Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns and distance education in Australia: Positive experiences of migrant/refugee parents and future directions

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a study investigating the engagement of migrant and refugee parents in supporting the distance education of their children amidst the Covid-19 lockdowns in Australia. While existing research has extensively addressed challenges within online education during the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a dearth of research examining the opportunities afforded to migrant and refugee parents. In pursuit of this, 20 migrant and refugee parents participated in individual interviews as part of the data collection process. The transcribed data underwent thematic analysis, drawing on the frameworks proposed by Foucault (1972, 1975, 1982) and Deleuze (2001), to scrutinise how the imposed structure of lockdowns has informed parents' educational and social opportunities. The findings suggest that parents' opportunities encompass improving their English language skills, helping their children to develop their mother tongue skills, familiarising themselves with school subjects, understanding how the education system works in Australia and strengthening their knowledge about improving their relationships with their children. The paper also discusses how the education system can prepare parents to educate their children more effectively in the future, while their education can promise a more inclusive education system.

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Introduction

This paper aims to investigate how the Covid-19 pandemic and the abrupt transition of schools to online delivery have generated opportunities for migrant parents to enhance their educational and social experiences in Australia. Unlike previous research (e.g. Jung et al., 2022; Popyk, 2021), which predominantly focussed on delineating challenges faced by migrant and refugee families during mandatory online education, our study aims to ascertain whether the shift to online education has, in fact, created opportunities for parents. To achieve this objective, we provide a conceptualisation of mandatory online education, delineate our target group participants and offer an overview of this research article.

Online education, a ubiquitous theme after the Covid-19 pandemic breakout, has profoundly affected teachers, students and parents. The pandemic necessitated a shift from face-to-face education to an online delivery mode. This transformative shift in schooling significantly influenced students' learning practices (Popyk, 2021), prompting parents to embrace a new role as educators (Latzer et al., 2021). While it is acknowledged that this new mode of education posed challenges for parents in general (Fantu et al., 2022), scant attention has been given to the experiences of a less-explored demographic—migrant and refugee LOTE (Languages Other Than English) parents. This paper seeks to address this gap by focussing on the unique experiences of migrant and refugee parents in the context of online education in a post-Covid-19-pandemic situation.

The participants in our data collection comprised migrant and refugee parents with diverse backgrounds. Migrant parents, constituting six individuals, entered Australia with an exclusive working permit visa. All possessed a college or university degree and demonstrated a reasonable proficiency in spoken English. However, it is important to note that proficiency did not necessarily equate to fluency in English. Refugee parents (14 individuals), conversely, sought refuge in Australia, predominantly arriving from countries entrenched in war zones. Unlike migrant parents, the majority of refugee parents lacked higher education. Regarding English language proficiency, while some could communicate in English, they generally faced limitations in using the language formally and academically. Despite these differences, a commonality across both groups is the absence of prior education in Australia.

Aligned with the study's aims and participants, this research article will explore the contention that mandatory online education, notwithstanding its distinct challenges, yielded opportunities for migrant and refugee parents. Firstly, parents found themselves compelled to acquaint themselves with the Australian education system and school subjects. Secondly, they perceived this circumstance as a chance to enhance their English language proficiency, facilitating better support for their children. Lastly, the implications extend to the education system, as this shift towards online education fostered a more inclusive approach. The following section of this paper provides a review of pertinent literature in this domain.

Review of literature

Concentrating on the positive aspects and experiences amid the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, our examination of the literature unveiled two principal trends: (a) positive experiences reported by students, parents and/or teachers, and (b) enhancements in teaching and learning environments or approaches. It is essential to underscore that these trends highlight a notable gap in the literature concerning the exploration of the roles and opportunities of migrant and refugee parents within the Australian schooling context.

Positive experiences of students, parents and teachers

The initial cluster of studies focuses on investigating the opportunities encountered by students, parents and teachers during the closure of schools following the Covid-19 breakout. For example, Morse et al. (2022) conducted a survey involving parents in Australia to explore their experiences with home-schooling. The analysis revealed that parents perceived a deeper connection with their children and identified a quieter and safer learning environment as positive outcomes. In a separate study, Murphy et al. (2023) delved into the opportunities arising from the Covid-19 pandemic for parents to enhance their mathematical skills. Australian parents, assuming roles as facilitators, mentors and enhancers in their children's home education, demonstrated improved mathematics knowledge, serving as a form of cultural capital by the conclusion of the home-schooling period.

Merga et al. (2021) conducted an analysis of the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns and school closures in Australia on students' writing skills. Despite their challenges, parents' familiarity with writing contributed to an enhancement in students' writing abilities. The engagement of parents in teaching writing allowed them to reconnect with essay writing, leading to improvements in their own writing skills. This positive outcome was facilitated by teachers' commitment to providing feedback on students' drafts. Furthermore, teachers reported greater enjoyment in teaching writing compared to the pre-Covid period. In a discussion by Fahey and Joseph (2020), the benefits of online schooling in Australia included an improvement in parents' opinions about the education system. This positive change was particularly notable in schools that maintained regular communication with parents. Hayat et al. (2021) explored the opportunities created by online education during the Covid-19 pandemic for students. They observed that students took greater responsibility for their learning, adapting to the pace of delivered materials. The pandemic and the shift to online education gradually improved students' attitudes towards online learning.

In exploring experiences beyond Australia, Bubb and Jones (2020) conducted a study on children and parents' adaptation to home-schooling in Norway. Their findings indicated that (a) parents' increased involvement in their children's learning resulted in a deeper understanding of their learning processes, and (b) students developed greater independence in working on their school subjects. Similarly, Pokhrel and Chetri (2021) investigated pandemic-related opportunities for students

and parents. The research revealed that students actively engaged in their learning processes and demonstrated increased flexibility in managing their time. The pandemic also provided an opportunity for parents and teachers to build stronger relationships, as the demands of home-schooling necessitated parental support for students' academic learning.

The aforementioned studies offered valuable insights, particularly in analysing the pivotal roles that parents play in their children's education. The examination of lockdowns and home-schooling highlights opportunities for parents to enhance their capacities, and students, in turn, benefited by improving skills such as writing. However, it is crucial to underscore that opportunities specific to migrant and refugee LOTE parents, particularly in relation to the education system, have not received sufficient attention. The subsequent sub-section delves into the transformations in teaching and learning environments arising from the lockdowns.

Improvements in teaching and learning environments

The second category of opportunities pertains to the transformations in teaching and learning environments. These changes, initially impacting teachers and students, also extended their influence to parents. In a study by Sharma et al. (2022), the potential opportunities for teachers and students during the pandemic were analysed. The study involved interviews with five primary and secondary school teachers. The findings revealed that teachers adopted more individualised and flexible teaching approaches during distance learning. This shift positively influenced students with special needs, enabling them to enhance their learning tasks. The absence of social and environmental anxiety, coupled with the removal of time pressure in the home environment, granted students greater flexibility in completing their learning tasks and fostering independence, even working more autonomously from their parents. Similarly, Flores and Gago (2020) proposed that despite the challenges imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic on the education system, it serves as an opportunity for the entire system. The pandemic compelled a re-evaluation of conventional teaching and learning approaches by the education system, teachers, and authorities. The emerging approaches aim to equip students to work independently, without constant reliance on parental help and supervision.

Karakose (2021) posited that the Covid-19 pandemic compelled the education system to navigate crises, asserting that such management 'has undoubtedly contributed to the rapid development of learning and teaching environments, and has ultimately facilitated an increase in the quality of educational services' (p. 9). Furthermore, Chakraborty et al. (2020) argued that online education has incentivised teachers to enhance and align their teaching skills with new platforms. These studies collectively indicate that shifts in teaching approaches and methods, particularly in tandem with technological advancements, play a role in enhancing parents' understanding of their children's academic achievements.

The pandemic and the transition to online education have presented opportunities for teachers and educators to enhance their teaching skills and adapt to the new educational landscape. Bergen and Daniel (2022) conducted an analysis of the

experiences of Australian teachers during the school closure period. Their findings indicated that positive experiences for teachers included improvements in their IT skills for development and application. Teaching online afforded teachers more freedom and time to concentrate on delivering content, as they were not required to spend time managing and controlling student behaviour. In contrast, the pandemic provided parents with an opportunity to closely monitor and regularly communicate with their children's teachers. Furthermore, Xie et al. (2020) maintained that the future of education in the post-pandemic world is likely to be online. This shift underscores the need for teachers to modify their attitudes and practices, recognising that the new normal, online education, has the potential to exacerbate existing inequalities. The study emphasises the importance of teachers adapting to online education and e-learning while promoting principles of equality, considering that not all families have equal access to economic and cultural capital. This underscores the significance of parents' cultural capital in shaping the future of online education, as it directly influences children's learning experiences.

The studies discussed in this section are crucial as they analyse the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdowns on the education system. They shed light on the need for adaptation by students, teachers and parents to the new normal, presenting an opportunity for them to enhance their teaching and learning skills. These studies underscore that the changes extend to aid parents and families. However, it is noteworthy that they do not specifically study the roles of and opportunities for migrant and refugee LOTE parents within this new normal. The absence of such focus highlights a gap in the current research, indicating the need for further exploration of the experiences and opportunities unique to this demographic in the evolving educational setting.

The direction of this study

The studies in the preceding sub-sections, as previously mentioned, possess commendable attributes, providing insights into the potential opportunities for parents, students and teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there remains a gap in our understanding regarding how the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns offered opportunities for migrant and refugee parents. Limited information is available on how these individuals navigated linguistic and cultural challenges in a new environment and how these challenges could serve as opportunities for transformative change. To address this knowledge gap, this research paper posits the following research question:

What educational opportunities did the Covid-19 pandemic provide for migrant and refugee parents, and how did they consciously leverage these opportunities?

This research question, along with the ensuing findings, will enrich our comprehension of online education in two significant ways. Firstly, the findings will offer insights into how migrant and refugee parents adapt to new structures, fostering their development into informed citizens. Secondly, the research outcomes can aid

policymakers in understanding parental needs regarding their involvement in their children's learning. In other words, in analogous situations such as future lockdowns, politicians and educational policies can cater to the needs and preferences of this particular group of parents, ensuring tailored support. Finally, as remote learning is being widely accepted, the findings of this study will have implications for the evolving scenario of online education in this new normal. In the subsequent section, we introduce the conceptual framework and the theories employed to analyse our data.

Conceptual framework

Our conceptual framework is grounded in the theories of Deleuze and Foucault, offering a lens through which to understand the experiences of migrant and refugee parents. Deleuze's theories are instrumental in analysing how restrictions, limitations and structures imposed on individuals, particularly migrant and refugee parents, can give rise to new opportunities. Deleuze's (2001) notion of *difference* is pivotal in examining the opportunities afforded to these parents. In Deleuze's philosophy, difference is intricately linked to repetition and the limits of structures. This means that two concepts, namely, 'repetition', and 'structures' yield difference.

Repetition involves behaving in a specific way in connection with a singular entity that lacks equivalence or equality. It is not a mere habit but a predetermined action that the subject practises. Through repetition of an object or action, subjects generate difference—not in the object itself but within their own minds. As Deleuze succinctly clarifies: 'difference inhabits repetition' (Deleuze, 2001, p. 76). In his philosophy, difference is not a pre-existing state achieved independently; instead, it is a state crafted through a continuous series of transformations, rooted in repetition. In this framework, the application of Deleuze's concepts of repetition and difference will illuminate how the imposed structures during the Covid-19 pandemic may have led to transformative opportunities for migrant and refugee parents.

Within Deleuze's philosophy, structure holds a central position alongside the concept of difference. According to Deleuze (2001), the significance of entities lies not in what they inherently are but in how they function and operate. Understanding the workings and transformations of entities involves a crucial emphasis on the role of structure in Deleuze's (2001) theory. Structure is not merely a static framework; rather, it is dynamic and integral to the transformative process. Williams (2014) provides a clarifying insight into Deleuze's perspective on structure, stating that, for Deleuze, structure is viewed as 'the limit of the knowledge of a thing, where that limit is the condition for the evolution and living intensity of something' (p. 54). In this sense, structure is an organic and essential aspect of entities that both intensifies their nature and serves as the framework defining changes and differences. Structure 'is about the symbolic' where symbols rearrange relations with other symbols (Williams, 2014, p. 58). When symbols are brought together, they establish symbolic relations with each other, forming a structure that plays a crucial role in deriving meaning from individual symbols. In practical terms, consider a new road sign. This sign, when introduced, establishes symbolic relations with existing

road signs, making it intelligible within the broader structure of road signs (see Williams, 2014). The meaning of the new sign is not isolated; rather, it is shaped and understood in relation to the existing symbolic framework, highlighting the dynamic nature of structures in contributing to the interpretation and evolution of meaning. This perspective will be instrumental in our examination of how the structures imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic informed the experiences and opportunities of migrant and refugee parents. In the past, the responsibility of educating children rested primarily with teachers, students or school principals. However, as the structure changed, LOTE parents emerged as influential contributors in the new normal structure whose impacts, including opportunities for them, should be analysed within the imposed structures of Covid.

As Deleuze's theoretical perspectives are based on changes, transformations and modifications that take place within 'structures of relations' where there exist power relations (Williams, 2014, p. 58), Foucault's theories of discourse and technologies of the self, which are related to power relations, can also offer further analytical tools for the purpose of examining potential opportunities for parents during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Drawing on Foucault (1972), discourse is shaped by a collection of signs and statements that influence modes of existence, action and expression. Discourses determine what to exist and what not to exist. Discourses are saturated and moulded by power relations, defined as forces determining the boundaries of existence. According to Foucault (1975), power relations function to permit or prohibit the emergence of specific knowledge, behaviour, or actions through mechanisms of discipline and punishment. They direct, control, determine and govern the conduct of individuals who perform as subjects within various discourses (Foucault, 1982). This implies that individuals, for instance, students and teachers, or doctors, are essentially formed by the educational and medical systems they are respectively affiliated with. Discourses and power relations play a role in subjugating those individuals, guiding how they should act and behave across various situations. Subjectivities, therefore, are the conformations within discourses determined by power relations, with individuals adopting these forms to align themselves with the models defined by discourses (Foucault, 1982).

Power relations within discourses also have functions relevant to the current study. Firstly, power relations exhibit productive aspects that generate new knowledge and facilitate its emergence and dissemination within society (Foucault, 1997). This implies that discourses, through principles of exclusion and inclusion, inform what is to be included, how it is to be included and what is to be excluded. Secondly, discourses and power relations are intertwined with technologies of the self. According to Foucault (1988), technologies of the self encompass a range of conducts, modifications and alterations that individuals undertake to 'attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (p. 18). Notably, technologies of the self are closely linked to discourses and power relations, as individuals adapt their practices and ideas in response to them (Higate, 2014). These technologies can be reinforced by existing cultural models and altered by specific discourses or institutions, such as social groups or educational institutions.

Foucault's theories (1972, 1988, 1997) are utilised to scrutinise how our participants, positioned as subjects to the discourses and power relations in the

new normal of lockdowns, adapt themselves to the restrictions and operationalise the norms defined by the education system. Furthermore, discourses and power relations provide analytical tools to explore how parents, as subjects to discourses of education, shape their identities and subsequently contribute to their children's education. Similarly, technologies of the self aid in unravelling the ways in which existing or potential future models in our education system could enable migrant and refugee parents to become more effective educators for their children. This involves assisting their children more effectively in completing tasks and supervising them more productively in the future.

The theories of Deleuze and Foucault complement each other in this study. Deleuze provides an analytical lens for untying participants' relations with the new structures during the pandemic, approaching them from a transcendental perspective. On the other hand, Foucault furnishes essential analytical tools for examining the productive power relations within education systems and families. Deleuze's lens allows us to explore the subjects within relations of power and adapt to the new structures, while Foucault accomplishes this through discourse and technologies of the self. Deleuze's contribution lies in offering an analytical lens to study the subjects within relations of power, whereas Foucault provides insights into the limitations of structures and their associations with difference, particularly through the notion of repetition. In summary, our combined Deleuzian–Foucauldian framework conceptualises parental engagement within the structure and limitations of Covid-19. It theorises parents as subjects to educational and political discourses who can adapt to new norms, modify their states of being and emergence and generate novel actions.

Methodology

This case study involves 20 migrant and refugee parents from diverse backgrounds, including Afghan, Somalian, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Sudanese, Iranian and South Sudanese origins. These participants were unfamiliar with the Australian education system. The rationales for conducting this case study are as follows: firstly, the study aims to analyse the opportunities that migrant and refugee parents were exposed to during the Covid-19 pandemic; a case study design allows an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences (see Gerring, 2006). Secondly, case studies, by delving into participants' views, attitudes and perspectives, contribute significantly to studies examining individuals' identities, values and attitudes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Thirdly, the flexibility of case studies to accommodate various data collection methods, such as interviews (Zipf, 2016), makes them suitable for studies related to the analysis of power relations or participants' identities (Gerring, 2006). Finally, the chosen case study is a collective case study, with an interest in patterns, overall conditions and various aspects (Stake, 2005) of Covid-19 lockdowns and opportunities for parents. This approach facilitated the exploration of viewpoints and the reflection of the voices of migrant and refugee parents in our study.

Our participants comprised migrant and refugee parents, each having at least one school-aged child. The selection of the participants was based on the following

reasons: firstly, these parents received their education outside Australia, and, in most cases, the Australian education system was unfamiliar to them. Some had limited educational backgrounds, posing challenges for them to play a constructive role in their children's education. Secondly, language presented a significant barrier for these participants. While they had some proficiency in English, their command of the language was not sufficient to assist their children effectively with their school subjects.

Participants were recruited through the distribution of flyers on Facebook and via snowball sampling. In an effort to control asymmetrical power relations (Creswell, 2009), the researchers initially had no prior knowledge of the participants. They were approached through the researchers' network, which included a research assistant and contacts who assisted in this regard. This is related to our positionalities as we played the role of insider researchers to a great extent. While positionalities can be related to categories of age, gender, ethnicity, or nationality, three researchers, out of four, are migrants in Australia and this helped us create stronger bonds with our participants.

After recruiting 20 parents, we conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom to collect data. Each interview, on average, lasted for one hour, and participants responded to questions about their experiences during the pandemic, detailing their actions, how they managed their children's subjects and time, the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic on them and the opportunities they identified during the lockdowns. For Persian-speaking participants (i.e. Iranians and Afghans), as two researchers had Iranian backgrounds, with one of them specifically responsible for collecting data from Iranian and Afghan participants, the use of the Persian language during data collection was implemented to ensure that the English language was not a barrier. The recruitment flyer and consent forms for Iranian and Afghan participants were designed in the Persian language to encourage participation. Subsequently, the data collected in Persian were translated into English. The translation process involved one researcher with a Persian background translating the data, and another researcher with a Persian background validating the translation. Upon reaching an agreement, other researchers also reviewed and modified the translated data where possible. This comprehensive process aimed to ensure accuracy and consistency in the translation of the data.

For our participants of African heritage, we employed a snowball sampling technique (Creswell, 2009), leveraging the social networks of one of the Chief Investigators (of Ethiopian origin) and a research assistant (of South Sudanese heritage). The interviews were conducted in English due to the extensive linguistic diversity within the African heritage group. Logistically, it was challenging to conduct interviews in participants' home languages, but it was determined that our participants were proficient in functional English.

After completing data collection, we transcribed the interviews and proceeded to code them for thematic analysis (Saldana, 2016). This analysis involved both first-cycle and second-cycle coding, as well as the formulation of larger themes. In the first cycle of coding, we identified, selected and coded compelling quotes relevant to our research questions. Subsequently, in the second cycle of coding, we amalgamated related ideas to create more extensive content, setting the stage

for the development of themes. Themes and sub-themes were then formed, guided by our research questions and the theories unpacked in the conceptual framework. While the overarching theme in this study was 'opportunities', some of the smaller categories included 'improving language skills', 'getting familiar with school subjects and the school system' and 'parents finding ways to encourage their children'. It is essential to note that thematic analysis serves as an approach for data categorisation, and in this study, the process was informed by the theories outlined in the conceptual framework.

The theory of Foucault (1972, 1988) and discourse informed the identification of three themes: 'Improving parents' English language skills', 'Understanding the Australian school system' and 'Learning about children's school subjects'. These themes were derived from our raw data using a Foucauldian lens, as parents were considered as subjects within educational, social and political discourses, where power relations played a pivotal role in creating and defining new modes of subjectivation. Parents, in turn, formed and adopted their identities in association with those discourses. The theory of Deleuze (2001), focussing on repetition and difference, played a key role in the emergence and analysis of two sub-themes: 'Improving children's mother tongue' and 'Positive labels'. Following Deleuze, our analysis delved into parents' repetition of new behaviours within newly defined structures, such as Covid-19 lockdowns and distance education. This repetition aimed to make a significant difference in their children's proficiency in their mother tongue. Additionally, the increased and repeated interactions between parents and children enabled them to learn how to constructively address each other, leading to positive transformations in family relations and the distance education journey.

To ensure and maximise the trustworthiness of our study, we implemented several steps. Initially, two researchers coded the data independently and exchanged their codebooks for mutual feedback—researcher 1 provided comments on researcher 2's codebook, and vice versa. Subsequently, two additional researchers reviewed the codebook, coded the data and offered their insights. Once a consensus was reached, the final version of the coded data was utilised in subsequent publications. Given that the data collected from Iranian and Afghan participants were in Persian, an Iranian researcher initially translated the data into English. The translated data were then reviewed and revised by another Iranian researcher. Subsequently, two additional researchers also scrutinised and refined the data as needed. In addressing transferability, following Creswell (2009), we made a concerted effort to provide a detailed account of the data collection and analysis process. Our aim was to allow readers to feel connected to the entire process, from data collection to analysis and presentation. To enhance dependability, we ensured that our research is logical, traceable and thoroughly documented, aligning with the criteria proposed by Tobin and Begley (2004). We articulated how our chosen theories informed our thematic analysis and the presentation of our findings to the readers.

Findings: positive experience of migrant parents

In this section, we highlight quotes from our participants, shedding light on their perspectives on certain aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic as opportunities.

Improving parents' English language skills

Some participants recognised the pandemic as a chance to enhance their English language proficiency. Soraya, an Iranian participant, expressed this sentiment:

> Previously, when we were invited to birthday parties, I would have been so embarrassed since I was not able to communicate with others well. The lockdowns, however, taught me that I can communicate with them even with broken English. I had to communicate with teachers more regularly, without a translator, and they encouraged and motivated me to convey my ideas and made an effort to understand my messages. Now, I am improving my English by focusing on my listening and speaking skills.

In response to the lockdowns, Soraya found herself in a situation that prompted a re-evaluation of her past experiences, leading her to enhance her English language skills. The distinctive interactions she had with teachers served as encouragement, motivating her to articulate her ideas and, consequently, focus on refining her language proficiency. Sara, another Iranian participant, shared a parallel perspective:

> It has created an opportunity, or it is better to say it has functioned as an alarm for me to improve my English. I am working on my English systematically after the second lockdown. […] I follow a strict plan. I use Internet materials and participate in language classes held by an Iranian English language teacher.

Recognising the inadequacy of her English language proficiency, Sara is aware of the need for improvement. She strategically planned to develop her language skills, drawing inspiration from her experiences during the lockdown. Elena, sharing a similar response, elaborated on her perspective:

> These problems [not being able to help her children with their school subjects] encourage me to improve my English by reading books and watching TV in the English language to help my children next time. I had more time to watch TV and read books and I did so on purpose and with a plan to improve my English.

Elena, displaying a strong determination, has committed to enhancing her language skills through activities such as watching TV and reading books. Her objective extends beyond personal development; it is rooted in the aspiration to equip herself adequately to support her children with their school subjects in the future.

The aforementioned quotes reveal a shared commitment among parents to elevate their English language proficiency. Such a reaction stems from a recognition that their current proficiency levels fall short of meeting both their personal needs and those of their children. The motivation to enhance language proficiency can be understood through the lens of technologies of the self, as proposed by Foucault (1988). Within the dynamics of power relations and the application of these technologies, individuals employ various techniques to align themselves with new 'modes of subjectivation' (Hansson & Hellberg, 2014, p. 27), shaping their moral responsibilities and agenda. In the context of the altered social disruption brought about by Covid-19 and associated lockdowns, our participants asserted that power relations were influenced by the emerging discourses of schools and the education system. These new discourses imposed novel agendas and obligations, subjecting individuals to changed power dynamics. As Foucault (1988, p. 18) suggests, technologies of the self are reinforced through social and cultural models, with individuals undertaking actions to 'attain a certain state of wisdom or perfection'. Confronted by the unexpected circumstances of Covid-19 lockdowns, our participants redefined their agenda and resources. Obliged to contribute significantly to their children's education, they immersed themselves in improving their language proficiency. This transformation can be linked to the concept of difference, as argued by Deleuze (2001), wherein difference emerges through repetition. The acknowledgement of their language skills' inadequacy and the necessity to contribute effectively to their children's education during the unique situation of Covid-19 lockdowns prompted them to initiate a repeated pattern of actions—the improvement of their language skills. This repetition is anticipated to generate a meaningful difference for them in the future.

Improving children's mother tongue

Our participants' responses also unveiled that the challenges posed by Covid-19 and the ensuing lockdowns prompted them to engage their children actively in enhancing their mother tongue proficiency. Zeinab, an Afghan participant with a Persian background, expressed her perspective:

> One of the problems is sending my son to a Persian school. My son doesn't speak Persian at all. He needs to learn, speak, read and write in Persian. I don't speak English and he doesn't speak Persian. He should be connected to his culture and me. Lockdowns taught me all these points. We spent more time together at home and I understood that the knowledge of the Persian language is necessary for him.

It is pertinent to note that Zeinab, being an Afghan participant, communicates in Persian Dari, a dialect of the Persian language. In her interview and at home, she predominantly uses the Persian language with her two daughters. However, the quote above underscores Zeinab's frustration with her son's limited proficiency in the Persian language. As a single mother, she aspires to communicate with her child

effectively in Persian and wishes for him to craft a connection with Afghan culture through the Persian language. Naghi, another Afghan participant, explained:

> We expect our children to be Persian and Australian at the same time, to belong to Australia and to Afghanistan at the same time and this makes lots of differences […] they don't invest in their Persian language, but I want them to know about their language and culture. In lockdowns, we felt it more conspicuously as we called our relatives in Afghanistan more often. I have set some incentives for them to improve their Persian.

This quote indicates that Naghi is keen on fostering a strong connection between his children and their Afghan culture, particularly through the Persian language. The disruptions caused by the lockdowns brought about aspects of life that his children had not encountered previously, emphasising the significance of cultural ties during these unprecedented times. David, an African participant, uttered similar responses:

> I used the English language when communicating with my children, but I have to mix it with my own mother tongue because if I only use Dinka, they don't understand it [….] they do have a religion and I want them to learn Dinka to get connected to their culture. During that time [lockdowns], we took a script or whatever and we did it in Dinka. The lockdowns paved the way for learning Dinka and created opportunities for us because we had more time to practise Dinka. Then, this trend continued as they are used to it.

This quote from David alludes to his profound concern and active efforts in involving his children in enhancing their mother tongue. His intention is to encourage them to connect deeply with their culture and religion through the medium of their mother tongue. The lockdowns presented a unique opportunity, providing them with ample time to focus on learning Dinka. David's commitment to repeated efforts in improving their mother tongue not only signifies its importance during the lockdown but also highlights a sustained initiative that persisted beyond the challenges posed by the pandemic. This echoes Deleuze's concept of repetition initiating difference, as discussed further below (see Deleuze, 2001).

The common thread woven through the three quotes is the shared realisation among parents that their children had become somewhat detached from their cultural and linguistic roots. This awareness prompted a unique decision to bolster their children's proficiency in their mother tongue. The prolonged period spent together during the lockdowns allowed parents to observe and engage in repetitive actions with their young children, encompassing various aspects such as communication, caregiving and remote education. However, the lockdowns introduced a transformative element to these repetitive behaviours, initiating a sense of difference, as elucidated by Deleuze (2001). In Deleuzian (2001, p. 2) terms, 'to repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent'. The unique circumstances of the Covid-19 situation compelled parents to recognise the need for change in their children's state of being—specifically, an improvement in their proficiency in the first language.

From a Deleuzian perspective, the lockdowns and the shift to remote education not only defined new structures in the participants' social lives but also introduced power relations. These power relations, within the confines of the new structures, created constructive situations where the limitations generated creativity and productivity. For parents, the decision to take action for themselves and their children emerged from the boundaries of the structure, leading to the learning of a new language. Repetitions, within these structural limits, defined a productive aspect for parents. Moreover, in line with Deleuze's philosophy, difference played a pivotal role in shaping identities. Participants appeared to form new identities, prominently displayed in their more hands-on roles in their children's education. The Covid-19 lockdowns reshaped their roles as active contributors to their children's educational journey. As these new players in the educational puzzle, parents actively encouraged their children to enhance their proficiency in their mother tongue. The unique situation brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic illuminated previously overlooked aspects of life—most notably, the profound significance of their mother tongue and culture. As the educational landscape shifted, parents, assuming more active roles, motivated their children to invest in improving their mother tongue skills, fostering a renewed connection to their cultural heritage.

Understanding Australian school system

Another sub-theme that emerged from our data revolves around parents gaining a better understanding of the Australian education system during the Covid-19 lockdowns. For instance, Shirin, a female Iranian participant, highlighted this perspective:

> This pandemic had an advantage for me: previously, his school was like a black box for us [the parents did not know much about the school system and their child's interactions with other students]. We did not know about their school situation and he, himself, would not have given us any information about it. Before the Covid-19 lockdowns, when I asked him about his school, he would say: Ok, all good, etc. Our interactions with the school were just like taking him to school and bringing him back home. Teacher-parent association wasn't that helpful as we didn't have enough time to talk to them […]. I even did not know some of his friends' names because he was literally hiding everything from us. However, now, I understand what they work on, and I can monitor him better [….] During the Covid, my son submitted blank pages, as his assignments, to his teacher. Initially, he played video games constantly with his friends, dressed and decorated himself like clowns and appeared in front of camera with his friends. Gradually, I understood his relations with his friends and could control his behaviour and understand what their teacher wanted from them and how I could approach and control him to do his job more seriously. I could communicate with him better, more directly and frankly because in Covid-19 lockdowns, he could not evade from my questions and queries about his lessons, what they are supposed to do, and how they should complete their

assignments. As I had to observe him directly, I learned so many things about his school system in Australia.

Shirin, a long-term resident of Australia, revealed that, despite residing in the country for several years, she had not been fully aware of the intricacies of the Australian education system. However, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic presented an unexpected opportunity for her to gain profound insights into how schools operate in Australia. This newfound engagement allowed her not only to oversee and manage her child's behaviour during remote learning but also to acquaint herself with the specific subjects they were working on. Another Iranian participant, Azzi, mentioned:

> One main problem is the difference between two education systems in Iran and Australia. In Australia there is no such a thing as homework. I knew this, but during the lockdowns, I had this chance to see how they run schools and how teachers teach.

Azzi, contemplating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns, perceives it as an opportunity to gain firsthand knowledge of how classes are conducted in Australia. While she was initially aware of the distinctions between the education systems in Iran and Australia, the unique circumstances of the Covid-19 lockdowns allowed her to immerse herself in and familiarise herself with the intricacies of the Australian education system. John, a Congolese parent, also added:

> It [lockdown] has created opportunities for me to stay in touch with kids and their teachers more often. I've found that if I stay in touch with the teachers more often, they respond to the kids' questions and the kids work better. I didn't know this before the lockdowns.

John perceives the Covid-19 lockdowns as an opportunity to comprehend how to navigate the school system and effectively engage with his children's education in Australia. The unique circumstances of the lockdowns have equipped him with insights on how to optimise his children's performance, emphasising the importance of staying in close communication with their teachers.

The quotes above hint at the opportunity for the migrant and refugee parents to know the Australian school system and how they can take the maximum benefit for their children. As Foucault (1981) maintains, truths are not fixed entities, but they are defined based on the situations which subsequently are informed by discourses and power relations. Foucault explicates that truths are modifiable, definable and changeable based on discourses and power relations. Individuals as the subjects to various discourses are exposed to the truths produced by them. As individuals are the subjects to opposing, multiple, and various discourses at the same time, they validate or reject the truths produced by multiple discourses owing to the fact that the subjects' relations with truths are not fixed (see Foucault, 1981).

In this study, our participants precepted and understood the education system in Australia, during the Covid-19, differently. For instance and following Foucault

([1981](#)), Shirin's perception of truth was introduced by the outbreak of Covid-19, when she perceived truths, unique to herself, about the Australian schools. Once the Covid-19 restrictions introduced a new structure and wanted them to behave differently, she understood new aspects of the school which helped her behave differently (i.e. monitor her child) rather than taking their child to school and returning him home. This also can be associated with a Deleuzian perspective which challenges a priori reasoning for phenomena. In fact, 'Deleuze's philosophy is about repeating by rendering something different' (Williams, [2014](#), p. 54). During Covid-19, the parents rendered something different; the repetition of the relations with children and school took a different shape. The repetition of lockdowns and the same practice (i.e. distance education) created opportunities for parents to discover new aspects of the education system in Australia, which was not possible for them previously.

Learning about children's school subjects

A seamless continuation of the aforementioned sub-theme involves parents actively engaging in 'learning about their children's school subjects'. This sub-theme encapsulates the opportunity parents seized to acquaint themselves with the curricula and content their children were immersed in during their educational journey. For instance, Mahin, an Iranian mother, said:

> I work with my little one who is at primary school. I'm learning with him. It is an opportunity for me to get familiar with the subjects that students learn, here in Australia. The school subjects have influenced me to be fairer and avoid dictatorship.

Mahin's journey through the changes brought about by the lockdowns has proven to be transformative in two significant ways. Firstly, the disruptions caused by the lockdowns have afforded her the opportunity to delve into her children's school subjects, fostering a deeper understanding of the educational content they engage with. Secondly, the challenges posed by the lockdowns have contributed to her becoming more reasonable and egalitarian. This positive shift is reflected in her heightened willingness to understand and listen to the voices of her children. The altered circumstances have facilitated a more collaborative and open dynamic between Mahin and her children. Morris, a Somalian parent, also mentioned:

> I wanted them to be at good levels of education and I used some extra resources such as Reading Eggs, Kumon, and so on giving them that sort of opportunity to do extra work and I am also learning new things. The school system wants me to teach my children and first I need to improve myself.

This quote also indicates that the lockdowns and the education system have created an opportunity for Morris to improve their learning experiences by getting involved in a new reading list, primarily intended for his children's use.

The examples above suggest that parents position themselves as subjects within the discourses of education (see Foucault, [1982](#)) and adjust their behaviour according

to the norms established by the education system (see Foucault, 1975). Drawing on Foucault (1982), subjectivity manifests as a form individuals adopt based on prevailing discourses and power relations. In response to the new circumstances imposed by lockdowns, parents found themselves compelled to contribute actively to their children's education. This necessitated modifications in their attitudes, behaviour and even standards (Hansson & Hellberg, 2014). In essence, their active involvement in their children's education positioned them as subjects within the Australian education system. Consequently, they had to familiarise themselves with school subjects or refresh their skills to effectively support their children. The new discourse they encountered demanded adherence to specific norms, resulting in outcomes such as becoming 'fairer', 'more democratic', and 'improving their knowledge' of school subjects. Such norms served as prerequisites uttered by the discourses of education and existing power relations. Subsequently, parents actively adapted themselves to those norms.

Positive labels

Our final sub-theme revolves around the positive labels that some parents employed to motivate and inspire their children to perform better academically. Amid the lockdowns, parents discovered that by attributing positive labels to their children, they could enhance their academic performance. For instance, Jane, a Sudanese parent, elaborated:

> It [lockdown] has created ways for us to communicate. Our communication skills have improved, our problem-solving skills have improved. We have learnt lots of skills and some of them are waiting and tolerance. I call them problem solvers to encourage them to approach their problems more responsibly.

This quote suggests that Jane motivates her children to excel as communicators and students by labelling them as 'problem solvers'. It is evident that such positive labelling plays a constructive role in shaping their learning experiences. Shiva, an Iranian mother, further emphasised:

> Children of this generation are different from our generations; they easily stand against their parents and tell 'you are wrong' or 'you are not supposed to tell me what to do'. Sometimes, I like his behaviour and call him 'industrious' or 'fighter' which motivates him to work harder. He tries to solve his school problems himself, and he is more independent when I encourage him by highlighting his abilities.

Shiva recognises that her relationship with her son differs due to belonging to different generations. Consequently, she adopts a different approach in her behaviour as the Covid-19 lockdowns and the new normal in the education of her child allow her to observe her child's learning with new eyes. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, she made a deliberate decision to employ encouraging labels to inspire him to become a better student. Lastly, Elnaz expressed:

> My daughter did not wear any uniforms. She attends her class with 32 other students. Their classes are very short, and they spend the rest of the day playing games. However, since the time I have called her 'active' or 'functional', she works better and harder. She works on time, she wears her uniform, and she does her assignment more independently.

Elnaz also employs a similar strategy, utilising positive labelling, to motivate her daughter to exert more effort. By referring to her daughter as 'active' and 'functional', Elnaz aims to inspire a sense of autonomy and encourage her to work independently.

The shifts in parent–child relationships can be attributed to the way parents evaluated the situations and structures presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Deleuze (2001), the Covid-19 situation introduced a new structure, which is not merely a repetition of an external structure or object but a necessary condition for transformation (Williams, 2014). This structure sets the stage for conditions of novelty and evolution for the subjects (Deleuze, 2001). In Deleuzian terms, 'structure is a living part of things. It is their intensity and the source of becoming and of change in them' (Williams, 2014, p. 54). Consequently, the limited and stringent structure of the Covid-19 situation provided an environment for parents to grow and implement innovation through positive labelling. Instead of resorting to negative labels and criticism, parents creatively encouraged their children through positive labelling, thereby enhancing their performance and learning experiences. From a Deleuzian perspective, the structure of Covid-19 has induced change (see Williams, 2014).

Implications for education system

Our findings shed light on several aspects related to parents striving to contribute to their children's education. In most cases, our parents were unprepared to assume a role in their children's education. The pandemic and lockdowns presented opportunities for them to engage in their children's education, but this engagement occurred within the context of what Foucault (1984a) terms the 'stifling anguish of responsibilities' (p. 145). Our LOTE parents not only endeavoured to actively participate in their children's education but also did so suddenly, facing unexpected responsibilities. Drawing on Foucault (1984a, p. 147), these subjects were exposed to a form of constructive power that 'dissipates the images [and] calms the passions': the parents drew closer to their moral truth, which involved educating their children. However, given their lack of preparedness for this role, there were both limitations and opportunities for them, emphasising the need for support.

Firstly, migrant and refugee LOTE parents need to undergo training to sustain and reinforce their engagement in assisting with their children's education, regardless of potential future lockdowns. They have demonstrated a genuine interest in participating actively in their children's education, and this inclination should be nurtured and strengthened. The concept of simulacrum, as defined by Deleuze (2001), could be a potential root of their interest. Simulacrum is a strong individual

sensation that allows individuals to navigate across all existing identities and structures. For our parents, the continuing repetition could be a form of simulacrum that assists them in navigating between their existing identities. This might explain their willingness to play various roles, such as parents (e.g. Elnaz), educators (e.g. David), learners (e.g. Morris) or democrats (e.g. Mahin). However, since existing structures are reinforced and dependent on power relations, the education system should strive to help these parents become more effective educators and parents for their children. As Sharma et al. (2022) argue, education within and after the Covid-19 era requires individualised approaches and an understanding of the needs of each student. A flexible approach is essential for parents to comprehend the needs of their children and unleash their potential for the sake of better education.

Secondly, a more knowledgeable parent cohort contributes to the creation of a stronger society. Our observations and analysis indicate that migrant parents often lack sufficient knowledge about the education system and school subjects in Australia. While they perceive this deficiency as an opportunity to enhance their understanding of the Australian education system, it can potentially hinder their children's educational progress. Drawing on Foucault (1984b), the parents in this study saw themselves as conforming subjects to the Australian education system, acting in a morally informed manner. Moral subjects construct their identities based on standards, norms, values and rules, all in association with power relations. They adapt themselves to these rules and values, dynamically making choices within the options defined by power relations. For example, Morris utilised available resources to maximise his children's learning experience. However, school subjects and the Australian education system are objects historically shaped within the discourses of education and power relations. LOTE parents, as moral subjects, lack comprehensive knowledge about them. In this situation, despite their efforts to act morally, they may struggle to optimise their children's learning experiences.

As Foucault (1984b) contends, moral subjects and morality are shaped by existing models in cultures, discourses and power relations. Therefore, our LOTE parents, acting as moral subjects, have the potential to enhance their actions if they are educated about the Australian education system. Despite the assumption of the education system, especially during the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown enforcement, that all parents were familiar with school subjects and the education system, our findings reveal that migrant and refugee LOTE parents were not well-versed in how the Australian school subjects and education system operate. This implies that parents, as moral subjects, were not acquainted with the objects of knowledge. It is worth considering how the education system can address and improve parents' knowledge about school subjects and the system, particularly in light of the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. As Finn (2019) discusses, strengthening parent-school partnerships can contribute significantly to children's learning outcomes, especially when relationships between parents and schools are reinforced, at least at a local community level.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to explore the positive outcomes that parents derived from distance education during the COVID-induced lockdowns. The findings reveal that parents had opportunities to enhance their English language skills, lay the foundation for their children to improve their mother tongue skills, acquaint themselves with school subjects and the education system in Australia and learn effective ways to encourage their children through positive labelling. Parents, acting as moral subjects, demonstrated a commitment to improving their skills and played a pivotal role in expanding their children's learning outcomes and enriching their overall learning experiences. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that while emphasising the positive experiences of parents, we should not overlook the challenges associated with distance education. As elucidated by Molla et al. (2023), many migrant and refugee parents experienced emotional and financial stress due to Covid-induced distance education.

This paper also delved into the implications for our education system. Despite the fatigue, stress, anxiety, tight resources and financial challenges experienced by these parents while contributing to their children's education, their invaluable roles cannot be overlooked. In times when Covid-19 lockdowns are not enforced, migrant and refugee parents can be supported to better assist their children through various programmes, alleviating them from the burden of Covid-19-induced pressures. Such programmes may involve educating migrant and refugee parents through voluntary initiatives, implemented at local levels. By educating more knowledgeable parents, we can cultivate a generation of more informed and skilled children, thereby contributing to the formation of a stronger society. Furthermore, such initiatives would foster a more inclusive education system, wherein parents and students actively participate in their learning journeys. The vision for future education, whether faced with the threat of a pandemic or not, should move towards fostering an inclusive educational environment.

In conclusion, we extend an invitation for further studies to build upon and expand our findings. One limitation of our study was the single interaction with parents during the lockdowns, acknowledging that the findings are highly situated. To provide more generalisable insights, longitudinal studies could allow parents to reflect on their ongoing engagement in their children's education. Future studies could also incorporate the perspectives of school authorities, teachers and students for a more comprehensive understanding of opportunities for students with migrant and refugee backgrounds, contributing to the development of a more inclusive education system. While we engaged parents from diverse cultures and backgrounds to identify common factors, future research might choose to focus on parents from the same cultural background. Recognising the unique nuances and potentials of different cultures (Zaini, 2022; Zaini & Shokouhi, 2023), this approach could lead to the development of tailored programmes for parents and students based on their cultural contexts. Additionally, considering that most of our participants and parents working with children were females, future studies

could explore the data from a gender-related perspective for a more subtle understanding.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There is no reportable conflict of interest or competing interest to report in this project.

Ethical approval We obtained ethics permission for this project from Faculty of Arts and Education at Deakin University, Australia. The Ethics ID of the project is HAE-21-123. The Internal Committee approved our low-risk project.

Informed consent Researchers were supposed to obtain the consent of potential participants beforehand.

Consent for publication Consent to publish was also obtained from our participants.

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