

Challenges faced by parents in managing distance learning for preschool children in the Republic of Kosovo

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Abstract

The closure of educational institutions due to preventive measures against the spread of COVID-19 has hurt the management of pre-primary school children by parents. This research has identified the challenges that have hurt the parents of preschool children, so that in the future this research will serve as an aid in managing distance learning, both for parents and preschool children aged 5-6. Data for this research were collected through electronic questionnaires conducted with 240 parents from 12 municipalities of the Republic of Kosovo, dividing them by gender (female and male). The study was conducted at the end of 2021 when the children had started returning to school. The results have convincingly shown that parents of preschool children have not been satisfied with distance learning. The research however reveals that female parents accept the new way of organizing distance learning more easily than male parents. In this case, the support of educators has helped parents alleviate their stress while organizing distance learning. The study has evidenced that in cases where there is good cooperation between parents and educators, good results can also be expected.

Keywords: Distance learning; pandemic; technology; parent; preschoolers

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1. INTRODUCTION

Parents, as primary caregivers, are considered to have a key, critical, and defining role in their children, in creating healthy relationships and shaping identity (Cowen, 2000). Distance learning, especially for the education of preschool children, in Kosovo, was a new method of teaching and learning that was realized through communication technology to educate pupils who are in their homes. At first, distance learning was used only by innovative teachers (Hannan, 2005). Kosovo has developed an integrated approach to early childhood education, which combines very naturally the process of education, health care, children's play, and professional care for their development. In this context, important steps have been taken for preschool education, such as the drafting of the Law on Preschool Education in (2006), and the drafting of General Standards of Preschool Education in Kosovo for 3-6-year-olds (Curriculum of Preschool Education in Kosovo, 2015).

Distance learning is a form of education in which pupils may not always be physically present in a school or other educational institution. It is universally acknowledged that technology is a bridge between knowledge (Tympa et al., 2023). Distance learning opens up educational opportunities by allowing children to learn in more comfortable environments and at a time when they are free (Agaj, 2010; Novita et al., 2023). However, even in unfavorable situations, it does not mean that distance learning can be easily accepted by families with social, economic, and health problems, among other things (Bellani et al., 2024). Most Kosovar families do not have the luxury of providing every child they have at home with technological equipment, a comfortable atmosphere, and space. Therefore, the researchers were motivated to understand the dissatisfaction expressed by the parents of preschool children during the organization of distance learning. It is common for older generations to choose remote learning in certain situations and circumstances, knowing that they will be attending the classes. However, it is not common for children in preschool education (ages 5 to 6), to know that parents will be confined and restricted as they will be required to devote their time to their children during the educational process.

In organizing distance learning, in addition to broadcasting videos, teachers use various electronic platforms such as ZOOM, Skype, Google Meet, and Google Classroom, to share homework and other teaching materials (Education in Kosovo, 2020). Although the distance learning system isn't perfect, the state authorities in Kosovo decided to organize distance learning for children aged 5 to 6 to maintain health and prevent preschoolers from missing out on their educational opportunities. This was necessary because of the COVID-19 pandemic, just like in other countries. This research is worth being treated scientifically because the whole community of parents, almost every day debates the situation in question both through meetings - parent councils as well as through the media. Therefore, the researcher was motivated to prove through this research what the concerns that most stressed parents are.

This research has identified the challenges that have adversely affected the parents of preschool children, such as daily engagement with children during the organization of distance learning, taking unpaid leave, unsuitable environment for learning activities, interruption of internet connection, occasional power outages, lack of technological equipment for communication, lack of sufficient knowledge on the part of parents to access digital platforms, long teaching hours and frequent interruptions between classes, among other things. The researchers believe that this research will contribute to better preparation and persuasion of parents for proper cooperation with their children and educational institutions. The problem can be solved by state institutions, especially by extending a free network (internet) to every house or family in the difficult economic situation and their supply with digital communication equipment, where, unfortunately, in the Republic of Kosovo, due to the difficult social situation, there are such families that do not have internet and technological equipment for communication.

In terms of perception of online learning, Potts (2019) in her qualitative study has identified three important factors: (1) the level of opportunity for them to interact with other participants in online courses, (2) course content, and (3) their experience with the technology used. Parents' concerns, apart from circumstances created due to physical distance and other personal factors, are presumed to have been influenced by unwillingness to support their children in distance / online learning or home learning, lack of access to technology and the internet, or the inadequacy of technological forms used for children with special educational needs, economic difficulties, among other things (UNESCO, 2020).

Parents and preschool-aged children (ages 5 and 6) have been impacted by the pandemic situation that has forced educational institutions to close for health reasons. However, one thing is known to have had a positive effect on preparing children and educational institutions for their future in an era of digitalization of educational institutions in the twenty-first century, based on the needs of the education system where distance learning will be necessary in the not-too-distant future. The study argues that the closure of educational institutions due to COVID-19 allowed a third possibility to emerge, where everything comes together around technology as a savior in this scenario (Soja, 1998).

1.1. Theoretical background

Until April 3, 2020, COVID-19 had caused school closures in at least 188 countries, affecting over 90% of the student population worldwide. Distance learning comes at a high cost to the family, with at least one parent having to take care of his / her children. To share homework and other teaching materials, in addition to streaming videos, teachers used various electronic platforms such as ZOOM, Skype, Google Meet, and Google Classroom. During the same period, MEST in cooperation with donors such as UNICEF and Save the Children launched the platform for early childhood education for the age group 0-6 years (Duraku & Hoxha 2021).

The educational authorities at the central level (MEST) and the local one (MED) foresaw the organization of the learning process according to three scenarios: Scenario A - school learning; Scenario B - combined learning and Scenario C - distance learning, defined by the general guide of MEST for the organization of the school year 2020/21 (MEST, 2020). When online learning was organized due to the physical closure of educational institutions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic situation, in the Republic of Kosovo, the situation was terrifying, stressful, and insecure, especially when for the first time you are faced with a meaningless situation that is constantly dominated by fear and insecurity.

According to data from MEST, 9070 or 2.8% of children were not involved in distance learning organized during the period March - June 2020 (MEST, 2020). In terms of stress management, parents were encouraged to allow their children to express themselves freely about their feelings without feeling prejudiced and to try to hear and see things "from their perspective" (World Health Organization, 2022). The tools that were used to attend classes remotely were phones, laptops, computers, etc. Some of the parents had difficult economic conditions and lacked communication equipment.

The teachers regularly communicated with the parents to check how their children (learners) are doing at home. Despite the relevance of socializing in learning, teachers believed that family supervision strengthens learning, so parents should give children learning space at home so that they can focus on the homeschool activities that their teachers gave to them (Gelir, 2023). With appropriate supervision from the parents, students with disabilities were still able to learn during the pandemic (Velvin et al., 2023).

'Though we are required to stay at home, the whole family has the chance to be socialized, have time for each other, knowing the individual personality of each member of the family is a great opportunity to make the family closer'; this result was reported by an article that family care and support were pertinent

during the pandemic (Hart et al., 2020). The parents can provide for the education of their children through home-based schooling although this is a perennial debate relative to human rights, homeschooling effects, and academic outcomes (Brown, 2020).

1.1.1. Homework, another challenge for parents

In response to the situation with COVID-19, numerous local and international mental health organizations and institutions provided open resources for parents (Parenting for Lifelong Health, 2020) and advised the latter to engage in joint activities with children. The pandemic was a threat to everyone that presented a surging emotional response to the current situation (Khosravi, 2020). Regarding this situation, as a mandatory part of distance learning, homework follows as a complementary and very important element in rounding off the learning process. In this extraordinary situation of COVID-19, the control of homework was very important, especially for parents, because children were convinced to do their tasks as accurately as possible. Other studies have shown that parenting approaches, which include active participation in children's activities, are supporting factors in the proper development of children and their abilities to successfully adapt to changes in difficult times (Masten, 1990 & Werner, 1993). Homework was a huge burden for preschool parents, especially those who had more than one child in school.

For every situation, homework is an integral part of the teaching work, which now means the continuation of homework started at school and their completion at home to activate children-pupils in reinforcing and revising the subject without supervision by the teacher, but by parental supervision. Regarding homework or distance exercises, De Baise (2014) says that such tasks or exercises enable students to speak under the guise of dexterity and compares this to the sense of empowerment experienced by Harry Potter when he wears his cloak of invisibility. After all, digital tools should only serve to enhance learning experiences and cannot replace the value of human interaction (McNeely, 2017; Kouhi & Rahmani 2022). In addition, providing costly digital devices to enable students to attend classes from home is another challenge that many families are unable to cope with (Wong et al., 2004).

It was a heavy burden for the parents because, at the beginning of the organization of distance learning, the educators asked the parents to take a photo of the homework each day and forward the same to the educator during the day, no later than the next day at 11.00, or leave them to be checked at the beginning of regular class, otherwise, the children's assessment would not be satisfactory. In this regard, educators kept homework files, while school principals kept weekly (written) reports about their cooperation with teachers to monitor the situation around the learning process from a distance (home) (Curriculum of preschool education in Kosovo, 2015).

1.2. Purpose of study

This study aimed to contribute to the comprehensive discussion on the organization of distance learning and to encourage teachers, parents, and responsible institutions to work closely with each other to facilitate the distance learning process, making learning as attractive as possible for children. The main aim of the research is the fact that: the parents of preschool children (aged 5-6) find it difficult to deal with digital devices every day and at the same time engage in their children's distance learning. Therefore, this paper had a positive impact on preschool education institutions and parents to find forms and methods of cooperation to achieve better results for children. The following objectives were achieved through this research:

- Identification and reflection of forms of organization of distance learning, organized by educational institutions.
- The effects of forms of organization of distance learning were analyzed.

- The forms of remote work organization and the commitments of parents towards their children were analyzed and compared.

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

2.1. Participants

As the Republic of Kosovo consists of 38 municipalities, the research focused on 12 municipalities. Since the population of parents of preschool children aged 5 - 6 years is large, then unable to survey all parents, we took a research sample of 240 parents or 12 municipalities with 20 parents each. To measure the attitudes of parents regarding the impact of distance learning, as a technical procedure, the researchers visited all participating schools in the 12 respective municipalities. The researchers asked the school principals to give us the names and emails of all the parents of preschool children (aged 5-6). Based on the names of the parents, we divided them into two groups according to gender (female-male). We have selected 120 female and 120 male parents, a total of 240. In this research, we tried to include parents with equal numbers from each municipality.

2.2. Data collection tool

The researchers selected participants for the survey according to the odd numbers listed in the parent lists and then sent electronic questionnaires to the personal emails of all selected parents. Some of the parents were reluctant to fill in the questionnaires, but after many attempts, managed to get the answers of all the parents selected for the survey.

2.3. Procedure

From the measurements made in the present research, it was possible to obtain data from the parents of preschool children about the situation created in their homes during the time of organizing distance learning. The research started in October and lasted until November 2021, when the consequences of the pandemic were in decline and preschool children aged 5 - 6 had begun to return to normal learning in school facilities.

During this research, the researchers used some of the basic methods through which we have researched this very sensitive problem for the challenges of parents of preschool children in the Republic of Kosovo, such as ***The respondent method through electronic questionnaires and the comparative method***. The current study used the research data to create a numerical comparison of the outcomes between parents of the same gender who were able to assist their children and those who were unable to do so for a variety of reasons; The data obtained by the respondents (parents) was presented using the *statistical method*, which allowed the results in both tabular and figural form.

3. RESULTS

The present study deals with a realistic description of comparative analysis regarding the challenges presented during the organization of distance learning. The data are statistically regulated and processed which shows the required truth between the two genders of parents about the challenges presented during the organization of distance learning.

This kind of description made it possible to gain real knowledge about the challenges parents face when organizing distance learning. To confirm the hypothesis: "During the organization of distance learning, the parents of preschool children were quite busy with school obligations", the research included parents with equal numbers of both genders and equal numbers from the respective municipalities.

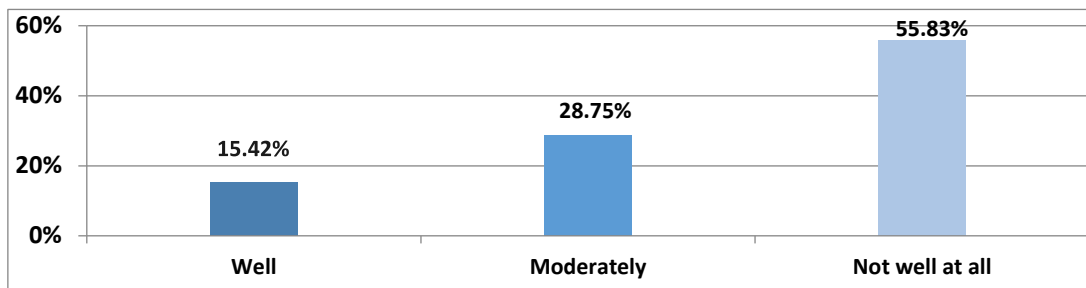
The questions addressed to the parents regarding the challenges presented during the organization of distance learning provide the following data:

- Regarding the first question, addressed to parents: How did you first cope with distance learning?

Out of 240 parents involved in the research, 37 parents or 15.42% of them stated that they coped with it well, 69 parents or 28.75% stated that they coped with it moderately, while 134 parents, or 55.83% of them, claimed not to have coped with it well at all (Figure 1). Most parents of preschool children, aged 5 - 6, did not cope with distance learning well at all. This means that the parents considered it bad for the children, as well as for themselves, and the whole family.

Figure 1

Opinions of parents of preschool children about coping with distance learning for the first time



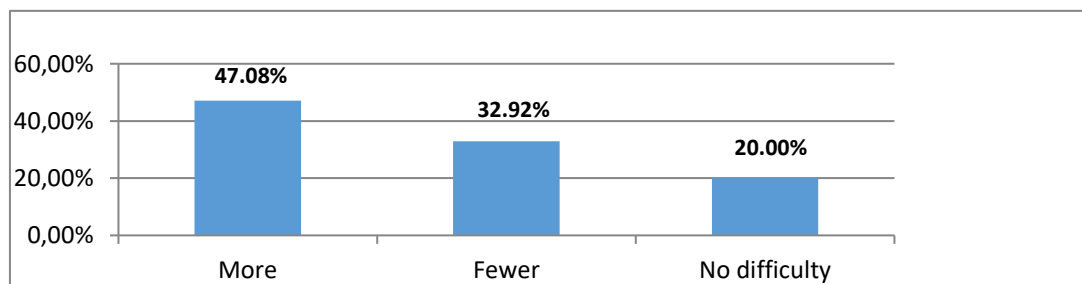
- Regarding the second question: During the organization of distance learning, did you have difficulty accessing the digital platform?

Out of 240 parents involved in the research, 113 or 47.08% stated that during the organization of distance learning, they had more difficulties accessing digital platforms; 79 parents, or 32.92%, stated that they had fewer difficulties accessing digital platforms, whereas 48 parents or 20.00% of them stated that they had no difficulties in accessing distance learning (Figure 2).

Most parents of preschool children, aged 5 - 6, stated that during the organization of distance learning, they had many problems or difficulties accessing distance learning. This means that parents were not well prepared or did not have enough knowledge to deal with digital platforms.

Figure 2

Opinions of parents of preschool children about their access to digital platforms



- Regarding the third question: Were you stressed before and during the organization of distance learning?

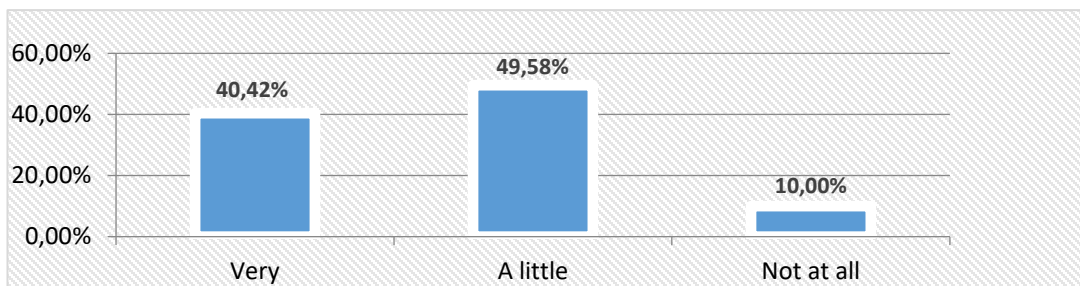
Out of 240 parents involved in the research, 97 parents, or 40.42%, stated that they were very stressed during the organization of distance learning, 119 parents, or 49.58% of parents stated that they were a

little stressed during the organization of the lesson, whereas 24 parents or 10.00% of them stated that they were not stressed at all when accessing distance learning (Figure 3).

Most parents of preschool children aged 5 - 6 stated that during the organization of distance learning, they had a lot of stress. This means that the parents were quite stressed during the organization of the distance learning and it was difficult for them to gather themselves even after a certain time because the results achieved during the learning process were not very satisfactory.

Figure 3

Opinions of parents of preschool children about the stress they had before and during the organization of distance learning.



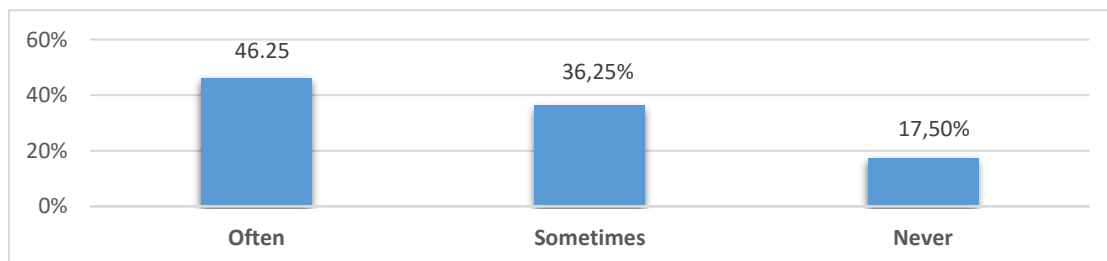
- Regarding the fourth question: Did you cooperate with your children during the time of organizing the distance learning?

Out of 240 parents involved in the research, 111 parents, or 46.25%, stated that during the organization of distance learning they often cooperated with children, 87 parents, or 36.25% of parents, stated they sometimes cooperated with their children during the time of organizing distance learning, whereas 42 parents or 17.50% of them stated that they never cooperated during the time of distance learning (Figure 4).

Most parents of preschool children aged 5 - 6 stated that during the organization of distance learning they often cooperated with their children but some did not cooperate as much as needed. This means that parents were interested in cooperating with their children, but the conditions of the parents were limited for many reasons.

Figure 4

Opinions of parents of preschool children about parent-child cooperation during the organization of distance learning.



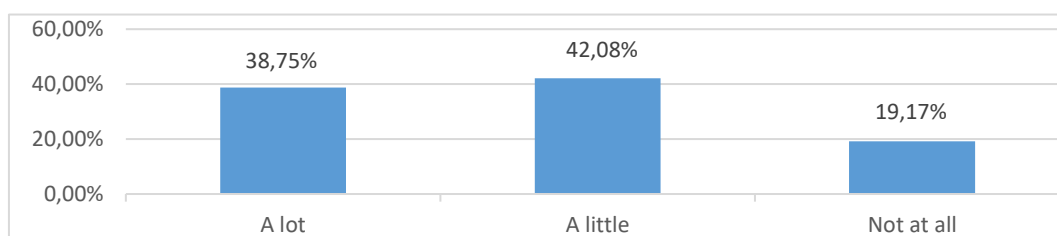
- Regarding the fifth question: Did you lack technological equipment and internet during the organization of distance learning?

Out of 240 parents involved in the research, 93 parents or 38.75% stated that during the organization of distance learning, there was a lot lack of technological equipment and internet, 101 parents or 42.08% of parents stated that they had little lack of technological equipment and internet, while 46 parents or 19.17% of them stated that they did not lack technological equipment for communication and internet (Figure 5).

Most parents of preschool children aged 5 - 6 stated that during the organization of distance learning, they had serious problems with the lack of technological equipment for communication and the Internet. This means that parents had big financial troubles with buying technological equipment and connecting them to the internet.

Figure 5

Opinions of parents of preschool children about the lack of technological equipment and the Internet when organizing distance learning



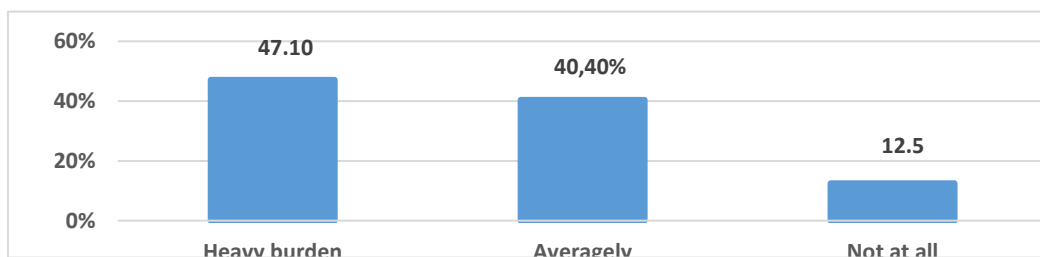
- Regarding the sixth question: Do you think that homework has been a heavy burden for you?

Out of 240 parents involved in the research, 113 parents or 47.10% stated that homework was a heavy burden for them, 97 parents, or 40.40% stated that homework was an average burden for them, whereas 30 parents, or 12.5% stated that homework was not a burden for them at all (Figure 6).

From these data, we can state that most of the parents of preschool children aged 5 - 6 stated that homework organized remotely was a heavy burden for them, knowing that among the parents some did not know, did not have time, or even were lazy to help their children with homework.

Figure 6

Parents' opinions about homework



- Regarding the seventh question: Do you think that distance learning should continue in the future?

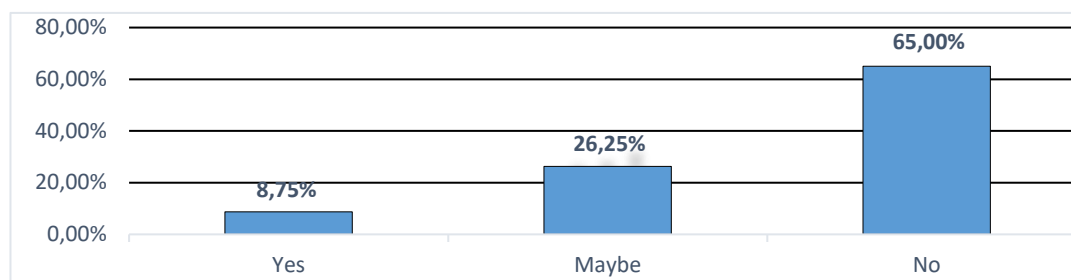
Out of 240 parents involved in the research, 21 parents or 8.75% stated that distance learning should be continued in the future, 63 parents, or 26.25% were in doubt about whether or not to continue with distance learning, whereas 156 parents, or 65.00% of them stated that distance learning should not be

continued with in the future (Figure 7). From these data, it can be confirmed that most parents of preschool children, aged 5 – 6 stated that distance learning should not be continued in the future.

This means that according to statistical data, parents do not agree that in the future distance learning should be organized, because this type of learning creates both job insecurity for parents and children, fatigue, and no expected results.

Figure 7

Parents' opinions on continuing with distance learning



3.1. Comparisons of opinions of parents by gender about the organization of distance learning

Regarding the organization of distance learning, the researchers have separately received the opinions of parents of both genders and through statistical analysis, we have made a comparison between them (Table 1, Table 2). Statistical analysis has shown that female parents, compared to male ones, coped with distance learning more easily, and also access to digital platforms by female parents was easier compared to male ones. Based on the stress experienced by parents during the organization of distance learning, based on the final data it is clear that female parents have been less stressed. The cooperation of female parents with preschool children was at a better level compared to that of male students while, due to lack of technological equipment, both genders had experienced it with moderate difficulty. Commitment to homework has also been a heavy burden for parents and male parents found it more difficult to cope with it than female ones. Whereas regarding continuing distance learning, female parents accept it more easily than male ones.

Table 1

Differences in female and male parents' opinions regarding the organization of distance learning

Questions asked to parents of both genders	Females 120						Males 120					
	Yes,		Somewhat		No		Yes		Somewhat		No	
	N _o	%	N _o	%	N _o	%	N _o	%	N _o	%	N _o	%
Have you had a hard time learning from a distance?	19	15.83	67	55.83	34	28.33	38	31.67	46	38.33	36	30.00
Did you have difficulty accessing the digital platform?	19	19.16	71	59.17	26	21.67	27	22.50	65	54.17	28	33.33
Were you stressed before and during the organization of the distance learning?	39	32.50	61	50.85	20	16.67	31	25.83	56	46.67	33	27.50
Have you cooperated with your children over time in organizing distance learning?	71	59.17	31	25.83	18	15.00	59	49.17	42	35.00	19	15.83
Have you lacked technological equipment and the internet?	22	18.33	16	13.33	82	68.33	21	17.50	19	15.83	80	66.67
Do you think homework has been a heavy burden for you?	28	23.33	60	50.83	31	25.83	47	39.17	58	48.33	15	12.50
Do you think distance learning should												

continue in the future as well? 16 13.33 31 25.83 73 60.83 6 05.00 25 20.83 89 74.17

Table 2

Final opinions between the two genders regarding the organization of distance learning

Final results	Yes	%	Somewhat	%	No	%
Females	218	25.95	338	40.24	284	33.81
Males	229	27.26	311	37.02	300	35.72
Differences	11	1.31	27	3.22	16	1.91

4. DISCUSSION

Implementing distance learning has been very difficult for teachers as well as children and their parents. Regarding the issue, the researchers had to discuss this with many parents, children, and teachers. The present research received almost all the answers from all parties claiming that distance learning has brought more stress to all parties than results. This very sensitive issue for our society has become a topic of discussion throughout the pandemic with representatives of the Municipal Directorates of Education and the Parents' Councils. The answers that came out of their representatives were not hopeful for children or parents because they also said very clearly that: If distance learning continues for a long time, the results would be catastrophic not only for children and parents from this part, but also for the whole society. The information received from the Council of Preschool Parents (CPP), indicates that distance learning has been organized to just waste parents' time.

This has often been discussed by the Regional Inspectorate of Education (RIE), the Ministry of Education (MEST), the National Parents' Council (NPC), educators, psychologists, sociologists, etc., saying that none of the above parties has claimed that distance learning brings expected results, much less for preschool children. According to all the discussions of the main actors of education in the Republic of Kosovo and beyond, distance learning has not brought the expected results, and such an approach must be changed.

Most parents of preschool children, aged 5 - 6, during the organization of distance learning often cooperated with their children but some did not cooperate satisfactorily. This means that the parents were interested in collaborating with their children, but their opportunities to be familiar with digital platforms well were limited. In addition, most parents of preschool children stated that during the organization of distance learning, they had serious problems with the lack of technological equipment for communication and the internet, which means that parents had major financial troubles purchasing technology equipment and their connection to the internet.

Among other things, most parents of preschool children, aged 5-6 stated that homework organized remotely, was a heavy burden for them, knowing that among the parents some did not know, they did not have time or even were not willing to help their children with homework. In this regard, the author Gottlieb (1983) suggests that "Parents should serve their children as a source of social support, which is defined as information or verbal and non-verbal advice, practical help, which have a positive impact on the recipient, or they benefit him".

General data from the respondents have shown that during the organization of distance learning, the parents of the Republic of Kosovo were not sufficiently prepared to help their children and thought that such an organization should not continue further. In terms of stress management, parents are suggested to allow their children to express themselves freely about their feelings without feeling prejudiced and to try to hear and see things "from their perspective" (Parenting for Lifelong Health 2020). These tips are especially needed for parents of gifted children, who face additional challenges, in their role as parents (Morawska & Sanders, 2009).

It is universally known that distance learning, in addition to the positive sides, also has its negative sides, because taking into account the young age of children (5 - 6 years), during the organization of the lesson, it is difficult to identify children, the direct physical contact educator - children disappear, children are not focused, inactive, there is a weak network, power outage, lack of technological equipment, fatigue of children in front of the monitor, commitment, and fatigue of parents during distance learning, lack of space, in some cases of very long and tedious hours for both children and parents.

To understand and address these issues, it is important to have data on the effects of these circumstances and changes in the format of schooling, which can later serve as a basis for intervention programs, and as a guide for future studies that explore additional influential factors over future COVID-19 periods, whether in online learning or regular physical education. This is also confirmed by Gao et al. (2015) who asserted that "Intelligent devices allow children-students to attend lessons anytime and anywhere".

The findings from this study confirm that physical distancing, the circumstances created by the spread of COVID-19, including changes in education, have caused several concerns among children, parents, and teachers in Kosovo. These changes are in line with the expectations that the spread of COVID-19 has caused fear, anxiety, and other concerns to citizens in different parts of the world (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2020).

Based on the findings, distance learning for parents of preschool children aged 5 – 6, we can say that parents are the main pillar of the organization of distance learning for preschool children aged 5 - 6, and if such an organization occurs without their help, learning does not make sense. This is also shown by the statistical truth that the final difference between the averages of both groups (female-male) is in favor of the female gender. This means that it is also statistically proven that female parents compared to male ones contribute more to help their children. To alleviate or get out of this aggravated situation, appropriate educational programs should be created based on the individual needs of students and raise the level of support for families, teachers, and caregivers as deemed necessary (UNESCO, 2020; Shafi et al., 2020).

5. CONCLUSION

A very important requirement for parents is to give children love, care, and attention because what they learn in the first years is valid for their entire lives. This study sample identified several concerns about school closures as part of the COVID-19 pandemic and their impact on the lives of children and parents. Parents are facing financial challenges, stress problems, the burden of caring for children, and insufficient government funding. On the other hand, some parents also expressed the benefits of closing schools from COVID-19 by spending more time with their children, which strengthens their family ties. The findings of this study are consistent with recent reports on the impact of COVID-19 on the family. In particular, developing countries like Kosovo, have relatively more socioeconomic and ethnic issues than other countries in the region. As a result, the best fit is to help these families improve the relationship between school and child.

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The results of this study can be generalized and tested for another similar population where socioeconomic and health conditions can have a significant impact on the family. The current study represents an overview of the difficulties experienced by parents of preschool children during the organization of distance learning in the Republic of Kosovo during the years 2020 / 21. However, the long-term effects of the pandemic have not yet been fully studied by academics and researchers.

Regarding the limitations of the present research, one of them is the self-reported data of teachers. Although all the questionnaires were in electronic form, they could also be completed by any member of their family and could provide unwanted answers because they could not be identified. Since there is no means of revealing the anonymity of the questionnaire, the survey carries an uncertainty in itself. This means that this questionnaire can be completed more than once. There are times when teachers are concerned about bad situations in their schools that require change, they have completed the questionnaire and used the opportunity to write the comment.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval: The writing of the article took publication ethics and research ethics into consideration.

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