Parental Involvement in the Education of Children with Additional Support Needs during the Pandemic: A Cross-National Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Parental involvement in children's education is one of the main components of inclusive education and one of the crucial factors in achieving positive academic outcomes for children with additional support needs (ASN). Using a comparative qualitative methodology, this study explores parents' perspectives on their involvement in the education of children with ASN attending the lower secondary educational cycle during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was conducted in Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia—three culturally and educationally similar contexts that applied slightly different educational measures during the pandemic. The study aims to explore the experiences of parental involvement during the pandemic and to gain insights into the personal, familial and contextual factors (level 1 factors in Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model [1995, 1997, 2005]) that influence these involvement practices. Semi-structured interviews with 42 parents of children with ASN from three countries were conducted in the spring of 2022. In all three contexts, the parents intensified at-home involvement and assumed various roles in supporting their children's learning during the pandemic. Three parental profiles were identified: stable high, intensified and stable low involvement, which were described based on their specific mixture of personal, familial and contextual factors. The results confirm the importance of parental role construction and self-efficacy, the perception of children's difficulties and the specific invitation from the child, as well as the perception of family life context, in determining parents' decisions about involvement during the pandemic; however, the results also highlight the crucial role of parental perception of school support for the child.

Keywords: parental involvement, inclusive education, additional support needs, COVID-19 pandemic, qualitative comparative study

Highlights

- Parental involvement in the education of children with ASN during the pandemic mainly intensified or remained intensive.
- The most pronounced parental role during the pandemic across the three countries was supporting children's learning.
- Personal, familial and contextual factors shaped parents' decisions regarding the level and types of involvement.
- Parental involvement mirrored the quality of school support for their child with ASN during the pandemic.
- Comparative contexts of Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia shared similar challenges of inclusive education.

…because for him, I am primarily the mother. I am not a teacher for him…

Introduction

Inclusive education can be described as an ongoing effort to provide opportunities for all students to learn, to create a learning environment that recognises and values differences, and to provide opportunities for families and children to participate in decision-making processes that affect the quality of children's educational present and future (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2012). This definition positions school professionals and parents as allies working together to increase participation and overcome barriers to learning and development for all children (Ainscow et al., 2004). The importance of parents as active agents is supported by decades of research showing that parental involvement in education is associated with a range of improved academic and non-academic outcomes, both for students from the general population and from marginalised groups (e.g. Fan & Chen, 2001; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Jeynes, 2003; Levy et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2019; Wilder, 2014). However, parental involvement in education is not a static and singular event; instead, it is embedded and substantially influenced by personal, familial, school-related and macrosystem factors (e.g. Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Oswald et al., 2017), such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic reshaped the learning context for students worldwide, initially shifting towards home schooling, which is predominantly supported online, followed by the introduction of various forms of blended schooling. These different learning contexts have changed the learning community, the tools used for learning and teaching and the rules that structure the educational process. In addition, the division of responsibilities between schools and families has changed, altering parents' involvement in their children's education (Carpenter & Dunn, 2020; Garbe et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Misirli & Ergulec, 2020; Ribeiro et al, 2021; Smith, 2020).

The pandemic has also posed some unique challenges to students with additional support needs (ASN) and their families (Lindner et al., 2021). We highlighted the vulnerability of students with ASN as those whose learning progress is highly dependent on the availability and quality of school support, including individualised support from their teachers. In addition, remote education in the early stages of the pandemic limited opportunities for social interaction with peers and teachers, increasing the risk of exclusion of children with ASN (Couper-Kenney & Riddell, 2021). This situation required the rapid adjustments of schools and families and the careful coordination of their efforts to overcome barriers to learning and participation for children with ASN. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the education of children with ASN during the pandemic, this study captures parents' perspectives on involvement in their children's education. In addition, the study offers a cross-

national perspective that provides insights into how different educational contexts contributed to parental involvement in children's education during the pandemic.

First, we introduced the conceptual model of parental involvement that we used, followed by a brief overview of existing research on parental involvement in the education of children with ASN during the pandemic.

Parental involvement in their children's education

In our quest to explain the differences in parental involvement, we relied on the revised *model of parental involvement* developed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (the HDS model) (1995, 1997, 2005; revised by Walker et al., 2005). The model attempts to explain why parents get involved in their children's education, what forms their involvement takes and how it affects students. It describes parental involvement as a dynamic process that begins with the decision for parental involvement (level 1), followed by the choice of the form of involvement (level 2), the mechanisms of influence (level 3) and the mediating variables (e.g. parents' use of developmentally appropriate strategies and the congruence between parents' actions and school expectations; level 4). The results of this process are the child's outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and self-efficacy (level 5). With the focus of our study in mind, we described the first and second levels of the model in more detail.

At the first level, the HDS model describes the three sources of motivation for parental involvement in children's education: (1) parents' motivational beliefs (What do parents believe is their role in children's education, and do they believe they can make a difference?); (2) parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement by others (Do parents perceive that the school and/or children need their involvement?); and (3) parents' perceptions of life context (Do parents perceive they have the knowledge, skills, time and energy to become involved in their children's education?) (Green et al., 2007). Parental role construction can be described as parental beliefs about the valued activities they consider critical to undertake on behalf of their children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). Walker et al. (2011) stated that parents believe either that they are primarily responsible for their child's educational outcomes (parent-centred), that responsibility is shared between the parents and the school (partnership-centred) or that responsibility for their child's education rests primarily with the teacher and the school (school-centred). Parental beliefs about their role in their child's education are one of the most important individual predictors of active parental involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011), with partnership-centred role construction being particularly beneficial (Walker et al., 2011). Parental self-efficacy describes parents' expectations of the outcomes of their actions. Parents with high self-efficacy believe that their involvement positively influences children, whereas parents with low self-efficacy do not believe that their involvement has

any impact (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). The second set of psychological constructs that underpin parents' decisions about involvement relates to parents' perceptions that the child and the school want them to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Through the invitation of teachers and schools for active participation, parent involvement is appreciated, and its importance to the child's education is emphasised. In addition to motivational beliefs and perceived invitations from others, the first level of the model includes perceptions of specific knowledge and skills and parental time and energy as prerequisites for effective parental involvement in children's education.

The authors of the HDS model acknowledge the other variables that may influence parents' decisions about school involvement compared with those offered by the model (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). For example, some authors (e.g., Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018) emphasise the importance of family socioeconomic background, recognising that socioeconomic status significantly influences parental involvement in their children's schoolwork and formal and informal parenting practices. In general, families with higher socioeconomic status provide more educational support to their children (Treviño et al., 2021); furthermore, higher household income and parental educational attainment are also considered protective factors against lower school engagement and motivation among adolescents (Maiya et al., 2021). In addition, parental involvement in a child's education is also influenced by the broad context of the family, including the family's educational background (Nusser, 2021), family structure—particularly the number of siblings and type of parenting (Treviño et al., 2021), parents' mental and/or physical health, special needs and personality traits (Larsen, et al., 2021). Results from a longitudinal study involving more than 2,300 families from Norway demonstrate the importance of the overall family climate and positive home-schooling experiences as protective factors for a child's positive adjustment to a changing context (Larsen et al., 2021).

The second level of the model describes parents' choices of involvement. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) stated that parents sometimes make proactive and intentional decisions about involvement, whereas in other situations, they appear to be reacting to external demands or events. For example, during the early stages of the pandemic, parents were requested to provide support and assistance to their children at home because of the remote mode of education.

In the following section, we provided a brief overview of the findings on the parental involvement of children with ASN during the pandemic, that capture the first and the second level variables of the HDS model.

Parental involvement in the education of children with ASN during the pandemic

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH ASN

The COVID-19 crisis helped raise awareness of the importance of parental involvement in schooling, as families were often expected to support children's education during the pandemic. During this period, parents assumed various roles and activities to support their children's learning, such as adhering to schedules (Bhamani et al., 2020), providing direct one-on-one instruction, organising study time, creating structures tailored to each child (Couper-Kenney & Riddell, 2021) and motivating their children. The latter, in particular, has been proven to be one of the biggest problems for all parents and is emphasised even more by parents of children with ASN (Nusser, 2021). In addition, Knopik et al. (2022) found that parents of children with ASN were likelier to extensively support and motivate their children in learning than other parents. As Couper-Kenney and Riddell (2021) noted, many parents of children with ASN described the extra work required on behalf of their children, from requesting work and providing one-on-one support to creating structures at home that are appropriate for each child.

Even though parents of children with ASN are often more actively and intensely involved in their children's education, viewing their involvement as highly essential to their children's positive learning outcomes (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011), their involvement became even more intensified during the pandemic. Indeed, research shows that the level of parental investment in the education of students with ASN was higher than that of the general student population during the pandemic (Knopik et al., 2022; Nusser, 2021). For example, German parents of eighth graders with ASN have reported spending twice as many hours (approximately 11 hours) helping their children learn compared with parents of children without ASN (Nusser, 2021). The finding that students with ASN required more time to learn during the pandemic may also indicate that teachers were not able to provide individualised instructional materials and assignments for students with diverse learning profiles (Letzel-Alt et al., 2020). At the same time, most parents were unfamiliar with different teaching methods and subject content, but had to act and provide support to their children at home, which also challenged their self-efficacy (Spear et al., 2021). Even though the children received significant support from parents during this period, the issue of parental competencies to support their children's learning was further raised by the poor outcomes of remote education compared with face-to-face learning (Nusser, 2021). In addition, the importance of parents' digital competencies was highlighted due to the shift to remote education (Couper-Kenney & Riddell, 2021; Spear et al., 2021; Treviño et al., 2021), suggesting that the availability of technology must be accompanied by knowledge on how to use the technology to support a child's learning. Less-than-optimal digital skills of parents have affected both communication with the school and engagement with their children's remote education (Spear et al., 2021).

Moreover, research shows that the quality of school support and parental involvement in the education of children with ASN are interdependent. The authors describe that the more the parents of students with ASN perceived the

demands of school as excessive and chaotic (e.g. overloading the child with too many tasks or the content is too difficult for independent learning), the more engaged they become in supporting their children in remote education (Knopik et al., 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2021). Therefore, studies regarding parental involvement in the education of students with ASN during the pandemic seem to reflect the quality of teacher and school support during this time.

Context of the study

Even though cross-national research during the pandemic has been suggested, only a few comparative studies have explored the variations in parental involvement of children with ASN across countries. The importance of a cross-national perspective stems from findings that socio-historical factors influence how both parents and schools construct their role in education, resulting in different parental involvement behaviours. In addition, parental involvement is shaped by the different responses of education systems to contemporary global events (Ribeiro et al., 2021). For example, due to the different educational measures students from Croatia have spent less time in online education (8 weeks) compared with Serbia and Slovenia, where schools were fully closed for 28 and 21 weeks, respectively (Covid-19 Response, 2021). Given the differences in educational policies across countries during the pandemic, school support for children with ASN and parental involvement is also expected to differ significantly (Letzel-Alt et al., 2022). Therefore, our study examines the experiences of parents of children with ASN in the educational systems of Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia, which have similar educational and cultural traditions but had different—to a certain extent— educational measures during the pandemic.

Despite a growing body of research on parental involvement in education, our knowledge of the types and factors that influence parental involvement comes from the experiences of parents of children with neurotypical development in North America and Northern and Western Europe during the pre-pandemic period. Therefore, this study provides an important contribution to a more nuanced understanding of parental involvement by exploring parental involvement in the education of children with ASN in Southern Europe during the pandemic.

Study aim

Existing studies show that the amount of time the parents of children with ASN invested in their children's education during the pandemic has increased (e.g. Nusser, 2021). However, given that the quantity of parental involvement is not critical to a child's learning outcomes and that the quality of parental engagement matters, we aimed to examine how the parents of children with ASN were involved in their children's education during the pandemic. Moreover, since the variables included in the HDS model are primarily dynamic in nature and may

change due to the influence of various actors and events in the involvement process, we are interested in exploring the interplay between the pandemic, the factors described in the model and the parents' choices of involvement.

The following research questions guided our analysis across three-country contexts:

- How have the parents of children with ASN described their involvement and changes in their involvement in their children's education during the pandemic?
- How have personal, familial and contextual factors affected the involvement of parents of children with ASN in children's education during the pandemic?

Methods

We employed a comparative qualitative research methodology to conduct an in-depth exploration of the perspectives of parents regarding their involvement in the education of their children with ASN during the pandemic.

Participants

Since we aimed to describe in detail the experiences of parents of children with ASN regarding their involvement in education during the pandemic, we used a purposive, homogeneous sample (Patton, 2015). The study was conducted in elementary schools in different regions and settlements in Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia. Within a school, the parents of students who were eligible or received instructions according to an individual education plan (IEP) with accommodations were proposed by school professionals to participate in the study. In all three countries, an IEP with accommodations was intended for pupils who could master the regular curriculum without altering or modifying learning goals but needed individualisation in some aspects of the teaching process (e.g. accommodations and adaptations of teaching strategies, resources and environment). However, the countries differ in their procedures for issuing IEPs. In Croatia, the education of children with ASN is governed by the Special Education Act. The decision on placement in the proper educational programme for pupils with ASN is made by local authorities, based on the assessment of an expert committee evaluating the child's psychophysical condition. Similarly, in Slovenia, the education of children with ASN is regulated by the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act. The decision on placement in the proper educational programme for pupils with ASN is conducted by an expert committee operating within the National Education Institute Slovenia and based on an extensive evaluation of the child's psychological, social and physical functioning. In Serbia, the decision on the

IEP with accommodations is based on the assessment of the child's strengths and needs, which is made by a school team that includes school associates, teachers, parents and other individuals familiar with the child.

Other than being a parent of a student with ASN, no other criteria were established for selecting the participants; that is, the parents decided whether the mother or father would participate in the study. The participants provided written informed consent prior to the interview. To protect the anonymity of the participants, we presented here only generalised descriptions of the group/subgroups.

A total of 42 parents of children with ASN who were attending a regular school at the lower secondary level during the school year 2021–2022 in Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia participated in interviews—16 in Croatia, 8 in Serbia and 18 in Slovenia (Table 1).

Table 1. *Description of the parents participating in the study.*

Characteristics of the participants	Country		
	Croatia	Serbia	Slovenia
Parent's gender			
Mothers	15	7	18
Fathers	1	1	0
Child's gender			
Female	3	2	8
Male	13	6	10
School location			
Village	4	-	9
Small town	4	4	8
City	8	4	1
Total number of the participants	16	8	18

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with parents were conducted at the end of the school year 2021–2022 (spring 2022), which was characterised by a mixture of school-based and remote models of teaching and learning in all three contexts. Most interviews were conducted in person at the schools' premises, with only a few interviews conducted online in each context.

The interview guide was developed by the second author, inspired by the HDS model of parental involvement (2005), and then validated with research teams from all three countries. It included general topics for discussion, specific questions and prompts for a more detailed elaboration of responses. The participants were asked to describe their children and how they perceive the school's response to the pandemic, to what extent was the child's environment supportive for learning, in which ways were they involved in their child's education, to what extent are they satisfied with cooperation with the school and the quality of the support school and teachers provide to a child, and how has the pandemic influenced family life. The interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes.

Data analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We used a thematic analysis that relied on a socio-constructivist approach to the inquiry. The themes discussed in this article emerged from the iterative process of data analysis, which employed the following tactics to generate meaning from the interview data (Miles et al., 2014): noting patterns, developing codes and coding, clustering and making contrasts/comparisons between contexts and parents who differ in the intensity of their involvement during the pandemic and identifying and defining themes. Our research questions and interview guides were developed in relation to the HDS model (2005); however, the process of analysis evolved over time in relation to the data collected. As described by McPhilips et al. (2001, p. 231), 'conceptual analysis and the data analysis co-constructed each other', resulting in themes that were not entirely determined by the model used. The analysis was conducted in three waves using the MAXQDA software. In the first wave, the initial codes were mostly deductively generated based on the pre-existing analytical framework; while data-driven, inductive coding was adopted in the second wave of the search for patterns/themes. In the third wave, these initial codes were reviewed and refined through extensive discussions among the authors, 'striving to reflect on their assumptions and how these might shape and delimit their coding', which is aligned with the reflexive approach we employed (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p. 3). Based on the constant comparison between cases, we generated themes that reflect the dominant positions of parents who describe their involvement in children's education during the pandemic differently: 'Increased parental involvement as a response to the emergency', 'Stable high parental involvement as an expression of life's mission', and 'Stable low parental involvement as a response only to the child's invitation'. The coding of the interviews was conducted by all three authors. Verbatim extracts from interviews were provided to support this argument. The coding system developed for the purposes of the study included a set of hierarchically organised codes (Figure 1).

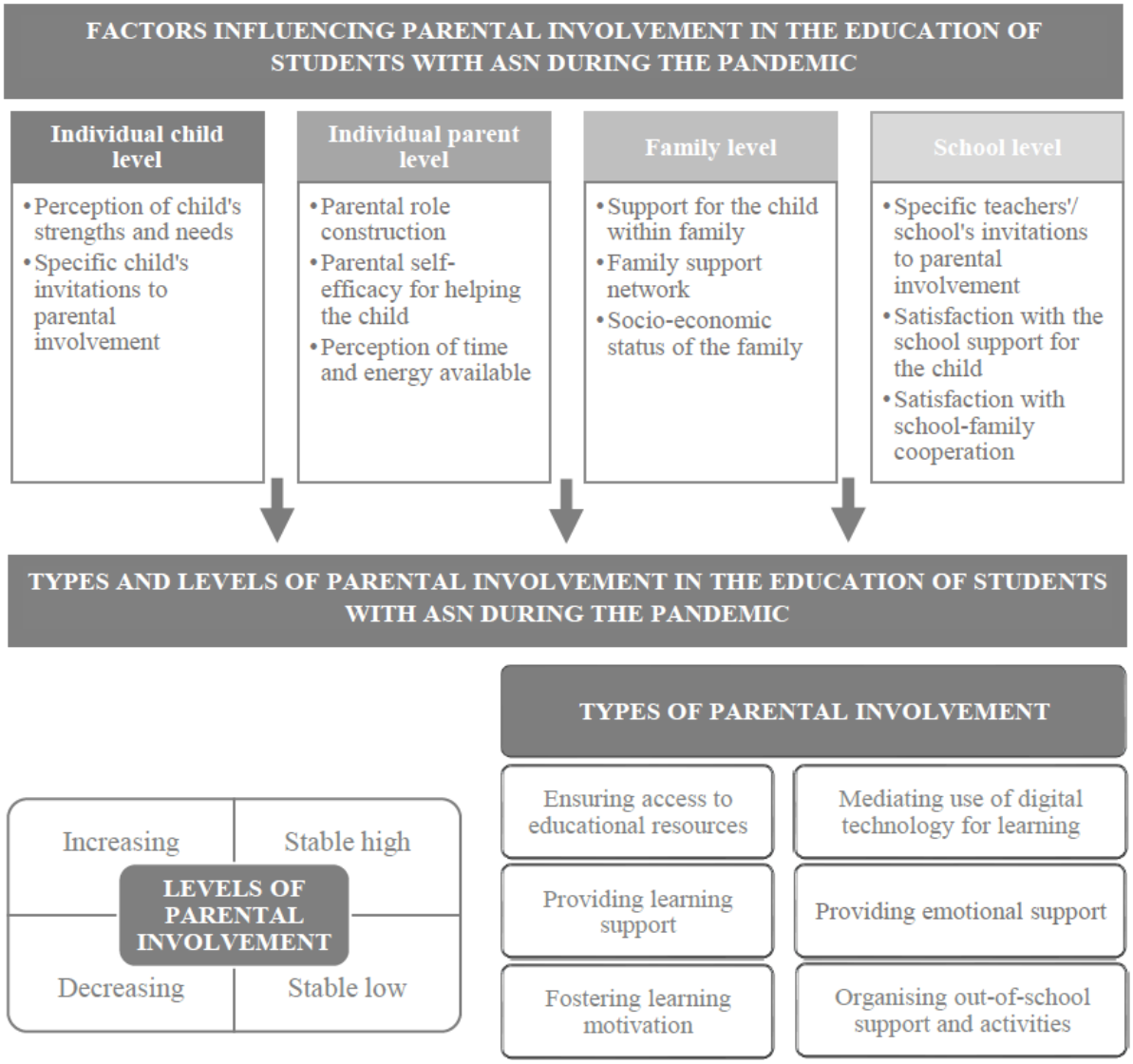

Figure 1. *The coding system used in the study.*

Findings

Based on the parents' retrospective accounts of their two-year experiences, we described how parents were involved with their children's education during the pandemic and how the pandemic influenced their involvement. This was followed by a description of the influence of personal, familial and contextual factors on parental involvement in the education of children with ASN, which provided insights into the complex interplay between factors at the level of a child with ASN, the family and the education system during the pandemic.

Types and levels of parental involvement in the education of children with ASN during the pandemic

Interviews with parents of children with ASN revealed a broad range of roles that they have assumed to support their children's education during the pandemic, including roles related to *ensuring access to educational*

resources, mediating the use of digital tools, providing learning and emotional support, fostering learning motivation and organising out-of-school support and activities (Figure 1). Even though most of these parental roles were not specific to education during the pandemic, the pandemic influenced its enactment. In this section, we presented how parents of children with ASN described involvement in their children's education during the pandemic.

In the early stages, the pandemic led to a rapid shift to home schooling, highlighting the effect of different aspects of the home environment on a child's learning even more. As a result, the parents described the difficulties in ensuring an optimal space for the child's learning (e.g. space to study, availability of digital devices), which was emphasised in families with school-age siblings. In addition, remote education has introduced various digital tools and devices, placing special demands on families in terms of the availability of digital resources. Therefore, parents described that—at the onset of the pandemic—they had to *ensure access to educational resources*, such as digital devices, the Internet and apps, as well as access to assistive technologies to support their children's learning, as described in the following excerpts:

> We had to buy a printer, since we could not use the printer we had anymore. There were too many prints. (Mother of a 9th grade boy, Slovenia)

> In the fourth grade, we bought him a tablet to help him a bit. He has sight difficulties, so it is not the same for him if he uses a mobile phone or tablet. Therefore, my husband and I decided to buy him a tablet, it has a larger screen after all, so it was easier for him… (Mother of a 5th grade boy, Croatia)

In addition, children's limited experience with the remote learning environment and lack of competency with digital technologies increased the invitations for parental involvement, as recounted by a mother of an 8th grade boy from Slovenia: "He had difficulty sending anything to a teacher because no one had asked him to do it up to that point... That's why we had to help him. Until the pandemic, he did not need to know that. Why should he?*"*

The parents described their role in *mediating the use of digital tools* as part of the teaching process by mediating communication between child and teacher, receiving and submitting school assignments through various online platforms and/or supporting a child in using digital devices and online platforms for learning. In addition to the general parental competencies needed to support a child's learning, remote education also highlighted the importance of parental digital competencies, leaving behind students who lack these resources within the family.

The most frequently described role of parents in all three countries was to *support children's learning* and in that to assume a significant part of a teacher's role. Parental activities within this role ranged from helping with

assignments to directly instructing and explaining the content of lessons. As described by the mother of a 6th grade boy from Serbia, this case was particularly highlighted when teachers did not fully perform their professional role, such as when they only referred students to learning materials to study alone or did not provide any learning material: "It was a problem for me when he sits at home all day and does not receive assignments or materials. All day. No materials for any subject. So, I started contacting other parents, 'please send us if you have something'. So at least we can do something." As a result, parents felt that they should assume the role of teacher to ensure continuity in their children's education.

Parent activities within this role also included the use of strategies aimed at adapting the teaching process to the child's strengths and needs. These strategies included efforts to present the learning content in different ways, to break the task into manageable parts, and/or to adapt the pace, task demands and instructions to their children's needs, as described in the following excerpt. Parental activities in this role often required an understanding of the learning contents as well as skills to individualise the teaching process.

> The first step is to look at what he needs to do for homework, and then we assess what he can do himself, so we do not help him with everything. If it's a new topic, like fractions, my husband starts explaining everything from scratch, with lots of examples and pictures... As for learning, we present the content visually, with mind maps, cards, stories, discussions... Since he needs individualised support, we realised that learning cannot be reduced to reading, there are different ways to learn. (Mother of a 5th grade boy, Croatia)

Some parents acknowledge that remote learning enabled them to be even more effectively involved in their children's education, as learning content, teaching strategies and assignments became visible to parents via TV instructions, synchronous or asynchronous classes and Viber groups. Consequently, parents were better informed about the instructional process and were able to individualise their children's education more successfully:

> When she goes to school, I do not know what she was learning, I have to first check what she has learned from the things they have learned in school and then start working on it. This way, it was easier for me because I was familiar with her school work. I have been listening to her teachers while I was doing some household chores, and it was clear to me what they are doing, how they are doing it, what she knows, and what she does not know. So I could assess what she has learned with just a few questions. In that sense, it was easier for me, I could help her learn with less effort. (Mother of a 7th grade girl, Serbia)

In addition to the above-mentioned predominantly task-oriented parental roles, the participants also described having a role in *providing emotional support* and *strengthening the child's motivation to learn* during the pandemic. Indeed, the period studied included several normative and non-normative transitions for children and families (e.g. transitioning between different modes of education, transitioning between class and subject teaching, introducing new individuals to support the child's learning and adjusting to a diagnosis) that elicited different emotional responses from children:

> The children were under pressure during home schooling. M. also felt that it was too much for her. She said that she could not take it anymore, that she was going to withdraw from the lessons, she had difficulty following instructions, she often needed my help... (Mother of a 9th grade girl, Slovenia)

For some children with ASN, the alternative forms of instruction (e.g. TV instruction, online education and hybrid education) were more appropriate than school-based instructions because they provided more time for learning and/or allowed for different methods of learning. However, for the majority of children with ASN, this issue resulted in emotional distress for various reasons. One such example was noted during the interview with a mother from Serbia, where she described an increase in peer violence during the pandemic, which led to his son being a target of such behaviour:

> He had some problems because he was mostly around girls. He was subjected to name-calling and harassment, so I approached his classroom teacher, and she called in the school psychologist. The school psychologist had a conversation with me, my child, and his classroom teacher. Since then, every time he has a problem, he talks to a psychologist or me. (Mother of a 7th grade boy, Serbia)

The following quote illustrated the negative influence that the discrepancy between teachers' expectations during remote education and after returning to school had on the self-esteem of children with ASN. As a result, the parents felt the need to support their children more intensively and emotionally by listening to them, praising them, giving them affection and empathising with them.

> Despite all the anxiety, uncertainty and fear we all experienced due to the pandemic, last year was easier for her, she did not feel stressed. And now, in the sixth grade, she is under a lot of stress, she cries, she comes out of school overwhelmed, she does not spend a lot of time with other kids, and she says she cannot achieve all she has to. (Mother of a 6th grade girl, Serbia)

The intense emotional reactions accompanying the learning process in the case of some students with ASN were perceived by their parents as a risk to the child's motivation for learning. In addition, the loose structure of

activities in the remote mode of teaching was threatening for children with ASN with poorly developed self-regulation skills, affecting their motivation to become involved and sustain their engagement in learning activities. Therefore, parents not only become engaged in maintaining existing routines, such as sleeping routines and study habits, but also in *establishing new structures and routines* for their child:

> I created a schedule for each day, they would study, complete the assignments, and each of them had their own schedule, so they could write down if they completed the assignment. And that is how we started establishing some kind of system for learning. (Mother of a 9th grade boy, Slovenia)

In addition to assisting with learning planning, parents employed various strategies to promote the development of their child's self-regulation skills, including reminding children of their schedule and tasks, reinforcing learning activities and monitoring and evaluating the child's progress, as illustrated by the mother of an 8th grade boy from Slovenia: "So you had to check if he has done his homework, if he has done it correctly, if he has done all the assignments…*"*

The parents also described that they were actively involved in *organising out-of-school support and activities* for their children during the pandemic by dedicating their time, commitment and financial resources. Even though this role is not directly related to a child's school learning, we considered it important, since it requires redistribution of both child and family resources among school-related activities and out-of-school activities and support. Parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds described relying on private tutoring to ensure continuity of their child's education and/or to overcome the lack of individualised learning support in school. In addition, they described enrolling their children in various enrichment activities, including sports and music, because these types of activities have health and psychological benefits and provide their children with opportunities to socialise with other children: "She had practice three times a week... And that was this space for socialisation with others that kept us going during that time." (Mother of a 7th grade girl, Serbia)

In addition, investment in different types of paid treatments and services, such as speech therapy and psychological counselling, was specific to the parents of children with ASN. Parent responses indicated that they were heavily engaged in this role prior to the pandemic. However, the pandemic increased the need for psychological support for the child, whereas the frequent change in educational modalities during the pandemic resulted in a need for more complex coordination of school and out-of-school activities:

> …it was, 'It's not convenient for me', or 'I am not available right now'. This is your work time, if you have class on the first shift, finish it on the first shift. Instead, everyone is looking for what suits them

> personally, so I have to organise my whole life and activities to fit my child's schedule. Do you understand what I am trying to say? And then the child has training, extra classes, other activities, and we have to reschedule it all the time because our priority is school. (Mother of a 6th grade boy, Serbia)

Comparison across countries revealed similar patterns of parental roles in the education of children with ASN, with the role of parents in *supporting children's learning* being the most pronounced in all three countries. The only observed difference was related to the role of parents in *organising out-of-school support and activities*; that is, parents from Croatia and Serbia were likelier to report being involved in organising out-of-school activities and support, especially in aspects of private tutoring and specialised treatments and services. This factor suggested that insufficient and/or inadequate support from the school or other government service providers might increase the need for parents to seek and secure support for a child in the out-of-school context. This interpretation, which stems from the idea of interdependence between the quality of school support for a child and parental investment in out-of-school support and activities, was supported by the results of the Slovenian sample. Indeed, parents from Slovenia rarely described organising out-of-school support and activities for their children with ASN, and they frequently expressed satisfaction with school support and described different types of individualised school support during the pandemic:

> For example, he or we could easily signal to the teacher that he needs additional hours of support, either via online classroom or Zoom, in mathematics, where he encounters the greatest challenges. And then she would provide him with additional explanations, tailored especially for him… Well, anyone who had difficulties, not just X, anyone with problems had an opportunity to contact the teacher or mention to her during classes that they didn't understand something. And then she would inform them when she will be available on Zoom, so that they could sign-up and receive additional explanation. Also they had supplementary classes and extra classes. They had everything, just like during regular school. Moreover, special and rehabilitation pedagogues worked with them just the same as during the regular school. (Mother of an 8th grade boy, Slovenia)

The above-described findings suggested that the sudden shift to remote education, primarily online education, brought a diversification of parental roles, with parents becoming engaged in *ensuring access to educational resources* and *mediating the use of digital tools for learning.* In addition, pre-existing parental roles were expanded due to the nature of the crisis (e.g. defusing a child's concerns about the health and safety of others) and/or change of roles of other educational stakeholders (e.g. taking on the role of a teacher).

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH ASN

In addition to role diversification and expansion, most parents were intensely involved in their children's education during the pandemic, describing their involvement as stable high or increased. Parents with *stable high levels of involvement* described that the pandemic did not change their involvement intensity, as they were also considerably involved before the pandemic. The analysis showed that this group of parents described their engagement during the pandemic as consistently high across all parental roles. In contrast, the parents whose engagement *increased during the pandemic* described being more intensely involved in supporting their children's learning. Increased engagement was considered by parents as compensation for the scarce, inadequate and/or fragmented school support during the pandemic.

Both groups of parents described the education during the pandemic as a stressful process, overloaded with teaching content and additional demands from the school and teachers. The emotional tone in their accounts was characterised by a sense of exhaustion and a feeling of being overwhelmed, as illustrated below. This issue was particularly evident when the intensification of the parental role was added to the already intense parental involvement in raising the child, scarce family resources, and/or disruptive events, such as the loss of a job or the death of a family member. However, from the parent's perspective, the effort the parents invested in their child's learning, as well as the time and effort of the child, was not always noticed by the teacher.

> I am not sure how the school dealt with the remote education, but I was not able to carry on! For me it was, I do not know, a disaster! When he mentions homework, it makes me sick. And then when we had to find learning materials and instructions, I say to him, 'My dear child, how do you expect me to find it?' I have no experience with this, I only used the computer to watch cartoons and movies, nothing else. Then I call a colleague and she explains it to me, since she has some experience in the last year, she has more information. So I started to work with her. This was really a disaster for me. If they have to attend class like this all the time, I do not know how I would manage, I would soon lose my nerve. (Mother of a 5th grade boy, Serbia)

A small number of parents described their involvement in children's education during the pandemic as *stable low*, whereas a *decreasing level of parental involvement* was noted in a single interview. The mother of a girl from Slovenia explained that the *decreasing level of involvement* resulted from the increasing requests for involvement from other family members; that is, she had to reduce her involvement in the education of her daughter with ASN to support a child who had just enrolled in elementary school:

> I was not very involved in her education because I was mainly focused on her brother who was in first grade. She knew the basics, she knew she needed to learn, she knew the basics of schooling, and I really was not involved in it anymore. If she needed help, of course, but other than that, no, because I was really focused one hundred percent on her brother. I mean, he transitioned from kindergarten to school, and he really did not know that he had to sit, that he had to learn, that he had to write... (Mother of an 8th grade girl, Slovenia)

The factors influencing these changes in the level of involvement of parents of children with ASN were described in more detail in the following section.

Factors influencing the patterns of parental involvement in the education of children with ASN during the COVID-19 pandemic

The presented findings demonstrated that the pandemic-induced shift to remote and blended models of teaching and learning highlighted the importance of the active engagement of parents in their children's education, resulting in intensified and/or more diverse parental involvement in most families. Several factors belonging to the spheres of individual child, parent, family, school and community influence parents' decisions (not) to intensify their involvement during pandemic or change their involvement activities. In the following chapter, these factors are explored through a description of the three identified parental profiles with different involvement decisions and practices during the pandemic. We named three profiles based on the major theme that best represents the specific pattern of parents' beliefs, perceptions and involvement practices during the pandemic: (a) *Increased parental involvement as a response to the emergency*, (b) *Stable high parental involvement as an expression of life's mission* and (c) *Stable low parental involvement as a response only to the child's invitation.* In the description of each parental profile, we focused on the dominant position of the parents belonging to the group and set a contrast between different profiles while also recognising that some variations in parental behaviours and factors influencing these patterns of involvement were present within each profile.

Increased parental involvement as a response to the emergency

Parents who significantly increased their involvement in their children's education during the pandemic shared a common belief that they should be involved in their children's education; not only due to the inflated needs of their children during the difficult period of the pandemic but also because they generally endorsed what the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of the parental involvement process (2005) called active parental role construction for involvement. The parents believed that their parenting role included regular at-home engagement

with the child in relation to his/her learning and homework and reported their profound sense of personal responsibility for children's learning and advancement, particularly during crises. The active role construction for involvement in children's education, being one of the key factors in determining parents' decision to intensify their involvement during the difficult period induced by the shift to remote and hybrid models of teaching and learning, was clearly visible in the following succinct statement of a mother whose daughter was currently in the final year of her lower secondary cycle:

> Like it or not, I had to pay attention to what they had for homework. To check if they wrote it at all, if they photographed it, if they sent it. So, actually, I was like a teacher. (Mother of 9th grade girl, Slovenia)

Besides having an active role construction for involvement, a crucial factor in these parents' decision to intensify their involvement during the pandemic was their recognition of the child's additional difficulties in learning and problems of adaptation to the new circumstances during this period. Many parents reported the various academic, social and emotional day-to-day struggles of their children during remote and/or hybrid teaching and learning and discussed how they felt invited to help and alleviate the unpleasant and unexpected situations of their children with ASN. In some cases, the parents reacted to an explicit specific invitation from the child to become involved; however, they mostly acted on their own personal sense of duty and urged to help their child in need, as demonstrated in the following interview excerpt:

> Well, I know that she can't achieve something, in 95% of cases because of dyslexia, because she needs much more time to complete the task. And I was there and could check that everything was as it should be, that she didn't skip something… as they cannot complete everything on time, they need more time, they skip the most difficult parts and bypass something because they can't achieve it, their day lasts only 24 hours… So, in that very first phase, I controlled if she completed all tasks, not to miss anything and to prompt her to do more when I saw that it was difficult for her (Mother of 7th grade girl, Serbia)

As parents constructed an active role regarding involvement and clearly recognised their child's difficulties in dealing with school demands during the pandemic, they kept a proactive stance towards schools. Rather than waiting to be invited to participate or simply responding to teachers' requests or appeals, these parents often acted in advance, asked for guidance and support and even formulated specific demands towards the schools during the pandemic. They were also the ones who often initiated communication with school personnel and had regular

online check-ins with teachers to demand information and extra support. They mostly believed that they had the full right to demand adjustments and adaptations for their children during the pandemic and frequently expressed that the schools were not doing enough to meet the needs of a child during this difficult period. Consistent with this opinion, they often viewed their intensified involvement as a reaction to the inadequacy of the system in accommodating all the needs of the children. The school support for the child during the pandemic was perceived as irregular and fragmented. In addition, individualisation and differentiation were inadequate for most subjects, whereas school-level support mechanisms, such as remedial lectures or individual personal assistance, were not available for long periods—at least in Serbian and Croatian schools. The dissatisfaction with school support for the child during remote teaching and learning was visible in the following interview excerpt of a mother from Slovenia who was otherwise satisfied with the frequency and adequacy of the communication with the teachers:

> I provided learning aid during remote teaching. Because she was supposed to receive learning support, but she didn't… I was the teaching assistant. (Mother of 9th grade girl, Slovenia)

In a similar fashion, a mother from Croatia described her negative experiences with school support for her son:

> In 7th grade, I saw something was happening to him. Then I called the school to ask what was going on, but no one responded. But you know, when an excellent student starts failing, you should be worried… I didn't know what happened at the school, their education rehabilitation professional went on sick leave, they could not find a permanent one… and they forgot [about] him. Later on, the psychologist said to me two or three times: 'But the teachers must have forgotten'. And I responded: 'This is completely unacceptable!' (Mother of an 8th grade boy, Croatia)

Having the time and energy to support children in learning was another relevant factor that facilitated parental decisions about the intensification or change of their involvement during the pandemic. Parents who could balance their work and family roles during the pandemic and were in the position to organise their entire lives while providing support for their children (e.g. because their working arrangements during the pandemic enabled them to establish home offices and spend more time with their child at home or had support from other family members—partner or older siblings) reported increased levels of in-home involvement and provision of a more systematic and efficient support for their child. The following statement of the mother from a Slovenian context illustrated how she organised her life during the pandemic according to the needs of her son:

> I was able to adapt my working hours and family obligations to his school... Since I have my own company, I adapted my work to his schedule… Me, whose B. has all these special needs, was able

> to adjust myself, my working hours, so I could help him, because the school just didn't deal with it well. It was almost like home schooling. (Mother of a 9th grade boy, Slovenia)

However, many parents in the increased involvement group struggled to find the time and energy to adequately support their children during this period. They had difficulties balancing their lives and viewed the pandemic as a very challenging period, especially if the support for the child or for them was not present within the family. Many parents reported their stress reactions, feelings of exhaustion, tiredness and frustrations related to the intensification of their involvement and challenges faced by their child in dealing with new circumstances of life and schooling, as exemplified by the following interview excerpt:

> As I have to sit with him for 2–3 hours a day, and because I have my job… we wouldn't have a cooked meal that day, we would eat sandwiches for lunch. If I have to sit with him…And the teachers used to say to me: 'You have to work harder with him'. Great! But I have another child, I have the whole house and I have myself. If I want everything to be clean and neat, so that we have cooked meals, I cannot sit for 4–5 hours… So I was constantly torn apart between Daniel and Val. All the time. I came home from work, immediately asked if homework was finished: 'Give it to me to check it!' And as I put more pressure on him, he would resist… Constant problems. Stressful for him, stressful for me, problem, big problem. (Mother of a 5th grade boy, Croatia)

Besides emphasising the negative emotions related to the fact that parents could not be readily available for their child's needs due to their work and/or family duties, several parents in this group also raised the issue of their less-than-optimal competences for supporting the child. The following quotation speaks clearly about one mother's frustrations related to her estimation that she lacked teaching competences and had to learn the subject content by herself before being able to explain it to the child:

> In remote school, I could help him once in a while, but I don't know, I don't know that much. I first had to learn what they were learning, and study a couple of examples of how to solve the task, so that I could continue working with him. Otherwise, you try, but you cannot catch up with what's in school. (Mother of an 8th grade boy, Slovenia)

Rather than engaging in their own preparation for the teaching role, many of these parents believed that searching for support elsewhere—in or out of the family—and providing additional support in the form of private tutoring and other educational or psychological services were easier and more efficient, especially as these families usually had financial and social resources to accommodate their children's needs. In all three countries during the

pandemic, these kinds of services were either largely unavailable in public institutions or had limited provision. Therefore, many families opted to secure services through the channel of private tutoring providers or private therapists (e.g. psychologists, speech therapists or special education teachers) who could offer their services throughout the pandemic. The following quotation representing using out-of-family services in combating the learning deficiencies of the child was a response of a mother from a higher socio-economic status (SES) family, which was typically observed in this group:

> We also have a lady who is learning with him, when I am at work. She helped him a lot. If we didn't have her, I can't tell, I really can't tell that he would have succeeded finishing this grade, because his teachers, regardless of his individualisation and all that, did not implement it. (Mother of a 5th grade boy, Croatia)

Stable high parental involvement as an expression of life's mission

Similar to the group of parents who intensified their involvement during the pandemic, parents in the 'stable high involvement' group also assumed active role construction for involvement and required no direct invitation for involvement from the teachers' or child's side. They claimed that supporting their children's education was an important part of parenting, which inevitably entailed a parent's willingness—and even obligation—to be involved. This dominant position implied the readiness of the parent to invest a lot of effort and time in assisting their child's entire educational path (i.e. not only during times of crisis, such as the pandemic) and even making substantial personal sacrifices for the sake of the child's advancement and well-being. These parents described their role during the pandemic as being on a mission of facilitating the child's learning and preventing their failure in school, as shown in the following two interview excerpts from Serbia and Croatia:

> Exhausting? Well, when you see the results, then it's not. This revives a new energy in me and somehow it is my mission. My children's laughs are my mission, that is something that keeps my life moving. (Mother of a 7th grade boy, Serbia)

> I felt like I was in a cage, closed with my children (laugh). This was not a good feeling… but many feelings aren't good, but when you know, at least you believe that I am doing something for his own good, for his future, I feel motivated. Some intrinsic motivation, not for bragging about 'I can't wait to come home so me and my son could learn together and I can help me'. I do not have that passion anymore (laugh). But we keep working, we are not quitting. All of us are involved. Daddy is involved as well, not just me. (Mother of a 5th grade boy, Croatia)

These parents' active role construction for involvement during the pandemic was amplified by the recognition that their children had disabilities or difficulties that hindered the easy adaptation to new circumstances in schooling and life in general. By their direct engagement in their child's learning and serving a supportive and understanding role regarding the challenges with the changes in teaching process, these parents believed that they were compensating for deficiencies in the educational system, as well as for the difficulties of a particular child. Parents in this group were quite knowledgeable about their child's strengths and challenges and well informed about their daily life in school; they also believed that they were greatly responsible for their child's educational outcomes and advancement. In general, they were satisfied with their child's school support during the pandemic and claimed that they cooperated successfully with the child's teachers. In contrast to the 'increased involvement' group, these parents demonstrated an in-depth understanding of the problems that schools encountered while reacting to the restrictions and changes in the organisation of the schooling process imposed by the pandemic; they also highly valued the efforts of the teachers to organise extra lessons for their child, provide additional explanations of the subject contents, and offer emotional support. Several parents from the Slovenian sample discussed the good practice of providing many additional lectures with special educators for children with ASN, whereas Croatian and Serbian parents emphasised the examples of particular teachers who demonstrated special care and concern for the child's academic and emotional well-being. The following interview excerpt clearly demonstrated how parents highly appreciated teachers' endeavours oriented towards facilitating their child's learning or boosting their well-being during remote and hybrid education:

> There were two teachers who really went beyond the limit for these children during the pandemic, I mean, this was more than the maximum you can give of yourself… I heard the teacher said to my daughter: 'Look, if you don't understand, here is my phone number, which I am on until seven in the evening every day, including Saturday and Sunday. You can call me. If I don't respond, it means I can't respond right now because I have someone else on the phone or I have Zoom with another class. I'll call you back'. (Mother of a 7th grade girl, Slovenia)

However, some contrasting views regarding parents' perceptions of the quality of school support for their child were also observed in this parental group. These parents expressed their general dissatisfaction with the school system and discussed the insufficient capacity of the system in providing adequate individualisation for their children during the pandemic. Therefore, they decided to act and prevent the possibility of their children failing due to the dysfunctionalities of the educational system. The following statement of a mother from the Serbian context indicated the problem of communication with teachers:

> I am really not satisfied, and I am constantly writing these complaints… COVID-19 pandemic is just another excuse for them. Honestly, I think that the school is failing… We have the worst communication with our headroom teacher… instead of having the best possible communication with him, and him being the real support for the child and me… I have a feeling that our headroom teacher is ignoring us. Because he has some additional things to do for my child… (Mother of a 6th grade boy, Serbia)

Many parents in the 'stable high involvement' group described their constant intensive involvement as a response to the characteristics of the child or his/her diagnosis and special needs, conveying implicitly the belief that additional support and individualisation of the teaching and learning process was their responsibility, as observed in the following interview excerpts:

> R: How were you involved in your daughter's education during the pandemic?
>
> P: Well, I am involved from the beginning, just because she has a problem.
>
> R: So, there was no changes during the pandemic, compared to your previous engagement?
>
> P: For me, it was the same. I know that other parents were making a fuss because it was a problem for them to learn much more with their kids. But I didn't care, because literally I learned with her before, during and now… I accepted that my child has a problem and that I have to help her. (Mother of a 6th grade girl, Serbia)

In contrast to the position of parents in the 'increased parental involvement' group, parents in this 'stable high' group reported having sufficient time and energy to support their children and worried less about their level of teaching competences. Evidently, given the long history of engagement in children's education, many of these parents had already arranged their lives (and the life of the entire family) around their duty of helping the child and did not experience extra-high pressure during the pandemic or urge to widen the support network for the child. In some of these families, the mothers were not working outside the family and were able to provide support for the child all by themselves, whereas in other families, the support networks were organised within the family by distributing the responsibility of providing support between different family members (most often fathers and siblings, but distant family members were also involved). In some families that belonged to the higher SES group, the parents even hired a tutor to continuously work with the child on school tasks. The following interview excerpt depicted the typical response of a mother from Slovenia who organised her entire life to be able to provide adequate support for her child:

> Well, I am the mother of two children with dyslexia, with the older one being even worse than B., and I actually quit my job, so I could help them through schooling. It's already better than it was before as it is treated, but some issues still arise… So I've said that I'm not looking for a job, not until I get B. out of high school, because I know he needs my help. (Mother of a 9th grade boy, Slovenia)

However, in this group of parents, increased pressures and challenges were also found during the pandemic. Some parents, especially those who were the only providers of support for their child, also struggled to find the time and energy and had difficulties with their new roles during the pandemic, as observed in the following statement of a mother whose beliefs about her high competences for supporting children in school were shattered due to the new demands of pandemic education:

> Even [for] me as a professor, whose profession is teaching, could not teach this subject to my children, because for them I am primarily the mother. I am not a teacher for him… but the expectations were that I should have done it with him. But it doesn't work that way. He treats his teacher differently. He talks back to me and says, 'You don't know it, my teacher does it differently'. (Mother of a 5th grade boy, Croatia)

Stable low parental involvement as a response only to the child's invitation

Among parents who did not experience changes in their involvement during the pandemic, a few described their involvement as stable low. Compared with the previous two parental profiles, this parent group was characterised more often by passive parental role construction and the belief that parents did not have any special obligation to be involved and were not supposed to be actively engaged in the daily learning activities of their children. This belief was also coupled with the assertion that their children, being at the level of lower secondary education, were old enough to be independent and self-sustaining in their learning. For these parents, learning was viewed as the responsibility of the child him/herself, and teaching as the responsibility of the school, as exemplified by the following interview excerpt:

> P: In this period, I even excluded myself as a parent from his education, because I generally think that parent's interventions such as when I would monitor what and how a 13-year-old kid is doing, do not contribute to the child's achievement of independence. I definitely asked him how it was, what they were doing, but I didn't go into any details... So I could not say precisely how things were organised there…

> R: Have you ever contacted school during the pandemic in relation to any question or issue?
>
> P: No, I haven't, but this might be because I am not the type of parent who would bother them, if it is not necessary. (Mother of an 8th grade boy, Croatia)

This back position, which was observed more in parents with lower education and in families with restricted resources, also incorporated a low level of parents' general interest in issues related to their child's education and incomplete knowledge about the child's strength and difficulties. Passive role construction was related to the expectation of these parents that the child and/or school would ask if they needed support. Even though these parents, in general, believed that the provision of support in learning for their child was not their implied parental duty, they performed some tasks during the pandemic regarding their child's education; they were also nonetheless initially involved in ensuring access to digital technology (e.g. computers and the internet) as a prerequisite for their participation with their child's remote teaching and learning. The following interview excerpt represented the typical response of the parent in the 'stable low involvement' group, which positioned their involvement in their child's education during the pandemic as contingent upon explicit invitation from the child's or teachers' side:

> He was independent, and as I said, the teachers were also involved… if he said that he had something to print, we did it with my laptop, but otherwise he took care of everything himself. (Mother of a 9th grade boy, Slovenia)

Likewise, the following statement of a mother from the Croatian context illustrated her position as a passive recipient of information that her son provided to her about how he handled the challenges of pandemic education:

> P: I don't know, he did not say anything, he did not inform me that he was stuck with something, that something is not right, that he got some bad mark… As much as I know, everything went well.
>
> R: Did they offer remedial classes? Did he attend them?
>
> P: It seems to me that he took math…
>
> R: Was it online or in-person?
>
> P: I really don't know. (Mother of a 7th grade boy, Croatia)

The above quotations demonstrated how parents in this group perceived no special invitation for their involvement from the child's side and used this argument as the basis for the conclusion that their help was not needed. They also emphasised that the school sent no information conveying that parental involvement was necessary. These parents frequently reported that the schools did not raise any particular issue during the pandemic and certainly

did not demand their active engagement in their child's learning. The following interview excerpt demonstrated a parent's satisfaction with school–family cooperation and responsive teachers during the pandemic and emphasised her view that there was no any specific problem that should have been addressed by her active participation:

> R: How satisfied are you with cooperation with school in regards to your children during the pandemic? Was there some additional cooperation, something different than before?
>
> P: No.
>
> R: Everything was the same?
>
> P: Yes.
>
> R: In general, how satisfied are you with school support for your child?
>
> P: They organise additional lectures, so there is no problem.
>
> R: You are satisfied, aren't you?
>
> P: Yes.
>
> R: Did you contact the school during the pandemic asking for something?
>
> P: No. I mean, there was no need for this.
>
> R: Did the teachers contact you sometimes?
>
> P: No, there was no problem…
>
> (Mother of a 7th grade boy, Serbia)

Besides the passive role construction for involvement and perception of no invitation for involvement, the low self-efficacy beliefs of this group of parents for helping their children succeed in school were considered one of the most important factors that impeded the involvement of these parents during the pandemic. Many parents in the 'stable low' group were willing to help their children in learning during the pandemic; however, they strongly believed that they did not possess the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively support their children in learning at the level of lower secondary school and that they could not master the subject content easily. These low parental self-efficacy beliefs were the relevant concern for many parents with lower education, who mentioned that their schooling days were long gone and that they could not currently assist in their children's homework, as demonstrated in the following interview excerpt:

> Our problem is that I am from a bad family. I did not finish school, I do not have any qualifications… My wife unfortunately is the same… And we do not have this knowledge… it is really complicated… When he was at home I could not teach him, as I do not know. Honestly, I

> don't know. He knows more than I do… He was lagging behind, he did not learn, but…no one could help him. I wish that you would not judge me wrongly, it's not that we did not want to work with him, we simply… I am stupid for that! (Father of a 7th grade boy, Croatia)

Furthermore, the preoccupation of parents in this group with work and other family roles in their daily lives was another relevant factor that decreased the rates of their involvement during the pandemic. Many parents who were scarcely providing assistance in learning pre-pandemic also continued this pattern of involvement during the pandemic because they had no time and energy to be involved. In this element, the responses of parents in the 'stable low involvement' group were similar to the group of parents who chose to increase their level of involvement, which was observed in the following interview excerpt of a mother from Slovenia who was willing to provide assistance to her daughter in learning but could not organise her work life accordingly:

> It is true that I was the 'lucky one' who was working during the whole period of Corona, because I worked in a grocery store. And, of course, we worked all the time on our farm, and we were open. And unfortunately, I didn't really have time... The girls were alone, I have two daughters, they were left to their own devices. So, well, what can I say, it was great, given that they could somehow do it on their own, because, as I say, I wasn't really present at home. (Mother of an 8th grade girl, Slovenia)

Many parents in the group with stable low involvement reported the involvement of other family members in assisting the learning of their child. The presence of these support systems within the family was important, especially for lower SES families, as these families had limited financial resources to organise out-of-family support (during the pandemic, some families were especially vulnerable, as one or both parents experienced non-working periods or had reduced salaries). The involvement of family members other than the parents enabled help that would otherwise be unavailable to the child and compensated for the deficiencies related to a parent being incompetent or too busy to actively engage in the child's learning. The following quotation demonstrated that parents appreciated the willingness and determination of another family member to have an active role in her child's education:

> Luckily, I have two older children and my Ana used to learn with him when I couldn't as she is seven years older. When I was at work, my daughter Ana did more, she learned with him and assisted him with homework, but not too much, mostly he would do it alone…. And, my husband was at home and was doing everything that had to be done... (Mother of a 7th grade boy, Croatia)

In contrast to this activation of within-family resources in providing support for the child, in some families in which the mothers were not involved in their child's education and other forms of within-family support could not be organised, the parents decided to hire private tutors. The services of private tutors were used regularly, but only in families with higher SES who possessed substantial financial resources. Positive experiences with such an arrangement were visible in the following statement provided by a mother from Croatia who could not be involved in her son's education because of her long working hours:

> When Iva pushes him, he is working, otherwise nothing. Last year his GPA at the end was 4.0, and it was great! That is all thanks to her. I do not know what we would do without her... She really helps; they learn together basically. Iva comes two times a week, sometimes three times, if needed… when he has some assessment, even every second day. Minimally two times a week, and on weekends if there is a need. (Mother of a 7th grade boy, Croatia)

Discussion and conclusion

This comparative qualitative study explores parents' retrospective accounts regarding the changes in parental involvement in the education of children with ASN attending the lower secondary educational cycle during the COVID-19 pandemic in three culturally and educationally similar contexts of Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia. In each of these countries, two years of pandemic education for pupils in the lower secondary educational cycle were characterised by a mixture of remote and blended models of teaching and learning; however, the number of days in each model varied substantially between and within each country. The changes in the organisation of the schooling process and the blending of school and home teaching and learning have presented special challenges for pupils with ASN and require the establishment of additional school support systems and the at-home involvement of parents. Consistent with the results of the studies exploring parental perspectives and involvement during the different phases of pandemic (e.g. Carpenter & Dunn, 2020; Garbe et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Misirli & Ergulec, 2020; Nusser, 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021; Smith, 2020), the results of this study confirm that the pandemic education has intensified and diversified parental involvement in the education of children with ASN. Parents in all three contexts have increased at-home involvement and shared their experiences of assuming the roles of teachers in supporting their children's learning and providing direct instruction during remote teaching and learning. In addition, some new and specific tasks for the parents have emerged, including ensuring access to online education, structuring supportive at-home learning environments, mediating the use of technology and sustaining their children's learning in remote environments, which demonstrate that their parental roles have also

expanded during the pandemic. In supporting children's learning at home during the pandemic, the parents have reacted to the inadequacies of the educational system and schools in providing all the necessary accommodation for their children in these special circumstances; thus, the main goal of their efforts is to individualise and adjust the teaching and learning processes, the materials and the learning context to the children's specific needs. These findings demonstrating the increase in parental involvement and assuming some of the professional roles of teachers suggest that the complex and demanding natures and requirements of pandemic education for pupils with ASN emphasise the forever-present problems of inclusive education in our educational systems; these problems still include insufficient and fragmented individualisation and differentiation in teaching and learning, deficiencies in recognising the needs of diverse pupils' body and organising adequate school support, suboptimal teachers' competences and self-efficacy beliefs for working in inclusive classroom environments (Golubeva, 2014; UNESCO, 2021). The quality of inclusive education in regular and emergency circumstances is also reflected by the considerable allocation of resources of several families of children with ASN in organising out-of-school and out-of-family support to assist in learning and prevent the possibility of school failure of their children.

In addition to the description of types of parental roles during the pandemic in the three contexts, this study explores the personal, familial and contextual motivators for parental involvement during this challenging period. We used the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) model's first-level factors to describe the three parental profiles with different involvement activities and intensities due to diverse parental role construction for involvement, parental self-efficacy beliefs or perception of knowledge and skills, perception of contextual invitation to involvement and perception of family life context and available family resources (Walker et al., 2005; Whitaker, 2019).

The group of parents who intensified their involvement during the pandemic and the group of parents who claimed to have a stable high level of involvement both have active role constructions for involvement and share similar perspectives on their children as the persons who need additional support in learning; however, they have different perceptions regarding life context during the pandemic and have different abilities to help their child succeed. Those who intensified their involvement are generally highly involved in their children's education, even in pre-pandemic times; however, these additional demands of pandemic education and suboptimal support of the school for their children have increased their levels of engagement. These parents struggled during the pandemic, which is related to high levels of stress, feelings of frustration and exhaustion in their new position and experiences of increased dissatisfaction with school. However, consistent with their active role construction and perception of shared responsibility for children's success between parents and school, they have continued to proactively

advocate for children's rights in schools, demanding accommodation, support and additional assistance within and out of family. Parents who constantly provide support for their children are also highly aware of their child's difficulties and needs, but they have lower expectations from the system. In general, they are more content with what the children already received from the school and do not feel entitled to demand additional adjustments and support from the teachers during the pandemic. Evidently, they are holding what Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) called the parent-focused role construction, indicating that the parent is ultimately responsible for the child's educational outcomes, and they have organised their entire life to enable their active involvement. In contrast to both groups, parents in the 'low stable' group are less aware of their children's difficulties and do not feel obliged to participate in their education. They are prone to react more to explicit invitations from the child. Some parents from this group have lower education, have low parental self-efficacy beliefs for helping, have no time and energy and believe that the school and the child himself/herself are responsible for a child's achievement. In general, these parents are not very knowledgeable about their children's rights in the educational system and have no clear ideas about the possible adjustments and accommodations that can be offered and therefore have no specific demands for the school during the pandemic. Other parents in the same group, those from higher SES families, have decided to save their personal capacities and invest instead in out-of-school support systems, such as private tutoring, instead of searching for additional support within the educational system.

In summary, the description of these three diverse parental profiles demonstrates the importance of parental beliefs, particularly the parental role construction for involvement (parent-, partnership- or school-focused) in motivating parental involvement in the education of children with ASN. It also mentions the importance of parental recognition of a child's strengths and difficulties, which is defined within Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model (2005) under the concept of (implicit) invitation from the child as one of the primary motivators for increased engagement of parents of children with ASN during the pandemic. Other level 1 factors of the HDS model, that is, self-efficacy beliefs and perception of family life context, have also been found to be relevant and appropriate for the description of what motivates parents to be involved with the education of children with ASN during the pandemic. Even though the model is developed based on the experiences of parents of children in the general population in regular circumstances, it serves equally well in describing the psychological motivators for involvement of parents of children with ASN. It also adequately captures several personal, familial and contextual factors that can influence parental involvement during the pandemic. However, in contrast to the research conducted in the contexts of Western societies and educational systems (e.g. Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995; Fishman & Nickerson, 2015), the results of this study indicate that the explicit invitation for parental involvement

from teachers is scarce. Parents act much more from their personal sense of responsibility and belief that they should be involved in their children's education and have reacted based on the perception of the child's difficulties in dealing with the requirements of the system. This interpretation can be assessed through the lens of still-dominant traditions in the contexts of Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia, which clearly separate the domains of school and home, in which the school is responsible for children's education and that teachers do not view inviting parents for participation in children's learning as a part of their role; although they do, in general, welcome parental at-home involvement (Kovacs Cerović et al., 2010; Pahić, et al., 2010).

Finally, the results of our study emphasise the importance of parental perceptions of the quality of school support for the child as a factor that is closely related to their involvement decisions but is not adequately addressed in the existing models of parental involvement. Consistent with the arguments of Park and Holloway (2018), we found that parental involvement is greatly motivated by a perceived need for such involvement because parents want to mitigate the incapacity of the schools to adequately meet and respond promptly to the needs of children with ASN during the challenging period of pandemic education. We believe that the interdependence between (the quality and the level of) school support and (the quality and the level of) parental involvement in the education of children with ASN can be described through the seesaw concept—the higher and better the quality of school support for the child, the lower the parental engagement in the child's education and vice versa, and if school support is inadequate or insufficient, the parents are in the position to act or ask for private support elsewhere, mostly in parallel tutoring systems. Future research on parental involvement incorporating these interactions between family and school and interactions between family, school and parallel educational systems will contribute to further explaining the complex processes through which parents decide about their involvement in the education of children with ASN. Future research will also benefit from the inclusion of more diverse samples of parents in terms of socio-economic status and minority status to capture a more nuanced and complete picture of parental perspectives and practices.

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