Online Schooling of Children in Times of Covid-19: Experiences of Parents

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Abstract: The COVID-19 affected individuals and institutions alike. Not only did it change human lives from the context of the biological, it simultaneously transformed the psychological, economic, social and educational lives too. This paper attempts to look into the online classes, specifically for Kindergarten and Grade One students, which became the norm during the years 2020 and 2021. It aims to see how it affected the caregivers (parents, particularly mothers) who were indirectly yet actively engaged and associated with this new medium of academic training. This paper discusses the investigation of parents to find out how this process affected their daily routines and what modifications they had to adopt in order to offer their children the proper guidance they required. It proposes to view what gender concerns arose in the management of this situation and how socio-economic backgrounds influenced the conduct of online classes. The psychological implications and effects are also equally delved into to understand how this set-up touched the stakeholders. This paper, in all, aims to depict how COVID-19 induced many striking transformations and reasserted the presence of inequalities, which were not just physical but also behavioural, emotional and psychological.

Keywords: COVID-19, online classes, children, parents, inequalities

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented shift in education worldwide, forcing institutions to transition rapidly from traditional classroom settings to online platforms. While this transformation affected students across

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all levels, younger children, particularly those in early education (Kindergarten (KG) and Grade One), experienced unique challenges due to their dependence on interactive and structured learning environments. In India, where education systems vary significantly across socio-economic backgrounds, online schooling raised crucial concerns about accessibility, parental involvement, and socio-cultural implications. This paper explores the experiences of parents who were actively engaged in facilitating online education for their young children during the years 2020 and 2021.

The sudden imposition of digital learning disrupted conventional pedagogical methods, affecting cognitive and social development in early learners. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasises that learning is deeply embedded in social interactions, and young children acquire knowledge through guided participation with caregivers and educators. Online education, however, altered these dynamics, placing parents in a direct instructional role, which in turn impacted family routines, work-life balance, and gendered labour divisions (Lareau, 2003). In India, where traditional schooling systems rely on structured classroom engagement, the burden of facilitating learning at home falls disproportionately on mothers, reinforcing pre-existing gender roles (Bhattacharya & Sharma, 2021).

Moreover, the digital divide in India further exacerbated inequalities in access to education. While privileged households had access to high-speed internet, digital devices, and quiet learning spaces, children from lower-income backgrounds faced infrastructural and technical barriers (Mishra, 2021). Anthropologists have long examined how socio-economic disparities shape educational access, with studies highlighting how technology adoption varies across caste, class, and rural-urban divides (Sen, 2020). This paper aims to analyse how parental engagement, especially mothers' social and cultural factors, influenced the effectiveness of online education for early learners.

Additionally, the emotional and psychological impact of this transition is significant. Parents experienced increased stress due to the dual responsibility of managing work and facilitating their child's education, often with little external support. Studies in psychological anthropology indicate that prolonged stress and changes in daily routines can have long-term effects on mental well-being (Das & Gupta, 2021). Furthermore, children faced social isolation due to limited peer interactions, raising concerns about their emotional development and adaptability in post-pandemic educational settings.

This research aims to understand the experiences of mothers in facilitating online education to their children who were enrolled in Kindergarten (KG)

and Class One at Amity International School, Saket, a private school in Delhi, during the years 2020 and 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through their narratives, this paper explores how online learning affected family dynamics, parental responsibilities, and children's early education within the socio-economic and cultural context of urban India.

Significance of the Study

The focus on primary students is critical due to the unique challenges faced by younger children in adapting to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike older students, children in Kindergarten (KG) and Class One require significant parental involvement in their learning process, making parents essential mediators in digital education.

This study is significant because it examines how parents—particularly mothers—navigated this transition, balancing their roles as caregivers, informal educators, and professionals. Since Amity International School, Saket is a private institution with access to digital resources, researching here allowed an exploration of how families with relatively better technological infrastructure still encountered difficulties in online learning. The study also sheds light on the socio-economic and gendered dimensions of this experience, highlighting the additional burdens placed on mothers, the impact on family routines, and the long-term implications for early childhood education in India. By capturing these experiences, the study provides insights into how digital learning during the pandemic shaped the role of mothers in facilitating early education, managing household responsibilities, and adapting to new educational technologies. It highlights the challenges faced by mothers in balancing work, childcare, and online schooling, as well as the emotional and cognitive impact on both them and their children. This research contributes to discussions on gendered labour in education, parental involvement in digital learning, and the broader implications of online schooling for early childhood education in urban India.

Key Questions and Research Focus

Building upon the broader discussions outlined earlier, this study takes a closer look at how mothers facilitated online learning for their young children during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the sudden shift to virtual classrooms has been widely analysed from an institutional and policy perspective, the role of parents—especially mothers—as key facilitators of early education remains underexplored. This research seeks to document their lived experiences,

uncovering the challenges they faced, the coping mechanisms they adopted, and the ways in which this transition reshaped household routines and family dynamics.

The study is driven by the need to understand how online schooling influenced the daily lives of mothers, particularly in balancing instructional responsibilities with other domestic and professional duties. It also aims to explore how this experience impacted parent-child relationships, mothers' emotional well-being, and the overall effectiveness of digital learning for early childhood education. By focusing on these aspects, the research offers insights into the shifting intersections of education, caregiving, and technology in urban India.

Understanding Experiences: Research Approach and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach, combining semi-structured interviews with participant observation to gain an in-depth understanding of how mothers facilitated online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the restrictions and safety concerns during that time, initial interviews were conducted through Google Forms, where mothers provided information about their experiences, challenges, and perspectives on online education. After analysing these responses, conversational, unstructured interviews were conducted over Google Meet, allowing for deeper discussions in a more interactive and flexible manner. This remote approach ensured accessibility and safety while enabling participants to share their experiences in a comfortable environment.

In addition to interviews, this study incorporates participant observation, as I was also a parent navigating the same learning environment. This first-hand engagement provided an immersive understanding of how mothers interacted with online schooling, responded to teaching methods, and managed their children's academic tasks, including classwork, homework, activities, and tests. Observing these interactions over two years allowed for the identification of recurring patterns in behaviour, support strategies, and emotional responses.

By combining these two qualitative methods, which were adapted to the constraints of the pandemic, the research captures both articulated experiences from interviews and behavioural insights from direct observation. This methodological approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of parental involvement in early online education, offering an ethnographic perspective on the shifting educational responsibilities of mothers during this unprecedented period.

Key Findings on the Impact of Online Schooling

Changes in Daily Routines

The transition to online schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant disruptions in the daily routines of families, particularly for mothers who bore the primary responsibility of facilitating their children's education. As a mother navigating the same experience, I found myself restructuring my entire day to accommodate my daughter's new learning environment. The sudden shift to digital education required parents to rearrange their schedules to ensure their children could attend virtual classes, complete assignments, and stay engaged in learning activities. The additional time spent supervising online schooling emerged as a central theme across all households, irrespective of socio-economic status. While teachers conducted lessons remotely, the execution of learning at home fell on the parents, creating a fundamental shift in daily routines that required careful negotiation of time, space, and responsibilities.

One of the most immediate changes was the reorganisation of daily household routines to accommodate online classes. Unlike traditional schooling, where children spend a significant portion of the day in structured classroom environments, online education requires constant parental supervision. As a mother balancing household responsibility alongside academic support, I found that simple tasks such as meal preparation or household chores had to be rescheduled around my child's class timings. This was a shared experience among many of the interviewed mothers, who similarly reported restructuring their entire day to align with their children's school schedules. Studies in domestic anthropology highlight how household labour, traditionally considered invisible, becomes amplified when new responsibilities are introduced (Strathern, 1980). In this case, the burden of integrating educational responsibilities into daily life fell largely on mothers, further intensifying their caregiving roles.

The need for an uninterrupted learning space within the home also led to significant changes in spatial arrangements. Many parents, including myself, had to reorganise rooms, set up study corners, and even share devices among siblings. This required constant negotiation of space and resources, particularly in households where both parents were working remotely. The shift towards accommodating school within the home aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus, where material arrangements and daily practices shape and are shaped by lived experiences. The new habitus of online schooling

restructured domestic spaces, reinforcing the home as an extension of the school.

As a parent, I experienced first-hand the complexities of managing a child's online education while simultaneously attending to other responsibilities. This reality was echoed by several of the interviewed mothers, who expressed similar struggles with balancing professional commitments alongside their children's schooling. The expectation that mothers would seamlessly integrate the role of the educator into their existing workload created an additional layer of stress. While some mothers were able to adapt their schedules, others found themselves overwhelmed by the competing demands of work, childcare, and education.

The daily routine of online schooling also blurred the division between school and home life, affecting both children and parents. For children, the lack of physical separation between school and home made it difficult to switch between study time and leisure time, often leading to fatigue and reduced motivation. For parents, particularly mothers, the constant presence of online schooling within the home meant that they were always engaged in some aspect of their child's education, whether it was assisting with assignments, troubleshooting technical issues, or ensuring that their child remained focused during lessons. This continuous engagement created a form of emotional exhaustion, as there were no clear boundaries between caregiving, work, and personal time.

Additionally, the challenge of coordinating household responsibilities with online schooling was heightened by the increased screen time required for digital learning. Many mothers, including myself, had to monitor and regulate our children's exposure to screens while also ensuring that they remained engaged with their lessons. The struggle to balance screen time with other activities became a central concern, as excessive screen exposure was linked to restlessness, irritability, and a decline in physical activity. Several mothers reported that their children showed signs of fatigue or disengagement after prolonged screen use, making it even more challenging to sustain their attention during lessons.

Despite these difficulties, there were also moments of learning and adaptation. As a mother, I found that I became more involved in my child's education in ways that I might not have been in a traditional schooling system. I was able to observe teaching methods first-hand, understand my child's strengths and weaknesses more clearly, and provide immediate assistance when needed. Some of the interviewed mothers expressed a similar sentiment,

noting that while the process was exhausting, it also gave them deeper insights into their children's academic progress. However, this increased involvement came at a cost, as it placed an immense burden on mothers to act as co-educators while also managing other responsibilities.

The transition to online schooling brought significant changes to daily routines, reshaping the way families functioned during the pandemic. The experience of integrating education into the home led to shifts in household schedules, spatial arrangements, and parental responsibilities. Mothers, in particular, bore the brunt of these changes, taking on the additional role of educator while managing their existing workloads. While online schooling ensured continuity in education, it also blurred the boundaries between school, work, and home life, creating new challenges for both parents and children. As a mother who lived through this experience, I witnessed the complexities of this transition and the ways in which it redefined traditional roles within the household. These findings underscore the importance of considering the lived realities of parents when evaluating the effectiveness of digital education, particularly in the context of early childhood learning.

Blurred Boundaries between Work and Education

The integration of online schooling into daily life not only disrupted household routines but also blurred traditional boundaries between home, work, and education. As a mother navigating this process, I found myself constantly switching between professional duties, household responsibilities, and my child's educational needs, making the separation between these roles almost impossible. The necessity of balancing professional commitments with supervising my daughter's classes created an overlapping of roles that had not existed in pre-pandemic times. This experience was echoed by many of the interviewed mothers, who described the struggle of managing their own work schedules while also ensuring that their children remained engaged in online learning.

Arlie Hochschild's (1989) concept of the "second shift" is particularly relevant in understanding this phenomenon. Hochschild initially described the "second shift" as the unpaid labour women undertake at home after completing their formal workday. However, the pandemic amplified this burden, extending it into a continuous, never-ending cycle of professional, domestic, and educational responsibilities. Many working mothers, including myself, found ourselves answering emails, attending virtual meetings, and preparing meals, all while ensuring that our children stayed attentive in class,

completed homework, and participated in online activities. This form of multitasking became exhausting, leading to increased emotional fatigue and burnout. The expectation that we could fulfil both roles effectively—without any structural adjustments from workplaces or schools—added another layer of stress.

For stay-at-home mothers, the shift was equally demanding. While their previous routines may have included personal time, social engagements, or community interactions, the shift to online schooling meant that their schedules now revolved almost entirely around their child's academic needs. Mothers who once had some flexibility in managing household chores or personal projects found their time constantly dictated by school schedules, assignments, and teacher interactions. Several of the interviewed mothers expressed feelings of exhaustion and frustration, noting that even though they were not formally employed, the expectation to manage online education placed them under immense pressure.

I experienced how online schooling altered the home environment, turning every corner of the house into an extension of the classroom. The challenge of maintaining a quiet, distraction-free study space was a recurring issue, particularly in households with multiple children or working parents. The simple act of setting up a stable internet connection, ensuring devices were functioning properly, and helping children navigate digital platforms became daily tasks that consumed more time than anticipated. The experience of having school and work coexist in the same space made it difficult for both parents and children to establish boundaries between study, play, and relaxation. This aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) theory of habitus, which suggests that material spaces shape and are shaped by social practices. The restructuring of home spaces to accommodate learning needs reinforced the idea that the home had become an extension of the school, with mothers playing the role of both educator and caretaker.

The increased mental load of managing a child's education, along with domestic tasks, resulted in heightened stress and exhaustion. As a mother, I often found myself switching between different modes—acting as a professional in meetings, helping my child with schoolwork, and managing household responsibilities—all within the same physical space and time frame. This aligns with research in psychological anthropology, which suggests that such drastic routine changes contribute to emotional fatigue, increased anxiety, and shifts in identity roles within households (Das & Gupta, 2021). Several mothers in the study echoed this sentiment, expressing how they felt constantly on

edge, unable to dedicate focused time to any single task due to the continuous overlap of responsibilities.

Another important concern was the shifting dynamics between parents, children, and teachers. With online schooling, the role of educators extended into the home, while parents became de facto teachers. The interactions between children and their parents took on new dimensions, as academic tasks that were once handled in school now became part of daily family life. Some mothers reported that their children struggled with this transition, often showing resistance to parental instructions because they viewed their mothers differently from their teachers. This blurring of roles created tension, as parents had to enforce school discipline while also maintaining a nurturing home environment.

Additionally, the constant presence of online schooling in the home influenced children's perception of their parents' work. Several mothers, including myself, noticed that our children often interrupted work meetings with requests for help with assignments, assuming that their educational needs took precedence over professional commitments. This highlights the changing dynamics within family structures, where children were increasingly exposed to their parents' work lives while also expecting immediate attention for their own academic challenges. The inability to fully separate work and home life contributed to increased stress levels for both parents and children.

Despite the overwhelming challenges, some mothers mentioned positive outcomes. A few expressed that online schooling allowed them to gain a better understanding of their child's learning process, giving them insights into areas where their child excelled or struggled. I, too, found moments of appreciation in being more closely involved in my daughter's education, witnessing how lessons were taught and how she responded to different subjects. However, even this positive aspect was overshadowed by the sheer exhaustion that came with managing it all. The balance between home, work, and school was delicate and often unsustainable, leaving many mothers feeling stretched beyond capacity.

Emotional and Psychological Adjustments

Mothers also reported feeling overwhelmed by the expectations placed on them to function as co-educators. Many were unprepared for the level of involvement required, particularly in assisting with assignments, troubleshooting technical issues, and keeping their children motivated. Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning helps frame this adjustment—parents, despite lacking

formal training, had to learn the pedagogical methods required to support their children's education. Unlike traditional models where the teacher played the primary instructional role, online schooling necessitated a shift toward parent-assisted learning, requiring continuous adaptation to new digital tools and teaching approaches.

The emotional toll was also felt by children whose dependence on their parents increased due to the lack of physical interaction with teachers and classmates. Parents observed behavioural changes, including increased restlessness, difficulty concentrating, and frustration with screen-based learning. This resonates with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which argues that a child's development is deeply embedded in their immediate environment. The absence of direct peer interactions and a shift from group learning to an individual-focused setting altered the social learning experience for young children, indirectly impacting parental routines as they sought to compensate for these missing elements.

Cultural Notions of Time and Routine

Anthropological literature also highlights how cultural perceptions of time influence the structuring of daily life (Gell, 1992). The rigid timetables of traditional schooling, with designated hours for lessons, playtime, and meals, were disrupted during online education, leading to a fluid and less regulated concept of time. Some parents found this flexibility beneficial, as it allowed for individualised pacing of learning, while others struggled with the lack of structured discipline that schools inherently provide.

The transition also underscored social class differences in managing time. While parents with flexible work-from-home arrangements could afford to adjust their schedules, those in professions requiring fixed working hours or external employment found it more challenging to accommodate their children's educational needs. This reinforces Bourdieu's (1986) idea of cultural capital, where access to time, digital resources, and parental literacy levels played a role in shaping children's online learning experiences.

Gender Disparities

The study revealed stark gender disparities in managing online schooling, with mothers overwhelmingly taking on the responsibility of facilitating their children's education, even those who were working full-time. This added strain to their already heightened domestic responsibilities, reinforcing traditional caregiving roles that have long defined gendered labour in

Indian households. While fathers were often involved in providing various support, including assisting with technical issues such as setting up devices and managing internet connectivity, the daily tasks of assisting children with lessons, ensuring participation in online classes, and troubleshooting classroom issues fell disproportionately on mothers. This division of labour was not only a reflection of existing societal expectations but also a reinforcement of them under extraordinary circumstances (Menon, 2021).

As an employed academic and a mother, I personally experienced the overwhelming expectations placed on mothers. Like many of the mothers interviewed, I found myself restructuring my daily schedule around my child's academic needs. The balancing act between monitoring online classes, assisting with schoolwork, and managing domestic tasks became a relentless cycle. This aligns with findings from studies on gendered labour in India, which suggest that caregiving and education-related tasks are often framed as extensions of a mother's natural responsibilities, even in dual-income households (Rao, 2019). For many working mothers in the study, juggling professional meetings with monitoring their child's lessons led to heightened stress, with several participants expressing feelings of burnout and guilt. Hochschild's (1989) concept of the "second shift" is particularly relevant in understanding this burden, as mothers were expected to seamlessly transition from their professional roles to educational facilitators.

For stay-at-home mothers, the shift was equally demanding. While they were already responsible for domestic work, online schooling added a new layer of cognitive and emotional labour. Many mothers reported feeling isolated in their struggles, as the expectations placed on them were immense yet unrecognised. I, too, found that the emotional engagement of managing a child's learning, ensuring they remained occupied, and simultaneously addressing their frustrations with the digital format of education was as demanding as the actual instructional role. Feminist anthropologists have long highlighted the invisibility of unpaid care work and the disproportionate emotional labour carried out by women, particularly in times of crisis (Das, 2020). The experiences shared by the mothers in the study reinforced this notion, as they described how their needs and aspirations had taken a backseat to the demands of online schooling.

The gendered nature of parental involvement was evident in how families structured responsibilities during online schooling. Even in households where fathers were supportive, their engagement was largely limited to occasional supervision or discipline, while the mother was expected to be the primary

educator. This reflects broader patriarchal structures within Indian society, where caregiving and early education are largely feminised responsibilities (Kapadia, 2018). Research in educational anthropology suggests that such gendered expectations are historically ingrained and tend to resurface in times of crisis, reinforcing traditional norms rather than challenging them (Sen, 2017).

As I observed in my own experience, the expectation to manage a child's education extended beyond the scheduled online classes. In addition to ensuring my child attended school, I had to assist with classwork, homework, and tests, as well as provide emotional support. Many mothers echoed this sentiment, stating that their children, unable to interact with their peers and teachers in a physical setting, became more dependent on them for learning and social engagement. This placed additional psychological pressure on mothers, as they had to constantly regulate their children's emotional well-being while suppressing their own stress (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The expectation that mothers would take on this role without institutional or community support reinforced pre-existing inequalities in education and domestic labour.

Furthermore, the reinforcement of traditional gender roles was particularly evident in how families viewed the role of fathers in online education. In many cases, fathers were expected to focus on their professional commitments without disruption, while mothers had to accommodate the additional workload of home-schooling. Even in families where both parents were working from home, the burden of education largely fell on the mother, highlighting the deep-seated societal norm that views childcare and education as a woman's primary duty (Bourdieu, 1977). This was evident in the responses of several mothers, who stated that they had to adjust their professional schedules, often reducing work hours or taking on flexible roles, while fathers maintained their usual work routines.

Mothers reported feeling anxious about their children falling behind, leading them to devote extra time to supervising lessons, managing assignments, and ensuring active engagement in online learning. In a private school setting such as Amity International School, where academic performance is highly emphasised, this pressure was even more pronounced.

Despite these challenges, some mothers described the experience as an opportunity to engage more deeply with their child's learning. A few expressed appreciations for the chance to witness their child's academic progress. However, the overwhelming sentiment among participants, including myself, was that online schooling placed an undue burden on mothers, with little recognition of the sacrifices they had to make. The pandemic not only magnified

existing gender disparities but also deepened them in ways that could have long-term implications for gender roles in education and domestic labour. Unless systemic changes are made to distribute these responsibilities more equitably, the expectations placed on women in times of crisis will continue to reinforce outdated norms that limit progress toward gender equality in both domestic and professional spheres (Menon, 2021).

Socio-Economic Disparities

The study revealed that while all interviewed mothers belonged to upper-middle-class families with access to digital resources, disparities in time availability, professional obligations, and domestic labour distribution created significant variations in their experiences of online schooling. Unlike lower-income groups, where the digital divide and lack of infrastructure were major concerns, the challenges faced by these mothers were more nuanced, deeply tied to expectations around caregiving, work-life balance, and the emotional toll of managing multiple responsibilities in a high-pressure environment.

One of the most striking findings was that two of the interviewed mothers had to leave their jobs because they were unable to physically manage both domestic responsibilities and professional engagements during the COVID-19 pandemic. While remote work allowed some flexibility, the demands of online schooling meant that these mothers were constantly required to assist their children, attend to household chores, and simultaneously fulfil their professional duties. For those with high-pressure jobs, this balancing act became impossible, forcing them to make the difficult choice of prioritising their family's needs over their careers. This reflects Hochschild's (1989) concept of the "second shift," where women, despite being part of the formal workforce, are still expected to take primary responsibility for domestic duties. The pandemic only amplified this existing inequality, exposing the fragility of women's professional stability when faced with a crisis.

Even among mothers who retained their jobs, differences in professional commitments influenced their engagement with their children's education. Some had flexible work arrangements that allowed them to supervise classes and assist with assignments, while others had rigid schedules that made it difficult to participate actively in their child's learning. This highlights a form of time poverty (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000), where the disparity was not in financial resources but in the ability to dedicate time to their child's education. Those working in highly demanding professions, such as finance or law, found it more challenging to provide consistent support, whereas those in more

flexible roles, such as freelance consulting or academia, had the ability to adjust their schedules more easily, as I was able to do in my role as an academic.

A key concern among the mothers was that despite their economic stability, they had little external support during the pandemic. While some had full-time domestic help, others had to manage the household without any assistance due to Covid-related restrictions. Those without external help reported greater levels of stress and fatigue, as they had to juggle housework, childcare, and professional duties with little relief. Even within an upper-middle-class demographic, the absence of social support systems such as extended family or household staff created an added layer of difficulty. This aligns with Putnam's (2000) concept of social capital, where the presence or absence of support networks can significantly influence an individual's ability to navigate crises.

Spatial constraints also played a role in shaping these disparities. While some families had dedicated study rooms and quiet workspaces, others had to make do with shared spaces, which often led to interruptions and distractions. Mothers in smaller apartments or joint family setups expressed frustration at the lack of privacy, making it harder to manage their children's learning environment. This finding echoes Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, where seemingly minor differences in resources—such as the ability to provide a distraction-free learning space—can have lasting impacts on educational outcomes.

Since none of the families opted for private tutors, mothers took on the role of full-time educators, reinforcing the idea that even in financially privileged households, educational responsibilities still fell disproportionately on women. This was especially evident in the experiences of the two mothers who had to leave their jobs; both expressed that they felt their careers had become "non-essential" in comparison to their household responsibilities. This supports the argument made by Sen (2017), who suggests that gendered labour expectations persist across socio-economic classes, particularly in times of crisis, when households revert to conventional norms to manage uncertainty.

Emotional and psychological disparities also emerged among mothers based on their occupational flexibility and available support systems. Those with more structured work hours and no additional help reported heightened levels of anxiety, guilt, and exhaustion. One mother who had to resign from her job described the decision as "not a choice, but a necessity," highlighting how traditional gender expectations pushed women into caregiving roles despite their financial independence. Another mother noted that "even though we could afford to keep working, the reality was that someone had to be there for the children and that someone was always the mother." This sentiment

underscores how gendered expectations remained unchanged, even among highly educated and economically self-sufficient women.

These findings suggest that socio-economic disparities in online schooling are not solely about financial access but about the intersection of economic class, professional engagement, time availability, and domestic labour expectations. The ability of these mothers, including me, to navigate the online learning transition was shaped by multiple factors beyond financial stability. The pandemic revealed that even among privileged groups, professional women were more vulnerable to career setbacks due to persistent social norms that position them as the primary caregivers in times of crisis.

This insight challenges the assumption that economic privilege automatically results in an easier experience with online education. Instead, it highlights how gender roles continue to shape the distribution of work in ways that disadvantage women, even in well-resourced households.

Educational Effectiveness

Though mothers played an instrumental role in bridging the gap between school and home, yet they also expressed concerns about how well digital learning could replicate the structure and effectiveness of in-person education. While online classes ensured that learning continued during the pandemic, many challenges emerged, particularly for younger children who require hands-on activities, peer interaction, and structured environments to grasp foundational concepts effectively (Vygotsky, 1978).

One of the primary concerns raised by the mothers was the limited ability of young children to engage meaningfully with digital learning platforms. At this early stage of education, children learn best through interactive and sensory experiences, which online schooling struggled to provide (Piaget, 1952). Many mothers observed that their children found it difficult to maintain attention for extended periods, often losing focus after a few minutes. Unlike physical classrooms, where teachers can regulate student behaviour and ensure engagement, the virtual setting made it harder for children to stay attentive. Several mothers described instances where their children became restless, fidgety, or disengaged during lessons, requiring constant parental supervision to keep them on track.

The reliance on screen-based instruction presented further challenges, as young children typically require reinforcement through physical activities (Lillard, 2005). In a traditional classroom, teachers incorporate storytelling, group exercises, and play-based learning to make lessons engaging. However,

these methods were difficult to replicate in an online format. While teachers made efforts to introduce animations, slides, and interactive questioning, many mothers noted that their children struggled to grasp abstract concepts without hands-on activities. Piaget's theory of cognitive development suggests that children in the preoperational stage learn best through direct interaction with their environment rather than passive observation. Mothers frequently had to supplement lessons with physical activities at home, yet they found it difficult to sustain this alongside other responsibilities.

Another major issue raised was the lack of peer learning and socialisation, an essential aspect of early childhood education. In a physical classroom, children learn not only from teachers but also from their classmates through group discussions, collaborative play, and informal interactions (Rogoff, 1990). The online format disrupted these natural learning processes, leading to feelings of isolation. Several mothers noted that their children expressed frustration over the absence of classmates and the one-dimensional nature of digital interactions. Even when teachers incorporated group activities into lessons, technical limitations and the structured nature of online classes made it difficult for children to engage freely with their peers. As a result, many children missed out on opportunities for cooperative learning and the development of social skills, which are crucial at this stage of education.

The challenges of assessment and evaluation in the online setting were another significant concern. At this stage, assessment is often observational and skill-based rather than test-driven (Neumann, 2020). The shift to online learning made it difficult for teachers to monitor individual student progress effectively. Mothers reported that they often had to intervene during assignments and assessments to ensure that their children completed tasks correctly, sometimes even guiding them through exercises. This raised questions about the authenticity of learning, as children were receiving more direct parental assistance than they would in a classroom setting.

One of the most significant aspects that emerged in the study was the blurring of roles between teachers and parents. With online schooling, mothers found themselves performing duties traditionally assigned to teachers (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011). They became responsible for keeping their children focused, assisting them with exercises, clarifying concepts, and even managing behavioural aspects during lessons. Several mothers noted that their involvement in their child's education went beyond supervision; they were actively engaged in teaching, often having to explain concepts multiple times or in different ways to ensure understanding. While parents have always

played a role in supporting education at home, the online format amplified this responsibility, transforming them into co-educators.

This blurring of roles led to multiple challenges. Firstly, mothers were not trained educators, and many found it difficult to replicate teaching methodologies that were typically employed in classrooms (Epstein, 2018). While teachers provided instructions, the actual implementation of these lessons required parental intervention, often leading to inconsistencies in learning outcomes. Secondly, mothers reported that their children began associating them with formal education, sometimes resisting their instructions or expressing frustration when they were asked to complete tasks. In a traditional school setting, children distinguish between home and school, associating different behaviours with teachers and parents. However, in online learning, this boundary became unclear, leading to role confusion and, in some cases, increased tension between mothers and their children.

This shift also affected the parent-teacher dynamic. Mothers who previously interacted with teachers mainly during parent-teacher meetings or school events were now in constant communication with them, seeking clarification on lessons, discussing concerns about attention spans, or troubleshooting technical issues (Jeynes, 2011). Some mothers felt an increased sense of pressure, as they perceived themselves as being evaluated on how well they were able to facilitate their child's learning. Others expressed a newfound appreciation for teachers, realising the complexities of handling multiple young learners simultaneously. However, a few also voiced concerns that teachers assumed parents would be available at all times, making unrealistic demands in terms of assignments and lesson follow-ups.

Despite these challenges, a few mothers noted certain benefits of online learning. They observed that their children became more familiar with technology and digital communication, skills that are increasingly relevant in modern education (Selwyn, 2011). Some also appreciated the opportunity to witness their child's learning process personally, gaining insights into their strengths and areas for improvement. However, even these positive aspects were outweighed by concerns about the long-term impact of online schooling on foundational academic skills and overall development. Many mothers worried that their children would struggle with the transition back to physical classrooms, as they had missed out on crucial aspects of early education that cannot be easily replicated through digital means.

While online schooling provided continuity in education during an unprecedented crisis, it was not an adequate substitute for in-person learning,

especially for younger children. The limitations of digital engagement, reduced peer interaction, challenges in assessment, and emotional strain on both children and parents contributed to concerns about the overall educational effectiveness of the online format. The study highlights the importance of structured classroom environments for early learners and underscores the need for hybrid or interactive teaching methods that blend technology with hands-on learning experiences. The blurred roles between teachers and parents further complicated the process, leaving mothers to navigate a demanding and often overwhelming educational responsibility.

The findings of this study highlight how online schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the learning experiences of young children, placing an overwhelming burden on mothers who had to navigate the blurred roles of educators and caregivers. Challenges related to attention span, peer interaction, assessment, socio-economic disparities, and gendered labour expectations collectively demonstrate that while digital education ensured continuity, it fell short in replicating the holistic and structured learning environment essential for early childhood development.

Discussion: Challenges and Reflections

The challenges of online learning for young children during the COVID-19 pandemic extended beyond technological barriers and encompassed deeper issues related to engagement, socialisation, parental burden, and long-term educational effectiveness. While digital platforms provided a necessary alternative to in-person schooling, they were not designed to accommodate the developmental needs of young learners, particularly those in kindergarten and early primary years. The reliance on screens for instruction limited interactive and experiential learning, making it difficult for children to fully grasp new concepts. As previously discussed, attention span and cognitive engagement became significant challenges, with many children struggling to stay focused for extended periods. Unlike physical classrooms, where teachers can employ varied pedagogical strategies such as group discussions, hands-on activities, and personalised attention, online schooling depended largely on passive learning, which did not align with the cognitive and emotional needs of early learners (Piaget, 1952).

Another major challenge was the blurring of roles between parents and teachers. As online learning shifted the responsibility of instruction onto families, mothers became the primary facilitators of education, often struggling to balance professional responsibilities, domestic labour, and their children's

academic needs. The findings indicate that the increased dependency of children on their mothers for understanding lessons, completing assignments, and maintaining focus led to significant stress and emotional exhaustion among parents.

The transition to online education also exposed and reinforced existing inequalities within the household and across socio-economic groups. While all families in this study belonged to the upper-middle class and had access to digital resources, disparities still emerged in terms of time availability, domestic support, and parental professional obligations. Mothers who had flexible work arrangements found it relatively easier to manage online learning, whereas those with demanding careers faced immense stress, leading some to resign from their jobs altogether. This reflects what Bourdieu (1986) postulated: that access to resources alone does not ensure equal opportunities; rather, the ability to utilise those resources effectively is shaped by broader social structures. In this case, financial privilege did not necessarily translate into a smooth online learning experience, as gendered labour expectations continued to determine how educational responsibilities were distributed within the household.

Beyond household disparities, the digital divide further deepened inequalities at a broader societal level. Although this study focuses on children from a private school setting, the experience of online education across India varied drastically based on access to infrastructure. According to Jha and Parvati (2021), children from marginalised backgrounds faced significant challenges in accessing digital devices, stable internet connections, and a conducive learning environment. While privileged families could invest in high-speed internet and multiple devices, many lower-income households relied on a single smartphone shared among siblings, limiting learning opportunities. The shift to digital education thus exacerbated pre-existing educational inequalities, favouring those with better access to resources while leaving others behind. Even within relatively privileged households, factors such as space constraints, sibling interruptions, and a lack of structured routine affected the quality of learning, demonstrating that online education was not a universally effective solution.

These findings have significant policy implications for the future of education, particularly in terms of accessibility, equity, and pedagogical approaches. The pandemic accelerated the integration of digital tools into education, and while online learning cannot replace traditional classrooms, a blended model that combines digital resources with in-person instruction may offer a more balanced approach. However, for such a model to be effective,

policies must address the structural barriers that hinder equitable access to education. The government's push for digital literacy and e-learning platforms needs to be accompanied by measures that ensure all children, regardless of socio-economic status, have access to the necessary tools for learning. This includes not only the provision of devices and internet access but also the development of pedagogical strategies that cater to diverse learning needs.

One of the key takeaways from this study is the need for formal recognition and support for parental involvement in education. While parental engagement has always played a role in children's learning, the pandemic revealed the extent to which educational responsibilities are disproportionately distributed. Future educational policies should consider mechanisms to support parents, particularly mothers, who have shouldered the majority of this burden. This could include workplace policies that provide flexibility for parents of young children, as well as school initiatives that offer structured guidance for home-based learning. Schools must also recognise the emotional and cognitive load carried by parents during online education and create more structured ways to involve families in a manner that does not exacerbate existing gender inequalities.

Furthermore, teacher training programs should incorporate strategies for effective online and hybrid learning. Many teachers, despite their expertise in classroom instruction, found it challenging to adapt to digital pedagogy. Ensuring that educators are equipped with skills to engage young learners effectively in virtual settings will be crucial in making digital education more interactive and participatory. Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory highlights the importance of scaffolding in learning, where teachers provide temporary support to guide students toward independence. Online education, however, often lacked this element of guided support, relying instead on parental intervention. Training teachers to implement interactive digital tools and alternative assessment methods could help mitigate some of these challenges, making remote learning a more viable complement to traditional education.

The findings also emphasise the importance of prioritising holistic education. Future educational frameworks should integrate strategies that promote integrated learning, ensuring that children receive a well-rounded education even in digital settings. This could include incorporating more interactive and hands-on activities into online lessons, encouraging experiential learning at home, and promoting play-based education as part of the digital curriculum.

Finally, this study underscores the need for research-driven educational policies that are responsive to the lived experiences of students, parents, and

teachers. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of digital education, and it is crucial that policymakers use this knowledge to develop inclusive and adaptable educational strategies. As India moves toward greater technological integration in education, a balanced approach that considers accessibility, gender dynamics, and pedagogical effectiveness will be essential in ensuring that all children have equal opportunities to learn and thrive.

In conclusion, while online schooling provided a temporary solution during the pandemic, its long-term viability remains limited for early learners who require structured, hands-on, and socially interactive learning environments. The challenges experienced by mothers in facilitating education at home, the reinforcement of existing gender and socio-economic inequalities, and the broader implications for educational policy highlight the need for a more inclusive and equitable approach to digital education. Moving forward, a hybrid model that integrates technology with traditional classroom teaching, combined with targeted policies that address access disparities and parental support, could provide a more sustainable and effective framework for early childhood education.

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