Exploring Greek Parents' beliefs about Distance Learning for their Pre-school Children during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
Distance Learning (DL) has become the basic form of education at all levels of schooling during the global Covid-19 pandemic. In this qualitative research, the beliefs of 56 families (109 parents) of preschool children who had Distance Learning during school closure in the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Greece are examined. This topic is important due to the unprecedented case of the massive use of DL in Early Childhood Education in which the contribution of children's parents was imperative. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews and then analysed using thematic analysis. The study's major findings showed that although parents tended to regard their involvement in DL as a useful experience, both for themselves and their children, as it provided educational continuity during class suspension. Nevertheless, they regarded it only as a temporary measure, preferring face-to-face education for their children because they stated that they had neither the required knowledge nor the time to support DL at home. They also stated that DL could have potential negative effects to their children. Further research could explore the experience of parents in the subsequent waves of the pandemic or compare parental views by students of other educational levels.
Keywords: Distance Education, Early Childhood Education, Parents' Beliefs, Covid-19

Introduction
The main feature of Distance Learning (DL) is the physical separation between the instructor and the learners, who do not communicate in an actual classroom setting, as is the case with traditional face-to-face teaching. Contrarily, the interaction is achieved via synchronous and asynchronous communication through electronic devices. Before the global health crisis of Covid-

19 such programmes were associated with parallel university curricula, adult training courses, or virtual schools and educational programmes that responded to specific needs, i.e., in remote areas or specialised student groups (Kyrma & Mavroidis, 2015). The coronavirus pandemic has greatly affected current practice. The need for social distancing and class suspension has been adopted worldwide as a means to combat the spread of the virus. According to official records, during the first wave of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, a large majority of students on the planet did not attend school or college (Anastasiades, 2020). In a situation of high emergency, educational institutions were compelled to adjust to the new circumstances by responding swiftly to meet the social demand for the continuation of the educational process via online classes/courses (Villiot-Leclercq, 2020).

In Greece, as an autonomous teaching tool, DL was present in Higher Education at the Greek Open University and/or in training courses within the framework of Lifelong Learning (Kyrma & Mavroidis, 2015). As regards primary or secondary education, DL played a rather minor or complementary role, assisting conventional education (Anastasiades, 2014). During the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic from March to May 2020, the period of our study, all education institutions in Greece were suspended, and educational processes in preschool, primary, secondary and higher education levels were carried out via synchronous and asynchronous learning (Hellenic Ministry of Education, 2020). In particular, the parents of preschoolers played a crucial role in the realisation of this attempt, as DL could not be achieved without their participation (Anastasiades, 2020). Therefore, investigating parents' point-of-view on DL is of great interest, as not only could it shed light on various aspects of the educational process during the Covid-19 lockdown, but it can also assist in acquiring a better understanding of the pros and cons of distance education. The present study aims to examine in what way and to what extent the parents of preschool students in Greece were involved in Distance Learning during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, as well as how they assessed their DL experience.

Theoretical Framework
Definition and forms of Distance Learning
There have been different terms for Distance Learning since its inception, such as distance learning, online education, e-learning, hybrid learning, virtual schools or terms that have been used to describe the educational processes that have emerged in contrast to traditional in-person, or face-to-face learning (Miminou & Spanaka, 2013). In every definition of Distance Learning, factors that are highlighted are: the physical separation between instructor and learner, the implementation of the educational process at a different time and space, and the various educational materials used (Moore et al., 2011). According to Lionarakis (2001; 2006), DL calls for innovative teaching methods, multi-formed educational material, cooperation, and constant interaction between the instructor and learner.

Distance learning can be synchronous or asynchronous: where synchronous instruction is live and involves real time interaction between teacher and student(s) via online meeting platforms; whereas, asynchronous instruction also occurs virtually online, but not in real time. The teacher has pre-prepared the material with the aid of educational software and learning content management systems that students follow and complete on their own and in their own time. DL can also be self-sufficient, when the distance educational programmes coincide with traditional

schools such as virtual schools, and complementary, when enhancing programmes, parallel to traditional school, such as school network cooperation (Miminou & Spanaka, 2013). DL is in no way in competition with or the opposite of traditional education. On the contrary, both educational forms can be combined to create hybrid or blended models by incorporating features of in-person and online delivery successfully (Anastasiades, 2014; Lionarakis, 1999; Miminou & Spanaka, 2013).

The benefits of Distance Learning have been well-documented and include, among others: overcoming both time and space constraints, as well as economic and infrastructure limitations; the implementation of flexible planning, autonomous, and self-regulated learning; and providing participation opportunities to vulnerable groups. Obviously, DL cannot be achieved if certain indispensable requirements are not fulfilled. Some of these include: having an up-to-date telecommunications infrastructure that supports digital technologies; meeting the enormous challenge to have effective educational planning and design to compensate for and complement the lack of physical presence; both teachers and students having a sufficient level of digital literacy which ensures competency and good practices for the former, and self-motivation, confidence, and good organisation of the latter. This is especially the case with young learners. Lastly, studies have shown that there is a higher dropout rate with remote learning in comparison to traditional learning methods (Kyrma & Mavroidis, 2015) making the above factors all the more pertinent in today's demanding educational environment.

Although up until recently, Distance Learning has been a limited educational delivery method in Greece, strong research interest has been shown mainly for primary and secondary level education. This is in contrast to Early Childhood Education where little research data is available regarding DL implementation (Miminou & Spanaka, 2013), despite digital literacy promotion and Information Communications Technology (ICT) training at this level (Early Childhood Education Curriculum, 2011). The existing literature in Greece is associated with complementary preschool DL, and more specifically is related to teaching suggestions to preschool teachers (Kalogiannakis & Ampartzaki, 2015), innovative teaching implementation (Mouratidou & Manousou, 2020; Vergou, Koutsouba, & Mouzakis, 2016, Paleodimou, 2017), and learning objects (Papadela, Koutsouba & Mavroidis, 2019).

Distance Learning during Covid-19 pandemic in Greece
The decision to implement Distance Learning as an alternate educational delivery tool was obviously not scheduled educational policy, but rather it was a way to enable social distancing while at the same time having educational continuity in response to the unprecedented Coronavirus pandemic (Anastasiades, 2020; Villiot-Leclercq, 2020). In pre-Covid-19 times, home schooling involved a small minority of students belonging to a heterogeneous population (Collom, 2005). This, however, changed suddenly in order for governments to contend with widespread school closings due to the global pandemic. The advent of virtual learning programmes conducted from home as emergency response measures has affected the vast majority of the educational community worldwide.

Under conditions of lockdown, the educational institutions, as well as teachers themselves were expected not only to undertake to continue the educational process but also to provide a framework of support to ensure students' emotional and psychological stability (Reich et al., 2020; Anastasiades, 2020), focusing on securing internet access for all students and sharing

educational materials amongst themselves (Meirieu, 2020a). The procedures implemented were characterized as being emergency remote support (Anastasiades, 2020), where what occurred was basically the transposition of prior standard pedagogical practices onto a screen; it was not the transition of in-person learning to Distance Learning (Caron, 2020). At the same time, issues came to the fore concerning digital inequalities and the widening social disparities, which are expected to affect -both to a greater extent and more long-term- students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those belonging to vulnerable groups (Di Pietro et al., 2020). Additionally, apprehension has been expressed about the future of the conventional "authentic" school which constitutes the symbolic space where collectivity is constructed, and which, due to these challenging circumstances, is seeing its traditional role threatened and its power diminishing significantly (Meirieu, 2020a). Furthermore, the important matter regarding the new role of Distance Learning is coming under greater consideration. The pertinent question which needs to be addressed is whether virtual teaching will be confined to a technocentric approach as a response to pandemic emergencies, or will its educational dimension be integrated into traditional pedagogy (Anastasiades, 2020), at the same time offering opportunities for both teachers and students to enrich their knowledge and skills while opening up new horizons for teaching and learning (Reich et al., 2020).

In Greece, during the first wave of the pandemic, that is from March until May 2020, with the subsequent imposed and unexpected lockdown, preschool teachers were at liberty to choose between synchronous or asynchronous DL, or a combination of the two (Hellenic Ministry of Education, 2020). During class suspension with the second wave (November 2020-May 2021) Distance Learning was fully implemented at all levels of the Greek education system (Government Gazette: ΦΕΚ 5042/Β'/14-11-2020). In regards to the application of DL in Greece during the first wave of the pandemic, which is the period being investigated here, it proved difficult if not impossible to implement ICT in an online educational environment for a number of well-documented reasons: teachers lacked the relevant training in digital skills and methodology, as well as the lack of direct support for families in terms of their not having either the necessary electronic devices and/or know-how (Anastasiades, 2020). Under these adverse conditions, it was the teachers, together with the parents, who had to carry the lion's share of the burden of Distance Learning, as it was they, who were called on to play the pivotal role in its accomplishment (Di Pietro et al., 2020) at such short notice.

Parents and Distance Learning in the midst of a pandemic
The relationship between school and family, as well as the influence of parental involvement in the educational process have been well-researched over the years (Epstein, 2010; Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Jeynes, 2010). Findings indicate that the benefits derived multiply when there is parental engagement, rather than the narrow conception of parents-supporting-school (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Recent studies show that parental contribution to the implementation of DL during school closure in the Covid-19 crisis was nothing short of remarkable (Anastasiades, 2020; Meirieu, 2020b). In order for the children attending preschool and primary education in Greece to gain access to the electronic educational platforms for their online learning, their parents were required to complete the online registration, which provided the necessary technological infrastructure and technical support (Anastasiades, 2020). In their attempt to adjust to the new reality of home learning and to support their young children, parents suddenly

found themselves in the role of teacher, without necessarily being equipped for the task. Studies have shown that the abrupt transition to Distance Learning, especially at the beginning, generated mixed reactions in families. For some, it created considerable tension among family members and caused confusion of the school-family roles (Meirieu, 2020b), whereas for others, it provided parents with the opportunity to deal with any difficulties that might have arisen, while at the same time offering them the chance to experience the energy and vitality of the teaching profession (Mabilon-Bonfils & Jaillet, 2020).

In their study on Distance Learning and preschool children, Dong et al (2020) explored Chinese parents' beliefs and attitudes about young children's at-home online learning during the Covid-19 lockdown. Their findings showed that parents believed in-person learning in traditional educational settings to be better than its online counterpart. They stated that Distance learning lacked: an appropriate teaching/learning atmosphere, social interaction and physical activity. They also expressed concern that it could prove harmful to young children's vision. Furthermore, parents claimed that it demanded great amounts of their time, as well as expert knowledge which they did not have. Another study conducted in Hong Kong (Hung & Lee, 2020) found that it was mainly the parents with limited digital literacy who were greatly dissatisfied with Distance Learning. Parents noted that their children had difficulty in completing at-home distance learning activities because of the unconducive home learning environment, on the one hand, and the children's lack of learning interest, on the other. Moreover, parents believed that the online learning process should be more interactive, there needed to be better learning support from schools, flexible work arrangements, and government subsidies, all of which would be more helpful. Finally, parents expressed their concern about their children's high use of electronic devices without parental mediation (Lau Yi Hung & Lee, 2020). In a similar research conducted in Russia (Fedina et al., 2017), parents were skeptical as to the usefulness of Distance Learning at the preschool level. They expressed the opinion that DL was not an appropriate teaching/learning approach for preschoolers, and that they themselves could not satisfactorily meet its requirements.

Research Methodology

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the involvement and beliefs of the parents of preschoolers about Distance Learning during class suspension in Greece due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The research questions were the following:

1.   How were parents involved in DL in the midst of the Covid-19 lockdown, and how did they assess their participation?

2.   What do parents think of DL as compared to face-to-face education?

Participants

The research is based on a sample of 56 families living in Athens, whose children attended state kindergarten schools, where Distance Learning was implemented during the first wave of the pandemic as part of the government's social distancing measures. Intentional and convenient sampling was employed (Bryman, 2017) and every attempt was made to ensure both sexes were equally represented both for parents and children.

The number of interviews that were given were 56 from 109 participants. More specifically, from 53 families both parents participated in the interview, while the other 3 were single-parent families, with the mothers taking part. The decision for a joint interview of both parents was deemed appropriate as both mothers and fathers supported their children in the Distance Learning process. They were, thus, given the opportunity through mutual interaction as members of a group with a common experience to express their perceptions (Bryman, 2017). All of the parents had basic knowledge of digital literacy (e.g., ECDL), 60 parents had secondary level education, while 49 had tertiary education. The age of the participants ranged from 35 to 45 years. Regarding the number of children per family, the statistics are as follows: 29 families with one child, 24 with two children, and 3 families with 3 children.

Data Collection
Semi-structured interviews were employed for the collection of the data, which were initially designed in terms of content and order of question formation, providing the possibility for an unstructured dialogue between interviewer and study participant enabling free expression. Through the use of open and productive questions, the researcher can elicit detailed responses from the participant (Tsiolis, 2014) leading to reliable findings. The following core questions were used:
Was Distance Learning implemented at your child's school? What kind [meaning synchronous or asynchronous]*? How often did it occur? Did you participate in DL? What was your role? How would you evaluate your experience? What is your view of DL? Did you notice any positive aspects? Did you come up against any difficulties? How would you assess DL in comparison to face-to-face education?*

Coding
The method of thematic analysis was used within our qualitative data (Bryman, 2017). The following steps were taken in the process:
The first step was to read through and index our data corpus. Using open-coding, each unit of data that specifically addressed our research questions, and the relevant literature, was broken down into discrete segments that were labelled with a particular code. The next step was to use axial coding to draw connections between similar codes and to organize them into categories. Initially, the first researcher individually undertook the coding of the content of the interview responses. Then, both researchers worked through the modified codes and through consensus indexed them into the final categories enabling the establishment of a framework of thematic patterns, since such patterns form the basis for a theoretical understanding of the data (Bryman, 2017).
The data analysis regarding the first research question on how parents were involved with Distance Learning during the Covid-19 lockdown and how they assessed their experience, presented a model of twofold-parental-involvement. The participants evaluated the experience as unprecedented, with the negative aspect being somewhat more than the positive; details of which are discussed in the Findings Section below.
As regards the second research question on parents' opinion of Distance Learning in comparison to face-to-face education, the data analysis presented a model where DL was thought of as an alternative form of education in an emergency situation, where, as will be seen in more detail

below, it requires specific planning, presents the risk of potential negative effects towards children, and cannot replace face-to-face education.

Findings

The study participants reported that during the three first weeks all the preschools that their children attended introduced asynchronous Distance Learning. Once or twice a week, the preschool teacher sent the subject matter to be learnt via email to the parents with the related instructions. At a later stage, following the teacher's initial attempts to organize the educational units under these new conditions, synchronous education was incorporated to enhance the asynchronous approach. This was conducted through weekly or twice weekly live video conferencing platforms, the day(s) and time(s) of which was agreed on by both the teacher and the parents. According to what was stated in the interviews, none of the families participated exclusively in one form of education. They all reported to do both asynchronous and synchronous learning. Table 1 below shows the number of families and the frequency of participation in the two types of Distance Learning. More specifically, 10 out of the 56 families did asynchronous distance learning once a week, while 46 families did it twice a week. Synchronous learning was done once a week by 7 families, twice a week by 41 families, and three times a week by 8 families.

Table 1: Number of families and the frequency they participated in the two types of Distance Learning

Distance Learning	No. of families participating once per week	No. of families participating twice per week	No. of families participating three times per week
asynchronous	10	46	-
synchronous	7	41	8

In both remote delivery models – synchronous and asynchronous – which were an emergency response to class suspension, the parents were the key participants in the educational process between teacher and pupils. More specifically, all parents stated that in online synchronous Distance Learning, it was they who facilitated the educational process by acting as mediators between their young children and the teacher. Logging in to the required video conferencing platform, parents attended the virtual class along with their children, and helped them -either in a direct or indirect way- to actively participate in the lesson. Characteristic examples of parents' responses include: "I contact the kindergarten teacher and she gives me the instructions on how to connect", "I watch over my son to make sure he remains focused" or "I help my daughter when needed." What happened with online asynchronous Distance Learning was that the preschool teacher, in some respect, 'trained' the parents, in order to offer them a means to continue the learning at home. In other words, after having received the educational material electronically, and having understood the objective, as well as the process of the respective activity, the parent was made to do what normally is the role of the teacher. The issue, however, is that they are not necessarily able to guarantee that they are implementing developmentally appropriate pedagogical practices. A characteristic parental statement is: "First I try to understand what the

kindergarten teacher is asking for and then I explain it to my child; I feel as though I am the teacher." Figure 1 below illustrates the two-fold-parental involvement in online synchronous and asynchronous Distance Learning.
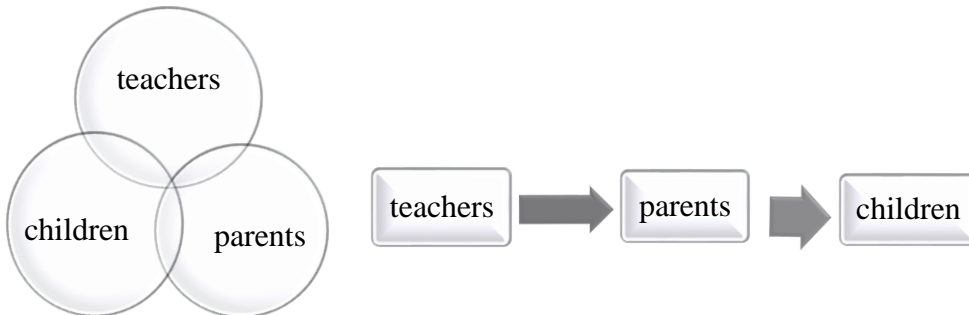

Online Synchronous Distance Learning   Online Asynchronous Distance Learning
Figure 1: Two-fold parental involvement

As regards parents' assessment of their experience of Distance Learning, all claimed it to be both positive and negative. On the plus side, 47 respondents considered that although unprecedented, their participation was overall an interesting experience, 45 respondents stated that it allowed them to help their children, 23 respondents said that it enabled them to deepen their understanding of preschool teaching and learning, while 18 respondents stated that it helped them to better comprehend the preschool teacher's role. On the down side, all the parents expressed concern and anxiety which they attributed to: a) the lack of specialized knowledge and skills (33 respondents), b) lack of time due to work commitments (27 respondents), c) the absence of an adequate support framework (19 respondents), and d) their inability to have access to or to obtain digital devices (14 respondents). Figure 2 presents some indicative statements made by the parents on their evaluation of their Distance Learning experience.
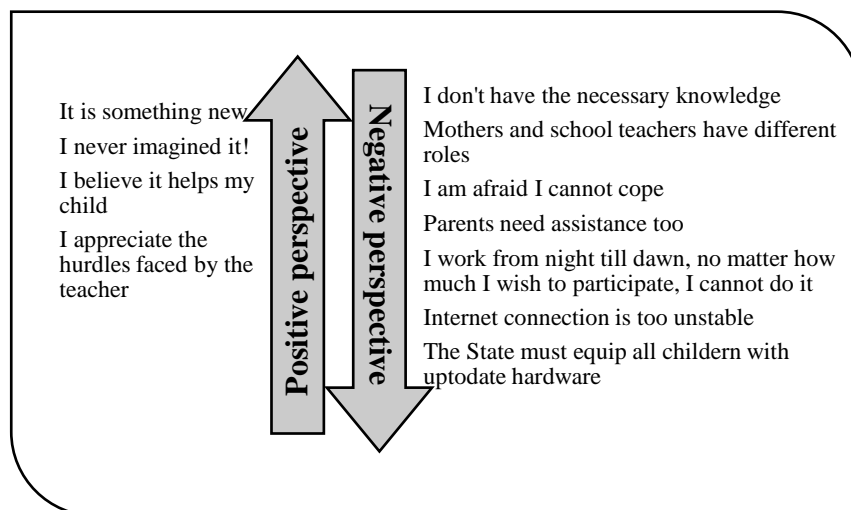

Figure 2: Parents' evaluation of Distance Learning

Given the severe circumstances of the global health crisis, all the parents view Distance Learning as a solution that guarantees educational continuity during class suspension and offers at least a semblance of normality to the children. Indicative statements the parents made were: "Even in this way [the children] get to learn something", "[It is a way for them] to continue their educational process", and "It is a workable solution under the current circumstances." Parents also pointed out that DL enables their children to have some contact with their fellow pupils and their teacher (29 respondents), as well as have something creative and productive to do during their day (29 respondents). However, the contribution of Distance Learning to ensuring the continuation of the educational process on the one hand, and to supporting the socialisation of children on the other, is acknowledged by all parents only under these special circumstances. This can be gaged by the phrases the parents used in their responses, such as: "at least", "even in this way", "under the present circumstances", thus expressing the views they hold on the temporary nature of Distance Learning as an alternate solution to the emergency response of a health crisis.

All parents believe that a Distance Learning programme on such a large scale is highly challenging in terms of design, infrastructure, equipment, and support mechanisms for all stakeholders involved. In their responses, they stated that interventions are needed, whose objective it would be to enhance the virtual education that is offered, with regard to: (a) upgrading the schools with the latest electronic equipment and software (39 respondents), (b) providing specialized training in online distance teaching and learning environments for the preschool teachers (27 respondents), and (c) providing assistance to families by making the latest devices for DL accessible to them (23 respondents), as well as providing support from specialized technical staff for the parents to improve their digital abilities (12 respondents) (see Figure 3). The following are indicative parental statements which confirm these views: "The use of modern tools to upgrade Distance Education is imperative", "Our child's teacher is conscientious and makes earnest efforts, but she doesn't seem to be able to meet the new realities, she needs help", "It is beneficial to train kindergarten teachers", "Not all families have the necessary technologies, nor do we have the knowledge to be able to implement such programs effectively on our own."

Figure 3: Necessary interventions to improve Distance Learning
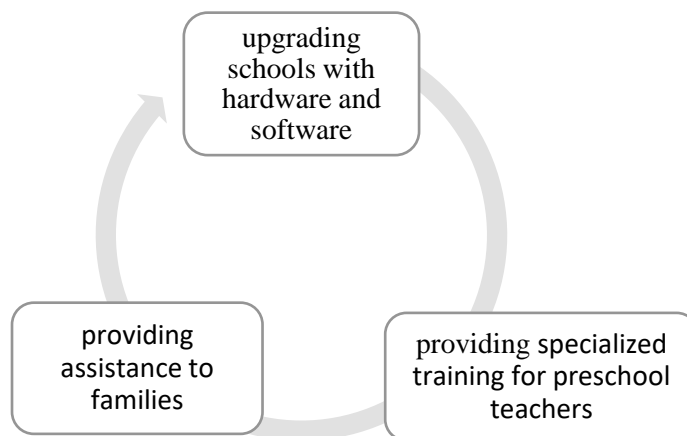
In 30 out of the 56 interviews, the parents expressed their concerns about the potentially negative impact that Distance Learning could have on the physical and mental health of their children. They particularly reported the following areas: the difficulty children have in adapting to and concentrating on the new educational delivery method (24 respondents), the lack of physical activity and the absence of play in physical space and with physical objects (23 respondents), as well as children's exposure to virtual reality (23 respondents), and excessive screen time (21 respondents) which seems to cause particular concern for parents as regards their children's increased risk of addiction to electronic devices. Figure 4 presents some indicative statements made by the parents on their evaluation of the negative effects of Distance Learning.
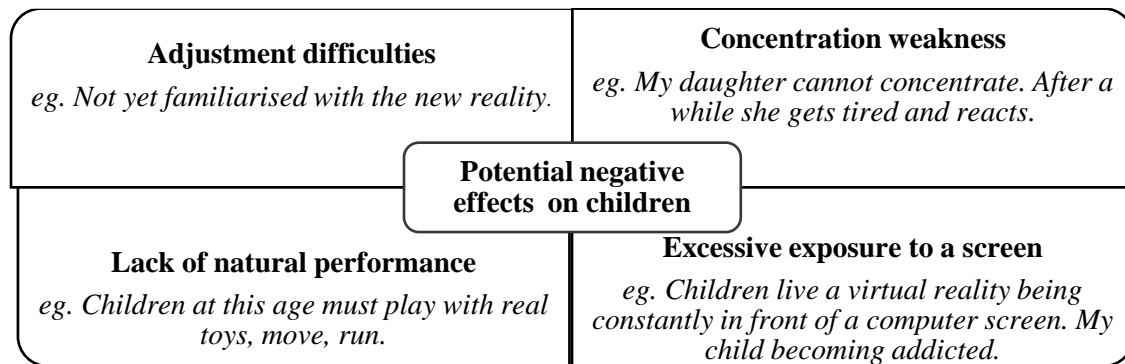
Adjustment difficulties

eg. Not yet familiarised with the new reality.

Concentration weakness

eg. My daughter cannot concentrate. After a while she gets tired and reacts.

Potential negative effects on children

Lack of natural performance

eg. Children at this age must play with real toys, move, run.

Excessive exposure to a screen

eg. Children live a virtual reality being constantly in front of a computer screen. My child becoming addicted.

Figure 4: The negative effects of Distance Learning

The majority of parents did not consider Distance Learning, which they experienced during class suspension because of the COVID-19 lockdown, as an appropriate educational delivery method under normal conditions. In fact, in 51 of the interviews this is explicitly stated, while in the other 5, it was alluded to. Parents' comments were as follows: "It is different to traditional lessons", "If I could choose, I would definitely choose traditional [in-person] kindergarten [education]", "the character of school has changed." More specifically as can be seen in Figure 5, parents believe that face-to-face education has the following beneficial influences: (a) it contributes to the holistic development of children (51 respondents), with statements such as: "[the children] make decisions, take initiatives, join groups, become socialized"; (b) it has the role of balancing any inequalities (38 respondents), "[School] provides all children with the opportunity to begin from the same starting point in their school life, irrespective of their family's socio-economic status"; (c) it caters for working mothers (32 respondents), "Kindergarten enables mothers to work"; and (d) it enhances the active acquisition of knowledge (19 respondents), "As the kindergarten teacher told us, children learn how to learn."
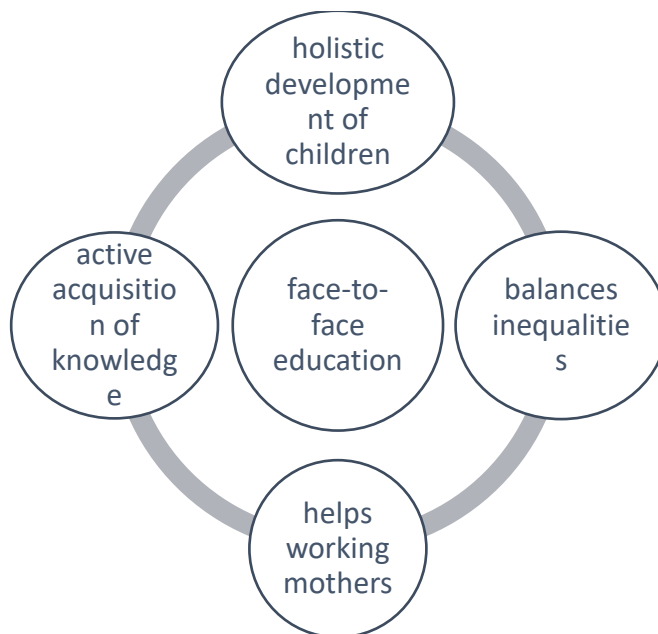
Figure 5: Beneficial influences of Face-to-Face Education

It appears that all parents essentially consider the notion of face-to-face instruction to be identical to the concept of school, as opposed to an online distance learning environment, which they consider to be complementary to conventional classroom teaching. Indicative statements made by parents include: "School means children leaving the house and going to a particular place", "[DL] cannot be implemented for prolonged periods", "It may help supplementarily, especially for young children." Overall, parents claim to be very much in favour of face-to-face learning where preschool level education is concerned, acknowledging the vital pedagogical, educational, and social role that it plays.

Study Limitations
The study aims to examine the context of Distance Learning through the perspective of specific study participants (parents of preschool children who are non-experts in the field) drawing on qualitative (subjective) findings (Bryman, 2017). This, as well as the limited scope it covers - despite the large amounts of detailed information resulting in a richer understanding of the issue at hand - does not allow us to make generalizations. However, our findings are in line with those of other research conducted on larger populations in other countries, which strengthens the credibility of our findings in spite of the limitations (Dong et al., 2020; Fedina et al., 2017; Hung & Lee, 2020).

Discussion and Conclusions
The research findings showed that parents were called on to play a key role in the implementation of their preschool children's synchronous and asynchronous Distance Learning during the first Covid-19 lockdown. The results indicate a double aspect of their experience. On the one hand, parents had a strong sense that they were helping their children, while at the same time being given the opportunity to gain a better understanding of preschool education and the role of the teacher. On the other hand, however, they were not comfortable with the new role

that was suddenly imposed on them because they felt that they lacked the pedagogical knowledge, digital skills, and the time needed to ensure the effective implementation of distance education. Our findings are in line with those of recent studies (Dong, Cao & Li, 2020; Lau Yi Hung & Lee, 2020), which offers us incentive to further enquire about the nature and conditions of the mass implementation of Distance Learning on the one hand, and the role of parents as this is being shaped on a global scale on the other. Additionally, these views reinforce the findings that emphasise the confusion of family-school roles (Meirieu, 2020b), as well as the absence of direct support for families both in terms of electronic devices and know-how (Anastasiades, 2020).

Our research findings clearly indicate that parents have a positive view of Distance Learning in preschool when it is used as an emergency response to class closure as with the Covid-19 health crisis. In other words, the parents' views confirm that DL contributed to the continuation of the educational process (Anastasiades, 2020; Di Pietro et al., 2020; Reich et al., 2020). At the same time, however, their views reflect the academic discourse expressed about the restrictive framework of the technocentric approach of Distance Learning in covering emergencies due to the pandemic, as well as the lack of emphasis on the pedagogical dimension of DL (Anastasiades, 2020). They explicitly state that under normal circumstances they prefer face-to-face education which they claim fulfills the objectives of preschool education and meets the needs of children and their families. Their views seem to converge with those of Russian parents, who in a 2017 study by Fedina et al, stated that Distance Learning was not an educational delivery method that was appropriate for preschool aged children. In our research, parents stressed that conventional schooling and in-person learning is of great importance to them, recognising its "authenticity" (Meirieu, 2020b).

As regards Distance Learning, the parents emphasized the need for special planning, with up-to-date infrastructure, as well and State support for both teachers and students. In their evaluation of their experience, the parents highlighted the conditions that are necessary for an effective implementation of DL, as well as the potential lurking hazards, which are the same as those referred to in the literature (Kyrma & Mavroidis, 2015; Lionarakis, 2001). Our findings are in agreement with those of a previous study (Lau Yi Hung & Lee, 2020), which showed that parents in Hong Kong also believe that better learning support from schools, flexible work arrangements, and government subsidies would be more helpful.

Furthermore, parents expressed concern about the effects of Distance Learning on their children's health, reporting that the children have difficulty in concentrating on online education at home, are deprived of play, have little or no physical activity, and have higher screen time exposure. Similar concerns were expressed by parents in studies conducted in China and Hong Kong, which were referred to in the literature search (Dong, Cao & Li 2020; Lau Yi Hung & Lee 2020).

In conclusion, parents consider Distance Learning as a complementary form of educational delivery, which cannot under any circumstances replace conventional face-to-face education. In actual fact, it seems that the parents in our study are -even unawares- in favour of a mixed-mode learning educational practice that had gradually begun to be implemented in Greek K-12 school programmes prior to the global health crisis, where, however, face-to-face interaction is the dominant educational form, while digital material and tools are used as supplementary support in the classroom or as homework (Miminou & Spanaka, 2013). Perhaps not surprisingly, the hybrid learning approach referred to in the most up-to-date literature as a future educational

delivery model, where instruction can be given in-person and online via video conferencing simultaneously (Anastasiades, 2014; Lionarakis, 1999; Miminou & Spanaka, 2013), does not seem to concern the parents of preschool-aged children in our research. The reasons might be that they are not aware of it and/or cannot envisage it from their experiences thus far. One factor that certainly came out in this study was parents of young children did not think the way Distance Learning was conducted during the first lockdown in the Covid-19 pandemic in Greece was an effective or appropriate long-term learning model for their preschoolers. It was simply viewed as a temporary measure for continuing their children's education where they tried to make the best of a less than ideal situation.

It would be of great interest and extremely useful to explore the experience of parents in the subsequent waves of the pandemic. For example, did the views of the parents remain the same or did they change in the second wave of the pandemic in Greece (from November 2020 to May 2021) where a longer lockdown was imposed and during which synchronous Distance Learning was mandatory and on a daily basis for all educational levels? Future research comparing urban and rural areas of Greece would also shed important light on the issue. Also of interest would be a comparative study of parental views by students of other educational levels. Parents, however, are only one group of people involved in the educational process. The experience of Distance Learning in the midst of a health crisis was also experienced by the pupils and the teachers, thus a study of their views, in parallel with the views of parents, is necessary for an in-depth understanding of this new fluid and emerging situation. In this sense, any research that is carried out contributes to illuminating its unknown aspects.

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