



# European Journal of Psychology and Educational Research

Volume 7, Issue 2, 93 - 107.

ISSN: 2589-949X

<http://www.ejper.com>

## Inequality in Parent Involvement in Children's Education During Covid-19

Dimitra Hartas\* 

University of Warwick, UNITED KINGDOM

Received: April 11, 2024 • Revised: May 25, 2024 • Accepted: June 15, 2024

**Abstract:** This study used the COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) Study to examine home learning and parent attitudes to education during Covid-19 in relation to demographic and household financial circumstances and parent educational aspirations. The findings showed that White, female, and degree-educated parents were more likely than their counterparts to report positive attitudes to home learning, support their 16-year-olds' learning, and contact schools during the lockdowns. Parents who experienced food poverty and reported being financially worse off after the pandemic were less likely to support home learning or contact schools but reported largely positive attitudes to learning. Also, parents who reported lower educational aspirations were more likely to support their children's learning, reflecting their educational needs. This study contributes to our understanding of home learning during the pandemic and has implications for public policy and action regarding supporting children's learning during health crises and reducing education inequalities.

**Keywords:** *Education inequality, home learning, parental involvement.*

**To cite this article:** Hartas, D. (2024). Inequality in parent involvement in children's education during Covid-19. *European Journal of Psychology and Educational Research*, 7(2), 93-107. <https://doi.org/10.12973/ejper.7.2.93>

### Introduction

The number of parents who routinely support their children's learning has been on the rise. Global cultural trends in parenting, observed in USA and the UK, have shown that most parents (between 75 and 95%) from diverse socio-economic and ethnic groups are routinely involved with their children's learning, especially during the early stages of education (e.g., Hartas, 2011, 2012; Peters et al., 2008). Parental involvement with children's learning captures a wide range of activities, including support with homework, reading or extra-curricular activities, and school contact (Epstein, 1995, 2001). In the UK, since 2010, family policy has increasingly placed the onus on parents to support their children's learning and enhance their life chances. More recently, parental involvement with children's education has been prominent in policy initiatives such as the Ofsted's (2019) education inspection framework, early career framework (Department for Education [DfE], 2019), and the white paper for schools (DfE, 2022).

#### *The Ecological Context of Parental Involvement*

Research on parental involvement with children's learning has been mixed, not least because of the different forms parental involvement takes (i.e., home / school based). Many studies agreed that home learning drives bigger improvements than parental involvement in school-based activities (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Lehl et al., 2020; Sammons et al., 2015; Sylva et al., 2003). Parental involvement with children's learning has repeatedly been linked to improvements in pupils' attainment, attendance, and wellbeing (e.g., Barbour et al., 2018). Other studies on parenting (e.g., Hartas, 2011, 2012; Lareau, 2018; Lee & Bowen, 2006) have found that family background factors, including family income, resources and cultural capital and parents' investments in children's education explain a bigger portion of differences in children's developmental outcomes and academic performance than home learning alone, because socioeconomic factors influence access to different forms of capital, i.e., educational resources, social and cultural capital, that facilitates educational guidance and interactions with schools and teachers. In examining home learning through socioeconomic lenses, Lareau coined the term 'concerted cultivation' to describe parental practices and behaviours that are conducive to enhancing learning and educational opportunities in children as a counterpoint to the 'accomplishment of natural growth' which is about catering for children's essential needs (e.g., food and shelter). Concerted cultivation

#### \* Correspondence:

Dimitra Hartas, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK. ✉ [d.hartas@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:d.hartas@warwick.ac.uk)



was mostly observed in middle class families in which parents invested in educational resources and services, whereas the accomplishment of natural growth was seen in parents in low-income families (Lareau, 2018).

### *Covid-19 Impact on Parents and Children*

The landscape of parenting and parental involvement with children's learning has become more complex since the pandemic. The Kaiser Family Foundation in the US found that 84% of people reported disruptions to their lives due to Covid-19. Amongst them, parents with children under the age of 18 (88%) reported the highest rates of disruption than any other demographic group (Kirzinger et al., 2020). At the start of the pandemic most studies on parenting and home learning focused on parents coping with a new reality whereby early years places and schools closed and childcare, learning, extra-curricular activities, and parent work were relocated into the family space (e.g., Bennett & Keyes, 2020; Lewis, 2020; Minello, 2020). The stress from trying to recalibrate and rebalance life was felt by both parents and children, having significant implications for their mental health and wellbeing, and reinforcing education inequality (Forbes et al., 2022; Lewis, 2020). Although Covid-19 brought significant challenges to families, education inequality has deeper roots. In their review of social policy actions of the Conservative government in the UK, Vizard and Hills (2021) found the reduction of welfare state, cuts in public services, and the resulting workforce capacity pressures to be responsible for compromising quality in education and eroding the resilience of parents and children to cope with crises. The challenges many families faced during the pandemic were 'syndemic', i.e., the consequences of Covid-19 being exacerbated by social and economic inequalities (Mezzina et al., 2022).

Covid-19 drastically altered many parents' domestic responsibilities with parents being forced to re-arrange employment, home learning and parenting (Lewis, 2020; Minello, 2020). As women tend to undertake most unpaid work in the house, bringing childcare back into the family during the pandemic has had significant implications regarding domestic workloads, with traditional gender norms coming back into the fore (Alon et al., 2020; Petts et al., 2020; Wenham et al., 2020). Some argued that gender roles and the division of domestic labour have been permanently altered because of Covid-19 restrictions, with women bearing the brunt of domestic work resulting in retrieving from public spaces into the home (e.g., Alon et al., 2020). Covid-19 laid bare existing gender inequalities and reinforced intensive mothering by posing unrealistic parenting expectations and standards on mothers which have contributed to their decreased well-being and mental health (Forbes et al., 2022; Hays, 1998).

Public health responses to contain the spread of the virus led to unemployment or reduction in work hours, especially among low-income parents who usually are employed in routine or semi-routine occupations that do not offer the flexibility to work from home (Mongey et al., 2021). The pandemic magnified social class and ethnic inequalities in learning, including home learning and family resources (Domina et al., 2021). Learning loss due to school closures is argued to set back children's cognitive and academic gains in the long term (Bol, 2020), disproportionately affecting disadvantaged children (Azevedo et al., 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020) and children in working-class families (Andrew et al., 2020; Bol, 2020). While learning opportunities have been significantly narrowed for all children globally, existing inequalities in parent education, access to basic IT equipment, and food insecurity have exacerbated the disadvantage of children living in poverty (Anand et al., 2007; Clay & Rogus, 2021). The rate of food insecurity has increased by approximately one third compared to the year prior to Covid-19 (18.8%), with 35.5% being newly food insecure (Forbes et al., 2022; Niles et al., 2020). The removal of external systems of support (e.g., Free School Meals) for low-income families due to school closures has accentuated their financial difficulties, resulting in increased food insecurity, which disproportionately affects low-income families (Paslakis et al., 2021).

Beyond household income, parent education is a critical factor in shaping parental involvement with learning: parents with lower levels of formal educational qualifications may feel less able and confident to take up teaching responsibilities (Domina et al., 2021). Parent educational aspirations have also been linked to home learning and children's academic achievement. Parents who have high educational aspirations for their children are more inclined than others to invest in educational resources and home learning to support their children's learning regularly (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2023). Educational aspirations are affected by parents' social class in that middle-class parents are keen to maintain their social status and possess cultural capital and confidence to optimise their children's life chances (Lareau, 2018).

Minority ethnic parents might be less able to support their children's learning during lockdowns not because of lack of aspirations but because some may have limited knowledge of the education system, curricula, and teaching styles (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2023) and feel less confident to contact schools and interact with teachers in ways that maximise opportunities for their children's learning (Lareau, 2018). Parents with Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black-African and Black-Caribbean backgrounds were more likely to be key workers during the pandemic, thus rendering them unable to support their children's learning at home due to long work shifts and vulnerability to the virus, adding extra pressures on their families (Platt & Warwick, 2020).

The key aim of this study was to examine associations between parent involvement with 16-year-olds' education and attitudes to home learning during Covid-19 and i) demographic factors; ii) parent educational aspirations; iii) parent attitudes to education; and iv) household financial situation. The study is hoped to shed light on whether the number of

mothers and fathers and parents from different ethnic and socioeconomic groups differed in how they supported their 16-year-olds' learning at home, and whether parent aspirations and household financial situation associated with home learning to reflect on whether the pandemic has deepened existing education and gender inequalities. This study hoped to make an important contribution to understanding parent involvement with mid adolescents' learning and parent attitudes to home learning, especially during Covid-19, and the role demographic and socioeconomic factors, attitudes and aspirations play in home learning support. Most studies (eg, Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Lehl et al., 2020; Sammons et al., 2015; Sylva et al., 2003) on parental involvement in children's learning have focused on younger children, often utilising small sample sizes. This study aimed to examine parental involvement and its social and attitudinal context by using a large, representative sample, identifying national trends in home learning support and attitudes to home learning during a health crisis. The study builds on prior research examining the role poverty and social class play in shaping home learning and parent attitudes to education especially through the pandemic lenses and raises important questions about education inequality.

The research questions in this study were as follows:

What were the associations between parent demographic factors (i.e., gender, ethnicity, education) and i) parent home learning support and school contact; and ii) attitudes about home learning during Covid-19? Were there any differences in the percentage of parents involved in home learning as a function of education, gender, and ethnicity?

What were the associations between household financial situation and i) parent home learning support and school contact; and ii) parent attitudes to home learning during Covid-19?

What were the associations between parent educational aspirations (i.e., post-16 aspirations, university likelihood) and attitudes to education and i) home learning support and school contact; and ii) attitudes to home learning during Covid-19?

### Methodology

The study utilised data from the first wave of the *COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) Study* to examine mental health and wellbeing in young people in year 11. COSMO examined, through high-quality evidence, how the Covid-19 pandemic affected socio-economic inequalities in young people's life chances in terms of mental health and well-being (Adali et al., 2023). Parents and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from the six main minority ethnic groups (i.e., Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean, Black African and Mixed) were oversampled. Data were collected via a parent questionnaire that included questions about different phases of the pandemic, during and between the lockdowns and the ensuing school closures (Lockdown 1: April to July 2020, and Lockdown 3: January to March 2021, as well as the time between September and December 2020 when most schools were open).

The study design and the tools to be used for COSMO were approved by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee.

### Measures

There were five measures in this study, namely demographic, parent educational aspirations; parent attitudes to education; parental involvement in children's education and home learning; and household financial situation (see Table 1 for descriptive measures for the categorical variables).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Categorical Variables

Demographics and Household financial situation		Parent educational aspirations and learning support	
Ethnicity		Post 16 choices	
White	65%	Full time education	85%
Black	14%	Training/ Apprenticeship	5%
Asian	21%	Something else	10%
Gender		University likelihood	
Male	22%	Very likely	46
Female	78%	Fairly likely	30
		Not very likely	15
		Not at all likely	9
		Recoded to:	
		Likely	76%
		Not Likely	24%

Table 1. Continued

Demographics and Household financial situation			Parent educational aspirations and learning support	
Parent education			Parent support	-
Degree level	45%		Lockdown 1	50%
A levels	10%		At least once a week	21%
GCSE level	31%		At least once a month	29%
No qualifications	14%		Not at all	
Financial situation		Covid	Parent support-	
comparison			Lockdown 3	
Much worse off	14			48%
A little worse off	28		At least once a week	22%
The same as before	45		At least once a month	30%
A little better off	11		Not at all	
Much better off	2			
Recoded to:				
Worse off	42%			
The same as before	45%			
Better off	13%			

N= 8721-10932

*Demographic Information*

Data were collected about parent ethnicity, gender and educational qualifications to provide participants' demographic information (Table 1). The ethnicity variable was recoded into three groups to avoid small group cell sizes, White, Black and Asian. There were females and males in the sample based on a question about biological sex. Finally, the parent education categories were qualifications at degree level, including postgraduate studies, A level, GCSE level, and no qualifications.

*Parent Educational Aspirations*

There were two variables about parent aspirations (Table 1):

Post-16 choices: Parents were asked what they hoped their children will do post 16, with responses ranging from 'pursuing full- time education (i.e., A levels, university)', to 'doing an apprenticeship /learning a trade' to 'other options (e.g., looking for employment, starting a family)'.

University likelihood: Parents were asked to predict whether their children were 'likely to go to university' with responses ranging from 'very likely' to 'not at all likely'. Due to small cell sizes, the variable was recoded into two categories (i.e., likely, not likely).

*Parent Attitudes to Education*

Parents were asked to rate statements related to their children's education, including 'I know all I need to know about how I can help with their education'; 'Nowadays you need qualifications in order to get a job worth having'; and 'I want them to have a better education than I did' (Table 2). Their responses ranged from 'agree strongly' to 'disagree strongly' (4- point Likert scale), and the Cronbach's alpha (reliability coefficient) was .42, being moderate. The responses were summed, and the new variable ranged from 3 to 15 (M=4.8; SD=1.6) – the lower the score the more positive parent attitudes to education were.

*Home Learning, Parent Attitudes and School Contact*

There were three variables, namely parent involvement in children's learning during lockdowns 1 and 3; attitudes to home learning; and school contact.

Parent learning support during lockdowns 1 and 3: parents were asked whether they or other family members helped their children's learning during lockdowns 1 and 3, with 'at least once a week'; 'at least once a month'; 'not at all' answers (Table 1).

Parent attitudes to home learning: parents were asked to rate the following statements: 'I clearly understood school's expectations of my child regarding home learning'; 'My child was able to manage work set by school'; 'The resources required for home learning were easily accessible'; and 'I felt confident supporting my child in their education while they were learning at home' (Table 2). The responses ranged from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' (5-point Likert scale). The items were summed with the new variable ranging from 4 to 24 (M=8.9; SD=1.4) – the lower the score the more positive parents were towards home learning. The Cronbach's alpha was .80, showing strong reliability.

Parent school contact: parents were asked whether they contacted their children's school on issues related to Covid-19 (i.e., 'health and safety at school'; 'child's progress at school'; 'child's wellbeing'; 'how teachers would grade child's GCSEs and whether it would be fair'; and 'child's future education or career choices') with 'No' and 'Yes' responses (Table 3). The items were summed, and the new variable ranged from 1 to 5 ( $M=1.4$ ;  $SD=.89$ ) (the higher the score the more contact parents had with their children's school). The Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .59, being moderate to strong.

#### Household Financial Situation

Two variables were included for household financial situation, namely food poverty and perceived financial situation compared to before the pandemic.

Food poverty: parents were asked whether they or others in household experienced food shortage since the start of the pandemic (i.e., 'Skip meals because there was not enough money or other resources to get food'; 'Ate less than should because of lack of money or other resources'; 'Ran out of food because of lack of money or other resources'; 'Were hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money or other resources for food'; and 'Went without eating for a whole day because of lack of money or other resources') with 'Yes' and 'No' answers (Table 3). The items were summed, and the new variable ranged from 5 to 10 ( $M= 8.4$ ;  $SD=1.3$ ) (the lower the score the higher the food poverty). The Cronbach's alpha was .90, being strong.

Financial situation compared to before Covid-19: parents were asked whether they were better or worse off financially compared to before the pandemic, with their responses ranging from 'much worse off' to 'the same as before', to 'much better off' (5-point Likert scale). Due to small group sizes, the variable was recoded into three categories, namely 'worse off', 'the same as before' and 'better off' (Table 1).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Parent Attitudes to Home Learning and Education

	Agree Strongly	Agree Slightly	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree Slightly	Disagree Strongly
Parent Attitudes to Home Learning:					
I clearly understood school's expectations of my child regarding home learning	42	31	12	9	6
My child was able to manage work set by school	42	29	9	11	9
The resources required for home learning were easily accessible	37	32	11	12	7
I felt confident supporting my child in their education while they were learning at home	26	30	17	14	11
Parent Attitudes to Education:					
I know all I need to know about how I can help with their education	39	44	-	12	4
Nowadays, you need qualifications in order to get a job worth having	50	34	-	12	3
I want them to have a better education than I did	73	21	-	5	1

N= 8721-10932

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Parent School Contact and Food Poverty

Parent School Contact	No	Yes
Health and safety at school	89	11
Child's progress at school	71	29
Child's wellbeing	78	22
How teachers would grade child's GCSEs and whether it would be fair	77	23
Child's future education or career choices	87	13
Food Poverty:		
Skip meals because there was not enough money or other resources to get food	89	11
Ate less than should because of a lack of money or other resources	83	17
Ran out of food because of lack of money or other resources	88	12
We're hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money or other resources for food	89	11
Went without eating for a whole day because of a lack of money or other resources	93	7

N= 8721-10932

#### Analytic Data Plan

Descriptive statistical analyses took place to offer an overview of the data. Frequencies were run for the categorical variables, namely demographics, household financial situation, and parent educational aspirations and learning support

(Tables 1, 2, 3) and M and SD values were obtained for the continuous variables. Two weighted binary logistic regressions (Table 4) examined the unique and cumulative contributions of demographic, parent educational aspirations, parent attitudes to education, and household financial situation to parental involvement with children's learning during lockdowns 1 and 3 (the binary measures were supported (at least once a week'; 'at least once a month') and no support ('not at all'). Also, two weighted linear regressions (Table 4) were run to examine associations between parent school contact and attitudes to home learning during Covid-19 in relation to demographics, parent aspirations and attitudes to education and household financial situation. All regression models were established using entry method with all covariates being entered into models at the same time. Diagnostic tests were run and assumptions (such as normality of residuals, no multicollinearity) were met. With the binary logistic regression analyses, the odds ratio for the predictor variables were examined. The odds ratio for a particular variable is defined as  $e^b$  whereas  $e$  is the natural log or base number (2.718) of natural logarithms and  $b$  is the logit coefficient estimate of predictors. Finally, cross tab analyses were run to examine differences in the percentage of parents supporting their children's learning during lockdowns 1 and 3 by ethnicity, gender, and education (Table 5).

Table 4. Odds ratio and SE for Parent Learning Support (Lockdowns 1 & 3) and Beta for Home Learning Attitudes and School Contact

	Parent Learning Support -1 Odds (SE)	Parent Learning Support- 3 Odds (SE)	Home learning attitudes Beta	School contact Beta
<b>Demographics</b>				
Gender (females)	1.53 (.07)**	1.48 (.07)**	-.054**	-.021*
Ethnicity:				
White v Black	.75 (.08) **	.73 (.07) **	-.024	.019
White v Asian	.55 (.07) **	.55 (.07) **	-.011	.004
Parent education:				
Degree v A levels	.71 (.09) **	.75(.09) **	.006	-.033**
Degree v GCSEs	.71 (.06) **	.74 (.06) **	.007	-.064**
Degree v no Educ Qual	.59 (.08) **	.58 (.08) **	.008	-.080**
<b>Household Financial Situation</b>				
Food poverty	.82 (.02)*	.83 (.02)*	-.076**	-.087**
Financial situation pre/post Covid-19:				
Worse off v the same	1.13 (.06)**	1.12 (.06) *	-.072**	.078**
Worse off v better off	1.11 (.09)*	.99 (.08)	-.026*	.054**
<b>Parent Educational Aspiration</b>				
Post-16 options:				
Full-time educ v Apprenticeship	1.21 (.14) *	1.35 (.14)*	.034**	-.007
Full time educ v something else	1.02 (.10)	1.08 (.10)	.002	-.012
University likelihood:				
Likely v not likely	1.37 (.07)**	1.26 (.07)**	.171**	.080**
<b>Education Attitudes</b>				
	.91 (.01) **	.91 (.01) **	.251**	.005

N= 4657-5782 \*\*\* $p < .001$  \*\* $p < .01$  \* $p < .05$

## Results

Most parents in this study were female, degree educated and White. Around half of parents supported their children's learning during lockdowns 1 and 3 and over three quarters reported high aspirations for their children's education. Nearly half of parents reported they were financially worse off after the pandemic (Table 1). Regarding the binary logistic regressions, the Nagelkerke pseudo  $r^2$  measures of effect size for parent learning support in lockdowns 1 and 3, were .13, and .14, respectively, indicating that around 13% and 14% of the variance in learning support was accounted for in the full models.

Diagnostic tests were run, and key assumptions for the binary logistic regression analyses were met. To check whether the model fits the data and how well the model predicts the outcome variables, the model chi-square statistic, which measures the difference between the model with the chosen predictors and the baseline model without the predictors, was examined. For the logistic regression models, the omnibus tests for parent support in lockdown 1,  $X^2(15) = 217.85$ ,  $p < .000$ , and in lockdown 3,  $X^2(15) = 210.06$ ,  $p < .000$ , were statistically significant, pointing to a good model fit. The Hosmer Lemeshow tests were also conducted to examine whether the observed probabilities matched the predicted probabilities. The Hosmer Lemeshow tests for parent support in lockdown 1,  $X^2(8) = 11.49$ ,  $p < .17$ , and in lockdown 3,  $X^2(8) = 8.2$ ,  $p < .40$ , were not statistically significant, which meant that the observed probabilities matched the predicted probabilities. Finally, to check multicollinearity (correlations between predictor variables) in the logistic models, the VIF (variance inflation factor) values were calculated and ranged between 1.2- 1.5 (below 10) across the two logistic regression models, indicating that the assumption of multicollinearity was met.

For the two linear regression models, the Adjusted  $R^2$  was .174 for home learning attitudes and .04 for school contact, indicating that around 17% and 4% of the variance in home learning attitudes and school contact respectively was explained by the predictors. The ANOVAs for home learning attitudes and school contact were significant,  $F(15) = 100.27$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $F(15) = 15.95$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively. Finally, the assumption of multicollinearity was met for the linear models, with VIF being between 1.05 and 1.53 for home learning attitudes and between 1.06 and 1.54 for school contact.

The results were organised along the three research questions:

*What were the associations between parent demographic factors (i.e., gender, ethnicity, educational qualifications) and i) parent home learning support and school contact, and ii) parent attitudes to home learning during Covid-19?*

Significant associations were found between parents' gender, learning support, and school contact, and home learning attitudes during Covid-19 (Table 4). Compared to fathers, mothers were 53% and 48% more likely to provide learning support during lockdowns 1 and 3, respectively. For fathers, the predicted scores for home learning attitudes and school contact would be .054 and .021, respectively, lower than that for mothers, showing that fathers reported more positive perceptions about home learning (the lower the score, the more positive the attitudes to home learning) but were less likely to contact schools on Covid-19 related issues. The relationships between parent ethnicity and attitudes towards home learning and school contact were not significant, suggesting that compared to White parents, Black or Asian parents were not more or less likely to contact the school or report positive attitudes toward home learning. In contrast, associations between parent ethnicity and parent learning support during lockdowns 1 & 3 were significant. Compared to White parents, Black parents were 25% and 27% less likely, and Asian parents were 45% less likely to provide learning support during lockdowns 1 & 3, respectively (Table 4).

Parent educational qualifications were found to associate significantly with parent school contact but not with home learning attitudes. Specifically, for parents with education at A levels, GCSE and below GCSE levels the predicted scores for school contact would be .03, .06, and .08, respectively, lower than that for parents educated at degree level, showing a positive relationship between school contact and parent educational qualifications. Likewise, compared to parents with a degree, parents with A levels were 29% and 25% less likely and parents with GCSE levels were 29% and 26% less likely to provide learning support during lockdowns 1 and 3, respectively. Parents with no formal educational qualifications were 41% and 42% less likely to provide support during lockdowns 1 and 3, respectively (Table 4). It appears that parents with A levels, GCSEs or lower education were less likely than their degree-educated peers to support their children's learning during the lockdowns.

*Were there any differences in the percentage of parents offering learning support as a function of parent education, gender, and ethnicity?*

Consistently, cross tabs analyses (Table 5) showed that parental support with children's learning at home varied across ethnic groups,  $X^2(4) = 111.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ; genders,  $X^2(2) = 19.40$ ,  $P < .001$ ; and parent education levels,  $X^2(6) = 78.76$ ,  $p < .001$ , during lockdown 1. Likewise, during lockdown 3, parental support varied across ethnic groups,  $X^2(4) = 116.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ; genders,  $X^2(2) = 18.98$ ,  $P < .001$ ; and parent education,  $X^2(6) = 71.29$ ,  $p < .001$ . Compared to Black and Asian parents, a larger percentage of White parents were involved with children's learning at least once a week or once a month (the same among parents who did not provide any learning support). Significantly more mothers than fathers were involved at least once a week or once a month with their children's learning (more mothers than father amongst those who did not provide any learning support). Finally, more degree-educated parents, followed by parents at GCSE level, supported their children's learning during the lockdowns. It is of interest to note that around 30% of parents at GCSE level supported their children at least once a week / once a month, whereas around 10% of parents at A level and parents with no qualifications supported their children at least once a week / once a month during the lockdowns. In sum, over three times more mothers than fathers, two thirds White parents and around half of parents educated at degree level supported their children's learning during the lockdowns.

Table 5: % of Parents in Home Learning during lockdowns 1 and 3 by Ethnicity, Gender and Education (Cross tab analyses)

	Parent learning support -lockdown 1			Parent learning support- lockdown 3		
	Not at all	At least once a week	At least once a month	Not at all	At least once a week	At least once a month
Ethnicity						
White	59	69	68	58	69	69
Black	15	13	12	15	13	12
Asian	26	18	20	26	18	19
Gender						
Male	19	23	23	19	23	23
Female	81	77	77	81	77	77
Parent education						
Degree level	41	47	51	41	47	50
A level	10	9	10	11	9	11
GCSE level	31	31	27	31	31	28
No qualification	18	12	12	17	12	11

N= 8721-10932

*What were the associations between household financial situation and i) parent home learning support and school contact; and ii) parent attitudes to home learning during Covid-19?*

Parents who experienced food poverty during the pandemic were 18% and 17%, respectively, less likely to support their children's learning during lockdowns 1 & 3, and their predicted scores on home learning attitudes and school contact were .07 and .08, respectively, lower than the scores from parents who did not experience food poverty (Table 4). These findings showed that parents who experienced food poverty reported positive attitudes to home learning although they were less likely to support their children's learning and contact schools. Pre-post-Covid-19 household financial situation comparisons were found to associate strongly with both outcome variables. For parents who thought they were the same financially as before the pandemic, the predicted scores for home learning attitudes and school contact were .07 and .07, respectively, lower than that of parents who reported to be worse off after Covid-19. Likewise, for parents who thought they were better off financially after Covid-19, the predicted scores were .02 and .05 lower than those of financially worse off parents. The results showed that parents who were the same or better off financially after Covid-19 reported positive attitudes to home learning and were more likely to contact schools and support their children's learning during lockdowns 1 & 3 (Table 4).

*What were the associations between parent educational aspirations (i.e., post-16 options, university likelihood) and parent attitudes to education and i) parent home learning support and school contact; ii) and parent attitudes to home learning during Covid-19?*

Compared to parents who aspired their children to pursue full-time education post 16, those who thought of training / apprenticeships as post-16 options were 21% and 35% more likely to support their children during lockdowns 1 & 3 (Table 4). In contrast, their predicted score for their attitudes to home learning was .03 higher than that from parents who aspired their children to attend education full time, showing negative attitudes to home learning. No significant relationship between post-16 options and school contact was found for parents who thought about training / apprenticeships. Compared to parents who thought their children were likely to go to university, those who thought it unlikely were 37% and 26%, respectively, more likely to support their children during lockdowns 1 and 3.

The predicted scores about parent home learning attitudes and school contact were .171 and .08, respectively, higher than those of parents who reported university to be likely for their children, showing negative attitudes to home learning although they were more likely to contact schools during Covid-19. Finally, compared to parents who reported positive attitudes to education, those parents who did not were 9% less likely to support their children's learning during the lockdowns (Table 4). The relationship between parent attitudes to education and attitudes to home learning is positive in that parents who were positive about education also showed positive attitudes to home learning (for every unit increase in attitudes to education there was a .251 unit increase in home learning attitudes).

Taken together, compared to fathers, mothers were more likely to provide learning support during the lockdowns although fathers reported positive attitudes to home learning. White parents reported to be more likely than Black and Asian parents to support their 16-year olds' learning during the lockdowns. Degree-educated parents reported to offer learning support during the lockdowns and contact schools and had positive attitudes to home learning compared to their peers with lower educational qualifications. Compared to parents who did not experience food shortages, those who did reported to be less likely to support their children's learning or contact schools during the lockdowns but reported a positive attitude to home learning. Parents who were the same or better off financially after Covid-19 reported more positive attitudes to home learning and were more likely to contact schools and support their children's learning



during the lockdowns. Parents who saw training/ apprenticeships as a post-16 option and parents who thought university is unlikely for their children were more likely to support their children's learning during the lockdowns although less positive in their attitudes to home learning and less likely to contact schools. Finally, parents who reported positive attitudes to education were more likely to also report positive attitudes to home learning.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine associations between parent involvement with 16-year-olds' education and attitudes to home learning during Covid-19 and demographics, parent educational aspirations and attitudes to education, and household financial situation. The findings revealed gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic inequalities in school contact and home learning, although not so much in parent attitudes towards their children's education and home learning.

### *Home Learning, School Contact and Gender and Ethnic Inequality*

Mothers and White parents were more likely than their counterparts to support their 16-year-olds' learning during the lockdowns, contact schools and report positive attitudes to home learning. Reflecting previous research (e.g., Bennett & Keyes, 2020; Lewis, 2020; Toran et al., 2021; Viner et al., 2020), this study's findings consistently showed gender discrepancies in parents supporting their children's home learning during the lockdowns, with mothers being more likely than fathers to provide learning support. The Covid-19 crisis exacerbated gender inequality as domestic duties, childcare and home learning fell heavier on women. It also emboldened culturally embedded notions of 'perfect motherhood' which places pressure on mothers to live up to this ideal and renders their disproportionate domestic work invisible. In a culture that reinforces intensive mothering (Hays, 1998), most mothers were already doing most of the domestic work. Parenting is shaped by gender role norms, which are not easy to change especially during crises. Some argued that Covid-19 will have long-lasting impacts on gender equality (e.g., Bennett & Keyes, 2020; Lewis, 2020; Minello, 2020).

Consistently with previous research (Drewnowski, 2022), the findings from this study unveiled ethnic disparities in parent learning support and involvement with their children's education during the pandemic. Compared to White parents, Black and Asian parents were less likely to support their 16-year olds' learning during the lockdowns and contact the school about matters related to their children's learning and wellbeing. These disparities could be explained by considering the nature of minority ethnic parents' work and reduced opportunities to interact with schools. A large number of minority ethnic parents were key workers during Covid-19 (Platt & Warwick, 2020); thus, their children, most likely, attended school during lockdowns which may explain why fewer minority ethnic parents engaged with learning at home. Also, minority ethnic parents were more likely to work long hours in low-wage jobs in the care sector, having limited time to support children's learning at home. They often have fewer opportunities to communicate with schools, especially if schools do not actively engage in inclusive practices and reach out to all parents (Crozier & Davies, 2007).

### *Socioeconomic Inequalities in Parent Involvement in Learning During Covid-19*

The disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on low-income families who were more likely to experience financial hardship due to unemployment or reduction in pay and food shortages has been well-documented (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Karpman et al., 2020; Wolfson & Leung, 2020). Parents who struggled financially during the pandemic were less likely to support their children's learning and contact schools during the lockdowns than financially better off parents. Children in families experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage were found to experience reduced home learning opportunities during lockdowns (Andrew et al., 2020; Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2023) not because their parents did not value home learning but because of the structural barriers encountered by parents who are often labelled by schools as 'disengaged' or 'hard to reach' (Hartas, 2014; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Vizard & Hills, 2021). The achievement gap is rooted in socioeconomic disadvantage and focusing on home learning alone is insufficient to tackle the impact of social inequalities on children's learning in that home learning does not appear to form a major part of education inequality (Gregg & Washbrook, 2011; Hartas, 2012, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2010). Disadvantaged parents have not been served well by the education system at the best of times (Lareau, 2018) and their limited access to cultural capital incurred by low educational qualifications and access to resources made home schooling even more challenging for them during the pandemic.

In this study, parents who experienced food poverty and those who reported to struggle financially post covid were less likely to provide home learning support to their children and contact schools on matters related to children's learning and wellbeing during the lockdowns, although they reported positive attitudes to home learning. Parents who are food insecure usually experience mental health stress manifested as anxiety, and depression, often contributing to burnout (Griffith, 2022) and their children experience reduced wellbeing (Drewnowski, 2022). Although most parents prioritise their children's access to essential food ahead of their own, children are often aware of food insecurity in the family and internalise parents' stress. For parents who encounter food shortages, the daily struggle to ensure their children are fed leaves little space for Lareau's 'concerted cultivation' in the form of home learning and active engagement with schools (2018). This is a significant finding considering that, in the UK, over 2.6 million children experience food insecurity, defined as having limited or unreliable access to food due to a lack of financial resources (Food Foundation, 2022; Power et al., 2023). Food insecurity has been found to associate to low wages and precarious employment, limited access to healthy foods, housing insecurity and other forms of neighbourhood disadvantage (Drewnowski, 2022).

Reflecting previous research (Bol, 2020; Cullinane & Montacute, 2020), parent education strongly associated with parent home learning and school contact during the pandemic. Although most parents reported a positive attitude to home learning, parents not educated at a degree level, particularly parents with no formal qualifications, were less likely to support their children's learning and contact the schools during the pandemic. Consistently, Bol (2020) found parents with lower levels of formal education feeling less confident in supporting their children's learning during the 2020 lockdown, having a limited understanding of the material schools provided, and being less likely to contact schools.

Parents who experienced food poverty and reduced financial circumstances post Covid as well as parents with low educational qualifications were less likely to contact schools during the pandemic. School contact is often initiated and controlled by the school and working-class parents and those from minority backgrounds face socio-economic and cultural barriers accessing schools (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Lareau, 2018; Wilson & McGuire, 2021). Crozier et al. (2011, p. 204) argued that schools' expectations of parental engagement centre on "school-approved behaviours arguably manifesting white middle-class normativity". Schools often reward children from families with relatively higher socio-economic and parent education levels and cultural capital and marginalise others (Archer, 2008). Teachers tend to make deficit assumptions about parents who are not visibly engaged with the school, often blaming them for their children's reduced learning (Goodall, 2021).

Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are more adversely affected by health crises and the measures taken to contain them, such as school closures, due to the difficulties they also face in their home environments, such as food poverty (Griffith, 2022) or digital poverty (Vigevano & Mattei, 2023), which contribute to reduced home learning. With school closures, existing inequalities in children's education transferred into the home and were amplified due to a lack of educational resources, parents' low formal education, and reduced family income.

#### *Parent Educational Aspirations and Involvement in Children's Learning*

Parent educational aspirations have been seen as crucial to children's learning (Axford et al., 2019). In this study, parents reported high educational aspirations about their children with around 85% of parents hoping their children will pursue full-time education post 16, and around three quarters seeing university as a possibility for their 16-year-olds. However, parent aspirations and involvement with home learning did not appear to run in the same direction. Compared to parents with high educational aspirations for their children, parents who saw their children not in full-time education post 16 and unlikely to go to university were more likely to support their learning at home during the lockdowns, suggesting that learning support was a response to children experiencing school challenges. In the literature of home learning, it is not uncommon for parents to support learning as a response to school needs for children who already find school difficult (Lee & Bowen, 2006). In this context, parent learning support is an instrumental response to school demands rather than an expression of high educational aspirations per se.

Interestingly, parents who saw their children not in full-time education post 16 and unlikely to go to university reported less positive attitude to home learning possibly because, with school closures, they did not have a choice regarding home learning. The findings showed that most parents reported high educational aspirations for their children but, for certain groups, high aspirations did not seem to translate into home learning. This could be due to practical reasons (e.g., parents' high workload) but also because home learning is often an instrumental response to the needs of children who already struggle academically rather than an inherent part of the 'family habitus', defined by Archer et al. (2014) as the social and cultural context of relationships between young people and their parents. A family is more than a place for school preparation and learning but a web of interactions and lived experiences. A view of family life as relational challenges the idea that home learning and parent aspirations directly lead to measurable educational outcomes for young people. Parent engagement with children's education often happens within certain cultural norms and conditions, and home learning constitutes a small part of it.

Since 2010, UK family policy has placed the onus on parents to reverse inequality by engaging in home learning and becoming aspirant citizens. Previous studies (Gregg & Washbrook, 2011; Hartas, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2010) have shown most parents to have high aspirations irrespective of their social and economic circumstances; however, translating high aspirations to academic outcomes requires structural changes that go beyond what parents do at home (Hartas, 2012). Socioeconomic inequalities drive the achievement gap rather than limited engagement with home learning (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2023; UNESCO, 2020). During the pandemic, families and children who were already experiencing disadvantage were at higher risk of poorer academic outcomes, with Covid-19 widening educational inequalities.

As the findings from this study showed, having high educational aspirations and positive attitudes to home learning is not sufficient to reverse disadvantage. This has significant implications regarding children's learning and development. High educational expectations and aspirations and home environment are often mentioned in debates about education inequalities as key factors for maximising children's life chances. However, structural changes at a family, school, and community level are required to close the achievement gap. At family level, food and housing security and parent access to public services are crucial to enable a family to function and meet children's basic needs. At school level, resources and the quality of the learning environment mostly in terms of high-quality teaching and learning can have a positive

influence on academic outcomes especially for disadvantaged students (Demie & Mclean, 2015). High-quality instructional practices, such as reading, writing and other subject-focused strategies (Cabral-Gouveia et al., 2023) and self-monitoring or self-evaluation (Moses et al., 2023) contribute to academic achievement. Furthermore, the significance of personalised support, especially 1:1 tutoring (Dietrichson et al., 2017) or mentoring to address the specific needs of disadvantaged students are crucial (Williams et al., 2019). At community level, as Vizard and Hills (2021) argued, the reduction of welfare state and the cuts in public services are key determinants for poor learning outcomes and reduced wellbeing in children, and their reversal requires political action to lessen the deleterious effects of austerity on families and children.

### Conclusion

This study painted a picture of parent home learning support and school contact, and parent educational aspirations and attitudes to education within the structural constraints and inequalities reinforced by the pandemic. Over half of parents, mostly mothers, offered learning support during the lockdowns, and parents across ethnic and socioeconomic groups were positive towards home learning, although parents with low educational qualifications and Black and Asian parents were not as likely as their degree-educated and White peers to support their children's learning during the lockdowns. Parent involvement with children's learning and school contact was found to associate with who the parents were, namely, White, female, degree educated and financially secure, rather than with their attitudes to home learning and educational aspirations.

Poor educational experiences and reduced home learning in children were exacerbated by the pandemic but were not caused by it. Education inequalities increased during the lockdowns, mostly due to limited teaching, especially in state schools. As Vizard and Hills (2021) argued, the reduction of welfare state, austerity and the ensuing deep cuts in public services are the root causes of education inequality manifested in this study as reduced home learning and school contact amongst minority ethnic parents and parents who experienced food insecurity and poverty during the pandemic. There is an expectation that parents should compensate for policy failures to support children's learning without accounting for the social and emotional toll of poverty or asking morally challenging questions about the roots of child poverty. Parents with socioeconomic privileges were more likely to offer home learning support as needed and felt confident to contact schools about their children's needs. Most parents showed positive attitudes to home learning, but positive attitudes alone are not sufficient to address the educational disadvantages children in financially strained and minority ethnic households face in that limited material and cultural resources, reduced pedagogical interactions and the emotional cost of poverty reinforce a "pedagogy of poverty" (Haberman, 2010). Placing the onus on parents to support their children's learning while not accounting for 'syndemic' influences reintroduces deficit discourses about parenting.

### Recommendations

School closures highlighted failures in education policy during the pandemic and caused social harm in terms of loss of income, schooling and childcare, and food poverty further entrenching education inequality. By making learning dependent on parents and family digital tools and resources, school closures also contributed to ethnic and gender inequalities. What was needed, during and post pandemic, was policy action to account for 'syndemic' challenges and reduce inequalities, together with a values-based approach to social and educational policy that recognises the challenges disadvantaged families face. In some deprived areas the mobilisation of school staff to organise food banks and bring basic IT equipment to families during the pandemic highlighted the important role schools can play in supporting parents during crises. Children's access to food and learning resources and protection of families from the cost-of-living crisis are crucial actions to equalise children's opportunities to learning and reduce the achievement gap. These should be the highest priority in any national strategic plan to lessen inequalities during and post health crises. In terms of future research, the role mediating factors (e.g., parent education, family structure) play in home learning need to be examined as well as explore other, non-instrumental forms of parent involvement with children's education, particularly those that have the potential to create a culture of learning at home.

### Limitations

The study has strengths and limitations. A key strength is the thoroughness of the COSMO dataset regarding parenting measures along parental attitudes to education, home learning and parent aspirations during Covid-19. Also, data were collected during the lockdowns 1 and 3 to offer a comprehensive view of parenting and children's learning when schools were closed. The COSMO dataset is innovative in that it offered data on 15 and 16-year-olds' learning loss during the pandemic considering that much focus has been on younger children's learning.

A key limitation in this study is that measures about household financial situation, parent learning support and attitudes to home learning and education were self-reported and thus prone to bias. Also, ethnicity was not fine-tuned due to small group sizes, and this did not allow us to capture the nuances of various ethnicity groups. Furthermore, the construction of some of the measures and sample constraints may have limited this study. Another limitation is that we cannot draw causal associations because the regression analyses examined associations between demographic, socioeconomic and parent educational aspirations and attitudes, and home learning, school contact and attitudes to home learning. The analyses did not specify the direction of effects or possible mediating factors.

## Ethics statement

The study design and the tools to be used for COSMO were approved by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the UK Data Archive for accessing the COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study.

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