

## Chapter 7

# Homeschooling in Norway During the Pandemic-Digital Learning with Unequal Access to Qualified Help at Home and Unequal Learning Opportunities Provided by the School



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**Abstract** The COVID-19 pandemic has forced an unprecedented global shutdown that has greatly changed what it means to be a teacher, a student, and even a parent in the months that schools have been closed. While most school systems normally require daily physical attendance and bring students together in large groups to learn in a collective endeavor, the closing of schools and the months of social distancing have shifted the site of learning to the home, where learning happens primarily alone or with the help of family members through the technologies available. In this chapter, we report on how school shutdown has affected the students in Grades 1–10 across Norway, where teachers in March 2020 were asked to perform all their teaching from home, through digital devices and remote teaching. As in other countries, Norwegian teachers and school leaders were not prepared to go digital overnight, despite good technological infrastructure and a curriculum that explicitly emphasizes the importance of digital competence across subjects. Drawing on a national survey administered to parents ( $N = 4,642$ ) about how digital homeschooling was organized, we have investigated what kind of educational opportunities students were offered during the period of remote teaching. Our key findings are that digital home schooling to a large degree consisted of students doing individual tasks, with limited support from their teachers, especially in the lowest grades. We discuss how the unequal access to qualified help at home challenges some of the core ideals of the Nordic model of education—where equal opportunities to learn is a key ambition.

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## 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we will investigate how the Norwegian government responded to the international COVID-19 outbreak and discuss what measures were taken to ensure equal learning opportunities for all students regardless of socioeconomic background—something that is a key tenet of the Nordic Model of education (Klette, 2018). The Norwegian authorities announced the first cases of confirmed coronavirus in Norway on February 27, 2020, stating that they were closely monitoring the situation. By March 13, several restrictions in all areas of society were implemented, aiming to suppress the virus and keep the Pandemic under control. In addition to strict social distancing rules limiting the number of people who could interact with each other and the distance to be kept in all situations outside fixed “cohorts,” a major change for most Norwegians was the restriction on where they could work or study. Beginning on March 13, all educational institutions were closed, and all citizens were encouraged to avoid any unnecessary use of public transportation and work from a temporary home office if they were capable of doing so. The regulations presented in March 2020 are considered the severest national regulations since Norway was occupied during World War II.

All education normally happening in Norwegian daycare, kindergartens, schools, and universities was suddenly replaced by so-called “homeschooling” or “remote learning” in line with school closures in other countries.<sup>1</sup> Around the world, leaders expressed concern about the expected global learning losses resulting from the Pandemic (Azevedo et al., 2020; Azevedo et al., chapter 16; Kuhfeld et al., 2020) despite a general global consensus that education for all should still be prioritized even with closed physical school buildings (Reimers, 2020). Another question of global interest was what curriculum teachers should use during the Pandemic (Daniel, 2020) and how schools could ensure equal learning opportunities to all students when all students were sent home (Azevedo et al., chapter 16; OECD, 2018).

In Norway, unlike many other countries, the Pandemic did not cause a reprioritization of the national curriculum or new educational policies at the national level. All Norwegian municipalities (“school owners”) are responsible for ensuring that their school is managed in accordance with the Act relating to Primary and Secondary Education (the Education Act, 1998). During the Pandemic, these municipalities also became responsible for appropriate infection control measures (the Norwegian Directorate of Health, 2020). The school owner is always obligated to ensure that all students receive a formal education in accordance with both the National curriculum and the Education Act, even if the schools are closed or have limited capacity (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2021b). Hence, the municipality level should, as far as possible, follow the established subjects and teaching hour distribution in periods when schools are closed or subject to other restrictions, and they should only provide fewer teaching hours if they can justify why this is necessary. Overall, the teaching should provide an opportunity for the students to achieve

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<sup>1</sup> Some daycare centers, kindergartens, and schools were kept open for the children of people with critical functions in society during the Pandemic (e.g., health services, transportation, infrastructure).

the competence aims in all subjects—and it should be emphasized that this expectation was not lowered during the Pandemic. In the case of students with specialized needs, such as students who are entitled to special needs education or other forms of personalized support, the temporary act passed in relation to COVID-19, allows for the school owner to adjust in their education if it is necessary and justifiable (Temporary Act on adaptations in the Kindergarten Act, the Education Act, and the Free School Act to remedy consequences of outbreaks of COVID-19, 2020).

## 7.2 The Norwegian Context

As a backdrop for the Norwegian response to the Pandemic, we will provide some key facts about the Norwegian school system and how it compares to other countries. Since the end of World War II, equal opportunity for all has been a cornerstone of the Nordic model for education—and the Nordic model is internationally known to emphasize features that are critical for high quality education (Klette, 2018). In Norway, all children have a legal right to 13 years of free education, starting at age 6, and a vast majority of students (96%) attend public school rather than private (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020). Norway does not allow private owners to make any profit from their educational activities. Further, the establishment of a private school is only allowed if the school follows an alternative pedagogy (e.g., Montessori schools) or if they are religious schools. The few private schools in Norway still must follow the national curriculum (Klette, 2018).

The Norwegian compulsory school system is divided into two parts: primary school (ages 6–13) and secondary school. Primary school consists of the lower primary level (grades 1–4, ages 6–10), the intermediate level (grades 5–7, ages 10–12), and lower secondary school (ages 13–16). The school year goes from August to June. Students receive only formative feedback until grade 8, when they begin receiving grades. As in the other Nordic countries, the school system is considered a key approach to ensure a fair and equal society supporting democracy, participation, welfare, and life-long learning for all, regardless of their social, economic, and geographical background (Klette, 2018).

Norwegian students are still performing at or above the OECD average in science, reading, and mathematics as measured on the international PISA test. The PISA results show little variation in test scores compared with other countries, indicating that Norwegian schools are “broadly able to offer an equitable education to pupils from different backgrounds and that the vast majority of schools have pupils performing at different proficiency levels” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020, p. 35). While there is no country in the world that can claim to have eliminated socio-economic inequalities in education, the egalitarian Scandinavian countries have higher levels of social mobility than more unequal countries (OECD, 2018). Diversity in students’ ethnic backgrounds has changed in recent decades, and 18% of all students in compulsory education in 2019 had an immigrant background.

These students generally do well in the Norwegian education system, although their grades are slightly lower compared to other students (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020).

Teachers in Norway have great autonomy in deciding how to adapt the national curriculum and teach their subjects, since the national curriculum is a framework indicating overall thematic areas and goals (Mølsted & Karseth, 2016; Sivesind & Wahlström, 2016) that leaves it up to each local school and teachers to decide when and how to teach a specific content area and topic. This means that the teachers and schools are supposed to make deliberate interpretations of the curriculum, such as determining their pedagogical methods and deciding which resources (e.g., apps and software) to include. Mausethagen & Møstad (2015) summarize Norwegian teachers' autonomy by pointing to three factors (1) pedagogical freedom and absence of control; (2) the will and capacity to justify practices and (3) a local responsibility (municipalities as school owners). As we will show, teacher autonomy becomes particularly visible during homeschooling, as schools and teachers might interpret and structure the homeschooling situation differently when it comes to required attendance, checking in, and assignment requirements. Also, the lack of national high stakes control such as teacher evaluation and national high stakes testing and exit exams give a high degree of autonomy, but also responsibility (Hatch, 2013; Hatch et al., 2020), to Norwegian teachers.

Teachers' high autonomy became particularly visible during homeschooling. While attendance at school was not suspended during the Pandemic, each school, and even each teacher, decided how often students should participate (e.g., by logging into Zoom or Teams at particular times or by handing in tasks by given deadlines). Each school had autonomy to make all decisions about the organization of remote schooling, and the only national decision was that all national final exams (normally held in May) were cancelled for 2020 and 2021. The defined main mandate of teachers in Norway to plan, deliver, and assess the learning of each student—and the class as a whole (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020)—was never questioned during the Pandemic. However, the authorities made no national efforts to support teachers in reaching all students digitally or to supplement the education of marginalized students who need extra support. Further, no national measures were in place to compensate for the discrepancy between the students who had access to their parents at home during remote teaching and those who did not. This does not mean that individual teachers were not following up their students, but it does mean that there were no national guidelines or support to make sure such help was consistent. When reading the other contributions of this book, it becomes evident that compared to several other countries, Norway did very little on a national level to ensure equality in education for all students during the time of school lockdown.

### 7.3 Pandemic Pedagogy: Digitally Mediated Learning

While some countries supported remote teaching through resources like books, educational TV classrooms, and even radio (Miks & McIlwaine, 2020, UNESCO/UNICEF/World Bank, 2020), the strong digital infrastructure in Norway made it natural that all remote teaching should be digitally mediated education using the digital platforms already established in schools. Norwegian educational policies and national curricula have made digital competence an explicit aim for decades, and teachers are supposed to draw on digital technology across grades and subjects (Erstad, 2006; Wieberg Klausen, 2020). In the compulsory and secondary education reform of 2006, the *Knowledge Promotion*, five skills were defined as basic to learning in school, work, and social life. These skills are basic in the sense that they are considered fundamental to learning across all school subjects as well as a prerequisite for students to show their competence and qualifications within and across subjects. One of these skills are digital skills (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2012). Digital skills are defined as being able to use different digital tools, media, and resources efficiently and responsibly, to solve practical tasks, find and process information, design digital products and communicate content. Further, digital skills include developing digital judgment by acquiring knowledge and good strategies for using the Internet (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training). These skills should permeate all subjects and be used when relevant, and it is up to each teacher to make all decisions on digital technology, within the limitations of what hardware and software the school has made available.

One key prerequisite for success in school with going digital overnight is that there is sufficient access to equipment and stable internet. Internet access at home has repeatedly been measured at 98% of the population (e.g., Statistics Norway, 2020), and students' overall access to technology has been significantly above the European average measured by the student-per-laptop ratio (OECD, 2015). While this great digital infrastructure may sound promising, previous research has revealed that the uptake of technology varies greatly by classroom and that how technology is used is largely dependent on individual teachers. Access to technology is not a reliable predictor of teachers' actual implementation of digital technology (Blikstad-Balas & Klette, 2020; Elstad, 2016; Gil-Flores et al., 2017). The fact that each teacher can decide to what degree and how they want to include digital technology in their lessons will lead to unequal opportunities to develop digital competence. Further, the latest Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) report from Norway highlighted the discrepancy between merely providing access for students and preparing teachers to utilize the technology in their everyday teaching (Thronsen et al., 2019).

The few studies that have been published so far from Norway have shown that most teachers were able to continue providing instruction for their students. Drawing on a small-scale study following students, parents, and teachers in one municipality, Bubb and Jones (2020) suggested that teachers adapted rapidly, and that homeschooling was well received by students and their parents. Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway

(2020) found that, despite teachers' inexperience and unpreparedness for online teaching, they were moderately prepared to use various digital tools and willing to make online learning work for them and their students. In a national survey, teachers and school leaders reported very limited prior experience with remote teaching, but they also noted that they were able to teach their students from a distance and to maintain contact with students and parents during the period of homeschooling (Federici & Vika, 2020). At the same time, this national survey also showed that only 27% of teachers in primary and lower secondary school, and 23% of teachers in upper secondary school, confirmed that they were able to follow up with vulnerable students who needed special support during this period (Federici & Vika, 2020). There is concern internationally that there will be less learning for most students during the period of remote learning (Azevedo et al., 2020). One concrete manifestation of this issue in Norway is the significant drop in writing competence in the first grade, when comparing students who were remotely taught during the Pandemic with students from previous years. Preliminary findings have indicated that, even though the schools were closed for under two months, the estimated achievement loss for first-grade students in writing was equivalent to one and a half semesters (Skar, Graham, & Huebner, in review). Further, Mælan et al. (2021) survey on lower secondary school, found that it was harder for low-achieving students to maintain engagement and motivation during the period with home schooling compared to regular school. They also found that students experienced less support from their teachers, and summarize that there is reason to be concerned, especially for the low-achieving students, but also when it comes to the effects of home schooling in general and the impact it may have on all students (Mælan et al., 2021). In the following section, we will share analyses from a national survey where parents with children in grades 1–10 were invited to share their experiences with remote learning. Drawing from these experiences, we will discuss both the main challenges and some possible benefits of homeschooling.

## 7.4 Parents' Survey on Homeschooling

To shed light on the impact of the Pandemic on educational opportunities in Norway, we developed an anonymous, digital survey about homeschool and remote teaching for parents with students in primary and lower secondary schools. Due to the crucial timing, we distributed the survey to parents digitally; specifically, we wanted responses to reflect sentiment during the emerging and first period of homeschooling and school lockdown, not in retrospect.

We invited parents with students in grades 1–10 from all over Norway to respond to the survey. If the parents had several children in primary or lower secondary school, they chose one of their children prior to starting the survey and answered all questions for that child. The main ambition of the survey was to investigate all aspects of homeschooling, including what kind of remote teaching students were offered and how parents experienced the homeschooling situation. The survey included background

questions about the school location, the student's gender and grade, and the parent's level of education and work situation during the period (i.e., work outside home, home office, laid off/unemployed, and stay-at-home parent). After completing the background information, parents answered 24 questions directly related to the home-school situation, such as digital equipment, attendance requirements, communication with teachers, tasks, subjects covered, students' engagement and efforts toward schoolwork, and the parent's own experience during the period of homeschooling.

Due to the time sensitivity, we opted for a non-probability convenience sample (Fowler, 2009) where we invited participation from invitations online, as with many other one-time internet surveys. We recruited parents through selected social media groups for parents on Facebook and Twitter. The teachers union and colleagues from other universities in the field of education also helped us distribute the survey through social media. As with any non-probability-based sample, the greatest limitations are the unknown relationship between the sample and the population and the missing theoretical basis for estimating the repetitiveness of the sample. To compensate for some of these uncertainties, we included several background variables about the respondents (e.g., where they lived and their educational background), which enabled us to systematically monitor these variables in our samples and compare them with nationally representative samples. In doing so, we were also able to evaluate responses as they came in to determine where we needed to put in extra effort to obtain more responses; for example, if too many parents from the capital area responded, we would systematically target parents in other areas.

The parent survey was answered by 4,642 parents from all over the country. A total of 262 of the country's 365 municipalities were represented with good geographical distribution including large and small towns as well as urban and rural areas. Furthermore, 52% of the respondents represented students at the primary school level (grades 1–4), 30% students at the intermediate level (grades 5–7), and 18% students at the lower secondary level (grades 8–10), indicating that parents of younger children were overrepresented in the sample. While 96% of all respondents had children in public schools, only 4% were in private schools, which is the same percentage as for the country (Statistics Norway [SSB], 2020). In terms of gender distribution, parents reported about 54% boys and 46% girls. As a measure of socioeconomic status, we asked parents about their highest level of education and compared their responses to the national average for parents between 25 and 50 years, which we assume represents most of the parents in our sample. Our sample had a higher percentage of parents with a master's degree or a Ph.D. and a lower percentage of parents with lower levels of education (Statistics Norway, 2020). Despite not being a national representative sample in terms of parents' educational background and distribution of grade groups, the data set we present here is, to the best of our knowledge, the most systematic and most comprehensive available to examine how parents with children in grades 1–10 experienced the period of homeschooling and what characterized the instruction their children took part in. The items we developed for this survey have also been included in later and ongoing national evaluations of the period of homeschooling.

In the following, we will present the main findings from the survey, with an emphasis on the impact of the Pandemic on educational opportunities for different



groups of students and what kind of learning students were engaging in during the period of homeschooling. We will also highlight what parents perceived as the most challenging and most rewarding aspects of remote teaching before we discuss the implications and potential lessons to be learned.

## 7.5 Analyses and Results

In the descriptive statistical analyses, we divided the students into the following three groups: grades 1–4, grades 5–7, and grades 8–10, to show how the educational opportunities between these groups varied. We believe that most parents answering this survey have good insight into what their child has been doing, particularly because 85.6% of the parents reported having been at home to a large degree during the period of homeschooling. This finding is consistent with the high number of respondents with higher education and jobs that typically can be done from the recommended home office.

The open-ended questions in the survey were coded qualitatively using conventional content analyses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), where we identified and aggregated patterns in responses before selecting examples illustrating typical responses. Two of the authors coded all the open-ended questions simultaneously and checked for consistency in the coding during this process. Further, any borderline cases or responses that were difficult to code were discussed before deciding on final coding.

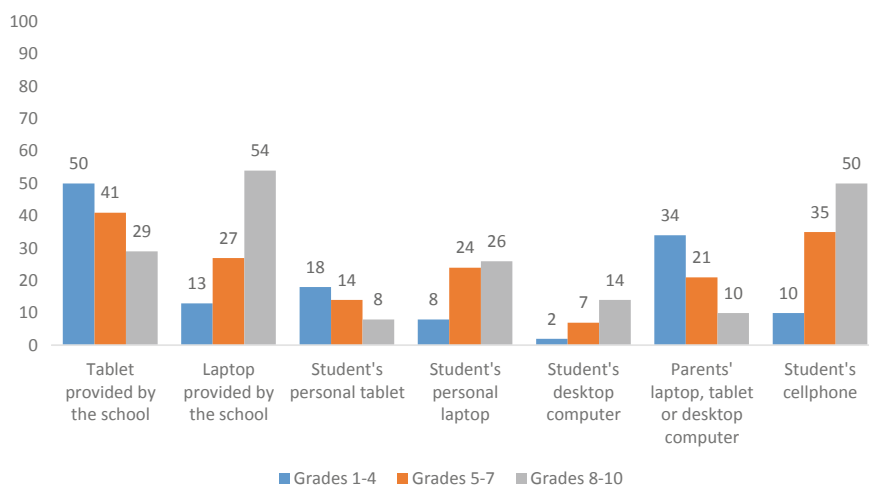
We will start the analyses by reporting the parents responses regarding what access to relevant technologies they had, what kinds of digital attendance schools expected students to show and how much contact students had with their teachers during the time of homeschooling. Then, we report on how parents and students experienced remote learning, before looking into how parents themselves describe the main challenges and benefits of homeschool education.

### *Access to equipment and prior knowledge about the schools' digital systems*

Access to equipment is a prerequisite for remote digital teaching, and we asked parents to report what equipment students used for homeschooling. Several answers were possible, and several parents reported up to three different devices. The results are summarized in Fig. 7.1.

Figure 7.1 reveals a tendency for younger students to use their parents' equipment, while older students were more likely to have their own more equipment. Only 63% of the parents with students in grades 1–4 reported using equipment provided by the school, but 83% of lower secondary students reported using the schools' equipment. Figure 7.1 also shows that half of the students in lower secondary school and a third of the students in grades 5–7 used a personal cellphone for schoolwork. While many chose to use equipment other than that provided by the school, hardly any parents complained about the quality of the equipment provided by the schools in the open-ended questions in the surveys. When asked if the equipment from school “worked





**Fig. 7.1** Percentage of parents who reported which types of digital equipment students used for schoolwork. Parents could give more than one answer

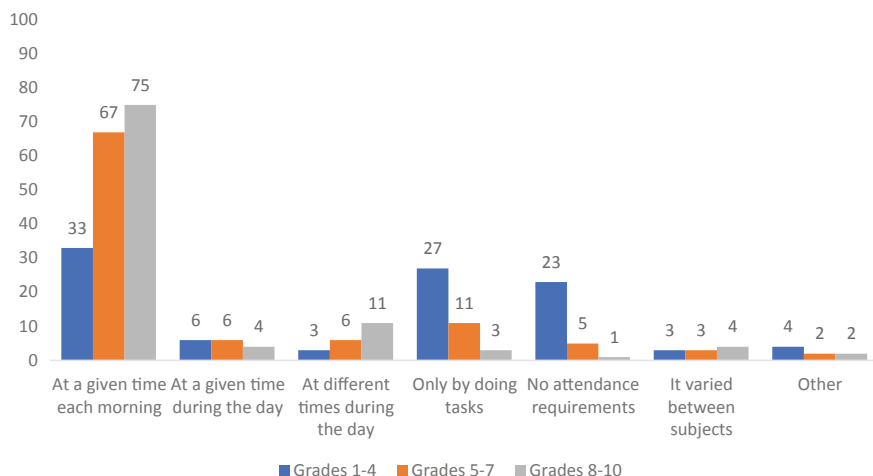
sufficiently well,” 96% of the 3171 parents who answered the question, confirmed that it did, while 4% answered no.

Parents were asked to list the main software used by the schools for managing remote teaching. We identified a clear trend that Microsoft Teams and Google Classrooms were used the most in lower secondary and in grades 5–7, while Showbie was the most used learning system for grades 1–4. When asked how familiar the students were with the schools’ chosen platform, only 48% of the parents reported that the platform was well known before the Pandemic. In contrast, 23% reported that it was known to some extent, while over a quarter of the parents (27%) reported that the students were not familiar with the platform, and 2% were not certain. Again, the tendency was that parents who had children in the lower grades reported the least prior knowledge on how to use the school’s platform.

### *Attendance requirements and teaching practices*

An important pedagogical question is how teachers can follow up with their students to make sure they are participating when they are not physically present in the same room. When both students and teachers are in their own homes, the everyday contact in the classroom is replaced by other forms of contact, either by the teachers or the students themselves. We asked parents to report on what was expected of the students regarding attendance during a normal day of homeschooling.

As Fig. 7.2 shows, three-fourths of students in lower secondary school and two-thirds of students in grades 5–7 were asked to be present at a given time each morning. This finding is in stark contrast to the one third of students in grades 1–4 who had to be present in the morning. We can also see that 23% of the parents with students in grades 1–4 reported that their children were not expected to attend online classes

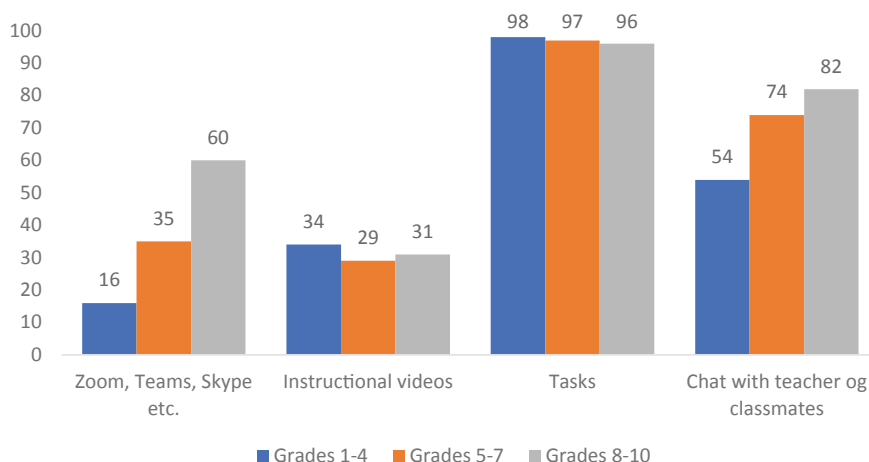


**Fig. 7.2** Percentage of parents who reported how students showed attendance during a normal day of homeschooling. Some response percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

at all. Further, 27% of the parents of children in grades 1–4 reported that all their child had to do to show that they were participating was to complete different tasks with a given deadline. In the open-ended questions, where parents could describe key challenges with homeschooling, this group expressed a particular concern regarding the amount of individual work that the parents had to follow up on.

The shift from classroom-based to remote teaching was expected to result in several new uses of digital tools. We asked parents to report on what kind of instructional practices their child would engage with on a typical day of homeschooling. As shown in Fig. 7.3, Real-time instruction through Zoom, Teams, Skype, etc. was more common with older students than their younger counterparts.

While 60% of parents with students in lower secondary school reported that this was typical instruction for homeschooling during the Pandemic, only 16% of the youngest children engaged in such instruction on a typical day. About a third of the parents across all grade levels reported that pre-recorded videos with the teacher were typical. Tasks from the teacher were by far the most characteristic aspect of homeschooling, as 96% (lower secondary school), 97% (grades 5–7), and 98% (grades 1–4) of parents reported that such tasks would be assigned on a normal day of homeschooling. The figure also shows how contact with the teacher and other students through chat increases with age. While 82% of the students in lower secondary school chatted with the teacher or with classmates, only half (54%) of the parents with students in the lowest grades reported the same. We also asked the parents what kind of learning their children had done most of during a typical day. We identified a clear tendency with little difference between the grade groups, as 95% of all parents reported that this would be individual work with tasks. Only 2% reported that collaborative tasks were the most common, 2% reported that the most



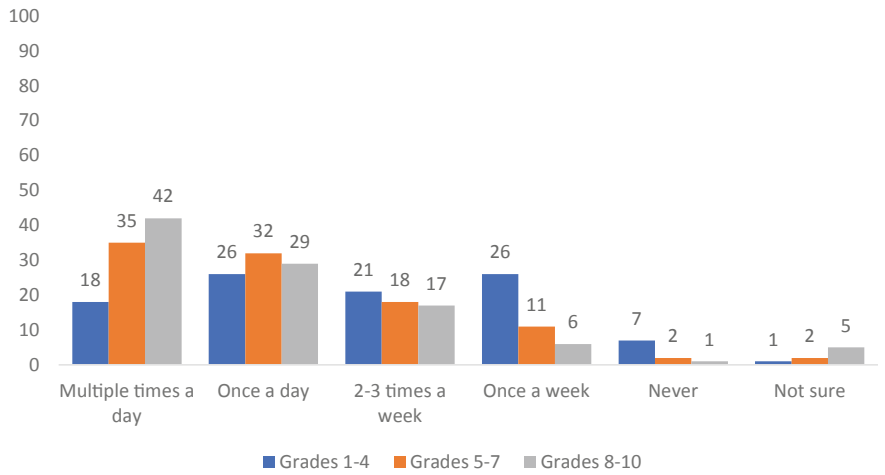
**Fig. 7.3** Percentage of parents who reported what instructional practices would happen on a typical day with homeschooling. (Parents could give more than one answer) Some response percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

typical was instruction on Zoom, Skype, Teams, or similar software, and 1% said they did not know the most common form of teaching activity.

#### *Contact with teachers*

A crucial question when it comes to providing equal opportunities to learn for all students is teacher availability and engagement. We asked parents to report on how often students had contact with their teachers, specifying both written and oral contact—through chat on the school’s learning system, digital video meetings, SMS, or phone calls, for example. As summarized in Fig. 7.4, the responses revealed substantial variation across grade levels.

The responses to this question revealed quite striking differences. In general, the older the student, the more contact they had with their teacher. While most students in lower secondary school had daily contact with their teachers, either once a day (29%) or multiple times a day (42%), over half of the students in grades 1–4 had contact with their teacher 2–3 times a week or less. The fact that 7% of the parents with children in grades 1–4 reported no contact with teachers during the period of homeschooling is quite concerning. However, it should also be noted that, when parents were asked if they felt they could contact teachers during the homeschooling period, a clear majority of parents answered that they felt they could contact the school to a large degree (52%) or to some degree (33%). Some parents (12%) reported they could contact the school to a low degree, and finally 3% reported uncertainties about whether they could contact their child’s teacher.



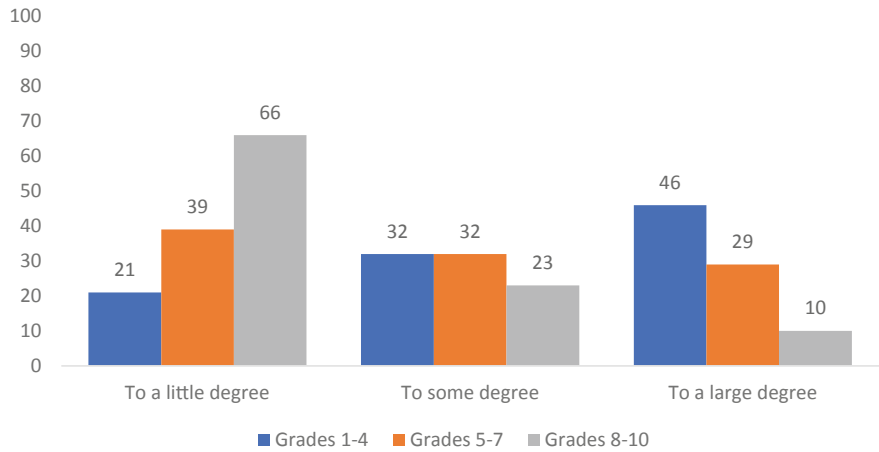
**Fig. 7.4** Percentage of parents who reported how often their child had contact, written or oral, with the school. Some response percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

*How did students and parents experience homeschooling?*

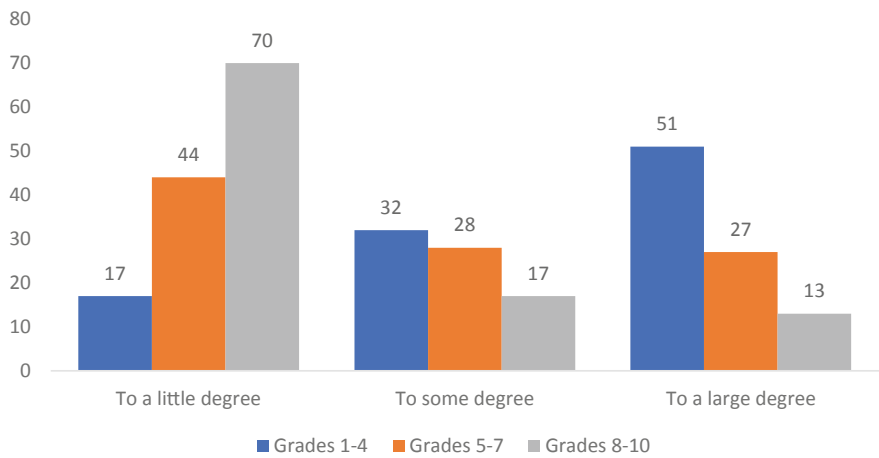
To learn more about how homeschooling was experienced compared to ordinary school, we asked parents to compare the two and rate the degree to which (*little, some, large, do not know*) they agreed with several claims. We asked them whether they had spent more time than they typically would on helping their child with schoolwork; whether following up with their child had harmed their own work performance; whether they had to monitor their child continuously to ensure progress; whether homeschooling had resulted in more insight about their child’s education; and finally, whether it was understandable and clear what the school expected from the student. The tendency here was that the parents of the youngest children spent far more time following up with their children than parents in the lower secondary grades (7–10), as shown in Figs. 7.5, 7.6, and 7.7.

These questions illuminated differences between the grades, revealing that parents with younger children had been significantly more involved in monitoring their children’s schoolwork. This finding implies that younger children with parents who were not able to follow up on their child’s schoolwork were in a very vulnerable position, not only because other parents were helping their children but also because teachers monitored children in grades 1–4 the least during homeschooling (see Figs. 7.2 and 7.4). In one item, we asked parents to report on how much time they usually spent a day following up on their child’s schoolwork, and the responses confirmed this tendency. As many as 85% of the parents with children in grades 1–4 reported spending 1–2 h or more on schoolwork a day, while this was the case for only 24% of parents with children in grades 8–10.

We also asked parents to report on how much their child engaged in schoolwork during the Pandemic compared to the duration of a normal school day. The parents

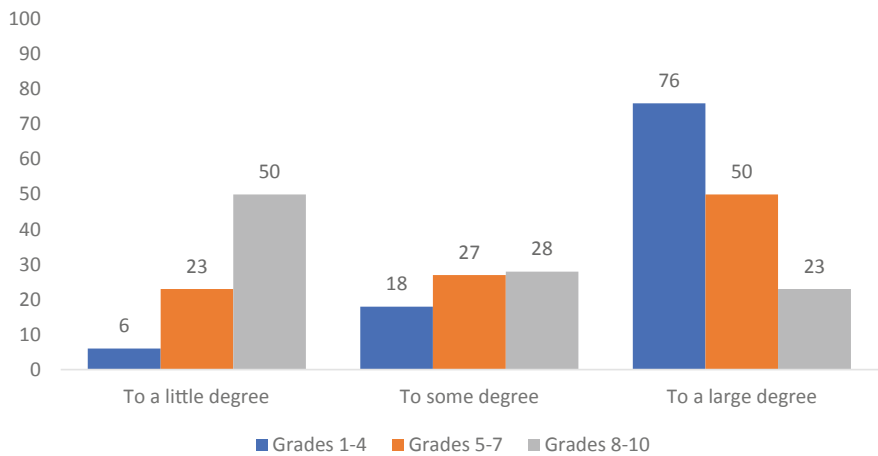


**Fig. 7.5** Percentage of parents who reported to what degree homeschooling had a negative impact on their own work performance. Some response percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

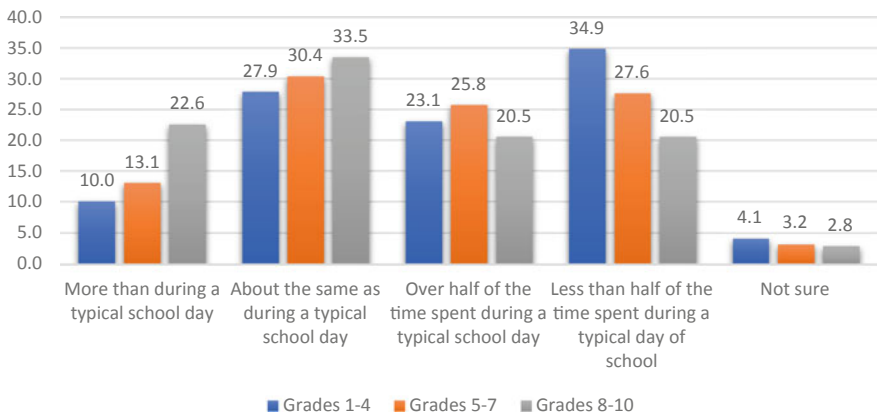


**Fig. 7.6** Percentage of parents who reported to what degree they had to monitor their student to ensure progress with the schoolwork. Some response percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

reported a clear tendency for students to work less compared to an ordinary school day. Overall, 31% of the parents reported that their child used less than half of the duration of a normal school day for school; 24% reported that students used more than half the time of a normal school day for schoolwork; 31% reported that students used around the same amount of time for school; and finally, 14% reported that students spent more time on school than the equivalent of a normal school day. Figure 7.8 breaks this information down into different grades to reveal trends.



**Fig. 7.7** Percentage of parents who reported to what extent they had spent more time than usual on following up with their child's schoolwork. Some response percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding



**Fig. 7.8** Percentage of parents who reported how much time their children spent on homeschooling during the Pandemic compared to a normal day with traditional school

As shown in Fig. 7.8, most students in the lower grades (1–4) worked less than normal during homeschooling. For students in the lower secondary grades (8–10), the situation was quite different: most of these students spent about the same amount of time—or more—than they normally would on schoolwork. This finding can have multiple explanations, including that these students were monitored more closely by their teachers and that, unlike students in primary classrooms, they also received grades for their schoolwork during the Pandemic. Students in lower secondary

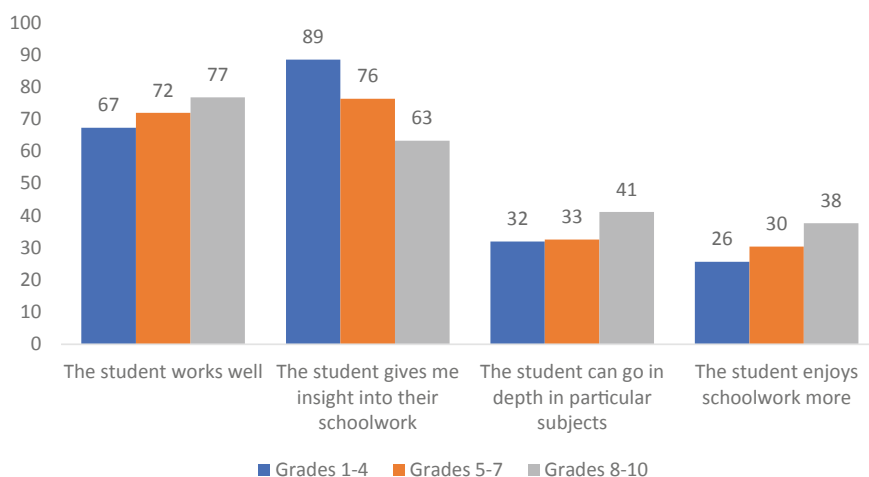
school are also more used to working individually and using digital tools for schoolwork, which may have allowed them to handle homeschooling better and more independently than their younger peers.

The findings that parents were more involved in following up with younger students, that teachers were less involved in following up with younger students, and that younger students spent the least amount of time on schoolwork during the Pandemic compared to ordinary schooling suggest that homeschooling has challenged some key ideas of Nordic schooling. They have challenged the notion that one's school performance should not be dependent on one's socioeconomic background, which we will discuss further in the final part of the chapter.

### *How was the homeschool experience for the students?*

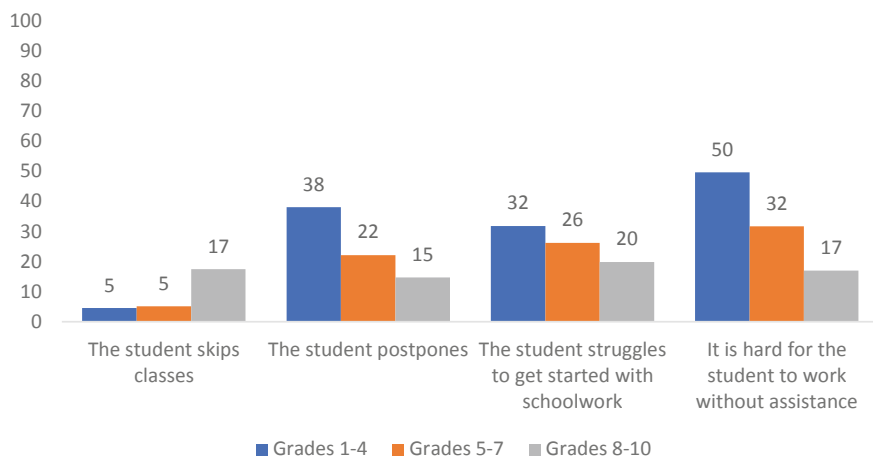
Parents were asked to assess how it was for their child to engage in the learning activities provided during homeschooling. Five statements described positive aspects and four statements described more challenging aspects. We used a 5-point scale with the response alternatives *always*, *often*, *sometimes*, *seldom*, and *never*, as well as the possibility to answer *I do not know*. In Fig. 7.9 we report the percentage of parents who answered *always* or *often* for each item describing positive aspects, and in Fig. 7.10 we report the percentage of parents who answered *always* or *often* for each item describing challenging aspects with homeschooling.

With the positive aspects reported in Fig. 7.9, parents with children in grades 1–4 reported that they have had the most insight into what their child was doing at school, as this response is very much in line with their answers to other items. Regarding the more challenging aspects of homeschooling and remote learning, we see again that except for skipping classes, the parents of younger children reported challenges to occur more often than the parents of the older students did. With a clear



**Fig. 7.9** Percentage of parents who answered “always” or “often” on positive statements about their child’s schoolwork





**Fig. 7.10** Percentage of parents who either answered “always” or “often” on negative statements about their child’s schoolwork

majority of parents at home, it is perhaps not surprising that very few of the youngest students skipped classes. 17% of parents of students in grades 8–10 reported that skipping class happened often or always. The parents of the younger children reported greater challenges with getting students to engage with schoolwork and being able to self-regulate their own schoolwork. The findings in Fig. 7.10 also indicate that homeschooling was more manageable for older students, who on average had fewer problems working individually with tasks.

A clear majority of the parents (81%) reported that their child missed ordinary school to a large degree or to some degree. While a few parents expressed in the open-ended questions that their child preferred homeschooling and learned more during this time, there were far more parents with open-ended responses who described that their child missed contact with classmates and that the lack of social contact due to homeschooling was very challenging. This finding is in line with Qvortrup (2020), who documented that Danish students missed the social aspects of teaching.

#### *Main challenges of homeschooling in the parents’ own words*

We identified some trends in the responses to the open-ended questions, but it should be noted that this part of the survey really shows how individual parents have experienced the Pandemic differently. On one end of the spectrum are parents who expressed that this time was extremely hard, that their child missed their friends and worried about older family members getting sick, and that the amount of fighting between parents had increased. At the other end of the spectrum are parents who referred to the Pandemic times at home as a “gift for the family” because they were close to each other every day while schoolwork was more successful than ever, and their child was happier and learning more than they ever did during normal schooling. As such, the trends we will report here are not descriptive for all participating parents; rather,

these trends express themes that were the most prominent in the parents' responses concerning both challenges and silver linings. We will start by reporting on issues many parents found challenging.

One open-ended question asked parents to explain in their own words what they experienced as challenging with the homeschool situation. Parents across grade levels often mentioned that it was difficult to combine their own work from home with helping children, as illustrated in the following examples of parents' responses:

The first grader needs to be monitored very closely, and that is not compatible with the degree of our independent work at our home office. Apart from the weekly plan with assignments that we received, there has been no teaching or direct contact between student and teacher. (Parent of a boy, 1st grade)

Even though I am not continuously helping, the homeschooling interrupts the home office so much that I am not able to do my job. (Parent of a girl, 2nd grade)

We are several people at home, three with homeschool and one or two in the home office. This is challenging when it comes to both noise and space. It is also challenging to be in a full-time job and at the same time be available for three students in homeschooling! (Parent of a girl, 8th grade)

The fact that many parents found home schooling so demanding also indicates how requiring students to learn from home seriously challenges equity ideals, as parents' ability to provide students with support varied. We know, for instance, that some parents had to prioritize their own work over their children's schooling, if, for example, they were small business owners trying to prevent their business from going bankrupt. The actual difference between home environment and support is evident in the open-ended answers, where some parents describe providing very close support that increased learning motivation and even student achievement according to the parents, while others describe how guilty they feel for not being able to follow up school as much as they would like. Closely related to the issue of combining one's own work with children's schooling, many responses indicated that it was time-consuming to follow up on the students' work. Many parents stated that it was demanding to take on the role of the teacher for their own child, who may not be willing to let them have that role. Two parents of third-grade students explained this situation below:

It has not always been easy to explain assignments because my son does not always want to listen to what I have to say. I'm not his teacher ... and I'm probably not suitable as a teacher either :-). (Parent of a boy, 3rd grade)

Parents neither know the current pedagogy nor the teacher's methods. Parents are NOT educators. (Parent of a girl, 3rd grade)

The clear trend in parent responses regarding challenging aspects of remote teaching was that homeschooling was time-consuming and demanded that parents follow the students' work carefully, especially with the younger grades. As in other studies (Bubb & Jones, 2020), several parents expressed increased admiration for teachers because they experienced firsthand how difficult it was to motivate students for all kinds of tasks. Regarding equity, it should also be noted that while we did not have a specific item in the survey about students with special needs, some parents

who did have such students described how these students were not being followed up, and that their school was failing to provide them with equal learning opportunities:

The assignments they get are not adapted to each student, for example special needs are not taken into account (Parent of a boy, 1st grade)

My child has dyslexia and is not given the adapted education she usually would get in school. It is demanding to help her when none of us at home are (special) educators. (Parent of a girl, 2nd grade)

My son is entitled to special need education – it is not being followed up (Parent of a boy, grade 8)

This is consistent with the research done by Federici and Vika (2020), who identified that only 27% of teachers in primary and lower secondary school and 23% of teachers in upper secondary school in Norway reported that they were able to follow up with vulnerable students who needed special support during the period of home schooling (Federici & Vika, 2020). This shows, again, that home schooling in Norway “outsourced” (to the parents) an explicit national educational principle during the Pandemic, namely that each student should have an adapted learning environment providing equal learning opportunities for all (The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2021b).

#### *Main benefits of homeschooling in the parents’ own words*

In the survey, we also included an open-ended question that asked parents to explain in their own words what they experienced as benefits with the homeschool situation. Most responses revolved around getting better insight into what a typical school day consists of and what is expected of the students in different subjects. The following is a typical example of answers highlighting the parents’ new insight into their child’s schoolwork:

We loved homeschool. We have had more time together, I have acquired greater insight into the schoolwork, we have talked more about the tasks they have been given, and we have reflected on the fact that it is important to practice several times to become good at something. For us, homeschooling has been golden and something we could continue to do for a long time. (Parent of a girl, 2nd grade)

Further, many parents agreed that the increased flexibility of when to do what and how to organize the school day was a welcome benefit. This response is in line with the OECD finding that homeschooling increased student autonomy and their ability to manage their own learning (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020), as illustrated by this parent response:

It is different. The student manages his own time better. He mostly finishes schoolwork during the normal hours of school and does not have to spend the afternoon doing homework. (Parent of a boy, 8th grade)

More family time was another benefit expressed by many parents across grade levels. This finding is connected to the increased flexibility that came with home-school, where parents were able to structure the school day (and their workday) as they wanted and spend more time together engaging in physical activities like skiing and hiking:

It was nice that there was some flexibility in relation to when the tasks had to be completed, so we had the opportunity to take a break in the middle of the day and go for longer cross-country skiing trips. (Parent of a girl, 2nd grade)

He has become more interested in physical activity, including running, strength training, and skiing with us. (Parent of a boy, 8th grade)

The student is very interested in the tasks and spends a lot of time on schoolwork, in addition to being able to exercise a lot every day (especially skiing). (Parent of a girl, 10th grade)

While these responses are positive, we also know that the best performing students during homeschool in Norway were those that were more physically active according to their parents (Roe et al., 2021). Again, we would like to underscore the variation in the material. While the responses indicated a trend of seeing flexibility for more family time, including time outdoors, as a benefit, parents also expressed their worries about screen time and lack of physical activity.

## 7.6 Discussion

A key aspect of the Nordic model is the idea that all students, irrespective of social, economic, and geographical background, should have the same educational opportunities (Klette, 2018). The Coronavirus Pandemic has the potential to aggravate social inequality, as all education has taken place in each student's own home (Azevedo et al., chapter 16; Doyle, 2020; Reimers, chapter 1). The survey data we have presented here suggests that this is very much the case in Norway, for several interrelated reasons that we would like to discuss further.

First, a key finding of our survey is significant variation in how much contact teachers had with their students and to what degree parents were assumed to be involved in the learning activities. While students in upper secondary school were expected to show up digitally in their classroom up to several times a day, many students in lower grades, especially the youngest students in grades 1–4, were not monitored in the same manner. In many ways, the youngest students are the most vulnerable ones, as they are often the least capable of administering their own learning and managing their own tasks. Paradoxically, these children had the least contact with their teachers and least frequently had real-time instruction through digital software like Zoom or Teams. Some students in the lower grades of primary school went weeks without contact with their teacher at a time when the official policy was to keep teaching full school days remotely. This expectation dramatically increases parental involvement in schooling, as found in other studies (Bubb & Jones, 2020). While many parents in our survey reported that they had spent a significant amount of time each day following up with their children's schoolwork, the basic idea of the Nordic school system is to avoid the implicit assumption that all children have access to qualified help at home, as we know that unfortunately such support is not universal.

As Krumsvik (2020) noted, it is important for educational researchers to investigate different aspects of the educational consequences of the Pandemic to avoid the

domination of anecdotal evidence about how the shutdown has affected students' lives. This is particularly important considering the World Health Organization's (WHO, 2020) prediction of more global pandemics in the future. We should therefore also ask if there are any didactical lessons to be learned here concerning the teaching practices that were the essence of homeschooling.

An important finding in our survey is that, while teachers in Norway have been expected to draw on digital tools across all school subjects and grades since 2006 (Erstad, 2006; Wieberg Klausen, 2020), this has not resulted in a shared digital repertoire of practices across, or even within, schools. Our survey shows some use of real-time instruction through digital platforms (more so in lower secondary grades than with younger students), but this was a limited part of homeschooling. The responses indicated that by far the most dominant educational activity was to let students complete tasks individually. This trend is significant if one is concerned with equity in education. Previous studies from Scandinavia indicate that individualized teaching methods, where students must decide themselves how and when to work, may put too much burden on the students (Dalland & Klette, 2014, 2016; Klette, 2018). Klette (2007, p. 352) argues, in an article about individualized teaching methods (such as the use of individual work plans with tasks to be done weekly), that this was particularly problematic for low achievers, who became responsible for "regulating their own failure at school". Individualized teaching methods will reinforce the individual background of the students, and by doing so produce fewer equal opportunities for all.

When schools opened again in May 2020, the Minister of Education explicitly underscored in a press release that the most vulnerable children had not been monitored well enough during the period when schools were closed (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020). She also expressed that the youngest students learned the least during homeschooling. In line with our survey data presented here, this raises questions about whether more could have been done to ensure access to high-quality instruction for all during the Pandemic. One could ask why there was not more use of collaborative tasks and virtual possibilities to connect students in a time when many missed their everyday social life at school. It should also be questioned why the youngest students had the least variation in how they were taught as well as the least use of digital technology that enables real-time interaction.

When we claim that the youngest students in many ways are the most vulnerable ones, it should not overshadow the fact that there are vulnerable students in all age groups. A student survey in Norwegian lower secondary school (grades 8–10) during the school closure by Mæland et al. (2021), found a tendency of lower efforts and self-efficacy among low achieving students, and the authors explicitly state that this trend may be difficult to reverse in reopened schools. A finding from our study that adds to this concern is that parents with children who have special needs describe that these needs have not been followed up during the Pandemic, and that they—the parents—are the ones who then must adapt the instruction and help as much as they can. This is reported by parents not only for the youngest children, but across grade groups. It is also consistent with other research on special needs education during the Pandemic (Federici & Vika, 2020).

There is limited research on the effect of the Pandemic on different groups of students, but Doyle (2020) emphasized that some evidence has suggested that school closures may have a greater impact on students with a lower socioeconomic background than their peers. Our survey shows some concerning trends, in particular that homeschooling was largely dependent on parental involvement. The great variety in how different schools practiced homeschooling, especially concerning attendance requirements and how closely and frequently teachers followed up on their students also raises both short-term and long-term concerns about the effects of homeschooling. As Doyle (2020) also underscored, some students will benefit from homeschooling if their parents can monitor them even better than a teacher could. In response to our open-ended questions, parents offered some descriptions that highlight this exact point: for some students, Pandemic homeschooling exceeded normal schooling in terms of both learning and motivation. However, the big question is what the long-term consequences are for all students, parents, and teachers who were not able to make the most out of the homeschool situation.

Sending each student to their own home to take part in remote learning for months will, for many, increase the impact of socioeconomic background on education. This is not surprising, but it makes it more important to really address the great variety of teaching students were offered during homeschool. As we see it, the most important take-home message from our research is that good digital equipment both at home and at school, as well as national curricula that highlights digital competence are not enough to ensure that all students are monitored as well as possible through remote teaching. As Soudien et al. (chapter 12) emphasize, the Pandemic has been an extremely challenging period for teachers. We have every reason to trust that Norwegian teachers did what they could in a very demanding situation, and there is evidence that school leaders and teachers were concerned about the most vulnerable students and that many local school leaders developed guidelines on how to support these students during the period of school closure (Federici & Vika, 2020). It is therefore of paramount importance to not blame individual teachers for the suffering of vulnerable students during the Pandemic, but to recognize that the Norwegian national response did not attempt to equalize opportunities to learn from remote teaching. Rather, the national response completely overlooked the inequalities in access to qualified help that already existed.

Our study also sheds light on the shared ambitions missing from remote teaching and the missing shared repertoire on ways to engage children in social, real-time interaction in a time that every child—and especially those in vulnerable situations—could benefit from interaction with their teachers and classmates. This is an important lesson for the future, not only because the amount of individual work in itself challenges equal opportunities, but because there are several studies indicating that students missed each other and the social arena that school is supposed to be during the period of closed schools (Bakken et al., 2020; Qvortrup, 2020).

## 7.7 Conclusion

In many ways, sending children to school is all about sending them away from their home environment to equalize their opportunities to learn—regardless of the opportunities and constraints they were born into. As Andreas Schleicher writes in his introduction to the OECD (2018, p. 3) report on equity in education, “what wise parents want for their children is what the government should want for all children”. Given that equity for all is such an explicit ambition of the Nordic welfare model, it is very concerning that the Norwegian Government’s response to the Pandemic did not offer any national guidance to support all students, and that teachers, parents and students were left alone to maintain the high expectations in the national curriculum as best they could—without any acknowledgement of the very unequal access to qualified help students had in their own homes.

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