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Middle-class parental engagement in pandemic times: developing strategies and mobilizing capitals

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ABSTRACT

Despite the rhetoric of 'we are all in this together' during the COVID-19 pandemic, not all families experienced schooling disruption in 2020–2022 equally. middle-class parents typically enjoy significant advantage over parents in working-class occupations. To illuminate class-based differences in parental engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, here we present data from interviews with 15 middle-class Canadian parents. We found that middle-class parents successfully mobilized their economic, social, and cultural capital to manage challenges they faced: lack of structure and routine, lack of communication with the school, perceived low quality of instruction and resources, student isolation during online learning, and parental stress about children's schooling during the pandemic. The main implication of the study is that although middle-class parents in the study acknowledged their privilege more compared to prior research on middle-class parental engagement, ultimately, their individual solutions to pandemic challenges merely exacerbated existing social inequalities in education.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to massive disruption in the education of children internationally (Kenway and Epstein 2021; UNESCO 2020) that resulted from the cycles of school closures, starting in March 2020, and numerous shifts between face-to-face and online modes of instruction (Aurini, Davies, and Gaps in Canada: Lessons from Ontario Summer Learning Research 2021; Lockee 2021). Subsequently, access to education decreased (Human Rights Watch 2021), educational inequalities between the privileged and marginalized groups widened (Haelermans et al. 2022), while educators, families, and students experienced increased stress (Calarco et al. 2021; Rao and Rao 2021; Robinson et al. 2023). The shifts and changes also created challenges to curriculum delivery, pedagogy, availability of resources and assessment practices, jointly affecting the quality of teaching and learning (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2021). Parents, especially mothers, had to provide additional care to their children in the home environment

(Calarco et al. 2021) and oversee their children's schooling in new and more labour-intensive ways by supporting remote learning (Knopik et al. 2021) and being their children's 'teachers' (Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez 2013).

The global response to the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted varied and uneven impacts, leading to increased inequalities both on a global scale and within local contexts. According to Reimers (2022) 'The pandemic created a context in which students in least developed countries experienced the brunt of six mutually reinforcing challenges: the longest school closures, the lowest levels of resources and institutional capacity to mitigate learning loss, lower levels of access to vaccines, the greatest increases in poverty, lower effectiveness of alternative modalities to education, and the greatest levels of social and educational inequality' (p. 463). Within countries, the most socio-economically privileged students had access to higher quality online learning opportunities, whereas their less privileged peers had to rely on a range of online, printed, or phone-based resources used mostly to relay content rather than engage students in more interactive activities. Although higher-income countries (e.g. Finland, Japan or Singapore) were well-positioned to provide devices and internet access to most students, only the best prepared and supported teachers had the capacity to offer high-quality online remote instruction to their students (Reimers 2022). The Canadian education system in 2020 also faced the issue of insufficient availability of computers and patchy broadband internet coverage, especially in rural areas and among families with lower incomes (Rizk et al. 2023). Crucially, this period was characterised by the so-called 'emergency remote learning', which goal was '[not] to re-create a robust educational ecosystem, but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis' (Hodges et al. 2020, para. 13). As a result, it was characterised by haphazard planning and piecemeal implementation of new teaching and learning arrangements and breaks in communication between families and schools (Barbour et al. 2020).

Against this background, parents and families of school-age children had to be engaged in their children's education and learning more than before. There is some emergent quantitative data showing that middle-class parents (in the case of this study) were more involved in educational practices with their children, both formal (homeschooling, checking school's website to follow the prescribed activities) and informal (learning something online, reading together, watching and discussing movies, making crafts, etc.) than parents in working class occupations (Treviño et al. 2021). Middle-class here refers to a social group, whose members have university education and occupy jobs that require a significant level of autonomy. Prior research shows that middle-class parents enjoy a privileged position in the education system due to their levels of economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) and their engagement in children's learning is valued by the school system more than that of working-class parents (Calarco 2018; Lareau 2011; Reay 2017). For more on debates regarding the concept of 'middle-class' see Bennett et al. (2009), Goldthorpe (2016), and Savage (2015). Not surprisingly, the ability of parents to engage in children's learning when schools were closed was shaped by their socio-economic conditions (ability to work from home, availability of home space for learning, employment and financial conditions) (Easterbrook et al. 2022; Pitzalis and Spanò 2021).

Very little is known about the qualitative dimensions of middle-class parental engagement in children's learning during the pandemic: their motivation, understandings, feelings, and

response strategies. To fill this gap, our study used Canadian interview data from 2020–2022 to answer the following questions: 1. How did middle-class parents respond to educational change caused by the COVID-19 pandemic? 2. How do economic, cultural, and social capitals of middle-class parents shape their response to educational change caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Shifting responsibilities to parents in the context of neoliberal reforms

Despite the unpredictability of the global pandemic, the increased demand for parental engagement and involvement was not unexpected. Since the late 1990s, the neoliberal reforms in school education have increased and intensified the role of parents in their children's schooling (Nawrotzki 2012). On the one hand, the state shifted some of its responsibilities for students' success through the school choice agenda (Feinberg and Lubienski 2008), where parents are expected to make the best choices for their children, and calls for increased aspirations among students, so that they can study better (Bowers-Brown, Ingram, and Burke 2019). Simultaneously, parental involvement emerged as an element of an accountability regime aimed at controlling the teachers' work, with parents being encouraged to take part in school governance (Ontario 2000). Increased social and economic inequality (Picketty 2014) made parents more aware of the risks for their children to secure promising post-secondary pathways and transition to well-paid employment, if children failed to achieve academically in school (Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014). Strategies aligned with intensive parenting[1] (Hays 1996) and concerted cultivation[2] (Lareau 2011), which middle-class parents have adopted in many Western countries, became normative for all parents to aspire to Golden et al. (2021).

A significant body of prior research shows that parental engagement and involvement are not neutral practices but are shaped by the parents' social class, gender, race, and immigration status (Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez 2013; Stitt and Brooks 2014). Middle-class parents, in particular, have enjoyed significant benefits for their children in education due to their socio-economic status and alignment with the school expectations (Lareau 2015). In this context, it is especially urgent to better understand how middle-class parents navigated an emergency situation like the COVID-19 pandemic and used their school engagement to the benefit of children's learning during the COVID-19 'conjuncture' (Kenway and Epstein 2021). This will, as the emerging research on sociology of the pandemics aptly asks (Dingwall, Hoffman, and Staniland 2013), allow educators, policymakers, and researchers to understand whether the almost universal encouragement of parental engagement and the related increased reliance on parents in emergencies like COVID-19 pandemic exacerbate social inequality in education or minimises it through engaging all parents.

Conceptual framework: middle-class parental engagement as capital

Sociologists agree that middle-class parents have a privileged position among their peers in the field of education (Calarco 2018; Lareau 2011; Vincent 2017). They enjoy such a position due to their high level of economic, social, and cultural capital (Antony-Newman 2020b; Bourdieu 1986; Reay 2004), which is valued by the school system (Crozier, Reay, and James 2011). The ability of middle-class parents to use such resources to their children's

advantage in school puts them at an advantage compared to working-class parents (Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2016; Warikoo 2022).

Economic capital (Bourdieu 1986) allows middle-class parents to pursue private education (Murnane et al. 2018), reside in more expensive neighbourhoods with higher school funding, including *via* fundraising (Winton 2018; Yoon et al. 2021), and provide supplementary instruction and quality learning resources (e.g. computers, study rooms and desks, printers, iPads, high-speed internet) for their children (Bray 2017). Fundraising, in particular, is a powerful tool used by middle-class parents to compensate for cuts in public education and enrich the education of children in their schools, which are attended mostly by middle-class students (Winton 2016). Many parents also believe that tutoring is essential for either preparing their children for high school and university applications (Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014) or for keeping up with the school curriculum (Antony-Newman 2020a) and middle-class parents have more money to spend on this type of supplementary instruction compared to their working-class peers. In this study, we conceptualise economic capital as financial resources available to pay for tutoring and digital devices used for learning (desktop computers, laptops, and tablets).

Social capital available to middle-class parents is represented by resources they can mobilise through their networks (Bourdieu 1986). Middle-class parents tend to be socially connected to peers in professional occupations related to education (teachers, guidance counsellors, psychologists), who can provide advice and information related to the education of children (Lareau 2011). Social capital can be utilised to get timely and professional advice in choosing a school, securing access to desirable academic services (e.g. gifted programs), and dealing with disciplinary issues in class (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003). Unfortunately, not all parents have such rich social networks to rely on, with many working-class, ethnic minority, and immigrant parents facing additional challenges when communicating with educators (Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez 2013). Here, we understand social capital as communication with teachers and school leaders and keeping contact with other parents.

Cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) in its institutionalised (educational qualifications), embodied (dispositions of mind and body), and objectified (books, musical instruments) states provides an additional advantage to middle-class parents (Reay 2004). University-educated middle-class parents have positive experiences of their own schooling (Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara 2016), which translates into high expectations for their children's education (Crozier, Reay, and James 2011). Prior research shows that high expectations is one feature of parental engagement that is associated with higher academic achievement of children across race, class, and gender (Jeynes 2022). As far as schools are predominantly middle-class institutions, the embodied dispositions of middle-class parents (comportment and language use) are aligned with those of schoolteachers (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). This alignment gives middle-class parents an advantage in communicating the needs of their children and advocating on their behalf (Lareau 2015). Access to material objects of educational value is especially beneficial in the case of books, which enhance students' learning (Notten and Kraaykamp 2010) and computers and other digital devices, which also help to develop digital cultural capital (Ollier-Malaterre, Jacobs, and Rothbard 2019). Hence, we view parental education, language skills, and the availability of books and learning resources as cultural capital.

Methodology

To answer our research questions, we interviewed 15 middle-class parents in a major metropolitan area in Ontario, Canada. As the paper's authors we were aware of our shifting social status. As immigrants to Canada, who have been able to complete graduate education in Canada, we were aware of the issues of struggle and privilege at the same time. Our positionality allowed us to remain sensitive to narratives of privilege present in participants' accounts.

All interviewed parents had a university education and had middle-class jobs at the time of the interview (e.g. university faculty member, journalist, NGO worker, teacher, entrepreneur). Location in the middle class (Goldthorpe 2016) confers significant privileges on parents in the study, which inevitably adds an element of entitlement to some answers (Brantlinger 2003; Calarco 2018; Vincent 2017). At the same time, some of the participants expressed awareness of the struggles and challenges of the parents who did not have the middle-class privileges, might be facing during the pandemics. In line with prior research on parental engagement and the gendered nature of parenting (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2013), not surprisingly, 13 participants were mothers, and 2 were fathers. Similarly, the high level of cultural diversity is representative of major metropolitan areas in the province (Statistics Canada 2022). Nine parents belong to racialized minorities, while seven are White; 10 out of 15 parents were born outside of Canada; only four parents are monolingual Anglophones, whereas the other 11 are plurilingual. All parents had children in the Ontario public system in 2020–2022, when interviews took place. The age of the children ranged from 5 (Senior Kindergarten) to 18 (Grade 12) (Table 1).

After the institutional Research Ethics Board approved the study, participants were recruited *via* the personal network of researchers through a combination of purposeful and snowballing sampling (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, all parents were interviewed online *via* Zoom. Participants' personal information was kept confidential, their proper names and other identifiable information were replaced by pseudonyms in the transcribed data. All interviews were conducted by the first

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants.

Name	Age group	Country of birth	Highest level of education	Occupation	Children in school
Amy	45–50	Canada	Bachelor's Degree	self-employed	M(14), M(12), F(10)
Anette	40–45	Canada	PhD	university professor	M(8)
Jade	45–50	Jamaica	PhD	communications specialist	M(12), M(12)
Jill	40–45	Canada	Master's degree	NGO employee	M(16), M(13)
Mary	40–45	USA	PhD	university professor	F(13), M(10)
Nelly	40–45	Canada	Bachelor's degree	self-employed	F(13), M(9), M(7)
Nogaye	40–45	Senegal	PhD	university professor	F(13), F(11)
Qiang	40–45	China	Master's degree	PhD student	M(17)
Raya	40–45	Egypt	Bachelor's degree	self-employed	F(16), M(8)
Salma	30–35	Palestine	Bachelor's degree	NGO employee	M(13), M(2)
Simon	45–50	Canada	Master's degree	Journalist	M(14), M(12)
Telma	40–45	Brazil	Master's degree	PhD student	M(14), F(13)
Thomas	40–45	South Africa	Master's degree	NGO employee and PhD student	M(15), M(4)
Yeva	40–45	Ukraine	PhD	Teacher	M(17), F(8)
Zina	35–40	Russia	Bachelor's degree	Homemaker	F(11), M(8)

author, automatically transcribed by Zoom, with transcripts cleaned and checked by the co-authors. Semi-structured interviews offered the flexibility to change the order and formulation of our questions, gain deeper insight into parents' experiences during pandemic learning, and greater possibility for the interviewees to elaborate on their thoughts (Denscombe 2021). We asked parents about their experience of emergency remote learning in the spring of 2020, shifts between online and face-to-face modes in 2020–2022, and challenges and solutions during this period. Questions included such areas as the availability of digital devices for online learning, organisation of home learning routines, perception of teaching and learning during the pandemic, and school response to the pandemic. Findings of the study represent the voices of middle-class parents. More research is needed to hear teachers' perspective on parent-school collaborations during the 2020–2022 COVID-19 pandemic.

All transcribed data was coded by authors independently, which was followed by meetings where we compared our codes and discussed them until we reached an agreement on the coding. We combined the use of pre-set codes based on the literature on parental engagement, middle-class parental strategies, and education in the COVID-19 pandemic context, with emergent codes coming up from the data. We refined the codes to create themes to answer our research questions. Although the analysed data covered the period between 2020 and 2022, the main emphasis in the findings presented below is on emergency remote learning and multiple lockdowns that characterised the pandemic learning experience in Ontario schools (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2021).

Findings

How did middle-class parents respond to educational change caused by COVID-19 pandemic?

The unprecedented disruption in children's education that was caused by COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 (UNICEF 2020; United Nations 2020) affected education systems around the world, including Ontario (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2021). Cycles of school closures influenced not only the educational achievement of students (Aurini, Davies, and Gaps in Canada: Lessons from Ontario Summer Learning Research 2021), but also had an impact on the lives of parents. Overseeing children's online learning at home during lockdowns created a range of logistical challenges for parents across the globe (Mifsud 2021; Skinner et al. 2021), which further exacerbated the gap between families based on social class (Liu 2021; Treviño et al. 2021) and added disproportionally to women's childcare responsibilities (Calarco et al. 2021).

Participants in our Ontario study also experienced several challenges and had to adopt a range of strategies to deal with disruptions during the COVID-19 school closures in 2020–2022 (Barbour et al. 2020; Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2021; Hodges et al. 2020). Here we divide such challenges into two interconnected groups: 1) academic challenges and 2) social and well-being challenges.

Academic challenges and parental response

Academic challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic reported by middle-class parents in our study were represented by 1) lack of structure and routine; 2) lack of communication

with the school; and 3) perceived low quality of instruction and resources offered by the school. The first significant challenge that parents had to deal with, especially at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when most schools were shut down, was the significant change in children's lives due to *lack of structure and routine*. If earlier the workdays of school children (9 am to 3:30 pm) were structured by the school schedule and its activities, now parents had to re-create such a structure themselves. During the first two weeks of the Spring 2020 lockdown (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2021), Ontario parents interviewed for this study were completely on their own as the schools tried to figure out the mode of online instruction. Parents felt at a loss and stressed as they quickly tried to develop new schedule and routines at home:

> …in the middle of spring break, we learned [that] we would have two more weeks of holidays and kids were happy, but for us it was horrible because we were working and we had so many things to do and we were, like, okay, what are these kids going to be doing for three weeks, [and] we don't know what to do with them. (Telma)

In response to the lack of structure, parents, who did not have any prior experience of homeschooling (Ray 2017), tried to recreate the regular school day schedule at home. For example, Amy put significant efforts into keeping the usual school day routine in lockdown:

> I thought that was craziness, I thought I was gonna lose my mind. I literally have a wall right in front of me here. I had a blackboard chalkboard setup. And then we would still try to stick to the same routine, like we would wake up, try to get up at the same time, you know, have breakfast, and then do our classes and then have lunch. And then, you know, we tried to get as close to what we did before. You know, I mean, we'd stay up a little bit later because we didn't have to get up. But it was maybe the same schedule. I was trying to accomplish maybe an hour later, but it was still somewhat of a schedule. (Amy)

The second challenge experienced by parents in our study was the *lack of communication with the school*, which significantly influenced the educational experiences of families during the first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2021). The unpredictable nature of the developing pandemic in the spring of 2020 and the response to it from the education system (People for Education 2020) left many parents in the dark regarding the changes to the mode of instruction, curriculum expectations, homework rules, and assessment:

> Oh, it was, that was awful. We had we, you know, my older son did not get, I think, he had three or four live instruction classes, the entire, you know, March to June, we had no communication from the school. The only reason why I knew what was going on in the school was because I was the school council chair. So, I was having conversations with the Vice-Principal. If I was a regular parent, I would have had no idea what was going on, what the kids were supposed to be getting in terms of instruction and work and things like that. (Jill)

> I have to say, the school's responses to the pandemic were not very fast. So, because, I remember that at the very beginning of lockdown, it seems that all people were in the dark, and so we waited, and I think during that period of time, it seems that children were lost… it seems that they were waiting to come back, and parents had no idea, teachers had no idea. (Qiang)

This challenge was the most difficult to overcome because only parents who were on the school council had a slightly better understanding of schools' response to the COVID-19

pandemic and health mandates. Most parents had to wait and see what the school would be offering in terms of curriculum and instruction.

Finally, the third challenge experienced by Ontario parents in our sample was the *perceived low quality of instruction* and resources offered by the school during the emergency remote learning period of the COVID-19 pandemic (Barbour et al. 2020; Hodges et al. 2020). The majority of parents remarked that the quality of remote instruction was below their expectations in terms of tasks, resources, and curriculum content. Mary, a university professor and teacher educator herself, was not happy with the pedagogical approach adopted in her children's school:

> And what my kids' teachers did was they created a Google slide. And on the slide, they put like, things to do. So, click on this link and read these things. But it was very vague. Like it wasn't a specific activity, it was like, click on this, here's a link for science in French, a science magazine, like, read something on this website. Very vague. And I was very disappointed by that. Because as a teacher, I was like, okay, no, they need way more structure.

Due to Mary's own teaching background and the fact that her parents were retired teachers, she managed to organise full-scale home teaching. They consulted the provincial curriculum, but were free to use their prior experience, tried to fill the gaps in their children's knowledge, and generally followed their own vision of quality teaching and learning:

> So, I basically just ignored what the school did. And I did my own school for the kids. I was working, so I couldn't teach them everything. But my parents are both teachers. So, I contacted my parents and I said, look, can you please teach them during the day. And I made a schedule, just like school. And basically, the kids were, like, doing French, Math, science, history, social studies, and English, with my parents, or with my husband or with me all day from nine till three.

Anette found the amount of teaching provided to her children in the remote learning stage in the Spring of 2020 insufficient. She reported that children were supposed to have only half an hour of synchronous contact time with the teacher and other students every week and most of the other time they were on their own:

> The teacher would just send assignments every day and say do this and post it to the Google classroom. There was no synchronous learning, it was completely asynchronous and very little feedback so it's kind of like sending things to a void.

In response, Anette's husband, who works as a freelancer, tried to compensate for this perceived lack of instruction and organised walks in different neighbourhoods with their child and discussed the history and culture of diverse populations in the city areas they visited. Yeva found online resources provided by the school board, which were supposed to complement the asynchronous remote learning activities, of insufficient quality. She enlisted her mother to find alternative resources and together they created their own curated list:

> Again, it was the start of the pandemic, we received some emails with resources recommended by the board and I looked at a few of them. And I was kind of very, very disappointed with the educational quality. I want to see conceptual development there. And what we ended up doing, we, my mom actually went through YouTube videos that popped up on her iPad and she found a few channels that she thought were useful and we basically did not use the school board provided resource sheet because we really, really did not like it.

Several participants remarked that the first phase of online learning was merely represented by teachers sending numerous worksheets for students to complete on their own, which resulted in high demands on parents.

Both *lack of communication with the school* and the *perceived low quality of instructions* made parents in our sample provide additional instruction at home, use alternative learning resources, and generally become their children's 'teachers' more than prior to the pandemic (Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez 2013).

Social and well-being challenges and parental response

The abovementioned academic challenges experienced by parents and students during the COVID-19 pandemic were often intersected and exacerbated by a range of social and well-being challenges. Firstly, the main finding that emerged from the data was that online learning turned out to be a lonely and isolating experience (Whitley, Beauchamp, and Brown 2021). When schools were closed for prolonged periods of time in 2020–2022, children struggled emotionally (Felfe et al. 2023), because they were suddenly connected to their school friends and teachers only electronically. Spending time in front of the computer screen between 9 am and 3 pm was especially difficult for younger children in primary grades. This experience made parents appreciate the social aspect of schooling:

> You know, for different reasons, both of my sons really flourish in the physical, the face-to-face environment. And I think it's really important, it's been an eye opener to understand how important that is. So that's the main reason that I want them back. (Simon)

> It is the engagement piece that's really missing, just being there physically…(Nelly)

While parents mostly focused on academic development during the lockdowns, their children were facing isolation and other mental health impacts of pandemic learning. High academic expectations and attempts to maintain the same routines were faced with tension and resistance in the families. Eventually, some parents reevaluated their priorities and focused more on their children's well-being rather than academic achievements:

> I had to realise that, you know, getting through the day and all of us being okay, at the end of the day instead of fighting through extra schoolwork that I was trying to give them because I was afraid of learning loss…I had to really spend a lot of time asking myself, is it more important that they're okay and that we're okay? Yeah. Rather than forcing them to do work that they're fighting me about. (Jill)

> My belief is that home should not be an extension of school. I really want to protect the home as a place, not where we don't have conversations that are vibrant, but I don't want it to be another school. I would rather school be an extension of home. (Simon)

To respond to the feelings of isolation, some parents facilitated social activities for their children to address the lack of social interaction during pandemic learning. A group of parents of elementary students took turns facilitating virtual trivia for their child's classmates to create opportunities for social engagement:

> We had like a trivia thing for the kids…we did it, like, three times, different parents facilitated it. Just so that the kids could talk to each other and engage in that kind of thing. (Anette)

Similarly, Anette took part in a learning pod (bubble) for her child, which responded not so much to the academic challenge, but helped children to learn in the same space as

their peers, albeit it was a small group of four. Together with parents from the same class, Anette organised a learning pod for their children during the virtual learning period, where a caregiver supported children's learning while they were all taking public school virtual classes in one of the parents' homes:

> [We have] been doing virtual online learning with a caregiver so we have, like, a caregiver who speaks French… we do this, out of one of the families' homes, they have a big enough basement that they're able to spread out and do it there, so it was a closed pod, but they were still working with a board teacher.

The second social challenge for parents was, in fact, managing their own emotional well-being during the COVID-19 lockdowns. While all parents tried to ensure the social and emotional well-being of their children during the pandemic, it was never easy for parents and caused stress and mixed feeling for them regarding their capacity to ensure that both the academic and social aspects of their children's lives were taken care of:

> Kids were craving for social interaction with other kids. Too long, too many long hours in front of a screen wasn't working for them, it wasn't working for me either, and the responsibilities on the parents became much, much more. It was like it's really got in the way of my work schedule; it was starting to get really stressful. (Raya)

> I thought that was craziness…. I was going to lose my mind. I didn't get any work done. I was just managing them [her children]. (Amy)

Jill realised that despite her challenges with her children's well-being during lockdowns her family was quite privileged compared to others in the city:

> I know not every family. Yeah, I know. That's not every family's experience. When we were out walking today, we were talking about it, how lucky we are that, you know, that we're thriving. Despite all of the challenges.

To sum up, our data shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, middle-class parents interviewed for this study were faced with a range of academic and social and well-being challenges related to their children's learning. Academic challenges included a lack of structure and routine, lack of communication with the school, and perceived low quality of instruction and resources. In response, parents tried to recreate the school routines at home, paid for additional learning resources, and took on some of the teaching responsibilities. Alongside academic challenges, parents had to deal with such social and well-being challenges as isolation and anxiety of their children studying online separated from their peers and their own stress caused by worrying over their children's schooling lives during the pandemic. Parents in our study tried to facilitate social activities for their children at home and in the community, while keeping their own anxiety about online learning under control.

Discussion

How do economic, cultural, and social capitals of middle-class parents shape their response to educational change caused by COVID-19 pandemic?

Similar to all parents in Ontario and internationally, the participants in our study faced a number of challenges that came with pandemic learning (Treviño et al. 2021; UNESCO 2020), and they creatively managed to come up with mitigating strategies. Parents' ability

to respond to these challenges was tied to their social class, based on the middle-class nature of their jobs, high level of education, and confidence when navigating their children's education and learning at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of our study confirm that middle-class parents have a privileged position in the field of education (Calarco 2018; Lareau 2011; Vincent 2017). Our participants, who were middle class parents in Ontario, had greater resources to help them cope with the negative impacts of the pandemic on their children's education and social and emotional well-being. Their higher level of economic, social, and cultural capital (Antony-Newman 2020b; Bourdieu 1986; Reay 2004) gave parents greater ability to address the challenges that came with remote and hybrid learning: lack of structure and routine, lack of communication with the school, perceived low quality of instruction and resources, student isolation during online learning, and parental stress about children's schooling during the pandemic.

The economic capital (Bourdieu 1986), which we conceptualised here as financial resources available to pay for tutoring and digital devices used for learning, allowed middle class parents to support and supplement school curriculum at home with a range of material resources that required financial investment on behalf of parents: they hired tutors, purchased textbooks, subscribed to paid online websites, while one parent (Anette) took part in a small group learning pod with a paid caregiver. Middle-class parents had more opportunities to support their children's virtual and hybrid learning while being at home during the lockdown (Sanrey et al. 2021). Many of our middle-class participants acknowledged their privilege based on the nature of their job. For example, Amy mentioned that her family '…have our own business so that allowed for a lot of flexibility. Yes, fortunately. I don't know how people that don't have that flexibility, did it. Honestly, I don't know'. Equally important, economic capital also allowed middle class parents to allocate electronic devices to their children while engaging in virtual learning during the lockdowns. This contrasts with many low-income students in Ontario, who, on the other hand, could not access appropriate personal electronic devices during the virtual learning period, which hindered their learning (OECD 2020; Statistics Canada 2020). Our participants were aware of their comparative privilege in this regard:

> So, I picked online learning, of course, because I knew there's still the pandemic and the kids are going to go back. We also have the luxury of like, we have the technology, we have three computers, so all of us can be on the computer. I know how to use the computer, I can support them with the computer. I have time. I'm working at home. (Mary)

Social capital (Bourdieu 1986), which we view as communication with teachers and school leaders and keeping contact with other parents, helped these parents to utilise their networks to create a more successful remote learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several middle-class parents in our study were able to mitigate the academic challenges posed by virtual learning through their already established relationships with the schools. Those who participated in the school council used their positions to stay informed about curriculum expectations and school affairs, despite the common lack of communication from schools. A group of parents from the same class organised a learning pod for their children during the virtual learning period, where a caregiver supported children's learning while they all took virtual classes in one of the parents' homes.

Middle-class parents interviewed for this study also possess a high level of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), which we define here as parental education, language skills, and availability

of books and learning resources. This stock of capital helped parents to feel more confident in adopting the role of their children's 'teachers' during the lockdowns (Mifsud 2021; Rousoulioti, Tsagari, and Giannikas 2022) and support their children's learning at home (Goudeau et al. 2021). Parents followed the school curriculum and often enriched it by organising supplementary instruction at home, especially when they felt that online learning provided by the school was not of the highest quality. Many were aware of their privilege in this regard that enhanced parental self-efficacy and lowered stress about their children's pandemic learning:' …it was a good experience. I feel like I'm glad I was able to have the skills and the experience to support their learning like that, but it was really hard.' (Mary). Cultural capital also gives middle-class parents an advantage in advocating for their children's needs (Lareau 2015), which was particularly important during the pandemic learning. One of the parents (Thomas), who has a high level of cultural capital as a PhD student in Education and is familiar with educational terminology, managed to mobilise his cultural capital successfully to arrange with the school for hybrid learning for his struggling child before hybrid learning became adopted in the classrooms at large.

Conclusion

The study has several implications both for research and policy. First, we would like to mention an implication related to parents' acknowledgement of their privilege. Middle-class parents in the study were acutely aware of their own advantage and felt comfortable talking about it. At the same time, some of them made connections about how it was difficult for other parents, especially those in working-class occupations and less confident to help their children with pandemic online learning. They also expressed their appreciation for the work of the schools and teachers, in spite of their overall dissatisfaction with the system-related failures to respond to the challenges, created by Covid-19. This finding contrasts with much of the literature on middle-class privilege in education, where parents either deny their advantage over other families (Brantlinger 2003; Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer, and Desai 2013) or develop creative explanations of why despite their beliefs in equity, they choose to act in their children's interest but to the detriment of others in their community (Crozier, Reay, and James 2011; Hagerman 2018). Two possible explanations seem viable: first, despite high levels of social and cultural capital, middle-class parents in this study did not enjoy levels of economic capital and associated privilege typical of middle-class parents included in the US literature, which makes the latter group benefit more from the misrecognition of their advantage (James 2015); and secondly, middle-class parents who work in education, non-governmental organisations or in small business (our sample) might be more likely to be committed to the social justice discourse than middle-class parents in private-sector managerial and professional occupations often represented in the literature on middle-class privilege in education (Yemini et al. 2020). This latter insight provides opportunities for harnessing the socially conscious middle-class parents' social, cultural and economic capitals for addressing anticipated challenges of pandemics in future.

Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that we need to pay more nuanced attention to the sociology of pandemics i.e. how pandemics exacerbate not only social, but also economic, emotional and other challenges and inequalities (Dingwall, Hoffman, and Staniland 2013). COVID 19 in particular, made it visible to the wider audience that the academic success and social well-being of students is highly affected not only by students' efforts or

school effects, but also by parental engagement, which in turn is shaped by parents' stock of capitals (Antony-Newman 2020b; Aurini, Davies, and Gaps in Canada: Lessons from Ontario Summer Learning Research 2021). While some parents were able to address these challenges with effective strategies, such as taking over the significant part of teaching responsibilities during the online learning, providing supplementary academic and social activities, recreating school routines at home, and creating learning pods, this was largely possible due to economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) available to middle-class parents in our study. As far as most parents had little communication with school at the start of the emergency remote learning (Barbour et al. 2020; Hodges et al. 2020), they had to adopt individual solutions to the disruption in children's education (Nygreen 2018), which only exacerbated educational inequality (Haelermans et al. 2022; Reimers 2022). COVID-19 pandemic highlighted existing and growing gaps in educational outcomes for students based on social class of their families (Haeck and Lefebvre 2020). In this context, the need for parents to be more engaged in their children's schooling can only increase such gaps rather than bridge them (Goodall 2021).

Notes

1. Intensive parenting has been adopted by middle-class families in the West in 1990s and is defined as "child centred, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive and financially expensive" (Faircloth 2014, 27).
2. Concerted cultivation includes organizing children's time in a structured way, especially through organized activities, developing critical thinking and presentation skills by talking to children as equals, and instilling the feeling of entitlement in children who subsequently expect adults in positions of authority, especially teachers, to meet their needs (Lareau, 2011).

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