Parental involvement in home preparation – "COVID-19 or not, I still need to help my child"

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Abstract: The study deals with parental involvement in the child's home preparation. The qualitative research with parents of primary school pupils showed the parental homework attitudes and conditions, and reflected changes and strategies in home preparation during pandemic times. Regardless of any pandemic, the results showed differences in homework management; nevertheless, parental help directs to achieve independence and responsibility for the child's learning, no matter the pandemic.
Keywords: parental involvement; homework; primary school education; home preparation for schooling; COVID-19

Tėvų dalyvavimas vaikui ruošiant namų darbus: „Turiu padėti savo vaikui nepaisydamas jokių COVID-19"

Santrauka. Tyrime nagrinėjamas tėvų dalyvavimas vaikui ruošiant namų darbus. Kokybinis tyrimas su pradinių klasių mokinių tėvais atskleidė tėvų požiūrį į namų darbų ruošimą ir sąlygas, atspindėjo pokyčius ir strategijas ruošiant namų darbus pandemijos metu. Nepriklausomai nuo pandemijos rezultatai atskleidė skirtumus pagal tai, kaip vaikai ruošia namų darbus; tėvų pagalba padeda siekti savarankiškumo ir didina atsakomybę už vaiko mokymąsi, ir tai nėra susiję su pandemija.
Pagrindiniai žodžiai: tėvų dalyvavimas, namų darbai, pradinis ugdymas, namų darbų ruošimas, COVID-19.

Introduction

The paper focuses on parental involvement in primary school pupils' home preparation. Parental involvement can be defined as parental participation in the educational processes and the experiences of their children (Jeynes, 2005), reflecting the external motivation of the parent to be involved in different forms and intensities, dependent on social and cultural aspects (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), the wider social context of the family (Patall et al., 2008), as an individualised system conditioned by the nature of personal attachments and internal

relationships (Výrost & Slaměník, 2008). Emotionality, interaction and communication strategies are reflected in the modes the parents support the child. The social status, prestige, and qualifications of the parents, as well as the cultural capital of the family, play an important role (Katrňák, 2006). The quality of parental involvement in a child's education varies; it is related to the age and grade level the child attends (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Grolnick et al., 1997; Sheldon & Turner-Vorbeck, 2019). Parents are involved in children's education because it is expected of their parental role (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Parental involvement in education can be viewed from the position of home-based involvement, which includes assistance with home preparation, talking about school issues, providing enrichment activities related to school success, and communicating with teachers. Concurrently, it is also manifested at the level of school-based involvement, which includes participation in class meetings, attending school events, or volunteering in the classroom. Parents are key players in a child's development, school achievement, and self-esteem, and influencers of their behaviour (Arcillas et al., 2018). Nuances in issues of parental involvement emerge in the delineation of the roles of the responsible actors for the child's education, perceived by the parent's approach, resulting from the parent's intrinsic motivation and belief in the child's success (Lazarides et al., 2016).

A relatively important factor in the quality of home preparation except for the intensity of parental involvement is whether parents have sufficient skills to support the child in home learning. The support is differentiated by the extent of the child's control and autonomy (Pomerantz et al., 2007). Parental involvement is most intense in the first stage of primary school (Wang, 2022), at the beginning of schooling (Šulová & Škrábová, 2012, 2013), and when the child needs the parent's help (Buchanan & Buchanan, 2016). Home preparation includes homework, home learning, and partial home preparation. This complex task involves preparing materials, doing homework, and other activities requested by the school, which the child, with the help of the parent, processes in the home environment.

Homework is a tool for reinforcing the curriculum, helping children to organise time, develop independence and create responsibility for the task at hand (Kukk et al., 2015). Núñez et al. (2017) consider homework as the most common school activity, extending into the out-of-school environment. A homework policy does not exist in the Czech Republic or other countries (Fitzmaurice et al., 2021), even though it represents a central theme in school–family cooperation. The importance of homework has been a debated topic for the last few decades (Corno, 1996; Corno & Xu, 2004; Kohn, 2007, Hutchison, 2012; Farrell & Danby (2015); in the Czech Republic, most prominently by Maňák (1992) or Bělohradská et al. (2001). Homework offers parents a report on the child's achievement and information on the progress of mastering the content of education. Homework as a problem is seen as an obstacle to democracy in education, bringing risks of becoming yet another factor of inequality at school. It can also be a source of tension between children and parents, even leading to family stress (Katz et al., 2012). Parents' perceptions of homework are significant because they affect the level and quality of their involvement (Fitzmaurice et al., 2021). Involvement in home preparation opens up an important interpersonal aspect of the child's success and learning at school (Sikiö et al., 2017). The interaction between the parent and child is a bal-

ance predictor in the parent–child relationship and helps to create positive attitudes towards the child's future education.

Home preparation and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 has completely disrupted the concept of traditional schooling (Alharthi, 2023); the closure of schools and the shift to distance education have transformed the lives of families with school-age children. Parents were faced with home management reorganisation concerning parental educational competence and the resources available at home (Fernández-Alonso et al., 2022). Markowska-Manista & Zakrezewska-Olędzka (2020) and Garbe et al. (2020) point to the absence of social life, interpersonal relations, and the well-being of students (Ribeiro et al., 2021). The situation was sudden, and parents were not prepared for such a major change, including helping children with online learning in case the parents worked away from home (Garbe et al., 2020). Parents' concerns about mastering distance learning were mainly related to their own education, employment, and material conditions (Smetáčková & Štech, 2021). The deterioration of relationships between children and parents was confirmed especially in the case of parents' lower educational levels and insufficient material conditions, mainly digital technology equipment (Hyo-Jeong et al., 2022). Family problems were significantly associated with the level of the family climate (Del Prado-Morales et al., 2020). The pandemic has negatively affected parents' mental health and emotions and children's stress, with a disproportionate impact on mothers and low-income families (Kerr et al., 2021). Parents who participated regularly in their child's school preparation were significantly better off (Friedlaender, 2021). Thus, schooling in the era of closed schools was transferred to the family environment, which raised parents' concerns about their competence to help children learn with regard to the requirements set by the schools (Švaříček et al., 2020). Teachers have also coped with pupils' deteriorating motivation to learn (PAQ, 2021) or low family support for children (ČŠI, 2021). Home preparation has thus acquired a completely different dimension. On one hand, it was positively reflected in the acquisition of experience with digital technologies (Friedlaender, 2021); on the other hand, it brought challenges related to the traditional way of education, the teacher's conception of teaching, and innovative teaching resources.

Methodology

The research investigation aimed to uncover how parents of primary school children engage in home preparation and how they transform their approaches, conditions, and strategies in engagement in the home preparation of children during the COVID-19 pandemic. To obtain data, we chose to interview parents of pupils in the ISCED 1 level (in the Czech Republic, typically the first five years of primary school education). The focus is justified by the expected highest level of parental involvement in the child's schooling and the associated parental support, which decreases proportionally as the pupil progresses to higher grades and parents become less involved with school (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). We used data from interviews with 17 parents (15 women and 2 men; 12 with completed tertiary-level education, 5 with completed secondary-level education) obtained in 2018, before the coronavirus restric-

tions, and then data from interviews with 20 parents (18 women and 2 men; 5 with completed tertiary-level education and 15 with completed secondary-level education) during the coronavirus crisis in 2020 and 2021. The children of the participants represented all grades of the ISCED 1 level of primary school. Interviews with parents lasting from 20 to 45 minutes were conducted through face-to-face meetings, in one case the interview was conducted via MS Teams. The research participants gave their explicit consent with their participation in the survey which was recorded on the recording device. At the beginning of interviews mostly all of parents declared that system of home preparation was based on the absolute autonomy and responsibility of the child. The parents were in the role of a controllers, involved only in the most necessary and, from their point of view, the most important duties. During the interviews looking deeply into the problem, the parents opened their minds and exposed the details about home preparation. At this stage, the research questions were also modified, particularly considering the experience of the participants; the interviews were conducted from a pre-prepared framework of question areas, which were further expanded by the flow of information from the interviewees. The research with parents aimed to obtain replies to the following questions: How does the home preparation take place? What does it involve? What is the role of the parent in home preparation? What are the parents' strategies for coping with the child's home preparation? How do parents describe the importance of home preparation? We were also interested in how parents' attitudes and perspectives on home preparation changed before and during the pandemic. After the data collection was completed, the interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings into MS Word. Data analysis followed the rules of qualitative research in transcription processes, coding, and categorisation (McKenna & Millen, 2013) presented in core categories in the result part.

Results

Parental involvement in home preparation before and during the pandemic shares several common characteristics, which we present below as the results of our research with parents of ISCED 1-level primary school pupils.

Home preparation management

Parental involvement in home preparation is particularly important at the beginning of a child's schooling (Šulová & Škrábová, 2013), when the child needs more time to acquire habits and gradually master the demands of daily preparation, thus becoming more responsible and independent (Ribeiro et al., 2021). In particular, parents of children in the first or second grade highlight the need to set rules and conditions for home preparation, and to set some kind of order associated with the daily routine *(PC3)*: "*As soon as they get home, if they have the opportunity, they are to do their homework. The same thing before the weekend, so that they're finished on Friday so that you don't have to do it on the weekend.*" As a rule, immediately after the child comes home from school, a short rest, snack or open play follows for the child. The child is then asked to complete his/her homework and prepare all the necessary tools for the next school day. The day's schedule is based on the obligation to do homework and pay attention to school

preparation. Parents inherently associate home preparation with doing homework and getting things ready for school. Homework dominates as the main activity of home preparation. Walker et al. (2004) also point to the importance of homework as a means of involving parents in their children's education (*PC7*): *"...that the children practice at home what they have studied at school, that's what homework is. At home, they repeat what they did at school."* Parents were usually involved in home preparation every day, but the time varied according to the individual setting of the school or the child's additional activities, especially after-school clubs or tutoring. Some of the parents whose children had a lot of homework complained *(PC3)*: *"It annoys me that they really have a lot, that sometimes it's really too much and my daughter sits and does her homework until 4:30 sometimes, that she is getting ready for school and in the end, she doesn't have time to go out."* It is important for parents to follow a certain routine and not take too long to complete their responsibilities. For the parents, setting the rules consisted of setting a schedule – *" first work, then play"*. The lack of time and energy is reflected in the quality of home preparation and brings negative aspects, often in terms of emotions. Establishing clear rules without being subject to criticism, pressure and negative comments from the parent leads to strengthening of the child's intrinsic motivation to master homework (Knollmann & Wild, 2007). The child's mood is affected by numerous aspects, among them the siblings as a disturbing element, the atmosphere in the household, the mood of the family members or the general running of the household *(P12)*: *"When there is a relaxed atmosphere at home, I don't have to persuade her over and over again to go and do something for school. She has to wish for it a little bit herself. Then it's ideal."* The family environment reflects the pupil's performance in school, but parents are often unable to meet the school demands, to help the child with the study tasks (Khanolainen et al., 2020) as they themselves have been out of school for a long time or their own knowledge level, especially in mathematics, is not enough.

Parent as an agent with a clear intention

Involvement in home preparation seems to be an indisputable part of a parent's role. The types of parental engagement in home-based learning and the chosen teaching mechanisms influence the child's success in school (Katz et al., 2011). Parents as actors in home preparation have their own expectations and beliefs (Goodall, 2018) about a child's mastery in home preparation; the child is subsequently more successful and the parents' expectations are more likely to be met (Madjar et al., 2016). Parents strive for the child's gradual autonomy and independence from their help, transferring to the child the responsibility for schooling: *"So some of that responsibility, so he knows he has to prepare for the next day."* Home preparation is the joint work of the child and the parent. However, help with home preparation is the main responsibility of mothers. This replicates the acknowledged thesis of mothers' dominance in collaboration with the school and initiative in the child's home preparation (Pomerantz et al., 2007; Rautamies et al., 2017; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019). Mothers who perceive that their child does not achieve the expected good results at school will give the child increased attention accompanied by monitoring and direct assistance with homework (Silinskas et al., 2015). Fathers tend to act more as tutors, especially in the area of mathematics, or fill in for

mothers when they are tired or have other work to do *(PC18)*: *"Well, my husband talks to them a lot, as he talks to them like peers, so they look at him, he explains it to them, and he knows so many things, even at bedtime, they keep asking, he explains it to them."* For this reason, fathers help with mathematics homework or take an interest in topics that mothers do not understand. Fathers are considered to be more appropriate persons to explain certain issues.

Strategies for parental involvement in home preparation

Responsibility arises from the parent's role, with their positive or negative attitude and its subsequent effect on the child (Falanga et al., 2022). Parents enter home-schooling with their expectations followed by compliance with school requirements and the diverse skills that a parent can impart to a child (Holte, 2016).

The parents' guidance is first more directive and gradually relaxes, leaving more autonomy to the child itself. At the beginning of school, the supervision, control, and parent's help with home preparation prevails *(P4)*: "*I'm involved because she wouldn't manage to do anything on her own. I'm checking to see if she's got all her stuff for the next day. We have to be involved otherwise she might not manage it. She needs supervision and a little help.*" Different school requirements and inconsistency in homework assignments reflect different parental approaches to helping their child (Grinshtain & Harpaz, 2021). A parent who is fully involved describes help as systematically getting the child used to responsibilities and acquiring work habits *(PC8)*: "*I'm not going to leave her to do it by herself yet. I don't dare yet, because she wouldn't care how it's written.*" Over time, parents take a more hands-on approach to the child's independence strategy, yet still with the support and control of the parent *(PC2)*: "*Of course, if I see that she reads something badly, I tell her, I correct her. When she does the math, she erases it and does it herself. So, then I just check. Like, I look, and if I see she's got it wrong, I'll correct her, of course.*" A part of the strategy of involving the parent in home preparation is to try to explain the studied material when the child is unsure (Echaune et al., 2015; Goodall, 2018). Parents most often help by reading the assignments, explaining the assignments, correcting their children's mistakes, and explaining why they got it wrong or searching for the correct answer on the internet. The need for practical and moral parental support is undisputed (Grinshtain & Harpaz, 2021) *(P16)*: "*If I really see some loophole that the kid is not sure yeah, then I should be the one to prop him up so he has that confidence, so he is sure.*" Every child is different and needs a different approach from a parent. This is also related to the gradual independence of the child in home preparation, the ability of the child to perform home preparation without parental supervision and assistance *(P10)*: "*He's just preparing himself for school and I'm more of an extra.*" The process of gaining independence is accompanied by less dependence on parental help. This process develops gradually as the child's education and experience progress.

Parental involvement has positive effects on students' academic achievement and motivation (Heddy & Sinatra, 2017). Parent–child learning can have a positive effect; nevertheless, sometimes we cannot avoid the bad experiences associated with home preparation. Negative emotions arise in children after a busy day at school when they have to attend to their schoolwork at home and prepare for the next school day. Mostly, the situation was exposed

as a sort of promise, a quid pro quo *(PC6)*: "*We have it set up at home that if he doesn't get his schoolwork done, then, unfortunately, there are consequences. So, he's got that motivation that, like, he has to do it.*" These included a chance to play games on a tablet or mobile phone or go out with friends. Also, a good grade for a reward is a motivational tool of the parent *(P17)*: "*So I motivate her by saying that if she brings good grades, she can get a small reward. I motivate her with rewards or praise to encourage her.*" Švaříček et al. (2020) mention that parents often do not know how to motivate children for action. Some parents were willing to agree on a deal or sometimes it was enough to ask "*How is it going?*" and the child would go and prepare without delay or procrastination.

"We're doing this for his future"

Since especially in the first and second grades of primary school the child still requires control and supervision of home preparation, parents show children how to prepare and guide them to a system of how to learn "to learn." The parents involved in the research perceive this differently because they relate their views to the child who is an individual and requires a specific approach. Parents want children to learn according to the requirements of the school and get everything right *(P2)*: "*To get it right and to learn it correctly.*" Of course, parental involvement has an impact on a child's school performance. According to Desforges & Abouchaar (2003), the greatest influence on a child's school performance is the difference in parental involvement, but the association is not completely linear. Thus, *the more the better* does not apply (Fernández-Alonso et al., 2022). The results of the pre-pandemic interviews clearly indicate that the trigger for increased engagement is the child's educational performance in school. Good grades are one of the important aspects in the evaluation and self-assessment of the whole family (Pecháčková, 2014, p. 18). Interviewing parents during the pandemic showed different results. Grades were not a priority for them (Del Prado-Morales et al., 2020); it turned out to be the child's satisfaction, success with establishing order, and gaining responsibility over affairs and actions without parental help.

Transformations of home preparation during the coronavirus crisis

Parents adapted to educational conditions in the home environment; they were able to provide technical learning equipment for the children. They admitted that they had to be more rigorous during the online teaching period than in regular school-going. Multiple interferences contributed to the children's distraction and loss of attention. Despite this, children learned to work with new applications, used electronic textbooks for learning, or communicated with teachers via email. Thus, home preparation changed in that more of the burden fell on the shoulders of the parents. More time spent with the children made some of the material harder for the child as parents spent more time on explaining and showing. It is also related to a kind of helplessness of the parents when they are not able to explain the task because they do not understand it themselves or they have learned it differently *(PC14)*: "*...so I'm looking in their propositions and textbooks and I'm more annoyed with myself for not being able to explain it to them.*" Another concern of the parents was the feeling they had during regular

classes that they had to learn the material to complete homework. Parents felt fully involved and tutored the child at home. Many parents felt discouraged from getting involved due to how some teachers treated them (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). The children of employed parents were taught independently, so they had to cope with the technology and the teacher's requests. Parents attended to them after they got home. Even parents who worked from home did not have an easy situation *(PC2)*: *"...in the morning I study with the child, cook, and still have to work from home. Doing both and running a household. To keep the kids occupied in the afternoon... I guess I was annoyed by the situation during the coronavirus. The kids were not even online yet, so I was tasked with completing the material that is normally covered in four hours at that school, and I was just trying to find that time."* Garbe et al. (2020) confirm the difficult situation the parents found themselves in. The parent became a teacher in the home environment: "*Teachers handed out assignments and every single day parents had to be involved, learning with the child, writing. If the kids had online lessons, it looked like they took a break after the lesson, rested, and then started preparing and completing the assignments the teacher sent. It worked like that every day*." Parents feel that they have not represented the role of a teacher well because they do not have the pedagogical skills of a trained teacher (Rokos & Vančura, 2020). Parents reported that cooperation with the teacher is critical and it depends on the mutual communication about the child's achievements. Some parents were satisfied with the teacher because of reasonable demands on the child during both classical and distance learning. Thus, parents appreciated teachers' work, the amount of assigned homework, and the teachers' availability when needed *(PC6)*: *"...when COVID was going on, the girls caught it in 2nd grade, and they started learning multiplication tables and I couldn't explain the principle of small multiplication tables to them in a week, we tried it on flowers, crayons, as the teacher told us, and they just didn't learn it. Then they came to school and within a week they had completely mastered the small multiplication table with ease".* The quality of the teacher and the clear requirements from the school made it easier for parents even when parents did not understand the homework assignment or instructions.

Discussion and conclusions

In a relationship-based family, the value of the child and concern for the child is paramount. Parents can realise that they can achieve their child's success at school more effectively through their support and help during home preparation. The parent–school relationship is based on sharing common goals, with both building and benefiting from cooperation (Pecháčková, 2014). The association between family socioeconomic status, home preparation involvement, and student achievement in school is also demonstrated by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003). We identified the parents' ambition to be a good parent who helps their child to cope with the demands of school, regardless of unexpected crises such as the coronavirus pandemic in the world. For parents, the only difference was in the parents' strategies to reach this goal. The first pathway to success is clear guidance and control, where parents consider the child's satisfaction to be a success. Relatively sophisticated child support practices are assumed with such goals; they correspond to the responsible parenting model in

which parents are mindful of their parenting and monitor parenting attitudes toward their child (Duncan et al., 2009). Another way is a success as a result of guidance to independence, help and support. The parents' displays of activism, represented by persistence, resilience, and goal orientation, are evidence of how important this is to them as an investment of time and emotion, but with a vision of the future effect of the effort and commitment. In the context of parental involvement in home preparation and the activism shown by the parents, we identified the main areas of parental involvement in home preparation:

- creating an environment with optimal conditions for the implementation of the child's home preparation, taking into consideration the fine-tuning of work and family issues;
- applying the strategies in homework (setting the rules for homework and observing them by the child, control, motivation, supporting child's independence);
- active involvement in home learning and help with homework, including checking that things are ready for school;
- communicating with the child about the importance of learning, creating systematic preparation for gradual automation, and taking the duty for granted;
- individual influence on the child's behavioural manifestations in a positive way (praise, encouragement, reward) and a negative way (verbal comments, conditioning, prohibitions).

The observed areas of parental involvement in home preparation are characterised by the fact that parents do not deny the importance of home preparation. They take it for granted and consider it an obligation arising from their role as parents. Parents universally consider home-schooling to be an emotional, relational, communicative, and relatively demanding time investment in their child's education, often accompanied by negative behaviour, stress, time pressure, and an inability or unavailability to help their child.

The changes that have occurred in parental involvement in the home preparation context of the COVID-19 pandemic have been more frequent parental involvement, with the parent becoming the "teacher" at home (Šarníková, 2023). The most common aspect that parents reported as limiting ideal home preparation is time (Chophel & Choeda, 2021). Most of the parents were working and it was time-consuming to combine work with the home preparation of the child, especially for the younger ones. Older children from 3rd grade were more independent, so there was not as much supervision needed. Despite the difficulty, parents stated responsibility and could not leave it entirely up to the child. Even when parents were concerned about the lack of help or time for the child, they tried to help the child with learning and home preparation. Aspects that enter into the child's home preparation are the parent's time, the child's and parent's misunderstanding of the task, the teacher's different approach and experience, and the persuasion or coercion of the child into home preparation.

The demands placed on parents in addition to their jobs are quite high not only during the pandemic, with daily chores, cleaning, and preparing children for school at home (Schienam et al., 2018). When the schools were closed, and the distance learning model was in effect, families were faced with reorganising the family management to support the child's school agenda, technologies, the time between lessons, free time and homework. This unpredictability, especially day-by-day changing policy restrictions and changes, affected families' work–family balance (Ribeiro et al., 2021). Although the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about

many negative aspects, changes and stress, it is still a family space to be together, to support and benefit from each other (Kerr et al., 2021). Parents, especially mothers as more dominant actors in home preparation than fathers (Alharthi, 2023) confirm that they are involved in practice and educationally and, above all, they are the moral and motivational support for children during the process of home preparation. Parents find homework helps to develop work habits for home learning in an effort to achieve the best possible results in school (Yavich & Davidovitch, 2020). The results confirm the active involvement in home preparation in a quest for independence, and responsibility with a reflection of good performance in school, regardless of the obstacles they were forced to deal with during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A challenge for further research is self-efficacy and parents' beliefs regarding motivation (Falanga et al., 2022) to understand parental homework involvement quality. It is important to find ways to minimise the stress families experience in the pandemic (Singletary et al., 2022). Home preparation displays the other side of the school–family relationship and thus deserves more research attention.

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Tab 1. *Research participants*

Participants (before Covid)	Gender	Child's grade	Parent's degree
P1	Woman	4th grade	High school
P2	Man	3th grade	University
P3	Woman	5th grade	University
P4	Woman	1st grade	University
P5	Woman	3rd grade	University
P6	Woman	4th grade	University
P7	Woman	3rd grade	University
P8	Woman	4th grade	University
P9	Woman	4th grade	University
P10	Man	3rd grade	University
P11	Woman	5th grade	University
P12	Woman	1st grade	High school
P13	Woman	2nd grade	University
P14	Woman	3rd grade	High school
P15	Woman	4th grade	High school
P16	Woman	4th grade	High school
P17	Woman	1st grade	University
PC1	Woman	1st grade	High school
PC2	Woman	1st grade	High school
PC3	Woman	1st grade	High school
PC4	Man	2nd grade	High school
PC5	Man	2nd grade	High school
PC6	Woman	5th grade	High school
PC7	Woman	1st grade	High school
PC8	Woman	4th grade	University
PC9	Woman	1st grade	University
PC10	Woman	3rd grade	High school
PC11	Woman	2nd grade	High school
PC12	Woman	2nd grade	High school
PC13	Woman	4th grade	High school
PC14	Woman	3rd grade	University
PC15	Woman	1st grade	University
PC16	Woman	3rd grade	University
PC17	Woman	1st grade	University
PC18	Woman	1st grade	High school
PC19	Woman	5th grade	University
PC20	Woman	3rd grade	High school