*‘We'd never had to set up a virtual school before’:* opportunities and challenges for primary and secondary teachers during emergency remote education

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about the largest disruption to formal education in recent history and has resulted in school closures and the move to online teaching and learning across the globe. Using data from interviews with 25 teachers and head teachers in England and Greece, this paper aims to capture educators’ experiences during emergency remote education (ERE) in spring-summer 2020 and contribute to current and future conversations about the post-pandemic school. Through a qualitative approach, the paper reports on the often improvised and compromised nature of online schooling during the first pandemic lockdown and presents the opportunities and challenges teachers experienced with the move to emergency remote education. It discusses how didactic modes of teaching prevailed, highlights the importance of parental involvement during ERE and argues that the move to online teaching and learning has accentuated digital inequalities. The findings of this study cast light on the hitherto unexplored area of ERE and offer original insights for future policymaking, research and practice on how schools can develop readiness and resilience to face future closures in a post-pandemic world.

Keywords: emergency remote education, online schooling, digital education, teachers

# Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about the largest disruption to education in recent history. School closures during national lockdowns rendered face-to-face learning, in the form of traditional, place-bound tuition impossible and educational institutions experienced a rapid shift to online, digital practices due to full or partial school shutdowns. Although, distant and remote approaches to pedagogy and curriculum design facilitated by digital technology use are not new, these ‘have taken on renewed salience’ during the pandemic (Williamson et al., 2020, p. 108). The terms ‘emergency remote education’, ‘emergency remote teaching’ and ‘pandemic pedagogies’ have been used to describe educational practices and contextualise the phenomenon under the extraordinary circumstances these changes have taken place. As Hodges et al. (2020) contend, well-planned, carefully designed and considered online learning experiences differ substantially from the abrupt migration to emergency remote education (ERE) that educational institutions experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, the term ERE is used in this paper to refer to the rapid transition to home schooling that involved the design and facilitation of online teaching and learning. In particular, this paper reports on educators’ experiences during ERE in England and Greece during the first pandemic lockdown in spring-summer 2020. Areas of focus include the platforms and methods used to facilitate online teaching and learning as well as the opportunities and challenges teachers experienced with the move to ERE. The paper considers how didactic modes of teaching prevailed, highlights the importance of parental involvement during ERE and argues that the move to online teaching and learning has accentuated digital inequalities. These findings contribute to current and future conversations about post-pandemic schooling and also offer original insights for future policymaking, research and practice on how schools can develop readiness and resilience to navigate uncertainty and face future closures.

# Emergency remote education during COVID-19 school closures

The move to ERE brought about unprecedented challenges to schools and there is still limited systematic research that sheds more light into teachers’ experiences of remote schooling. Existing studies published to the point of finalising this article (February 2021) highlight how English schools’ response to ERE has been characterised by the extent of its variation (EEF, 2020) ranging from online distance learning with video conferencing facilities at one end of the spectrum, through to traditional worksheet activities that students are expected to complete independently, with little or no support and supervision at the other end (Parkin et al., 2020). Selwyn and Jandrić (2020, p. 992) highlight the differentiated nature of how remote schooling has been experienced even within individual schools and describe this as a mix-and-match approach that adopts the use of a ‘hodgepodge of technology’.

Research conducted on the impact of the ERE on schools in England highlighted how the approaches more likely to be offered by primary teachers included accessing pre-existing online content from external providers, completing a worksheet and reading a book while secondary teachers were more likely to adopt more active learning approaches that included synchronous teaching (Sharp et al., 2020). Similar practices were described in a survey of 277 schools in England according to which setting students tasks in digital platforms and sharing online video materials were the most common approaches while delivering homework packs was also reported by a third of teachers (Brink et al., 2020). Although research within a Greek context remained limited up to the point of finalising this paper, findings from a large-scale teacher survey revealed that teachers predominantly used digital tools for looking for pre-existing or creating original educational resources and facilitating online teaching as well as a means of interacting with students (Perifanou et al., 2021).

These findings highlight how digital technologies were at large used to facilitate more traditional, teacher-centred approaches and pedagogies that evolved around sharing learning material and resources whereas working collaboratively with teachers and other pupils was less frequently reported. As Hall et al. (2020, p. 439) argue, adopting a more student-centred approach and facilitating collaborating learning or peer review activities requires ‘specific pedagogical-, content- and technological knowledge and skills’ whereas replicating traditional classroom pedagogies is simpler to achieve. To this end, Manousou et al. (2021) emphasise the teacher-centred, online lecture-based nature of the training provided to Greek educators during and first lockdown and highlight the need for offering instead training within a participant-centred environment that allows for opportunities for interaction and collaboration in order for teachers to be able to create similar experiences for their students.

Other research in the field has emphasised the increasing digital inequalities that have been exacerbated by the move to online schooling particularly for children from low-income families (Andrew et al., 2020a; Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020) and children with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) (Mantzikos & Lappa, 2020) as well as the impact of school closures and lack of social interaction on Greek students’ mental wellbeing (Nikolaou, 2020). At the same time, it is important to also remain mindful of how school closures have shifted education from the classroom to the home and how there is a high level of variability in the parents’ capacity to effectively engage with home schooling due to lack of physical resources, time constraints, literacy issues and heightened stress levels (Aguilar et al., 2020; Doyle, 2020).

Notwithstanding the significance of these predominantly quantitative studies, a recent rapid systematic review on teaching and learning during the pandemic highlighted the need for more qualitative research exploring in-depth stakeholders’ experiences during ERE (Bond, 2020). As such, the present paper addresses this need and develops a deeper and more meaningful understanding of how teachers experienced and navigated the move to ERE in spring/summer 2020 in England and Greece. These original insights will be relevant for informing educational policy making aimed at developing school readiness and resilience to face future closures in a post-pandemic world. To this end, the article considers the following questions:

* What types of digital platforms and tools did teachers use to facilitate ERE and what did they use them for?
* What were the opportunities and challenges that teachers identified in relation to ERE?

The choice of countries was not random but was informed by the findings of a recent study conducted by the European Commission that aimed to benchmark progress in relation to ICT implementation in schools and specifically in relation to access, use and attitudes towards the use of technology in education (European Commission, 2019b). Findings highlighted the great diversity and variations that existed between these two countries. In particular, it was reported that there were fewer highly digitally equipped and connected schools in Greece compared to the European average (ibid). Furthermore, the number of schools with strong policies and support mechanisms in place for facilitating digital technology use for teaching and learning and promoting teachers’ professional development was very low compared to the European average (ibid). In contrast, schools in the UK were reported to be more highly digitally equipped and connected, while teachers demonstrated slightly higher digital confidence compared to the European average (European Commission, 2019c). It was, thus, deemed worthwhile exploring and comparing the two countries’ educational response to ERE when taking into consideration how they differed in terms of digital readiness and prior familiarity with digital technology use to support teaching and learning.

# Divergent pandemic policies on ERE

Both countries issued some relevant guidelines regarding the move to ERE but the striking difference was that Greece adopted a very centralised approach whereas the UK allowed room for greater divergence in relation to ERE. This is in line with the varying degree of centralization that overall characterises the two educational systems. Greece is pervaded by a highly centralised and bureaucratised educational system (Papazoglou & Koutouzis, 2020) controlled by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (MERA) which is responsible for formulating and implementing relevant policies. In contrast, each of the UK countries has a distinct education system under devolved governance. For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on England and the overall responsibility for this country lies with the Department for Education (DfE). In particular, recent policy reforms in the area of education have instated greater autonomy and powers to schools and have allowed the establishment of a vast array of school models leading to the diversification of the English education system (Keddie, 2015).

These differences between the two educational systems in terms of autonomy and centralisation are to some extent reflected in the relevant guidelines that became available with the move to ERE. The Greek government announced school closures in March 2020 and guidelines regarding synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning were posted on the MERA website (Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2020a, 2020c, 2020b). This centralised approach suggested that all schools should use the virtual learning environments (VLEs) ‘e-me’ and ‘e-class’ for asynchronous teaching and learning. Furthermore, the Greek MoE (2020d) promoted synchronous online teaching via the use of the Webex videoconferencing tool from the beginning of lockdown with phased access to virtual classrooms provided to all teachers and students shortly after school closures. A list of relevant online educational resources was also included in the guidelines and emphasis was placed on revising and consolidating previously taught content during ERE.

In March 2020 English schools also closed their gates to the majority of pupils apart from the children deemed most vulnerable and the children of critical workers (such as those working in health and social care, education and childcare, key public services etc.). The DfE published guidelines and good practice guides regarding remote education and the Oak National Academy website (2021) was set up with the financial backing of the DfE to provide schools with free lessons and digital resources. At the same time during the first lockdown schools were warned against live-streaming lessons by the National Education Union (NEU) for reasons of safeguarding and online safety (Lough, 2020).

As such, a more centralised approach was promoted by the Greek MERA whereas in England there was greater flexibility for schools to pursue their own ERE approach. A commonality between the two educational systems was that engaging with remote education was not mandatory during the first lockdown for neither Greek nor English students although the guidelines changed from September 2020 in both countries making provision and participation in ERE compulsory. According to the DfE (2021, p. n.p.)‘from the middle of March [2020] and for most of the summer term […] there was no requirement to provide remote education during this period, although some guidance was published’ and participation was not mandatory. Similarly in Greece engagement with remote education was not mandatory during the first wave of school closures and there were no formal repercussions for students or parents and carers if participation in ERE was limited or did not happen at all.

# Research approach and methods

Against this context, this section will go on to outline the research approach and the methods adopted. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers’ experiences of ERE during the first pandemic lockdown a rapid qualitative research approach using in-depth interviews was adopted (Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020). This allowed the researcher to capture the data in real-time within a short timeframe when the teachers were still either teaching remotely or they had just started teaching face to face again in the case of Greece. Ethical clearance was granted by the Ethics Committee at the author’s University and the research involved individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with educators from primary and secondary schools in England and Greece conducted between May-July 2020. A snowballing sampling strategy was adopted in order to recruit participants across the two countries. Staff in teaching and leadership positions were initially approached through the author’s personal networks and they in turn identified other possible respondents. The sample (n=25) consisted of educators across a range of schools in the two countries (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary or special educational needs schools) in inner-city, urban and rural areas. As Table 1 and 2 show, participants represented a variety of subject domains and levels of experience. For the purpose of this article, a pseudonym was assigned and any identifying features were removed so as to guard participants’ anonymity.

Table 1: Participant demographics and data summaries in relation to digital tools and practices adopted (England)

Table 2: Participant demographics and data summaries in relation to digital tools and practices adopted (Greece)

The interviews, which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, took place over the phone or via video conferencing tools such as Skype and Zoom, depending on the preference of each participant. They were audio recorded and then transcribed while the interviews conducted in Greek were also translated into English by the author. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019) was employed in order to identify levels of patterned responses within the data set. In particular Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis (ibid) were adopted and the data analysis process involved the following: i) reading the interview transcripts to familiarise oneself with the data; ii) generating preliminary codes relevant to answering the research questions; iii) examining the codes and collated data so as to identify potential overarching themes; iv) reviewing and refining the themes against the data set to determine how these answered the research questions; v) defining and naming the themes and identifying which aspects of data were being captured; vi) writing up the findings by embedding interview excerpts in the analytic narrative. Still, the analysis was not viewed as a linear process that involved moving from one phase to the next but it was a recursive process that developed over time.

The paper will now go on to explore how ERE materialised across different schools, the digital platforms, tools and practices that were adopted and the opportunities and challenges that educators identified.

# Findings

## Types and usage of digital platforms and tools

### Setting up ERE provision and schools’ readiness

The interviews revealed that there were marked variations and differences in the ways teachers and schools across the two national contexts coped with the shutdowns at the start of the lockdown in March 2020. Participants reported that they had less than a week to find new ways to support students and prepare for remote teaching. This included becoming familiar with VLEs and digital tools that were not frequently used prior to school closures or setting up new platforms and tools from scratch. As such schools’ readiness to cater for ERE was reported to be low.

With time, varying approaches as well as digital platforms were adopted and lack of homogeneity characterised the implementation of online schooling especially in England where there was no specific guidance from DfE regarding the particular types of tools or platforms that schools should adopt to facilitate remote teaching and learning. In particular, teachers from English schools reported they resorted to using pre-existing VLEs or apps such as Google Classroom, Showbie, Class Dojo, Show me your homework etc. which were previously used predominantly for school-home communication or as behavioural management tools while very few teachers used them for assigning homework.

The majority of Greek interviewees reported that they adopted the Ministry recommended platforms to set up virtual classrooms and facilitate synchronous teaching. However, technical issues with access and registration during the first two weeks led some teachers and schools to adopt alternative tools. For example, Athina described how ‘there was an unofficial off-record flexibility’ and her head teacher did not mind her using Zoom if this resulted into better educational outcomes. Similarly, Katerina recounted that Padlet was used across the whole school as ‘e-class’ was not user-friendly and they could access it ‘only very late at night after 1am’ at the start of the lockdown. However, these were exceptions as the majority of interviewees waited until technical difficulties were resolved and they could use the Ministry recommended VLEs.

The move to ERE appeared to be somehow easier for schools that had higher levels of digital readiness in relation to pre-existing use of VLEs. For example, one head teacher explained how the move to Google Classroom was seen as ‘quite an easy transfer to using it for home learning’ (Kate) due to teacher and students’ familiarity. Having pre-established VLEs in place was also seen to save valuable time as ‘all parents had this app on their phone, they were registered with their classes and they were communicating with the class teachers anyway’ (Freya).

In contrast, only two Greek teachers reported using VLEs prior to the lockdown and they both taught at Model Lower and Upper Secondary schools. The other Greek interviewees described how their school had to create up-to-date databases with the parents or students’ email addresses and register them on the new VLE:

In primary schools we do not ask for the parents’ email address. So the Head was not able to contact them via email, she had to collect all these over the phone, which was really challenging (Katerina).

Interview findings revealed that schools took different approaches to the types of teaching and learning activities they offered with the majority relying on using the digital platforms asynchronously as repositories for information, resources and worksheets for children to work through, while others delivered a full set of online synchronous lessons and created online timetables. Asynchronous activities were reported to be more prevalent in the English schools across both levels of education, while synchronous online teaching was more widely adopted in Greece particularly with older students (13-18). This is to some extent justified by looking at the national guidelines that differed across the two countries as described earlier in the paper.

In particular interviewees from only two schools in England reported that they used synchronous teaching consistently across the school. The first was a primary, which used Google Meets for weekly sessions with the students, and the second was a private school, which set up a synchronous weekly timetable for all students. In the case of Greece seven out of the thirteen interviewees reported that they used synchronous teaching as the main tool for supporting ERE. A daily timetable of videoconferencing sessions was created, however, this did not replicate the face-to-face curriculum. Instead the frequency of synchronous sessions was reduced due to concerns relating to digital overexposure and ‘children spending so many hours in front of a computer’ as well as due to the logistics of digital access from home and the challenge of parental support as ‘for very young children such as Year 1, an adult needs to be around to support them’ (Katerina).

### Opportunities and challenges associated with synchronous ERE provision

The teachers who engaged in both synchronous and asynchronous activities reported how video-streaming sessions were better received by parents as they felt that ‘having a kind of personal face to face sort of situation brings a bit more gravity towards the lesson’ (Jake). The benefits of synchronous teaching for the pupils were at large associated with social interaction and as this teacher explained ‘they seem quite excited to see each other […] they are feeling lonely, they are feeling bored, they're just desperate for any kind of interaction (Liz).

Similarly, teachers in Greece also described how her students preferred videoconferencing due to ‘their need to be together, to see their classmates, to talk about something different, we tried to have fun, they really needed this kind of contact’ (Dioni). The use of video conferencing was also viewed as a useful means of checking the wellbeing of the students or as one head teacher put it of ‘having eyes on the children, having a brief assessment of what they're looking like, are they looking despondent? Are they engaged?’ (Kate). Still, interviewees also highlighted how it was hard to replicate online the immediacy of the classroom, ‘the interaction with the students, looking at their faces, realizing if somebody is finding it hard to understand something even when they are not saying so, just from their expression’ (Athina).

Furthermore, some schools used synchronous tools such as Zoom to set up online assemblies since they realised that ‘the sense of community was one of the things that the children were really missing out on’. As this interviewee goes on to describe:

There's lots of thinking about teaching and about learning, but actually the community side of school, I think, is something that is quite easy to overlook in the panic of having a big strategy (Julian).

Other opportunities highlighted by interviewees in relation to synchronous teaching were associated with the ease of using and accessing videoconferencing platforms, as ‘Zoom was much easier to set something up and for children and parents to be able to log into’ (Julian). Other benefits related to the range of teaching tools available such as ‘sharing a screen to show a PowerPoint, annotating, having a whiteboard, the chat facility again for students to ask questions during a lesson and be able to reply’ (Brian).

Interview data from Greece also suggested that synchronous modes of delivery had the potential to widen participation, as students with limited digital access were able to ‘call in’ from a landline or mobile phone:

There was this kid who told me they only had one smart phone at home and the mum needed it for her work so the kid would connect using a landline and listen to my voice. This was a remarkable kid; he would try to imagine what I showed on my screen (Katerina).

However, even when students were able to access some of the educational activities via a mobile device this was not necessarily seen as providing them with a rounded learning experience. As one interviewee explained ‘a phone isn't sort of symptomatic of good learning in the sense of, you could see what the homework is, but, you know, you want to be able to complete a word document or whatever it is, or see the resource in it's full’ (Jake).

Teachers involved in synchronous teaching also reported challenges associated with students’ reluctance to use their camera and microphone so it was difficult to gauge engagement and understanding. As one teacher commented ‘they appear to be there, but how much are they actually learning?’ (Tessa). Similarly, a Greek teacher acknowledged how some of her students ‘would go AWOL’ during the videoconferencing sessions and as she explained ‘I did not wait for them to raise their hand so I would ask them questions to keep them alert’ (Athina). Others described how turning off their cameras protected their own home and family privacy:

I had my camera on so that they could see me for most of the sessions, but sometimes I had to switch off my camera as well, when my daughter would storm in and ask me questions because she was also having an online lesson (Eleana).

Other issues underpinning synchronous teaching reported in Greece were associated with parents having to deliver different curriculums for children in different years, which required simultaneous access to devices and the internet in order to attend live videoconferencing sessions. Furthermore, the majority of the teachers who used synchronous tools described how live-videoconferencing was ‘not the same as being in the classroom by any stretch of the imagination’ (Brian) and how they found the online experience somehow lacking:

This [WebEx] was very limiting, you might have wanted to approach a student and you said something encouraging or positive and they would go 'can you repeat please, your sound was breaking up' and the moment is lost really (Melina).

### Opportunities and challenges associated with asynchronous ERE provision

Some schools opted exclusively for asynchronous activities and a few interviewees in England mentioned how guidance from the NEU regarding the privacy risks and workload implications of live teaching via zoom influenced their schools’ direction towards asynchronous modes of ERE. One teacher, for example, explained how his school was not ‘a hundred per cent keen on live teaching’ because ‘that live element I think scares a lot of people’ (Donald). Some of the Greek teachers also reported how their school was against the use of synchronous teaching for data protection reasons despite the external imperatives to do so:

WebEx was greatly promoted by the Ministry, there was a strong imperative that this was to be used by everyone...But there were concerns regarding data protection with the use of cameras both by parents and teachers so a lot of schools, including us, were reluctant to use it (Ariadni).

All interviewees reported that they engaged in asynchronous teaching provision either as the sole means of delivering ERE or as a means of supplementing synchronous activity. The most predominant aspect of asynchronous teaching across both national contexts consisted of sharing worksheets with links to pre-existing material for students to work through. Fewer teachers in England described how they created narrated PowerPoint presentations and pre-recorded video lessons. For example, pre-recorded videos were used to ‘read parts of a scene from Shakespeare’ (Martin), ‘read story books to do with our literacy’ (Ranya) and to ‘create songs and massage stories’ and ‘videos using a model, to show to parents how manual handling works’ (Freya) for supporting SEND students.

The benefits of asynchronous activities were associated with fewer technical problems to overcome in real time and greater flexibility for teachers to create asynchronous activities and for students to access and engage with the material at their own pace and time. Furthermore, setting up asynchronous activities on VLEs was less demanding in terms of connectivity and device availability as this could be done when other members of the household were not using the internet or when a device became available.

The teachers who used pre-recorded material to facilitate asynchronous teaching reported challenges associated with working from home with young children and finding a quiet environment to record but also the challenge of becoming familiar with curating oneself online. As this teacher explained the biggest barrier was ‘being comfortable with recording yourself and then not being perfect’ (Donald).

### Institutional imperatives shaping ERE

The findings suggest that head teachers’ expectations of staff obligations during ERE also accounted for its differentiated nature in both countries. Since there were no national guidelines that ‘quantified’ ERE provision, it was down to each school to structure their approach. As a result, a few teachers reported strong institutional pressure to deliver online teaching and use particular tools and platforms:

I was made to video myself reading storybooks and posting them on Class Dojo for the children to look at…I was very uncomfortable, very, very, very uncomfortable. And I wasn't the only person, but what I, what I noticed is that very young teachers and teachers in their twenties and maybe thirties, they were okay with that, they went ahead. They're like professional YouTubers or whatever. And those of us, the older ones, we were not comfortable with that at all (Ranya).

For the above teacher her reluctance to create video lessons was not a matter of lack of technical skills but it had to do more with familiarity with the medium and feeling comfortable with being on camera. Similarly, other teachers experienced this as indirect, psychological pressure:

There was some indirect, psychological pressure from the head teacher because she said that ‘Whatever we do I want to do this collectively so if some colleagues were keen to organise Webex sessions she would say that 'it can't be only you doing this, I'd like all children to have equal opportunities’ (Katerina).

The majority of teachers, however, both in Greece and England acknowledged that their school allowed a certain degree of flexibility regarding the approach they would adopt. This also created tensions and a deputy head described ‘we've got a kind of mixed economy and some parents feel a bit disgruntled...in some classes they get the Zoom lesson and in other class, it's just a worksheet’ (Jake). Greek teachers also reported how the non-mandatory nature of ERE created conflicts amongst the teaching staff as ‘a lot of teachers fell out and there were disagreements along the lines of “I worked harder than you did” because nothing was compulsory and it was down to the individual and this created tensions’ (Dimitris).

## Opportunities associated with the move to ERE

A few teachers emphasised how the move to ERE created opportunities for students as ‘it's allowed them to work at their own pace’ (Tessa) and facilitated independent learning. As one interviewee noted there were pupils who ‘have kind like a fish to water gone through it, and some of them have even stated that they prefer that method of work and that they like the independence’ (Jake). Online synchronous teaching was also seen to facilitate ‘better understanding of some students’ progress because for example on the Zoom chat they will be giving me an answer when they wouldn’t normally put their hand up in the air’ (Brian). Asynchronous practices were also found by some teachers to enhance student engagement and ‘provided opportunities for shyer students who are usually not very animated in the classroom’ as these students ‘stood out during asynchronous teaching, perhaps because they thought that their work will only be seen by the teacher, they will not be exposed to the whole classroom’ (Diana).

Furthermore, benefits associated with a more flexible working pattern and reduced commute were reported by a few interviewees while those in Senior Leadership positions identified opportunities in relation to a permanent move to virtual staff and senior leadership meetings and one described altering their school’s professional development strategies by giving staff ‘a bit more freedom in terms of generating the materials and the resources, and actually they can dip in and out of it and engage in it as and when they need’ (Jake). Furthermore, the interviewees in Senior Leadership roles highlighted how the move to online teaching and learning reduced some teachers’ prior reluctance to adopt the use of digital practices:

I feel in some ways I’m being a bit of a prophet in the wilderness in using the VLE and a lot of ICT things. I think now people have seen that they are really useful […] so I think that staff who’ve not really had to engage with it have now had to and have seen the benefits and will carry on using them (Brian).

Greater exposure to new online educational tools and resources was also perceived positively by the majority of teachers and particularly participants from Greece who had very little, if any, prior experience of using digital platforms and tools. Indeed, the majority reported how they planned to continue to use these in the future ‘as a supplementary tool so I can upload assignments or games’ (Dimitris) or to ‘upload what we do in the class for the students who are absent so that they can catch up’ (Faidra). Last, the move to ERE was also perceived as a wake-up call by the majority of Greek interviewees who reflected on how unprepared their school was for online teaching and acknowledged that ‘we should not wait for another lockdown to be digitally connected with our students, I think this is really vital’ (Melina).

## Challenges associated with the move to ERE

### Access

One of the biggest challenges schools faced during ERE was addressing issues of digital access. The move to online teaching and learning served to highlight existing digital inequalities and demonstrate how these were more acutely experienced during the pandemic. All participants in both countries, with the exception of the private school, described how digital access presented a significant barrier for their students. This ranged from insufficient devices that had to be shared within the household to limited access to a smartphone with mobile data only or total lack of a digital device or internet connectivity in the household.

The majority of the interviewees reported that their school was not able to overcome these issues and the relevant governmental schemes that were publicised during the pandemic in both countries were not effective. As some teachers explained ‘we created a list but these devices never arrived at our school (Ariadni), ‘it was just empty promises’ (Dioni). Similarly, a head teacher in an English school described how ‘that strategy has been of no use to us at all…out of all the children who don't have devices there's only two that are going to get them’ (Kate). Instead, head teachers lent out spare devices available at their school or Academy Trust, others took advantage of schemes that became available, for example, by ‘accessing some funding from British Telecom’ (DM) while others received tablets ‘from the Parents and Teachers’ Association and the Local Authority’ (Vasiliki) or the ‘the association of the ship owners’ (Yiannis).

National lockdowns resulted in whole families working and studying from home and it was common that multiple family members needed simultaneous digital access. This was particularly profound in Greece where teachers reported how both themselves and their students struggled with having to share devices and not having sufficient internet bandwidth to allow good quality video conferencing for simultaneous sessions. For example, some Greek teachers reported how they had to ‘upgrade to fibre’ (Athina) or their partners ‘had to borrow a laptop from work’ (Eleana) or how they ‘could not afford to get a new computer so I got a new phone’ (Melina). Furthermore, the use of synchronous video conferencing was often problematic for families with multiple school-aged children due to timetable clashes but also for teachers themselves. As this interviewee explained, ‘my daughter was taught remotely, my husband worked from home and I taught remotely. So we had to resort to using any devices available’ (Athina).

Challenges regarding access were not restricted to infrastructure or internet availability but also to a conducive physical teaching and learning environment. Digital education is not an immaterial process and lack of space often posed additional challenges for larger households confined within the boundaries of their physical home. As one teacher described ‘there was this girl with seven siblings, all students, she’d go on the building's roof terrace in order to find a quite space to attend the synchronous session’ (Dioni).

### Technical Issues

Participants in both countries reported a range of technical issues but these were more prevalent in Greece during the first weeks of school closures. The migration of all Greek schools to Ministry recommended platforms resulted in systems crashing and teachers and students struggling to register and access these. In Greece technical support was available through a national website and helplines while teachers in England predominantly sought support through their schools’ ICT teams. As one teacher described resolving technical issues ‘was a patience game, we were all new to it’ (Ranya). Furthermore, troubleshooting often took place through the peer networks that teachers had set up with colleagues. Technical support to students and families was at large provided by teachers who described how they had to resolve login issues or support students with accessing the VLEs. As one teacher reflected ‘I felt as if I was acting as a helpdesk and teacher at the same time’ (Eleni) while another explained how she ‘painstakingly…probably had all 30 of them on the phone whilst talking them through how to get online on whatever device they had’ (Liz).

### Pedagogical challenges

A range of pedagogical challenges also underpinned the move to ERE. Building collaborative learning activities into online provision and facilitating peer interaction was very limited across both countries while student-teacher interaction at large involved students returning completed homework and teachers providing feedback and this was seen as a ‘one way teaching experience’ (Donald). As this teacher also pointed out ‘it's not the same as quality face-to-face teaching where the teacher can be assessing the children as they're going along and adapting the lesson, it's a poor replacement for that, but I think it's the best that we can do (Kate).

Additionally, engaging students with more creative approaches to ERE and experimenting with new tools and pedagogies was rather limited. For example, one Greek teacher reported how using podcasting for the first time was positively perceived by her students:

They really enjoyed doing podcasts, at first they found it challenging, they were unnerved and panicked, I sent them instructions but then they also looked for online guidance and I asked them to upload their own instructions on the e-class wall, so they used that for collaboration and peer support. When they learned how to do podcasts, they loved it, all they wanted to do was this (Nefeli).

This teacher also demonstrated greater readiness in relation to the pedagogical challenges the move to ERE posed as well as responsiveness to her students’ needs by selecting to explore a book that related to the students’ lived experiences during the lockdown while also addressing the curriculum aims:

I focused on exploring Anna Frank's diary, we looked at isolation, we'd discuss how they dream their own refuge, what annoys them about this lockdown. The focus of the synchronous sessions was on giving the students the opportunity to share their experience and release some of the tension. I tried to combine learning aims and outcomes, writing essays but also express how they experienced the lockdown. E.g. they had to keep a diary which is a curriculum aim and the topic was '13th day of lockdown' (Nefeli).

The importance of adopting relevant pedagogies and research informed practices was also highlighted by some interviewees in leadership positions and as one head teacher emphasised:

You can have a school full of technology, but if you don't have a plan of how to use it, it won't make a difference… If you haven't got a very clear pedagogy and approach for how you want to teach, then the technology doesn't really make a difference (Julian).

A few interviewees in both countries reported how they used online tools to support student interaction and facilitate more playful activities and social events, however, this was the exception rather than the norm and did not take place regularly apart from the case of the private school. These playful, interactive activities included live videoconferencing to conduct online quizzes and cooking demonstrations for families and virtual coffee breaks for staff (Brian), a ‘fun’ Google Meet and Zoom for catching up with students (Liz and Ariadni) and virtual assemblies (Rob and Julian).

Some teachers also reported elements of creativity underpinning the tasks the students had to complete on the VLE such as posting pictures and videos of their daily activities not necessarily related to learning tasks. Still, this suggests that the VLE was largely used as a digital repository to upload resources for students to engage with as well as tasks to complete. Both synchronous and asynchronous practices presupposed the ability for self-directed, independent learning and was particularly problematic for younger students:

As a child, you're so reliant on your adult for their help and their input, you are depending on what their adult or parent is capable of or willing to do…you can't really just expect seven year olds to be online at two p.m. on Monday without an adult's guidance at home (Liz).

Furthermore, the play-based nature of early years learning was also hard to replicate outside the school classroom and created additional tensions for time-pressed parents working from home, therefore schools had to adapt their pedagogical approach during the lockdown. As one head teacher recounted ‘we still cringe cause it doesn't sit right with us, you wouldn't see a worksheet in our reception classroom, but we had to adapt for the children to actually to be able to be supported by parents and for that to fit in around what parents had to do’ (Julian).

### Unfamiliarity with online teaching and learning

The rapid move to online schooling meant that hardly any teacher training took place prior to school closures in both countries. Instead online training was provided and this took various shapes and forms. In Greece a more centralised approach was adopted, consisting of a dedicated website with relevant tutorials as well as training webinars provided by local ‘school counselors’ for teachers of the same subject area. In the case of England this was organised and facilitated by School Leadership Teams and often this translated in the Head of school delivering the virtual training:

Because it was really, really sudden I did a lot of virtual training. So I showed people how to use Hangouts, I made little videos…I just learned by doing it myself. Just Googling around and hacking away at it and practising. (Rob)

Many teachers also reported how they became familiar with the online platforms and tools through trial and error especially during the first weeks when training had not been provided yet. As some teachers described ‘I started from scratch by watching some videos and experimenting’ (Vasiliki); ‘I played around with it, figured it out for myself...It's not ideal, but you learn the hard way (Ranya).

Furthermore, teachers reported how informal support groups were created for ‘sharing practice’ and ‘giving each other little tutorials’ (Ross) and engaging in spontaneous peer learning. The majority of Greek teachers also described how peer support networks were set up on social media for sharing resources and good practices, troubleshooting as well as trialing the tools with colleagues. Furthermore, some of the Greek teachers mentioned how they sought the support and guidance of more experienced family members when experimenting with new platforms:

I wanted to trial out WebEx and I did this with my children. My eldest daughter is more familiar with digital technology use, she is 14 years old and she reassured me that the platform was not difficult to use and she explained a lot of the features to me (Melina).

In both countries teachers reported that the training was at large focused on acquiring the technical skills to use the platforms effectively and safely but little emphasis was placed on pedagogical approaches for online teaching and learning. This, however, would have been particularly relevant since this the move to ERE was a novel experience for teachers and brought about unprecedented pedagogical challenges.

None of interviewees reported student or parent-oriented training courses although they also had to navigate a system of often-unfamiliar learning tools and they had to rapidly develop skills and confidence to use these effectively. Teachers described how they often had to support students or parents with setting up accounts and navigating the platforms and this was particularly challenging not only for younger but also for older students. Although they could access the relevant platforms and engage with the content more efficiently compared to primary aged students still they were unfamiliar with distance learning practices as this teacher described:

I could tell they were struggling and I found it funny when a student sent me 5-6 different emails with one photo of his solved exercise in each, instead of attaching all into one. I was surprised that upper-secondary students did not have a grasp of basic things (Dioni).

### Parental engagement

Interview findings highlighted the significance of parental involvement during ERE particularly for younger students and illustrated how a lot of the responsibility for supporting learning was transferred from the teachers to the parents since younger children in particular lacked the competences, self-control and motivation to work independently. Engaging with remote schooling successfully presumed a high level of parental involvement as this excerpt suggests:

They would go on the school's website click on their year group and see what work they had to do, but they couldn't complete the work on the website. It was just a word document that set out the work they had to do. And then the parents had the choice to either do the work in books or print the worksheets if we gave them any worksheets and to post pictures of these on class Dojo. So it was mainly the parents posting things (Miriem).

Parents of young students had to play a central role in supporting various aspects of their children’s daily learning and their involvement was critical to student participation and progression. This direct involvement depended on their own digital competences and confidence whilst additional challenges were present for parents who were not native speakers and time-pressed parents working from home. Parental anxiety was common and as one teacher acknowledged ‘it would all be down to parents’ for reception class students and some of them ‘were under a lot of pressure’ or ‘were getting really confused’ (Ranya). At the same time, although older students were more able to engage independently in online learning, the need for parental involvement was still acknowledged in relation to ‘setting those boundaries and those routines and building that structure into their day and then checking that they've completed the work’ (Martin). Parental engagement was also identified as a significant enabler or barrier to student progression and as one interviewee described:

It’s a massive indicator and also probably where we're going to find that some of the gaps start to emerge is where that, that child has had perhaps the support from the parent or encouragement from the parent (Jake).

### Student engagement

Schools adopted varying approaches in relation to the amount of work they set and the expectations they had for student engagement. Across both national contexts consolidation was in the heart of ERE and the aim was to preserve a baseline level of skills rather than continue to make progress on the core curriculum. Participation in ERE was not mandatory and this posed challenges for teachers since motivation started to wane and the students stopped engaging. In particular, varied levels of engagement as well as decreasing motivation were reported by all interviewees in both countries with greater levels of participation being reported by the teachers in the private English school and the Model schools in Greece. Overall teachers described how there was a core of committed students who regularly took part in the synchronous videoconferencing sessions and returned asynchronous assignments, another group who dipped in and out while there was also a significant number of students who remained absent and ‘who did not even register on the platform’ (Faidra).

The findings suggest that student engagement at large depended on the quality of available digital access, the age and digital competences of the students as well as on how they were supported and motivated by parents. As this deputy head teacher explained, ‘we've probably got every kind of confidence level online to sort of those that are extremely confident and those that have either not even tried it yet or have struggled (Jake). Additionally, teachers were not in a position to challenge disengaged students since they were not familiar with their personal circumstances:

I don't feel comfortable putting a lot of pressure on students to complete work. If they're not doing it, I don't know about their family situation. I don't know what sorts of difficulties they've got at home, what sort of access they've got, whether their parents are working from home (Martin).

Many interviewees reported that student engagement began to wane as months went by and they had to adopt new approaches to re-engage students such as ‘having things like our learner of the week’ as well as offer some kind of recognition for parents which ‘helped to kind of keep that engagement’. As this interviewee pointed out:

We didn't maybe approach it the right way straight away, but we'd never had to set up a virtual school before (Julian).

### Time pressures and workload

The findings regarding the impact of ERE on teachers’ workload were varied and depended at large on their personal and family circumstances as well as their school’s expectations and their individual level of commitment. Teachers, who also had to support their children’s homeschooling, perceived the move to online teaching as particularly demanding. This was exacerbated by some teachers’ inability to switch off. Although none of the participants reported an institutional pressure to be available 24/7, some of them felt obliged to instantly respond to messages, address queries and provide feedback. The lack of regular, physical contact with their students intensified their responsibility for their students’ wellbeing and they also believed that a prompt response would keep the students motivated. This was also acknowledged by interviewees in leadership positions and as one head teacher pointed out ‘work life balance for teachers was a real thing’ (Julian).

### School as a safe and social space

Underpinning all these conversations with educators was a general sense that that ‘being in school’ as opposed to ERE was invaluable in relation to students’ physical and mental well-being and safeguarding:

One of the things that we've really realised is that in terms of children's mental health school is really important and being in school and being with their peers and being in a regular environment with boundaries and routines is really, really important for children and that helps them to thrive (Jake).

Interviewees, particularly those in schools with a high number of vulnerable pupils, described how their priority was on checking on the pupils’ wellbeing if they did not engage with the online learning and as this teacher recounted: ‘We have realised how much of a carer we are as well as everything else and how reliant the children are in terms of that as well’ (Liz). Similarly, one head teacher described how one of their priorities during the lockdown was ‘delivering food parcels’ and ‘sending out messages to parents about local food banks’ (Kate). As such, some interviewees highlighted how schools are not merely spaces of learning but also spaces of escape for disadvantaged students:

For our children one of the big protective factors around them is that they get up every day, they come to school. And they are in a school for six, seven hours a day, and they’re looked after and then we have that contact. When we lose that contact and when they’re at home for weeks on end, we worry when we don’t speak to the parents (Rob).

Furthermore, missing out on the ambience of the real classroom and the opportunities for social interaction and direct support and intervention facilitated by face-to-face teaching was another shortcoming of ERE. This quote from a head teacher reflected the sentiments of all interviewees who perceived a brick and mortar school as a social space not solely focused on teaching and learning:

I think the other thing reaffirmed is this idea that's been peddled around for the last sort of 10 years, which is one day we won't need schools. Everyone will learn virtually. Well, they won't. I think it works and we've seen it work. But the thing that is really confirmed for us is, is that the community, the social interaction is a human thing. And doing it through a screen, doesn't work the same way for children. Schools are communities and they need to be together (Julian).

This was particularly acute also from the students’ perspective since social interaction was seen to be essential for children. As one teacher explained:

That's where they learn so much, they learn how to interact with the world. They said they miss their friends because they're little, they're not gonna say, 'Oh, we missed social interaction'. They are not going to say that. They say 'I missed my friend', 'I was sad. I didn't see my friends' (Ranya).

The interviews were conducted between May-July 2020 when there was still a lot of uncertainty about what the return to school in September would entail. When asked how they viewed a more permanent move to remote or blended education, the majority of interviewees did not view this prospect favourably. Some argued that such a move would compromise the quality of education and would create further challenges for lower ability children and this excerpt echoes the sentiments of the majority of interviewees:

I would think that we would lose an awful lot. We'd lose a lot in terms of the teacher engagement, the way teachers were able to respond to children. And it's very difficult to see remotely whether a child has understood something or whether they need a bit more support before they are left to go off and do something independently, you know, an awful lot in lost. So I think if were told that this was forever? I think the quality of the education that the children were receiving would be really compromised and I think it would probably be the lower ability children that would suffer the most (Kate).

# Discussion

The findings of this study highlight a range of similarities and differences underpinning teachers’ experiences of ERE in England and Greece. In particular, there are clear disparities in relation to the digital readiness of schools and teachers in the two countries. All English schools adopted pre-existing digital platforms and tools to set up their ERE provision and the majority of teachers and to a much lesser extent parents and students were somehow familiar with accessing these. Conversely, the majority of Greek participants did not have such prior mechanisms in place at their school and they largely adopted Ministry recommended platforms. This suggests that new forms of ‘platformized education’ (Perrotta et al., 2020) had started to proliferate in England but remained scarce in Greece prior to the school closures. This resulted in time lost while Greek schools created contact databases, registered teachers and students to VLEs and dealt with technical challenges when the digital platforms started crashing. Furthermore, the highly centralised nature of the Greek education system prevailed with schools adopting the Ministry recommended platforms to facilitate ERE while the more diversified nature of education in England allowed greater divergence in relation to the choice of digital platforms and practices. Apart from these glaring disparities, at large the findings that emerged from the analysis of the 25 interviews highlighted similarities across the two countries and five main points for discussion are apparent.

First, this study’s findings highlighted how the move to remote education brought issues of digital and other inequalities to the forefront in both countries. All schools, with the exception of the private one, faced significant challenges in relation to the level and quality of digital access. This echoes the findings of other studies that have reported little to no IT home access during school closures for approximately one third of students (Lucas et al., 2020) with more pronounced digital divides in primary schools (Andrew et al., 2020b). Furthermore, despite governmental promises very few devices were actually received by schools in both countries and provision was extremely limited in relation to actual need. As Chalari and Atta (2020, p. 184) point out within a Greek context ‘the pandemic crisis intensified pre-existing invisible structures of inequality and injustice and revealed in particularly stark terms that the endemic issues in education, unmasked by the 2008 economic collapse, remain unaddressed’.

As such, this study has shown binary distinctions between those who have and do not have access to a device and the internet not only remain relevant but were accentuated during the move to ERE and presented a main barrier for student engagement. Despite evidence of pre-existing digital inequalities, such as the so-called ‘homework gap’ (Anderson & Perrin, 2018), political rhetoric to date has failed to effectively address these long-standing inequalities. Instead the move to ERE has demonstrated that ‘digital inequalities are as entrenched and important an issue as ever’ (Selwyn & Jandrić, 2020, p. 992). This is not a new concern and there is a wealth of research that looks at students’ experiences of digital inequalities, however, limited scholarly attention has been given so far in relation to teachers’ experiences of digital access. This study substantiated how insufficient digital access can present a significant barrier for teachers and students alike and how teachers’ digital access should not be taken for granted particularly in the national context of Greece.

At the same time this study indicated how it is also important to consider the level and quality of digital access and take into account factors such as digital skills and support. Greek teachers reported limited prior training and experience of digital technology use to support teaching and learning compared to their colleagues in England. This echoes the European Commission’s (2019c, 2019a) findings regarding digital activities and digital confidence of teachers and emphasises the need for teachers to develop broader and more sophisticated competences, for example, as outlined in the DigCompEdu framework for educators (Redecker, 2017). Teachers’ experiences of online teaching also highlight the exacerbation of the digital use divide during the move to online teaching. This refers to having the competences to use digital technologies effectively ‘in ways that enhance learning, social development, and goal attainment’ (Lee & Wang, 2019, p. 113).

In addition, during the pandemic, digital inequalities were further compounded by lack of access to digital support. Teachers reported how they often relied on friends and family to resolve technical issues or become familiarised with new digital tools and platforms. Digital support was more problematic for students particularly for those whose parents were not able to assist them due to their own limited competences or their inability to seek external help when language barriers existed. The findings, thus, highlight the importance of enriching teachers and students’ ‘digital capital’, that is understood as ‘internalised ability and aptitude (digital competences) as well as externalised resources (digital devices), which can be accumulated, but also transformed and productively reinvested and converted into other forms of capital’ (Ragnedda & Ruiu, 2020, p. 14).

Second, the findings of this study highlighted the materiality of remote education which has been ‘forcibly decentralized into students’ own homes, largely disaggregated from the institutions and practices of education and instead repositioned as a form of homeschooling mediated by technology tools’ (Williamson et al., 2020, p. 108). As the findings suggest, having access to a conducive home set-up is crucial for effectively engaging with ERE both for teachers and students, and this was not always possible for families to provide. As Selwyn and Jandrić (2020, p. 993) argue:

The lockdowns have starkly illustrated the limitations of presuming digital education to be an immaterial process. Digital education always takes place somewhere (more accurately, in multiple somewheres). When that somewhere is a household then the institutional boundaries of the family need to be factored much more prominently into our discussions over what digital learning is.

This study also substantiated how ERE and ‘anytime, ‘anywhere’ teaching and learning carried the potential threat of ‘all the time’ and ‘everywhere’, colonized the physical spaces of the home and disrupted personal or family life routines resulting in what has been called the Bring Your Own School Home (BYOSH) movement (Williamson et al., 2020). In particular, the interview findings offer original insights from the perspective of the teachers into what happens when classroom space-time travels into the home environment (ibid) and the unprecedented challenges and tensions this created particularly to those teachers who also had to homeschool their own children.

Third, this paper accentuates the heightened importance of re-thinking ‘pandemic pedagogies’ and addressing the challenges of transitioning from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. The findings revealed how didactic modes of teaching prevailed in both countries and how students were at large positioned as knowledge consumers and were offered limited opportunities for online collaborative and creative practices with VLEs largely used as repositories for sharing educational resources. This is problematic for all levels of education but poses particular challenges in relation to the play-based nature of early years and primary education. As such, re-imagining and re-structuring online teaching and learning approaches in order to move away from a worksheet based model and adopt more interactive, engaging and playful practices is particularly crucial for younger students but remains relevant also for older students.

Although synchronous and active learning approaches were associated with greater student engagement in line with Sharp’s findings (2020) these were more common in secondary education, particularly in Greece and were less likely to be offered by primary teachers across the 25 participants from both countries. Still, prevailing teacher-centred synchronous sessions that replicate a traditional ‘chalk and talk’ classroom approach were not conducive to offering students an engaging learning experience and this became clear as student motivation and engagement started waning with time. Furthermore, although collaborative distance learning has been identified as key to pupil engagement during lockdown (Lucas et al., 2020) and is seen as a strategy that could enhance the academic as well as social experience of students (Brink et al., 2020), this presupposes adequate digital access, support mechanisms as well as prior experience with relevant pedagogies.

The didactic approaches that schools adopted are understandable given the urgency of setting up a remote provision and teachers’ unfamiliarity of online schooling. The move to ERE was a novel experience for teachers and brought about unprecedented pedagogical challenges which were not addressed by providing relevant training in either England or Greece. Within a Greek context training was seen to focus at large on how to use the digital tools made available to the teachers and less on the educational design of remote education (Manousou et al., 2021). Although continuous just-in-time, context-specific professional development was instrumental in shaping Greek teachers’ understanding of remote teaching and enhancing their skills and confidence this not provided at national level (Avgerinou & Moros, 2020).

As such, addressing the digital use divide requires to provide access to training and expertise in how best to use technology in order to move beyond solely presentational modes and instead facilitate interactivity in learning and teaching (Hall et al., 2020) and integrate digital technology into meaningful social practices (Iivari et al., 2020). Indeed, the interview findings suggest that new or adapted pedagogies and meaningful ways of interacting with students online are required on the part of the teachers. Furthermore, interviews with Greek teachers highlighted current concerns and tensions over issues of data privacy and surveillance practices associated with the move to ERE. To this end, emphasis should also be placed on developing teachers’ critical data literacies as part of their wider digital competences (Marín et al., 2020) and also enacting critical data education in school contexts (Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2020).

Fourth, while ERE facilitated active, self-directed learning, which was reported to widen opportunities for participation for shyer students who appeared more disengaged in the physical classroom, it also presupposed students’ ability to work independently and self-regulate. At the same time, great variation with respect to students’ readiness for digital learning was reported and this suggests that successful engagement with ERE on the part of students requires relevant digital competences as well as the ability to self-regulate (Aguilar et al., 2020).

Furthermore, as this study has highlighted this was particularly problematic for younger students and carried the responsibilities over to families. This echoes previous observations of how the use of digital technologies to support home-school relations and the digitised approaches to homework ‘carry the demands of schools more directly into the home’ (Head, 2020, p. 604). During the Covid-19 lockdown parents were expected to play a greater role in their children’s education than ever before and the younger the age of the children the more invested and supportive the parents needed to be. This corroborates the findings of Andrew et al. (2020b) who reported that parents struggled to navigate often-unfamiliar learning tools and content and support their children’s learning at home and this was more acute amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to classmates from better-off home. Since pupil engagement was lower in more deprived schools during lockdown (Lucas et al., 2020), the move to online teaching and learning has been seen as almost certain to widen the educational inequality gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Last, the interview findings suggest that schools are much more than spaces where learning takes place. Although the focus of ERE in both countries was predominantly on ‘learning’ with a particular emphasis on foundation subjects, all teachers reported that that the main challenge they faced was creating online the school and classroom buzz and ambience. Opportunities for interaction and collaboration with teachers and peers are important design elements of successful online learning programmes, however, this requires that both teachers and students receive relevant pedagogical support and training in order to be able to facilitate adapted pedagogies on the part of the teachers and relevant skills to engage effectively on the part of the students. As such it is important to acknowledge that separating learning and socialization within the context of ERE was particularly problematic and these should be seen as binaries instead:

The space of the school houses social relationships. Education and learning are about human interactions, dialogue and exchange. Others are essential to our own learning. Schools are forms of collective living that cannot be replaced by distance or remote learning (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020, p. 6).

Furthermore, in times when face-to-face interaction is non-existent due to school closures, certain groups are more at risk of becoming disconnected from their educational environment than others and this can have serious implications for the physical and mental wellbeing of the students. It was clear that schools felt responsible for the safeguarding and welfare of their students and keeping in touch with families was the priority for a lot of the teachers. As Moss et al. (2020, p. 20) note:

We now know ever more clearly how important a resource schools are for all their local communities. They are part of the glue that holds us together during times of stress and economic strain.

# Conclusion

This study aimed to understand how teachers in England and Greece navigated the move to ERE and gain insights into the challenges and opportunities they encountered. Notwithstanding the limitations of this qualitative study with regard to generalisability, pertinent conclusions can be drawn regarding the concurrent and divergent patterns across the different national contexts. In particular, the findings suggest that schools had to work under immense pressure to set up remote practices with very limited, if any, prior experience of online teaching and learning. Although there were great variations within and across countries regarding the digital platforms and tools that were adopted, there was less variation in relation to the ways of ‘doing’ remote schooling. This involved predominantly the use of VLEs as online repositories and the use of video-conferencing for synchronous teaching. Furthermore, common drivers and barriers underpinning ERE were identified across the two national contexts. These were at large associated with digital access (to infrastructure, competencies and support), teacher and students’ readiness and familiarity with online teaching and learning pedagogies, students’ ability to self-regulate and levels of parental engagement.

This qualitative research study has only scratched the surface when it comes to identifying and understanding the range of complex issues surrounding the move to ERE and therefore generalisable conclusions should not be drawn. Still, the study offers original insights regarding the opportunities and challenges teachers experienced during ERE in the two countries and it joins an emergent body of international research in this field. Future studies may by conducted with a larger scale of participants while an alternative research avenue could be to explore parents and students’ experiences of ERE.

Notwithstanding its limitations, this study raises novel questions for scholars and policymakers in the field and offers original insights into teachers’ experiences of ERE. It is, thus, important to critically reflect on the lessons learnt during the Covid-19 pandemic and rethink the role of digital technologies in supporting (remote) teaching and learning in schools. As Selwyn and Jandrić (2020) point out, the Covid-19 pandemic can be seen as an opportunity to challenge the existing order of things, think more imaginatively about what schooling might look in the future and develop a better and fairer ‘new normal’. Additionally, it is important that policymakers in both national contexts consider how to support schools in becoming more resilient and adaptable so that they can better respond to and mitigate the effects of future crises.

Despite the growing enthusiasms for the ‘digital transformation’ of schools’ (Iivari et al., 2020) and the efforts to remodel schools around digital technology use, this study has exposed how digital inequalities have been exacerbated during the move to ERE and how targeted measures are required by policymakers in both countries in order to address these. Particularly within a Greek context it is important to consider the significant disparities that exist not only in relation to students but also to teachers’ digital access. Furthermore, this study has shed light on teachers’ unfamiliarity with facilitating more student-centred and collaborative online activities. The importance of continuous professional development has been previously highlighted (European Commission, 2019d), however, this has not materialised yet and more pedagogical support is required so that educators across both national contexts can use digital technologies to support creative and collaborative activities. As Glover et al. (2016, p. 1002) contend pedagogy needs to precede technology otherwise it will fail to create ‘a vibrant, engaging learning experience for students and a varied, active teaching experience for staff’. In addition, contrary to prevailing assumptions regarding students’ digital competences and their ‘networked lives’ (boyd, 2014), the findings suggest that not all of them were *au fait* with using digital technologies to support autonomous, online learning and this was particularly problematic for younger students in both countries.

In light of the above, governments and policymakers in England and Greece need to explore ways to address digital inequalities, develop less didactic and teacher-centred pedagogies for online learning suitable to the needs of students, establish troubleshooting and support systems for teachers and families, and create more robust national mechanisms within schools to develop critical digital literacies and cultivate long-term digital readiness. We also need to be mindful that, unless issues of digital inequality are resolved, a post-pandemic heavy reliance on online educational practices can further widen the so-called ‘homework gap’- that is the inability to complete school work at home due to lack of digital access (Anderson & Perrin, 2018).

Perhaps the main conclusion to emerge from this study is that we need to move away from the notion of the ‘technological fix’ since ‘technology cannot fix social inequality’ (Williamson et al., 2020, p. 111). Instead there is an ongoing need to consider the multifaceted dimensions of digital inequality and include schools, educators and families in future discussions about what ‘digital education’ might look like. As this study has highlighted, ‘schools are forms of collective living that cannot be replaced by distance or remote learning’ (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020, p. 15) as well as places for ‘camaraderie, shelter, nutrition, social services, teaching and learning’ (Reich, 2020, p. xi). As such, any future planning of post-pandemic schooling is a complex issue that certainly requires careful consideration of all the challenges highlighted in this paper.

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Table 1: Participant demographics and data summaries in relation to digital tools and practices adopted (England)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Alias** | **Role /**  **Curriculum Focus** | **Years of Experience** | **School** | **Location** | **Pre-existing tools / VLEs** | **Asynchronous tools/practices** | **Synchronous tools/practices** |
| Rob | Head teacher | Between 10-20 | Primary | Inner London | Google classroom (in place but not widely used) | Google classroom | Zoom assemblies |
| Liz | Primary school teacher | Under 10 | Primary | Inner London | Google classroom  (in place but not widely used) | Google classroom  Physical homework packs as needed. | Weekly Google Meets for English, Maths and 1 for ‘fun’. |
| Kate | Head teacher | Over 35 | Primary | East Yorkshire urban | Google classroom (in place but not widely used)  Tapestry (in place for foundation stage) | Google classroom to upload resources and material.  Tapestry for foundation stage | Google Meets once a week (supplementary). |
| Freya | Physical Education teacher | Under 10 | All through Special School | Inner London | Class Dojo (for teacher-parent communication) | Class Dojo (for sharing videos and other material) | Weekly Zoom sessions with parents and children with SEND. |
| Miriem | Primary school teacher | Between 10-20 | Primary | Outer London | Class Dojo (for teacher-parent communication) | School website with links to word documents  for learning tasks.    Class Dojo to communicate with students and parents and for them to upload completed work | None. |
| Martin | English teacher | Under 10 | Secondary | Inner London | Google classroom (mainly to set tasks and remind students about homework) | Google classroom (PPTs, video lessons)  Paper copies of resources to collect once a week  YouTube channel to share pre-recorded videos (inks posted on Google classroom) | None. |
| Jake | Deputy Head of Quality of Education | Between 10-20 | Secondary  (11-18) | Outer London | Show my homework  Google classroom | Show my homework | Zoom by some teachers |
| Donald | Computing teacher\* | Between 10-20 | Primary | Outer London | N/A | School’s website to embed links to YouTube tutorials. | None. |
| Ranya | Reception teacher | Over 20 years | Primary | Outer London | Class Dojo  (Behavioural management and urgent messages to parents) | Class Dojo (pre-recorded videos and other resources) | None. |
| Julian | Head teacher | Between 10-20 | Primary | East Anglian urban | Showbie | Showbie (for sharing learning resources). | Zoom for assemblies only. |
| Brian | Director of Teaching and Learning | Over 30 years | Private Secondary | East Yorkshire urban | School’s VLE | School’s VLE (for communicating, sharing learning resources, receiving students’ work) | Zoom (daily lessons) |
| Tessa | Head of learning support | Between 10-20 | Private Secondary | East Yorkshire urban | School’s VLE | School’s VLE  (for communicating, sharing learning resources, receiving students’ work) | Zoom (daily lessons) |
| \*Donald is employed as a freelancer to teach computing at this primary school. He used to work as a primary school teacher in the past. | | | | | | | |

Table 2: Participant demographics and data summaries in relation to digital tools and practices adopted (Greece)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Alias** | **Role /Curriculum Focus** | **Years of Experience** | **School** | **Location** | **Pre-existing tools / VLEs** | **Synchronous tools/practices** | **Asynchronous tools/practices** |
| Ariadni | Primary school teacher | Between 10-20 | Primary | Athens suburban | N/A | E-mail (for communication, sending material, receiving completed work and sending feedback) | A few zoom ‘fun’ sessions  (supplementary). |
| Dimitris | German teacher | Between 10-20 | Six Primaries | Athens inner city | N/A | E-class (main tool) | Webex (supplementary) |
| Katerina | English teacher | Between 20-30 | Primary | Athens suburban | Website (to share information with parents) | Padlet  (main tool used across the school)  E-class (supplementary) | Webex (Timetabled lessons) |
| Vasiliki | German teacher | Between 10-20 | Lower Secondary \*\* | Athens suburban | N/A | E-class (Main tool) | N/A |
| Nefeli | Greek teacher | Between 20-30 | Lower secondary | Athens suburban | N/A | E-class | Webex (Timetabled lessons) |
| Faidra | French teacher | Between 10-20 | Lower Secondary | South-west Greece | N/A | E-class (Main tool) | N/A |
| Yiannis | Head teacher | 36 years experience | Lower Secondary | South-west Greece | Website (to share info with parents) | E-class | Webex (Timetabled lessons) |
| Ismini | Greek teacher | Between 10-20 | Lower Secondary | Northern Greece inner-city | N/A | E-class (main tool) | Skype for one to one with SEND students |
| Athina | Chemistry teacher | Between 10-20 | Lower Secondary  (Model school\*\*\*) | Athens suburban | ‘E-me’ VLE as a repository for homework tasks | E-me | Zoom (Timetabled lessons) |
| Eleana | Greek teacher | Between 10-20 | Upper secondary\*\* | Athens suburban | N/A | E-class / Email (Main tool) | Webex (supplementary) |
| Eleni | English teacher | Between 10-20 | Upper secondary  (Model school\*\*\*) | Athens suburban | Edmodo (used by most staff)  E-class (used by some staff) | E-me | Webex (Timetabled lessons) |
| Dioni | Physics teacher | Between 10-20 | Upper secondary | Athens suburban | N/A | E-me  Messenger  Email | Webex (Timetabled lessons) |
| Melina | Greek teacher | Between 10-20 | Upper secondary | Athens inner city | N/A | E-class | Webex (Timetabled lessons) |
| \*\*Lower secondary school students in Greece are aged 12-15 and upper secondary school students are 15-18.  \*\*\* Model schools fall under a special category of state schools with a strong focus on academic achievement and the provision of extra-curricular activities. Students are selected by means of an examination taken at age 12 and the staff are also selected based on their qualifications. | | | | | | | |