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## **PUBLIC POLICY MASTER THESIS**

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# **Inequalities Behind the Screen**

## **A qualitative study of parental involvement during the period of school closures caused by COVID-19. The case of Portugal**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 crisis led to unprecedented school closures and a worldwide shift towards distance learning. Inequalities of access to digital devices soon became a central issue. However, less emphasis has been put on how the greater requirement of parental involvement exacerbated inequalities related to families' cultural capital. This aspect is particularly relevant in Portugal, the European country with the highest proportion of adults without an upper secondary education. By collecting data through semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers, this research aims to explore the mechanisms through which mothers' level of education impacted learning opportunities of primary school children during the period of school closures. The findings revealed that the main differences in parental support were due to the quality of help provided and were less related to the amount of time spent monitoring children's learning. In addition, mothers with lower levels of education are not only eager to learn but are already using digital tools for this purpose. These are encouraging findings that showcase that measures aiming to tackle educational inequalities should focus on empowering parents who had fewer educational opportunities in the past. At the same time, this research highlights the crucial role that school policies can have in attenuating inequalities. Policy recommendations aimed at reinforcing parents' capacity to support their children, namely through digital technologies, should not be interpreted as a transfer of responsibilities from school to families. Instead, these should be implemented in a framework where schools continue to hold the central place of an education ecosystem that promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all.

### **Key words**

Education, COVID-19, Distance Learning, Parental Involvement, Inequalities

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## CONTEXT

- **The COVID-19 pandemic** led to unprecedented school closures, leading 1.6 billion students worldwide to learn remotely or to disconnect from school entirely. To guarantee the continuity of learning, countries developed different digital learning strategies. Portugal closed its schools on the 16th of March 2020 and digital learning tools were widely adopted in the following weeks as a way to deliver the curriculum and maintain contact with students.
- Inequalities of access to digital devices soon became a central issue. However, there was less discussion on how this period would exacerbate **inequalities linked with differences in parental involvement related to parents' cultural capital**.
- Because distance learning requires greater parental involvement, we can expect the COVID-19 crisis to have increased these differences. However, we do not know precisely how parents with varying degrees of cultural capital have used this capital at home. Therefore, this research aimed to explore the **mechanisms through which mothers' level of education impacted learning opportunities** of young children during the period of school closures. This was done through the analysis of four dimensions of parental involvement: 1. **children's learning support at home**; 2. **children's leisure activities**; 3. **children's learning environment**; and 4. **communication between home and school**.
- The conduction of 30 interviews with families from different socioeconomic backgrounds aimed to address this question by understanding differences in children's daily routines during this period, which constituted the main gap in the literature.



## MAIN FINDINGS

- The **quality of substantive help was a more determinant factor** in differences in parental support than time spent monitoring children's learning.
- When they felt that their children were not learning enough, mothers with higher levels of education mobilized their cultural capital and **provided extra work** besides what was required by the teacher. This may have been a factor which reinforced educational inequalities.
- Mothers with lower levels of education frequently used **online search engines** to be able to support children with school content.
- Children from both schools have a similar level of consumption of technologies for non-school purposes. Both mothers with higher and lower levels of education revealed awareness of the need to **limit screen time**. However, mothers with higher levels of education mentioned alternative activities as a substitute.
- The provision of **tutoring/external support** with homework seems to still be highly dependent on families' economic capital.
- Besides mothers' level of education, other aspects such as **parents' working status/conditions** and the different ways in which schools implemented distance learning guidelines also generated inequalities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS



- 1 **Empower parents through lifelong learning** (medium-term)
- 2 **Develop quality digital learning content accessible for all** (short-term)
- 3 **Minimize gaps in learning opportunities during out-of-school time** (medium-term)
- 4 **Promote the development of networks of parents that foster mutual support** (short-term)

# **I. Introduction**

## **A. Contextualization**

In March 2020, national authorities worldwide decided to close schools to contain the spread of COVID-19. At the peak of school closures, there were a total of 173 countries closing their schools and 1.6 billion students were learning remotely or no longer engaged in school learning (UNESCO, 2020). Portugal was no exception, closing its schools on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2020.

At the time, governments, supported by leading organisations in the field of education such as UNESCO, adopted distance learning strategies to guarantee that learning would not stop. Many saw this as an experimental period for innovation, which could provide an idea of what the future of education could look like. However, the risks of this transition to distance learning were soon identified, as there was increasing awareness that "a shift to remote online learning will exacerbate inequalities, not only in the Global South but even in the most well-resourced corners of the planet." (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020).

As pointed out by UNICEF, the burden of school closures was felt mainly by parents, "particularly by those who are also teleworking and those with limited schooling themselves" (UNICEF, 2020). These two factors are particularly relevant in Portugal, a country in which most mothers are integrated into the labour market, and that has the highest proportion of adults without an upper secondary education in the European Union. In addition, according to the OECD, in Portugal "the odds of a disadvantaged student being a low performer on the PISA assessment are seven times higher than the odds of an advantaged student, a worse rate than all but one other OECD country" (Liebowitz *et al.*, 2018).

The Portuguese Ministry of Education soon recognised how social inequalities could be fostered by the pandemic and implemented several measures such as guaranteeing the provision of meals during school closures, producing a TV program with educational content and developing and speeding up the "Digital School" program, which aims at providing all students with access to a computer, starting by those who receive school social action. In addition, Portugal's Minister of Education always considered schools to be the "last thing to close and the first thing to open", precisely due to the awareness of the impact of school closures on the most disadvantaged children.

Although inequalities in access to digital devices were extremely detrimental for some children, with teachers not being able to reach many students, especially during the first period of school closures, it seems necessary to move away from the idea that providing universal access to digital technologies would have been enough to guarantee the same learning opportunities to all students. As recent studies conducted in other countries have shown (Engzell, Frey and Verhagen, 2021), even in situations in which high-quality levels of distance learning were provided, the period of distance learning translated into deep learning losses (in the Netherlands, 20% of expected progress was lost due to school closures). The

same study concluded that students from disadvantaged homes were impacted the most (the loss was about 50% worse compared to others).

Therefore, it seems necessary to understand precisely through what mechanisms socio-economic inequalities, namely those related to mothers' level of education, impacted the learning opportunities that students had during the period of school closures. This research has as a departing point the concept of cultural capital, which guides the analysis on how a family's habitus shapes its educational practices, which may be more or less in accordance with what is required by schools, putting some students in an advantageous position as compared to others and, leading to the reproduction and perpetuation of inequalities.

By identifying these factors, this research expects to draw attention to important questions around distance learning and highlight what possible solutions could be implemented to avoid the perpetuation and worsening of current inter-generational cycles of inequality.

#### *Chronology of school closures in Portugal*

<b>05/03/2020</b>	– Schools partially closed
<b>16/03/2020</b>	– Schools fully closed
<b>30/03/2020</b>	– School holidays - Easter
<b>14/04/2020</b>	– Schools remained closed
<b>18/05/2020</b>	– Schools partially opened – For students in 11th and 12th grade with final exams
<b>27/06/2020</b>	– School holidays – Summer
<b>14/09/2020</b>	– Beginning of the new academic year fully presential
<b>21/12/2020</b>	– School holidays - Christmas
<b>04/01/2021</b>	– Start of the second term fully presential
<b>15/01/2021</b>	– Portugal enters strict lockdown, but schools remain open
<b>22/01/2021</b>	– Schools close due to COVID-19, but it is decided to consider the following two-week period as "school holidays". Distance learning is not allowed during this period.
<b>08/02/2021</b>	– Start of the period of distance learning with schools officially closed due to COVID-19.
<b>15/03/2021</b>	– Schools partially reopen – Kindergartens and Primary schools
<b>05/04/2021</b>	– Schools partially reopen - Second and third cycle
<b>19/04/2021</b>	– Schools fully reopen - High schools

## **B. Motivation of the research, research question, hypotheses, and theoretical framework**

It is undeniable that the COVID-19 crisis has brought attention to the issue of educational inequalities among students. In both developing and developed countries, emphasis has been placed on inequalities of access to digital devices and connectivity, relating to the first level of the digital divide (Ragnedda, 2017). However, disparities in distance learning go beyond the availability of technological devices, with students, especially those in lower grades, requiring family support to use the devices and understand the teaching material. Therefore, the school closures required not only the mobilisation of the student's family economic capital (through the acquisition of devices, for example) but also cultural capital (including digital capital).

Existing literature acknowledges that differences in parents' cultural capital have an important influence on a child's educational achievement, since possession of high volumes of cultural capital is associated with higher levels of parental involvement. Therefore, the general objective of this master's thesis is to go beyond the existing evidence regarding the increase of inequalities due to differences in access to digital devices and connectivity and deepen the discussion around parental involvement during the distance learning period, acknowledging the fact that this period required parents to engage more than usual with their children's schooling, often to the extent of assuming the teacher's role.

Research conducted in Portugal during this period, which was primarily quantitative, does not specify through which mechanisms these inequalities are reproduced and how they concretely translate into the way parents engage with their children's formal and informal learning.

Therefore, the **general research question** is:

*With regard to the existing literature, it is known that differences in parental involvement related to parents' cultural capital, influence students' learning, especially in primary school. Because it required greater parental involvement, we can expect the COVID-19 crisis to have increased these differences. However, we do not know precisely how parents with varying degrees of cultural capital have used this capital at home during periods of school closure.*

The main hypothesis and sub-hypotheses guiding this research are as follows:

***Hypothesis 1: Mothers' level of education will have a strong influence on:***

*1a – the ability to support children's learning*

*1b – the type of leisure activities offered*

*1c – the learning environment provided*

*1d – the communication between home and school during the school closure period.*

In order to better understand what the primary educational practices adopted by parents during periods of school closure were and how they differed depending on mothers' level of education, four dimensions of parental involvement will be considered: 1 - learning

support at home; 2 - children's leisure activities; 3 - learning environment; 4 - communication between home and school. These will be the dependent variables and the mother's level of education will be the independent variable. Given that it is at primary school that students depend the most on their parents' involvement, it was decided that this research would focus on the primary school level of education.

It is expected that this analysis, which covers the first and second periods of distance learning, will add to the existing quantitative research currently being conducted in Portugal regarding the periods of school closure but also to the existing literature on parental involvement and its connection to the reproduction of social inequalities, namely by mobilising the concepts of cultural and digital capital.

The theoretical framework for this analysis is Conflict Theory and particularly, Pierre Bourdieu's contributions to this domain, concerning the role of education systems in the reproduction of inequalities between social classes. The aim is to explore whether the unforeseen phenomena of school closure and distance teaching and learning add to or disrupt sociological theories of reproduction, and confirm or bring a different perspective on the role of schools and educational policy in general.

The paper is structured in four sections. The first section analyses the interdisciplinary state of knowledge regarding inequalities in parental involvement in education and Bourdieu's definition of cultural capital; it also includes a brief characterization of the Portuguese education system and an analysis of the recent literature on distance learning and inequalities in the COVID-19 context. The second section explains the methodology behind data collection and analysis with regard to the thirty interviews that were conducted with teachers and parents. The third section presents key findings from the interviews, identifying trends regarding parental involvement during distance learning and its impact on inequalities. Finally, the last section discusses the main findings of the research, highlighting best policy practices implemented in Portugal and offering policy recommendations.

## **II. Interdisciplinary state of knowledge**

### **A. Parental involvement in education**

The role of parents in education has been a source of interest for sociologists, who emphasise the "crucial importance of family as a universal instance of socialisation" (Duru-Bellat, Farges and van Zanten, 2018). It is within the family that primary socialisation takes place, through direct and indirect actions, including language learning, which "constitutes not only a communication tool, but also a set of themes and thought categories" (Thin, 2017). Therefore, as the primary setting of the construction of one's social reality, the family appears as the privileged place of social and cultural reproduction (Sebastião, 2009).

Two main macro-sociological theories have guided researchers focusing on the role of school. The first theory is based on the work of Emile Durkheim, who considered school as a place for the reproduction of shared values, allowing for the "methodical socialisation of the young generation" (Durkheim, 1999), and therefore enabling social integration. The second theory, based on Marx's work, considers school as a place where conflictual social relations and structures of domination are reproduced. The discussion around the social reproduction of inequalities in the field of education started to gain attention in the 1960s, with the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1964) and the Coleman Report (1966). These works highlight the strong links between school results and families' social background due to differences in parental language habits and educational attitudes and practices. According to Bernstein, families' socialisation practices can be in continuity or discontinuity with teachers' practices making school "a source of cultural and symbolic development" for upper-class children or "an experience of symbolic and social change" for working-class children (Bernstein, 1975).

The existing literature highlights that school, as a space of socialisation "competes with the family regarding the structuring of the children (...) sometimes in a contradictory way" (Sebastião, 2009). As the results of this study will show, the COVID-19 crisis in Portugal significantly augmented the amount of time that children spend with their families and reduced or eliminated school time. There is therefore an urgent need to understand how the disappearance of the social space of school from the children's lives and the prominence of the family may have impacted the socialization processes of children. According to Beckman, given the time that students would spend in school, it constitutes a "significant field in shaping (reproducing or transforming) the habitus of its members" (Beckman *et al.*, 2018). In the context of school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems relevant to understand how the "complex interplay of influences in the two contexts of home and school" (Fitzmaurice, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020) were disrupted, as well as the consequences these closures had for learning and social inequalities. This research departs from the assumption that pre-existing inequalities between families became more prominent after the role of the school was reduced or suppressed and children spent more time with their families, reinforcing their habitus. Although the theoretical framework of this research is Conflict Theory, this analysis considers developments in the literature that counter the determinism of the earlier studies, and acknowledges the role of different actors.



## *Cultural Capital*

This research departs from existing literature which mobilises the concept of cultural capital to analyse the role of parents in formal education and in the reproduction of social inequalities. The concept of cultural capital "was conceived of as a way to break with the "essentialist" idea of the existence of innate intellectual aptitudes" (Nogueira and Nogueira, 2002) by bringing attention to the way that a family's habitus shapes its educational practices, which may be more or less in accordance to what is required by schools, putting some students in an advantageous position as compared to others, leading to a "reproduction" of the dominant culture and perpetuating inequalities.

*Habitus*, is "an internalised set of dispositions and preferences that subconsciously defines an individual's reasonable actions by reflecting the internalisation of structural boundaries and constraints that determines what is possible for an individual" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Such a concept is relevant in the comparison of families from different social classes, as demonstrated by the ethnographic study conducted by Lareau and the consequent development of the concepts of *concerted cultivation* and *natural growth* (Lareau, 2011).

Despite a complementary consideration of economic and social capital in the reproduction of school inequalities, Bourdieu put particular emphasis on the role of cultural capital in its three states in the reproduction of existing divisions in the social space (Bourdieu, 1979). These are:

- *An embodied state*, corresponding to durable dispositions/attributes of oneself, which are consciously acquired or passively inherited
- *An objectified state*, corresponding to cultural material resources (books, paintings, instruments, machines ...)
- *An institutionalised state*, corresponding to credentials and other types of formal recognition of individual cultural knowledge and habits.

In the literature on parental involvement, parental level of education has been widely used as a proxy for cultural capital (Feyfant, 2011; Hartas, 2015). Many authors consider mothers' level of education as a good indicator of cultural capital and justify it with the argument that "mothers are more likely to directly involve [themselves] in many aspects of their child's education than fathers" (Rawls, 2013). This idea adds a gender dimension to this research, which will be further developed in the discussion.

It is also relevant to bring to this analysis literature that employs the concept of emotional capital, which includes assets such as "care, concern, love, attention and the expenditure of time" (Fitzmaurice, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020) and is defined as "a form of social capital located within families and used primarily by mothers to secure educational advantage for their children" (Hutchison, 2012). According to Hutchison, "the processes by which educational privilege is generated through homework cannot be explained by straightforward correspondences between class affiliations and educational achievement" and

therefore, "class position does not necessarily guarantee the ways in which emotional capital is mobilised".

Being a multidimensional concept (Kohl, Lengua and McMahon, 2000), literature on parental involvement includes different aspects in which parents' cultural capital can be mobilised, such as learning support at home, children's leisure activities, the learning environment and the communication between home and school.

### ***Homework and school holidays: deepening inequalities***

Given the fact that such long periods of school closures are unprecedented and that when this research was conducted, the topic was still very recent, it seems relevant to consider existing literature on parental involvement during homework and school holidays in order to understand the possible effects of school closures during the COVID-19 crisis in the reproduction of inequalities linked with parents' cultural capital.

An article of relevance for this analysis uses Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural reproduction and his concepts of capital, habitus, field, and practice to explain how parents support their children in completing their homework (Fitzmaurice, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020). The authors highlight the fact that middle-class families "draw on their cultural capital and social capital to intervene on behalf of their children" and may as well "employ their economic capital in the provision of out-of-school, extracurricular, or enrichment activities", which reproduce children's initial habitus and "potentially leads to preferential outcomes for middle class students relative to their working-class peers". As highlighted by Sebastião (2009), the school has the tendency to "delocalise" a part of the learning activities to other settings outside school, for instance, through homework, and this is precisely one of the areas in which families' cultural capitals constitute a differentiating factor in school learning, especially when moving to higher levels of education.

One of the typologies developed around parental involvement in homework identifies three types of engagement: 1) substantive help, 2) monitoring, and 3) fostering independence (Lutz and Lakshmi, 2015). In this study, the authors found that "middle-class parents are more likely to offer substantive help than working-class parents, but middle- and working-class parents have similar levels of monitoring and fostering independence." Among the reasons respondents gave for not substantively helping with homework, working-class parents were more likely to point to their lack of knowledge or skill, which reinforces the central role of the concept of cultural capital. The existing literature shares these authors' perspectives that "homework potentially serves as a mechanism to further advantage these students who already experience some privilege in the school system while further disadvantaging those who may already be in a marginalised position". However, these authors conclude that there is no difference in the time invested by parents and that although "social class plays a role in substantive help with homework", it is not relevant in "forms of engagement that do not require human capital such as monitoring and fostering homework

independence" (Lutz and Lakshmi, 2015). Therefore, differences in parental involvement in homework across social classes seem to be linked more to questions about the quality of the support rather than the frequency of parental intervention. (Rawls, 2013).

Researchers in economics have also tried to explain why disadvantaged parents are less involved in homework. For example, the Family Stress Model is based on the idea that socio-economic disadvantage impacts the outcomes of the children via the effects that it has on the parents. This effect acts like a snowball since economic hardships create certain pressures, giving rise to emotional distress, which leads to conflict and other types of negative consequences on children. According to one of these studies, "a key feature of the FSM is the recognition that socio-economic disadvantage taxes family processes, including parent-child relationships", which has consequences on children's development and success at school (Gard *et al.*, 2020). According to these studies, the reason why working-class parents would invest less is that they face more precarity and instability. It is necessary to take into account that while most sociological studies focus on the notion of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970) when considering the link between parental level of education and children's school achievement, the field of economics mainly focuses on the concept of human capital. Extensive literature was developed using this concept to explore positive correlations between parents' schooling and their child's school achievement.

It seems essential to consider literature on the period of school holidays in order to analyse the consequences of school closures. This is particularly relevant because Portugal is one of the countries in Europe with the most prolonged period of school interruption during summer, with an average of 12 to 14 weeks (European Commission, 2020). School holidays may contribute to increasing inequalities both in terms of formal and informal education. Formal education refers to "traditional schooling" while informal education refers to "experience-based and often accidental learning, occurring, e.g. at home or during a leisure activity" (Bonal and González, 2020). Existing literature clearly states that during summer holidays, while students from families with an upper socio-economic status (SES) continue to advance, students in families of lower SES stagnate (Alexander, Entwisle and Olson, 2001). For the authors of this quantitative study, there is no doubt that "material resources, family processes, and affective context all are implicated in these summer differences". Given the fact that the authors highlight that the partitioning of the calendar "approximates a "schooled"- "unschooled" natural experiment", it seems highly relevant to include this kind of analysis when investigating the impact of COVID-19 school closures on educational inequalities.

### ***Questioning determinism: parental practices and the schools' role***

According to Bourdieu, a practice is a product of the relations between field, habitus and capital (Fitzmaurice, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020). Therefore, "individuals' practice is both structured by their habitus and capital within the field occupied, and structuring, in that they shape future practice" (Beckman *et al.*, 2018). Although the sociologist recognises the role of

school in shaping a student's habitus, he assumes that school does not change it but instead reproduces it, perpetuating a legitimization of the inequalities in the society. The theory of "*l'école reproductrice*" is the departing point of many analyses of inequalities in education, including this one.

However, this deterministic view does not explain exceptional cases/practices which contradict expectations. Recent research has highlighted how school can be a space for the strategies of actors, such as families (Duru-Bellat, Farges and van Zanten, 2018). Therefore, it seems necessary to include both structure and agency in this analysis, following the comment of Nogueira, who mentions that "this is not to deny the socio-cultural determinants but rather to recognise the existence of other issues and other factors that articulate and interact with them" (Nogueira, 2017). According to Bourdieu's conceptualization of *Habitus*, the socio-economic background structures family's practices. However, as will be further explained by this research, the differences between social groups may vary in different degrees depending on the educational practices under analysis.

The way that Bourdieu conceptualised the weight of cultural heritage does not seem to be fully applicable today in a world in which culture and tastes across class lines have changed, with "the cultural practices of individuals becoming more heterogenous" (Nogueira, 2017). It therefore becomes necessary to adjust the concept of cultural capital to take into account the changes in the cultural landscape since "the rise in force of the various modalities of the culture known as "of mass", associated to the fact that contemporary individuals are subjected, much more than in the past, to diversified socialising experiences, contributes today to weaken the opposition between what is legitimate and what is illegitimate in culture". (Nogueira, 2017)

Finally, it is also necessary to take into account the "school effects" (Bressoux, 1994) that is the fact that schools, because of their "organisation and internal dynamics", can intervene in the process of students' knowledge acquisition, especially in favour of those from "unprivileged backgrounds" (Nogueira, 2017). In a recent intervention on the topic of school closures caused by COVID-19, Bernard Lahire stated that, even if the "school plays most of the time a role of reproduction, it tries nevertheless to reduce the differences and manages, despite everything, to transmit knowledge to those who are in difficulty." (Lahire, 2020).

### ***Distance Learning: from cultural to digital capital***

Although distance learning already existed in other forms, including courses by correspondence, radio, and television, it was only with the arrival of the personal computer that it started allowing interactivity between teachers and students. As pointed out in the literature, distance learning has been mostly used as a palliative form of education (Gendron, 2017). By obliging so many children to have "school at home", the COVID-19 crisis raised awareness on the need to evaluate the implications of this type of learning. Therefore, to

properly analyse the role of parents during the COVID-19 period of distance learning, it is necessary to look at recent literature on the usage of digital devices by students and their families. As has been often mentioned during the COVID crisis, there is a striking digital divide, not only between developing and developed countries but also within developed countries. The concept of digital divide, which emerged in the mid-90s in academic and political discourses (van Dijk, 2005), refers to the gap between those who have access to information communication technologies (understood as resources that confer advantages), and individuals or social groups that do not. However, more recent literature has emphasised the need to go beyond differences in access to digital devices and Internet connections and consider inequalities in digital competencies. The concept of digital capital emerged, therefore, as “the accumulation of digital competencies (information, communication, safety, content-creation and problem-solving), and digital technology” (Ragnedda, 2018).

In his book, Massimo Ragnedda highlights how a theoretical discussion on digital capital as a new “bourdieusian capital” is missing in the literature, given the fact that “like all the other capitals, its continued transmission and accumulation tend to preserve social inequalities”. Therefore, the digital divide does not concern only inequalities of access (first level of the digital divide) but also of uses (second level of the digital divide) and of outcomes generated online and valuable in the social realm (third level of the digital divide). Another relevant set of research studies seeks to understand how traditional forms of capital (economic, cultural and social) are converted into digital capital and how digital capital is reconverted back into economic, cultural, and social capital (Calderón Gómez, 2020). Calderón Gomez conceptualises digital capital as a *sub-form of cultural capital*, backing this idea with the fact that, in his study, participants who had attended university reported how they were forced to increase their digital skills. Similarly, Ragnedda recommends that “the formal educational system should take into account the development of digital skills and motivation to adopt ICTs, and make students aware of the potentiality of the Internet as a powerful tool to improve social mobility” (Ragnedda, 2018).

Although the COVID-19 crisis pushed more students and parents to use technology, many had limited access or limited competencies, which at the same time reflected and reproduced already-existing inequalities in economic, social and cultural capital. As this research will later confirm, technological practices go beyond the simple use of technology “but also encompass social and cultural relations, systems and structures, and the meaning the practice has in the individual’s life” (Beckman *et al.*, 2018).

## **B. The Portuguese education system and the prevalence of inequalities**

To analyse educational inequalities in Portugal, it is necessary to consider some key characteristics of the Portuguese education system. One of them is its delay in terms of universal access to education in comparison to other European countries. In 1992, the level of education in Germany for the population aged between 55 and 64 years old was the same for the population aged between 25 and 34 years old in 2015 in Portugal (Loura, 2020). This has been explained in the literature by a lack of investment in education during most the dictatorship period (1933-1974).

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, only 25% of the active population (25-64) had secondary education as a minimum level of education, compared to the EU average of 68% (Eurostat, 2021). Given this situation, several public policies aimed at closing this gap have been implemented over the last twenty years. One of the most ambitious is Law 85/2009 which establishes 18 years old as the age of mandatory schooling with the objective of having the entire student population reach 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In 2000, the percentage of the 25-34 year old population with secondary education was 32%, and by 2018, it had increased to 71,5% (Loura, 2020). Nevertheless, data from 2019 reveals that Portugal is still the EU country with the highest number of people aged 25 to 64 without an upper secondary education (47,8%), while the EU average is 21,2%. (Eurostat, 2021).

The data mentioned above is crucial to understanding the level of education of the parents who had to support their children during the period of school closures. In addition, even though this research does not consider time spent with grandparents during the pandemic (which was supposedly less due to the nature of COVID-19), it is necessary to take into account that before COVID-19, many Portuguese children spent much of their time outside schools with their grandparents, given the fact that Portugal combines high female full-time employment without an equivalently generous provision of child-care (Janta, 2014). This is especially relevant because given the country's educational backwardness (in the 60s, most children only finished elementary school), the majority of grandparents has a low level of education. Given the fact that school results are, as mentioned above, related to families' levels of education, and that Portugal is a country whose adult population has comparatively lower levels of schooling (Carmo and Barata, 2014), we can assume that the kind of support that many parents can provide is limited by their educational background. Even if the level of education of younger generations has exponentially increased, this evolution was not followed by an equally significant reduction in the different forms of social inequalities concerning school (Justino, 2013).

According to the OECD, Portugal is one of the countries in which the socio-economic situation of a student's family is most determinant for his or her performance at school. In fact, "the odds of a disadvantaged student being a low performer on the PISA 2018 reading assessment were nearly seven times higher than the odds for an advantaged student, compared to an average of five times across the OECD. [...] 52% of disadvantaged students in PISA 2015 reported having repeated grades in Portugal, compared to 19% on average across the OECD and just 9% of advantaged Portuguese students" (OECD, 2020b).

Relatedly, a study conducted by the Ministry of Education in 2016 suggests that “there is a very strong correlation between students’ school performance and the socio-economic environment of their households. For example, for students whose mothers have a bachelor’s degree, the percentage of “successful paths” in the 3rd cycle is 71%, while among students whose mothers have lower educational attainment, equivalent to the 4<sup>th</sup> year, the same percentage of successful pathways is only 19%.” (DGEEC, 2016).

Furthermore, in Portugal, educational inequalities based on parents’ socio-economic status are particularly relevant for those of immigrant backgrounds. In the study “Afro-descendants in the Portuguese Education System”, Cristina Roldão concluded that the repetition rate of children in primary school whose nationality is from one of the Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP) is three times higher than for Portuguese students (Roldão, 2019). Besides, it is essential to note that these numbers may be higher since calculations for the study were made based on nationality and not on ethnic or racial categories, because Portuguese law does not allow it.

Finally, the last dimension which needs to be taken into account is how, in the context of COVID-19, the inequalities mentioned above were translated into the three types of digital inequalities (Ragnedda, 2018). While 98,7% of individuals with higher education and 96,5% of individuals with secondary education use the internet, this number reduces to almost half (56,3%) for individuals who have only a basic education (which in 2019 corresponded to 51,5% of the population) (Pordata, 2020). According to a study conducted in 2019, “the differential of institutionalised cultural capital (schooling), more than the disparities related to economic capital (income), emerge as the main explanatory variable of the first-order digital divide in Portugal” (Lapa and Vieira, 2019).

To conclude, there seems to be a consensus in the literature that the democratisation of the Portuguese education system has “essentially assumed the form of massification” (Sebastião, 2009; Carmo and Barata, 2014; Loura, 2020). As explained by Sebastião, although there is more equality in terms of access to school, this happened with a “maintenance of inequalities in school trajectories”.

### C. Distance learning and inequalities in the context of COVID-19

Inequalities in students' and schools' digital preparedness for distance learning were already mentioned in the literature before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. These studies highlighted that “for distance education to work, it takes a good study place with digital equipment, sufficient digital skills, involved parents, and a well-prepared school, and these circumstances are likely to be socially stratified” by socio-economic and immigration backgrounds (van de Werfhorst, Kessenich and Geven, 2020). The literature highlights two primary sources of aggravation or attenuation of these inequalities: school differences in terms of infrastructure and parents' digital capital. A study conducted in 2019 on the experiences of mothers of primary school-aged children with digital technologies highlighted that “digital homework demands certain skills and resources from parents that not all possess, which has the potential to deepen inequalities in educational experiences for children” (Head, 2020).

Although this study is being conducted only one year after the COVID-19 outbreak, there is already some literature highlighting how these inequalities were translated in different contexts. For this analysis, it was decided to include literature mainly from studies conducted in European countries, whose characteristics are more comparable to the Portuguese context.

In France, a study on “*L'école à la Maison*” (Delès, 2020) aimed to understand the impact of distance learning on the “(re)production of inequalities” by comparing the answers on parent's home school experience to already-existing sociological data on educational inequalities. While the first inequality pointed out concerned the use of computer equipment, the second one concerned educational experience, since there are different study conditions in lower-class families than in middle-class families. The authors also demonstrated that although the time spent learning at home was the same for lower-class and higher-class families, the type of activities being conducted differed considerably, with lower-class families supporting their children in following teachers' instructions and higher-class families offering activities that promoted more cultural openness and discovery.

A quantitative study was also conducted to analyse inequalities in home-schooling in the Netherlands, (Bol, 2020). The study focused on “the extent to which children from different socio-economic backgrounds get the same opportunities to learn during the school lockdown”, assuming that “in a normal situation, this strong variation in opportunities that children get at home is at least partly mitigated by the school”. The authors underscored that along with inequalities in school involvement and material resources, differences among children are also partly explained by the education level of parents, highlighting that there is a gap between parents with higher levels of education (80%) and those with lower levels of education (63%) concerning their confidence in their capability to support their primary school children. Relatedly, a German study about “COVID-19 and Educational Inequality” (Grewenig *et al.*, 2020) focused not on inequalities between students from different family backgrounds but between low and high achieving students. According to the authors, “differences related with parental level of education already existed before COVID-19 and



were not particularly relevant now”. Contradicting the results of the Dutch study, this study concludes that “the COVID-19 school closures did not increase learning-time gaps by parental education”. A significant contribution from this work, which is going to be considered in this research, is that the typology used to analyse children’s activities during the school closure period includes not only school-related activities but also two other dimensions: *activities conducive to child development such as reading, arts, playing, music or doing sport* and *detrimental activities for child development such as watching TV, playing computer games, or consuming social media* (Grewenig *et al.*, 2020).

Complementary to the studies mentioned above, research in the United Kingdom found that heterogeneity in learning experiences is strongly associated with family income. Based on time use, home learning practices and the economic circumstances of families, this analysis reinforces the idea that “by bringing home all education investments, the pandemic is reducing the equalising role of the time that children normally spend in school may have for their learning” (Andrew *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, it is essential to include in this analysis two studies conducted in Portugal, published in February and March 2021. The first one, (Esteves *et al.*, 2021) uses statistical data to draw a portrait of the country’s educational inequalities by looking at data pertaining to housing conditions, access to food, socio-economic conditions of the families and the impact of those conditions on school results. Some of the key points of this analysis, which were widely shared in the media, are the fact that in Portugal, 15,5% of students live in overcrowded houses, 3% of children felt hungry and only 20% of students in 4<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade have a mother who has completed higher education. It also showcases strong links between being a recipient of school social aid (SASE) and academic achievement, with the percentage of students with the maximum grade being half for those who benefit from social aid. Although this study highlights relevant statistical data, it does not explain what is the precise nature of the inequalities associated with home schooling.

In March 2021, the Institute of Evaluation of Education released the results of a diagnostic study that, by comparing tests done in January 2021 with the results of PISA 2018, aimed to identify learning gaps following the first period of distance learning. According to this study, contrary to what happened with students in other levels of education, the results of students from the 3rd grade were above what was expected. However, this study focuses on an average and did not focus on how results among students varied across different socio-economic levels. An interesting point for this analysis is that the diagnostic test also inquired about students’ contexts, which provided important conclusions. For instance, 20% of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students reported not having a quiet space to study.

The recent Engzell, Frey and Verhagen (2021) study highlighted how, even in countries with high-quality levels of distance learning, the period of school closures translated into deep learning losses, which impacted students from disadvantaged homes the most. In the Netherlands, the country this study analysed, 20% of expected progress was lost because of school closures and the loss for students in disadvantaged homes was about 50% worse than for others. However, the same study concluded that “although the vast majority of

students' performance deteriorated during remote learning, some schools experienced only a small, or no drop, in learning", which emphasises the role that certain policies may have assumed in the attenuation of the effects of school closures. To conclude, it seems essential to include a chronology of the different policies implemented by the government during the two periods of distance learning.

*Portuguese school policies during school closures<sup>1</sup>*

- Launch of the web platform “Apoio às escolas” to facilitate the use of online platforms by schools and teachers by presenting the functionalities of the different video-conference platforms as well as other educational resources (16/03/2020)
- Launch of the TV program “Estudo em Casa” for basic education (Grades 1 to 9) as a measure to reach students who didn't have access to devices and the internet (20/02/2020)
- Municipalities and associations distributed computers
- Meals were distributed to students who received social school support
- The government promised that there would be universal access to the internet at the start of the new academic year, and all students from basic and secondary level would have access to devices. (04/2020) (Silva, 2020)
- The program “Estudo em Casa” started to include programs for secondary education – Grades 10 to 12 (14/09/2020)
- Announcement of the project “Digital Academy for Parents”, which was supposed to take place from January to March 2021 (11/11/2020). It did not take place due to the confinement imposed on January 15<sup>th</sup>.
- In response to the severity of the health situation, the Ministry took the decision to begin school “holidays” and interdicted distance learning over two weeks (22/01/2021 – 07/02/2021)
- Release of clear instructions regarding the time for synchronous and asynchronous classes, to begin on February 8<sup>th</sup> (02/02/2021)
- Reference school reception of essential workers' children and children with special needs, but also children from disadvantaged backgrounds, which were signalled by their teachers (08/02/2021)
- Parents who alternate the support given to their children at home due to the school closures would be able to receive 100% of their salaries, instead of 60% (17/02/2021)
- Kindergartens and primary schools, as well as ATL centres for the same ages reopened (15/03/2021)
- Schools were given autonomy to decide on evaluation criteria of the 2nd term (15/03/2021)
- Schools of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle and ATL centres for the same ages reopened (05/04/2021)
- Secondary schools and universities reopened (19/04/2021)

<sup>1</sup> School Policies can also be found in Eurodyce  
[https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/national-reforms-school-education-53\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/national-reforms-school-education-53_en)

### III. Methodology of data collection

#### A. Sampling

I decided to conduct a comparison between parents of students enrolled in two different schools: one school in an economically-advantaged area and one school belonging to the list of “Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária – TEIP” (Areas of Priority Education). By identifying patterns and comparing the answers of parents from schools with very different socio-economic backgrounds, I hoped to highlight how the dependent variables (ability to support children’s learning; type of leisure activities offered; learning environment provided and communication between home and school during the school closure period) would vary according to the independent variable (mothers’ level of education). The decision to analyse families of primary school-aged children is linked to the fact that these children are less autonomous (Hartas, 2015) and therefore it is at this level that parental involvement is most crucial. At this age, students require not only the help of their parents to work with technology but also to self-regulate (UNESCO, 2021). In addition, children of primary school age represent those who are more likely not to have had a computer before this period. The choice of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students was made with the possibility of interviewing students as well in mind. Lastly, Portugal was selected as a case study because the government frequently showed its concern about rising inequalities during the COVID-19 school closure period.

This sample can be considered a convenience sample because the two schools chosen were located in areas with which the researcher was familiar and could easily access. Simultaneously, it is also a judgement sample because the schools were chosen by taking into account processes of spatial segregation and therefore seemed to correspond well to the purposes of the research. I attempted to use a snowball sampling strategy in order to reach the most disadvantaged parents. However, it only worked in one case.

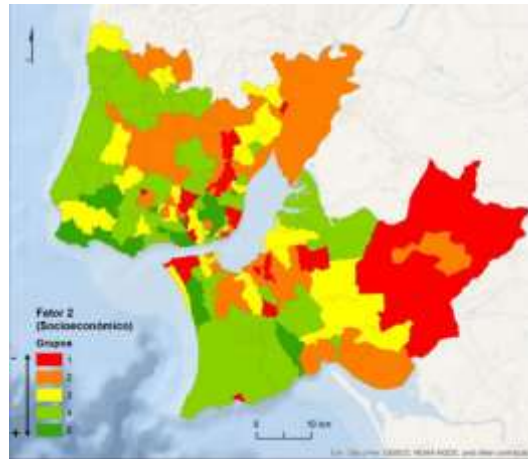
The criteria to choose the schools that were contacted was based on:

- Their inclusion on the list of TEIP schools<sup>2</sup>
- Their inclusion in an economically advantaged area (by level of income) as portrayed in the map of the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon. The socio-economic characterisation of each area considers the following aspects: school dropout rate; population with at least an upper secondary education; illiteracy rate; socially-valued professions; overcrowded housing; average value of rent; unemployment rate; population (18-24 years old) with 3rd cycle education and not studying.

Given the fact that this research aims to identify inequalities between families, the choice of these schools is linked to the fact that, due to school segregation, it was thought that it would be possible to identify the “social differences that have been shown to be associated with inequality in school trajectories (i.e. the social conditions of the student’s parents, the ethnic-national origin of the student and/or his/her ancestors, the territory of residence [rural, urban, city centre, suburbs])” (Seabra, 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> List of Schools TEIP : [http://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EPIPSE/lista\\_de\\_uo\\_teip\\_nut\\_ii\\_lisboa.pdf](http://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EPIPSE/lista_de_uo_teip_nut_ii_lisboa.pdf)



Map 1: Socio-economic areas in Lisbon Metropolitan Area<sup>3</sup>

The choice of two public schools in the suburbs of Lisbon is linked to the aim of documenting inequalities in parental involvement, while controlling for another kind of inequalities, namely geographical. For instance, many parents in rural areas faced problems regarding connectivity, and it was decided that to simplify the comparison, a rural-urban comparison would not be relevant.

The size of the sample determined at the beginning of the research was 30 parents, 15 in each school. However, as will be explained in Sub-section C, the COVID-19 context brought up multiple challenges in reaching schools that would provide interviews following the required criteria. A total of 30 interviews were conducted, but these included parents and teachers from more than two schools.

## B. Methodological tools

As presented in the previous section, existing studies on the distance learning period are mostly quantitative. The rationale behind choosing to conduct a qualitative study is linked to the fact that, although differences in the ownership of digital devices, parents' level of education or housing conditions are highly documented by existing studies (Esteves *et al.*, 2021), there seemed to be no suggestion as to “how and why” these differences translated into differences on children's daily routines during the period of school closures caused by COVID-19. Following phone calls with the authors of the Portuguese (Esteves *et al.*, 2021) and the French studies (Delès, 2020), it was decided that the main knowledge gap in the literature was related to understanding differences in families' routines during this period. Therefore, as mentioned in the introductory section, this qualitative research aims to identify differences in the main educational practices by analysing a child's “normal day” during the period of school closures.

<sup>3</sup> Source : Area Metropolitana de Lisboa -

[https://www.aml.pt/susProjects/susWebBackOffice/uploadFiles/wt1wwpgf\\_aml\\_sus\\_pt\\_site/componentText/SUS57FCBBEE58CA4/EATLAS\\_AML\\_SOCIOECONOMIA\\_FORMATADO.PDF](https://www.aml.pt/susProjects/susWebBackOffice/uploadFiles/wt1wwpgf_aml_sus_pt_site/componentText/SUS57FCBBEE58CA4/EATLAS_AML_SOCIOECONOMIA_FORMATADO.PDF)

I conducted semi-structured interviews with an interview guide (*see Annex 1*) comprising a first section, in which the parent was asked general questions related to the socio-economic status of the family, a second section with a departing question on the “typical day” of the child and a set of open questions corresponding to the main themes to be explored on the topic of parental involvement (learning support at home, children’s leisure activities, the learning environment and the communication between home and school). The questions were asked in different order from one interview to the other due to the need to adapt to parents’ discourse. Taking advantage of the semi-structured character of the interview guide, additional questions were asked to deepen the clues that were provided by the interviewees, therefore allowing the discovery of new trends, which is often not possible with quantitative studies.

### **C. Modes of access to interviewees – The impact of COVID-19 on the research methodology**

As mentioned in section A, although this research aimed at having a clear-cut sample (one teacher and 15 parents in each school), the circumstances generated by the pandemic imposed several challenges. Besides repeated silence from many of the teachers and schools contacted, the biggest obstacle to this research was the strict lockdown that started in Portugal on January 15<sup>th</sup> 2021. At that time, one in-person interview with a teacher at school A had been conducted, as well as a visit to school C (the first TEIP school selected). Therefore, while the initial idea was to conduct two interviews with the teachers, and with their authorisation, try to reach out to parents that would pick up their children at school, the degradation of the sanitary situation prompted the decision that all interviews would have to be conducted over the phone.

Teachers’ engagement with the research also varied. While the teacher from school A was highly efficient in obtaining parents’ written authorisation to share their contacts, school C provided no response, despite multiple efforts to contact them. Different strategies were therefore developed to obtain a similar sample of 12 parents from a TEIP school (namely by contacting old neighbours, reaching out to contacts on Facebook, contacting the city council where school C was located, and e-mailing more than 30 school groupings).

The pursuit of an ideal sample from a school in a disadvantaged context led to the conducting of a total of 30 interviews with parents and teachers. While only 12 interviews will be considered as the primary sample for this research, there are 18 extra interviews which, given their richness, will still be integrated into the analysis as additional support to the main findings from the main sample. The diversity brought from these “extra” interviews provided an understanding of more settings and namely the recognition that there were different school policies and teaching practices during the distance learning period. The reason why the interviews conducted with parents from school C were not adapted for the analysis is related to the fact that children were all in different grades and classes.

*Number of interviews conducted and dates*

Main Sample:

**Teacher School A** – 11/01/2021

**8 Parents School A** (all 4<sup>th</sup> grade) – Conducted between 23/01/2021 and 17/02/2021

**Teacher School B** – 09/03/2021

**5 Parents School B** (all 4<sup>th</sup> grade) – Conducted between 12/03/2021 and 21/03/2021

Extra interviews:

**6 Parents School C** (from 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade) – Conducted between 19/02/2021 and 08/03/2021

**Parents from different schools and grades - D1** - 09/02/2021, **E1** - 27/01/2021, **E2** - 29/01/2021, **F1** - 9/02/2021, **G1** - 27/01/2021, **H1** - 10/02/2021

**Teachers I** - 01/03/2021, **J** - 22/01/2021, **H** - 26/12/2021

Interviews with parents from school A started on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January. However, a new period of distance learning was announced to begin on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February, so it was decided that the subsequent interviews would only happen after this period in order to be able to take into account the experiences from the new confinement. Therefore, most of the interviews done before this date were not considered, with the exception of one, which is particularly interesting because it is one of the few interviews conducted with a father. It is important to note that the parent with whom the interview is conducted is usually the one who is the “Encarregado de Educação” (In charge of Education), which can be the mother or the father.

Despite all the inconveniences that a new period of school closure brought to the research, namely an increasing difficulty in reaching the schools and parents, this situation allowed for an undertaking of a real-time analysis of the topic and to understand the evolution of school policies and parental involvement between the first and second confinements.

#### **D. The conducting of phone interviews**

As mentioned above, the context of the pandemic led us to conduct interviews by phone. The rationale behind this choice rather than videocalls, for instance, is related to the topic itself. This being a study which aimed at reaching parents who could have faced significant hardships with access and use of the internet, it seemed reasonable that the contact should not require internet access. Therefore, all interviews were conducted by voice, either by WhatsApp or a normal phone call, with no camera.

Many researchers in the field of sociology consider that not being face to face while conducting an interview can prevent the researcher from observing a number of essential aspects such as body language, facial expressions or the environment surrounding the participant. Indeed, these factors constituted important limitations to this research. However, the literature also mentions some positive points about conducting interviews by telephone, such as the fact that it allows reaching people who are geographically distant or located in dangerous places. This obviously also applies to the current situation caused by COVID-19. In addition, telephone interviews may be more effective when there is a high need for

anonymity. For this particular study, this is an important point since parents may consider some of their answers as “less socially desirable information”, as pointed out by the literature (Block and Erskine, 2012).

In order to guarantee that the interview took place in the best possible conditions, a text message was sent to parents beforehand with a short introduction, acknowledgement for offering their availability and a request for information of the time that would better suit them. At the start of each interview, there was a small reintroduction and a mention of the fact that all the information would be anonymous. Their permission to record the interview was requested. All the interviewees accepted without asking any questions.

The 30 interviews ranged in length from 15 minutes to one hour, although most interviews took around 30 minutes. Most interviews were transcribed the same day or the following day, using the Otranscribe software. The process of transcription facilitated the familiarisation with the data and the beginning of the observation of some patterns, while conducting the interviews.

## **E. Thematic analysis**

In order to address the main hypothesis using data collected in interviews, I decided to conduct a thematic analysis on the corpus, to explore “inter-interview thematic consistency” as well as “the different forms under which the same theme appears from one subject to another” (Blanchet and Gotman, 1992). Therefore, three main discursive tools “to make the facts speak” (Kaufmann, 2014) were taken into account: 1) Recurrent sentences, 2) Contradictions, and 3) Recurrent contradictions. By following this approach, it was possible to identify themes that were later organised into categories established beforehand. Besides the socio-economic characteristics of the families, five other categories were identified which corresponded to the main topics addressed through the interview’s guide: children’s learning support; children’s leisure activities; children’s learning environment; communication between home and school; and subjective perceptions of the distance learning period.

In contrast to studies that follow grounded theory’s open/emergent coding, according to which the researcher has no preconceptions about what she or he is going to find in the data, this research followed a pre-defined conceptual framework, resorting to categories and to some codes [themes] identified beforehand (Saldaña, 2013). Nevertheless, while reading the transcripts of the interviews, different themes were identified and organised into the already-defined broader categories mentioned above, which represent the dimensions of parental involvement under analysis in this research. The category “subjective perceptions of the distance learning period” aims at introducing new themes related to the COVID-19 related school closures.

As mentioned by Kaufmann (2014), it is important to conduct a “permanent confrontation between local knowledge (indigenous categories) and global knowledge

(abstract concepts)". Therefore, the literature review mentioned earlier was beneficial to assess the relevance of the themes identified. Even if some themes are widely present in previous literature on parental involvement, others are particularly relevant for the context under analysis, such as the provision of extra work, usage of technologies to support learning, working status, housing conditions, concern with the child's emotional wellbeing, control of screen time, etc. While new themes emerged in some interviews, at a certain point of the research, those identified and categorised in the analytical grid started to repeat very frequently, reaching the point of saturation (Baribeau and Royer, 2013). The discussion in the following segment will highlight how the selected teams varied within the corpus and what elements can explain these variations. (Blanchet and Gotman, 1992).

## **F. Limitations and validity**

When discussing the findings of this research, several limitations must be taken into account, the most relevant being the possibility of a selection bias (Beaud and Weber, 2010). During the interviews with the teachers, in which it was requested if they could share the contacts of some of the parents of the class, their reluctance to share the contacts of the families whose communication with the school was complicated was notorious. We can safely assume that these were the families in the most unprivileged situations. Therefore, having to go through teachers as a third party posed significant challenges to the research. Although the interviews with the teachers provided important insights about the parents that were not reached, these descriptions can still be biased by the teachers' own perceptions and prejudices.

The fact that the interviews were not supported by direct observations raises several questions regarding the degree to which it is possible to trust parents' responses. In addition, it is possible that, by providing examples when presenting a question to the parents, especially when the responses were concise, the answers might have been biased to follow the example provided. Another limitation is the fact that since these questions were not asked through a survey but were asked directly to the individuals concerned, the interviewer was often uncomfortable asking more personal questions, namely those concerning the socio-economic conditions of the family. To solve these issues, it would have been of interest to conduct a longitudinal study, which would allow interviewing the same parents during different periods. However, the time and length limit of this research did not allow for conducting such a study.

Finally, it seems relevant to mention other approaches which could have enriched the study, and mention the reasons and impediments that prevented their integration. From the beginning of the research study, a direct observation of the Digital Academy for Parents<sup>4</sup> was planned. These workshops would have provided an ideal setting to deepen the research on the topic of digital inequalities in education and allow access to the parents. However, after

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<sup>4</sup> An initiative from the Ministry of Education which aimed at training parents in digital skills through workshops in TEIP schools.



several e-mail exchanges with the Ministry of Education seeking authorisation to conduct the observation, no further information was received after the lockdown was announced. In addition, it would have been of great interest for this research to interview the students as well. Nevertheless, given the current context, the possibility that a parent would be next to the student while conducting the interview led to rule out this possibility. Finally, it would have been relevant to conduct a previous online survey in order to have access to the information related to families' socio-economic statuses. However, given the fact that one of the goals of this research was precisely to analyse inequalities in the use of technologies, it would be counter-intuitive to conduct a survey which would require these sorts of competencies. Researchers in Spain and France (Bonal and González, 2020; Delès, 2020) reported similar worries, mentioning that only conducting an online survey did not allow them to grasp the full extent of the current digital divide. Nevertheless, even if it was not possible to include all these aspects in the process of triangulation of the information, the media and other studies recently conducted on the topic provided significant insights.

In terms of validity, even though qualitative studies provide data and interpretations that are less generalisable than those from quantitative studies, the conduct of 30 interviews seems to have ensured a certain saturation of the topic, with most of the replies becoming repetitive at a certain point, in which it was no longer possible to identify many more new themes. In addition, according to the literature, "information from interviews is validated by the context and does not need to be validated by its probability of occurrence" (Blanchet and Gotman, 1992). Blanchet and Gotman also mentioned the importance to "diversify but not disperse". Therefore, while the extra interviews allowed us to include diversity in the analysis, it seemed important to maintain the focus on a well-defined setting. Even if there were three other interviews conducted in school A, these were excluded in order to reach an equal number of interviews for each school and also based on the fact that they took place before the second period of distance learning had started.

Finally, another methodological dimension that needs to be addressed is how the evolution of policies during the COVID-19 context and the interviews themselves led to a reformulation of the research question and the hypothesis. The main reason behind these changes is the definition of the independent variable, which initially was families' socio-economic status. To define the socio-economic level of the students' families, it was initially decided to follow the same approach as the General Directorate for Statistics of Education (DGEEC, 2016) and consider the level of education of the mother as well as the level of School Social Action (SASE) of the student. However, the choice of using proxies for SASE, such as having received a computer or benefiting from free school lunches, instead of directly asking parents about this support, quickly became a biased question due to the different policies implemented regarding meals and digital devices, either by the municipalities or the Ministry of Education. Therefore, only the level of education of the mother was considered a determinant for socio-economic status.

## IV. Findings and discussion

### A. Overview of the schools' characteristics

#### Portrait of the School A

The interview conducted with the teacher at school A was the only face-to-face interview, having taken place on January 11th, four days before the announcement of a strict lockdown in Portugal. The school was located in a residential area, characterised by a mixture of apartment buildings and detached houses. A quick observation of the children in the playground indicated that children were predominantly white. According to the teacher, the socio-economic status of the parents was high middle class, nearly all of them having a post-secondary education. The teacher added that even if almost all parents teleworked, they could help. When asked if she faced particular difficulties in reaching all students, the teacher mentioned that in her class, only two students did not do the tasks that were proposed, one of them being from the Roma community and another who had to stay alone because the parents were working. She added that of all the students, only one had to ask for a tablet.

#### Portrait of the school B

According to the description made by the school coordinator, despite some improvement over recent years, the school remained a mirror of the community's social problems. Built to house people who had previously been living in makeshift houses, the neighbourhood is completely isolated from the rest of the urban fabric. It has been the stage of many social problems and conflicts with authorities. Nevertheless, the municipality in which it is integrated has been very proactive in promoting local projects aiming to provide extra-curricular activities to children, providing information about parental involvement through workshops, and promoting literacy and arts. As explained by the school coordinator during the interview:

*"(...) in this school there are a lot of things (...) we aim at having a line, a linkage, to work all for the same, to see if we can really improve, fine-tune things ... now we have a project which is very interesting for us that is working more around social competencies ...".*

In addition, the teacher mentioned several times that even if she knew that inequalities increased during distance learning, in this school, they were not linked to access to devices. Tablets were lent to all children since the first confinement, due to a project already implemented in the school, which put the school in a situation that differed from many other schools:

*"(...) I think that distance learning even created more inequalities, not by lack of devices, because we have them, they all have (...) I think that it is more the conditions they have (...)*

Despite all the projects which had been implemented and the consequent improvements, the coordinator still drew a pretty negative picture of the current social situation:

*"(...) there is still a lot of criminality, a lot of drugs, there is prostitution, there are a lot of things there ... just this week, I don't know if you saw the news, there were problems in the neighbourhood (...) We know that the context influences a lot (...) if I tell you that I have kids in the first cycle who are outside until very late at night and it is not with kids their age ... but older youngsters who are already leading them (...)"*

Regarding parental support, the teacher also portrays a negative scenario:

*"(they) really have no interest ... I notice by that child, when I later taught him how to get into Webex to have the synchronous class, I taught him how to get into Escola Virtual, to do the tasks ... how to send the tasks to the teacher ... his little eyes were shining ... he was happy (...) even if we have fantastic families, even from the Roma community, who do everything for their children ... there are others that really ... unfortunately ..."*

When asked about what solutions could be envisioned, the teacher said it was urgent to work with the families by going to their homes. The teacher voiced that many parents did not see the value of education and therefore engaged neither in providing learning support to their children nor in communicating with the school. While making these comments, she was thinking especially about the Roma community. The teacher mentioned several times how distance learning had worsened the number of absences and the difficulty of communicating with families. She believes that parents from the community "don't care about education" because parents, especially mothers, have a low level of education and often do not know how to read and write.

The teacher also mentioned how the working conditions of some families affected their ability to support the children, with many families, especially mothers from the African-descendant community having "two or three jobs". They would have to leave at dawn when the children are sleeping and many times arrive home when the children are already asleep, meaning that many of them spend their day alone at home. According to the teacher, the mothers' jobs are mostly related to cleaning or working in restaurants as cooks.

Another point raised by the teacher was that children were living in overcrowded houses and this affects learning in the teacher's perspective.

*"(...) Houses are not very big and up to 15 people are living there (...) what we notice during synchronous classes is that there is a lot of noise, we sometimes see people walking in pyjamas (...) noise, screams, children are on the bed having the class, many are eating, watching TV (...)"*

Finally, the teacher mentioned how the school plays a key role for the children:

*"We have children who tell us when Friday comes, that they don't want the weekend to come... because they prefer to be with us at school than at home ... so that's a sign of something, isn't it?"*

## B. Overview of parents' characteristics

**Table 1**

N°	Highest qualification obtained by mother	Highest qualification obtained by father	Mother's job	Father's job	Working status during school closures	Number of children and ages	Migrant origin
A1	Master's degree		Marketing and Com		Teleworking	9, 13	USA
A2	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree	Judge	Senior Consultant	Teleworking/ Teleworking	9	
A3	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Administrative officer	Barber	Unemployed/ Closed	9, 18	
A5	Master's degree	Master's degree	Data Analyst	Informatic engineer	Teleworking/ Teleworking	6, 9	
A6	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Civil servant	Logistics department	Working/ Teleworking	9	
B1	6 <sup>th</sup> grade	7 <sup>th</sup> grade	Waitress	Construction worker	Unemployed/ Unemployed	7, 9 + pregnant	Cape Verde
B2	7 <sup>th</sup> grade	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Hairdresser	Trash driver	Closed/ Sick leave	5, 10, 13, 18, 25	Cape Verde
B3	6 <sup>th</sup> grade		Cleaning			9, 14	Cape Verde
B4	9 <sup>th</sup> grade		Assistant of Education		Lay off	9	Cape Verde (only father)
B5	9 <sup>th</sup> grade*	6 <sup>th</sup> grade	Firewoman	Gardener		8, 9	Brazil and Cape Verde

\*Currently studying at night to complete 12<sup>th</sup> grade

As mentioned in the methodology section, it was decided that the independent variable would be the mother's level of education due to the difficulties in defining the socio-economic status of families more broadly. However, several aspects linked to using this variable also need to be taken into account in its analysis given the specificities of the Portuguese education system.

Although I did not ask a specific question about mothers' age, it seems safe to assume, based on the ages of older siblings, pictures on WhatsApp or comments during the interview itself, that on average, mothers were between 30 and 45 years old. This means that the oldest mother would have reached the 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the early 90s, while the youngest would have reached the 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the late 2000s. This means that most of these mothers had already finished school when the law introducing the 12<sup>th</sup> grade as the last year of

mandatory education was adopted in 2009. Therefore, something that needs to be taken into account is how the meaning of a "high level of education" has changed in the country during the above-mentioned period. In 2000, the proportion of the population between 18 to 24 years old that was not studying and did not have secondary education was 43,7% (Loura, 2020). In 2008, only 54,6% of the 20-24-year-old population had at least an upper secondary educational attainment. Ten years later, this number rose to 80%. Therefore, we can assume that while parents A3 and A6 only have a 12<sup>th</sup> grade education, they were part of the small percentage of the population that reached that level at the time they were at school. This fact seems to translate into a small difference in the type of support provided by parents with higher education and those who have completed 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Literature from Spain documents the same type of effects (Bonal and González, 2020).

Although there was a will to include families with a migrant background, the fact that all families in the school B sample have a migrant background, as shown in the table above, is the result of the selection done by the teacher and the fact that these families represent a large proportion of school B population. Given the centrality that this characteristic took in this study, the discussion of the results will specifically provide attention to this dimension, based on existing literature.

## **C. Results: Identification, description and discussion of patterns found**

### *i. Learning Support*

The analysis of the theme "provision of support with the synchronous and asynchronous school related activities" during the period of distance learning was based on the literature related to homework and therefore follows a typology that presents three types of engagement with homework among parents: substantive help, monitoring and fostering independence (Lutz and Lakshmi, 2015).

The most important finding of this research is the fact that, at the primary school level, differences in the way parents supported their children's learning during the period of school closures seem to be more related to the quality of substantive help than with time spent monitoring children's learning. There do not seem to exist differences in parents' willingness to invest time in this activity depending on the mother's level of education, as both mothers with high and low levels of education mentioned the provision of support in activities required by the teacher. This meant monitoring that the child was paying attention to the class, correcting the worksheets and explaining to the child what was necessary to do, for example, by reading the exercises. Regarding asynchronous tasks, mother B4 explained, for instance, how she did paired reading (Nickow, Oreopoulos and Quan, 2020) with her daughter in one of the exercises provided by the teacher.

These findings are in line with existing literature (Rawls, 2013; Hartas, 2015; Duru-Bellat, Farges and van Zanten, 2018; Delès, 2020; Fitzmaurice, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020), which also indicates that differences in substantive help across social classes in primary school seem to be more related to the quality of the support than to time spent on helping children. This literature also shows that social class plays a role in substantive help with homework but not in forms of engagement that do not require human capital, such as monitoring and fostering homework independence (Lutz and Lakshmi, 2015).

The recently published diagnosis study conducted by the Ministry's of Education Evaluation Institute revealed that, while 76,6% of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students reported that their parents wanted to know if they were conducting school tasks, only 53% mentioned that their parents explained new content to them (Serrão, Simões and Pereira dos Santos, 2021). Considering the literature and the results of this research, it seems reasonable to conclude that among the 48% of students whose parents did not explain new content to them, we can probably find those whose parents had lower levels of education. An interview conducted outside the main sample (E2) was particularly important to understand this aspect, where a mother claimed that she was unable to support her child due to her low level of schooling, adding that it was her 8-year-old child who was teaching her the content he was learning in school.

The most visible difference between the families of the two schools was identified around the theme "provision of extra work", both in the period of "holidays" and the period of distance learning. Among the mothers who had a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education or less, only mother B1 reported having asked the children to do some "copies, exercises" during the "holidays". In the case of mothers with a 12<sup>th</sup> grade education or more, the provision of extra work was something done regularly and thoughtfully, revealing a mastery of the necessary pedagogical practices for improvement. These practices include asking the child to read and summarize texts (A1), do worksheets with exercises (A2, A6) or review topics that were seen in class (A3).

*"I always give her work extra classes, she does my worksheets of Portuguese and maths (...) This year, there was the period when there were no lessons, she still had her homework, she did my sheets every morning the same way (...) I buy notebooks in an online bookshop, and besides the notebooks, there are some groups on Facebook that sometimes post evaluation sheets... So, when I get an interesting one, I take it out and give it to her, but I mainly buy books" (A2)*

*"To explore that theme a little bit more, she (the mother) would look for more things and print even more, so that she (the child) could become more enlightened ... it's not a way of giving her a lot of schoolwork, it's a way of making her more enlightened about that subject" (A6)*

While talking about the provision of extra work, two of the mothers from school A linked their practice with the fact that the level of the school was not very demanding, especially when compared to private schools. Therefore, the provision of extra work can

eventually be seen as an educational strategy aiming at compensating for inequalities between their children and children in private schools. This seems to need the mobilization of not only cultural capital but also economic capital, with mother A2 explaining how she bought exercise books online.

In an attempt to prevent inequalities generated by disparities in access to digital devices, schools were told by the government to not provide any kind of synchronous or asynchronous work to students during the school "holiday" period in January. However, the literature highlights how periods of holidays increase the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students (Alexander, Entwisle and Olson, 2001) and stresses that limitations to help children with school-related tasks depending on parents' level of education "become more acute when support from the school has been reduced and demands for autonomous work by students increase" (Bonal and González, 2020). Therefore, it seems relevant to discuss how a measure that aimed at attenuating inequalities may have exacerbated those very inequalities. In this sense, it would be of interest that future research analyses the extent to which low performing students may have had a higher learning loss during this period than their high performing peers. This could be done by individually comparing the results of the IAVE diagnostic study (2021) to students' previous performance. If the results of students with the highest levels of performance changed less than those with the lowest levels, this could eventually reveal the extent of the impact of differences in the substantive support provided by parents at home during this period.

When asked about their perceptions of emerging learning gaps following the period of distance learning, all parents from school A appeared particularly confident about their capacity to evaluate their children's learning progress and believed that the two periods of school closures were harmful in that sense. A recurrent sentence from mother A5 was how she believed that her child *"did not consolidate a series of key concepts"*. Although most mothers from school B also answered that they believed that school closures were harmful in terms of learning, they did not specify that perception with the same kind of detail. Nevertheless, in both schools, some of the mothers mentioned being worried about progression to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade without the acquisition of certain basic skills and some even considered asking the teacher if the child could repeat the year.

The provision of support in the use of technologies was key to guarantee that children followed the synchronous classes, had access to the asynchronous tasks and were able to send them to the teacher. In this regard, it is relevant to consider the existing literature on digital capital, namely the fact that "like all the other capitals, its continual transmission and accumulation tends to preserve social inequalities" (Ragnedda, 2018). Although children from school B were provided access to devices from the start of the first lockdown, four out of five mothers said that the family did not have its own computer, while all families in school A already had at least one. Therefore, when asked about their previous knowledge of the technological tools being used for distance learning, most parents in school A mentioned already knowing how to use them, while three out of five in school B mentioned not knowing. Although support from their older children or the teacher seems to have been

particularly important at the beginning of distance learning for parents of school B, when the interviews were conducted these parents mentioned having already learnt how to deal with the collaborative tools used by the school.

Parents were also asked about their use of technologies to support learning, namely if they used research tools such as Google or YouTube to find out the answer to a question they did not know. Although most parents mentioned using these tools, these uses seem to have varied between parents from school A and school B. While parents from school A used it as a way to provide a more interactive explanation, parents from school B mentioned using it to be able to understand the content themselves and then explain it to the child:

*"Yes yes, there are many things that I do not understand anymore, I don't remember, and to explain to her I have to study" (B2)*

*"(...) there are a lot of things that I don't remember, but I always went to the net to search (...) on Google" (B4)*

*"(...) sometimes there were things that I could not (help with), that I didn't remember, I did not know anymore and had to study as well, and we researched the three of us" (B5)*

These findings were particularly surprising since they indicate that digital capital, which may be considered a "sub-form of cultural capital" (Calderón Gómez, 2020), may be developed differently and perhaps quicker through other means that do not necessarily require high levels of formal education. This seems to be a promising finding for future policies that could aim at developing parents' digital skills, since it reveals that these are already part of their practices. However, these results need to be analysed with caution, given the possible selection bias associated with this research. The portrait done by the teacher in school B highlights several difficulties faced by parents regarding the usage of the technologies. The teacher mentioned how she had to provide the code of the meeting for the classes several times to the same family because *"they change the password and then cannot go back"*. It would be of interest to develop a quantitative study that could ask parents about the main hardships they faced while dealing with technology during this period and correlate the findings to their educational levels. Nevertheless, previous knowledge of these technologies seems to be mostly linked to parents' work experiences. Mother A2 stressed how the fact that the father was a software engineer helped her and the child use digital technologies. Mother D1 mentioned having learnt how to use collaborative tools through her work as a representative for a cosmetic brand. Unfortunately, the interviews did not allow to understand how parents' different levels of acquaintance with digital devices translated into different "outcomes" for the child, which constitutes the third level of the digital divide (Ragnedda, 2018). This would deserve further research.

Surprisingly, something present along all the interviews in school A and B was that parents used the term "autonomous" several times to describe their child. This expression was used when parents were asked questions about support with activities involving the teacher, in the use of technologies, or to play. The literature mentions that "in families where parents



do not offer substantive help with homework, the primary reason for this is that parents feel that children have achieved homework independence." (Lutz and Lakshmi, 2015) and that "the older the child, the less the parents want to be involved, to offer their child more autonomy" (Feyfant, 2011). In both school A and B, parents reported having tried to make their child autonomous in using these technologies, namely with regard to attending the synchronous classes and sending their worksheets to the teacher, a task that parents pointed out as very time-consuming. In both school A and school B parents would compare their 4th grade children with younger children, mentioning:

*"(...) the eldest, she is already completely independent. The younger one, as she doesn't know how to read, it's more difficult, sometimes she has to ask what she has to do." (A5)*

*"(...) the fourth-grader, she handles herself well, it's more the smaller one that is more ... I always have to help her, but the fourth-grader, she gets by fine." (B1)*

The role of siblings seems to be important but in a different way in each of the two schools. In school A, it is mostly older siblings helping the ones in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, while in school B, more than one mother mentioned how their 4<sup>th</sup> grade children helped their siblings in lower grades:

*"(...) the sister also helps the brother a lot." (B1)*

*"She reads a lot to the little one (...) the teacher tells him to read (...) and who reads this story to the boy is my daughter, the 10-year-old (...) who has more time than I do." (B2)*

*"(...) it was more the older sister that helped the younger one." (B5)*

This finding seems to be in line with existing literature that highlights the role of older brothers and sisters in the provision of learning support in working-class and immigrant families (Duru-Bellat, Farges and van Zanten, 2018).

It is also particularly relevant how three mothers from school B mentioned how the children take their own initiative in matters related to studying, such as asking parents to help them study, trying to solve questions alone and taking the initiative to read.

*"Question: Does mom usually read at night, for example, or is it more her who goes alone and picks up...*

*- No no, it's she who goes more alone, she does things more alone" (B1)*

*"(...) many times when she asks me a question and I can't help her, she does her own research, goes to google and answers her doubts like this" (B3)*

An interesting case that reinforces the idea that children from disadvantaged backgrounds take their own initiative is the one from interview D1, where the child is the one asking the mother to help her in doing extra activities to reinforce learning. The child was

also near the mother during the interview, correcting her when something she said was not accurate.

*"she likes to study so much that sometimes I even get irritated (laughs). She sometimes gets a sheet of paper with a pencil for me to do the math and then she does it (child corrects behind) ... yes, sometimes I dictate, say some things to her, she writes. She brings the paper and pencil, and I dictate to her, and she writes. Then she shows it to me to see if it is well written or not. I also do the math with  $2+2$  and then I put  $=$  and she will tell me how much it is, if it is 4 or what it is." (D1)*

These findings seem to provide an example in line with existing literature which states that "some facets of academic excellence are not based on cultural heritage in the strict sense, but rather on "strategic skills" that can be acquired by the student" (Nogueira, 2017).

Parents were also questioned about the provision of external support, before and during the period of school closures, which can happen through private tutoring, participation in a "study center" or in a CAF centre (Family Support Component), more commonly known by ATL, and usually located at school. According to a document emitted by the Ministry of Education, the CAF is "the set of activities designed to ensure the monitoring of students in the 1st cycle of basic education before and/or after the components of the curriculum and the AEC, as well as during periods of school interruption." (Ministério da Educação e Ciência, 2015). This service is not free of charge for parents.

When asked about their use of this service, mothers from school B provided very different answers. Mother B2 mentioned that it would have been too much for the child to have to spend extra hours in school (from 5 to 7 pm) and therefore did not see positive aspects of the CAF. Mother B5 thought that there are very few educators for many children in these places. Contrarily, mother B4, whose child is a user of CAF, mentioned that it was a great help since the child could do all her homework there. Interestingly, answers from some of the mothers highlighted how the opportunity to have external support was highly conditioned by families' economic capital. Mother B1 said that she would have liked her children to attend because *"it helps a lot, for homework and a lot of things"*. However, she has no means to pay for it given that she is currently unemployed. Mother D1 mentioned the same financial hardship regarding having her child in the study centre.

*"I've thought of putting her in the study center, but I still don't know if I'm going to do it or not, because they charge (a lot) ... life is complicated." (D1)*

One of the extra interviews was particularly pertinent to highlight how mothers with higher cultural and economic capital are able to mobilize it to release some of the stress caused by the need to support the child's learning (Duru-Bellat, Farges and van Zanten, 2018), particularly during the period of distance learning. Mother F1 commented:

*"So you can see the difference between parents who have the capacity to give emotional and physical support, being present, or having the monetary means necessary to provided that*

*support (...), and those who don't. I make an effort so that my child has this support and succeeds, but I know there are parents who can't..." (F1)*

## *ii. Children's leisure activities*

Taking into account the literature which analyses how some parents use free time activities to reinforce capacities that the school values and how research has shown class inequalities on this subject (Lareau, 2011) it seemed important to enquire about the kind of activities that children did in their spare time. This is even more relevant because, with distance learning, especially the first period in which there was less time for synchronous classes with teachers, children had a considerable amount of free time.

A study published in Germany in October 2020 (Grewenig *et al.*, 2020) analysed the linkage between students' educational achievement and the types of activities they did at home during school closures. Although this study did not focus on SES inequalities, the typology developed by the authors seems to be of relevance since it divides activities developed at home into three groups: 1) school-related activities; 2) activities conducive to child development (such as reading, arts, playing music or doing sports); and 3) activities detrimental to child development (such as watching TV, playing computer games and consuming social media). All parents in school A were particularly aware of what would constitute activities conducive to child development and what could constitute detrimental activities. When asked about the family's activities, the parents' answers from the two schools differed substantially. While parents in school A mentioned outdoor activities (jogging, playing basketball, playing outside etc.) and board games as the kind of activities that they do in the family, families in school B referred to dancing, tickling, or doing traditional games such as "tag", "hide and seek" or "Stop" (a word game), as well as games that the children learn in school. Only mother B5 mentioned, similarly to mothers in school B, doing sports, board games, as well as experiment kits for children.

Among the activities conducive to child development mentioned by parents in school A, reading seems to be the one to which parents gave more attention, with many of them stating that their children had an established reading routine. All parents were asked about the reading habits of their children and the role that they took. On this topic, it seems interesting to mobilise the concepts of "concerted cultivation" and "natural growth" (Lareau, 2011). While in school A, parents mentioned reading as an activity in which they particularly wanted children to engage, mothers in school B (except mother B5) often mentioned reading as a "playing" activity that the child decides to do autonomously, referring back to the idea of "natural growth".

*"(...) I like them to read and we established this routine, they have been reading a lot (...) before they did not have this habit so much because they came home tired from school but now, even the youngest one, they read a little every day and that is great, they read a lot"*  
(A5)

*"No, I never had the habit of reading, I may tell stories but without reading ... but well, they have a lot of books, from time to time they grab a book and ask "mum read me this", but it is not an habit" (B2)*

*"(...) she had the habit, when she was in school, of requesting books to be able to read at home" (B3)*

On the subject of concerted cultivation, parents from school A also revealed knowledge of relevant information regarding other topics around pedagogics. Mother A1 mentioned that, as she works a lot on the area of "conscious parenting", she does not like to use the word "punishment" very much. She also said several times how she believes that the purpose of education, both inside and outside the classroom, is to stimulate the child's creativity. On pedagogics, other parents mentioned the importance of using paper and not only digital devices in order to "stimulate the child's fine motor skills" (A2) or of encouraging the child to do some crafts (A6). These activities were often presented as alternatives to screens, which according to these parents, is something already too present in children's lives these days.

Given current trends, it was no surprise that children would spend a lot of their free time using technologies (mainly smartphones and tablets) for non-educational purposes. Both in school A and school B parents reported that their children spent long hours using smartphones.

*"(...) at this moment, as I'm working for more time and I come home very late and usually I'm the one who controls this, I can say that they spend 70% of time on technologies" (B5)*

Something which was mentioned with a lot of frequency was the usage of Tik Tok, a social network that allows users to share short videos of them acting. Some of the children in both schools seemed to spend most of their online time on this platform. Some mothers mentioned that they bought their child a smartphone because they would spend so much time on the mothers' device that they would not be able to use it themselves. Despite this fact, most mothers who mentioned this platform showed awareness of the need to control the time spent and the content seen.

*"I joke with her and say "where did you learn that?" and she tells me "in the encyclopedia", because I now say that Tik Tok is the encyclopedia here at home ... because she comes to ask me things she sees in Tik Tok and she thinks that everything that appears there is true ... and so I had to get those myths out of her head (...) so it's very dangerous, it can be fun for them to have fun and dance but there's another very complicated side to it that has to be managed by the parents because they absorb the information that comes from there in a frightening way (...)" (A2)*

*"(...) I control who she follows, who follows her ... Tik Tok is the only thing that she has ... otherwise she has no Facebook, no Instagram, no nothing ..." (B2)*

The way children use these forms of social media, needs to be linked with the literature on digital capital, according to which it corresponds to "the accumulation of digital competencies (information, communication, safety, content-creation and problem-solving), and digital technology." (Ragnedda, 2018). Interestingly, both in school A and school B, children appear as content-creators, creating their own videos on Tik Tok and YouTube. It also seems relevant to highlight how this activity seems to be present among children of all social classes and how it goes in line with the literature which highlights how the rise of the "culture of mass" contributed to "weaken the opposition between what is legitimate and what is illegitimate in culture" (Nogueira, 2017).

In school A, all parents reported imposing limits on screen time, even when not directly asked this question. They often mentioned trying to develop other activities that replaced time spent in front of screens, such as making the child play outside. In school B, three of the mothers mentioned trying to control the amount of time spent using the smartphone by taking it away from the child. However, they do not mention which activities the child is supposed to do during that time, which can include, for example, watching TV, something that was mentioned as a common activity. Both in school A and school B, some mothers shared the impression of feeling some "guilt" regarding the amount of time that they allow their children to use technologies or the fact that they even bought their child a smartphone. This was noticed by how mothers try to justify themselves (A2, B4, F1). When discussing this topic, most families mentioned how children are particularly prompt to spending all their free time using smartphones or tablets, even after having long periods of screen time due to synchronous classes. Although this was already a trend before the COVID-19 pandemic, further research should analyse how school closures may have increased children's dependency on these technological devices.

Regarding the topic of extra-curricular activities, it is not possible to make a proper comparison since parents were not directly asked about this. However, it is interesting to note that both schools offered a broad range of AECs (curricular enrichment activities conducted at schools), which is particularly relevant for school B, where these offers are part of the municipality's policies to improve circumstances in the neighbourhood. Recent research on this topic found that "the effects of COVID-19 on these kinds of activities have also increased the gap between socially-advantaged and socially-disadvantaged children." (Bonal and González, 2020). However, mother B2 mentioned how her child was able to keep participating in her violin classes during the confinement. It is also relevant to consider that, in the case of school B, taking part in these development-conducive activities, is often a choice of the child and is not something the parents impose, as stated by the mothers interviewed. This reveals how school policies can play an important role in mitigating class divisions among the lines presented by Lareau (Lareau, 2011). Nevertheless, given the fact that the development of AECs is still highly dependent on municipalities and parents' associations, it is possible that the scenario is not the same in all TEIP schools, especially those integrated into municipalities where there are a lot of schools in need, which is not the case of school B, being one of the few schools in this municipality on the TEIP list.

Interestingly, two of the parents from school A mentioned having withdrawn the children from AECs at the start of the second period of distance learning, arguing that, after spending so many hours in front of the computer in the asynchronous classes (around five hours per day), they preferred the child do something off-screen after that period. This also applies to the provision of extra work, which these parents reduced at the start of the distance learning period, to avoid “overcharging” their children.

### *iii. Learning environment*

The quantitative study conducted in Portugal (Esteves *et al.*, 2021) gave particular importance to students' learning environments by highlighting statistics regarding their housing conditions. While this data also included rural areas (which are not covered in this analysis), it is important to consider that 15,5% of the children under 12 years old in Portugal live in overcrowded housing and 6,5% live in an area of crime, violence or vandalism. The authors also stated that, while the child poverty rate for a "typical family" was 12,9%, this number increased to 30,2% in numerous families and 33,9% in single-parent families.

One of the key differences among families from school A and school B is indeed linked to the housing conditions since in school B, four out of five families mentioned living with extended family members. Only family B2, which was also a numerous family, composed by the parents and their five children, did not share the house with extended family members.

*"Yes, I live with the grandparents from the side of the father and my brother-in-law" (B1)*  
*"(...) my children, plus my nephew, my sister and my brother, my father and my mother" (B3)*  
*"I live with my mother and in the weekends my nephews come here" (B4)*  
*"We live the three, the grandfather, the father and the uncles" (B5)*

Therefore, in school B, most children shared their rooms with siblings, cousins, or their mother. Although this question was not directly asked to parents in school A, since those interviews took place beforehand, none of the parents mentioned living with extended family.

Regarding the room used to study, in primary school, for both parents in school A and B, it seems suitable that children use the living room to study. Parents justified this choice by mentioning that the children still need a lot of support, and that way, they are closer to them while they telework or do housework. It seems relevant to cross the results from this research with the results of the study from IAVE, according to which 20% of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students reported not having a quiet space to study.

To better understand the children's routines, parents were asked to describe the normal day of the child during the confinement. Here, the most striking difference between families of the two schools was the length of the answers provided. In the long answers provided by

most parents in school A, a detailed description of the child's daily routine was presented, with details of almost every hour and even half-hour. For instance, some parents described paying specific attention to the fact that their kids dress up for classes. Literature on this topic mentions that "parents often establish routines for homework completion (...) thereby establishing elements of the field of school within the field of home" (Fitzmaurice, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020). The interviews conducted with the teachers reveal how this practice is appreciated and in line with the expectations that schools had from families during this period. As the quote below shows, the lack of a clear routine during the period of distance learning was seen by the teacher of school B as one of the most detrimental aspects:

*"What we notice even when we are in synchronous classes, is that there are really no conditions in the houses .... there is a lot of noise, a lot of people live there, we even see people walking (laughs) in their pyjamas (...) a lot of noise, shouting, the children are in bed sometimes while having class, many of them are eating, others are watching TV (...) I think that distance learning has created greater inequality, not because of lack of equipment (...) it's more the conditions they have" (Teacher Coordinator, school B)*

#### *iv. Communication between home and school*

According to the literature (Kohl, Lengua and McMahon, 2000; Walker and Berthelsen, 2013; Hartas, 2015; Fitzmaurice, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020), one of the important components of parental involvement is communication between home and school. In the context of school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, this aspect seems to be of particular relevance given the fact that children's learning is dependent on these communications, especially at the primary school level, as student's digital competencies were "still too low to participate in remote learning without parental support." (Carretero *et al.*, 2021).

When asked about their relationship with the teacher, all the parents reported being satisfied and able to quickly reach out to the teacher by e-mail, phone or WhatsApp. In school A, some of the mothers were particularly satisfied, revealing high levels of trust in the teacher.

*"She is excellent ... excellent excellent, the teacher is fantastic and really they are blessed by the teacher they have." A1*

*"(...) she is very attentive, she is very patient ... she is like they say, the best teacher in the world" A3*

However, an important limitation of this research is the fact that this question would have brought a more important contribution if, instead of asking whether parents were able to contact teachers when necessary, it had focused on how often they mentioned having contacted the teacher and for what purposes, since this would have been more enlightening to understand if there were differences in the way that parents communicated with schools

during this period. In addition, due to the selection bias mentioned in the methodology section, the interviews with the parents were not very revealing on this topic since teachers seemed to have provided the phone numbers of those with whom they were more often in contact. However, the portrait done by teachers during the interview is extremely relevant and needs to be analysed, taking into account how the teachers associated parental involvement with the parents' ethnic origins.

According to Lareau, "because of the cultural alignment between parents and schools, middle-class parents tend to adopt proactive, interventionist behaviours" (Fitzmaurice, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020). On this topic, it is interesting to mobilise literature that highlights how in disadvantaged areas, "the questioning of family modes of socialisation is such that it prevents these "families" from being considered (...) as real actors in the educational process" (van Zanten, 2001). An example is how both of the teachers from school A and school B clearly divide parents into those "who care" and those "who do not", something which frequently happened across lines of ethnicity and professional prestige:

*"The rest of the students did their homework every day, they were always very participative in class, they rarely missed classes, I had the one student who borrowed the tablet, until he borrowed the tablet he couldn't attend class, he never sent his homework ... he is a kid who also doesn't have any support at home (...) his parents don't work, they are of the Roma ethnicity and were at home with him ..." - Teacher, School A*

When asked if this was related to parents' levels of education, the teacher replied, *"Yes, and culture"*. Similarly, the teacher from school B described how communications with parents from the Roma community were extremely complex. It is interesting to point out how both teachers (schools A and B) and parents from school A seem to more easily "excuse" the lack of parental involvement of mothers from the PALOP by mentioning how the economic precarity faced by these mothers may lead them to have multiple jobs, which imply schedules that force them to leave children alone for many hours. The teacher from school B stressed that, while she believes that hardships faced by African-descendant families are more related to their working conditions, in the case of the Roma community, it is the result of a lack of interest in education, which she links with the low levels of parental education. Relatedly, the teacher mentioned how very few parents participated in webinars organised by the municipality on the topic of parenthood during confinement and linked it to the parent's profession:

*"The majority of these parents do not register, there may be one or another, but there you go, we already have one or two children who are the children of teachers or educators ... Unfortunately, these are people who are more concerned with the education of their children." (Teacher, School B)*

These two interviews revealed important tensions between the teaching body and marginalized communities, with an important prevalence of common stereotypes shared by the teaching body of different schools. Teachers' discourses on cultural differences are also highlighted in the literature (van Zanten, 2001). According to the Portuguese sociologist



Cristina Roldão, the sociology of education in Portugal has been focusing on the theories of class while "being colour blind" (Roldão, 2019). The awareness of the need to develop statistics that include an ethnic dimension has been given increasing attention in recent times since it is now widely recognized, including at the government level, that this would allow an understanding of the way in which structural racism shapes the labour market and the education system.

The interviews conducted with the teachers and parents from school A revealed the prevalence of prejudice among teachers and parents towards families from the Roma community. One example that illustrates this is how one of the schools refused to provide a replacement device to a student from the Roma community, who broke her computer, leading the child to have no access to distance learning. Although a rule which only guarantees the provision of one computer per child is understandable given the lack of devices, it seems nevertheless relevant to question whether this situation would take place with a child of another background, given the fact that these families are commonly portrayed as "careless". Recently, the impact of ethnic and racial prejudices in education has been receiving more attention and important recommendations that aim at guiding educational policy on this matter have been produced<sup>5</sup>.

Another aspect that seems to be important to consider is communication between parents themselves. The literature mentions that when parents meet other parents, these "provide information and insights about the school that inform their own efforts to engage with the school." (Walker and Berthelsen, 2013). Therefore, we can assume that the existence of a network of parents within a school can be defined as social capital and is something which produces positive outcomes for the children. As described by Bourdieu, an individual's social capital is determined by the size or number of networks, the capital that its members possess, and the individual's ability to benefit from them (Bourdieu, 1986).

In school A, some mothers communicated on WhatsApp to discuss with each other about situations linked to the COVID-19 situation in school (A3). Interestingly, it was in the most disadvantaged contexts that these communications seem to translate into actual support. In school B one of the mothers revealed that a classmate's mother asked her to help her child. When asked if that request emerged because this mother was not at home or because she had a low level of education, mother B5 said that she was home, but *"she just didn't have much patience"*. When asked if this was a burden, the mother replied: *"where one learns, two learn, three learn"*. Two of the extra interviews (E1 and E2) also revealed how a mother supported the mother of her daughter's classmate by providing her not only with information but also in-kind support with food and clothing. Taking this finding into account, it seems interesting to further explore how enhancing communication between parents could foster better levels of parental involvement.

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<sup>5</sup> Recommendation of the National Council of Education on "Citizenship and Antiracist education" (Menezes, Brocardo and Malho, 2020) and the recent National Plan Against Racism, released in April 2021

### *Subjective perceptions of the distance learning period*

Finally, it also seemed important to ask parents about their subjective perceptions of this period. Even if elements contributing to this analysis were raised several times during the interviews, a particular question was asked, almost always with the same structuring: *"In a ten years-time, when you look back to this time of school closures, could you identify what would be a positive and a negative memory?"*

Interestingly, mothers from the same school, and consequently with similar levels of education, tended to have similar answers. In school A, almost all the parents were unanimous in pointing out the possibility of having more family time together as the positive memory. On the other hand, they pointed to the harmful impact on their children's learning and emotional wellbeing as the negative memory. The exception was mother A3, who, having been at home for a long time, mentioned the division of house tasks as a positive memory and the impossibility of doing activities outside as a negative memory. In school B, while two of the mothers also mentioned the possibility of spending more time with their children as a positive memory, two others interestingly said that the positive memory is the fact that their children were still able to learn despite the lockdown. One of the mothers said that a very positive point was being able to spend more time with her children, allowing for more meaningful conversations.

*"(...) about school, about her, about things that she is now beginning to discover, isn't it ... she is becoming a little woman ... well these were things that we had no time to speak about before, life was a race ... (now) I had more time to sit down, listen, cause I did not have so much patience before... now I have all the time in the world to listen to what they want, what they think, what they believe ..." (B2)*

This case seems to work as a perfect example that confirms the conclusions in the literature, which mentions that "class position does not necessarily guarantee the ways in which emotional capital is mobilised" (Hutchison, 2012). It also brings to light the fact that the working conditions of some of the parents in normal times constituted a major obstacle to greater involvement in their children's education.

Finally, this research interestingly showed how some mothers from school B revealed an interest in learning, often finding it useful to listen to their children's classes. (B1, B2, D1). Mother B2 said

*"I also learn from the teacher ... because besides being a teacher she also educates the kids (...) she puts them in the line" (B2)*

While in school B listening to the classes seems to be a passive action, the teacher from school A mentioned how having the parents listening to the classes could become uncomfortable if they decided to intervene, giving the example of the father of one of the children, who interrupted her during the class to correct something that she was explaining to the students. Although this only happened to her once, the teacher mentioned that some

colleagues had had similar experiences. This anecdotal situation raises awareness about the extent to which distance learning blurs the lines between home and school and the kind of negative effects which can result.

### *An exceptional case*

The interview conducted with mother B5 seems to bring an important contribution in confirming the hypothesis that mothers' level of education had a strong influence on their capacity to support children's learning and the type of leisure activities provided. This mother, although being in the group with a lower level of education, combined with other unfavourable socio-economic factors such as her working status and migrant background, provided answers that were closer to the ones of mothers with higher levels of education. Interestingly, she even added comments regarding strategies of school choice. The explanation for this exception may be the fact that mother B5 is currently studying to obtain her secondary education, which reinforces the hypothesis that the mother's level of education had an impact on the way mothers were able to support their children during distance learning. Another interesting insight from this interview was how she supported another mother at her child's school.

### *Other significant constraints that generated inequalities*

Although not directly linked to the research question, this research revealed other important aspects that need to be considered as evidence that can guide public policies aiming to promote parental involvement in education to achieve a more equitable education system in post-COVID times. These aspects include the parents' working statuses/conditions, the different ways in which distance learning was implemented, and as often mentioned, inequalities in access to devices. All of these constituted factors that differently shaped the ways that families engaged with distance learning during the period under analysis.

This research shows how the working status of parents had an impact on their time availability during the period of school closures. We can consider three types of situations: 1) parents whose occupations allowed them to telework (usually those which required more qualifications); 2) parents whose occupations were interrupted with no possibility of teleworking (leading to situations of lay-off or unemployment), and 3) parents whose occupations continued despite the confinement. In this sample, most mothers from school B had occupations that were interrupted with no possibility of teleworking, such as waitress, hairdresser and education assistant (see Table 1). Given the fact that, in this given sample, parents who usually had more time to be with their children had to telework, while parents who usually had jobs with less regular schedules (e.g. leaving too early and/or arriving too late, working on the weekend, etc.) could not telework, it seems relevant to discuss whether this may have impacted the results and to what extent it attenuated inequalities between the

two groups of parents under comparison. An analysis of the impact of changes in parents' availability merits further research.

It is also necessary to mention how the working conditions of parents in Portugal seem to be dependent on a division of labour that follows racial lines, with many of the jobs which had to continue despite the confinement (e.g., cleaning, security) being undertaken by parents with a migrant background, namely from the PALOP (Neves *et al.*, 2016), which reinforced already existing inequalities.

At the same time, on the topic of teleworking, both mother A1 and A5 mentioned how it could also allow for more flexibility, one of them having explained how she asked for a change in her working schedule in order to be able to support her child in the morning during the first distance learning period. Interestingly, in the discourse of mother A5, the theme of "guilt" appeared three times linked to the time spent with the child:

*"I have to confess that as we are both working, there is a part of the day in which they are a bit in self-management (...) Maybe if we were not so busy, I would do a little more follow-up, correct everything ... but that's the way it is, that's what it is" (A5)*

Mothers A1, A2 and A6 also mentioned how hard it was to reconcile telework with their child's needs, pointing to this as the major source of stress, especially during the first confinement, in which the number of synchronous classes was reduced. It also seems necessary to highlight the gender dimension of this situation. In interview A6, when the father was asked to describe how he did the correction of homework, he mentioned:

*"That part of the support was: imagine I was a bit overworked, then I would ask her (the wife) and it would be at the end of the day when the mother arrived that she would correct ... if not, if I was more relaxed, yes, I would see, correct, remove the doubts that needed to be removed, those doubts in which it is often necessary to give them a little push so that they begin to reason a little differently ..." (A6)*

This seems to be in line with the literature, according to which the supervision of school work is more often a female activity, whereby "fathers limit themselves to signing the notebook or giving 'a helping hand' in various subjects" (Duru-Bellat, Farges and van Zanten, 2018). It also seems to validate the literature that supported the definition of mothers' levels of education as the independent variable.

Perhaps one of the factors that contributed the most to inequalities during this period, was how schools implemented distance learning differently, both in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> periods of distance learning, despite the general guidelines from the Ministry of Education. Although in the main sample of this analysis only the interviews from two schools were considered, discussions with parents and/or teachers from the other eight schools were extremely relevant for understanding the broader reality. For example, while school A and B had a minimum of one hour of synchronous classes per day in the first confinement, there were no synchronous classes at all in school C. At the start of the second period of distance learning, students from

school A were having five hours of classes per day, students from school B were having two hours per day, and students at school C were only having one hour, two times per week. In addition, distance learning in school C only started two weeks later than the official date.

The rationale behind not providing synchronous classes in school C was that some children did not have access to digital devices and therefore this would increase inequalities between students. However, it seems necessary to consider how inequalities between students in different schools may have significantly increased during this period, as a result. It seems reasonable to assume that, as has happened in other countries (Bonal and González, 2020), "the instructional time received by students from different social backgrounds has been unequal". Therefore, this situation highlights the need to guarantee a common implementation of future policies, which may be challenging given the framework of the recently implemented guidelines concerning school autonomy. It also seems relevant to question the extent to which parents who were more involved in schooling may have created a sort of pressure concerning distance learning. In this sense, one of the limitations of this research is that it does not consider private schools.

Although this research aimed to go beyond access to digital devices, it is still necessary to briefly analyse this dimension. While students in school B had immediate access to devices in the first period of school closures, as explained earlier, this was linked to the exceptional fact that the municipality had already implemented a project and acquired the devices and does not seem to reflect the reality of the rest of the country. In other schools, the delay in acquiring and distributing the computers among students with school social action led many children, as was the case of school C, to only have access to printed materials and the television program "Estudo em Casa". A study conducted by the Educational Evaluation Institute (IAVE) in January 2021 revealed that from March to June 2020, almost a fifth of all the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students did not have access to a computer (Serrão, Simões and Pereira dos Santos, 2021). Some of the extra interviews conducted for this research are particularly relevant in highlighting hardships faced by parents whose children were not in schools where computers were immediately available when schools closed. Mother D1 explained how, at the start of the second period of distance learning in February 2021, because her daughter was the last one on the list of students with the right to benefit from a computer, she had to buy one resorting to a credit line. Access to devices was a complex question, not only for the families which previously had no computers at home but also for families that, despite not facing any particular hardships, were unable to buy multiple devices at the same time, which was necessary if parents were teleworking and there were other siblings in schooling age.

The Portuguese government implemented several policies at the start of the second period of distance learning, aiming to address some of the problems mentioned above. These include not only the attempt to provide universal access to digital devices to all students but also the publishing of clear instructions regarding the time for synchronous and asynchronous classes (02/02/2021); the enlargement of "reception" schools to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, which were signalled by their teachers (08/02/2021); or the possibility for

parents who telework to be able to receive their salaries at 100%, instead of 60%, through the regime of assistance to family (17/02/2021).

By highlighting how inequalities between students increased due to school closures, this research contributes to the discussion which questions the deterministic vision of the theory of reproduction and emphasizes the capacity of schools to attenuate socio-economic inequalities if the right school policies are put in place. Longitudinal studies (Duru-Bellat, Jarousse and Mingat, 1993; de Almeida *et al.*, 2021) reveal how inequalities are built up throughout the schooling process, as the gap widens with the advancement of the years of education. This reinforces the idea that it is crucial to intervene at the primary school level and highlights the potential of change that these interventions wield.

Little was known about the impact of the situation at the start of this research in January 2021. Although important information was published before the submission of this thesis (Serrão, Simões and Pereira dos Santos, 2021) and multiple recommendations were suggested (Carvalho *et al.*, 2021), the added value of this work is that it analysed the experiences of parents during the second period of distance learning in real time. While the novelty of this study constitutes one of its stronger points, the constant evolution of the situation and the initial lack of literature on this topic represent important challenges.

## **VI. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

The main goal of this research was to understand how and why the COVID-19 crisis reinforced pre-existing inequalities related to mothers' level of education in the European country with the highest proportion of adults without an upper secondary education. Although other socio-economic factors, such as economic capital and working conditions also played an important role, mothers' level of education appears to have been an essential factor in the way mothers were able to provide learning support to their children during the period of school closures. It also seems to have an influence on the type of leisure activities and learning environment offered to the children, as well as in the way that families communicated with the school, although the results of this research were less conclusive on this last point.

Given the fact that this is an analysis of a crisis period, which is expected to be temporary, it seems that policy recommendations need to have a vision that goes beyond the crisis and consider how these inequalities could be tackled in the post-COVID era, acknowledging current trends in the digitalisation of education and incorporating recent knowledge about the negative effects of depriving children of school space. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to take into account that, given the current scenarios related to climate change, it is possible that situations like this will happen again in the future, and the state needs to be prepared to provide a better answer to this kind of emergency. Considering that this research revealed how different schools provided very different learning opportunities during school closures and how this may have impacted disadvantaged students the most, it seems necessary to guarantee that this would not be the case in a future emergency.

The main result of this research seems to be the fact that differences in parental involvement are more connected with mothers' competencies in providing substantive help than with their predisposition to spend time supporting their children. Therefore, as mentioned by Hartas, "the focus of policy should be on supporting parents to enhance the quality of the learning support they already provide to their children to sustain a culture of learning across primary and secondary school years." (Hartas, 2015). Public policies that aim at increasing parental involvement should therefore empower parents – especially those who had fewer educational opportunities – but at the same time refrain from passing the responsibility for children's learning onto families.

With the increasing digitalisation of education, middle-class families will eventually mobilise their capital towards a higher consumption of digital solutions in the area of personalised learning. Facing these new trends, it seems necessary to guarantee that the emergency of hybrid learning does not "serve as a mechanism to further advantage those students who already experience some privilege" (Lutz and Lakshmi, 2015), as has been the case with homework. To prevent increasing gaps, digital learning technologies should be defined as public goods, allowing all children to have access to them and all parents to be able to provide the necessary support to use them. This is particularly relevant because the research also found that one of the key differences between families of the two schools which may have exponentiated inequalities during the period of school closures was parents'

capacity to provide extra work to the children when they felt that school was not demanding enough. While at the broader level, the implications of this digitalisation should be further researched and taken into account, the COVID-19 crisis revealed the necessity of taking concrete actions that prevent this trend from exacerbating already existing inequalities related to the increasing reliance on parental support in education.

Therefore, while providing recommendations that aim to reduce inequalities in parental involvement considering the increasing usage of technologies in education, it is necessary to consider to what extent this is a desirable trend. According to Hartas, "as neoliberal economic restructuring policies advance discourses of individual governance and self-responsibility, parents, mothers in particular, are held accountable for their children's success or failure with regards to academic achievement" (Hartas, 2015). While digital technologies could indeed empower parents to better support their children, these should not be seen as a replacement of school, which shall continue to be a central place of socialisation in children's lives. On the contrary, future scenarios (OECD, 2020a) which portray the schools of tomorrow as learning hubs that mobilize parents and the community towards lifelong learning seem to present a brighter side of digitalization than those who describe the future of education as a scenario of hyper-individualisation in which each student learns at home.

## **1. Empower parents through lifelong learning**

The findings from this research highlight that some of the hardships faced by parents with lower levels of education could be attenuated if they had access to more information. As previously mentioned, at this level of education, differences in parental involvement regarding learning support seem to be more related to the quality of support and the confidence to support than the willingness to do so. In addition, this research demonstrated how mothers with lower levels of education showed an interest in learning, with some listening to the children's classes and reporting how this also allowed them to learn.

On this matter, digital technologies could indeed be seen as a lifelong learning tool to empower parents in supporting their children. Although digital capital is also linked to cultural capital, the interviews revealed how parents with lower levels of education mentioned using digital tools such as search engines to support their children during the period of school closures. Therefore, it seems necessary to envision ways to provide quality information, both on school-related content and pedagogical aspects, that could empower parents who, during this crisis, did not feel knowledgeable enough to support their children, as mentioned by some during the interviews.

There seem to be multiple approaches to implementing programs that foster parental competencies. In Portugal, these are often implemented at the local level, for example, by foundations, associations, or municipalities, and seem to mainly target "families at risk". Interestingly, in 2020, the Portuguese government presented the "Digital Academy for



Parents", a program that would allow parents of children in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle from schools in the TEIP programme to attend training sessions promoting digital skills. According to the General Directorate of Education, "the aim is to provide families with basic digital skills that will make it easier for them to keep up with their children at school and also provide them with integration tools, which are essential in today's society". It is also stressed that the program "intends to combat existing socio-economic asymmetries, in the imminence of contingency situations that require the suspension of classroom-based school activities". As previously mentioned, one of the goals of this research was to conduct direct observations of this program, which was expected to take place from January to March 2021 but was cancelled due to the strict lockdown during this period. Given the fact that the initiative did not take place, it seems necessary to highlight how this research revealed that it would be important to re-schedule it.

Training sessions with a similar format (happening in school, with a duration of eight hours spread through several weeks) could also include other topics such as information about how to guarantee children's safety while using technologies; recommendations about social media usage and limits to screen time; suggestions of playing activities that are conducive for child development, amongst others. As mentioned by the teacher from school B, these training sessions should not take the form of webinars or be extremely technical, as this would probably restrict the audience to a specific category of parents. An engaging communication would be key to guarantee the presence of the parents who would benefit from it the most.

Finally, the interview with mother B5 seems to suggest that increasing parents' levels of education may have a direct impact on their capacity to engage with their children's learning. Since the early 2000s, the Portuguese Government has been promoting different programs seeking to extend the minimum level of education of the adult population up to the 12th grade (e.g., "Novas Oportunidades", "Qualifica"). It appears to be highly relevant to continue to promote these programs, especially among parents of school-aged children. Bringing parents back to "school" in a lifelong learning perspective may have significant impacts since, as stated by Walker and Berthelsen (2013), "parents' own working models of school, a combination of recollections of their own school experiences and their attitudes, values, and beliefs about school, influence parenting involvement".

## **2. Develop quality digital learning content accessible for all**

Given that many of the mothers from school B mentioned using search engines to look for questions when they did not know something, it would be of interest to empower parents to use these tools in the most effective way possible, allowing them to increase their knowledge of the curriculum. This could be offered through the development of a repository of quality digital learning content. Similarly to what was done with the website "Apoio às

escolas" (Support to schools)<sup>6</sup>, the Ministry of Education could design a website entitled "Apoio às famílias" (Support to families). This should be designed in a user-friendly and engaging manner, unlike the current website which aims to support schools with learning resources.

On the topic of digital content, digital learning platforms such as "Escola Virtual" should not be reserved only for families who can afford it. While private companies have developed most of the existing tools, it is urgent that the state ensures digital learning content to be considered a public good. This could happen by state-led investment in innovation in educational technology and the promotion of Open Educational Resources (OER).

Some of this digital learning content could also be specifically targeted to parents, covering curricular content but also a broad range of pedagogical information. Taking advantage of the use that many parents do of social media, could also be of interest to promote targeted digital content with information (tips & suggestions) on parental practices through these means.

### **3. Minimize gaps in learning opportunities during out-of-school time**

As revealed by this research, the period of school closures significantly increased inequalities between students due to the different opportunities that were provided to them. This was particularly relevant during the period of "school holidays" in January 2021, which followed the regular Christmas holidays and was particularly harmful to the most disadvantaged students. In the absence of clear guidelines from teachers, many parents found themselves not knowing what they were supposed to do regarding their children's learning. During this time, as revealed by this research, parents with higher levels of education provided significant learning support, namely by facilitating new learning content, as they considered that the learning process should not be interrupted.

Existing literature on the period of summer holidays (Alexander et al., 2001) highlights how schooling interruptions increase learning gaps between students depending on their socio-economic backgrounds. As mentioned previously, this is particularly relevant considering that Portugal has one of the longest summer holidays in Europe. It seems therefore necessary to overcome the idea of a three-month academic break during which there is no communication between school and families. While an evident suggestion would be to shorten summer holidays, additional measures which strengthen school-parents communication and offer out-of-school learning opportunities for all children could minimise inequalities during this period.

As mentioned by the International Commission on the Futures of Education (2021), to ensure effective teaching, teachers "will need to engage in much collaborative work, both within the profession and in relationship with other groups", such as families. As the COVID-

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<sup>6</sup> <https://apoioescolas.dge.mec.pt/Recursos>

19 pandemic seems to have increased communication between families and teachers, it seems appropriate to seize the momentum to further improve on this subject, and eventually extend this collaboration beyond the duration of the academic year. As this research revealed, namely through the interview with the teacher from school B, public policies that enhance teacher's capacities to work with families seem to be crucial to face current challenges of communication. As stated by the literature, “teachers need to be skilled in knowing how to involve parents” (Walker and Berthelsen, 2013). On this point, it seems extremely necessary to promote positive interactions, such as those which celebrate children’s successes. This seems particularly relevant since in the case of some marginalised communities, interactions between home and school generally focus on negative aspects of a student’s schooling, which necessarily has negative consequences on how families perceive school. As stated by the National Council of Education (Menezes, Brocardo and Malho, 2020), teacher training needs to address common stereotypes towards these communities, such as those identified in this research.

It is also necessary to take into account how periods in which children have no contact with school may be even more harmful for children with a migrant background who are not yet fluent in Portuguese, since their contact with the language is drastically reduced. One of the mothers interviewed mentioned how her daughter’s level of Portuguese was decreasing due to the periods that she is not in school, especially while there were no synchronous classes. To equip children whose Portuguese is not their mother tongue with digital tools that would allow them to practice with a teacher during periods of school holidays could be an impactful intervention.

As this study has shown, the possibility for parents to have access to paid external support for their children’s education is still highly dependent on the family’s economic capital, leading many children to spend after school time or the holidays supervised by family members, mostly grandparents, without having access to a diversified set of activities and learning opportunities. It seems therefore necessary to rethink the strategy for social responses in the field of family support<sup>7</sup>, in order to guarantee that a family’s income is not a factor that affects a child’s possibility to have learning support after school in the ATL/CAF centres or to take part in enriching activities during the holidays. A strategy which considers the level of the School Social Action of the child, providing for example free access for students with the level A, should be adopted. In addition, given the fact that children have different opportunities to participate in conducive learning activities during summer breaks, depending on their families’ income, it also seems important to underscore the need to guarantee a wider offering of free activities, which should also include the families. It seems relevant to highlight that most museums are not free of charge in Portugal. One possible action could be to offer a voucher book which would allow families to participate in educational activities during the summer holidays, such as going to the oceanarium, to a museum, etc. However, to guarantee that the most marginalised families take advantage of this opportunity, labour laws that promote work-life balance would have to be strengthened, especially for the most precarious jobs.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.dge.mec.pt/enquadramento-7>

#### **4. Promote the development of networks of parents that foster mutual support**

As this research revealed, some children seem to have benefitted from the support of mothers of classmates during the period of distance learning (B5 and E1/E2), which may have generated significant positive effects for the children being supported. Therefore, it would be relevant to explore what kind of measures could be implemented to foster a sense of community, promote mutual support and exchange of information among parents. Although these processes seem to occur mostly in a natural way, research on how to trigger them in the Portuguese context would be of timely interest. A recent study that evaluated an intervention that took place in the United States of America mentions that “schools can promote the development of strong parent networks by strategically embedding facilitative opportunities for relationship building within their organizational processes” (Rangel, Shoji and Gamoran, 2020). One of these “facilitative opportunities” can be for instance the provision of “resource rooms” in schools, where parents can meet each other.

An example of an intervention that could be of relevance in Portugal would be to transform the dynamics of the regular teacher-parents meetings, which usually consist of a one-way conversation where the teacher shares information regarding students’ grades and behaviour, and parents do not necessarily interact with each other. It appears urgent to promote more interactive sessions that would allow parents to exchange their concerns with each other and generate common ideas for improvement, building a sense of community. As mentioned before, when parents meet other parents, these “provide information and insights about the school that inform their own efforts to engage with the school.” (Walker and Berthelsen, 2013). These sessions could be made more dynamic, for example, through team-building activities that increase parents’ feeling of belonging and raise their awareness of how valuable their implication on these matters can be. As stated by Fitzmaurice, Flynn and Hanafin (2020), parents’ motivation to become involved depends not only on teachers’ expectations and pupils’ invitations, but also on their assumptions about parental responsibility. Following Coleman’s concept of social capital, these assumptions can be shaped by social ties, which “create conditions that enable the enforcement of norms, shared values, and the flow of information and other resources” (Rangel, Shoji and Gamoran, 2020).

However, it needs to be considered that these interventions would only be fully effective if measures that tackle the high levels of segregation between schools and classrooms in Portugal, highlighted in a recently launched study (de Almeida *et al.*, 2021), are tackled first. Interestingly, a mother in school C mentioned how she was afraid that the fact that other parents were not able to support their children during the period of distance learning would have negative effects for the whole class. In order to avoid that these fears lead to even more segregation, measures promoting collaboration between families towards the achievement of better results for the whole class would be advantageous. While almost every school has its own “association of parents”, these appear as a very formal instance and, most of the time, do not seem to include the most disadvantaged parents. Therefore, new formats of engagement that go beyond these structures need to be envisioned.

As pointed out by George Felouzis, it is likely that the primary source of educational inequalities is "linked to the fact that societies are hierarchical and stratified" (Felouzis, 2014). Therefore, when reading the recommendations on this matter, it is necessary to take into account the fact that many structural changes, namely regarding the division of labour in society, would need to take place for them to be fully effective. As highlighted by the literature on the Family Stress Model, economic hardships create certain pressures which have negative consequences on family processes, namely on parent/child relationships. A lifelong learning approach would therefore only be applicable if individuals' work and life conditions allow it.

Therefore, while the conclusions of this research stress the need to empower parents through lifelong learning with the aim of reducing inequalities, this should not imply a transfer of responsibilities. According to the literature, "digital technologies are contributing to increasing demands for involvement in education that are placed on parents, reinforcing the wider norms of the intensification and professionalization of parenting." (Head, 2020). One of the mothers of school A reported how, at the beginning of the new period of synchronous classes, she was able to release some of the stress caused by the feeling that her child's education was dependent on her, since she did not have to find materials to make sure that the child would keep learning. Similarly, most parents who were active in providing learning support to their children mentioned how even when they knew the content, they did not have the methodological skills to explain it to their children as a teacher.

This research contradicts some current discourses that consider the role of school, and more precisely of the teacher, as obsolete, by highlighting the key role of educational institutions in our society, not only for learning but also other social services. The current Portuguese government seems to have been aware of this during the COVID-19 crisis. Despite numerous challenges mentioned in this paper, the Portuguese Ministry of Education conducted several efforts to attenuate inequalities generated by the context of the pandemic under the motto "We leave no one behind". While other countries in the world closed their schools yet kept other activities open, for the Portuguese Minister of Education, Tiago Brandão Rodrigues, schools always had to be "the last thing to close and the first thing to open", revealing the executive's awareness of the matters discussed in this dissertation.

Acknowledging the important role that school policies may have in attenuating inequalities, it seems essential that the country continues to design its policies with an equity dimension in mind. At this crucial moment in history, future policies need to define the school space as the centre of the education ecosystem and take advantage of the increasing usage of digital technologies to promote online and offline lifelong learning opportunities, aiming at fostering positive attitudes towards learning and empowering those who did not have full educational opportunities in the past. If concrete measures are not taken in this sense, the universal provision of digital technologies may not decrease inequalities but rather exacerbate them, as the findings of this research have shown.

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## **Annexe 1 - Guide of the semi-structured interview**

1. Presentation of the research project, which aims to understand the challenges faced by the parents of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students in supporting their children's distance learning during the period of school closures.
2. Request for parents' oral consent regarding the recording of the interview.
3. Set of general closed questions:
  - a) How many children do you have, and what are their ages and genders?
  - b) Before the first period of distance learning, how many computers/tablets were available? Were you entitled to a free computer?
  - c) Does the child study in his/her room? How many people live in the house?
  - c) What was your working status during the period of school closures?
  - d) What is the profession of the father/mother?
  - e) Until what level of education did the mother/father study?
  - f) Did at least one of the parents already know how to use distance learning tools before school closures?
  - g) Did you pick up your lunches from school during one of the two periods of school closures?
4. Set of open-ended questions to parents:
  - a) Can you describe what a typical day is like for the child during the period of school closures?
  - b) Did your child learn from the TV programme "Estudo em Casa"? Do you think it was useful?
  - c) Could you describe how you help your child with the school tasks during the periods of school closures?
  - d) Do you ever use online resources to help your child understanding content?
  - e) What is your perception of your child's learning progress? Do you feel any delay, for example, in relation to an older child that you have?
  - f) Which tool was used by the teacher to communicate with you? Could you describe your relationship with your child's teacher? Did you understand the tasks proposed by the teacher?
  - g) Do you have any contact with the parents of the students in the class? Do you have any WhatsApp groups?
  - h) Did you develop any educational activities (e.g. reading/games/using educational websites) besides what was asked by the teacher? Is there any activity that you do in family?
  - i) Could you describe how your child uses technology for non-school purposes?
  - j) Before confinement, did you ever have resorted, on an occasional or regular basis, to private tutoring?
5. Can you identify one positive and one negative memory of the period of school closures?

## Public Policy Master's Thesis Series

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### **Inequalities Behind the Screen: A qualitative study of parental involvement during the period of school closures caused by COVID-19. The case of Portugal**

Catarina, Cerqueira

#### Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis led to unprecedented school closures and a worldwide shift towards distance learning. Inequalities of access to digital devices soon became a central issue. However, less emphasis has been put on how the greater requirement of parental involvement exacerbated inequalities related to families' cultural capital. This aspect is particularly relevant in Portugal, the European country with the highest proportion of adults without an upper secondary education. By collecting data through semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers, this research aims to explore the mechanisms through which mothers' level of education impacted learning opportunities of primary school children during the period of school closures. The findings revealed that the main differences in parental support were due to the quality of help provided and were less related to the amount of time spent monitoring children's learning. In addition, mothers with lower levels of education are not only eager to learn but are already using digital tools for this purpose. These are encouraging findings that showcase that measures aiming to tackle educational inequalities should focus on empowering parents who had fewer educational opportunities in the past. At the same time, this research highlights the crucial role that school policies can have in attenuating inequalities. Policy recommendations aimed at reinforcing parents' capacity to support their children, namely through digital technologies, should not be interpreted as a transfer of responsibilities from school to families. Instead, these should be implemented in a framework where schools continue to hold the central place of an education ecosystem that promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all.

#### Key words

Education, COVID-19, Distance Learning, Parental Involvement, Inequalities