# Migrant parents' challenging experiences of home-schooling during the COVID-19 lockdowns

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**Abstract:** *The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant educational disruption globally. When the pandemic forced schools to switch to emergency home-schooling, parental engagement in education became more critical. Some parents found home-schooling as an opportunity to form stronger relationships with their children. Others acquired an enhanced insight into their children's schoolwork. However, the emerging literature shows that, as not all parents were equally positioned to support their children's learning at home, emergency home-schooling has resulted in a significant learning loss. Guided by the concept of capital interaction, this article reports on a qualitative case study that investigated the experiences of 20 migrant parents in Victoria, Australia. A thematic analysis of the data reveals challenges associated with parental self-efficacy, financial hardship, language and technological barriers, time constraints, and disengagement and exhaustion. Remote learning may return in the future, and we must prepare for such disruption by improving equitable access to education delivered online and at home. To this end, the paper outlines some policy ideas.*

## 1.  Introduction

Parents are their children's first and most important educators. Parents, regardless of their economic background, hold high aspirations for their children (Buchmann et al., 2022; Spera et al., 2009). Individuals of elevated social standing seek to uphold their position in society while those on the margins of society hope for social mobility (Hargreaves, 2020). Perhaps the difference is in how the two groups translate their aspirations into reality. The situation for migrant parents is, however, different and more challenging. Many immigrant parents seek to bridge cultural differences by offering the kind of support they learned in their native countries' educational environments (Bendixsen & Danielsen, 2020; Snell, 2018). Further, unlike the other sections of society, migrant parents (especially those recently resettled refugees) often have limited social networks and relationships (social capital) to rely on when they need help with their children's learning (Molla, 2023). The literature on migrant parents' engagement in their children's education underscores the importance of proficiency in the languages of host societies (Bergset, 2017; Rah et al., 2009), the availability of proactive systemic support (Bendixsen & Danielsen, 2020), cultural resources and aspirations for status attainment (Langenkamp, 2019), resettlement stressors (Rah et al., 2009), and schools' readiness to engage the newcomers (Schneider & Arnot, 2018). For refugee and migrant parents, their idea of the good life and their view about their children's chances of success in society inform the extent to which they engage with schools and support learning at home. Parents' working commitments, cultural resources, and financial stability also play significant roles towards their children's achievement. One study by Sari et

al. (2023), for example, through multivariate data analysis, has shown that, in Germany parents with limited educational attainment were twice as likely to be unable to provide sufficient support compared to highly educated parents.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the significance of parental involvement in education. Emerging empirical research (e.g. Bonell et al., 2022; Molla & Zaini, 2022; Osorio-Saez et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021; Treviño et al., 2021; Zaini et al., 2022) shows that parents have played critical roles in facilitating home-based learning during the pandemic. During the COVID-19 school closure, parents took on a more central role in their children's learning. When COVID forced school closures, many parents became more involved with their children's learning. Ideally, home-schooling could provide parents or carers with opportunities to learn more about their children's learning and hence could play an essential role in supporting them. Some parents found home-schooling as an opportunity to form stronger relationships with their children.

But learning at home was not equally available to all. For some parents, it was hard but broadly achievable. For many others, the COVID-19-induced home-schooling presented critical challenges. For instance, Primal et al. (2021) studied the teaching and learning problems of migrant and refugee parents and their children in Denmark. The researchers conducted a qualitative study involving eight teachers to analyse the challenges those families faced. Their findings revealed that, due mainly to language barriers, building constructive communication is one of the most significant problems with these families. Parents' proficiency in the host society's language is another challenge. In most cases, teachers had to use interpreters to contact the parents. However, a few studies have analysed how migrant and refugee parents can be supported during the pandemic. For instance, Gorfinkel et al. (2021) studied how NSW State Government in Australia helped parents from various linguistic backgrounds to manage the home-schooling journey more effortlessly through different strategies such as the introduction of websites, media, podcasts, and Facebook pages. Fantu et al. (2022) involved a group of African families with refugee backgrounds and studied how the COVID-19 disruption influenced them. Their challenges, in terms of online education and school closures, were analysed, and the researchers suggested that parents' employment, language problems, gender, and the duration of their stay in the host country influenced their children's education, learning gain, and whether children completed their homework and reading lists. Further, Popyk's (2021) study revealed that some parents had to deal with several children when home-schooling them. The study also showed that some parents were unfamiliar with the school system, while others faced challenges associated with employment uncertainties and financial difficulties. Due to all these overwhelming issues, some parents could not provide any support to their children. In a different study, Mudwari et al. (2021) analysed the experience of Bhutanese adolescents with refugee backgrounds in Tasmania (Australia) during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closure. The researchers conducted interviews with 16 adolescents aged between 16 and 18. The findings of their study revealed that the students were disengaged from learning mainly due to the lack of parental support. The participants also reported that, during the lockdowns, their relationships with their families deteriorated.

People are disadvantaged when they have little or no valuable resources that enable them to succeed in a given field (e.g. schooling). The reproduction of dis/advantage in and through education is a function of the structure, volume, and interaction of specific stakes (capital) within and without the school. In terms of structure, Bourdieu (1986) identifies three primary forms of capital: economic capital (e.g. income, property, financial stocks), cultural capital (e.g. embodied, symbolic and institutionalised resources such as durable dispositions, cultural knowledge, and skills, credentials and

books), and social capital, which includes material and non-material resources that one mobilises through valuable networks and a sense of shared trust. The notion of volume emphasises the magnitude of usable resources one has access to. The unequal distribution of cultural, social, and economic resources reinforces social positions through their influence over school activities, parental practice, home environment, and the socialisation of children.

No single form of capital fully explains the reproduction of social position; it takes the interaction of all three forms of capital. Different forms of capital interact to reproduce positions and dispositions that correspond to a given social space (Abel, 2008). Here we specifically highlight two forms of capital interaction that mediate the home-schooling experiences of migrant parents, namely: accumulation and conversion. Capital accumulates, or 'capital attracts capital' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 331). Capital has 'a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). Money can be invested in the stock market to make more money. More often than not, highly educated parents raise well-educated children. The primary driver of capital acquisition/accumulation is socialisation. Through socialisation and acculturation at an early stage (at home and in schools), children develop durable dispositions that inform their future decisions and choices in later stages of life. As Bourdieu (1990) argues, durable dispositions (or the habitus) function as schemes of perception, appreciation, and action. Young people draw on those dispositions to acquire – consciously or habitually – different species of capital at different times and in different contexts. For example, children can form a 'scholarly habitus' through familial interaction at home (Watkins & Noble, 2013). Capital is also convertible (Bourdieu, 1986). The notion of conversion underscores the fact that one form of capital is transformed into another. Financial assets can be converted into cultural and social forms of capital. People invest money (economic capital) to learn and achieve higher-level education (cultural capital) so that they can access well-paid jobs and valuable networks (social capital). Parental investment in education is a way of converting economic capital into cultural capital (knowledge and qualifications).

## 2. Procedures

Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews with selected refugee and migrant parents. All interviews were conducted individually and online, after participants had provided active consent to the process. The parents were asked to explain opportunities, processes, and challenges, as related to their experiences of home-schooling during the lockdowns. The interview questions addressed the following topics:
  - Routines of home-schooling during the lockdowns
  - Parents' experiences and views of home-schooling during the pandemic
  - Parental familiarity with children's schoolwork
  - Level of parental engagement in children's education at home
  - Material and symbolic resources that facilitate parental engagement
  - Challenges parents faced in following up and supporting their children's learning at home.
  - The availability of support from schools and communities

At the analysis stage, we imported the transcribed data into NVIVO 12 (a qualitative coding software). Then, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach, the thematic analysis proceeded in four phases: (a) data familiarisation, (b) systemic recursive data coding, (c) theme generation and naming, and (d) writing up findings for dissemination. Once each of the two researchers formed their codebooks, they shared their analysis with the other party. After reading and reflecting on the initial coding of the other colleague, they met for several sessions to discuss anomalies and differences.

Reflexive thematic analysis also allowed deep theoretical sensibility and reflective and critical engagement with data. In the writing-up stage, emerging themes were 'theoretically re-described'; that is, the themes were interpreted in light of conceptual resources and the latest literature on parental engagement in COVID-induced home-schooling. For example, in making sense of the qualitative data, we draw on Bourdieu's (1984, 1990) concepts of habitus and capitals.

Findings and discussion: Naming the challenges migrant parents faced

Melbourne, where this study is located, was the world's most locked-down city during the pandemic – from March 2020 to October 2021, the city entered six lockdowns, lasting a total of 262 days (Cassidy, 2021). Following subsequent school closures, much of the responsibility of teaching children shifted from teachers to parents. Given not all parents are equally positioned to support their children's learning, home-schooling exacerbated achievement gaps. Parents from low socio-economic backgrounds (e.g. refugees and recent migrants) faced many challenges. In this section of the article, we outline critical challenges that migrant parents reported encountering as they tried to engage in their children's learning; these are: parental-self efficacy, financial hardship, language and technological barriers, time constraints, as well as disengagement and exhaustion. In what follows, these themes will be briefly discussed in turn.

### 3. Parental self-efficacy: 'It's out of my hands'

As Britto et al. (2022) noted, pandemic-induced home-schooling imposed new parenting parameters on parents (including active engagement in their children's formal learning). But not all parents were equally positioned to fulfil the new role. For instance, in facilitating learning at home, parental role construction is critical. Whether parents believe they need to be engaged in their children's learning, in turn, depends on their sense of efficacy – how they perceive their ability to help their children (Emerson et al., 2012). During the lockdowns, parents were burdened with the responsibility of taking the place of the teachers instead of their respective homes. Almost all participants mentioned subject content knowledge as a critical factor in their ability to support their children at home. In reflecting on their experiences, parents used such phrases as: 'I'm struggling', 'I was quite disappointed', 'I'm very distressed', 'I'm not very quick', 'I'm still learning', 'I'm not a teacher', 'it's way too difficult', 'it's out of my hands', 'it's not possible', 'writing was challenging', etc. Many participants felt that, as parents, what was expected of them was too complex. Below are the accounts of three parents:

1. We are not highly educated; I can read, I can speak English, I can support my child from grade 1 to grade 6 English, all of that; but after 6, you know, it's out of my hands. […] You know, so if I was highly educated, I would have checked the computer and checked the assignments to see how they were doing. (A mother from Ethiopia)

2. There is a lot of information. I've got three kids, so it was burdensome trying to understand exactly what they needed for their studies. […] The school provides materials that are very difficult to understand. […] In terms of implementing what the school wanted the kids to do, I said, 'look, you need to provide me with simpler guidance. I'm not a teacher; provide me with a bit simpler communication; what they need to study, what they need to learn, how to spell these words'. (A professional father from Somalia)

3. I have asked my children to do their duties on their own. I am not aware of things that go on with them. This is something on their shoulders. In the case of my little son, I only know that he progresses through his course, can pass his units, and proceed to the next year, but I am not aware of his academic situation. (A single mother from Afghanistan)

The three accounts above suggest that some migrant parents could not support their children mainly because they found the subjects complex and difficult. Meaningful parental engagement in children's learning requires cultural capital. As Brubaker (2005) noted, individuals can appreciate and take advantage of cultural goods, such as educational opportunities, 'only if they already possess the necessary schemes of appreciation and understanding' (p. 41). Inequalities in cultural capital are also expressed in unequal familiarity with school culture and expectations. In this respect, migrant parents with limited educational attainment (cultural capital) and marginal social position might be less able to assist their children in schoolwork and structure the learning space and time at home. On the other hand, well-educated parents are more likely to be familiar with learning activities, can understand complex curricular contents, and provide timely educational and career advice to their children. As such, school closure amplifies the impact of cultural capital on parental engagement and student learning outcomes.

Language and technological barriers

Migrant parents' engagement in their children's education is mediated by their proficiency in the language of instruction (Bergset, 2017; Rah et al., 2009). In English-speaking countries such as Australia, home-schooling posed a special challenge for recent arrival non-English speaking migrant families. As a result, they faced difficulties in assisting their children and understanding the communications from governments and schools (Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe [MiCREATE], 2021). The language barriers and social isolation can leave parents overwhelmed, frustrated, and disengaged from their children's schoolwork. Many of our interviewees told us limited English language proficiency made it hard to engage with their children's learning. They complained about the difficulty of school and government messages.

The pandemic has also widened the digital divide between disadvantaged students and their peers from advantaged backgrounds (Baker et al., 2022; Loble & Hawcroft, 2022). A growing digital divide perpetuates the reproduction of educational disadvantage as those with limited access to digital learning resources (including computers and educational applications) might lag further behind. The digital divide was evident within households. For example, some participants struggled to set up their digital devices while others reported a significant digital divide between themselves and their children. Parents specifically noted that because of the gap in digital literacy, they found it difficult to monitor the extent to which their children engaged with the learning activities. Monitoring student learning was particularly challenging for parents with large families (e.g. a couple of participants had more than four school-age children). The following three quotes highlight the language and technological barriers that migrant families faced during the pandemic-induced home-schooling.

7. My daughter has a very native-like accent, and it is difficult for me to understand what she says […]. Sometimes, I don't understand what she wants or how I should help her. When I approached the school, they sent me English emails that I didn't understand. (A mother from Iran)

8. I have technology-related problems as no one taught me how to use it, then my children are not helpful in this regard. They know it well, but I had to learn how to use different applications myself. […] We also had problems related to attending classes because of technology. Sometimes, we would receive the information so late, and we would miss some classes. (A mother from Iran)

9. Our kids are way ahead of us; they already know how technology works; they can split the screen and do video games or watch movies while they are also in a meeting, so that's a challenge. Then another challenge is that sometimes the Internet is lagging because the kids are playing; I mean the internet gets disrupted. (A mother from Sudan)

Linguistic and digital literacies constitute less transposable forms of capital that significantly affect

parental engagement in home-schooling. As noted in the conceptual framework above, capital produces more capital. High SES families have the necessary form of capital to invest in their children's learning – to produce more capital. Conversely, as the stories of our participants imply, people with diminished resources found it difficult to support their children's learning at home.

In this age of automation, 'the ability to access, afford and effectively use digital services is not a luxury – it is a requirement for full participation in contemporary social, economic and civic life' (Thomas et al., 2023, p. 4). The 2021 Australian Digital Inclusion Index Report shows a strong link between digital literacy and socio-economic status (Thomas et al., 2021). While parents with high SES can easily transfer their economic capital into 'techno-capital' to support their children's learning (Liu, 2021; Shuo, 2021), those with low SES might find it challenging to take advantage of technology-based educational resources. For example, some participants in our study confessed that it was not easy to discern whether their children were learning school subjects, watching silly YouTube videos, or playing online games. Disruption in Internet connection was another challenge. For some parents, it took them more than two weeks to set up their children's tablets, and they complained that schools did not help them effectively support their children's learning at home. The digital and linguistic divide that migrant parents face is, in fact, evident in other sections of society across many countries (Harris et al., 2017). When it comes to managing remote learning, social position is associated with unequal access to digital resources and unequal familiarity and uses of such tools for learning purposes (Goudeau et al., 2021). Following the abrupt shift to home-schooling, many disadvantaged parents found themselves on the losing side of the digital divide. They face difficulties in accessing and making use of digital learning tools. The digital divide reflects the inequalities in socio-economic and cultural resources.

Time constraints

Many of the parents we interviewed had to meet competing demands. This is not to say that migrant parents did not spend enough time supporting their children. What our participants told us is that they were so frustrated by their inability to support their children meaningfully. Most of them worked full-time during the pandemic. One participant complained: 'I have to work and be a teacher at the same time. It is not possible'. Another parent admitted: 'Because I have a large family so I cannot monitor what my children do online'. They had limited time to help their children in their studies. Time constraints became critical, particularly for single parents and those families with multiple children (one participant had seven children).

10. I am a single mum with four kids from Year 1 to Year 7. […] I am doing my work from home as well then, they go on games, so the challenge is supervising them and doing my work as a worker and a mother. […] I have to go to four different activities, four different age groups, four schools, four classes, and four iPads which takes time and sometimes I need to cut my sleep hours, which again makes me wake up as I am tired. (A single mother from Ethiopia)

11. I don't sit next to them; I provide bills. If you work, what would you do? When you work and have kids, you need to prepare them; you need to make food, you need to make money, and you need to pay the bills. Yeah, the teachers should have sent me more emails; I didn't receive anything from the school side. (A father from Somalia)

12. The problem is that I was working full-time. I was at work until 5 p.m., and I was so tired of work, and he was home and tired of not having a plan- both of us were tired. When you help your son, and it takes time, both parties get tired, and this will make both parties angry, annoyed, and heated. Based on this, I concluded not to help him if I did not know anything. I told him, 'look, do whatever

you can and leave the rest when you get back to school and ask your teacher'. I concluded that the bond and the relationships between a son and a mother are far more important than schooling and learning. (A single mother from Iran)

Disengagement and exhaustion

Parents also complained about disengagement in terms of both student disinterest in learning activities and school disconnection with students. Our participants complained that students were distracted from their learning activities. Isolated from friends and family members for an extended time, children also felt lonely and depressed. Online games and YouTube videos easily distract students. Concentration did not come easy – making kids sit for too long proved challenging. In addition, parents expressed their frustration with respect to the lack of timely school communications on children's level of engagement. One parent complained that their child missed classes for over a month, but the school did not let them know the problem.

13. It really miffs me – I am very distressed. Previously, he would go to school for 8 h, and he would be very tired. If he was tired after 8 h, no worries. But now, he always plays video games and says he is tired. Is he tired of joining the class for half an hour? (A mother from Iran)

14. My son's teacher talked to me on the phone and said, 'your son is not ending in the class; what is going on?' I said, 'how many days'; and she said 'more than one month' They were supposed to let the parents know what the children do; all of us are through difficult times. I said, 'you should have sent an email to me', and they said, 'oh, sorry, we were busy'; I was seriously upset. (A mother from Eritrea)

15. You get tired of your children; you're connected to them, that is good, but now it's too much. I can't wait [until] they get back to school because I want them to be away from me. (A mother from South Sudan)

Limitations

Our study had some limitations based on which suggestions for future research are proposed. First, even though we involved both male and female participants, we did not approach our data following gender-related theories. Future research can analyse whether and how male and female parents, specifically single parents, might have been influenced differently during the COVID-19 pandemic and in associations with online education.

Second, we involved participating parents from various cultural backgrounds based on the aims of our studies. This means that cultural concepts and issues that are related to certain countries or people with the same backgrounds have not been analysed and addressed. Future research can scrutinise whether and how the cultural concepts, within each culture, can facilitate or impede online education during potential future pandemics. Third, we did not study and analyse students' ideas, feelings, and attitudes on working with their parents as teachers. To the best of our knowledge, this issue is yet to be addressed adequately in the literature. To maximise students' learning experience in the case of potential pandemics, future studies can scrutinise students' feelings about working with and under their parents.

In addition, we regrettably did not include enquiries about our participants' resettlement processes, pre-migration educational attainment, and duration of residence in Australia. We acknowledge that the individual differences stemming from these factors can influence how migrant parents engage in their children's schoolwork. By understanding the unique migration pathways, educational backgrounds, and settlement experiences of our participants, we could have gained more comprehensive insights into the varying levels of parental involvement in their children's education. We also recognise that income level can significantly influence the time parents can dedicate to their children's learning. Due to the

sensitive nature of discussing income and social stigmas associated with accessing social welfare services, we did not explicitly include these factors in our study. Despite these limitations, it is essential to underscore that migrant parents and students, while forming diverse groups, face similar and intersecting challenges. Acknowledging these shared struggles is essential in designing targeted support and interventions to empower and uplift these communities.

## 4. Conclusion and implications for policy, practice, and further research

The key message of this small-scale qualitative research is that the COVID-19 educational disruption and similar educational interruptions may contribute to the reproduction of disadvantages in society. Home-schooling was largely tough for most parents; it was even tougher for migrant parents. The online mode of delivery was foreign to many migrant children and their families. Our study set out to document specifically the challenges migrant parents in Australia faced in managing their children's remote learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Themes related to struggle with complex school subjects, financial hardship, linguistic and digital barriers, time constraints, and academic disengagement of children were readily apparent in our interviews with migrant parents. As a result, children from disadvantaged migrant parents are more likely to lag in their learning. Goudeau et al. (2021) argued that COVID-induced home-schooling is 'likely to increase the social class achievement gap' (p. 1273).

Our research also provides a theoretical insight that can benefit future research. In documenting contexts, causes, and consequences of educational disadvantage, it is critical to pay attention to the interplay between social positions and individual dispositions. Parental engagement in home-schooling represents all dimensions of capital interaction. Children from middle-income families are better off educationally because the values they acquire at home through interactions with extended families and community members are congruent with school practices. Through direct engagement in their children's learning activities, they enact 'osmotic' 'transmission of aspirations, values, and tastes' (van Zanten, 2015, p. 32). Likewise, economically better-off parents can afford to buy educational resources; also, as well-educated parents mostly hold professional careers, they could work from home, enabling them to support their children and monitor their learning. Conversely, migrant parents are not equally 'disposed and equipped' to support their children's learning meaningfully. Especially those with limited cultural capital may face what Brubaker (2005) refers to as 'dispositional lag' whereby 'dispositions, adapted to the social conditions under which they were formed, maybe "out of phase with the social conditions under which they must function"' (p. 44). Put differently, those positioned on the margin of society are likely to scale down their aspirations and miss out on opportunities.

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