

# Navigating Homeschooling, Parenting, and Work During an Educational Emergency: Insights from Kazakhstan

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## Abstract

Emergencies disrupt education service delivery; recent global political developments, environmental disasters, and the emergence of new diseases underscore the need for governments and education systems to learn from past crises to better prepare for future challenges. This qualitative study captures the perspectives of Kazakhstani parents as they navigated the difficulties posed by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic and school closures. Interviews with 30 parents from different social backgrounds, geographical locations, family types, and employment situations revealed significant challenges. Utilizing the Balance Between Risks and Resources and Family Systems Theory, the study found that parents faced job losses, reduced income, and increased childcare responsibilities as schools swiftly transitioned to online learning. Gender inequity was particularly evident, with most educational support falling on mothers, who often felt unqualified to facilitate online schooling. Compounding these issues were poor internet access and the necessity of sharing a single device among multiple family members. Prolonged social isolation left many mothers feeling emotionally drained, with confined living spaces further impacting their well-being. Educational inequities widened and varied significantly along residential locations. To effectively address future emergencies and the long-term impacts of COVID-19, governments must ensure equitable digital access, provide financial and emotional support to families in need, offer technology training for parents and address unequal gender norms surrounding childcare and domestic labor. These steps will help build a stronger education system that meets the needs of all stakeholders and is better equipped to withstand future crises.

## Keywords

online learning, Kazakhstan, parents, homeschooling, educational emergency, gender

## Introduction

The rapid speed with which the COVID-19 infection touched cities and communities across the globe compelled governments to put measures in place of social isolation through quarantine, lockdown and school closures in an effort to slow down the rapid spread of the infection (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020) to protect the healthcare system from collapse. These measures, while necessary, impacted social and economic activity, profoundly affecting the social-emotional and financial well-being of individuals, families, communities and society (Prime et al., 2020).

The closure of businesses and schools also significantly impacted work-life balance for many individuals,

especially working mothers, as they shouldered most of the childcare burden (Lutz et al., 2022; Shum et al., 2023). Parents, including teachers, were juggling many tasks to balance domestic and professional work, negatively impacting their overall health and well-being (Durrani et al., 2023). In their new role as teachers, parents were inundated with a proliferation of resources,

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ideas and content to engage and educate their children. The difficulty of determining which resources to choose further intensified their anxiety, as acting as a teacher was overwhelming for most who did not feel qualified for this additional role (Bokayev et al., 2021).

This research remains highly relevant in Kazakhstan, other Central Asian countries and globally, particularly as worldwide education systems continue to navigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Durrani & Ozawa, 2024). Although case numbers have stabilized and countries have a better understanding of this infection, it is crucial to reflect on the lessons learned regarding delivering education online and supporting families to ensure this knowledge can inform responses to future crises. Furthermore, understanding how partnerships between the school and the family can be created and sustained will support children's education and broader health and well-being in the post-pandemic world. While COVID-19 has received significant attention as a global crisis, it is important to recognize that other educational emergencies—such as war, health crises like the Ebola outbreak and natural disasters, such as earthquakes—can also have devastating effects on a country often causing school systems to come to a halt for many months or years (Durrani & Makhmetova, 2024). When there is an emergency, schools and educational delivery suffer (Lopez Cardozo & Novelli, 2018), and the role of parents and families becomes pivotal in ensuring that children continue to receive an education. Therefore, it is essential to understand how parents can be supported to fulfil this critical role more effectively, as their involvement is key to safeguarding children's right to education during times of crisis.

This paper is part of a larger study that specifically addresses the findings from parents during the pandemic.

- (1) How did parent(s) from different social backgrounds, geographical locations, family types, and employment situations experience juggling work and life whilst supporting their children's education?
- (2) What was the differentiated impact of school closure on families' well-being and relationships?

## Background

The impact of COVID-19 is known to have negatively affected families with fewer resources (Scrimin et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, most students from urban, affluent backgrounds with well-resourced families experienced minimal disruption when schools transitioned to online learning, as they had access to reliable internet and personal technology (Yu et al., 2021).

However, those from disadvantaged backgrounds were often further marginalized. Parents from low socioeconomic groups found it a greater challenge to suddenly provide an appropriate physical space for study, ICT, and internet access (Scrimin et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2021). Families with fewer resources do not always have the same level of resilience to deal with unexpected hardships (Walsh, 2016).

The suddenness with which the pandemic forced school closures across the globe exposed the many inadequacies in education systems (Schleicher, 2020). Several influences need to be considered, such as the fact that parents were overburdened with supporting online schooling for several children and, for many, an inability to work now that schools and daycare centers were closed. Parents had no time to consider their own emotional health and well-being (Fortier, 2020; Parkes et al., 2015). The extra stress on their family's financial security added an unpredictable worry. While some parents were still working, they now had to balance supporting their child's education and their remote work or finding child-care if they were in a profession that required them to continue going to work (Alon et al., 2020; Kerr et al., 2021). Single-parent households were particularly at risk of losing income if the parent was now required to stay at home to watch or educate their children (U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID], 2020).

## The Kazakhstani Context

The central Asian country Kazakhstan was no exception to the upheaval and stresses associated with the impact of COVID-19 and the chaos that country-wide closures of schools and workplaces brought to people's lives. In early March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) announced COVID-19 as a pandemic. This was the time that the Kazakhstani government declared a "state of emergency" and imposed a lockdown in two major cities, with others to follow quickly. On March 12th, 2020, all educational facilities were forced to close their doors. In Kazakhstan, 131 universities, 801 colleges, and 7,398 schools had to change their educational delivery to online learning (Bokayev et al., 2021). Children were given an early and extended Spring Break with online learning commencing in April 2020, giving schools, teachers and families little time to prepare for online school, thus making the changes stressful and chaotic for teachers and parents (Hajar & Manan, 2022). As in other countries, the inequities between school types were further exacerbated with teachers in the better-resourced schools who already were versatile in using online resources also receiving emergency training during Spring Break to get ready for online schooling while rural and less well-resourced schools were neglected and

left to their own devices to enact this change (Durrani et al., 2021). Emergency online teaching faces several obstacles, such as parents' inability to support their children, students' and teachers' lack of exposure to digital platforms, and poor digital infrastructure in more remote locations (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

### ***Widening Gender Disparities During COVID-19***

These changes affected each member of the family in different ways. Due to the pandemic, women's participation in the workforce deteriorated (Alon et al., 2020). Many women lost their jobs due to forced closures or had to resign to care for and support their children, who could no longer attend school. Women's ability to continue working was restricted as they were given an even heavier burden of childcare (Power, 2020). Childcare due to school closures was generally assumed by women as cultural norms often dictate (Dejardin & Owens, 2009; Fortier, 2020). Women comprise a greater proportion of non-essential service jobs in retail, restaurants, and hospitality (Kochhar & Barosso, 2020). Additionally, women are far more likely to leave their jobs, as in many cases, they earn less or are working part-time, meaning their jobs are less vital in economic support for their families (Fortier, 2020). This leaves women vulnerable with no income and can potentially decrease their well-being. Single-parent households, which are generally headed by mothers, were at even greater risk (Alon et al., 2020; Fortier, 2020).

The severity of the COVID-19 pandemic affected families varied depending on the social group; as with some groups, the situation further exacerbated inequities in the health, education, and socio-economic spheres (Fisher & Ryan, 2021; Fortier, 2020). The usual challenges of parenting can be difficult, but the additional stressors brought on by the pandemic significantly increased the risk of parent burnout, adversely affecting their mental and emotional well-being. This was especially hard for women in Kazakhstan, who are usually expected to care for and support their children. Indeed, around 40% of Kazakhstani women saw an increase in the time spent on care/domestic labor during the pandemic (United Nations Women and United Nations Population Fund [UNPFA], 2020). Historically, Kazakh culture promotes a man's superior status, with a woman's status dependent on her ability to have children (Sattarov, 2021).

While modern Kazakhstan has committed to advancing women's status and improving gender equality (Almukhambetova & Kuzhabekova, 2020), the construction of a national identity still seeks to preserve traditional gender roles (Arystanbek, 2021; Durrani et al., 2022), which may vary within families based on factors such as ethnicity, class, and location. Kazakhstan, like

other Central Asian countries, promotes motherhood and nurturing as the most important role for women to maintain traditional values (Palandjian et al., 2018). Therefore, gender has not advanced beyond traditional family (women's) roles. Although women have been encouraged to reproduce as part of their national duty since Soviet times (Durrani et al., 2022), in contemporary Kazakhstan, the "essentialisation of women as mothers and caregivers" is supported by "embedded conservative social norms" and bolstered "by the neo-liberal approach to welfare provision" (Dugarova, 2019, p. 397).

Despite better levels of education than males, women are concentrated in education or the health industry, and both are considered jobs more suited to females. In Kazakhstan, around 76% of teachers are women, but only 53% serve in leadership roles, suggesting that while teaching is considered an appropriate career for women, being promoted to school leadership presents fewer opportunities (Organization for Economic Co-operational Development [OECD], 2019). The feminization of the teaching workforce in Kazakhstan, the social expectations of women's centrality to caring and nurturing responsibilities within households (OECD, 2019), and entrenched gender stereotypes in the country (United Nations Development Plan [UNDP], 2020) have had profound implications for gender and family relations in the context of homeschooling. COVID-19 further highlighted entrenched gender inequities that existed long before the pandemic took hold (Yavorsky et al., 2021). Research focusing on school leaders' perspectives in Kazakhstan indicates that female leaders spent more time engaging with parents (Durrani et al., 2024) and reported lower well-being compared to their male counterparts (Durrani & Makhmetova, 2024). This disparity underscores the need to address gender inequities in the educational landscape and society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical frameworks that guided the study centered on parents' well-being and, more specifically, mothers. The Balance Between Risks and Resources (BR2) theory explains the philosophy around parental stress, which may subsequently lead to burnout (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018). The researchers were interested in understanding how or if the educational emergency was impacting the balance between risks and resources. Stress can take over if there is an imbalance between real or perceived parenting expectations and the availability of resources and time to meet expectations (Holly et al., 2019).

Family Systems Theory looks at family interaction and how the unexpected changes thrust upon families due to COVID-19 posed a critical challenge to the well-being of the family unit through possible financial

insecurity, loss of full-time employment, having to support homeschooling, and imposed confinement. These factors resulted in high levels of stress for some, thus leaving a critical impact on overall well-being (Carr, 2015; Fiese et al., 2019). These theories helped guide us in developing the interview protocol used with parents.

## Methods

### Research Design

This research was carried out in Kazakhstan during the time of school closures to listen to parents' voices and gain insights into how they coped with the changes to their lifestyle and daily routines resulting from school closures. Through a qualitative research design, the research sought to understand the lived and subjective experiences of individuals in challenging circumstances, shedding light on how people make sense of and construct their world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Considering this focus, a phenomenological qualitative design was deemed most suitable to understand how parents were experiencing this educational emergency. Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p. 28) emphasize that "a phenomenological approach is well suited to studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences." Semi-structured interviews, with a more flexible interview protocol, allowed us to better capture individual stories and probe in further detail (Glesne, 2011).

The initial interview topics were based on the literature review, with attention to the theoretical frameworks. The Balance Between Risks and Resources led to questions about topics such as the positive aspects of the school closures (resources to manage the situation) and the risks (over-demanding role of parents) that this situation had created. This led to guided discussions on the transition to distance teaching, exploring the balance between the resources needed and the risks imposed on parents as they supported their children's education. The interview questions also addressed collaboration with teachers, managing chat groups, and balancing work, household responsibilities, and children's learning.

The school closures disrupted the family unit. In developing the interview protocol, we also viewed this situation through family systems theory. The stressors associated with this emergency could undermine previously well-established routines within families (Peltz et al., 2021). Was there an overload on one or both parents in terms of childcare and ensuring they supported their children's education? The interview protocol concentrated on exploring the challenges faced within the family unit and the balance of risks to resources such as loss of income, the implication of the school closures, the ability to be their child's teacher, and the need for additional resources to support home learning. Threats to

their overall health and well-being and that of their family, such as the psycho-social impact, were also explored. After several pilot interviews, a few more specific probes were added to guide participants in the discussion of the home situation as a result of the pandemic.

### Participants and Research Sites

The goal was to talk to parents from schools that were catering to families from varying social backgrounds. All interviews were done in the state language, Kazakh or Russian, the language of inter-ethnic communication. Participants were selected from the top three most populous cities and outlying areas of Astana, Almaty and Shymkent via convenience (Mertens, 2015) and snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019). Shymkent is located in south central Kazakhstan, Almaty is in the southeast and Astana, located in central Kazakhstan, is the capital city. These sampling methods were employed as participants were difficult to reach during the pandemic.

The project hired three former school teachers from each region as research assistants who were responsible for conducting the interviews. The research assistants focused on government schools, called "mainstream schools" in the country. They started by interviewing one or two people from their immediate networks and then asked participants at the end of each interview if they knew of a family that would possibly be interested in speaking to them.

All parents interviewed completed an anonymous biographical data sheet that requested information about their current employment status, their highest level of education, family type (i.e., single parent, nuclear, or extended family), number of children in primary and secondary school, their ages and if any of their children had an identified disability, number of computers or iPad.

Thirty parents were interviewed, 10 from each location. Interviews included parents from both urban ( $n = 14$ ), semi-urban ( $n = 13$ ) and rural areas ( $n = 3$ ) in each region; however, all parents interviewed were mothers except one, demonstrating the fact that both caring for the children and supporting their schooling had been, for the most part, been delegated to the mothers who shared that they had to give up their jobs outside of the home to support their children's learning.

While we had hoped to engage more fathers in this research, we ultimately were only able to recruit one, and this only took place after rescheduling several times to fit his schedule. Thus, 97% of our participants were women. Family composition was 43% nuclear families, 40% single-parent families, and 17% extended families. Sixty-three percent of parents were on regular monthly salary, while 20% were unemployed, receiving state benefits, and 17% were self-employed. Forty-seven percent

of families lived in urban or semi-urban locations (43%). Parents' education levels varied, with 10% having completed secondary school, 33% college, another 33% had a Bachelor's degree and 24% a Masters' degree.

The priority was to interview parents in person as virtual/ telephone interviews are likely to exclude the voices of those who were not well digitally connected. However, the situation in Kazakhstan regarding COVID-19 also inhibited our ability to collect data. Virtual interviews were used for 20 of the 30 participants as the quarantine regime was still in place throughout data collection. Interviews lasting around 1 hr were held at a time and place that suited each participant using methods appropriate to the context (e.g., via telephone, Skype, or face-to-face), particularly considering COVID-19 and equitable access considerations. Interview data was gathered via research assistants who lived in each region under the guidance of more experienced researchers.

### **Ethical Approval**

All prospective participants were sent a consent form to sign prior to being interviewed. The consent form outlined that they had the right to say no and that any confidential information they shared would only be accessible to the research team. Their identity would not be revealed in any reports, conferences or journal publications. Participants were made aware that if they were uncomfortable with any questions, they could refuse to answer and withdraw their consent without reason at any time, and the data they had provided would be destroyed if they wanted to withdraw later. They were also asked for their consent prior to starting the interview. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the School of Medicine Research Ethics Committee (SoMREC), University of Leeds, on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2020.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed on an iterative basis to inform and refine the qualitative research instruments as interviews progressed. In line with phenomenological analysis, a fieldwork diary, detailed descriptive notes and reflections were developed in narrative form following each interview and entered into NVivo, along with interview transcripts, in order to develop an audit trail, which was used as a summary activity to begin to document our interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The team met regularly to address their preconceptions and biases, aiming to maintain an impartial analysis of the data, a practice known as bracketing in phenomenological research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Throughout this process, the team also engaged in frequent discussions regarding the emerging codes and

**Table 1.** Themes and Sub-Themes.

Impact of school closures	Family health and well-being
Impact of the sudden move to online learning	Finding the positives
The online learning process	Lack of work/life balance
For some, technology can add stress	Deteriorating family relationships
	Deteriorating physical health
	Emotional and psychological well-being
	Economic impact

themes. Interviews were analyzed inductively as the voices of the parent participants emerged with each subsequent interview. Manual coding was done on a sample of data to further develop and refine final codes and themes. Both open and thematic coding was employed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2013). Initially, four members of the research team each analyzed a sample of the early interviews individually to identify emerging codes. These codes were shared, discussed, and agreed upon. Afterwards, data transcripts were distributed across the authors for analysis. With the initial coding, we assigned a shortened meaning to different phrases and text, then moved from codes to categories, which were developed based on the recurring words and phrases that were evident across the data (Merriam, 1998). Using this analysis, these themes were then further analyzed through the lens of the theoretical frameworks. From these categories, major themes and sub-themes were identified, as illustrated in Table 1. Team discussions also aided in the identification and consensus of the main and sub-themes.

### **Data Validation**

After completing the data collection and analysis, we organized an online roundtable to share our findings and recommendations with a group of stakeholders, including parents, school leaders, representatives from the Ministry of Education, NGOs that support families, and other researchers conducting empirical studies on COVID-19. During the presentation, we found that our results resonated with the experiences of the attendees. Additionally, the insights from roundtable participants and relevant literature enriched our work and supported our findings.

### **Findings**

The findings are presented under two main themes, Impact of School Closures and Family Health and Well-being, each with several sub-themes (see Table 1).

## Impact of School Closures

*Impact of the Sudden Move to Online Learning.* Overall, there was uncertainty among most participants as to how to deal with this change. With the abruptness of the school closures, families had no time to prepare for this disruption. The lack of a digital infrastructure was quickly apparent, especially in towns and villages outside major metropolitan areas. This sudden transition was even more problematic for lower-income families with limited educational resources or income to purchase devices required for online learning, and for rural families an inability to connect to the internet. Larger families with several school-aged children, single parents, parents still having to work, and families with elementary school children found the new normal an unpredictable challenge. One parent shared:

The transition to online learning was terrible [...] Distance learning is quite difficult. Not everyone understands it [...] we study until about 1 am. [...] It's a nerve-wracking experience [...] we didn't have time to do a lot of things [...] in time. (PS4—Divorced mother, two children, Shymkent region).

Another parent shared:

I don't think the school was prepared for this. Well, I guess no one was prepared. Or we thought it was temporary. No one expected it to last this long. At first, we were distraught. Children sort of felt neglected. It was difficult for them. It was also difficult for us. I realise no one was prepared for this. Neither the children nor the parents or the school. (PAR10—Single mother, one child, Almaty region).

Most parents agreed that the initial stage of online education was, for the most part, quite chaotic, with teachers and parents often unsure how to proceed with this type of learning. Many parents did not have the digital or academic knowledge to take the current curriculum and support their children in an online space. Some shared stories of staying up late to try and learn the content they needed to know to support their child's learning. This left many parents feeling physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted as they attempted to cope with this additional role of the teacher:

I had to study everything in Mathematics myself in order to explain it to my child [...] I am not a teacher; I do not get a salary for this. I have a lot of household chores and I also work. I still had to study with my son until midnight or until one o'clock so he could understand something. (PS9—Married mother, four children, Shymkent region).

Several parents who were teachers were even more stressed as they tried to juggle doing their job as a teacher and supporting their own children's education.

*The Online Learning Process.* Parents who had children in secondary school held more positive views of online learning as most secondary students have greater independence and could continue their learning with little to no support from parents if they had the technology and the ability to connect to the internet.

He does everything on his own. [...] he determines what he needs. I thank him for not having to assess, watch, and control all this. Since he is already 15 years old, he does it for himself. (PAR10—Single mother, one child, Almaty region)

Another parent confirmed that upper-secondary students are better at independent learning. "There is no need to monitor and supervise my daughter in secondary school as she is completely independent" (PAR6—Single mother, one child, Almaty region).

Another parent shared: "My eldest daughter helps my younger daughter in sixth grade; she explains what she needs to do as she has already studied that" (PN5—Married father, two children, Astana city). However, he also made it clear that any issues around education were his wife's concern as he was still working, so he didn't see it as his responsibility.

However, parents often became quite anxious and upset when discussing their primary school-aged children's quality of learning. Participants with younger children discussed how quickly the child would get distracted in the online session. Without the usual school infrastructure for discipline, parents were less able to deal with a child's temptation to ignore the lesson and check out the internet, an ever present distraction.

My child has turned into a gamer and a liar. As soon as we walk away, she turns on the internet and plays online games. We want to provide a normal education, but this (online schooling) is turning them into vegetables and gamers. (PAR1—Married mother, two children, Almaty)

A single mother with a daughter with special educational needs admitted that she could not get her child to study without additional support, and her daughter would not accept her as her teacher. "When I ask her to study, she does not want to study. She has a baby brother, so she looks after the baby, and that is it" (PS1—Divorced mother, four children, Shymkent, rural). She was perturbed that her daughter was losing her progress and would never want to return to school as she now saw her role as caring for the baby.

A constant concern among participants was the lack of their children's engagement in the learning process now that they had to access their education online. Parents often commented that their children had learned that they could ignore their teachers for the 20 to 30 min they were required to be online, if not being supervised.

Mothers mostly had been delegated the job of supervising their child(ren)'s learning. Husbands, in many cases, were still working outside of the home to bring in an income. The school closures for those with primary school-aged children were quite demanding and took up an enormous amount of time in addition to their other household work. This became even more of a balancing act for those who continued to work outside the home, and support their child(ren)'s schooling. Parents working outside the home were very vocal about the unrealistic demands on their time in terms of being expected to supervise their children's education and the negative impact it had on their overall health.

Most parents agreed that the situation with online learning had improved somewhat over time as teachers received training over the summer break and could better navigate online platforms such as BilimLand and WhatsApp. However, others remained unsatisfied with their children's education and shared very negative views. With online learning, teachers could not check facial expressions to ascertain whether a student understood the information being presented due to the low bandwidth of the internet. Students and sometimes teachers had to keep their cameras off. High-speed internet is required for online education to be feasible; this is still unavailable in many rural or semi-urban locations throughout Kazakhstan. This impacted not only the students in these areas but also the teachers who were meant to deliver education.

There are problems with Zoom. Sometimes it kicks you out. BilimLand also won't always load. By the time it loads, the lesson is over. She (the child) completes the task and sends it, but they (the teacher/school) do not receive it for a day or two, so the feedback comes very late. (PAR6—Divorced mother, one child, Almaty region)

This added to many parents' stress levels as there was a constant worry that with each passing week of the school closure, their children were becoming further disadvantaged. This constant lagging of the internet was detrimental to teaching and learning.

Lessons during the lockdown were only 20 minutes, and it takes almost that long for some to get online, so basically, they get nothing. They are not able to learn anything in 20 minutes. (PAR7—Single mother, one child, Almaty city)

Parents understood that changing the lesson time to only 20 min would be less of a burden with multiple children trying to access their schooling from home.

**For Some, Technology Can Add Stress.** The transition to online schooling was especially problematic for lower-income families, families with several school-aged

children, single parents and parents with limited educational resources. Parents described the move to online learning as a "disaster," "chaotic," and "nerve-wracking." Among those living in rural areas, getting on the internet was problematic, with one parent sharing that their child had to go onto their roof to get even a weak connection. Parents viewed the lack of internet connectivity as a factor, further widening inequalities between rural and urban schools, adding to their concerns about their children's education. Another issue raised was the lack of support for those families who could not afford computers for all their children, forcing some to learn via their mobile phones. While some reported receiving a device from the school, this was not true of all parents, and not all children could competently use the internet:

The school provided us with a computer for learning since we could not purchase a computer or mobile phone. However, the children are not very skilled at using the internet. (PS4—Divorced mother, two children, Shymkent region)

Other parents had to share their phones with their children to mitigate these disadvantages. Some shared their worries about the increased power bills, with phones or computers having to charge all day.

No one was ready for this. Many didn't even own phones. We also had internet outages and blackouts, which prevented children from studying. (PAR5—Divorced mother, one child, Almaty region)

How much support was provided seemed to depend on the individual school. More privileged schools surveyed their student population to determine what support was needed to continue the learning process online. One interviewee shared, "They provided the technical equipment needed. They gave us laptops and routers. They provided us with pre-paid Wi-Fi cards" (PN4—Married mother, two children, Astana city).

However, even when provided with phones or laptops, many families did not possess the skills to use them for learning. Parents with lower levels of education and/or technology skills found this time extremely stressful as they felt guilty they could not offer adequate support to their children. While some schools/teachers helped parents by offering support in navigating the online platforms, this was not true for many.

Even with support, parents were still very concerned that this form of learning was not the same quality and that children were falling behind.

The performance of children has deteriorated [...] If we return to school, we can teach them the same material that they were taught this year, again [...] We gave them a task,

yes, they copied it from the internet [...] they don't even read. (PS4—Divorced mother, 2 children, Shymkent region)

Some parents believed that online study encouraged disengagement from the learning process as it was easy to complete the assigned tasks by copying from the internet or guessing from a multiple-choice list of answers.

The platform BilimLand cannot be regarded as educating. They can just click randomly and guess [...] they have other classes via WhatsApp, but they sit in a separate window and just chat with their friends about their interests. When children return to school, they will be far behind. (PAR5—Divorced mother, one child, Almaty region)

However, for some families, education remained inaccessible despite the school's efforts to ensure continuity. One interviewee shared that in her community, there was one family where the children could not attend class as they did not have any phone or other device. "This family became an outcast in their community [...] there was humiliation" (PN1—Single mother, three children, Astana region). This inequality further impacts the mental health of both the child and the parent. This uncertainty as to how long the pandemic and school closures would continue left many feeling like they were no longer doing a good job as a parent with little ability to provide a family structure or feel they were doing a good job with supporting their children doing home education as the pandemic continued for weeks and months.

### Health and Well-Being

**Finding the Positives.** Most parents shared that it was not all doom and gloom as there were advantages to the school closures, at least in the initial weeks. When participants reflected on the initial few weeks of the school shutdown, most interviewees expressed how the closures of schools and most workplaces had positively affected them. The pace of life slowed down and families were no longer as rushed in the morning to get children to their different schools. Also, being allowed to stay inside during the harsh winter months, when, on most days, the temperature is well below zero Celsius, was welcomed by many interviewees. One participant commented: "In the winter, especially now in Astana, the weather is harsh. Well, you don't have to go outside. That's an advantage when it's cold. Also, probably all parents saved on school uniforms" (PN4—Divorced mother, two children, Astana region).

Another participant who was a single mother added:

You don't have to rush to several places [laughs]. It's just that one of my daughters starts her studies at noon and the other at 1:40 pm. Then I pick up one at 3 pm and the other

at 5 pm; rushing here and there, I have to leave the little child here with the oldest daughter and run around. Plus, you have to have time to pick up another child from kindergarten. (PS2—Divorced mother, five children, Shymkent region)

Some parents noted that children could sleep longer because they were not commuting to school, and there was more time to spend as a family unit. "I became closer to my family. Family relationships improved markedly simply because we started spending more time together" (PAR4—Divorced mother, one child, Almaty region).

Other participants shared that they were happy because it kept their children safe from the possibility of getting COVID-19. There was little known about this situation, and parents felt safer with their children at home. "For me, the good thing is they are staying at home now. If they don't go anywhere, they don't catch the infection [...] But of course, I'd rather send them to school" (PN4—Married mother, two children, Astana city).

A few female parents who were also teachers expressed positive views about the changes as they could better balance their work and family responsibilities. Once the spatial boundaries between work and home had been erased, they could move seamlessly between online teaching and domestic duties, thus feeling good about their role as mothers. Saving money and being able to cook healthy meals were viewed as positives in terms of staying home, as shared by a participant: "Since we were at home, I feel like a mother on vacation" (TAR4—Married mother, four children, Almaty region). However, others raised concerns that there was now no distinction between work and home as they had to continue teaching and supporting their children's online learning.

The initial advantages of school closures quickly faded as the situation persisted. Families began to recognize the challenges and exhaustion associated with maintaining their children's education in an online environment, and their work-life balance suffered as a result. This posed a critical challenge to the family unit, as illuminated by Family Systems Theory (Carr, 2015; Fiese et al., 2019).

**Lack of Work-Life Balance.** School closures impacted everyone, but in most cases, mothers were overburdened as they attempted to balance domestic chores, supervise their children's schooling, and monitor multiple online sites and chat groups that were meant to assist the process but actually added to their workload.

Mothers reported feeling exhausted and noted that their parenting had been affected as they attempted to juggle multiple responsibilities, including supporting the education of several children. On average, parents with



children in the primary grades spent 2 to 3 more hours per week helping and supervising their child(ren) than those with children in secondary school. There was also more opportunity for children to avoid learning:

It is very difficult to monitor if the child is actually attending classes constantly [...] She is just clicking aimlessly around; she might say there are technical issues. The opportunity to escape learning has increased. (PN1—Single mother, two children, Astana city)

This heavy load falls not upon the teachers, but upon the parents. Parents should monitor the process. For parents who work offline, it is very difficult to know if the child is attending classes or if they are sleeping during that time. (PAR10—Single mother, one child, Almaty region)

Parents also shared how the impact of being responsible for supervising online learning and then supporting their children in completing the assigned tasks left little time for other household tasks such as cooking and cleaning. Time was added to their day as some parents now had to learn subject matter they had forgotten decades ago. In addition, there were reports of fights among children as they argued over space and the use of various devices such as laptops and phones. Mothers with several children reported being frustrated and emotionally exhausted as they attempted to manage multiple chat groups that were designed for parents to keep up to date with their children's learning, but at the same time, this just added an additional layer of work:

I get drained because I have to cook breakfast, lunch and dinner, and all of this together with Summative Assessment for the Unit (SAU) and Summative Assessment for the term (SAT) at the same time [...] It is physically difficult for me, and I have to do my main work at night when it is quiet and everyone is asleep. (PAR9—Married mother, three children, Almaty region)

This is really a shock, the group's WhatsApp! I have two children, and their groups are on my phone. And now 500 messages. Well, to be honest, I am losing my patience [...] My phone is already boiling from an overload of information and messages [...] with so many messages, you sometimes miss important ones. (PS9—Married female, four children, Shymkent region)

**Deteriorating Family Relationships.** After spending so much time together, mothers reported that it impacted their relationship with their children. The fact that mothers became teachers meant that relationships were being tested. These blurred lines, as mothers have taken on education, added stress and arguments to family life as they were now responsible for ensuring they complete their school tasks and pushing them to achieve with an imbalance between risks and resources (BR2 theory).

"The children do not obey their parents as much as their teachers" (PN4—Married female, 2 children, Astana city). "And everyone becomes angrier, to stay with a person alone at home for many weeks [...] it's uncomfortable" (PN1—Married mother, three children, Astana region):

Because the mother takes on the teacher's responsibility [...] We do not have enough professional knowledge to give a decent education to a child, to explain the topic. Let's say we do not have enough nerve cells, and the relationship with the child deteriorates. So you choose; either your child will have a bad grade or you will have a bad relationship with the child.

**Deteriorating Physical Health.** The deteriorating health of some family members worried the parents. Issues constantly mentioned during the interviews were severe headaches and poor eyesight from spending so much time glued to a screen and gaining weight due to the lack of physical activity. "The child's eyesight is deteriorating because she's either on the phone or computer all day long" (PAR7—Single mother, one child, Almaty city). Another mother added: "We ruined our eyes [...] my son recently had eye surgery. It's hard to see on the mobile phone; everything gets smaller" (PN4—Married mother, 2 children, Astana city). The time spent on the computer or other devices was a common worry. "A lot of time in front of the computer; a sedentary lifestyle. It had a big impact. I mean, I have backaches. It also greatly affected my health" (PAR2—Married mother, two children, Astana region).

While everyone was very concerned about getting infected with COVID-19, the forced isolation had other unanticipated health consequences.

**Emotional and Psychological Well-Being.** While the fear of contracting COVID-19 ensured that most were compliant with forced isolation and understood why transitioning to online learning was necessary, a critical issue that emerged over time was how being inside for weeks and months had impacted the family's psychological and mental well-being. Several participants who were not working outside the home shared that there was no longer any separation between home, work, or school, as these lines had now been erased. The risks far outweighed the resources needed to cope with the extra load imposed on mothers as they never got a break from being with their children or attempting to manage arguments that arose between siblings. A participant shared: "We were very stressed at home; we did not understand what was going on and what would happen to us. We were very frustrated" (PS10—Married mother, four children, Shymkent region).

Parents shared their constant anxiety and feared the possibility of someone in the family getting COVID-19. Many had friends, relatives or neighbors who had contracted the virus. This fear was much stronger in the early days of the pandemic when people did not yet know much about it. They felt that there was a lack of communication from the government. "During the quarantine, everyone in our apartment building was locked inside for 14 days [...] They did not let us out of the building to go anywhere" (PS4—Divorced mother, two children, Shymkent city). Another participant added: "The pandemic affected those who I love and care about. One of our relatives died, and one of them only recently left the intensive care unit" (PS1—Divorced mother, four children, Shymkent region). Many participants clearly expressed the significant effect on their emotional well-being: "The situation with the lockdown has probably affected not only our well-being but that of all Kazakhstanis in general [...] there needs to be a psychologist to reach out to for both parents and children" (PN4—Married mother, two children, Astana city).

There was concern about the overall effect on people having to self-isolate: "Everyone has started to get more nervous being stuck at home. I am nervous. I used to be nervous, but now it is even worse" (PS1—Divorced mother, four children, Shymkent region).

Rural participants shared their belief that community connections are generally much stronger in rural areas and villages. People from rural areas shared their angst and emotional stress. "Oh, so many people died in our village due to this pandemic. At that time, people were terribly stressed" (PAR2—Married female, two children, Almaty region).

Others felt that the emotional connection was missing now that there was no personal contact outside of the family and they wondered how children would cope once this was over with not being able to socialize anymore.

The child cannot go out, go to school, or see his classmates. I mean, he lives an antisocial life. This has a substantial impact on the children. Many are depressed. We are all lethargic. Children are exhausted. Will they even want to return to school after this? The children have stopped going outside. The children have not played sports. There is no engagement or creativity. (PAR10—Single mother, one child, Almaty region).

Familial interactions may have changed as members were forced to only interact with one another. Family systems theory suggests that stressors such as increased child-care and forced isolation can have a negative effect on the cohesion of the family system over time (Daks et al., 2020).

**Economic Impact.** Many spoke of the negative impact on their finances, having lost their job with the closures of shopping centers and cafes, which caused much stress

as they worried about how they would continue to provide for their family. "We experienced a significant negative impact on our finances since I have a small business which I decided to close" (PAR8—Married mother, one child, Almaty region). "It is difficult with the children at home, so I had to quit my job. Since this started, we struggled financially; I had to take a loan and borrow money, which I have not paid yet" (PS1—Single parent, four children, Shymkent city).

Parents who were teachers expressed their gratitude that they were still receiving their salary. However, some of the savings of not having to commute to school were offset by money teachers now had to spend on Wi-Fi as their schools did not cover this. "We had to adapt so as not to lose our status [...] some bought gadgets on credit to teach" (TS10—Married female, 5 children, Shymkent region). Those who were not teachers also talked about the significant investment needed to suddenly purchase smartphones or computers so their children could continue learning. Others were so upset with what they perceived as a poor-quality education that they were paying for private tutorials. Some mothers were looking for any type of paid work outside the home so that they could earn money to hire tutors:

Lessons now literally last half an hour. During half an hour, she learns four subjects. This is not possible at all. And even I, as a mother who had been staying at home all this time, had to start working because I cannot afford the tutor now. (PAR1—Married female, 2 children, Almaty region)

## Discussion

This qualitative research presented the voices of Kazakhstani parents as they dealt with the pandemic. Participants all tried to find and discuss the positive aspects of the pandemic, such as increased family time, and saving money and time, as the school commute was no longer necessary, and there was no need to buy new school uniforms. This is consistent with other research reporting on this educational crisis (Agaton & Cueto, 2021; Clayton et al., 2020; Jones, 2020). The effects of the pandemic were especially evident within the education sphere. However, the psychological impact and frustration resulting from the school closures and loss of employment for many increased as the lockdown continued posing significant challenges on the family unit and, in particular, the mothers who had taken on the burden of supporting the homeschooling (Fiese et al., 2019). This concurs with both of the theoretical theories framing this research. There was a loss of balance between the risks and resources required to manage everyday life (BR2 theory). Many discussed what they perceived as the lack of support from the school, with little being provided in terms of home-school collaboration, as with the

closures happening overnight, there was little offered in terms of preparation for this monumental change in school delivery. There were some positive stories, but this depended on the teacher or the school, with those from better-resourced schools being much more satisfied. It is imperative that education departments and schools develop plans that can be accessed when there is an educational emergency or long-term school closure so the loss of learning stays at a minimum. What has been learned is the need to develop learning models for teaching and assessment beyond the long-established usual pre-pandemic ones. As many families suffered from these imposed closures, it is suggested that school psychologists should have played a more active role in supporting the needs of the school community to ensure less impact on the family's emotional health (Hyde et al., 2022).

The parents shared several common factors that impacted on how well they could parent and support their child's online learning. Most parents felt they could not offer strong or quality support in terms of understanding their children's schooling, as they didn't feel they had enough knowledge about the different subject areas. In terms of supporting education, low self-efficacy perceived by parents may have further added to their overall stress level and feelings of failure (Crnic & Low, 2002). Younger children were especially demanding of their mother's time. Parents now had to both care for their children 24 hr a day while also supporting their online schooling while in isolation. The family systems theory describes the additional stresses on the family when hardships are beyond their control and there are no options or resources to mitigate these challenges (Fiese et al., 2019). This was especially difficult for single-parent families, and those in paid employment outside the home. Some needed to continue going to work each day, so children were supervised by siblings or left on their own. All of this additional pressure could make significant demands on resilience, and, for some, triggered mental disorders, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Sarkadi, 2021; Walsh, 2016). Our research concurred with other studies, which revealed that many parents struggled to balance work and parenting during the pandemic (Bates et al., 2022; Hinderliter et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2021).

Intersecting markers of inequality widened the gaps in access to quality education, which negatively impacted the broader well-being of parents and children. Families with fewer social and financial resources are less able to cope and bounce back from adversity (Fiese et al., 2019). It was observed that parents from semi-urban and rural areas and those with fewer financial resources faced a "poverty penalty" (Mendoza, 2011), often receiving less support and having to deal with more expense in providing devices needed for access to the internet. Similarly,

poor parental understanding of technology exacerbated the disadvantage some children already experienced, while better-resourced parents and those living in urban areas were more equipped to support their children during the school closures (Yu et al., 2021). Additionally, some parents reported the financial burden for the family with increased usage of electricity required to charge the devices (Agaton & Cueto, 2021) and the necessary purchase of computers (Yu et al., 2021) or phones. Having a larger family, young children, a special needs child, limited finances, and sharing a small living space were critical factors contributing to mothers' feelings of overwhelming stress (Sheridan et al., 2021). Parent accounts confirmed existing evidence on parental worries about children's health when they were no longer allowed to go out and play, or socialize outside the family (Agaton & Cueto, 2021).

The gendered impact of the lockdown was also evident in this study, where women had to take on the majority of childcare and online schooling, thus being more susceptible to the loss of employment or forced to leave their jobs to care for the family (Alon et al., 2020). Studies of economic data from countries such as Norway, the US, Canada and China also found that reduced working hours were greater for women than men (Alon et al., 2020). For those mothers working from home, juggling work and family needs created additional stress (Adisa et al., 2021), with resources and risks not equally balanced thus creating stress on the family unit. Our findings highlight the psychological impact of multiple stressors and confirm other research from previous epidemics that a sudden loss of income is connected to adverse mental health and parenting (e.g., Puff & Renk, 2014). The findings of this research are consistent with the Balances between Risks and Resources theory for parent burnout "that the chronic imbalance between stress-inducing factors (i.e., demands and risks) and stress-alleviating factors (i.e., resources and protections) is what leads parents to experience parental burnout" (Griffith et al., 2022). The findings of this research align with the Balances between Risks and Resources theory regarding parental burnout, which states that a chronic imbalance between stress-inducing factors (such as demands and risks) and stress-relieving factors (like resources and protections) contributes to parental burnout (Griffith et al., 2022). These insights should inform policies related to educational emergencies rather than assuming that homeschooling will simply be managed by families, particularly mothers. Education was also impacted by the fact that there were parents who had limited education and, therefore, lacked the background knowledge to take on this role, adding further stress. Parents must be provided support, especially those who struggle to fulfil teaching responsibilities.

## Conclusion

This study adds to and supports other research on parents' concerns and perspectives during school closures during the pandemic. Parents were quite worried about how their children would cope when school finally reopened, given how long they had been away from the brick-and-mortar classroom. Parents believed children were getting farther and farther behind each week the schools were closed as all felt that the online education was inadequate and most had little belief in their ability to replace the teacher. This further impacted their fear and feeling of having little to no control over their lives, which especially wore on the mental health of the mothers who had taken over the bulk of supporting the child's education. It was evident throughout this research that living in a semi-urban or rural location further disadvantaged families. Those with fewer financial resources, single-parent families, and mothers who had to continue working struggled more to manage the changes this educational crisis inflicted. As a result, deteriorating mental health adversely affected the day-to-day family's well-being. It is crucial to reflect on and learn from these experiences so that policies and support systems can be implemented to enhance the educational system, making it more resilient to future educational emergencies.

## Implications

This research presented the unique challenges inflicted on families and, more specifically, mothers during restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In many cases, this further widened the inequities between rural, semi-urban and urban life, and socio-economic groups in Kazakhstan. When the pandemic brought chaos to countries worldwide, the focus was on keeping people safe by minimizing the spread. This educational emergency forced many parents to become much more active in their child(ren)'s education. This is a positive, and continued collaboration should be supported.

While online schooling was a quick fix, even if not consistently implemented very effectively, it highlighted that technology access must be improved for all, irrespective of where they live. It is no longer a luxury but a part of daily life. Improving the speed of the internet and making it available to everyone, regardless of their geographic location, should be a top priority to better modernize Kazakhstan. High-speed internet would also provide other economic opportunities to rural villages (Bokayev et al., 2021). Doing this would also give rural residents the chance to develop technological literacy.

Very few of those interviewed felt they had received adequate support, and this really depended on the individual teacher or school. There needs to be helplines put

in place so parents who are really struggling have someone to call, whether for advice on schooling or their own mental health. Providing qualified childcare services so parents sometimes get a break is needed. Mothers rarely received any reprieve from supporting schooling and providing care; our findings confirm those of other studies, which demonstrated that over time, these strains caused parents' mental health to deteriorate (Agaton & Cueto, 2021; Shum et al., 2023). Parents who are struggling cannot parent to the best of their ability, and this spills over to the child, affecting their ability to deal with the changes (Spinelli et al., 2020). The parent-child conflict impacted the family functioning with the imbalance of childcare time exacerbating family stress, which can be viewed through the family systems theory (Holly et al., 2019) as any type of "prolonged, intertwined individual mental health and family relationship problems" (Feinberg et al., 2022, p. 1). There is a need to develop family support and mediation so most vulnerable families do not feel so alone and have nowhere to reach out to. Parent's perceived stress is linked to family well-being (Spinelli et al., 2020). When there is an imbalance between resources and risk, overall family mental health will eventually suffer.

Stakeholders need to review how this disruption to education was handled and based on lessons learned, work to improve communication and support networks offered to families to avoid similar experiences during the next educational emergency. Pre-pandemic disadvantages were further exacerbated for women and low-income families, especially single parents and those living in rural areas. These lessons can be used to utilize a gender lens to further improve current policy and address populations that were most negatively affected. Policies must be formulated that consider the emotional needs of families and, more specifically, mothers (Brown et al., 2020). It is essential that we retain all the lessons learned, as this is not the first disruption to education that has worsened existing inequities, and it certainly will not be the last crisis we face.

## Limitations

This research was conducted during a very short time frame during the school closures and quarantine in Kazakhstan. This limited the team's ability to locate and reach out to those who lived in the most remote rural locations. There are remote villages that are hundreds of kilometers away from major urban centers. As two-thirds of the interviews were done online, we were unable to reach out to those in more remote rural locations who did not have reliable internet. Also, the study only included one parent with a disabled child. In Kazakhstan, there continues to be much social stigma

around disability, so finding those with a disability was a further challenge (Allan & Omarova, 2022).

It can be assumed that those in very remote locations experienced the greatest hardship during the school closures. While we cannot make these generalizations from a small qualitative pilot study that employed convenience and snowball sampling, the work allowed us to collect baseline results, which informed a larger mixed methods study.





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### Data Availability Statement

Interview transcripts are available from the Leeds University Repository for researchers who meet the criteria for access to confidential data. Interested researchers should contact Ghazala Mir (G.Mir@leeds.ac.uk).

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