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Educators by proxy: Emergency remote teaching and learning in the voice of parents

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Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic led educational systems worldwide to transpose activities planned for face-to-face education to mediated contexts - through what is known as Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL). This posed unprecedented challenges to schools, teachers, families, and students. In this context, it was relevant to describe and understand how parents perceived this process, including what challenges to themselves and their children they faced and what advantages they acknowledged in the process. The present study focuses on Portuguese parents' views on this process.

Methods: Data were gathered in April and May 2020 through an online questionnaire answered by 184 parents of preschool, basic, and secondary education students (ages 3–18). The present paper presents data from open questions analyzed by deductive and inductive content analysis using MaxQDA.

Results and discussion: Results evidence three overarching themes: equity, parental labor, and the meaning of school. Parents reveal substantial difficulties juggling the role of proxy educator and parent and point to inequalities - including those concerning very young children, children with disabilities or learning difficulties, students enrolled in professional education, families with insufficient access to technologies, and parents working from home. The school is portrayed as a crucial environment for development, a designated space for learning and caretaking, but also a relational and emotional context. Despite this scenario, parents acknowledge ERTL as having positive aspects and as the possible outlet to keep education going even in extreme situations.

KEYWORDS

emergency remote teaching and learning, COVID-19, preschool education, basic education, secondary education, parents' perspectives

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected over 1.5 billion students and their respective families across the globe (OECD, 2021). In Portugal, the physical closure of all schools on 16th March 2020 led to the fast and unexpected transition from face-to-face to digitally mediated education, for youths and children to be able to continue with their education and learning processes even when confined to their homes (Seabra et al., 2021). Parents were thus called to perform the role of proxy educators, in the words of Davis et al. (2021).

This article will analyze how Portuguese parents faced this transition from face-to-face education to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL), including the challenges they

and their children faced and the potential they recognized in this process.

To frame our study, we will present a brief analysis of the concept of ERTL and how it was implemented in Portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic. We will also present a brief review of studies centered on the main challenges of ERTL for parents as proxy educators.

Unlike online learning, which presupposes careful instructional design and planning using a systematic model for design and development (Branch and Doussay, 2015 in Hodges et al., 2000). ERTL emerged as a quick and necessary response to a worldwide health crisis, shifting activities and curricula planned for face-to-face education, without the planning or necessary conditions, including infrastructure or teacher training (Seabra et al., 2021).

The educational response to COVID-19 was described as going through four phases (Barbour et al., 2020), namely: Phase 1—Rapid Transition to Remote Teaching and Learning; phase 2—(Re) Adding the Basics; phase 3—Extended Transition During Continued Turmoil and phase 4—Emerging New Normal.

We focus on the first two phases to better frame our study since the data gathering occurred in the transition to phase 2. This framework helps to contextualize what was going on in Portuguese schools, from preschool to secondary education. Phase 1 included approximately 4 weeks of massive changes, when educators did whatever they could to have some educational activities available to their students, often relying on synchronous video, without much time to worry about quality or even equity. Phase 2, dubbed (Re) Adding the Basics, was a time of gradually incorporating concerns about access for all, support for students with disabilities or academic integrity, and reflection on planning (Barbour et al., 2020, p. 3).

The pandemic affected the holistic well-being of all students in a more or less profound way. However, some studies show that children and young people from families with disadvantaged socio-economic realities, children from migrant families, and children with special educational needs were/are substantially more affected (Di Pietro et al., 2020). It is, therefore, crucial to hear the voice of parents, as the ones who have most closely experienced, together with their children, the issues of inequalities and lack of equity in education during the lockdown period.

As Misirli and Ergulec (2021, p. 6701) acknowledge: "During the emergency remote teaching, parents can be considered as one of the most important stakeholders of distance education, as they are the only ones who physically accompany their children. Since children's homes became the new learning environment during the pandemic, parents influence their children's learning by providing digital technologies, learning environment, and learning how to support their children." Furthermore, even in the absence of a situation forcing parents to take on a particularly active role in their children's education, their participation in education has proved highly influential (for instance, Barger et al., 2019; Kim, 2022), this situation called for particular attention to their perspectives.

2. Background

2.1. Emergency remote teaching and learning in Portuguese preschool to secondary education

Once the pandemic was declared, the Portuguese Government ordered all schools to close (from preschool to higher education) from 16th March 2020, with only a weekend's notice, to mitigate the spread of the virus. Following that decision, the Ministry of Education prepared guidelines and support measures for students, teachers, and families to transfer education to ERTL.

The closing of preschools, schools, and other childcare facilities led to the need for at least one of the parents/caregivers to have to stay home to care for the children. In this sense, the Government approved exceptional and temporary measures to support parents who were in a situation of assistance to their children. One of the parents of children under 12 had their absence from work justified and received monetary compensation from Social Security, which compensated them for two-thirds of their salary in conjunction with the employer. This support could be extended to children over 12 with disabilities or chronic illnesses. The value was due during the period when the school was closed, excluding periods of school vacations—this situation, coupled with the reduction of income, was significantly limiting to families of lower income. However, the parents who could work from home could not require this parental leave, regardless of their children's age. This reality would only be corrected by Law-Decree no. 14-B/2021 of 22nd February 2021, almost a year later (Flores et al., 2021; Seabra et al., 2021, 2022; Ávalos et al., 2022). This means that, at the time of data gathering, many parents worked from home while simultaneously caring for their young children.

Approximately 10 days after the schools' closure (27th March 2020), the General Directorate of Education issued a document entitled "Guiding principles for the implementation of Distance Education at Schools" (General Directorate of Education, 2020), presenting recommendations for the development of "distance learning." Taking this document as a guide, each school was asked to develop its own distance learning plans. This may have contributed to a swift, deconcentrated response. Nevertheless, relying on schools for much of the responsibility in this response meant significant differences in response quality.

As Pacheco and colleagues state (Pacheco et al., 2021, p. 189), one of the most striking effects of the pandemic on school education was not so much the use of digital technology but rather its use as an alternative to face-to-face education and the inequality that provokes. As (UNESCO, 2020, 2021) acknowledges, inequality and exclusion have gained prominence with the pandemic, causing significant learning loss for many students and amplifying their learning gaps (Reimers, 2020; Pacheco et al., 2021).

In an attempt to alleviate some of these inequalities, the Portuguese Ministry of Education launched the television program "Study at home" on 20th April 2020 to enable even the most isolated students to access some educational content. Still, although the implications of the pandemic on education are still not fully known, it is sure to have affected more negatively those who live in the most vulnerable and challenging contexts (Fernandes et al., 2021, p. 5).

Other measures were taken to try to balance concerns of equity (Aguiilera and Nightengale-Lee, 2020) with issues of academic integrity (Hill, 2020), such as suspending national examinations for basic education, suspending all teaching activities for the third term except for the students of the 11th and 12th grades and for the nuclear subjects necessary for the access to higher education. However, many of the measures taken were directed to the teaching activities of regular programs, leaving out both the specialized pedagogical support offered to students with specific needs and the more specific programs, such as vocational/professional education and training

(Pacheco et al., 2021), which further compromises equity in education, when it should be for all.

Equity is defined as "the extent to which individuals can take advantage of education and training, in terms of opportunities, access, treatment, and outcomes" (European Commission, 2006, p. 2), and achieving equity in education is an essential political priority, especially in the time of crisis caused by the pandemic. In this regard, the European Parliament resolution of 11th November 2021 on the European Education Area highlights that education was/has been negatively affected by the pandemic, "including lack of access to IT infrastructure for people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, which has had negative repercussions on access to education" (European Parliament Resolution, 2021, article F p. 3).

2.2. Parents as proxy educators during school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic

As we have seen, school closures have strongly disrupted children's educational processes. Alongside the enormous professional challenges and family responsibilities on the parents' shoulders, the responsibility of facilitating their children's learning was added (Drvodelić and Domović, 2022; Francis et al., 2022). Parents were called to become *de facto* proxy educators (Davis et al., 2021), despite having no training for that role in the vast majority of cases, which led to high levels of anxiety, stress, and exhaustion among parents (Deeb et al., 2022; Francis et al., 2022; May and Hoerl, 2022).

Parents' efforts to help their children with ERTL included managing and facilitating online work (such as helping with assignment instructions, managing technology, working one-on-one with their children, and organizing their learning spaces), communicating with others (parents, teachers) and finding support, and motivating their children. Parents expressed difficulties with children's attention and motivation during online classes, and that meant they tried to keep children on task, encourage them, and sometimes had to stay near the children during class to help make sure they were focused on the tasks being asked of them (Carrell Moore, 2022). These efforts have put a strain on parents, but also reavealed their capacity to adjust to a difficult situation. The need to support parents' basic needs for them to be able to support their children's educational needs (Nyanamba et al., 2021) becomes evident, as being overhwelemed by supporting their children's distance learning correlates with negative mental health results for parents (Deeb et al., 2022).

Mothers explained children's lack of motivation and concentration as deriving from using digital devices—a source of entertainment and distraction—but also from relational reasons, such as not being under the authority of their teacher or being bored because of lacking social interaction with their peers, and finally for aspects related to their characteristics such as lacking discipline (Aladsani, 2022).

Bringing the school into the home context meant that the Covid-19 pandemic reinforced the need for schools and families to create close relationships in order to support distance learning (Pattnaik and Jalongo, 2021) as well as to minimize the negative implications for the mental health of parents in general (Cabral, 2019; Bıkmazer et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2020; Calvano et al., 2021; Davis

et al., 2021; Lateef et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022), and mothers in particular (Niels et al., 2022).

Studies found differing attitudes from parents toward studying from home (Pratama and Firmansyah, 2021)—some being disengaged, and some having positive or negative perspectives. A Portuguese study found that Portuguese parents were moderately satisfied with the ERTL process, and very negative perspectives were scarce (Seabra et al., 2022).

While the pandemic affected the education of almost all schoolchildren in the world, it did not affect them all equally (Flores and Gago, 2020; Pacheco et al., 2021; Delès, 2022). For instance, children with disabilities were a particularly vulnerable group in this context (Averett, 2021; Francis et al., 2022), whose support was reduced in the face of the needs felt by their parents (Kouroupa et al., 2022; Rababah et al., 2022). Also, different family contexts and realities lead to different perspectives on ERTL. Factors such as the family's economic situation, number of children, and access to the internet and electronic equipment seem to influence how ERTL is perceived (Delès, 2022; Heers and Lipps, 2022).

As an example, those with a less positive perspective of ERTL include mothers (Daniela et al., 2021; Heers and Lipps, 2022) of multiple children (Khaled et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022; Niels et al., 2022) working from home, caring for their children from home and parenting young children (Misirli and Ergulec, 2021; Heers and Lipps, 2022; Khaled et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022; Niels et al., 2022). On this matter, a study by Aladsani et al. (2022) in the Saudi Arabian context involving parents of K-12 children (kindergarten to 12th grade) reveals that parents, particularly mothers, were more stressed by distance learning because they lost any free time they had. The study by Drvodelić and Domović (2022) found that the main difficulties perceived by parents refer to decreased motivation for learning, excessive use of digital technology, parents assuming the roles of teachers, possible disruption of family relations, and lack of contact with peers. This aspect is reinforced by Misirli and Ergulec (2021).

Other constraints revealed by studies on the matter pertain to: (i) time management and juggling between supporting the children, work, and caring for the home (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021; Haller and Novita, 2021; Mangiavacchi et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021; MacDonald and Hill, 2022); (ii) lack of autonomy by the children (Lau et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021; Uzun et al., 2021) which requires added dedication by the parents to supporting their school activities; (iii) excessive burden of school tasks required of children, and (iv) inadequacy of distance learning for small children and children with special needs (Misirli and Ergulec, 2021).

The confinement also brought about changes to parent–child relationships—as schools and other childcare services closed, and many work places closed as well, parents' and children's habits, support networks, and opportunities for social contact all changed abruptly in a scenario of great uncertainty at many levels. Still, at an early stage in the pandemic, many parents seem to have experienced steady relationships with their children—they might be spending more time together, but the relationship has not changed. Nevertheless, others felt they had to navigate challenges in this new situation. That meant they were dealing with increased anxiety, answering tough questions, and dealing with children's frustration over limited opportunities to socialize outside. Having to balance multiple roles was also a strain on parent–child relationships. Finally, some parents also reported an

increase in relational quality due to having more time to spend together as a family (Vaterlaus et al., 2021). Enhanced family connections were also reported in other studies (Aladsani et al., 2022; Drvodelić and Domović, 2022; Haines et al., 2022; Hill and Reimer, 2022). However, the strain some parents reported on their relationships with their children seems to have been affected by the amount of school work. Days when children were working on school tasks and when parents were more involved in learning because children worked less independently, were associated with more negative parent–child interactions and lower parental positive affect. Such negative interactions contribute to the lower well-being of both parent and child (Schmidt et al., 2021).

Studies have also pointed to positive aspects of this process, for example: (i) increased autonomy by the students (Delès, 2022); (ii) increased parental support for learning (Delès, 2022; Drvodelić and Domović, 2022); (iii) developing competencies such as self-regulated learning or digital socialization (Misirli and Ergulec, 2021).

We share the perspective of Delès (2022) when the author cautions that the aspects stressed as positive and or negative in various studies must be considered nuanced, as they depend greatly according to each family's context and its specificities.

To summarize our literature review, we highlight that the pandemic that swept the world in 2020 had profound implications for education in Portugal as elsewhere. One of the crucial implications was an increase in inequality, particularly for students from less advantageous cultural, economic, and social backgrounds and for students with special needs. Parents were also critically impacted by this process, and studies in contexts different from ours have shown them to be affected in several negative ways, although some positive aspects are also acknowledged. Given that, at the moment of data gathering, parents who worked from home could not apply for assistance from the Government to pay assistance to small children and being relieved from work, many of our participants were, as could be expected, working from home. Thus, we expected to find a significant work overload among those parents, which correlates with mental health concerns. Previous studies have highlighted the immense discrepancy in experiences according to context, which calls for attention to situational aspects of the ERTL process, and caution not to overgeneralize results.

Although several studies have already documented how the pandemic impacted students, parents' perspectives are still relatively underrepresented (Misirli and Ergulec, 2021). To our knowledge, no other qualitative studies in Portugal have addressed parents' perspectives, and few studies addressed their perspectives from a quantitative perspective (Aguiar et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021; Seabra et al., 2022). As we have mentioned before—social and even cultural context plays a role in how ERTL is lived, and therefore knowing contextual realities is relevant. Furthermore, while there are other qualitative studies of parents' perspectives in other contexts, they do not encompass such a large number of parents from all regions of a country as in our study. We, therefore, believe to be contributing to closing a gap in research.

We proposed to answer the following research questions: (i) What challenges did parents face during the emergency remote learning process? (ii) What challenges did they perceive their children to experience during that process? And, finally, (iii) what advantages and potential gains did they acknowledge in that process?

3. Methods

We chose to conduct a qualitative study of an exploratory and descriptive nature. Our research questions were oriented toward capturing a specific moment in time and gathering parents' perspectives during that unique period. We believe capturing their experiences, priorities, frustrations, and victories would be done best by allowing them to express themselves freely, in their own words. Likewise, data analysis was primarily based on an inductive category scheme, as there were no theoretical categories to draw from—apart from the basic categories derived from our research questions, we used the data as the guide for our categorization.

Data were gathered through an online questionnaire distributed through parents' groups on social media during April and May 2020 (13th April to 14th May)—that is, very early into the first confinement and school closure due to Covid-19, when ERTL was still very new. This is an exploratory study, as it was done soon after the confinement when very little was known about the remote learning process and how it was being lived by those directly involved. Therefore, we created a data-gathering instrument based on our research questions. We assessed its trustworthiness by applying it to people in the same conditions as our prospective participants (parents of school-aged children) and using the talked reflection method, whereby participants commented on the instrument as they answered them. Three parents were interviewed during the validation stage.

The questionnaire included closed questions directed at characterizing the participants' demographic characteristics, and open-ended questions, namely: (i) Please, identify the main difficulties you have experienced in this process of transition to distance education as a parent/caregiver; (ii) Please, identify what you believe have been the main constraints on the part of children/students when adapting to this process of transition to distance education; and (iii) Please identify the main potentials and positive aspects you have identified to this process. Other questions were included that are outside the scope of the present article.

We used a questionnaire for the data-gathering process mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the exploratory nature of the study and the diversity of perspectives that we expected would exist—of parents of different aged children, with different levels of education, and access to technology, in different areas of the country—required us to try to include that possible diversity by encompassing a large number of participants, from backgrounds and contexts as diverse as possible, something that would have been unmanageable by using interviews. Secondly, the very fact that we were in lockdown prevented us from going to schools and otherwise contacting parents, forcing us to resource to online communication and communities to encounter our participants.

For this reason, we met parents where we could find them—in parent groups on Facebook. This resulted in a group of participants formed by their voluntary adhesion to the request for participation, a convenience sample. Despite this uncontrolled nature, we intentionally sought parent groups from all regions of the country and included groups for parents of children with special educational needs. Still, the fact that parents with higher education degrees are overrepresented in our sample may be evidence that they felt more at ease or more qualified to answer a questionnaire of this nature or even that they had more time available during such a difficult period.

One hundred eighty-four (184) participants answered at least one of the questionnaire's open questions. The participants lived in all areas of Portugal, including the insular regions. Most lived in urban areas. Parents of children between preschool and secondary age were represented, with parents of children in the second cycle of basic education (2nd CBE) and secondary education being less represented. Most of the children were enrolled in public schools. The respondents' gender was predominantly female, and the most represented age group was between 36 and 45 years. Most respondents worked from home and had another caregiver living in the same residence (Table 1).

Data were imported to MaxQDA and codified using *a priori* categories—Parent's difficulties, Children's constraints, and Potentials and gains, which were derived from the research objectives and the questionnaires' open questions; and emergent subcategories, derived from the data (Creswell, 2002, 2013; Bardin, 2014; Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2019; Rädiker and Kuckartz, 2020; Gizzi and Rädiker, 2021). A qualitative approach intended to understand participants' experiences and perceptions was used. However, that does not impede using some quantitative measures to better express the diversity and frequency of certain experiences.

Ethical procedures were followed (AERA, 2011), including appreciation by the ethics committee of the research center, informed consent, voluntary participation, and participants' anonymity.

4. Results and discussion

We have organized the data presentation according to the research questions that guided the categorization process. However, we begin by pointing out three major themes that have overarched the data analysis and which we will focus on further at the end of this section: inequality (invisible) labor, and the meanings associated with the school. We will also highlight references to those three themes throughout the data presentation.

Inequality is a theme that is not so much present as implied in the parents' voices. Although few parents directly complain about inequality—with the possible exception of parents of children with disabilities and educational difficulties, as we will see—it is always in the background. Unequal conditions are everywhere, marked by social, economic, and educational differences, but not limited to those: from the access to a computer per person in the household or unlimited internet connection to the existence of adequate space for learning to the different levels of dependency of different aged children to the division of the parent's time and presence among the countless solicitations they were faced with during the ERTL process.

This last aspect—parents' time, availability, and even level of knowledge to support their children's education—is closely linked to the next overarching theme: labor. Labor is present in the gender differences that emerge when we find that fathers are overrepresented among those who did not feel overburdened by this process—hinting that the division of labor in the household is still often skewed toward the women/mothers in terms of caring for the children. The invisible labor of caring for the home and cooking—while also working from home, acting as a proxy educator, even the emotional work of dealing with the unforeseen and trying to keep some semblance of normality—all these tasks merged into the same space and time. At the same time, external support was often removed, leading to a generalized feeling

TABLE 1 Participants' characterization.

		Frequency	%
Context	Rural	35	19.0
	Demi-Urban	41	22.3
	Urban	108	58.7
Preschool age children	One or more	59	32.1
1st CBE children	One or more	81	44.0
2nd CBE children	One or more	39	21.2
3rd CBE children	One or more	59	32.1
Secondary age children	One or more	40	21.7
Type of school frequented by the child/children	Public	141	77.0
	Private	34	18.6
	Private + Public	8	4.4
Parent's gender	Female	157	85.3
	Male	26	14.1
	Rather not answer	1	0.5
Parents' age	25 or under	12	6.5
	26–35	17	9.2
	36–45	108	59.0
	46–55	41	22.4
	56 or above	5	2.7
Parents' education	2nd CBE	1	0.5
	3rd CBE	6	3.3
	Secondary	21	11.5
	Post-secondary	3	1.6
	Bachelor's degree	5	2.7
	Undergraduate	100	54.6
	Master's	36	19.7
	Doctorate	11	6.0
Another caregiver in the home	Yes	155	84.2
	No	29	15.8
Parent's professional situation	Working outside	17	9.3
	Working from home	114	62.3
	Not working / other	52	28.4

of exhaustion that, as we have seen, can have mental health consequences.

Finally, and also related to the previous two themes, is the meaning of the school. The home and the school are represented as two spheres that are usually relatively independent. The home would be the space for leisure, and the school the physical place of learning—this reveals a markedly formal conception of education with limited interrelation between the school and the family. The school closures broke the boundaries between those spheres—opening possibilities for positive interplay between them, as visible in testimonies of parents who state they can finally accompany their children's learning, but also contributing to the overburdening of parents that we previously mentioned. The space of the home, associated with

playful interaction, riddled with distractions, sometimes overcrowded, and the very conception of electronic devices as tools for distraction rather than for learning, are also brought about by parents who feel that their children have a hard time concentrating at home. The school is also very clearly portrayed as a place for relationships outside the family—with peers and teachers—that are greatly valued and missed, leading to increased emotional labor. Technology sometimes appears as a bridge allowing for the continuing of education and social relationships, and sometimes as a barrier—due to limited digital competences of students, teachers, and parents, limited access, or limited autonomy in their use—which, again, leads to the parents' role as a proxy educator and the overburden associated with it.

We will now look in greater detail into the parents' difficulties, the children's constraints, as expressed in their parents' perspectives, and the potential and gains acknowledged in the process.

4.1. Parents' difficulties

The first question pertained to parents' difficulties in dealing with ERTL and was answered by 161 parents. The answers to this question were organized under three categories: Family context, School context, and No difficulties. The particular case of parents of children with disabilities or learning difficulties was also analyzed separately due to its sensitivity (Figure 1).

4.1.1. Family context

The majority of parents' concerns were related to the category Family Context, which was referred to by 110 parents. This category was further subdivided into the following subcategories: Proxy educators (87 coded segments from 64 documents), Time and work management (79 coded segments from 77 documents), Resource management (16 coded segments from 16 documents), Conditions of family life (13 coded segments from 13 documents), Emotional management (12 coded segments from 11 documents), and Space management (5 coded segments from 5 documents; Figure 2).

The difficulties expressed by parents were overwhelmingly related to their home context. Having to take on a role as proxy educators (Davis et al., 2021; Drvodelić and Domović, 2022), a role many felt unprepared for or unable to fulfill due to the other responsibilities they had was the primary concern (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021).

It is apparent that the most frequently voiced concerns were related to Time and work management—mentioned by the highest number of participants, and dealing with the responsibilities of becoming proxy educators—mentioned the highest number of times. Time management was also a prominent concern voiced by parents who participated in other studies (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021; Haller and Novita, 2021; Mangiavacchi et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021; MacDonald and Hill, 2022). These findings contribute to the overarching theme of labor—parents felt it as their responsibility to take on more roles—a proxy teacher, focused on supporting and motivating their children, a full-time parent, a full-time worker, and a full-time homemaker, roles, and responsibilities that contribute to adding multiple layers of work to the job of parenting and leading to an overburden.

The subcategory proxy educators included statements about assuming responsibilities as a «teacher.» Some parents voiced not being capable of facing those challenges for a lack of training or digital competencies, which aligns with the findings of Francis et al. (2022). For instance:
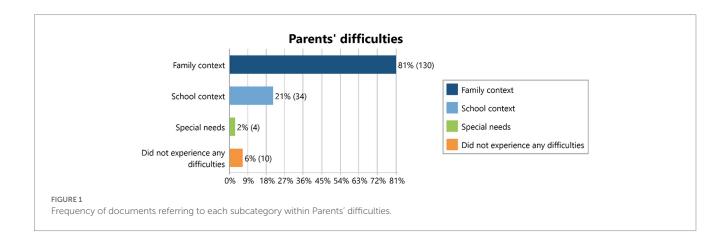
> "I am not trained as a teacher," or

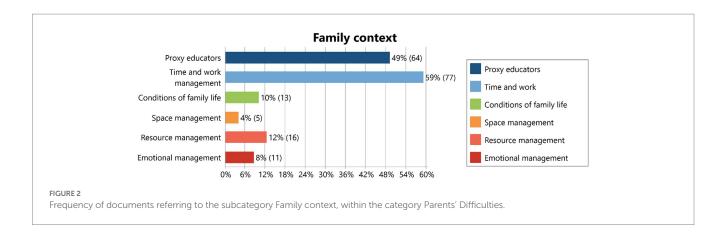> "Difficulty with the technologies regarding access to digital platforms."

Here, we see how technology may sometimes be a barrier rather than a bridge, pointing to inequalities in how ERTL was lived. Others refer to the difficulty in establishing a routine and learning environment, such as:

> "Especially creating a routine and sometimes acting as a «teacher»".

A frequent concern relates to promoting their children's motivation and engagement with the learning activities—a responsibility they seem to assume as parents, which echoes the findings of Drvodelić and Domović (2022), Misirli and Ergulec (2021), and Aladsani (2022). For instance,

> "Keeping the child interested, focused on the tasks."

FIGURE 1
Frequency of documents referring to each subcategory within Parents' difficulties.

FIGURE 2
Frequency of documents referring to the subcategory Family context, within the category Parents' Difficulties.

The children's lack of autonomy is frequently evoked as a reason for the need to take on this role—less autonomous children require continuous support and care from their parents (Lau et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021; Uzun et al., 2021):

> "In the second CBE, the students' self-regulation is harder. Constant supervision of their work is needed."

Finally, some parents expressed frustration with this dual role:

> "We are parents, not teachers," or

> "They are practically demanding that parents substitute teachers, and that is not possible when you are also working."

This frustration, and the very expression "substitute teachers," agrees with the perspective that we chose to include in the title— parents were called to become proxy educators (Davis et al., 2021), and that situation led to high levels of anxiety, stress, and exhaustion (Deeb et al., 2022; Francis et al., 2022; May and Hoerl, 2022). The merging of the home and school spheres and the dislocation of a significant part of the teachers' job to the parents, particularly those of younger and less self-regulated children, led to the excessive labor we have been referring to.

This heavy toll was already apparent at such an early stage of ERTL, which some parents also felt had emotional consequences (Heers and Lipps, 2022; Khaled et al., 2022). At the time the results were gathered, parents working from home, regardless of children's ages, could not apply for parental leave, which would later be corrected (Flores et al., 2021; Seabra et al., 2021, 2022; Ávalos et al., 2022). As one parent said, "that is not possible when you are also working," something that at the time seemed to be missed by the Government. It appeared that adding more tasks in the same space meant they could all be done ad infinitum. Clearly, that was not the case. Despite being mostly resilient and able o find positive aspects in the process, these parents were tired and sometimes angry. This was an overburdened group of parents, and the consequences of this stressful situation, with few outlets, could have implications for mental health (Bıkmazer et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2020; Calvano et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2021; Lateef et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022) and well-being (Heers and Lipps, 2022).

This leads us to the other most frequent complaint—difficulty managing time and work—not only formal work but also invisible work, such as cleaning the home, cooking, or caring for younger children below preschool age. Almost 38 percent of participants expressed this difficulty in testimonies such as:

> "Many hours of studying and organizing (…). It has been very hard, really, so many hours of studies, home, food…," or

> "The fact that I have a lot more work and still have all the responsibilities in supporting my children and the upkeep of the home," and still

> "inability to accompany my children because I am working from home many hours above my normal schedule."

Juggling responsibilities of caring for one or multiple children, frequently working from home and having to maintain the living environment clean and safe and meals ready was a heavy toll, which is also in agreement with previous studies (Parczewska, 2021).

Emotional management was mentioned with several nuances— guilt for not being able to support their children as much as necessary, problems in the parent–child relationship caused by the role as a proxy educator, anxiety over the whole situation, and lack of outlets for frustration due to confinement, among others. For example:

> "Fear that they will fail school [because I cannot help them more],"

> "High levels of anxiety."

These negative feelings may be indicators of lower parental well-being (Calvano et al., 2021) and mental health (Achterberg et al., 2021; Deeb et al., 2022).

These findings support the overarching theme of labor, and the multiple layers added to the parents' everyday routines, including emotional and invisible labor.

Less frequent but still relevant concerns were organized in the subcategory Resource management, which includes access to computers, reliable internet connection, and other materials. For instance:

> "We only have one computer. Most activities have to be done on the mobile phone, which makes access and visualization of certain documents and the timely answer to online tasks even harder".

Space management was also a concern. For example:

"Managing spaces so everyone in the family can have their own space and work conditions."

The same is true for the subcategory Conditions of family life, for example:

"I became totally conditioned by the schedules of online classes—not just because of respecting those schedules, but because we cannot make noise, and on the other hand, the classes are heard throughout the house."

These less frequent concerns bring to mind the overarching theme of equity and also of different conditions affecting how ERTL was lived—again, and since we seem to have a relatively privileged group pf participants, these more practical concerns may have been more frequent in the general population. Not having easy and unlimited access to the internet or electronic equipment, or even less than ideal or overcrowded living conditions, are significant limitations that cannot be forgotten even if they are not frequent in our results (Delès, 2022; Heers and Lipps, 2022). These complaints uncover practical difficulties that some participants had to deal with and others did not. The school has a vital role in promoting social equity, as within its walls, all students have access to the same basic conditions—the same teachers, resources, devices, and experiences. Although that fundamental level of equality is not enough to ensure equity, even that was taken away during ERTL. Implicitly, these responses also point out one of the meanings of the school—that of a social equalizer.

4.1.2. School context

The subcategory School Context was mentioned by 34 respondents (42 coded segments). The most frequent difficulty in this category relates to Work overload or lack of coordination (24 segments, from 23 documents), followed by far by the remaining subcategories: Teacher-parent communication (7 segments from 6 documents), Insufficient support (6 segments from 6 documents), Contact between teachers and students (3 segments from 3 documents) and Teachers' digital competencies (2 segments from 2 documents; Figure 3).

Work overload or lack of coordination includes mentions of excessive work requirements on the part of teachers and a lack of coordination among teachers of different subjects. For example:

"There was an overload of tasks for my children. It is very complicated to manage all this overload of work required by all the subjects. There hasn't been much common sense in managing this kind of teaching, knowing that the students are at home, with parents working from home. There should be a better organization, so it doesn't become so overwhelming."

This is coherent with the stages of ERTL (Barbour et al., 2020; Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020)—in the initial stage of ERTL portrayed in this study, many schools were likely still struggling to keep education going, despite the dire circumstances (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020).

There were also some complaints about parent-teacher communication, such as:

"Little direct articulation with parents. The end-of-term meetings could have been held using the same resources used to communicate with the students."

Lack of support, although not frequently, was reported by some parents, for instance:

"There is no support from 85% of teachers".

In rare cases, Insufficient communication between teachers and students was mentioned. For instance,

"Feeble interaction of teachers with the students."

Again, these complaints draw into the theme of labor, further clarifying that in some cases, the excess burden felt by parents resulted from inefficiencies in school-family communication and a lack of understanding of each others' roles, times, and possibilities now that the spheres of school and home were interlinked and partially merged. Parents attributed much of these difficulties to the school and the teachers, although they only represent half of that relationship. Indeed, the schools also complained about the role some parents played in this time of dissolution of boundaries, roles, and expectations (Seabra et al., 2021). The theme of the meaning of the school is at play here.

A lack of human interaction between teachers and students, as well as insufficient cognitive and social presence, were also reported as limitations in other studies (Ferri et al., 2020). These may relate to the following concern pertaining teachers' digital competences, and we add teachers' pedagogical competences related to the implementation of distance learning.

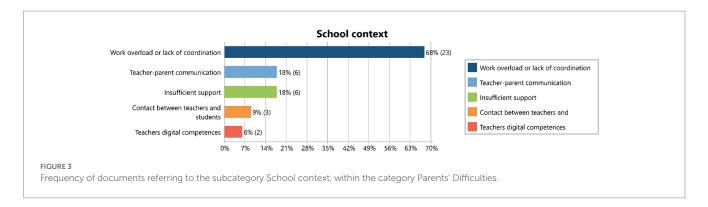Also infrequent were references to the lack of digital competencies by the teachers, such as:

"Some teachers are not familiarized with the technologies and are still adjusting to synchronous classes."

The crucial importance of teachers' digital competences also became evident as a limitation in a Portuguese study with teachers (Seabra et al., n.d.), and a study in the Basque Country (Portillo et al., 2020) stressed insufficient digital competences as the most significant difficulty expressed by teachers and educators during the ERTL period. Therefore, it is unsurprising that some parents faced difficulties pertaining to this aspect. The role of the school, and particularly the place of technology as a tool for learning—at home, as well as at school—is present in these concerns.

4.1.3. No difficulties

Despite the frequent difficulties expressed by many parents, 10 parents stated not having felt any difficulties with this process. Although they were a minority, we were interested in trying to find similar characteristics among them and see if there were possible patterns at play.

We found some compelling data that future studies can look into further. None of these parents had children in the second cycle of basic education, and only one had younger children (one in preschool and one in the first CBE). This was someone who worked outside the home and resided with another caregiver who was working from home. It is, therefore, plausible that the bulk of the work related to

FIGURE 3
Frequency of documents referring to the subcategory School context, within the category Parents' Difficulties.

caring for children and their education may have rested on the other parent. The remaining nine parents who stated not facing difficulties were parents of older children enrolled in the third CBE or secondary education. The majority (seven) had only one child under their care. A previous study with parents also found that the second cycle of basic education seemed to be a particularly challenging period to go through ERTL in the Portuguese context (Seabra et al., 2021). Several studies show that parenting younger and more dependent children was more complex during this period (Misirli and Ergulec, 2021; Heers and Lipps, 2022; Khaled et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022; Niels et al., 2022). Older children are usually more independent and can manage their own learning with less assistance from their parents.

Despite the underrepresentation of self-identified males in our sample, half of the parents stating not having difficulties were males. This raises the issue of task distribution between parents and how much work related to caring for the home and children still lies on women. Mothers have also been shown in other studies to have been more affected than fathers by this process, which reflects the continued inequality in the division of invisible labor, including care for children and the home (Daniela et al., 2021; Heers and Lipps, 2022). The theme of labor is, therefore, present in this absence of difficulties through the lens of gender.

Nine of these ten parents were living with another caregiver, which may lead to a better division of tasks and more support. Also, nine reside in an urban context.

4.1.4. A specific case: Parents of children with learning difficulties or disabilities

Another specific case was parents of children with disabilities or learning difficulties. Although they were few in the present sample, their difficulties were related to the specific needs of their children. The small number of answers in this sense does not allow any broader inferences to be made, but we are compelled to stress that this group of parents seems to have been particularly affected by the ERTL period. They seem to have felt neglected. One parent stated their most significant difficulty was "the fact that he has special needs, but everything is the same as for his classmates." Another parent claims to have not had support from the school. Another briefly states, "Daughter with Dyslexia. All the difficulties." Finally, the fourth parent considers their special needs daughter would require more constant support than was received.

Other studies have revealed the unsuitability of ERTL for children with disabilities or learning difficulties (Misirli and Ergulec, 2021). Families with children with learning difficulties or disabilities are among the most vulnerable to being left behind during a crisis of this nature (Averett, 2021; Kouroupa et al., 2022; Rababah et al., 2022). We contend that they should also be at the forefront of the current efforts to recover learning and support parents' mental health.

As we have seen, the more dependent the children are, the more they require hands-on and constant supervision from their parents, contributing to increased labor involved in parenting. In the cases of children with special needs, this may often have been the case. In some cases, the school takes on a caretaking role, as well as an educational role, as round-the-clock care is required. Educational assistance is permanent, and other levels of care, such as feeding and hygiene, among others, are necessary. That contributes to an extreme case where parents are not only teachers by proxy but also special educators, physical therapists, or personal assistants by proxy all day long. This is not the case for all children with disabilities—many are just as self-reliant as any other child the same age and can sometimes even benefit from the extensive use of educational technology. The added difficulties experienced by these parents, however, include aspects related to all three overarching themes: they are an extreme case of lack of equity since equal treatment means insufficient care in their case; they are an extreme case of overburden and added parenting labor since even more roles can be at play; and they shed light into the caregiving role of the school.

4.2. Children's constraints

The second question asked parents to report what they believed were the main constraints to their children's adaptation to ERTL. One hundred and seventy-two parents (172) answered this question. The limitations they identified were categorized into four categories: Personal limitations (119 segments from 92 documents), School context (116 segments from 100 documents), Family/Home context (40 segments from 36 documents), and No difficulties (10 segments from 10 documents). The graphs below continue to portray the number of documents (individual parents' testimonies) containing references to each category (Figure 4).

4.2.1. Personal limitations

We begin by remarking that the fact that we asked parents about their own and their children's difficulties is not rooted in a deficit perspective (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Leo and Wilcox, 2020). We view parents—from all backgrounds—as active participants in their children's development and learning. However, acknowledging and identifying the difficulties they claim to have experienced in this situation—in their own words—is a necessary step toward informing

policy and practice to overcome those difficulties better and provide them with the necessary resources. Although some parents attributed their children's difficulties to their individual characteristics—somehow assimilating a deficit perspective themselves——we, as researchers, present but challenge that vision. We also note that those same individual characteristics that were challenged while faced with unprecedented demands of learning from home were also identified as having been developed during the experience.

The children's and students' characteristics were frequently mentioned as constraints in adapting to their living situations. Motivation and concentration were frequently stressed as difficulties (32 segments from 32 documents), for instance:

> "More sources of distraction at home," or

"Difficulty concentrating in an environment that—until schools closed—was for leisure and rest."

These comments align with the overall vision of the home and school as separate realms and learning being closely linked to the schools' physical space.

The same is true for students' lack of autonomy (by 18 parents):

> "Children's capacity for self-regulation because they are still small."

As can be noted through these examples, this subcategory has significant overlap with the home context. Childrens' motivation (Garbe et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021; Drvodelić and Domović, 2022), autonomy/self-regulation (Lau et al., 2021), and concentration (Drvodelić and Domović, 2022) are also mentioned as conditioning factors in other studies. In fact, self-regulation is a critical prerequisite for distance learning (Wang et al., 2013). Digital technology is also referred to as a source of distraction in other studies (Aladsani, 2022).

Also frequent are mentions of the children's digital competences (23 segments from 23 documents), such as:

> "Using platforms without previous knowledge."

The fact that specific characteristics of the children—including lower autonomy—which is related to the children's age and how well they read and interpret written texts, but also to their levels of digital competence—have a relevant impact on how much extra labor is required of parents, and how intensive that labor is. The parents may,

therefore, place the onus of that burden on the children's characteristics rather than on the circumstances that required them to take on those roles.

Routines and habits—including study habits—were also challenged by the transition to ERTL (20 segments from 20 documents), as is expressed in testimonies like,

> "Adapting to individual, autonomous, and asynchronous work habits" or

> "Changing routines."

Adapting to new routines as a source of stress is also mentioned in studies (Freisthler et al., 2021; Pattnaik and Jalongo, 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021). Emotional consequences, such as stress, anxiety, pressure, isolation, unsafety, shyness (not speaking up during online classes), confusion, or frustration, were also referred to (13 segments from 13 documents), for instance:

> "feelings of unsafety."

The pandemic and lockdowns impacted children and youth's well-being and mental health (Villanti et al., 2022; Landman et al., 2023), which may have been reflected in the concerns voiced by the parents in our study.
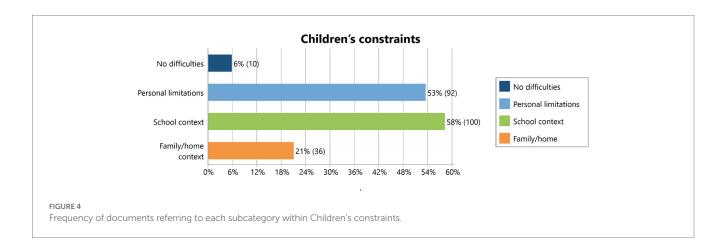
Excessive screen time, not only due to the time spent learning on digital screens but also to leisure on screens, was referred to as another limitation (11 segments from 11 documents), for instance:

> "Too much time in front of screens—computer and television."

Finally, two parents mentioned the lack of access to physical or artistic activity, for example

> "[lack of] doing fun activities, sports, and arts."

An excessive amount of screen time (Carroll et al., 2020; Mangiavacchi et al., 2021), and lack of physical activity (Pattnaik and Jalongo, 2021; Merce et al., 2023) have also been reported by others. These factors may also be involved in children's and youth's well-being. All these factors contribute to parents' emotional labor (Figure 5).

FIGURE 4
Frequency of documents referring to each subcategory within Children's constraints.

4.2.2. School context

One hundred parents (116 coded text segments) referred to limitations connected to the school context (or lack thereof). This includes the most frequently pointed out constraint to their children— lack of social interaction with peers and teachers (47 segments from 45 documents), for example,

"absence of physical contact with teachers and peers" or

"school recesses make a lot of difference."

Schools are represented in parents' words as more than learning spaces—they are places for affection, relationships, play, and development. School is a crucial context for socialization and meeting with friends and adults who care for their children and whom their children care for. Physical presence is an essential factor in those relationships, and although, as we will see ahead, virtual spaces sometimes can (Croft et al., 2010), and sometimes did meet the need for relational connections, they did not entirely replace them. Concerns with socialization and physical presence were present in other studies (For example: Sofianidis et al., 2021). The significance of the school emerges in this prevalent concern as crucial for the children's development and their relationships.

The two following constraints are more directly related to teachers' work. On the one hand, difficulties learning and lack of teacher support (30 segments from 30 documents), for example,

"Lack of quality of the synchronous moments," or

"They feel like they are working with an insufficient support network. Sometimes, they complain a certain teacher hasn't understood that distance learning is not the same as face-to-face education".

On a similar note, the following subcategory, Excessive or disorganized work (28 segments from 27 documents)—which was also mentioned as one of the parents' difficulties—is a prevalent concern, expressed in sentences such as:

"Lack of uniformity in procedures. For older children, having four or five hours of synchronous sessions daily," or,

"Not being able to manage the enormous amount of information they receive daily, through multiple platforms, without any planning."

This disorganization that may stem from the stage of ERTL when data were gathered is another factor weighing on parents' labor. Organizing and managing a certain level of chaos, and filtering information for their children (another way of invisible labor), may have been added to their roles as proxy educators, and therefore to parental labor, during this stage. Tachers' digital competences (1 segment from 1 document), also mentioned as a hindrance to the parents themselves, also emerged when considering their children's difficulties:

"older teachers' difficulty in dealing with technology."

These issues related to teachers' knowledge of digital pedagogy and digital skills were also reported elsewhere (Portillo et al., 2020; Sofianidis et al., 2021; Seabra et al., n.d.).

Less prevalent concerns relate to time, which is closely related to the previous category—feelings of lack of time to face the number of tasks they are presented with (6 segments from 6 documents), for instance,

"Lack of time to consolidate learning, lack of time for family and for themselves,"

doubts concerning evaluation and assessment (2 segments from 2 documents), such as

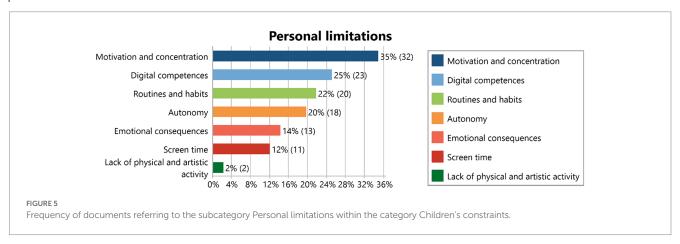"not understanding how they will be assessed,"

And bad behavior on the part of the students (2 segments, from 2 documents), for instance

"bothering and distracting those who want to learn."

It is possible that the children themselves may have taken on at least some of the emotional labor of ERTL, expressed in this lack of time, uncertainty, and even acting out (Figure 6).

4.2.3. Family/home context

Although less frequently than the previous subcategories, constraints related to the family and home context were also mentioned (40 segments from 36 documents). The most frequent of

FIGURE 5
Frequency of documents referring to the subcategory Personal limitations within the category Children's constraints.

these constraints relate to the study environment (20 segments from 20 documents), such as,

> "understanding they are not on vacation,"

> "surrounding distractions," or

> "Knowing they have to be in class, even if they are at home."

If previously we have highlighted parents' understanding of the school as a place of socialization, we now focus on the school building as a designated space for learning—and a conception of learning that is deeply linked to that space. The home, in contrast, is associated with leisure. Therefore, making the home a place for learning and overcoming distractions may be concerning for many. As we have seen before, the issues of concentration and self-regulation intertwine with this dimension. The overarching theme at play here is the meaning of school.

Even though the sample is skewed toward parents with access to technology, as it was gathered online, and the respondents' characteristics point to a relatively socially advantaged group of parents, 15 parents (15 segments) referred to problems related to resources, primarily due to having to share a computer among more than one child and parents working from home or problems with internet stability, for instance

> "requiring a computer per person, because activities are very hard to do on a mobile phone" or

> "synchronous sessions don't work because of the lack of internet [access]."

This was also reported in other studies (Agaton and Cueto, 2021; Sofianidis et al., 2021).

Finally, five parents referred to limitations in parental availability and support, for example:

> "lack of availability and knowledge, on the part of the parents, to help them."

We have previously highlighted parents' sense of being unprepared and untrained to face such challenges and roles (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk,

2021; Aladsani, 2022). These limitations have as an underlying theme the equity of ERTL. If access to education is limited by the resources at the student's disposal, sometimes preventing access altogether, we face an immense setback in the progress toward SDG4, quality education for all (UNESCO, 2019; Spiteri, 2021; Figure 7).

4.2.4. No difficulties

Similarly to what concerns parents' difficulties, 10 parents stated that their children had no difficulties in this process when describing their children's constraints. Only two of these had also considered that they, as parents, had not had any challenges.

Four of these parents had children of preschool age, three had children in the 1st CBE, four in the 3rd CBE, and 3 had children in secondary education. No parents of children in the 2nd CBE were represented in this small group, again pointing at this stage of Portuguese education as requiring particular care in the aftermath of ERTL (Seabra et al., 2022). The parents of younger children seem to feel that ERTL was particularly hard on them, as it required more hands-on and constant attention to their still very dependent children, but that does not necessarily mean that they feel it was harder for their children as well.
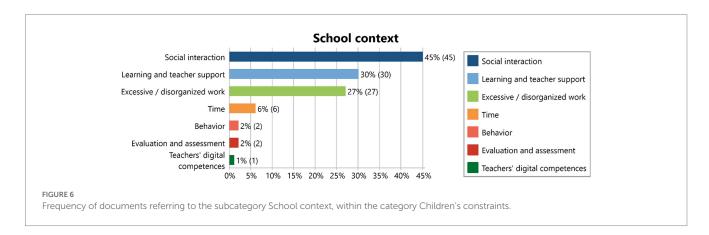
Once again, four of these parents had children in private schools, which is overrepresented concerning the general sample. Two identified as male, and the most frequent age group was 36 to 45 years. All but one had higher education degrees. This points to more educated and potentially better-off parents as having possibly been able to support their children more (Bol, 2020) and, once again, to potential gender differences in how parents experienced the process (Bıkmazer et al., 2020; Pattnaik and Jalongo, 2021).
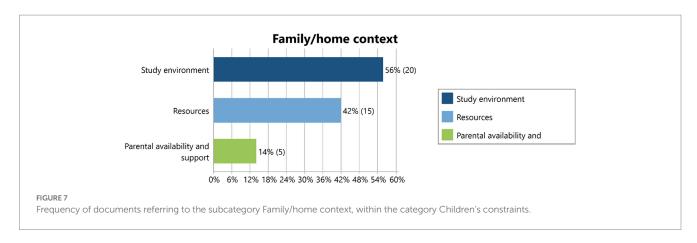
Again, all three overarching themes are represented in this analysis of who fared better during ERTL—social, educational, and gender equity; distribution of parental labor, particularly concerning the younger children; and the role of the school as an equalizer and a place for caregiving, that usually relives parents of part of these tasks, allowing them to compartmentalize each area of work and better manage their time.
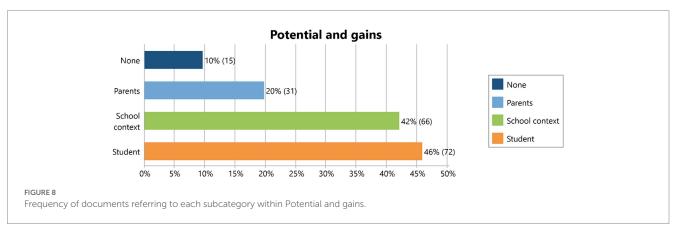
They were all at home, but seven worked or studied from home. Nine resided with another caregiver.

4.3. Potential and gains

One hundred and fifty-eight (158) parents answered this question. Their answers were analyzed in four subcategories: Student (98 coded

Frequency of documents referring to the subcategory School context, within the category Children's constraints.

FIGURE 7
Frequency of documents referring to the subcategory Family/home context, within the category Children's constraints.

FIGURE 8
Frequency of documents referring to each subcategory within Potential and gains.

segments from 72 documents) includes gains or potential related to the students; School context (76 coded segments from 66 documents) includes gains and potential directly linked to the school; Parents (35 coded segments from 31 documents) includes gains to the parents; None (15 segments from 15 documents) includes statements of not perceiving any potential or gains to the situation (Figure 8).

4.3.1. Student

The most frequent gain or potentials identified by parents to ERTL relates to their children's autonomy (33 coded segments from 33 documents), for example:

"This kind of teaching promotes the student doing their own research and their autonomy," or

"Greater autonomy and responsibility on the part of the children."

Also frequent were references to gains in terms of digital competences by the part of students (28 segments from 28 documents)—as we will see, digital competences were also recognized as a gain to teachers and parents, although less frequently—for example,

"He is enjoying developing his autonomy in the digital world" or

"for my older children (seventh and ninth years of schooling), it seems this has been an opportunity to look at technology as something with other potentials that is not only good for gaming."

Other competences were also referred to as having been developed (16 segments, from 16 documents), namely soft skills and everyday competences, for example:

"It has been a time of great practical learning for him, such as using the sewing machine, how to mend a broken tire, how to plant vegetables…"

Also mentioned were: adaptation to new circumstances, emotional competences, perseverance, organization, research capacity, responsibility, informal learning, and investment in other interests. Increased motivation or concentration (eight references from eight documents), for instance,

"more pleasure learning this way,"

"curiosity due to the novelty of the situation," or

"they have fewer sources of distraction."

Furthermore, time management (five segments from five documents) was also referred to as a skill developed by this process.

As mentioned before, others have also pointed to positive aspects of ERTL, including the development of autonomy by the students (Delès, 2022), self-regulated learning, and digital socialization (Misirli and Ergulec, 2021). All these competences that seem to have been developed have also emerged as students' factors that impede

ERTL—competences and attributes such as self-regulation, motivation, or digital competences were heavily required by this learning experience. That means that some children may have been better equipped to face ERTL and even gain from it, while others who lacked those competences fell behind. Again, the theme of inequality is apparent, not only concerning students' competences, but also the opportunities provided to them. That inequality of opportunities emerges when we analyze the contrasting discourses together. They highlight the unevenness of the school response and the conditions of each household to meet the challenges.

Less frequently, keeping a sense of normality amidst this turbulent period was referred to as a gain by six parents. Three parents mentioned the prevention of COVID-19 as a gain (Figure 9).

4.3.2. School context

Sixty-six parents (76 coded segments) acknowledged some gain or potential related to the school context. The most prevalent gain acknowledged in this category is New methods (23 segments from 23 documents), including an opportunity to include technology in education and diversify the materials used for learning—for example:

> "Finally, understanding distance learning is not easy and does not require lesser standards,"

> "New ways of communication and learning" or

> "accessing more information and in a more creative way."

Closely related to this subcategory is the subcategory Learning (19 segments from 19 documents), related to the possibility of continuing learning despite the circumstances or learning differently, for instance,

> "Greater opportunity to develop learning in a non-formal environment,"

> "Keeping the educational process going" or

> "efficacy in developing tasks and objectives, clarity in what is asked of the students and deadlines."

The teachers' role was also recognized by some parents (12 references from 12 documents), for example:

> "Teachers' full availability,"

> "The teacher's response and motivation," or

> "The teachers' efforts so that the student can learn! I value the teacher's and educator's work a lot more."

Teachers themselves have reported a relevant increase in their workloads and, in some cases, a better and closer relationship with parents (Seabra et al., n.d.).

Less frequently mentioned were gains in terms of technology (4 references from 4 documents), such as using a learning platform, in terms of evaluation, including greater flexibility or focus on formative evaluation (3 references from 3 documents), and in terms of teachers' digital competences.
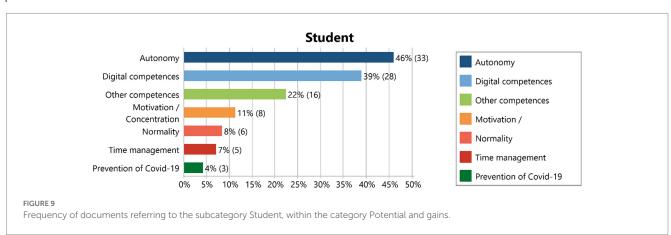
Again, there is a stark contrast between the parent who is pleased with how organized the process was and those who complain about its lack of coordination; between those who revel in the opening of new educational possibilities and those who state their children's teachers are trying to act as if they were still at school and required countless hours of synchronous lessons; and between those who praise the teachers' enormous efforts and proximity and those who state they had little support. The theme of inequality in the quality of the educational response provided is again underlying these contrasts.

Keeping contact (13 references from 13 documents) with teachers and peers was also recognized as a gain of ERTL, as expressed in sentences such as:

> "Not losing contact with colleagues and teachers" or

> "a closer relationship with some teachers."

As we have mentioned before, losing physical and social contact with peers and teachers was experienced as a loss, but ERTL mitigated that loss to some extent, at least in some cases. This points to the social and emotional meaning of school and the relevant role pedagogical

FIGURE 9
Frequency of documents referring to the subcategory Student, within the category Potential and gains.

relationships and peer relationships have in that context. In these lines, the school is not a place, but a group of people and the relationships they establish. Technology is the bridge allowing those relationships to be maintained (Figure 10).

4.3.3. Parents

Thirty-one parents (35 segments) recognized some gain to themselves arising from this experience. The most frequent gain they acknowledged was related to their involvement with their children's education (17 segments from 17 documents), for example:

> "Everything is documented, allowing parents to better accompany what is being taught," or

> "I can fully accompany my children's learning. I had never been able to do that."

Once more, technology is expressed as a bridge between the spheres of the home and the school. The merging of those spheres, which had negative consequences regarding parents' labor, also had beneficial impacts. This greater proximity, with or without technological mediation, is something schools and parents may wish to explore in the post-pandemic present.

Twelve parents (12 segments) referred to spending more time as a family, for instance:

> "More time to be with family,"

> "The time spent with my son."

Others also mentioned better parent–child and parent-school relationships (Liu et al., 2021; Uzun et al., 2021; Vaterlaus et al., 2021)—although acknowledging this is not universal. This is the diametral opposite of the excessive labor many parents expressed, and another manifestation of how diverse the parental experiences of ERTL were.

There were also mentions of convenience (five segments from five documents) and a gain in digital competence (one parent; Figure 11).
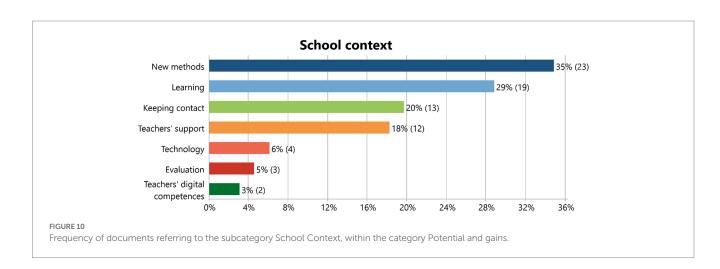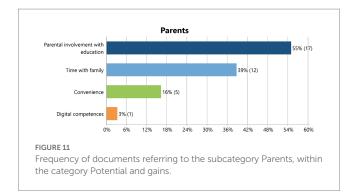
4.3.4. None

Fifteen parents (15 segments) stated not finding any potential or gain arising from ERTL. Once more, we tried to find patterns to characterize these parents' identities better. Their children predominantly went to public schools, although two had children in private schools, and one had children in public and private schools. They lived predominantly in urban areas. Over half (seven) had at least one child in the 2nd CBE. Four had children in preschool, six in the 1st CBE, five in the 3rd CBE, and four in secondary education. The majority (10) had more than one child. Most identified as female (12) and were 36 to 45 years old (11). Four of these parents did not have a higher education degree. Seven were working from home, while nine were not working. All but two resided with another caregiver. The main differences between these parents and the parents who, on the other extreme, found no difficulties in the process concern gender, the number of children, and the number of children in the 2nd cycle of basic education. These results align with those that have revealed a particular toll on mothers (Ribeiro et al., 2021; MacDonald and Hill, 2022), social and educational inequalities (Bol, 2020; Delès, 2022), and difficulties pertaining younger and more dependent children (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021). Again, the issues of equity and labor are evident.

4.3.5. Revisiting the overarching themes

As we have highlighted throughout the text, the three overarching themes of equity, parental labor, and school significance are present in all the categories of analysis. The global picture is of a process that is (at least at that early stage) relatively uncoordinated and uneven, leading to inequalities of different levels. First and foremost, equity in access to education, even if not very frequent in the discourse of our participants, is unacceptable. As ERTL evolved, more and better answers emerged, and equity became a concern (Barbour et al., 2020), possibly leading to a decrease in these concerns. Still, equity is essential to any educational system and should remain a concern in years to come.

Schools' closures seem to have forced two relatively independent areas of children's and parents' lives to merge almost entirely—in space and time. The home and the school now coincided, which, on the one hand, brought about a relevant increase of the layers of parental labor, with no respite, and on the other hand, brought light to the significance

FIGURE 10
Frequency of documents referring to the subcategory School Context, within the category Potential and gains.

FIGURE 11
Frequency of documents referring to the subcategory Parents, within the category Potential and gains.

of school. A school is a physical place that allows all to access similar resources, spaces, and conditions, acting as a social equalizer. School is a network of professional and personal relationships, partially transposable online. School is the designated place for learning and caretaking (particularly for younger children or children with disabilities). Parents and teachers have been used to relatively separate and defined roles, times, and places, all of which were abruptly put in question, sometimes causing friction. The assumption of the role of proxy educator had consequences in terms of children's learning—considering the differing levels of availability, education, and digital competence of parents, it was another factor leading to inequality—and in terms of parents' multiple labors, leading to a feeling of being overburdened and not having enough time. Hence, we conclude that these three themes are deeply intertwined.

Finally, in a study where problems and limitations were often at the center of discourses, resilience and the capacity to find potential and gains even in a challenging process emerge as an underlying current of thought. The vast majority of the parents were able to find some silver lining in the situation and were involved in their children's education.

5. Limitations

The present study has limitations, which we acknowledge and consider when reflecting on the results. Namely, the fact that the participant sample—a convenience sample—was obtained online likely skews the sample toward more technology-aware and economically well-off parents. In fact, the participants' characterization reveals a predominance of parents with higher education degrees and relatively older parents. Therefore, we are aware that any difficulties the participants express, particularly concerning access to technology and knowledge of how to accompany their children's learning, among others, are likely to be far less expressive than those felt in the general population. We are likely to portray a relatively mild perspective of the difficulties encountered by parents and, eventually, a more positive perspective on ERTL. Nevertheless, this exploratory study has some relevant contributions to the understanding of the ERTL process in Portugal from the perspective of parents of children of diverse ages, encompassing preschool to secondary school—data were gathered soon after the schools' closure, capturing a glimpse into the initial stages of the process. Moreover, a large number of parents (for a qualitative study) from all over the country expressed their perceptions in their own words, with a very open questionnaire,

allowing them to point out what they felt were the essential aspects of ERTL rather than when the researchers might expect those aspects to be.

Another limitation may be that, despite being a qualitative study, we used a questionnaire as a data-gathering instrument. Although in-depth interviews might have provided a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the experiences of participants, they would not have been possible to carry out with such a large number and variety of parents and would have been very challenging to organize during a period when both researchers and parents were confined to their homes. Therefore, we believe the balance between using a relatively unstructured data-gathering instrument and being able to access a large number of participants ultimately paid off.

6. Conclusion

Parents' perspectives are relatively underrepresented in the growing literature about ERTL (Seabra et al., 2021). They were, however, indispensable partners in the educational process, particularly concerning younger children, having been called to take on a role as proxy educators (Davis et al., 2021). Their perspectives on this process are, therefore, crucial to its understanding.

In the present study, we sought to characterize parents' perspectives on (i) their difficulties with ERTL, (ii) their children's challenges with the process, and (iii) the potential and gains arising from ERTL. We will now address each of these objectives. We came across other realizations related to the overarching and intertwined themes of equity, parental labor, and the significance of the school.

We begin by highlighting the striking diversity of perspectives expressed. The perspectives of parents of children with disabilities or learning difficulties were an example of such diversity. We have remarked that although the number of parents in that situation who took part in the study was diminutive, their testimony was striking as to not having been supported enough (Pattnaik and Jalongo, 2021). Besides this—perhaps extreme—case, there were clearly very different starting points for ERTL—families with more than one child, families with more limited access to computers or reliable internet, and parents in different economic situations (Heers and Lipps, 2022), and these seem to have nuanced the way this experience was perceived (Delès, 2022). As has been popularized, parents may have been in the same storm but were in very different boats—all these different experiences and perspectives highlight the amplification of inequalities in this initial stage of ERTL. On the positive end of the spectrum, parents with only one child, older children, fathers, and those with another caregiver at home, seem to have been among those with a more positive perception of the process. On the negative end, mothers (Daniela et al., 2021) with multiple children (Khaled et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022), working from home or caring for children at home with younger children (Misirli and Ergulec, 2021; Heers and Lipps, 2022; Khaled et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022), and particularly, children in the 2nd CBE—a finding also reported by Seabra et al. (2021) seem to have been among those experiencing more hardship.

Furthermore, the process of ERTL itself seems to have been heterogeneous in its implementation. This is evidenced in the diversity of perceptions, such as the fact that while some parents complained about excessive workloads, others stated that their children had more time for extra-school activities. Similarly, while

some parents complained of a lack of communication with teachers, others claimed to have better involvement in their children's learning, among multiple seeming contradictions that likely stem from the differences in how the schools and teachers implemented ERTL. This aligns with the national policies implemented, which gave schools a broad leeway in determining how to act during this process (General Directorate of Education, 2020; Portuguese Government, 2020). Although this flexibility allowed schools and communities to organize quickly and flexibly to respond to the emergency in record time, it also allowed for inequalities in the quality of the response provided. Inequality in terms of access to education, quality of the educational response, adequation to the different needs of students (personal differences, age, disabilities), and social, financial, and educational inequalities of parents and households all emerged as relevant dimensions. This inequality (also remarked in other studies, such as Aguliera and Nightengale-Lee, 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Flores and Gago, 2020; Yi et al., 2020; Pozas et al., 2021; Delès, 2022; Francis et al., 2022)—perhaps inevitable, to some extent—is one of the key reflections we take from the parents' testimonies and warrants special care to policymakers in the present moment of returning to relative normality, in the aftermath of the crisis.

The second question we intended to answer pertains to children's constraints with ERTL through the eyes of their parents. Once again, we were able to organize these constraints according to the context they refer to—home context and school context. To these, we added personal constraints and no limitations. Most of the constraints parents pointed out concerned how their children relate to the school context, unlike their own difficulties. This may, to some extent, result from externalizing the problems, seeing them as originating elsewhere, beyond their control. In the parents' answers, the school context is represented not only as a context of learning but also as an essential context for socialization. School's significance, one of the overarching themes in the study, is closely linked to the school grounds but exceeds it, encompassing the personal and professional relationships established in the school context. Lack of social interaction due to not going to school (Misirli and Ergulec, 2021), and therefore not interacting with peers and teachers, is the most prevalent limitation acknowledged by the respondents. Issues related to learning and correlated issues associated with teaching—namely work overload and disorganization—also stand out as very relevant.

Children's difficulties are also often attributed to personal limitations, such as lack of concentration, insufficient digital competences, difficulty establishing new routines and habits, or lack of autonomy. These personal limitations clearly interact with the parent's difficulties, as they are at the root of the parents' need to support their children's learning, taking on the role of proxy educators. In fact, another study found that students' difficulties with distance learning were the primary correlate of parents' mental health issues (Davis et al., 2021). The characteristics of children that require a more permanent and hands-on commitment to the role of proxy educators are related to an increase in parental labor. This labor includes direct educational support, emotional labor, such as filtering and organizing information, keeping a semblance of normality, managing frustration, and invisible labor related to caring for the household. These aspects still seem to be riddled with gender biases, at least in some families, requiring further research. These difficulties are also associated with children's mental discomfort in the parents' discourse.

The home/family context is mentioned primarily in relation to the study environment. Studying in a context that is usually devoted to leisure and which is sometimes seen as having more distractions is seen as difficult by some parents. A smaller number of parents refer to a lack of resources at home—which is nevertheless relevant because, as we have seen, the respondents of our study were a relatively advantaged group of parents. The general population of parents and students may have struggled significantly more with this issue. The role of the school as a social equalizer and the separate nature of the home and the school are apparent in these discourses as well as the social and economic aspects of equity.

Finally, we wanted to know if the parents were able to find positive aspects, such as gains or potential, in the ERTL experience. In fact, although a small group of parents found nothing positive in the process, the majority were able to find some gains. This is coherent with a moderately positive perspective of the process (Seabra et al., 2021) found in a previous study. The gains acknowledged are mainly related to the children—and interestingly, very similar to their personal limitations. ERTL seems to require higher levels of autonomy, digital competence, motivation, concentration, or time management, leading children with less developed competences in those realms to struggle but also providing children with a context prone to the development of the same competences (Misirli and Ergulec, 2021; Drvodelić and Domović, 2022). The school is also seen as possibly benefiting from this experience, particularly in promoting new educational methods (Bubb and Jones, 2020). Stressing the diversity in how ERTL was implemented in different contexts and also the diversity of learners' characteristics, some parents consider this process to have led to closer teacher support, better or different learning, or more formative evaluation processes. To conclude, some parents consider the process brought gains to themselves in terms of closer knowledge and involvement in their children's education (Aladsani et al., 2022; Haines et al., 2022; Hill and Reimer, 2022) and more time spent as a family (Drvodelić and Domović, 2022).

The concluding remarks of our article stress the pertinence of providing support to parents, particularly those of younger children (k-6th grade), as a route to preventing mental health concerns and promoting positive educational outcomes for their children, in emergency situations leading to school closures. We also call attention to the need to follow up on the 'new normal' situation to assess the impact of this experience, not only in terms of equity and learning but also in terms of the eventual maintenance of the potential gains that this experience could have promoted, in terms of methodology, digital competences, and the closer relationship between parents and their children's education.

Returning to «the new normal, » compensation measures are being implemented to reduce these inequalities. This study reveals some target groups that should be cared for and supported—we highlight children with disabilities or learning difficulties, children whose parents were working from home during the lockdown, children with less advantaged family backgrounds, and fewer resources. It also points out the importance of caring for mental health and considering the parents of small children (until the second cycle of basic education) and children themselves as priority targets of such care.

The potential of using technology to ensure pedagogical and curricular differentiation, to reach students who may be less participative in a classroom context, and even to promote parents'

involvement in their children's education—not as proxy educators, but as parents—has been uncovered and we would be wise to learn from this experience and expand it.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of the LE@D (Laboratório de Educação e Ensino a Distância, Universidade Aberta, Portugal) (29 April 2020). The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

FS, LA, and AT: conceptualization, methodology, and validation. FS: formal analysis, investigation, data curation, visualization, supervision, and project administration. FS, MA, and LA: writing—original draft preparation and writing—review and

editing. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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