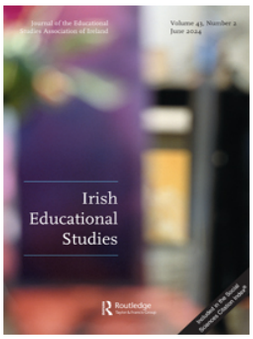

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Parental perspectives on the management of online learning and school readjustment for children with SEN during the COVID-19 pandemic: lessons and applications for possible school closures

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in worldwide school closures and disrupted education – which was extended in the Republic of Ireland – and some children with SEN may be more adversely impacted by prolonged school closures than others. Despite this, and possible future pandemics, experiences of Irish children with SEN have not been explored to date. The current research utilised semi-structured interviews to explore parental perspectives (n = 10) of online learning and the subsequent return to education for children with SEN. Reflexive Thematic Analysis resulted in the identification of three global themes: [1] Balancing Act, pertaining to a lack of support and educational provision, [2] Prioritising Wellbeing over Education, whereby parents made the decision to stop engaging in online learning to promote familial wellbeing, and [3] The Return to School and its Challenges, highlighting academic, behavioural, and mental health concerns on return to education. Inclusion of parental feedback was noted as important for the success of home-schooling during future school closures and is a clear application of this work. Finally, suggestions are made for research to examine the links between support for parents and children's academic attainment and wellbeing, as well as child insight directing provision for school closures.

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Introduction

Primary Education During COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic brought numerous challenges pertaining to the access to education globally. Government responses and their attempt to curb the spread of the virus led to school closures and disruptions to education for learners internationally. UNESCO (2020) reported that, by April 2020, more than 90% of children enrolled in education globally were subject to school closures and confinement at home, with many switching to a form of emergency remote teaching.

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Despite Hodges et al. (2020) stressing how this should not be considered a long-term replacement for a robust educational system, Irish primary schools had one of the longest school closures (141 days) in Western countries (Richardson et al. 2020). The Irish Primary School Curriculum aims to provide its pupils with a broad learning experience and encourages a rich variety of approaches to holistic teaching and learning, catering to the needs of each individual child (Department of Education 2019). In order to achieve this, Irish classrooms are set up to facilitate an environment within which teamwork and collaboration are fostered, and teachers are trained in how to effectively educate and support pupils with varying needs (The Teaching Council 2020). Said training focuses on equipping educators with the necessary pedagogical skills, content knowledge, and classroom management techniques, in order to meet these standards. Despite laying an essential foundation for everyday teaching, they may not have specifically prepared educators for the unique challenges presented by a global pandemic such as COVID-19, where they were abruptly placed in a position of supporting students' educational growth and mental health solely through the use of Information Technology (IT). IT has become an integral part of education, with both teacher training modules (Teaching Council 2020) and Professional Development courses advocating its integration throughout the school day. However, despite an increasing presence within the classroom, challenges relating to its daily use have been noted (Johnson et al. 2016). These include, but are not limited to, teacher confidence, available technology and/or high speed internet, and therefore investigation into its prolonged use as the sole medium of instruction during COVID-19 is essential. Indeed, a reliance on IT was internationally noted as challenging in the early stages of the pandemic (e.g. Dong, Cao, and Li 2020; Lau and Lee 2020; Parczewska 2021; Spinelli et al. 2020). For example, Dong, Cao, and Li (2020) mixed methods, self-report work with Chinese parents ($n = 3000$) showed that almost 85% of their children spent less than 30 min engaging with study materials. Moreover, with Professor David Alexander reporting that a 'future pandemic is inevitable' during the COVID-19 inquiry (June 2023), emphasis should be placed on investigating the provision of education during this time.

Currently, there is little research on the extended use of online learning in a Western cohort, and while online learning has been widely noted as challenging for children, Spinelli et al. (2020) identify more vulnerable groups, such as Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), as being at a higher risk for the long-term effects associated with prolonged school closures. Since the Republic of Ireland had one of the longest school closures in Western countries (Richardson et al. 2020), an insight into the delivery of education – and the experiences for children with SEN and their parents – was the focus of this work. Indeed, insight can indicate the potential lasting influence of experiences, as well as areas to address should a future scenario necessitate a long-term school closure.

Children with SEN. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN 2004) legally defines SEN as a person's restriction in their capacity to participate in, and benefit from education in a similar way to their peers, on the account of an enduring physical, mental health, sensory or learning disability. Examples include, but are not limited to, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Dyslexia, and Down Syndrome. The number of children and young people (CYP) diagnosed with SEN in Ireland currently constitutes over a quarter of the school population (McCoy, Shevlin, and Rose 2019). International

literature has highlighted children with SEN as widely overlooked during the COVID-19 period of online learning, with their education being put on hold in many cases (see Barnett and Jung 2021; Latzer, Leitner, and Karneili-Miller 2021; Neece, McIntrye, and Fenning 2020; Toseeb et al. 2020). Given the prolonged school closures in Ireland during the pandemic, examining this time is essential to evaluate school attendance for children with SEN. Sonnenschein et al. (2022) examined the concerns of parents of children with SEN through open and closed-ended questions. Results showed that parents faced a decrease in in-person therapy services, limited access to special education, and a lack of adapted materials, which led to parents taking on these roles with great difficulty. A more recent study (O'Connor Bones et al. 2022) investigated the experiences of parents of children attending special schools within Ireland during COVID-19. Their results showed a large percentage (84%) struggled to support their children's learning at home due to their confidence in managing both behavioural and practical matters. However, despite the discussed lack of teacher preparation for this switch, these participants described their schools as supportive throughout this time, with only a minority reporting concerns with information, guidance or support from their child's school. It is important, however, to note that these classroom numbers are considerably smaller, with a student to teacher ratio of 9:1 (Department of Education 2023) when compared with mainstream classrooms which currently have an average class size of 23:1 (INTO 2022). This naturally leads to an increase in demands and a decrease in time available for personalised check-ins for mainstream class teachers. Results therefore may vary between the type of school attended and is indeed an area which could benefit from investigation. Specifically, Trzcińska-Król's (2020) small-scale qualitative work ($n = 4$) emphasised parental concerns regarding teachers not considering the cognitive and socio-emotional needs of their pupils with SEN during online learning which led to substantial disruption and frustration for these children. However, a problematic qualitative gap in the literature has been noted, and this methodology is needed to explore lived experiences and glean more detailed perspectives[1] (Banister et al. 2012; Spinelli 2005). Therefore, the current research utilised qualitative methodology to explore the experiences of online learning for children with SEN across both mainstream and special schools, and their families during COVID-19 in order to better prepare for possible future pandemics that disrupt education.

Role of the Parent in Access to Education. Successful, inclusive education requires the partnership between educators, parents, other professionals, and the community (Epstein 2010). Current literature highlights parental involvement as pivotal in a number of areas of SEN, with benefits including improved school attendance, social skills, and academic attainment (Connor and Cavendish 2018; Lendrum, Barlow, and Humphrey 2015). Epstein (2010) highlights effective communication and collaboration between educator and parents as key in achieving such. In order to include parents in their child's learning, multidisciplinary teams meet at regular intervals to draw up Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for each child with SEN, in order to work collaboratively to meet their academic and social goals for a set period (NCSE 2006). However, with the sudden changes and increased pressure for both teachers and parents, research into the approach of this during the pandemic is necessary.

Currently, there is limited research surrounding the role of parents in the access to online learning throughout the pandemic. However, pre-pandemic work has linked

providing instruction; conducting administrative tasks – such as recording attendance and progress, and motivating children (Bogden 2003; Huerta, Gonzales, and d'Entrement 2009) to successful and meaningful engagement in online learning. Despite parents being a key educational facilitator, the lack of preparation and added demands during the pandemic (Dong, Cao, and Li 2020) e.g. childcare, may have impacted both motivation and ability to support online learning. For example, Dong, Cao, and Li (2020) found that parents needed to continually supervise their children while learning online and felt pressure to choose between their careers and helping their children succeed educationally. Moreover, families of children with SEN were met with further, unique disruptions since several of their resources and therapies were also suspended during this time (Schiariti and McWilliam 2021; Wendel et al. 2020). Due to government restrictions, these families lost access to regular carers and familial support (e.g. Patrick et al. 2020; Prime, Wade, and Browne 2020; Russell et al. 2020), as well as mental and physical stress mediators (e.g. gyms, restaurants, cinemas, etc.), increasing the risk of mental health concerns (Parkes, Sweeting, and Wight 2015) and negative emotions, including anger, annoyance, irritation, and helplessness (Parczewska 2021).

To mediate the challenges associated with online learning, the results from both Dong, Cao, and Li (2020) and Vlachopoulos and Hatzigianni (2017) show child characteristics influenced parental perceptions of its suitability. Specifically, parental rating of the suitability of online learning was lower when their child was having difficulties with self-regulation and/or interest and attention, which SEN children are more likely to struggle with (Barkley, Cross, and Major 2005; Biel and Peske 2009; Murray et al. 2010). This further contextualises the educational challenges faced for children and parents during school-closures. Indeed, literature shows that parental stress decreases when their child's learning is considered satisfactory and manageable, and the quantity and quality of involvement in their child's learning increases (Lau and Ng 2019; Tao, Lau, and Yiu 2019). Reiterating this point, Sonnenschein et al. (2022) found that parents of children with SEN felt they were essential in the provision of education for their children, who, without parental support, would not have been able to access the learning materials. However, a range of personal circumstances during school closures may have prevented parental involvement, more so than others e.g. work commitments, furlough, financial concerns, etc.

Egan and Beatty (2021) found that IT was essential in access to education for children between 1 and 10 years, both for work assigned by schools as well as in replacement of their pre-COVID activities. This ultimately led to an increase in screen time, although results also show that the time spent on school work became reliant on their access to appropriate technology. Despite parents of children with SEN being entitled to additional financial benefits, children with SEN are estimated to require up to 3 times more financial support than children without a disability, often leaving these families with less disposable income (John et al. 2019). Furthermore, literature from during the pandemic signals a pressure for parents to choose between their jobs and supporting their children at home (e.g. Dong, Cao, and Li 2020). Such financial pressures may have led to limited access to this essential technology, further widening the gap between children with SEN and their counterparts. Indeed, recent findings from Mohan et al. (2021) indicate that unequal home learning environments may put children at risk of magnifying existing inequalities on return to in-person education.

Return to In-person Education. Throughout the existing literature, a consistent concern has been the readjustment period for children with SEN on return to school (e.g. Lau and Lee 2020; Parczewska 2021; Sonnenschein et al. 2022). For example, Lau and Lee (2020) highlighted that 83.2% of parents were worried about how schools would be arranged upon the children's return, while 77% of parents showed concern regarding their child's learning progress during the pandemic, and subsequently their academic ability on return to school.

Literature pertaining to previous school closures can be useful in indicating the challenges these children may have faced on return to school, whilst also recognising that these events cannot directly map onto the experiences of children during the pandemic. Numerous studies pertaining to the effects of short-term school stoppages, such as teacher labour disruptions or natural disasters, have been shown to lead to a decrease in academic achievement for children with SEN (see Belot and Webbink 2010; Johnson 2009). Madrid et al. (2006) noted, for example, irritability, regression of skills, and social withdrawal in children when investigating the short-term effects of school closures due to a natural disaster, and considered the potential association with long-term mental health issues, as well as concerns relating to interpersonal and/or academic abilities.

With consideration for academic achievement pertaining to school closures, Kuhfeld and colleagues (2020) found that children were not likely to have grown as much academically during the 2019/2020 academic year and were likely to return to school in the Autumn 2020 term with approximately 63-68% of expected reading ability, and 37–50% of expected math ability. Furthermore, Peek (2008) provides insight into mediating factors regarding long-lasting effects of traumatic events for children, including: the child's characteristics; the child's coping skills; the coping support received at home and at school; and family factors (Fothergill 2017). Literature consistently highlights these areas as problematic for children with SEN during the pandemic and therefore increases risk for behavioural regression, mental health problems, and decreased academic attainment on return to school (e.g. Belot and Webbink 2010; Fothergill 2017; Johnson 2009), and placed greater emphasis on the current study to also explore the effects of online learning on children's (with SEN) return to school.

Research Question. How did parents of children with SEN experience online learning and return to education during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Method

Design. The researcher's aims and question aligned with qualitative methodology and a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological research focuses on participant experiences through analysis of written or spoken words) enabling a rich engagement with the participants' lived experiences and how they view and understand their 'lifeworld' (Banister et al. 2012; Spinelli 2005). For this work, participant experiences were obtained through semi-structured interviews whereby the researchers followed a schedule of questions to encourage deeper discussions but utilised the flexibility of this data collection method to explore novel perspectives.

The analytical method of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019) was used to develop, analyse, and interpret patterns of shared meaning (Braun and

Clarke 2019; 2021). Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasise that these are not rigid or linear stages, meaning that a researcher may need to, for example, move back to other stages if the analytic process requires this. Moreover, they reiterate the importance of reflection and engagement with the data, and this was adhered to as part of the current data analysis to increase trustworthiness. Given the exploratory nature of this work, RTA with an inductive approach (Moretti et al. 2011) was chosen to support the identification of broader patterns – without preconceptions or theoretical-based assumptions.

Participants. Participants were recruited online via social media support groups for Irish parents of children with SEN and utilised a purposive, voluntary sample. In total, 10 participants (all females) of children with a range of SENs (e.g. Dyslexia, ASD, ADHD; see Table 1) discussed their experiences. This sample size reflects a small qualitative study, but met requirements for a phenomenological focus (Starks and Trinidad 2007) that was oriented toward exploring shared participant experiences. The inclusion criteria required participants to have a child who had been previously diagnosed with a SEN, participated in online learning during the pandemic, and was attending primary school (mainstream or special school) before and after online learning.

Materials. Qualtrics was used to host the research materials and key information, and securely collected initial participant data, while Microsoft Teams was used to record and conduct the interviews. Microsoft Word was used to edit the automatically generated transcripts and transcription was verbatim and did not focus on prosodic features of speech. Recordings and transcripts were stored on a secure OneDrive account.

Standardised question schedule. The devised question schedule comprised 10 questions – with integrated prompts to promote elaboration – that focused on pertinent points supported by empirical evidence in the field of online learning during COVID-19 to further enhance the trustworthiness of the work. For example, prompts were devised to reflect findings highlighting parental concern regarding return to school (Lau and Lee 2020; 'How did you feel about your child returning to in-person learning?'), and to address the literature gap pertaining to long-term effects of online learning during the pandemic, participants were asked 'In general, how well do you feel your child re-adjusted to being back in school?' All questions were open-ended, and the researcher aimed to lead the interview in the style of a more naturally occurring conversation (DeMarrais 2003).

Procedure. Following informed consent obtained through the research software Qualtrics, interviews were arranged and conducted digitally through Microsoft Teams. Semi-structured interviews began with an informal conversation to put participants at

Table 1. Child diagnoses information.

Child's diagnoses	Type of school
Severe Dyslexia, Dyscalculia	Mainstream
Autism, ADHD	Mainstream
ADHD	Mainstream
Dyslexia	Mainstream
ASD, SPD	Mainstream
ADHD, Dyslexia	Mainstream
Down Syndrome	Mainstream
Twin 1: ASD, LD Twin 2: Epilepsy Encephalotomy, Severe LD, CANK2	Special School
Down Syndrome	Mainstream
2q24.2 microdeletion	Special School

ease before the researcher introduced the study's aims and focus. The question scheduled was fully utilised and the semi-structured approach enabled the exploration of novel points of interest. On completion of the interview schedule, participants were asked whether they wished to add anything else, ensuring that any potentially overlooked points were not omitted. Following data collection, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the recordings were listened to numerous times to enable transcription and familiarisation with the data. Any identifying personal information was removed from the transcripts, and the participants' numbers were used thereafter for identification. On completion, the original recordings were deleted. The transcripts were analysed according to the principles of RTA.

Analytical Strategy. Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) six-step guide to RTA was used as follows: [1] Interview transcripts were read and re-read to become familiarised with; [2] Initial codes were generated manually, through highlighting aspects of the interviews which were topically interesting, and which had a potential to form repeated patterns (see Table 2); [3] Related codes were grouped together with extracts to assign meaning; [4] Potential themes were considered using the grouped codes; [5] Themes were defined and labelled as the researcher's understanding of the data deepened and continued to engage in a reflexive process, and; [6] A full set of themes had been established and

Table 2. Coding examples for some of the research questions.

Question	Examples codes
Can you tell me about some of the challenges you or your child experienced during the period of online learning?	Lack of resources. Lack of space. Technological issues. Incapable of independent work. Balancing the needs of siblings. Balancing work and online learning. Unrealistic expectations of teachers. Strained relationships. Wellbeing concerns.
Can you tell me about some of the successes you or your child experienced during the period of online learning?	Challenge to think of successes. Online learning helped to establish a daily routine. Increase in socialisation. Finding solace in nature. Focus on life skills. Increased quality, family time. Increased time for hobbies.
How did you feel about your child returning to in-person learning?	Relief. Fear of COVID-19. Concerns regarding social interaction. Excitement for normality to be restored. Excitement for learning to resume. Excitement for previous roles to be reinstated.
In general, how well do you feel your child re-adjusted to being back in school?	Challenges with emotional regulation. Increased social anxiety. Problems with sleep. Extra supports needed. Drop in academic ability. School refusal. Challenges with adjusting to use of COVID-related PPE. Grateful for supports available in school. Adjusted to new normal. Concerns improved with time.

adherence to. This process led to the findings of 3 global themes. Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasise that RTA facilitates the researcher in creating themes inherent in the data, while also recognising and highlighting that, by nature, qualitative research lends itself to assumptions and positionings. The researcher was therefore reflexive throughout this analytical procedure, reflecting on and identifying the assumptions that were being made about the data.

Ethical Considerations. Guidelines from the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018) were adhered to, and the research was approved by the University Ethics Committee.

Findings

The analysis presents key reflections surrounding parent experiences and perspectives regarding their child's (with SEN) management of online learning and school readjustment. Initial points of interest were identified in each of the transcripts, and these were reflected upon in accordance with RTA and the suggested stages of this analytical method. Through the analysis procedure, codes were grouped together to form three global themes: [1] *Balancing Act*; encompassing the parent's need to balance poor resources and support with an increase in demands, [2] *Prioritising Wellbeing over Education*; showcasing parental frustration with the inaccessibility of online learning, and their decision to pause and/or stop participation, and [3] *The Return to School and its Challenges*; a collective relief surrounding the return to in-person education, despite being simultaneously faced with academic, behavioural and mental health concerns. These themes capture the discussions surrounding the shared experiences of the participants and were analysed in relation to core theory and relevant literature (see Figure 1).

Global theme 1: balancing act

This theme encompasses the parent's need to balance poor resources and support with an increase in demands, and the adverse impact on family life. Throughout the period of online learning, parents felt a responsibility to ensure their children were meaningfully engaged in the material. These pressures came naturally from teachers, and in response to the challenges presented by their child's inability to independently access online learning.

> *[..] they're just too young to understand Zoom so you're trying to assist in all that. (P1, Lines 129-130)*

> *If you leave her to do something, she's not gonna do it. (P3, Line 204)*

Eight participants felt that without their support, their child would not be able to access the learning materials and emphasises the need for parental supervision in accessing online learning, aligning with pre-pandemic literature (Bogden 2003; Huerta, Gonzales, and d'Entrement 2009).

> *There was an awful lot of pressure, to update […] and do the home schooling […] put the homework online so that the teachers could correct it. (P6, Lines 106-108)*

> *[Teacher's] feedback […] like 'you didn't do this work, why wasn't it done? Can you do that next week on top of the work we're giving you for this week? (P2, Lines 389-390)*

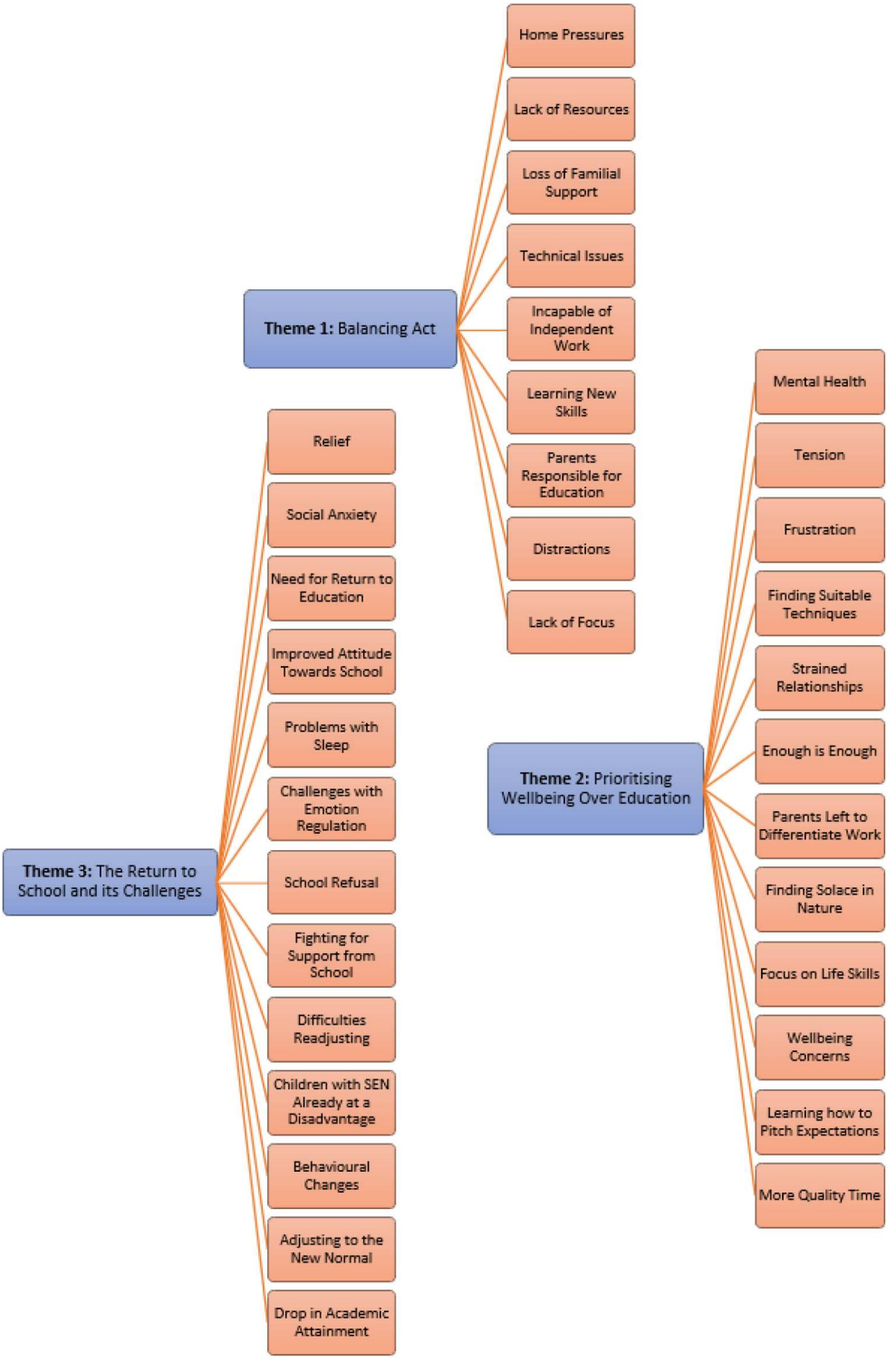

Figure 1. Thematic map of the identified global and basic themes.

However, the current results build on pre-pandemic literature by linking heightened parental stress with asynchronous learning and identifying these administrative and sometimes unrealistic tasks as burdensome for parents. While these results corroborate those of Dong, Cao, and Li (2020), they also emphasise a degree of blame toward teachers, as parents felt that they could have offered more educational guidance, as well as being more empathetic towards familial circumstances. However, participants who experienced synchronous learning shared more positive experiences.

[Her teacher] was very, very animated, very lively and very engaging with the children. […] So, you could hear them laughing. You could hear them communicating with each other. (P4, Lines 183-186)

Participant 4 described a more engaged and motivated attitude toward her child's learning and aligns with previous findings surrounding synchronous learning being more motivating (Watts 2016). Additionally, the above extracts show increased satisfaction with their child's learning, which both Lau and Ng (2019) and Tao and colleagues (2019) found to minimise parental stress and increase the quantity and quality of their educational involvement. Moreover, Participant 4 highlighted an increase in social interaction between classmates, similar to previous findings that suggested synchronous learning to be less socially isolating (Francescucci and Rohani 2019). Other parents discussed a lack of meaningful support from schools with regards to differentiating work (Sonnenschein et al. 2022) or alleviating the parental stress associated with asynchronous learning and suggests that children did not receive sufficient education during this time.

I heard nothing from them during the whole time of isolation, […] nothing from the learning support as to maybe giving suggestions of how I could support [my child]. (P1, Lines 234-237)

The above extract highlights Participant 1's frustration with a lack of communication and support from their child's teacher that limited facilitation of their child's learning and progress, and this did not improve over time. In addition to a perceived lack of support from schools, participants discussed their experiences of withdrawal of familial support, like the findings of both Patrick et al. (2020) and Prime, Wade, and Browne (2020).

We went from a situation of real good family support, […but] suddenly it was just us and she could go nowhere with anybody. (P5, Lines 112-120)

Parczewska (2021) links this lack of support to increased parental stress and risk of parental burnout. Furthermore, Participant 5 emphasised the abrupt removal of socialisation opportunities for her daughter, which may have been further heightened by the social isolation associated with online learning (Khurana 2016). Parents also discussed the negative consequences of balancing the increase in demands with poor resources and support, and subsequent familial strain, leading to emotional responses.

One day me and my husband got so angry with her on the point of nearly giving her a slap. (P1, Line 172)

[So] her annoyance or her anger with me would have kind of gone through the whole day, and I found that like, our relationship definitely took a hit. (P2, Lines 315-316)

The above extracts clearly demonstrate strained familial relationships (Parczewska, 2020). Participant 1 gave an honest yet worrying insight into how the build-up of

these emotions almost resulted in physical violence. Furthermore, Participant 2 discussed how the anger their daughter directed towards them – due to the pressure of online learning – impacted their relationship. Linking to this, 5 participants discussed sacrificing sleep to 'get a few hours done' of their own professional responsibilities, leading to exhaustion and strain within these households. Indeed, McQuillan et al. (2019) discussed sleep deprived parents as being harsher and more reactive, which could have a further negative impact on children's (with SEN) learning during school closures.

> *My office phone was diverted to the house, so the phone was constantly ringing […] it was very distracting […] impossible to do homeschooling during work hours. (P9, Lines 97-99)*

Global theme 2: prioritising wellbeing over education

This theme reflects the frustrations associated with inaccessible online learning for children with a SEN and presents parent strategies to lessen these pressures in order to improve homelife.

> *We tried one or two sessions online. [Child's name] would not even entertain [it]. (P10, Lines 79-80)*

> *[…] it didn't work really well for [child], for the likes of [child] with additional needs. Online work just didn't work. (P3, Lines 109-110)*

Despite encouraging children to engage in online learning, it was discussed as unsuitable and inaccessible for children with SEN. Participant 10 discussed the challenges relating to focusing during asynchronous learning, where class content was posted in advance to be completed independently (Coy, Marino, and Serianni 2014). This is contextualised when considering Barkley, Cross, and Major (2005) who suggested that children with SEN are more likely to have issues with interest in and attention to learning. The current results highlight how, without the support and resources available in schools, education at home was challenging, and aligns with other findings that children with SEN were not receiving the same level of support and differentiation from their schools (Schiariti and McWilliam 2021; Wendel et al. 2020), and places a greater emphasis on parents receiving clearer guidance for future school closures.

A lack of school support and guidance led parents to prioritise their children's wellbeing over learning. Despite acknowledging a likely impact on academic attainment, 5 participants shared the perspective that prioritising their children's mental health and home environment was more important. Instead of engaging in the materials being provided, these parents found alternative ways of learning and focused on personal areas of growth, resulting in a perceived improvement in family life. Indeed, a focus on wellbeing to minimise stress and anxiety may protect against damage to brain regions e.g. the hippocampus (Krugers et al. 2010) and the prefrontal cortex (Woo et al. 2021), and can minimise the risk of depression.

> *I did worry about the effect on their education long term […] but […] I was less worried because I kind of said look, [mental health is] more important. (P6. Lines 267-268)*

> *Maths was checking out the numbers that were written on the lambs […] outside of the box learning […] how many layers of the fence are you climbing and holes in the fence. (P7, Lines 185-188)*

The above extracts support a perspective that has been absent from literature to date and may be linked to the length of time which Irish children were required to study online (Richardson et al. 2020), combined with the lack of research into its long-term effects (Spinelli et al. 2020). The above extract from Participant 6 highlights that despite being aware of the negative educational impact, they chose to prioritise their child's mental health. This decision somewhat counters the legal responsibility to ensure children have access to formal education (Education Welfare Act 2020) and therefore greater emphasis should be placed on ensuring parents have the necessary resources and guidance to support their child's education in the home setting. A participant discussed how the use of nature for educational purposes and the implementation of skill-based learning led to a decrease in pressure for both the child and their families, which was likely to have increased mental health and reduced strain on familial relationships (e.g. Lau and Ng 2019; Tao, Lau, and Yiu 2019). Indeed, the utilisation of nature to support learning maps to nature connectedness whereby attention and enjoyment can be increased, and stress levels can be decreased (Kuo, Barnes, and Jordan 2022). This could be further considered in preparation for future school closures, although this does still place greater demand on supervision responsibilities of parents. In the current work, parents also discussed developing their child's coping skills and hygiene routines. While parental choice to divert from formal education during the pandemic is a novel finding in this work pertaining to online learning, Peek (2008) previously considered child coping skills as beneficial in mediating any negative effects of traumatic events, such as the displacement of students and teachers, and may be helpful in understanding the perceived success of readjusting to in-person learning, especially given the extended closure period in the Republic of Ireland.

> *She's drawing a lot more and she's learned a lot more coping strategies because I suppose it was what we were focusing on. (P2, Lines 400-401)*

> *But she's in a routine now where she knows she's to wash twice a week. (P2, Line 69)*

Global theme 3: the return to school and its challenges

This final theme highlighted a collective relief surrounding the return to in-person education, despite being simultaneously faced with academic, behavioural, and mental health concerns. However, there was a shared belief that schools had the relevant tools to mitigate these concerns.

> *She was delighted when she saw the bus again, she was just, well they were just so happy. (P8, Lines 409-411)*

> *It was definitely a relief. And it was a happy time when she was going back in. To see her face when the school bus pulled off was just amazing. (P10, Lines 304-306)*

Participants reflected on feelings of relief for them and their child surrounding the return to school, although were met with several concerns, namely social anxiety, behavioural regression and a drop in academic attainment.

> *There was […] a level of anxiety because you still don't know what way COVID is and you're worrying about will the kids get it because they're not vaccinated. (P1, Lines 278-280)*

In addition to concerns surrounding the spread of COVID-19, a participant highlighted the stress that their daughter felt after returning to school – which may be a product of social isolation during online learning, indicating a degree of social anxiety (Khurana et al. 2016) – and school refusal was noted by others.

> *We're a lot more anxious, like she'd have been fine in groups but post COVID, we're a lot more anxious. (P2, Lines 192-193)*

> *[There] was a lot more of 'my stomach is sore, I feel sick. I don't want to go. (P2, Lines 603-604)*

Due to being novel in its exploration of experiences post-return to education, these results have not been present in previous literature. However, they demonstrate the challenges faced by children and their families during this time and highlight school refusal as an area of concern. Additionally, participants noted further behavioural concerns surrounding classroom disruption and changes to sleep routines which can impact cognition and memory and a child's overall engagement with learning (Alhola and Polo-Kantola 2007).

> *When she went back to school, initially she was doing some of those [negative] behaviours in the class. (P10, Lines 312-313)*

> *Now coming back into the structure of it was quite challenging for her so we did find the sleep […] a bit awry again. (P2, Lines 522-523)*

Observed regressive behaviours are consistent with the results of Madrid et al. (2006) who noted short-term irritability, nightmares, and clinging behaviour, post short-term school closures, and highlighted children with SEN as at risk of the associated long-term mental health concerns, due to the prevalence of such behaviours. Furthermore, concerns regarding academic loss on return to education were shared.

> *Knowing that they were both facing challenges already. I worried that when they went back, they would be way behind all the other children. (P6, Lines 258-259)*

> *I would have been concerned within reason because like children with Down Syndrome do regress. (P7, Lines 426-427)*

Like the results from Lau and Lee (2020), the above extracts demonstrate fears relating to children's drop in academic performance post-pandemic. These highlight educational challenges specific to children with SEN, and risks further widening the gap between their educational ability when compared to their typically developing peers (Government Services 2015). Additionally, when considering these participants, prolonged stress regarding their children's academic attainment can implicate parental burnout (Lau and Ng 2019; Tao, Lau, and Yiu 2019).

Participant 1 discussed how their child was no longer able to access the grade-level curriculum in math, and aligns with Kuhfeld et al. (2020) who anticipated that math would likely be a subject for major concern. Given the pervasiveness of math anxiety and its impact on attainment (Dowker, Bennett, and Smith 2012) there is a particular need for provision to be addressed for subsequent school closures. During the pandemic, math learning loss was reported (e.g. Haser, Doğan, and Erhan 2022) and was also linked to teachers being unprepared, as well as limited learning-related interaction and not being able to observe and assess learning.

In addition, 2 participants shared an experience regarding a drop in scores in the Irish Standardised Examinations (STen), which may be due to the large variance between parental input during online learning. However, parents felt that schools had the necessary resources and expertise to help mitigate attainment deficits due to the support systems and familiarity of schools. Interestingly, Participant 10 showed that, despite previously discussed concerns regarding an increase in negative behaviours on return to school, these were short-lived and improved after an adjustment period of three to four weeks. The comments suggest that provision was the same as before school closures, and it can be inferred that the familiarity and consistency supported children's (with SEN) reintegration to school. In other institutions – where this may not have been possible due to a range of factors – this may have been more challenging and disrupted.

She adjusted to it very well […] for her, everything was the same as before she left. (P3, Lines 476-477)

After […] about three to four weeks, completely back to […] herself […] and all of those behaviours were, I wouldn't say gone, but definitely lessened. (P10, Lines 315-317)

Discussion

The current study explored parental experiences of online learning and return to school for their children with SEN during the COVID-19 pandemic and, through doing so, obtained insight into the delivery of online learning for Irish children with SEN, identified the associated educational successes and challenges, while also highlighted parental perspectives of the perceived lasting consequences, by identifying themes regarding their children's return to in-person learning. Pertinent findings and implications are considered surrounding [1] the delivery of online learning [2] the experiences of online learning, and [3] the return to in-person education. We end the discussion by considering limitations and future directions and outlining final points.

Delivery of Online Learning. The results from the current research reflect those of international studies which show that children with SEN were widely overlooked during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Neece, McIntrye, and Fenning 2020; Toseeb et al. 2020). Given the discussed lack of preparedness of teachers, they were left to rely on their resilience, creativity, and support from colleagues in order to approach this new way of educating. The current results showcase a large discrepancy between the differentiated curriculums and support systems in place for these children while in school, when compared to those which were received throughout the pandemic, and showed that SEN children were not receiving a holistic, differentiated curriculum in line with governmental standards (Department of Education 2019; EPSEN Act 2004; The Teaching Council 2020). Due to educators' freedom in approach to online learning (INTO 2022), there was a variance between the provision of synchronous and asynchronous learning during this time. Despite some participants finding asynchronous learning more engaging and motivating for their children, there was a shared perspective that online learning was inaccessible for children with SEN, which may have been as a result of everyday IT issues becoming magnified during this period of online instruction (Johnson et al. 2016). These results demonstrated a continuation of early pandemic experiences for children with SEN (e.g. Barnett and Jung 2021; Neece, McIntrye, and

Fenning 2020), and further indicates the long-term lack of suitable provision during this time. This highlights the need for clear and consistent guidance, as well as contingency training for educators on how to achieve the governmental standards for children with SEN should the likely need for online education arise (Williams and Sharpe, 2023). Furthermore, future emphasis should be placed on increasing social interactions during online learning through use of, for example, smaller group discussions (Akcaoglu and Lee 2016) due to the consistent concern relating to social isolation. We therefore encourage additional work surrounding online provision to explore factors that underpin increased social engagement and presence, with emphasis on children with SEN due to the higher risk of impacted learning.

Experiences of Online Learning. The current research findings add to existing knowledge surrounding a shared responsibility, by parents and teachers, in both the provision of education and in completion of administrative tasks (Bogden 2003; Huerta, Gonzales, and d'Entrement 2009). However, the findings highlight the abrupt shift in responsibility towards parents who were involuntarily placed in this role (Dong, Cao, and Li 2020). Similar to early findings of Patrick et al. (2020), parents also saw a decrease in familial support during this time, as well as an increase in stress pertaining to balancing the requirements of their career (Dong, Cao, and Li 2020), implicating parental burnout (Lau and Ng 2019; Tao, Lau, and Yiu 2019) that somewhat limited their capacity to support their child's access and engagement with online learning. Additionally, current results show participants felt they were neither receiving adequate guidance from educators on how to best support their children or given the opportunity to express their concerns. Clear preferences expressed by these parents provided crucial insight pertaining to provision improvements which could alleviate the negative effects of this time for families. Suggestions are therefore made to consider how to best include parents as part of a multidisciplinary team that plans for the effective provision of education for children during future school closures, as is the case with the regular building of an IEP. Additionally, both teacher training and professional development courses should seek to learn from these findings in how to best support parents in their role as educators. Ross, Kennedy, and Devitt (2021) highlight the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) as a pivotal link in the collaboration process in order to ensure successful learning outcomes. These findings could be useful in creating a professional, mediating link between home and school during any future school closures.

Despite these challenges, this research presents a novel perspective regarding success for these families. Discussion revealed that several participants embraced the responsibility and became more autonomous whereby they prioritised their child's wellbeing and used more naturally occurring scenarios to integrate educational opportunities. Participants emphasised how this was successful in improving their children's mental health, coping skills, and identification of new hobbies, while also increasing quality family time. Fothergill (2017) highlighted coping skills and family factors as mediating in the long-term effects of school closures due to natural disasters, and perhaps is a contributory factor that mitigated the challenges on return to school. However, despite the perceived increase in child's wellbeing following this, this lack of direct guidance from educators increased the risk for academic loss during school closures. Indeed, when speaking with school leaders, OFSTED[2] identified that during school closures, children with SEN have 'struggled' and 'fallen further' than those without SEN (OFSTED 2020).

Therefore, more effective approaches and pedagogy must be prepared, and should draw on parental experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic, such as focusing more on well-being and integrating educational opportunities. Recent works have emphasised the importance of emotion regulation to prepare children with educational worries and anxieties for learning (e.g. Petronzi, Schalkwyk, and Petronzi 2023). With collaborative pedagogic design, this could become an effective approach for children with SEN during school closures, but also more generally. For example, Zhao and Watterston (2021) discuss the pandemic as a unique opportunity to implement areas of educational strength which were identified during this time, notably a developmental, personalised, and evolving curriculum, that is student-centred, with inquiry-based pedagogy, and capitalises on the strengths of both synchronous and asynchronous delivery of instruction in the classroom. While these suggestions mirror the educational successes experienced in the current study, parents are additionally implicated as invaluable in the identification of how online teaching can be implemented for young SEN learners in a home environment. For example, harnessing nature and the young learners' immediate environment to achieve curriculum goals, which was found to have a positive impact on children with SEN's motivation to learn.

Return to In-person Education. A concern throughout previous literature has been the readaptation of children to in-person education following a prolonged stint of online learning (e.g. Lau and Lee 2020; Parczewska 2021; Sonnenschein et al. 2022). The current study addressed a limitation in the literature by gaining parental perspectives of this reintegration and highlighted how, despite initial relief, parents were quickly met with concerns including social anxiety, behavioural regression, and impacted academic attainment. The current results highlight social anxiety as a concern for children with SEN post COVID-19 pandemic, which may be a consequence of the social isolation linked with online learning (Khurana 2016). Furthermore, parents witnessed behavioural regression, such as school refusal, irregular sleep patterns, and deregulation on initial return to education, in line with Madrid et al. (2006). Parents also noted a continuous drop in STen scores following their child's return to education, suggesting longer-term effects of the impacted education provision for these children. However, parents strongly felt that despite concerns, schools had better resources and support systems in place than the home, and felt that with time, they would be able to mitigate these losses. Despite this, recent research by Liverpool et al. (2023) has shown students with additional needs as more likely to experience increased levels of anxiety on return to in-person education, when compared with those reported both during online learning and pre-pandemic, placing a greater importance on sufficient training for educators to support students on their return to education. The current findings highlight the mirroring of pre-pandemic routines and environments as beneficial in lessening these adverse long-term effects of disrupted learning for SEN children and may be beneficial in planning for future returns to school following long-term closures.

Limitations and future directions

The current research was novel in its identification of the shared decision by parents to stop engaging in online learning to promote the wellbeing of their child, but also

highlighted the continued drop in STen scores for children with SEN following the subsequent return to in-person learning. This drop in academic performance highlights specific educational loss as an area for future studies to address. The current study had several notable strengths. Use of qualitative methodology enabled rich exploration of the participants' lived experiences of online learning (Banister et al. 2012; Spinelli 2005), while an inductive, RTA enabled the development, analysis, and interpretation of consistent patterns throughout the dataset, which were data driven (Braun and Clarke 2021; Moretti et al. 2011). Additionally, semi-structured interviews provided enough flexibility to ensure that the research aims were addressed, while also leaving space for participants to add their own meaning to their experience (Galletta 2013). However, the study is not without limitations. Indeed, the subjectivity associated with qualitative research is acknowledged, in addition to the limited geographical scope and breadth of the work. Therefore, the study could be replicated to include a larger, more diverse group of parents to gain wider perspectives that could inform future provision for online learning, that is not necessarily reserved for 'emergency' teaching provision. Moreover, participants were recruited through use of a purposive, voluntary sample with participants self-selecting into the study; therefore, results may reflect viewpoints of those who were most negatively affected. More valuable insight could be obtained by exploring children's experiences, which would more accurately highlight perceived engaging approaches to learning, and therefore better direct subsequent provision. Adding to this, quantitative methods such as self-report measures surrounding the use of online learning (e.g. in a blended approach) for children with SEN would enable a statistical analysis of the impact of this approach on a range of key measures, including children's attainment, enjoyment, and wellbeing to better prepare for possible future pandemics.. Finally, a wider understanding of the resources available to these households would be beneficial in assessing which factors were impactful on the success of online learning. Therefore, future research may aim to investigate areas such as parental education, income and links to child attainment during this period.

Conclusion

The current findings highlight the inaccessibility and unsuitability of the education offered for children with SEN during the COVID-19 pandemic and calls for more emphasis to be placed on this vulnerable group, should home-schooling be required again. Parents were highlighted as at risk of parental burnout due to an increase in demands, as well as a decrease in support systems, as well as concerns regarding their child's access to education. Furthermore, the current study highlighted a variance in educational access for children during this time, emphasising a need for teachers to be trained in how best to differentiate learning, and tailor supports to mitigate the educational and psychological concerns following this period. This work advocates a focus on developing engaging and sustainable education-based approaches for children with SEN in anticipation of future school closures. Parents and children should be given the opportunity to draw on COVID-19 home-schooling experiences to co-devise an approach to education that does not demand that children with SEN simply engage with a screen when this will likely not meet their needs.

Note

1. The data for this reference (Banister et al. 2012) should be 2012
2. Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills and inspects services (within England) providing education and skills for learners of all ages. Ofsted inspect and regulate services that care for children and young people (GOV.UK).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Author contributions

We note that RF is the lead author, and DP is the second author. Contributions are as follows; RF and DP conceived the project and RF was the principal investigator. DP was the research supervisor. RF and DP sought ethical approval and worked on material setup. Study administration and data collection were led by RF. Manuscript writing was led by RF with input/amendments from DP. All authors provided approval for the final paper submission.

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