to-face learning process, in which students learn under the guidance of a teacher, as, in a few days, this learning process had to be transformed into remote education [2], and the concept of "homeschooling", from its prior understanding of being a way to provide education at home to certain groups of people [3–7], suddenly became a general form of education and parents became accidental homeschoolers [8,9]. In this situation, a large role was played by the parents of the students, who had to become homeschoolers within a few days without prior training. While parental involvement has previously been analyzed as necessary but often insufficient [10,11], parents were now the ones who helped students to learn digital skills, helped them to learn and helped them to understand how to organize the learning process of children in a balance with other daily responsibilities.

Parents also had to help children to overcome emotional problems caused by their inability to meet their friends. Parents usually want their children to learn well, to be fully

present in life, to be responsible and motivated and to be successful in defining the concept of flourishing in life [12], but these parental desires are mostly related to the education system. This article analyzes the role of parents in the remote learning process, wherein parents have been learning agents in the homeschooling process, and uses a social approach to the learning agents' perspective [13].

The unexpected turn in education provision caused by the pandemic created various challenges, which can be described both as problems in achieving learning goals and growing social inequality gaps. It would not be an overstatement to say that the parents of the students were one of the most important learning agents at this stage to enable the learning process to take place rather than let the educational processes stop and to enable the students to achieve at least some of their learning goals [14–16]. Students' learning achievements depend to a large extent on their parents' ability to provide this support [17], which can be linked to the parents' own knowledge of different subjects and their ability to use digital tools and teach their children. This opportunity to learn also depended on the social situation of families, whether or not children could be provided with digital devices to access learning content from home, whether the child had the opportunity to set up their own learning space or whether parents had the opportunity to monitor the learning process because there were parents whose work was related to the provision of important functions, such as medicine, emergency services and the supply of goods. Similarly, parents whose daily work responsibilities required them to continue to perform their duties online were less likely to be involved in supporting their children. Single parents, or parents who became ill with COVID-19 themselves, could not be so fully involved in the children's homeschooling process. Studies have already shown that families with higher incomes and higher levels of parental education are better able to cope with this crisis and are satisfied with the benefits of distance learning [18–20]. Based on this, it can naturally be concluded that not all students are in the same position with regard to the acquisition of education in this remote learning process, so it is important to understand the parents' views and wishes in order to be able to support them in their role as learning agents in homeschooling. One benefit of parents' in-depth involvement in the learning process is that they became more aware of what their children needed to learn and were able to discuss issues that were important to them. It was also found that parents are the ones who motivate students to learn more and provide them with social and emotional support when they face learning difficulties [21–25]. Parents also praised teachers' work, which they had not appreciated before [22]. There is also evidence that this crisis could be a turning point in the learning habits of many students, with less emphasis on following teacher instructions and more on self-regulated learning [6].

However, despite the benefits that parents experienced during homeschooling, there were also different challenges they faced. Aspects of wellbeing were also important; when parents had to think about providing their children with technical devices, they also had to teach children who had not used them before, and at the same time, parents themselves had to continue to perform their work duties to ensure the continuation of their home life. They were also stressed about the possibility of illness and about the possibility of losing or having already lost work and relationships. Various studies have shown that parents feel that they are not able to help children sufficiently in remote learning [21] because they do not fully understand the principles of learning, do not have specific knowledge on particular subjects and feel isolated, and this points to the need to analyze parents' views in order to define possible forms of cooperation between schools and children's parents. Currently, the data collected show that the pandemic has had a more negative impact on women, but at the same time, that home care is still perceived to be the responsibility of women and the responsibility for support for children's learning lies more directly with mothers [14,26,27]. In this study, more answers to the questions were given by mothers (the questionnaire was completed by mothers for 661 students out of 738), which confirms the assumption that mothers are more involved in the provision of learning support.

In this situation, when parents had to become agents of accidental homeschooling [8,9], there are both benefits and various risks that need to be considered when planning post-crisis support to fill the education gap, as modeled in the World Bank study [18], where it was concluded that, depending on what kind of models are used to assess possible scenarios, there will be losses after a pandemic. The chances of recovering from them will depend on the financial resources invested by countries in bridging this education gap and the policy decisions taken, as well as the extent to which parents are able to support their children during this period of distance learning to keep the potential gap as small as possible [18].

The main goal of the research project “Life with COVID-19: Evaluation of overcoming the coronavirus crisis in Latvia and recommendations for social resilience in the future” (CoLife) was to develop recommendations on how to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on education and to evaluate digital learning tools used in Latvia. In the first stage of the research, different scenarios were identified after conducting a pilot survey of parents, because parents are one of the main educational agents during the homeschooling process, setting the assessment of how parents were involved in providing education during remote learning, what support they received from schools and what problems they encountered as a research objective for this stage. Based on the data gathered during the pilot study, the next steps of the research were developed for the research project mentioned.

2. Research Design and Methodology

The study considered all ethical research standards in accordance with the General Data Protection Requirements (GDPR). The questionnaire was anonymous, and participation in it was completely voluntary. The survey included questions on the demographic information of the respondents, the number of children in the family and the age of the respondent child. Questions were asked about the amount of support children needed, how students performed the tasks assigned to them by teachers and the technological equipment available to families. Parents were not asked to indicate the child’s school or even the exact region where the school is located. After completing all the demographic information, parents were asked to fill in separate questionnaires for each of the children attending the general education institution (forms 1–12), anticipating that the situations for different children at different ages may vary. In cases where parents did not want to complete the questionnaire for each of the children living in the respondent’s family, researchers asked them to complete one for the child whose experience the parents found most informative from a research point of view.

The questionnaire was created using Google Forms, and a link to the survey was disseminated through social networks and contacts of academic members of the university where researchers work. The researchers used the principles of nonprobability sampling, in particular convenience sampling [28], which is assumed to be an appropriate method of sampling for pilot studies and reduces the expenses for conducting the survey [29,30], making a request to the administrations of schools to send them to parents asking for their views on distance learning support. Parents, caregivers or other persons living in the same household as a child and supporting them in their learning were invited to answer the research questions. This was the only formal requirement to take part in the research. Questionnaires were completed between 8 and 28 June 2020. It was the researchers’ conscious choice to discover the parents’ views at the end of the semester, by which time the parents had gradually adapted to remote learning, to avoid extreme answers.

SPSS (IBM Corporation, New York, USA, version 22) software and, in some cases, Microsoft Excel were used for data analysis.

The study has a couple of limitations. Firstly, it was carried out after the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, so the results cannot be fully applied to the current situation. Secondly, the questionnaire was distributed through online communication tools, asking parents to fill out a Google Form that may have affected the data obtained. This type of

survey is easier to use to reach a wide range of people, but at the same time, it has its limitations, as opinions are expressed by people who use digital tools and social media on a daily basis. This creates a situation wherein the opinions of people living in households without technology may be out of the sight of researchers. However, these limitations do not affect the results of the study, as the researchers' task was to understand how parents were involved in the remote learning process and what forms of collaboration schools used to help parents in the accidental homeschooling process.

3. Results

In total, 839 questionnaires were completed in the study, but some of them did not provide complete information, so parents' responses for 738 students were used for further analysis. For 661 children, the mother provided answers; for 63 children, the opinions were expressed by their fathers; for 9 children, by their legal representative; and for 5 children, another person close to the child.

The respondents also provided answers about the number of children living with them in the same household, and the results are as follows: in 206 cases, it was one child; in 319 cases, it was two children; in 161 cases, it was three; and in 52 cases, it was answered that 4 or more children lived in the same household. The researchers chose to ask about the number of children living in the same household on a daily basis rather than the number of children in the same family, as the researchers considered that in cases where families are separated, limited contact during a pandemic could affect the ability of a non-household parent to participate in the daily learning process.

Table 1 summarizes the data on the number of students in the classes in which they study and shows that, in general, parents of primary school students were more involved in expressing their views on their children.

Table 1. Distribution of students by form.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	form 1	85	10.1	11.5	11.5
	form 2	67	8.0	9.1	20.6
	form 3	77	9.2	10.4	31.0
	form 4	84	10.0	11.4	42.4
	form 5	66	7.9	8.9	51.4
	form 6	88	10.5	11.9	63.3
	form 7	81	9.7	11.0	74.3
	form 8	70	8.3	9.5	83.7
	form 9	57	6.8	7.7	91.5
	form 10	38	4.5	5.1	96.6
	form 11	15	1.8	2.0	98.6
	form 12	10	1.2	1.4	100.0
	Total		738	88.0	100.0
Missing	System	101	12.0		
Total		839	100.0		

First of all, the researchers wanted to discover what types of work teachers used during the remote learning process, so parents were asked about these forms of work and asked to evaluate them on a Likert scale, where 1 = all teachers did/used it, 2 = most teachers did/used it, 3 = only some teachers did/used it, 4 = no one used it, and 5 = I do not know. The data obtained are summarized in Table 2 and show that, in most cases, teachers used the opportunities offered by the learning platforms, but tasks such as essays and reports were the least assigned. In a crisis, it is important that learning continues; however, the indicated learning platforms are more suitable for acquiring exact knowledge [31] and are less suitable for acquiring skills such as the ability to express one's opinion, critically analyze information and discuss various issues and views, which are also important in education.

Table 2. Teaching methods used by teachers.

Form		Online Lessons (Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp, etc.)	Sending Tasks That Had to Be Printed and Completed after Sending the Completed Work to the Teacher	Assigning tasks Using Online Learning Platforms (Uzdevumi.lv, Fizmix.lv, etc.)	Assigning Essays and Reports (Digital Submission)	Assigning Tasks from Books Where Certain Tasks Had to Be Completed (Printed Version)	Assigning creative Tasks Where the Child Needed to Do Something Independently	Physical Activities	Video Filming about the Assignment
form 1	Mean	3.29	2.42	2.87	3.69	2.28	2.27	2.74	2.88
	N	85	85	85	85	85	85	85	85
	SD	.884	1.062	.884	.951	1.053	.762	.693	.944
form 2	Mean	2.99	2.81	2.64	3.55	2.40	2.40	2.75	3.24
	N	67	67	67	67	67	67	67	67
	SD	.945	1.062	.753	.974	.970	.698	.659	.986
form 3	Mean	2.88	2.65	2.35	3.42	2.56	2.36	2.65	2.96
	N	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77
	SD	.959	1.109	.757	.951	1.019	.705	.739	.924
form 4	Mean	2.92	2.70	2.31	3.15	2.54	2.57	2.82	3.20
	N	84	84	84	84	84	84	84	84
	SD	.764	1.062	.711	1.035	.937	.682	.697	.875
form 5	Mean	2.83	2.74	2.33	3.00	2.67	2.55	2.74	3.11
	N	66	66	66	66	66	66	66	66
	SD	.852	.997	.810	1.008	1.043	.706	.640	.862
form 6	Mean	2.74	3.00	2.23	3.08	2.70	2.77	2.92	3.22
	N	88	88	88	88	88	88	88	88
	SD	.890	.994	.798	.834	1.063	.739	.776	.809
form 7	Mean	2.84	2.99	2.40	3.02	3.00	2.83	3.20	3.56
	N	81	81	81	81	81	81	81	81
	SD	.941	1.066	.918	1.183	1.275	.985	.781	.962
form 8	Mean	2.91	3.24	2.41	3.03	2.96	3.06	3.13	3.46
	N	70	70	70	70	70	70	70	70
	SD	.794	1.122	1.042	1.007	1.069	.866	.883	.912
form 9	Mean	2.67	2.86	2.09	2.68	2.91	2.77	2.95	3.35
	N	57	57	57	57	57	57	57	57
	SD	.893	1.109	.635	.909	1.040	.866	.789	.916
form 10	Mean	2.58	3.16	2.13	2.87	3.55	2.84	3.03	3.37
	N	38	38	38	38	38	38	38	38
	SD	.858	1.366	.777	1.070	1.245	.973	.822	.942
form 11	Mean	3.13	3.33	2.67	2.80	3.53	3.33	3.27	3.40
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
	SD	1.060	.976	1.113	1.146	1.060	1.397	.961	.910
form 12	Mean	2.40	3.70	2.80	2.30	2.80	2.60	3.30	3.50
	N	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
	SD	.966	.675	1.229	.675	1.135	.966	1.059	1.354
Total	Mean	2.89	2.86	2.41	3.16	2.72	2.64	2.90	3.23
	N	738	738	738	738	738	738	738	738
	SD	.900	1.099	.858	1.033	1.109	.846	.774	.935

Overall, these results suggest that students were offered remote learning opportunities, but this should be seen in the context of students' digital skills, which indicated that students learned to connect to the Internet, use a computer and printer and use WhatsApp. These results also need to be analyzed in the context of the technological equipment available to students, as many parents indicated that they had purchased computers (55 parents), printers (43), scanners (28), tablets (32), headphones (58) and cameras (38). Several family members shared one device—computers (in 135 cases), tablets (53) and headphones (20)—which generally indicates relatively good technological support but can mean devices are not available all the time. However, the context of the study should be taken into account, as the questionnaire was distributed in a digital environment, and, most likely, opinions were provided by parents who use digital solutions. This questionnaire probably did not reach parents who do not use digital devices themselves, and their opinions on the necessary devices for children's distance learning are therefore probably not represented here.

In the block of questions about the support provided by different people to students during homeschooling, respondents were asked about the approximate amount provided, on the assumption that the child's learning process totals 100%. To evaluate other people's involvement, respondents were asked to mark the approximate percentages of support provided to the child during their distance learning by different family members and teachers. No mathematical accuracy was expected from the respondents as the researchers only wanted to understand the approximate distribution. For example, if the respondent considered that the father was involved with 50% of the support provided, the mother with around 20% and the child themselves with 30% of the assigned work, then it was not necessary to fill in the information for all 100% of support needed. If the respondents thought that the child themselves coped with everything completely, then all the people mentioned in the survey could be marked as having 0% involvement. The obtained data were coded as follows: 1 = 90–100%; 2 = 70–90%; 3 = 50–70%; 4 = 30–50%; 5 = 10–30%; 6 = 1–10%; 7 = did not provide support.

In a summary of the data (see Table 3), it can be seen that most of the support was provided by mothers (mean 3.57), which is in line with the conclusion of other researchers that the greatest burden during this period of homeschooling was on mothers [22,23]. Teachers were identified as the second-largest group of supporters (mean 4.25).

Table 3. Support provided to children.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Mother	738	3.57	1.901	3.615
Father	738	5.25	1.696	2.878
Other children in the family	738	6.14	1.403	1.968
Grandparents	738	6.26	1.454	2.115
Teachers	738	4.25	1.787	3.193
Other people	738	6.50	1.348	1.816
Valid N (listwise)	738			

The researchers also analyzed the support provided to students and how much teachers needed it. The obtained data are summarized in Figure 1, which shows that students in younger classes needed more continuous support which was no longer so necessary in older classes, where the answer that *It was necessary in certain situations, but it can't be assumed that it was cumbersome* was chosen most often. However, it is important to note that the indicator for the type of support required—*In some tasks, it was more necessary than we were able to provide*—increased in the 5th–8th forms.

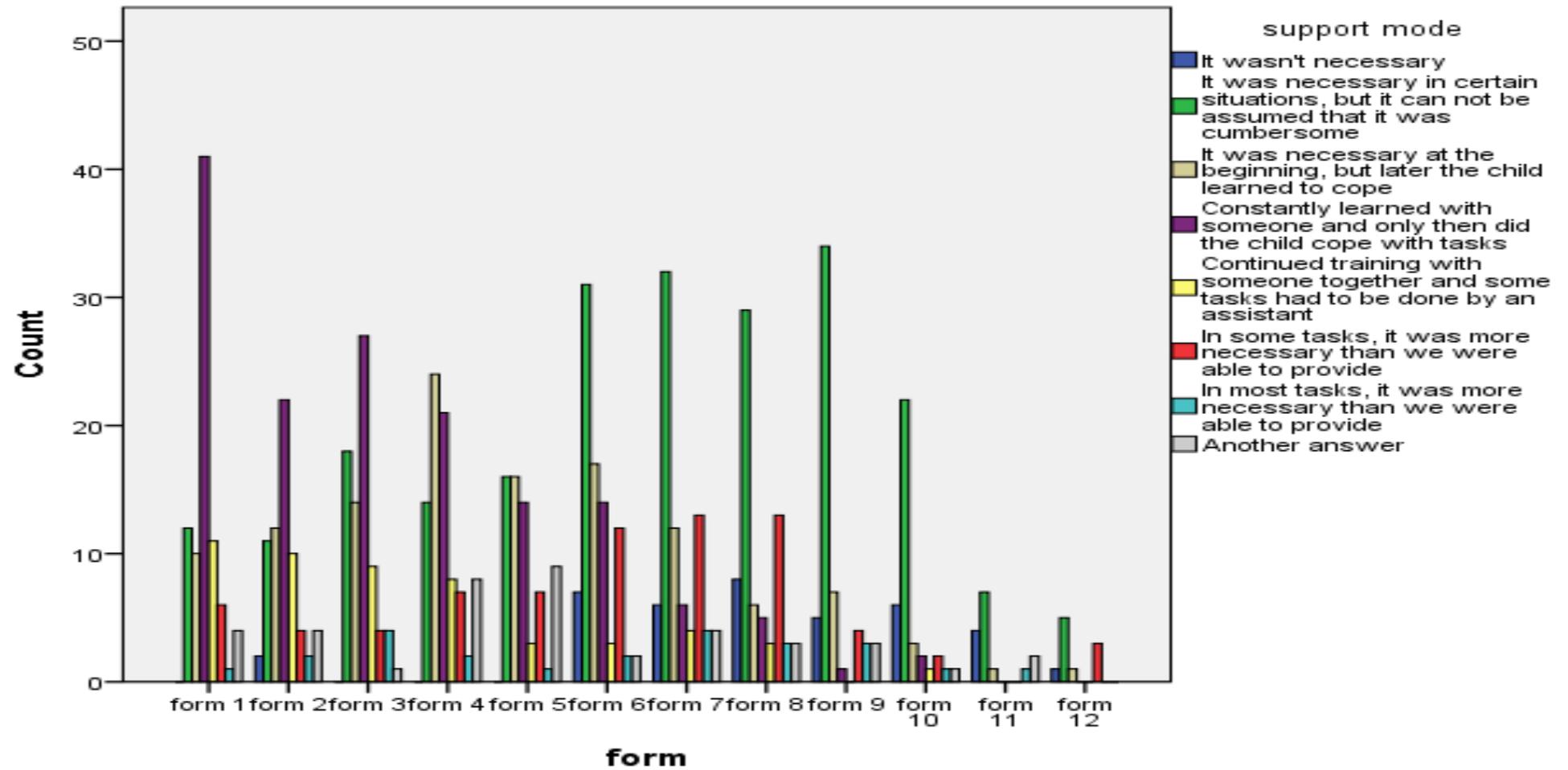


Figure 1. Support needed for children by form.

Analyzing the data distribution by gender (see Figure 2), it can be seen that more continuous support in the learning process was needed for the boys, while gender differences are not visible in the answers *In some tasks, it was more necessary than we were able to provide* and *In most tasks, it was more necessary than we were able to provide*.

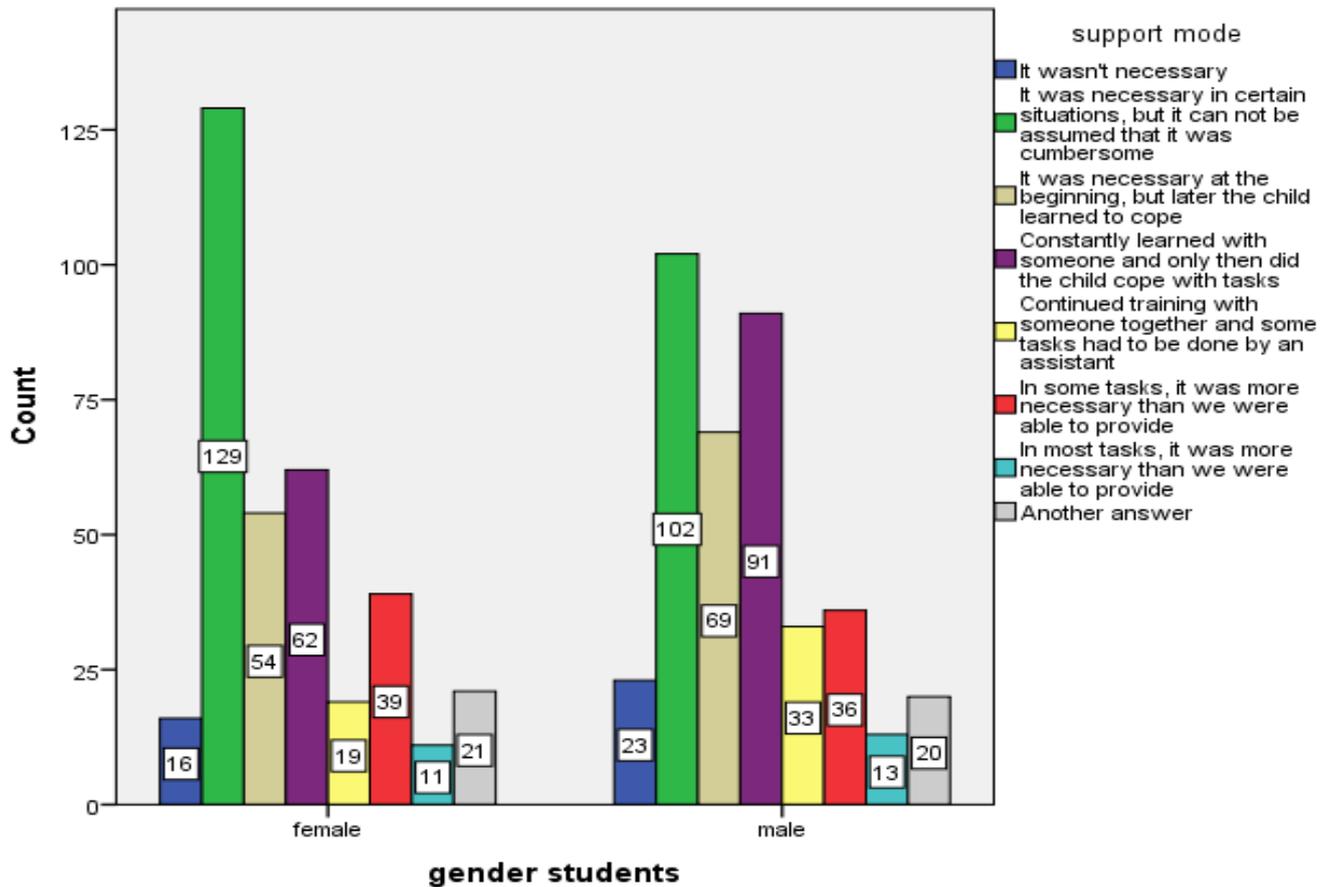


Figure 2. Support needed for children by gender.

Respondents were also asked what information they received from the school during the remote learning process to enable homeschooling. Parents could express their responses indicating that a particular type of support was available and regular (coded as 1), that support was minimal and irregular (coded as 2) or that no such aid was received (coded as 3). The obtained results are summarized in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Support received from schools (N).

	Yes, Regularly	Minimally and Irregularly	No
Regular information on how remote learning will be organized	377	238	107
Guidelines on the use of digital tools	143	154	410
Guidelines on the use of conferencing tools (Zoom, Skype, Teams, etc.)	145	145	416
Online courses to help parents understand how to use digital tools and learning materials	23	53	634
Online courses to help students understand how to use digital tools and learning materials	43	84	581
Information on how to support the student during remote learning	138	175	395

Table 5. Support received from schools/forms (mean).

Mean							
Form	Regular Information on How Remote Learning Will Be Organized	Guidelines on the Use of Digital Tools	Guidelines on the Use of Conferencing Tools (Zoom, Skype, Teams, etc.)	Online Courses to Help Parents Understand How to Use Digital Tools and Learning Materials	Online Courses to Help Students Understand How to Use Digital Tools and Learning Materials	Information on How to Support the Student during Remote Learning	
form 1		2.40	2.42	2.92	2.82	2.48	
form 2	1.66	2.43	2.48	2.88	2.84	2.43	
form 3	1.63	2.47	2.36	2.95	2.89	2.36	
form 4	1.83	2.43	2.41	2.93	2.74	2.49	
form 5	1.62	2.40	2.43	2.89	2.78	2.37	
form 6	1.46	2.29	2.42	2.82	2.77	2.15	
form 7	1.59	2.28	2.38	2.81	2.77	2.24	
form 8	1.56	2.45	2.35	2.90	2.77	2.44	
form 9	1.55	2.28	2.25	2.69	2.57	2.27	
form 10	1.65	2.47	2.42	2.89	2.72	2.56	
form 11	1.71	2.36	2.29	2.50	2.21	2.36	
form 12	1.33	1.78	1.67	2.56	2.33	1.89	
Total	1.63	2.38	2.38	2.86	2.76	2.36	

Analyzing the results, it can be concluded that most schools provided information on how remote learning would be organized, as 377 parents indicated that they received sufficient information, while 238 parents indicated that they received minimal information. For all other possible forms of support that schools could offer to parents during remote learning, the mean scores are above 2, meaning that only a small proportion of parents indicated that such types of support were received. There was a very low level of support in the form of online courses for both children and their parents on the use of digital learning materials, which shows that parents organized themselves according to their own understanding and provided support to their children to the best of their own ability, which means that there is a predictable gap in pupils' learning outcomes that will depend on parents' ability to provide support to their children in the homeschooling process. These results are very alarming, keeping in mind that most parents do not have specific knowledge on strategies how to support knowledge construction. In Table 5, it can be seen that the information provided by schools was mostly about organizational aspects but not strategies on how to support students (total mean 2.36) which can be used during homeschooling, guidelines for how to use digital tools (total mean 2.38), and the lack of online courses for parents on how to use digital tools and learning materials (total mean 2.86) indicates that parents were left without support during homeschooling. It is understandable that the switch from classroom-based teaching to remote teaching takes a lot of effort from teachers, and they do not have a capacity to prepare all the online lessons for students and at the same time online materials for parents on how to support learning. This leads to the conclusion that there is more support needed from administrative staff of educational institutions and the educational system as whole, who could organize extra pedagogical support for parents to ensure that learning loss is mitigated.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

Analyzing the obtained data, it can be concluded that schools, in trying to ensure the success of remote learning processes, tried to organize these using learning platforms available in Latvia, and parents served as learning agents [13] to provide homeschooling for their children during this period. Overall, this is a good way to organize remote learning, but there are a number of issues that should be taken into account:

- (1) Teachers also tried to organize lessons on online communication platforms (Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams). In general, this trend is to be welcomed, but the availability of technologies should be taken into account as data show that in many families, devices are shared, and this means that there could be occasions when students are not able to join synchronous learning because their siblings have online lessons at that time.

- (2) The learning platforms used in Latvia are more usable in STEM subjects because there are various tasks and tests that require analytical–algorithmic thinking and providing specific answers that are well developed [24,25,31].

However, it must be acknowledged that the choice of such forms of teaching by teachers points to the need to use technology and the Internet and that this form of teaching, although innovative, may pose a risk of social exclusion for students without digital devices to fully connect to their school. This resonates with the conclusion reached by different authors [21,32] that distance learning is better for students whose parents can provide the necessary technology and individual support in the learning process [19,22,33].

At the same time, parents often pointed out that the tasks assigned by teachers were so difficult that their children would not have been able to complete them without parental support, and the need for this support increased in primary school from the 5th grade. Often, parents chose the answer that more support was necessary than they were able to provide. This confirms the desire of parents to support students to strengthen their flourishing [12]. There is an interesting trend when comparing the support needed by students by gender, as it can be seen that boys' parents indicated more frequently that continuous support was needed to enable their child to complete his tasks.

The answers obtained concerning the information parents received from the school about how the remote learning process would be organized, with information about how they could support their children during homeschooling being minimal, allow the conclusion to be drawn that children's learning achievements during this period depend on the possibility for families to provide their children with the required technologies, on the personal understanding of parents about the support necessary for their children's learning and on the possibility for parents to provide such support and parental wellbeing because research has shown that parents also suffer from this unprecedented situation [34,35].

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study, due to the nature of the research where all the respondents were reached on social media and they voluntary took part in this pilot research to express their opinion.

Informed Consent Statement: All the respondents were informed about the use of research data and the statement "By filling this questionnaire you agree that the information provided will be anonymously used in the research. You can stop filling the form if you feel that you do not wish to answer any of questions".

Data Availability Statement: All the data can be found <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ckfqMRzTzhOqIw1tBkGUheqbufOM8T80/view?usp=sharing>.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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