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Research Article

Learning Chinese Mandarin characters in an English-speaking country: The development of a child's symbolic mind

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Abstract: This qualitative research explores the development of the symbolic mind in children through learning Chinese Mandarin characters. Navigated through the lens of relational developmental system metatheory and guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, findings present the analysis of the developmental processes in children's recognition of symbols and use of known symbols to make and share meaning. This study also offers an explanation of the effect of changes in the sociocultural environment on children's symbolic development. Further, cultural differences toward symbolic representation are discussed with the recommendation of focusing on recognition followed by writing when learning Chinese Mandarin characters.

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Symbolic development; Symbolic representation; Early childhood; Chinese Mandarin characters; Relational developmental systems metatheory; Sociocultural theory

Introduction

Symbol systems have existed and have been utilized for communication throughout history (Vallotton and Ayoub, 2010). Symbols, symbolic play, symbolic thought, symbolic development, symbolic interpretation, and symbolic representation have been widely studied across multiple fields (DeLoache, 2004; Uttal and Yuan, 2014; Wu, 2013). Symbolic representation is considered an important phenomenon in children's cognitive development and language learning (Smith and Jones, 2011). For our purposes here, symbolic representation refers to developmentally dependent abilities to discern symbolic meaning, to interpret symbolic meaning, and to use symbols to convey or communicate meaning. However, on the one hand, most studies underline symbolic representation for learning an alphabetic language, but less research attention is given to non-alphabetic languages such as Chinese Mandarin[1], which is characterized by its non-alphabetic orthography. On the other hand, learning Chinese Mandarin is becoming more and more popular in the United States. Numerous research studies have been conducted primarily focused on teaching Chinese Mandarin as a second language to a non-Chinese population, teaching Chinese Mandarin as a heritage, and developing Chinese Mandarin programs and curricula for populations of Chinese descent (Wu, 2013). Chinese Mandarin has been studied from listening, speaking, reading, and writing perspectives with specific investigations on mastering Chinese Mandarin characters among youth, but there is less research exploring how young children learn Chinese characters from the lens of symbolic development, especially to those who are temporarily residing in the United States.

With such background that is described above, we were very interested in comprehending how Chinese children develop cognitive abilities to perceive meaning from symbols in the course of learning Chinese Mandarin characters. This is of particular interest, from a developmental perspective, when taking into consideration that the preschool children in this study have been learning characters when residing in

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[1] For the purposes of this article, unless otherwise specified, the words "Chinese" and 'character/s' refer to Chinese Mandarin (simplified) characters.

the United States, and not immersed in Chinese culture. The research inquiry for this study is about children's development in understanding and using symbolic representation in the process of learning characters. In attempting to acquire some understanding of these developmental processes, the research questions for the study are:

1) How a child's symbolic mind is developed when learning Chinese Mandarin characters?
2) How do Chinese children learn to discern meaning from the symbols represented in Chinese characters?
3) How do cultural and social environments influence children's learning of Chinese Mandarin characters when they are temporarily residing in the United States?

This study aims to contribute to the educational field, especially in the area of early childhood with a focus on symbolic representation in learning non-alphabetic languages. Parents, teachers, early caregivers, school administrators, and other educators are able to refer to the collected information on symbols, symbolic understanding, visual object recognition, symbolic function, symbolic play, symbolic representation, and concept acquisition in children's learning and teaching. Much of this work is cited here, comprising many underpinning features that make up the abilities we refer to as symbolic representation. This paper incorporates previous work that examines the understanding and use of symbols and has applied that to a non-alphabetic language system, also taking into account what experiences Chinese families have had, especially in improving learning Chinese characters with a change of social and cultural environment. Besides, the cases in this study may serve as examples to families of how to advance non-alphabetic language learning, such as Chinese characters, and this study may call attention to how symbolic representation and concept acquisition works in children's cognitive development from the very beginning with appropriate strategies. In addition, teachers, educators, and researchers may benefit by having more detailed information about the role of symbolic representation in the Chinese language and the non-alphabetic system.

Theoretical Framework

In seeking to better understand developmental processes in young children, this research is focused on some of the most uniquely human capacities; symbolic representation and language. Examining these topics through a developmental framework, it is important to note that, while at times, we may refer to cognitive or linguistic development, our developmental lens is not ordered in distinct stages or learning domains. Traditionally developmental theories have conceptualized child development as a teleological and, mostly, linear movement toward increasing complexity. Child development is often portrayed as progressions in mental structure and successively higher skill level, whereby each successive 'level' encompasses previous 'levels', allowing for increasing mental complexity and skill acquisition (Taylor, 2016). While we do agree that development typically proceeds toward greater complexity, we do not see it progressing as parallel lines of ages, stages, and learning domains that never meet. Cognitive development encompasses, among other things, symbolic representational abilities, abstract thinking and language learning. These three aspects of cognitive development are part of a relational system that produces cognitive processes such as comprehension, conveyance, and communication.

As such, this line of inquiry comes through the lens of relational developmental systems metatheory (Overton, 2013). Relational developmental systems offer a holistic, context-based perspective on developmental sciences. In relational developmental systems, development is seen as emergent from the relations of interacting aspects of the whole system. Overton (2013) explains, "It is through complex reciprocal bidirectional and circular reciprocal interpenetrating actions among the co-acting parts that the system moves to levels of increasingly organized complexity" (p. 53). The system in this case would refer, not only to the child, but also to the environment in which the child is contextualized and situated. Relational developmental system metatheory is not another Cartesian developmental theory pitting the influence of a discrete 'environment' against the influence of a predetermined biology. Instead the child's development is understood to emerge from the relations of the system's interdependent parts; ancestry, child, family, culture, community, society, language, and others. Development, then, is an emergent

quality of an adaptive system, where the parts are unique to each child, place, and time, thus making the behavior of the whole system undetermined (Overton, 2013). A main principle of relational developmental systems metatheory is that people have agency and have a significant impact on their environment, bodies, and development. Individual considerations including, "biological, demographic, personality, cognitive, motivational, emotional, and behavioral characteristics, in conjunction with context-specific variables explain variation or consistency in developmental trajectories over time" (Gayman, Fraser-Thomas and Baker, 2017).

With this holistic view on children's development, it was impossible to explore development, especially focusing on factors as centrally situated as symbols and language, without deeply considering the culture and society in which a child is embedded when developing the capacity for symbolic representation. Hence, we have also employed Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory as a theoretical framework through which to analyze this research. Vygotsky offers several metaphorical devices and routes to understanding the effect/s of language and culture on development. The sociocultural theory has been widely used in various studies regarding language teaching and learning, based on the belief that the process of language learning is always being socially constructed and reconstructed (Menezes, 2013) with cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978). On the one hand, tools, in Vygotsky's (1978) understanding, exist in two categories, technical tools such as texts, books, materials, media, digital devices, and psychological tools such as language, signs, and symbols. Both play crucial roles in children's cognitive development and concept acquisition. On the other hand, Vygotsky (1978) views language as not only a technical tool for communication, but also a psychological tool that promotes cognitive development through constructing meaning between humans and their linguistic objectives (Hammond, 2002). Therefore, children's language learning involves both types of tools through social interactions. Children convert/transform from technical tools to their own representations, symbols, patterns, and meaning when they have conversations and other types of communications in the context of social interactions, and in turn, social interactions internalize children's understanding of the language, form the individual's perceptions toward language practices, and establishes foundations for further language progress and growth (Gee, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

In this research study, sociocultural theory informs us that children learn Chinese characters through interaction with technical tools such as books and apps, as well as through social and linguistic interactions with others. Children became symbol-minded through deconstructing characters from abstract concepts to concrete visuals and reconstructing them with meaning-making by acknowledging the engagement of the learning environment such as family communication, school collaboration, peer influence, and community participation. With this being said, sociocultural theory and relational developmental systems metatheory guide us to a deeper exploration of the relationship between two main aspects of cognitive development; the symbolic mind and language learning, as well as a broader understanding of children's concept acquisition and symbolically relevant mental activities and deeds.

Review of the Literature

Based on the background of the study and focused on the research questions, this study provides reviews from two paths, 1) the development of cognitive capacities that involve symbolic representation and language learning and 2) learning Chinese Mandarin characters.

Children's Symbolic Representation in Language Learning

As this paper seeks to provide some explanation for the developmental processes that account for meaning-making from symbols, especially when learning language, it proved useful to examine the literature that has deconstructed the levels of complexity in representational abilities. We begin by examining symbols and early symbolic understanding in young children. As children grow they begin to incorporate visual object recognition, object substitution in play and gain understanding of the symbolic function. Further cognitive development leads most children to the ability to discern, convey and communicate meaning from and through symbols; symbolic representation, which underpins deeper

understanding and concept acquisition. These developmental progressions in cognitive complexity have been studied by many in the field. Here we present a brief overview of children's symbolic representation in language learning.

In discussing children's cognitive development, including symbolic representation and language learning, Piaget and Bruner's theories must be first highlighted as they are pioneers who studied symbols in children's development. Inhelder and Piaget (1964) advocated that children should be able to make connections and find relations among abstract concepts, as well as have abstract thinking ability when they learn to read written language. Piaget further suggests that until children are about 12 years old, they do not fully acquire these abilities because children need to first develop symbolic and operational thinking abilities (Piaget, 1950). In a similar vein, Bruner (1966) also said that there are three modes of representation relating to children's development, they are, enactive, iconic and symbolic, and symbolic is the foundation for children's language learning. Both Piaget and Bruner believed that symbols are keys to support children's symbolic development which further advances children's cognitive development including abstract thinking skills and symbolic representational abilities. This can be seen, especially in areas of language learning, such as when children express themselves through mark making (Abbott, 2000; Pampoulou and Detheridge, 2007). Written expression is evidence of a child's relationship with symbols (Athey, 2007).

Symbol and symbolic understanding. A symbol can be any number of things as long as it is intended to represent something else and can be interpreted that way by another person. Uttal and Yuan (2014) state that, "to use a symbol, children need to 1) understand the intention that led to the creation and use of the symbol and 2) how the symbol relates to its referent" (p. 295). Bruner (1966) also asserted that objects include social objects or people, physical objects or things, and abstract objects or ideas (p. 10). In language learning, Vygotsky (1981; 1987) proposed that symbols are also tools for serving social-emotional-cognitive functions, namely, communication and representation. As such, Uttal and Yuan (2014) explain that there are three components of symbolic understanding: a symbol, its referent, and the human interpretation that discerns the relationship between the symbol with its referent. The intention of both the creator or user of the symbol and the interpreter or receiver of the symbol is central to the final meaning that can be taken from the symbolic representation.

Several research studies have shown that children as young as three years old use symbols to interact with the world and then use language/words to communicate with others as well as to represent more complicated social concepts (DeLoache, 2004; Namy and Waxman, 2005; Vallotton and Ayoub, 2010). A child may not know how to read or write but can understand the intention of using spoken sounds to represent words; comprehension of words constitutes a form of symbolic understanding (Uttal and Yuan, 2014). DeLoache (2004) has explored young children's use and creation of symbols. She showed how children's understanding of intention is evident in symbol production. A study was conducted where children were asked to make a drawing to convey information to an adult about a game. When the children were told that more information was needed on the drawing to make sense to the adult, the children added more marks on the drawing to provide more information. This research demonstrated that the children understood the communicative aspect of the drawings; i.e. that the drawing's function was to convey information (DeLoache, 2004). This research further demonstrated that children's ability to understand the communicative function and shared meanings of symbolic representation coincides with the age at which many developmental theorists believe children develop the cognitive functions called Theory of Mind, or the ability to perceive emotional and intellectual states in others (Mercer, 2018).

Visual object recognition and symbolic function. Children's visual object recognition and play with objects (symbols) can be related to children's early language development because children use various objects and substitute one object for another to interact/communicate (Smith and Jones, 2011). The ability to employ object substitution in play or communication depends on sufficient development in visual object recognition. This refers to a child's ability to recognize visual objects, even when they are represented in such a sparse and geometric way as to be a symbol of the visual object. With this being said, according to Smith and Jones (2011), "the tie between object substitutions and language development is classically

attributed to a shared 'symbolic function'" (p. 2). They propose that a symbol-like object is tended to be substituted by younger children in implementing the symbolic function.

Symbolic play and symbolic thinking. With the understanding of object substitutions and symbolic function, symbolic play is introduced and extended to a broader umbrella with "a range of pretend play behaviors including dress-up and role-playing" (Smith and Jones, 2011, p. 1). Starting from here, the ability to use a symbol to represent something else is often referred to as symbolic development which is "a set of abilities that enable humans to represent concepts in their absence" (Vallotton and Ayoub, 2010, p. 2). Symbolic thinking develops from children's increasing understanding of the symbolic function and encounters with symbols in the course of interacting with others. Specifically, it refers to children's ability to understand concrete concepts, as well as abstractions, and from initially a physical standpoint to both physical and mental stances (Vallotton and Ayoub, 2010).

Symbolic development and symbolic representation. Clarifying the aforementioned terms is significant for understanding how children make further progress in symbolic development. Vygotsky (1987), Piaget and Inhelder (1969) viewed children's symbolic play as a crucial stage in developing children's symbolic representation. According to Veraksa and Veraksa (2016), "symbolic representation is understood as a special form of mental representation of a learned object or a phenomenon in the mind where the latter are represented through their external (as opposed to their content) traits that can be substituted by some other object or a phenomenon" (p. 669). In play, children have opportunities to develop their capacity for concept formation and symbolic representation through "use of gestures, speech, and written signs in an imaginary situation" (Wu, 2013, p. 13) and have chances to operate and practice the nature of social rules that both contribute to children's language development. An example of this can be seen when a child pretends something like a deck of playing cards is a cell phone and has a pretend conversation. Black Delfin (2020) demonstrated how everyday play objects can become infused with symbolic meaning in pretend play and used by children to construct and define aspects of their own identities and their understandings of discursive information that surrounds them. Vygotsky (1987) also agreed with the importance of symbolic representation, and he viewed that symbolic systems or signs, as used by humans could be used to, not only, change the environment, but also to transform and master themselves.

Concept acquisition. In short, younger children under three years old mainly use symbols-objects to engage with the world and then these symbols-objects are gradually replaced by symbolic representation in the form of language/words. In this process, visual object recognition, object substitution, and play with objects are crucial signals to assess children's language development (Smith and Jones, 2011). Although the symbolic function is implemented at a superficial level by younger children, symbolic development is further deepened as they grow up. This deepening of symbolic development results in concept acquisition. As children have more experiences and social/ linguistic exposure to symbols and symbolic thought, they begin to arrange the knowledge gained into broader concepts that include symbols. Vygotsky (1987) described two types of concept acquisition; 'every day' and scientific concepts. Every day conceptual understanding arises from the day-to-day experiences of children's lives. In this way, everyday concepts exist in the sensory and concrete, as this is where most young children are developmentally in the early years. Everyday concepts serve as a foundational understanding of the material world and prepare the child for comprehending scientific concepts. Fleer and Raban (2006) describe Vygotsky's concept acquisition model with everyday concepts developing from "below (concrete) to above (abstract)... and scientific concepts develop from above to below, from the more complex to the more elementary" (p. 70). This two-way avenue of concrete to abstract/ abstract to concrete was noted by Vygotsky, "the weakness of the everyday concept lies in its incapacity for abstraction. In contrast the weakness of the scientific concept lies in its insufficient saturation of the concrete" (1987, p 169). Vygotsky suggested that the two types of concept acquisition- every day (concrete) and scientific (abstract) merge together in a mutually reinforcing relationship that allows deep thought to take place.

Learning Chinese Mandarin Characters

As a print system that is non-alphabetic, in Chinese the concept of what makes up a word is structured differently than alphabetic orthographies where words are composed of letters that have an auditory connection to the written symbol or letter. Chinese word learning involves the radical, the character, and the word.

Radicals are individual units, made of strokes. Chinese characters are made from radicals, usually two or more. Radicals can indicate meaning in a character (semantic) or indicate phonetic clusters that cue pronunciation similar to rime in alphabetic systems (Yeh, Chou and Ho, 2017). For example, the water radical (氵) can be found in the characters lake (湖), ocean (海), and river (河). In this way, words in Chinese can be comprised of one or more characters, making word definition in print more difficult to isolate compared to alphabetic print systems where there is a designated auditory sound for each letter, with each sound mapped onto a letter and a word is formed. According to McBride (2016), "Chinese characters represent syllable-level sounds" (p. 526). However, Chinese writing does not directly reflect representations of speech sounds, rather "one Chinese character maps onto a single syllable which is usually also a single morpheme or meaning unit" (McBride, 2016, p. 527). As many radicals are phonetic and indicate the pronunciation of the character, Tong, Tong and McBride (2017) point out that young children gain access to character configuration knowledge visually, followed by auditory cues to pronunciation. They state, "using radical cues in encoding novel Chinese characters is a gradual developmental process" (p. 1263). Their research implies that young children's first access to understanding meaning of characters relies on sensory pathways (vision and hearing) that develop before neural abilities for processing of abstract concepts.

There are about 2500 to 5000 commonly used Chinese characters that should be memorized which sounds impossible, but they are introduced with six different categorizations. They are, 1) pictographs; 2) explicit characters; 3) associative compounds; 4) pathopoeic characters; 5) mutually explanatory characters; and 6) phonetic loan characters (Wu, 2016; Sun, 2015).

Pictographs represent the shape of certain objects or their parts such as 木 (mù, wood; tree), 刀 (dāo, knife), 女 (nǚ, woman). Explicit characters are simple diagrammatic indications of abstract ideas such as 上 (shàng, above), or下 (xià, below). Associative compound characters are derived from their components, which may combine two or more ideographs such as, 明 (míng, bright, the combination of 日 rì, sun and 月 yuè, moon), and 森 (sēn, forest, the combination of three trees 木 mù). The majority of Chinese characters are pictophonetic, which combines semantic and phonetic components. For instance, the character 妈 (mā, mother) consists of 女 (nǚ, female) and 马 (mǎ, horse); 女 suggests the general meaning of the character while 马 signals its pronunciation. Mutually explanatory (or synonymous) characters refer to those that are of the same or similar meanings and thus can be used to define one another (Wu, 2016). Phonetic loan characters refer to those that originally had no written form and so borrowed existing characters of the same or similar pronunciation. For example, the character 我 (wǒ) resembles a weapon with a saw-toothed blade and long shaft, and originally referred to a kind of ancient weapon. Because the pronunciation of this character is like that of the pronoun "I", 我 was borrowed to mean "I" or "me" (Sun, 2015).

With the above descriptions of Chinese characters, in analyzing how character recognition is taught in China (the mainland), Hong Kong, and Taiwan, McBride (2016) emphasizes that character learning usually relies on strong visual-spatial skills to discriminate between the subtle differences in how the characters are written or printed. This is combined with repetition in recreating or copying the characters, resulting in visuo-motor long-term muscle memory. Repeated encounters with Chinese characters afford memorization. It is also worth noting that simplified Chinese characters are taught and used in China mainland, while traditional Chinese characters are applied in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The differences between simplified Chinese characters and traditional Chinese characters is the former uses fewer strokes for complex characters while the latter maintains the same. Thus, simplified Chinese characters are easier and faster to write compared to traditional Chinese, which is more visually complex.

In thinking about how children discern meaning from character recognition, one might ask what is the difference between memorization and recognition? What is recognition, if not to identify a visual memory? Do children discern meaning from symbols because an ascribed meaning has discursively been assigned and thus, the meaning associated with that symbol has been 'learned' or memorized to later be 'recognized'? It would seem that meaning is, at first, 'learned' and later recognition is applied (i.e. the memory of the assigned meaning is recalled and applied to the symbol.) With memorization and recognition central to Chinese character learning, over time proficient Chinese learners recognize characters in somewhat the same way that proficient English learners can recognize words as 'sight words', where the character or word is not decoded but the meaning is memorized and recognized in whole (McBride, 2016).

Researchers Lu, Wu, Fadjo & Black (2010) have more recently proposed integrating bodily movement and response in learning Chinese characters. Their work, along with others (Fadjo, Lu and Black, 2009; Glenberg, 2008) in the area of instructional embodiment is grounded in theories of embodied cognition. Embodied cognition (Gibbs, 2006), like relational developmental systems, does not recognize a mind/body split; instead cognition is understood to be constituted from the lived experience in a human body that interacts with the physical and cultural environments. Cognition, then, is seen as emergent from the body's interaction with others and in the environment in which it is embedded. Instructional embodiment is grounded in the idea that the mind is embodied, and as such, instruction or learning is more comprehensive if the body is involved in the process of taking up the new instructional content, in this case learning characters. Lu et al. (2010) explain, "The kinesthetic action of a person has its importance on how he or she thinks, perceives, learns, uses language, and experiences consciousness, feelings, and the world" (p. 2487). Instructional embodiment in the case of Chinese character learning could involve learning to write characters and incorporating characters into drawings. Additionally, many of the forms of instructional embodiment available involve computer technologies that facilitate the embodied experience; for example, a student wearing a webcam while writing Chinese characters and, hence also seeing themselves move (their hands) on the computer screen as their hands form the characters. This perceptual feedback loop serves to amplify the already existing interaction of body, space, materials, content, and cognition that situates the symbolic understanding within the body (Lu et al., 2010).

Research Design and Method

Using a qualitative case study approach helped both the authors and the participants of the study to recognize multiple perspectives of the research as well as provided a more in-depth understanding of the research questions. This research study was designed as a two-case study. Purposeful sampling was used in order to focus on Chinese families who temporarily live in the United States and have China-born parents and China-born children who are bilingual learners between four to five years old.

Research Context and Participants

Families were selected from a local university at City X (pseudonym) which is located in southern New Mexico. Although the White and Hispanic/Latino are the majority population, a range of diversity is represented by the local university. With this wide range of diversity, we initially planned to conduct the research face to face at the university campus, however, a state lockdown occurred due to Covid-19 and we had to modify our research plan. After seeking suggestions from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the entire research changed from person-to-person to online, that is, call for participants, recruitment of participants, purposeful sampling, consent process, data collection and member check were all processed through emails and online meetings. First, an email of call for participants was sent through our personal and professional contacts. In specific, the call for participants invited people who are, 1) a Chinese-born parent; 2) a temporary resident in the United States and 3) teaching their own child/children Chinese characters to participate in this study. To those people who thought they were qualified and responded to this email, we then sent a recruitment email with a detailed explanation of the research study such as the research questions, benefits and risks, rights and confidentiality with options of scheduling a phone call for clarifying questions if they need. We also stressed that if they decided to participate in this study, they

are free to withdraw from the research study at anytime and anywhere without any penalty.

In other words, purposeful sampling was used in recruitment of participants. According to Patton (2002), purposeful sampling is an effective strategy in qualitative research for identifying and selecting cases with limited resources. Cresswell and Plano Clark (2011) also address that purposeful sampling involves classifying and determining a group of people who experience and share a common phenomenon or interest. With purposeful sampling, a consent form was sent to potential participants to complete, sign and return to us. As a result, two families, family A and family B were selected. There were a total of five participants, two mothers and three children. Family A is Flora and her daughter, Kayla. Family B is Zara and her twin sons, Aden and Alex. All of them are China-born but temporarily living in the United States. Both mothers are language teachers who were bilingual in Chinese Mandarin and English and paid great attention to language teaching and learning to their child/children. All of the children are bilingual (English and Chinese Mandarin) learners in both countries and they were from four to five years old. Detailed information is provided in the following table.

Table 1. Participant Information

Case/Family	Participants	Age	Gender	Length of stay in the U.S.
A	Flora	42	Female	1 year
	Kayla	5	Female	1 year
B	Zara	44	Female	2 years
	Aden	4	Male	Half-year
	Alex	4	Male	Half-year

Methods of Data Collection

We used a parent questionnaire (see Appendix A), parent interview, and children's products such as children's writings and drawings as data. The three methods provided us with rich and first-hand information that built a foundation for analysis. In order to further process information in a way that gives both breadth and depth, parents were first invited to complete a parent questionnaire via email. Following receipt of the parent questionnaire, interviews were then scheduled and conducted through online meetings for further clarification and comprehension. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the interview questions (see Appendix B) were semi-structured. Depending on the participants' responses, follow-up questions were also added. In terms of children's products such as drawings and writings, Thompson (1995) says that children's products are one kind of picture language which represents children's personal expression and intrinsic thoughts. Hence, as important evidence of symbolic development, children's drawings and writings demonstrate their thinking and learning, namely, cognitive development (Thompson, 1995). These were also collected for data interpretation. Depending on participants' selections, participants scanned their child/children's drawings and writings, shared with us via email and talked about them through online interviews.

Methods of Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis and visual analysis were used to interpret the data. These two methods helped us to carefully explore the role of symbolic representation in Chinese character learning. On the one hand, qualitative content analysis was applied to analyze the parent questionnaire and interview data via an inductive approach by Saldaña's (2009) The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers. Steps such as coding and grouping, categorization, abstraction, comparing, and generalizing were followed in this process. On the other hand, children's drawings and writings were analyzed by visual analysis. Elkins (2003) states that in order to help researchers to navigate data, explore relationships, and understand complex concepts, visual data analysis is a way of discovering and comprehending patterns via visual interpretation. Combined with qualitative content analysis and visual data analysis, findings were

organized and reported together.

Findings and Analysis

Findings are constructed and analyzed by responding to the research questions one by one. In responding to the first question of how Chinese children learn to discern meaning from the symbols represented in Chinese characters, the analysis focused on switching between a concrete referent and a symbol. In discussing the second question of how a child's symbolic mind is developed when learning characters, analyses mainly include: 1) applying known symbols to reproduce more meaning, and 2) using symbols and simple storytelling to share meaning from daily experiences. In explaining the third question of how changes in cultural and social environments influence children's Chinese character learning when they are temporarily residing in the United States, the main theme is interpreted as increased interactions with technical tools and decreased interactions with the community.

How do Chinese Children learn to Discern Meaning from the Symbols Represented in Chinese Characters?

Switching between a Concrete Referent and a Symbol

Both families highlighted digital tools that helped children understand Chinese characters. Both families used an app, named *Wukong Literacy* (2020) which is featured by its animation demonstration of the transformation of Chinese characters. As discussed earlier in the literature review, Chinese characters are symbols and they originally come from the actual things, in other words, how the actual things, or referents, slowly transform into the characters. Throughout history, Chinese characters get reformed, changed, and simplified and this accounts for why the current characters look different from the earlier days. Table 2 includes a few examples—the screenshots from the app that displays the transformation from referents to symbols by animation demonstrations when children learn characters.

Table 2. Examples of character transformation from a concrete referent and a symbol (Wukong Literacy, 2020)

Actual thing	Transformation	Symbol	Meaning
			Bird
			Fish
			Water

As the animations demonstrate the transformation of Chinese characters, children can see how the character describes a concrete referent and over time became a symbol for the referent. However, actually learning to recognize characters requires that learners can mentally construct and deconstruct the symbol from its concrete origin to its symbolic representation. As young children experience and learn about reality, the understanding of the material, or concrete, world occurs first in their development. With time,

children begin to acquire the capacity for abstract understanding. van Oers and Poland (2007, p. 14) state that abstraction is 'a dialectical process between the concretely given objects and the abstract representations of them' where symbolic representations are constructed as mental objects, which sustain 'inner relationship' with the concrete world" (van Oers, 2001, p. 287). This 'inner relationship with the concrete world' is reflective of the directional sequence of a child's lived experience with concrete encounters preceding and providing a foundation for neural development that enables abstraction.

Because of this, reality is usually constructed by young children hierarchically from a concrete understanding of material objects to more subtle abstractions of the object/s that evolve into symbolic representation, or in this case Chinese characters. The development of the ability to discern meaning from symbolic representation is linked with the child's progressing ability to "detach from the concrete world, while maintaining connection with it through representations" (Otsuka and Jay, 2017, p. 994). Once the ability to conceptually hold both the concrete and the symbolic is achieved, then children can conversely begin to understand abstractions or symbols by deconstructing their meaning back to the concrete origin.

This ability to comprehend the concrete/abstract relationship of symbols through construction and deconstruction allows children to discern meaning from symbols, recognize new symbols, and to learn characters. Specifically, since the level of character, learning speed and total time spent working with the app can be set up by parents, both families in this study only required their children to learn five new characters per day within 30 minutes due to children's age and their capability of learning. Children comprehended new characters from a concrete referent to abstract through watching character transformation, namely, animation demonstration. Based on each individual's development and progress, parents can add a section of character writing when children's fine motor skills are improved. When the section of character writing is added, children can move from character recognition to character writing through practicing character stroke order that the app offers. Thus, working with an app, such as described above that visually demonstrates this two-way evolution of meaning, improves children's symbolic thinking skills, enhances their symbolic representation ability, and extends their imagination. Participants reflected that children enjoyed watching the animation demonstration and their recognition and memorization of characters became stronger and firmer compared to without it.

How a Child's Symbolic Mind is Developed When Learning Chinese Mandarin Characters?

Applying Known Symbols to Reproduce More Meaning

As discussed earlier, one of the main components of a Chinese character is the radical which can be a character or an abstract form of a character. Radicals usually indicate a character's meaning or pronunciation and there are about 200 radicals that construct the Chinese writing system. In other words, one must remember 200 radicals and use these radicals as a foundation to learn more characters. Along with the characters' stroke order and stroke count, learning Chinese is challenging. However, according to Wu (2016, p. v), "most radicals, for example, are pictographs, or visual representations of objects or concepts. Given a pictograph, learners can turn the character into a vivid picture, or associate the character with a shape, color, sound, smell, feeling, emotion, movement, or action". In this research study, participants also stated that children must understand radicals and then to learn more complicated characters. In order to do so, participants explained that children first memorize radicals through switching between symbols and concrete referents which is discussed in the previous section, and after that, children interpret radicals' meaning or sounds (in this research study, children only interpret radicals' meaning) when they learn more complicated characters. In this way, children continuously expand their vocabulary and symbolic capacities in applying knowledge of radicals to new characters to form new and related meanings.

One of the participants, Zara, offered an example of how her children tried to use a known symbol to reproduce more meaning of other Chinese characters. For instance, when her children, Aden and Alex learned a character 口 (kǒu), means mouth, they were also explained that 口 (kǒu) also can be a radical in other Mandarin characters and it is possible that the radical indicates characters' meaning. Hence, when Aden and Alex saw more complicated characters which contain a radical of 口(kǒu) such as 唱, 吃, 喝, and

吵, which all has 口 (kǒu) on the left side, they knew the meaning of the complicated characters are somehow associated with the mouth. Indeed, these characters can be viewed as verbs. The first character, 唱 (chàng) means to sing; the second character 吃 (chī) means to eat; the third character 喝 (hē) means to drink and the last character 吵 (chǎo) means to quarrel and all of them are related to using the mouth. In such a way, Aden and Alex further develop their symbolic mind by applying known symbols to reproduce more meaning.

Taking 女 (nǚ) as another example. Flora shared that her child, Kayla learned a character, 女(nǚ) which means women/female, and 女(nǚ) is also a radical. When Kayla saw a new character, 妈(mā), she analyzed that the left part of the character is 女 (nǚ), which means female so the meaning of the character 妈 (mā, means mother) might be related to female. It is similar to the earlier example of 口 (kǒu), although Kayla didn't know the new character, she was able to guess its meaning by applying known radicals. The last example also illustrates the development of the symbolic mind. Specifically, children comprehend 水 (shuǐ) as a character means water along with its radical 氵 (氵 is a radical which is an abstraction form of its character, 水), and they further apply its meaning of water to the following characters which contain the radical of 氵 such as 江(jiāng) means river; 河 (hé) means river; 湖 (hú) means lake; and 海(hǎi) means ocean. Table 3 lists three examples that are discussed above.

Table 3. Examples of applying known radicals to reproduce more meaning

Known symbol		More meaning	
Character/radical	**Meaning**	**New character**	**Meaning**
口	Mouth	**唱**	sing
		吃	eat
		喝	drink
		吵	quarrel
女	Female	妈	mother
		姐	older sister
		妹	younger sister
		姨	aunt
		奶	grandmother
水/氵	Water	**江**	river
		河	river
		湖	lake
		海	ocean

Using Symbols and Simple Storytelling to Share Meaning from Daily Experiences

Flora also underlined the importance of using symbols and simple storytelling while her daughter Kayla learns characters. According to Flora, using symbols and simple storytelling made Kayla relax when she learned the characters. They increased Kayla's self-motivation, which resulted in more recognizing, memorizing, and writing practice. Flora further described that Kayla enjoyed using symbols such as drawing and simple storytelling to express her ideas when she learned a new character. For example, when learning a new character of 马 (horse), it is more effective to ask Kayla to draw a horse, then write the character followed with a simple story of the drawing and text that she produced, rather than give her an order to write the character five times and remember it. In this way, Kayla's understanding of the new character's meaning is embodied (Gibbs, 2006) as she uses her bodily movements to incorporate the character (马) into a framework (in this case, drawing and writing) that employs symbolic representation to produce and convey meaning to the viewer/reader. By using symbols such as drawings and writings, and simple storytelling, Kayla not only processes symbol recognition and symbolic representation, but her memorization is also advanced.

Table 4 displays Kayla's products where Kayla used symbols and simple storytelling to share meaning from daily experiences. For example, in the first picture, Kayla drew a birthday cake with five candles because she just celebrated her five-year-old birthday. She also drew a little pig and wrote 豆 (dòu) and可 (kě) on the top of the little pig because her nickname is 可 (kě) 可 (kě) and sometimes her parents also called her豆 (dòu) 子 (zi), so together 豆 (dòu) 可(kě) is her nickname. Kayla shared her five-year-old

celebration of blowing five candles by using a sketch of a little pig that represents herself and writing two characters that make up her nickname.

Table 4. Kayla uses symbols and simple storytelling to share meaning from daily experiences

Symbol		Simple storytelling
Drawing	**Writing**	
	豆;可	"This is how I celebrate my five-year-old birthday. The little pig is me and I am ready to blow candles".
	小;羊	"The sun is red, the sky is blue and the cloud is white. The little lamb is hungry and looking for food, and there is a bone in front of her".
	五岁生日	"Today is my birthday, I am five-year-old now. I want to have a gift of a unicorn. Here is a Santa hat and a Christmas tree. I want to celebrate my birthday and Christmas together, but I cannot".

Similarly, in the second picture, Kayla drew a house, a bone and grass on the left bottom, a little

lamb on the right bottom, and a sun with a piece of cloud on the top. She explained that the sun is red, the sky is blue, and the cloud is white. She also expressed that the little lamb is hungry and looking for food. So, she gave the picture a name, 小 (xiǎo) 羊 (yáng), which means little lamb, and wrote the two characters in the middle of the picture. The third picture shows a birthday card made by Kayla. Kayla first made five candles on the top, drew a unicorn, a Santa hat, and a Christmas tree on the left side of the card, and wrote characters, 五 (wǔ) 岁 (suì) 生 (shēng) 日(rì) which means five-year-old-birthday on the right side. Kayla showed her understanding of celebrating birthdays by using symbols such as drawings and writings which represent candles, cards, presents, and wishing. Kayla further told a simple story of how she interpreted the meaning of these symbols, and from there, she shared important moments of her everyday life experience.

How Do Changes in Cultural and Social Environments Influence Children's Chinese Characters' Learning When They Are Temporarily Residing in the United States?

Increased Interactions with Technical Tools and Decreased Interactions with the Community

Both families shared that children relied on Chinese learning apps, online videos, and books with other materials to learn Chinese characters when they were living in the United States because Chinese is less used in the community. For instance, Zara said,

> Everyone speaks English and many of them also speak Spanish. Whenever we go, we see English and Spanish and there is no Chinese (Mandarin) at all. Even within Chinese community or meeting with Chinese friends, we also use English or combine both (English and Chinese Mandarin). So, it is hard to them (children) to have that (Chinese Mandarin characters) visualizations (Participant interview, 2020).

In other words, concept acquisition emerges from symbolic understanding and, thus is based in the culture and social world in which the child lives. "Culture and social environment are crucial elements that determine both the form of concept constitution and the acquisition of the concept" (Toran and Temel, 2012, p. 595). This, as seen in this study, becomes central to our research questions regarding children learning Chinese characters while temporarily residing in the United States. Vygotsky (1987) described everyday encounters and scientific direct instruction as the means by which children acquire conceptual understanding. Every day concepts include knowledge and learning that a child experiences in the course of living in a human body within a culture and society. Scientific concepts are 'adopted by the child in completed form from the domain of adult thinking' (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 169). These concepts are presented by a more knowledgeable other in the form of direct instruction or, perhaps, as an app or computer program.

In applying the two pathways of concept acquisition, it would seem that learning Chinese characters when not being situated in Chinese culture, would require that children take up the concepts associated with Chinese characters by way of scientific conceptual acquisition. This would imply direct instruction in the meaning associated with the abstract symbol, with the understanding of the symbol deconstructed back to the concrete referent and then back to the symbol. In contrast, children learning characters while immersed in Chinese culture would encounter characters as part of being embedded in the culture surrounded by environmental print. However, at the same time, children's everyday experiences with language provide a foundation for understanding the more abstract aspects of character learning. The mutual entanglement of the two ways of acquiring concepts allows for children's thinking to begin to move from simplistic to complex; from concrete to abstract and back to concrete; from the referent to the symbol and back to the referent. For children learning Chinese characters while residing in the United States, it was found that this change in cultural and social environment increased children's interaction with technical tools (scientific concept acquisition) and decreased their interactions in a Chinese community (every day concept acquisition). With learning being disproportionately presented through technical tools and scientific concept acquisition, it is unknown how this affects children's internalized understandings of the meaning of Chinese characters when this learning does not occur within Chinese cultural immersion.

Discussion

This research study explored the development of a child's symbolic mind when learning Chinese characters, especially when Chinese children are temporarily residing in the United States. As the overall findings of the study analyzed how symbolic thought is developed and how symbols are used, it also sheds light on the relationship between symbolic representation and sociocultural differences as well as symbolic representation in non-alphabetic language learning. In this section, we took a deeper look from these two angles and provided our recommendations accordingly, one is we believed that all children have the capacity of symbolic representation but it is influenced by cultural differences, as well as development over time of cognitive capacities that encompass symbolic understanding, abstractions and language learning. Since development is time-dependent there are implications for instructional practice. Therefore, it is our suggestion when teaching young children Chinese characters that it is necessary to separate recognition and writing as two steps.

Symbolic Representation is Influenced by Cultural Differences

Based on conversations with the participants, it became understood that children perceive objects first, and then turn objects into pictorial production. This process is referred to as pictorial competencies by Rochat and Callaghan (2005, p. 3). According to Apperly, Williams, and Williams (2004), pictures are understood before written words, and the meaning discerned in pictures, as shown by the answers our participants provided, is always seen through a cultural lens. The impact of cultural influence and how children take that up play a crucial role in children's symbolic development and symbolic representation.

As the participants expressed, children were surrounded within a kind of sociocultural environment that impacts children's interactions with it. Wang (2018) states, "While adapting from one country to another and transforming from one culture to another, one's heritage language maintenance endures many changes—social, cultural, economic, and linguistic—along with changes to people's conceptions of life, societal values, and world outlook" (p. 253). For example, even children residing temporarily in the United States, tend to switch their language from Chinese to English to discover it and in turn, they gain more chances to acquire English rather than Chinese. In different sociocultural environments, an artifact, a decoration, an ornament, an item, a dish, a piece of clothing, a hairstyle, a toy, a gesture, and even eye contact is composed of cultural elements. Cultural influence is an invisible process that impacts children quietly. Rakoczy, Tomasello, and Striano (2005) state that "the symbolizing process always assumes a collective background of shared rules and practices for symbol making and interpreting" (p. 70). Indeed, children's understanding and development of symbolic actions with objects are in fact about cultural learning. It is through culture that shared understanding is defined. With natural observations and interactions, children imitate and sense cultural norms through various cultural (i.e. family) activities (Rakoczy et al., 2005).

Research participants further confirmed that they communicate with their children frequently regarding cultural differences between China and the United States. As they are currently living in the United States, there is a cultural comparison constantly occurring between the family's home culture and the culture in which they are temporarily residing. Where families make an effort to use Chinese language in the home, to provide exposure to Chinese media or artifacts, to share their cultural knowledge and understandings with their children, the children can experience, as well as comprehend, the differences (between Chinese and American culture) hand-in-hand and make connections with those differences to their language learning.

Implications for Practice: Separating Recognition and Writing as Two Steps When Learning Chinese Characters

Participants responded that to fully learn Chinese characters, that is, being able to recognize Chinese characters as well as write them, children should separate recognition and writing as two steps with recognition as the first step and followed by writing as the second step. As described earlier, the learning level, speed, and time can be set up through the Wukong Literacy app by parents who have a better

understanding of their child/children's learning background. When the child is ready, such as having better fine motor skills and a foundation of character recognition, parents are able to introduce the character writing system to them. The app offers demonstration of character stroke order as well as the relevant practices, quizzes and games. Starting from here, on the one hand, participants stated that it is difficult to ask children to achieve visual recognition of characters, as well as writing at the same time. Recognition is usually easier compared to writing and it also occurs earlier in the developmental process than writing. Participants confirmed that they started to teach their children character recognition when their children were three years old, but children started to produce writing only after they turned four-years-old. It is understandable that children are still developing fine motor skills when they are three-years-old, their muscle control, balance, coordination between brain and action are not as mature as at four-years-old, thus, teaching children recognition first, then writing, makes sense.

On the other hand, Chinese characters consist of strokes and both strokes and characters must follow certain writing order rules. It is very hard for children to complete a character without following a correct stroke order, especially when a character has many strokes. At the same time, repetitive writing practice is commonly needed in memorizing the stroke order in reproducing characters. Repetitive movements (writing strokes) may establish a motor memory of the action, but for this to be internalized as having meaning, the motor movements should be accompanied by interaction with a 'more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky, 1987) to situate the meaning linguistically within a cultural context. Hence, the participants emphasized that to achieve the ability to write is a slow process while children not only need to be mentally-physically ready, but also should have enough mastery of word recognition. However, as children mature and can begin to produce and reproduce characters, the act of drawing and writing, as it involves the body in representing meaning, will ground and integrate previous character recognition in deeper symbolic understanding (Gibbs, 2006).

Limitations of the study

The limitations of this study are also recognized. For example, the study is limited to two families who temporally live in the United States; second, each family's perspective and experience brings stories that are specific to that family; and third, this study began in early 2020 and during the Covid-19 pandemic period with stay-at-home orders in place, which to some extent, reflects two families' strategies in assisting children's Chinese character learning and may be different from the way Chinese characters would be taught during regular times.

Conclusion

Symbolic representation and concept acquisition underlines much of children's language learning and development. Here this was studied through Chinese children's learning of Chinese characters in response to the research question of how do Chinese children learn to discern meaning from the symbols represented in Chinese characters? These two case studies offered some clues and they are, first, children become symbol-minded through interactions with more knowledgeable others, who through shared meaning and shared understanding of meaning, co-constitute a learners' 'culture' (Rakoczy et al., 2005). This introduction to meaning, whether through language learning or exposure in the environment, emerges through a cultural filter of shared meaning. When this shared meaning is intentionally introduced, as in the teaching of Chinese characters, learning and interacting in this way *is* cultural transmission of the underlying shared meaning of that culture, and the cultural mediator is language (Vygotsky, 1978). It can be said that cultural influence is infused in, not only the content of the language being learned, but also in the structure, the syntax, the grammar, and the phrasing of meaning (Boroditsky, 2001). Further, for a young child learning a language, the developing child's neural architecture forms in relation to information, cultural and otherwise, that is embedded in the process of learning that particular language. How a child understands symbolic information is greatly influenced by the child's exposure in the environment and to interaction with others (Fox, Levitt and Nelson, 2010).

In looking at this through the lens of relational developmental systems metatheory, a child, and thus,

a child's development is holistic and occurs simultaneously in a mutually-reinforcing interaction between mind and body "that extends mental processes out into the body and into the technological and cultural worlds" (Overton, 2013, p. 36). Thus, under this theoretical construct, cultures, individuals and communities are "co-constructed, co-determined, and co-developed" (Overton, 2013, p. 36). It would seem that the children in this study who are learning Chinese characters when not immersed only in Chinese culture, are being exposed to Chinese cultural components intentionally by their parents. Since the exposure to cultural components is not spontaneous, as it would be if they lived in China, then their first uptake of the cultural aspects of the symbols is coming by way of what Vygotsky (1987) called scientific conceptual acquisition. However, since these children are also simultaneously learning other languages (English, Spanish) and the associated symbols (alphabet), prior learning from spontaneous concept acquisition is present and transferrable to support their scientific conceptual acquisition of Chinese Mandarin characters.

The second clue to how Chinese children discern meaning from Chinese characters can be seen when utilizing digital aids such as apps to demonstrate the evolution of Chinese characters. The animation process seems to help children engage in every day (spontaneous), as well as scientific, concept acquisition (Fleer and Raban, 2006; Vygotsky, 1987) by way of the process described by Vygotsky. Further, in encouraging children's drawings to reinforce symbolic representation, connections are established between children's production of images and the application of the appropriate Chinese character/s. The last clue can be seen in the participants' suggestion that character recognition and character writing be separated into two steps, as these two items require different skill sets and levels of development. Being able to recreate a Chinese character may indicate an understanding of the symbol or it may indicate high levels of fine motor skills and imitation. Writing Chinese characters may not give as much information about symbolic representation as the ability to recognize characters. However, once children begin to recognize the characters, the meaning can be internalized through the (embodied) motor process of (re)producing the symbols through writing (Yeh et al., 2017). While it is acknowledged that use of apps, such as Wukong Literacy, are helpful because they are designed to demonstrate character evolution, capture children's attention and provide structure for learning practice, it is also understood that due to the cultural basis of language and meaning, children still need social interaction during the learning process to fully comprehend the symbolism inherent in language and specifically, Chinese characters.

It appears that two, mutually reinforcing modes of acquiring understanding about the world, i.e. the process of constructing concrete mental models into abstractions and deconstructing from an abstract concept to a concrete item, are required for children to develop symbolic thought and abstract concepts. The recognition of Chinese characters, and the later step of symbolic representation through writing, exemplifies this relational developmental process where meaning is emergent through the interaction of spontaneous exposure to culture and directed instruction.

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Appendices

Appendix A Parent Questionnaire

Please fill out this questionnaire to the best of your ability. There are no right or wrong answers, and the intent to this questionnaire is to help us get to know your child/children's Chinese learning.

Basic information		
1. Child/children's name		
2. Child/children's age		
3. Child/children's gender		
4. Number of siblings		
5. You and your child/children's length of stay in the U.S.		
Language learning		
Question/country	China	United States
6. Child/children home language(s)		
7. Child/children school language(s)		
Length of time learning Chinese (speaking, listening, reading, and writing)		
9. Place(s) of learning Chinese		
10. Way(s) of learning Chinese		
Your observation and reflection		
11. Child/children's learning result		
12. Child/children's interests		
The learning differences between the two countries		
14. The challenges of learning Chinese		
15. Other thoughts		

Appendix B Parent Interview

1. How many language(s) is/are your child/children learning now? And at what age did you start teaching your child/children those languages?
2. What is your child/children's Chinese level? Can you explain it from the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing?
3. How does your child/children learn to recognize Chinese characters? Do you have specific methods?
4. How does your child/children learn to write characters? Can you share some strategies?
5. How does your child/children learn Chinese in China? Can you provide some examples?
6. How does your child/children learn Chinese in the United States? Can you provide some examples?
7. What are the differences between learning Chinese characters in China and the United States?
8. What challenges do you have when you help your child/children learn Chinese characters when you are in the United States? And how do you handle those challenges?
9. What suggestions do you want to give to families, parents, children, and educators who are also engaged in Chinese learning?
10. Do you have any other thoughts that you would like to share?

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Research Article

How have after-school clubs adapted in the United Kingdom post-March lockdown?

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Abstract: After-school clubs have provided an important childcare service for parents and carers where children are provided with an environment to play once the school day has finished. When the United Kingdom went into lockdown in March 2020, all children's services closed that included the childcare provision of after-school clubs. When they re-opened in between July and September 2020, changes had to be implemented to meet Government restrictions. This study from 54 respondents working in the childcare sector identified changes within four themes: maintain service; bubbles; play space and play behaviour. This has resulted in an increase hygiene measures, staffing and amount of space for individual children, however, there is a decreased in the number of children attending, the resources and activities on offer and movement within the place space. Although after-school childcare is still being offered, there is financial concern on their viability and sustainability as parental demand may drop which has implications in providing a unique environment where children of different ages and abilities mix.

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Introduction

Childcare is a service offered in the United Kingdom (UK) with the first recorded childcare provision in 1816 in New Lanark, Scotland set up by Robert Owen (Bradburn, 1966). Childcare within UK law, for example legislation for England and Wales, is defined as:

> (2) "Childcare" means any form of care for a child and, subject to subsection (3), care includes—
> (a) education for a child, and
> (b) any other supervised activity for a child (Childcare Act 2006, p. 10).

This research study focuses specifically on (b), supervised activity in relation to after-school school club provision where children attend out of school hours whilst parents and carers may require childcare due to support them to work or attend educational or training requirements (King, 2020a). After-school clubs within the UK are mostly run in primary schools but are not linked to the educational curriculum. They are not an after-school activity run by the school or school staff. They are a dedicated recreational time for children to play whilst still on the school premises. After-school clubs focus on supporting children's play (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group [PPSG], 2005) and are staffed provision run by childcare workers and playworkers.

The number of after-school clubs within the UK saw an increase in the 1990s as a result of two Government initiatives to encourage more adults, particularly women to return back to the workforce (Faulkner & Coates, 2013). The first was the Out of School Childcare Initiative (OSCI) through the Conservative Government (Education Extra, 1997) and the second was the National Childcare Strategy (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1998) developed by the Labour Government through the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) (BIG Lottery Fund, 2004). The OSCI initiative begin in 1993 and

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provided funding by the Conservative Government's Department for Education and Employment through local Training and Enterprise Councils (TEC), whereas the NOF was through the BIG National Lottery charity, both providing set up grants for sustainable childcare provision. The after-school club were:

> "designed to provide a safe haven for children after-school, with play, rest, recreation and stimulating activities within a high quality care setting for which parents pay a fee" (Education Extra, 1997, p. 11)

The sustainability of the provision was primarily based on parents and carers paying a fee for their children to be cared for at the end of the school day and during school holidays. At its height in the early 2000s, it was estimated from around 350 clubs in 1990, the number of after-school clubs in England rose to an estimated 5000 (Barker et al, 2003), which also included the introduction of breakfast clubs and wraparound care. Although there has been a decline in the number of after-school clubs due to a combination of set up funding not in existence and the result of austerity measures being introduced by the new Conservative and Social Democrat Party (SDP) collation Government in the UK in 2008, 79% of families in England in 2017 had used some form of childcare during the school term (Department for Education [DoE], 2017) which would include an after-school club. In addition to providing childcare as parents and carers worked, children attending after-school clubs were spending much of their free time outside of school playing in these adult supervised settings and have taken these memories of play into adulthood (King, 2020b).

After-school clubs continue to provide childcare for adults and a safe space for children to play in their childhood. However, in March 2020, the UK Government announced a national lockdown (Dickson, 2020) resulting in the closure of schools to all except for those who were kept open specifically for children of key workers and vulnerable children (King, 2021). A qualitative study using semi-structured interviews undertaken at the start of lockdown on how playwork and childcare provision responded identified three themes: provision stopped where staff were furloughed; provision continued supporting the school 'hubs' and provision had to adapt to a different way of operating (King, 2021). To support key workers, the UK Government instructed Local Authorities to implement a 'cluster or hub model' (UK Government, 2020). A cluster or hub is one location where any key working children can be educated and looked after whilst their parents and carers undertake a key working role, for example, a doctor. Most hubs were situated in schools, although other venues such as family centres were used, however these were only accessible for families of keyworkers. The closing of adventure playgrounds, afterschool clubs impacted on both the children who attended, and the staff employed to support children's play (King, 2021).

The themes of provision closing, supporting 'hubs' for key workers and being adaptable were supported by a quantitative online survey undertaken by the Out of School Alliance (OOSA) (2020a) in England. During the first national lockdown in May 2020, from 359 after-school clubs, 82% of them were temporarily closed and just 13% remained open to support key workers children. The closure of the after-school club was mostly by either not financially viable to remain open or the school was providing the childcare as a function of running as a 'hub'. Two follow up studies undertaken by the OOSA in August (2020b) identified from 620 clubs, 72% still remained closed and by November (2020c) found from 313 after-school clubs, 51% (just over half) were running with reduced numbers of children attending. It was also noted that between the August and November survey's, there were half the number of respondents and this was put down to clubs having to close (OOSA, 2020c). In Scotland, the Scottish Out of School Network (SOSCN) re-opening survey in October 2020 found from 103 responses, 91% of clubs were operating with less numbers compared to pre-lockdown in March.

In the UK, from the first lockdown in March 2020, support for childcare providers had been provided by the Scottish Government for staff who have been furloughed who could apply for funds under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (UK Government, 2021a). In addition to the funding for furloughed staff, the UK Government also provided funding support for small businesses, which many after-school clubs operate as (UK Government, 2021b). There has also been additional funding support in Scotland for childcare providers who remain open for keyworking and vulnerable children under the 'Temporary Restrictions Fund' (Scottish Government, 2021). In Wales, any childcare provision affected by the coronavirus can also apply for a COVID-19: Childcare Provider Grant (Welsh Government, 2021) and the

Childcare Support (Cwtch) Grant under the 'ERF Restrictions Business Fund' (Business Wales, 2021). There is worry that as small businesses, after-school clubs will stop operating as they rely on fee paying parents and carers (OOSN, 2020c; SOSCN, 2020).

The focus of after-school clubs has been to provide a safe space to play whilst their parents and carers continue to work or study. Play, and particularly free play is recognized to be important in children's development (Santer, Griffiths, & Goodall, 2007; Zosh et al., 2017). Recent research has shown that within the primary schools within the UK, children's recess time has decreased (Baines & Blatchford, 2019; Ramstetter, Murray, & Garner, 2020), so reducing the amount of play during the day. Although there has also been a decline in the number of children attending after-school clubs in the last 10 years in the UK (Baines & Blatchford, 2019), for many children who still attend them, the after-school club can provide both the time and space to play with other children and still have an important informal role in their development (Zosh et al., 2017). What the after-school club also provides is a unique provision where children aged often between 4 and 11 years can play and socialize together, where the provision supports the five fundamental types of human Play: physical play, play with objects, symbolic play, pretense, or socio-dramatic play, and games with rules (Whitebread, Basilio, Kuvalja, & Verma, 2012) where children have more control over their play. Research has indicated the nature of after-school clubs empowers children and contributes to their informal learning (Smith, 2010). With the lockdown in March 2020 causing all after-school clubs to close, this not only had a financial implication for the staff but there is also the consideration of the effect this may have on children deprived of an important space for them to play.

The importance of after-school club provision has shown they provide a place for children to meet their peers, make friendships and engage in a variety of play activities (Barker et al., 2003; Beunderman, 2010). Although not part of the school educational curriculum, after-school clubs can provide an important 'addition' to the school by providing a safe space for children to play whilst their parents and carers are still at work when the school day finishes. After-school clubs provide an essential service to the community and may be considered as a developing 'Community of Practice' (CoP) (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015), particularly in areas of deprivation (Callanan et al., 2016) as evident in other child related services as adventure playground (King & Newstead, 2020). The impact of COVID-19 and lockdown is already a concern for children's education (McGuinness, 2021), and this can also include other aspects of children's lives, for example being able to meet and play with friends within the after-school club in their recreation or free time (Dodd, 2021).

After-school clubs provide an important service for both children and their parents and carers. This study is a follow up study to the March study on how after-school clubs operated during lockdown (King, 2020c) to find out how after-school clubs have managed to operate since lockdown finished in July 2020 and the new school term in the UK began in September 2020. This formed the basis of the research question 'How have after-school clubs operated post-March lockdown?'

Method

An open-ended online survey was constructed using the Qualtrics® platform with ethical approval granted from the College of Human and Health Sciences Ethics Committee, Swansea University. The survey asked whether participants considered themselves to be a childcare worker, a playworker or both. The participants stated their job role from manager, co-ordinator, senior practitioner, practitioner, volunteer or director. The location of the after-school club was provided in relation to where in the UK and the type of building it is located in (e.g. school). Participants then stated what happened to the provision during lockdown from closed and being furloughed, closed but still working, opened for keyworking children, open for both keyworking and vulnerable children and open for all children. The responses from these questions provided demographic data.

Participants were provided with x open-ended questions to provide qualitative narrative data:

- Describe a typical day at the after-school club before lockdown?
- How has the after-school club run since it re-opened?

- What new policies and procedures have had to be put in place since post-lockdown?
- How did the children play when they returned to the after-school club after lockdown?
- What changes to your practice has there been since post-lockdown?
- How has social distancing been implemented in the after-school club?
- Is there anything you would like to add or say?

The survey was piloted with five experienced professionals in the play and childcare sector. Feedback was positive with minor changes in wording, the only significant change was the addition of whether the participant considered themselves both a childcare worker and playworker. The online survey was circulated through a link and posted on various social media platforms including Twitter® and Facebook ® from September 2020 to December 2020 and circulated to local and national out of school networks who distributed the link to their members.

All responses from the open-ended questions were analysed using the Nvivo 12® software for analysis. The analysis used the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) which is a six-step process to develop initial codes to form themes.

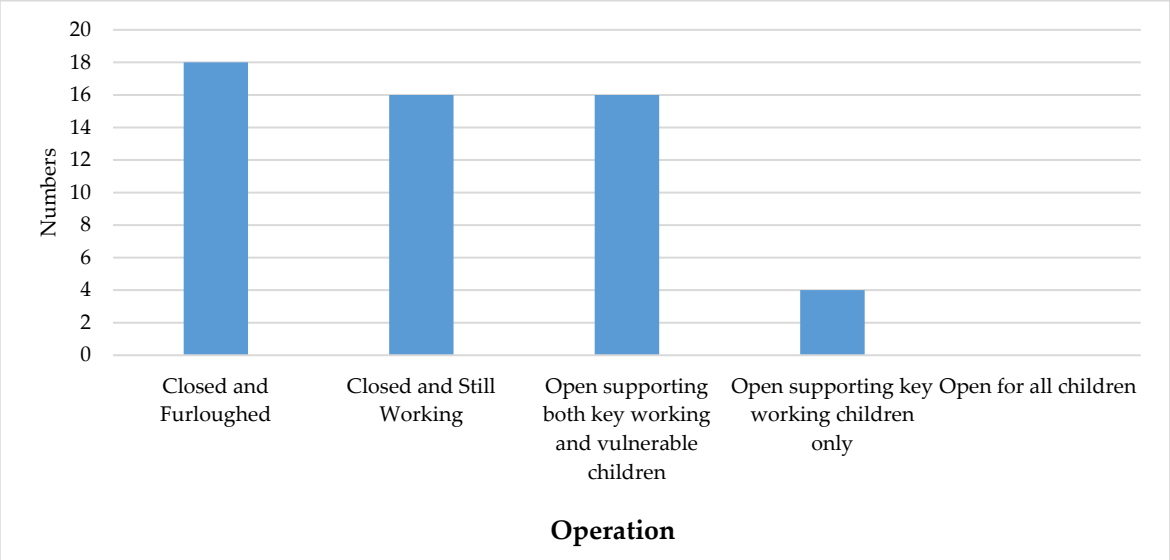
Participants

In total 130 people clicked the survey link. Out of the 130, 3 stated they were under 18 years or age so were not able to take part in the survey, 2 responses were from adventure playgrounds so the data was not used and 71 respondents did not provide any information. This left 54 responses where the data was used for this study.

When asked if they considered themselves a playworker, childcare worker or both, 25 (48%) stated they were playworkers, 6 (12%) were childcare workers and 21 (40%) stated there were both. The responses showed 33 (61%) were managers, 11 (20%) directors, 5 (9%) senior practitioners, 3 (6%) practitioners and 2 (4%) co-ordinators reflecting a range of different roles and responsibilities within the after-school club. The majority of responses were from England with 45 responses (85%), 6 from Wales (11%) and 2 from Scotland (4%). Most after-school clubs were situated in a school with 36 responses (67%), followed by other at 13 (24%), 4 in a community centre (7%) and 1 in a village hall (2%).

Results

Graph 1 shows how the variation on how the after-school clubs operated during the March to July 2020 Lockdown:



Graph 1. How after-school clubs operated between March and July 2020

Graph 1 shows that 34 after-school clubs (63%) were closed where the staff member was either furloughed, or still working but not running any sessions. Where the provision was still running, 16 places (33%) were supporting both key working and vulnerable children whilst 4 (7%) were catering for key working children only, presumably all supporting the school 'hubs'.

A 'Typical' Day Before Lockdown

When asked to describe a 'typical' day before lockdown, the comments provided from the survey respondents are shown in Table 1 and reflect the after-school club type provision:

Table 1. A 'typical' after-school club session

Time	Provision	Age Range	Number	Snack	Space	Activities
Staff arrive before the sessions start to set up, organise activities, prepare food and do any paperwork Clubs start at the end of the school day (around 3pm) and run up to 6 pm	School-based after-school clubs collect reception children up to year 2 from classrooms or their schools. Children in Y3 upwards can make their own way. Some offer wraparound care (breakfast and after-school club) and holiday playscheme For school-based clubs with children from other schools, or non-school based after school club, all children are collected from their schools.	4-11 however key was children 'mixing together' and not being segregated into age groups	Range 20 to 160 with 30-40 around average	Mostly cold snack where children can self-select	Both indoor space and outdoor space is available which is supervised	Mixture of organised activities and resources available to choose from. Child-led, free-flow play, free play

The 'Typical' day for an after-school shown in Table 1 has not changed much in relation to the structure and emphasis of being a child-led provision (King, 2000). The common use of phrases such as free play and free-flow play (Bruce, 1994) where children can choose what, where and how they want to play within the confinements of after-school clubs. Children have the movement of using both indoor and outdoor space, although there would be adults supervising these areas all the time. These confinements include having to be supervised, not allowing to leave if they get bored and provision having to adhere to any registration and inspection regulations. Another aspect that was stated was 'mixing together' children, which provides a unique feature for school-based after school clubs as during the school day children will stay within their peer and age groups, however in the club children do mix together (King, 2000).

Table 2. An after-school session post-lockdown

Time	Provision	Age Range	Number	Snack	Space	Activities
Staff arrive earlier more staff needed and allocated 'bubbles'	Children collected in their year groups	4-11 and children now kept in 'bubbles' in year groups reflecting the school	'Bubbles' of 15 children	Children either bring snack from home or is made	Both indoor space and outdoor space is available which is supervised and children stay in their 'bubbles'	Resources fixed within 'bubbles' and cleaned before another 'bubble' uses them. Less freedom of movement and choice of activities

A more detailed description of how the after-school clubs have been able to operate is shown from the thematic analysis can be shown in Table 3, where four main themes are considered: Maintain Service; Bubbles; Play Space and Play Behaviour.

Table 3. Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Main Points
Maintain Service	Revise Policies	All operational policies and procedures amended (Health and Safety, Safeguarding, registrations forms etc.) COVID-19 Policy Risk Assessment
	Increase Hygiene	Cleaning of resources Change in collection and pick-up routine No parents/carers on site access
	Financial Concerns	Reduce numbers as parent demand decreases either not working or working from home Furloughed Staff during lockdown Extra staffing costs forming bubbles Restricted Government Funding making sustainability uncertain
Bubbles	Designated Groups	Year Groups Class Groups Key Stage Groups
	Designated Staff	Enough staff for number of bubbles Staff remain 2m apart within and between bubbles
	Regulated Movement	Bubbles Kept Apart No Social Distancing within bubbles
Play Space	Re-arrange physical space	How snack time is arranged and implemented Specific room or allocated space for bubbles Increased children's individual space
	Designated Resources and Activities	More structured and less freedom to choose how to play Less equipment and rotated between bubbles Some physical activities not allowed
	Increase outdoor use	Safer to be outside Children are encouraged to play outside Restricts types of play as not indoors
Play Behaviour	As before	Children happy to be back Adapt to changes
	Challenging	Frustrated with new restrictions in place Nervous at first Friends, peers and siblings can't play together outside of their bubble
	Social Interaction	Increase in staff and children interaction 1:1 interaction Reduce physical contact between children and with staff

Theme1: Maintain Service

Theme 1 focuses on how after-school clubs have continued to provide a service. This required a complete revision of all policies and procedures resulting in developing a new COVID-19 policy and risk assessment:

> COVID-19 policy which covers - health and safety, safeguarding, play, registration and induction, risk assessment, payment (Respondent no. 17).

The revision of all the policies and procedures resulted in an increase in hygiene which not only involved cleaning of equipment, but a change in how children were brought to the club and where and when they were collected which prohibited access for parents and carers:

> Adults collecting children ring doorbell when arriving, and a member of staff then takes child to the exit of school where parent/carer collects them. No adults allowed into setting (Respondent no. 22).

The increase in cleaning costs, the drop in parental need for the provision and where children were put into bubbles, the maintenance of existing number of staff or in some cases increase staffing has put a considering financial burden on the after-school clubs. This is reflected in the comment below:

> We are operating on a shoestring budget due to needing more staff for less children and operating bubbles (Respondent no. 8).

Theme 2: Bubbles

The theme of 'bubbles' reflected the biggest change to practice. The bubbles formed placed children in designated group, often reflecting the school's year, class or key stage groupings. In addition, staff were allocated specific bubbles:

> The segregation of children into bubbles is the biggest headache for me. I am lucky that we have always worked with surplus staff. This means I now have enough staff to support each bubble (Respondent no. 13).

The formation of specific bubbles resulted in staff having to remain 2m apart from each other and the children, however, for children within the bubbles, social distancing was not strongly adhered to, although, children between bubbles could not mix together:

> Some have found it difficult not being able to play with friends from other key stage bubbles or only being able to be with those from their own key stage. Adults must social distance. Under 11's are not expected to. Activities (more structured) are set up to support and advocate social distancing (Respondent no. 34).

Theme 3: The Play Space

The main focus of an after-school club is to facilitate a space for children to choose how they want to play. However, with the formation of bubbles and the increase hygiene this resulted in the re-arrangement of the play space in relation to the rooms being used, providing snack and increase use of the outdoor space:

> Tables are arranged in rows facing one way. Staff prepare the snack and take in to the children. We try to make it a bit more fun by the staff taking the children's snack 'order' (Respondent no. 16.)

> We feel it is safer to be outside and have been surprised how much some of the children, who would normally stay inside given the choice, are enjoying being outside (Respondent no. 29).

However, with the number of children in each bubble at a maximum of 15 and bubbles being in different rooms or rotated where specific activities may take place, this has increased the amount of space children have to play within their bubble:

> More room was needed so it was easier to spread out (Respondent no. 2)

Although there was an increase in individual space for each child, the choice of activities within the play space was reduced as resources and activities were either stopped or allocated to specific bubbles at a time:

> Limited choice of activities each day due to quarantining toys, games and activities where wiping down is not an option to ensure virus spread is limited" (Respondent no. 9)

Theme 4: Play Behaviour

Children returned to the after-school club, unless a designated key worker or vulnerable child, after three months of lockdown. The interaction between children and staff were impacted on the introduction of bubbles, staff having to social distance and reduced choice, however although some children found this a challenge to start, it was noted how they quickly adapted and for most, were happy to be back among their friends:

> The children were very happy to return but the excitement and lack of contact for so long affected their behaviour towards each other (Respondent no. 17).

> The children seemed to have adapted very well. They seemed pleased to be back and seemed to enjoy the interaction within their own groups (Respondent no. 31).

A summary of the results shows:

- Prior to the March-Lockdown, after-school clubs had a distinct structure where children of all ages can mix together during snack and when they played they had choices on how and freedom to move where they wanted to play
- Post March-Lockdown, the structure of the after-school club had changed in relation to the collection at the start and end of the session and the creation of 'bubbles' reducing the number of children who attended. Children's choice of play and freedom to move was restricted as well as who they could play with
- Thematic analysis on the changes between pre- and post-March lockdown identified four themes: Maintaining Service; Bubbles; Play Space and Play Behaviour

Conclusion and Discussion

Play has been considered an important aspect for children's development (Zosh et al., 2017), and particularly their free play (Santer et al., 2007) where children can have more choice and variety in their play. With the reduction of school recess time in the UK (Baines & Blatchford, 2019), the after-school club has become for some children in the UK an important provision to be able to play.

Across the UK, after-school provision has provided a space for children to play after the school day offering childcare whilst parents and carers are able to work. They have become a common feature in many schools, however there is concern for childcare services continuing as a result of the current COVID-19 pandemic reflected in the following comment:

> After 22 years my business may not re - open due to COVID 19. I worked hard to build up my business over the years. I feel a sense of despair and loss as there is nothing I can do about it. It is a sad day for all us child carers/playworkers (Respondent no. 20).

This study reflects the statistical evidence provided by current childcare surveys (OOSA, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; SOSCN, 2020) where clubs that have managed to still run are doing so with reduced numbers in bubbles, staffing issues and reduced space and resources. There is a clear uncertainty of demand for the future, especially as the completion of this research is undertaken during the third national lockdown in the UK.

The rise of after-school clubs in 1990's was a result of the Government's OSCI initiative to get adults (predominately women) 'economically active' and provide a space for children to be looked after when the day finishes. With an uncertain economy in relation to more adults home working and supporting during lockdown children home schooling, this has put huge pressure on after-school clubs to continue as they are run as a business and rely on fee paying parents. The short-term financial help currently available needs to develop into long-term support for this needed provision.

The importance of after-school clubs is not just for the benefit of providing childcare for parents and carers, they provide a unique space for children to play and interact. The universal opinion that play supports children's development (Whitebread et al., 2012) and the role school recess allows for children to have free play (Santer et al., 2007), for example, during recess during the school day (Baines & Blatchford, 2019). Here, children in primary schools tend to stay in their year groups, both in lessons and during their time in recess, although current research in the UK. However, when coming to the after-school club, children between an age range of 4-11 years mix together, and form friendships where research has shown this is an important factor for attending after-school provision (Barker et al., 2003, Beunderman, 2010). It can be argued that after-school clubs provided this Vygotskian approach to play with mixed ability and age of children is a strong feature of this type of childcare provision. A study on using mixed-age classes within primary school early years education in Ireland indicated a positive impact on learning and well-being (Kerr, Murphy, & Doherty, 2016) and empowerment (Smith, 2010). However, with the change of children in age or class 'bubbles' has resulted in children not being able to mix as freely as they did, in addition to the reduced freedom of movement and choice of activities, and thus potentially on children's development as well as their wellbeing with less play opportunities and not engaging in the five important types of play (Zosh et al., 2017) as there were restrictions on what the after-school club could provide.

Another aspect to consider is the loss of a play space for children of mixed ages, and abilities to play together, supervised by staff supporting and not controlling their play. How we play in childhood are memories we take into adulthood. A study undertaken by King (2020b) asking adult who attended an after-school club between 1990 and 2010 identified four key factors they remembered playing in this provision. These were the activities that were on offer, the supervising adults, the food provided, and friendships made. These positive memories reflect the 'structure' or most after-school clubs and also highlights the importance of the supervising adult there to support children in their play. The friendships made were in the mixed age range playing together, a unique factor of after-school clubs. During the school day, most children stay and play within their peer and year groups. However, when attending an after-school club, children of all ages mix and play together.

The current restrictions have reduced children forming friendships outside their bubbles and can only interact with designated staff in their bubbles. Even the providing of a snack is more controlled, and in some cases children have to bring in their own snack to eat in the after-school club at the end of day. One positive consideration is staff recognized they sometimes had more time to play with individual children within the bubbles, something not often being able to do prior to the March Lockdown. There needs to be a follow up study on finding out children's perception's of these changes in their after-school club that are happening now, as this can impact on their memories of attending when they become adults (King, 2019).

There are limitations to this study in relation to a sample of 54 which would appear small compared to the number of after-school clubs across the UK. However, the findings from this qualitative study do reflect, and compliment the quantitative survey's undertaken by two childcare networks (OOSA, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; SOSN, 2020) where a larger number of respondents took part and provide credibility of the findings (Shenton, 2004). This study was a cross-sectional study undertaken after the first lockdown in March 2020. Subsequently there have been two more lockdowns in the UK in October 2020 and January 2021. Further studies are needed on how after-school are going to survive, particularly with a staggered return to education for primary children, and the uncertainty of new strains of COVID-19 resulting in further lockdown.

This study provided a historical snapshot on how childcare provision of after-school clubs have managed to stay operating post-March 2020 lockdown in the UK. Although after the first lockdown, the different countries within the UK introduced slightly different measures, the result was the same for all after-school clubs. The measures put into place has resulted in the increase of hygiene measures and the restricting of how after-school clubs operate resulting in less parental contact, reduced number of children in year or class bubbles and less opportunities in their choice of play, reduced movement within the play space, and to mix with children of different ages. The reduced numbers of children in bubbles have resulted in more space for children to play and in some cases, more time to interact and play with the childcare staff. However, the overall worry is the financial future for after-school provision in relation to reduced numbers attending due to having smaller 'bubbles' of children and whether parents and carers still need the service.

Declarations

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Research Article

Parents' perspective on a children's learning

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Abstract: Contemporary curricula of early childhood education were founded on perspective of *playing learning child*. Although that approach leads to children's well-being, research by Yahya (2006) has shown that parents do not want their children to learn through play, rather to focus on early and preschool education and teaching academic skills. If parents expect professionals to deliver the knowledge necessary for the development of academic skills to their children, research has been conducted on parental experience of a child's learning. The aim of the research was to find out how parents understand their children's learning and approach to the contemporary concepts of child learning as well as children's competence. The research was conducted in the period from November 2017 to May 2019. Parents involved in the study, documented how their children learn in a family environment, assessing their children's competencies. Results show that parents see learning through everyday situations whereas learning was related to the academic mode (direct teaching of letters), has only appeared in one example. At the end of the research, parents participated in a group interview, discussing their expectations of the institution towards educating children. The results showed that parents expect the institution to encourage the development of a child's social knowledge and skills, while academic knowledge and skills are ranked lower.

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Introduction

By adopting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), a child is recognized as a subject of rights and accepted as active, competent researcher of his or her own environment and creator of his or her own development (Bašić, 2011). The changed view of a child and childhood, understanding and appreciation of a child's perspective and perception of a child as an active participant in their own learning, have sparked discussions about a position of children in contemporary society (Bogatić, Visnjic Jevtic, Campbell-Barr, & Georgeson, 2019; Clouder, 2014; Sylva, 2010; Toros, Tiko & Saia, 2013). Although, childhood has been in scientists' focus of interest for a long time, these changes have led to a scientific rethinking of child's well-being and in this context, the importance of the environment for learning and developing young children (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). Determining the environment for children's learning may differ. Rodger (2012) describes learning environment as environment that, based on children's interest and current stage of development, acts on children's development by setting challenging but attainable goals. Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, and Hundeide (2010) state that, in addition to the material and social environment of learning, special emphasis is placed on the importance of the key person with whom a child relates. McDowal Clark (2017) emphasizes the importance that the environment enables children to acquire different experiences, to ensure more successful learning. Considering the results of research, indicating the link between the enabling environment and child development (Bridges and Hoff, 2014; Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl, 2003; Moss and Petrie, 2002; Papatheodorou and Moyles, 2009), it is reasonable to conclude that both, the material and social environment are equally necessary for learning, and therefore the development of a child.

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Responsibility for providing an enabling environment, for the development and learning, lies on the adults and communities in which children grow up. A responsibility is extremely high, because of intervening in the context of growing up and influencing the development of a child. Therefore, the most important task for adults is to understand a child as a learner, as well as a child's learning strategies.

The key people in supporting a child's development and learning are parents. Unlike professionals, parents usually do not have formal parental support. Support in the Republic of Croatia refers to material forms of support (for example, paid parental and maternity leave, child allowance). Due to the lack of support from immediate and extended families (Widmer, 2016), support for strengthening parental competencies occurs in various programs such as schools for parents. In Croatia, these programs are most often available to parents in larger places for a fee. Thus, residence, along with economic status, is a discriminatory factor for strengthening parental competencies.

Parents whose children attend early childhood education settings should receive support there. The research by Dobrotić, Matković, and Menger (2018) shows that more than half of parents (58%) of children attending early childhood education settings receives support in the settings. Documents governing early and preschool education (i.e. National curriculum for early childhood education (Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i sporta 2015)) emphasize the importance of partnerships between families and institutions, including support for parents.

This paper discusses children's learning within the cultural-historical wholeness approach (Hedegaard, 2012), defines the parental perspective of children's learning and brings these concepts into relation with empirical research. Some research indicates that parents equate learning with the acquisition of academic skills (for example, Yahya, 2016). Given the lack of such research in the Republic of Croatia, it was justified to investigate whether parents see children's learning (exclusively) as the acquisition of academic skills.

Learning in the Early Childhood

Early childhood is the most sensitive period for learning. Some of the research (i.e. Shumow 2001) is talking about early childhood period as *preparation* period for future, (mostly) academic success. It may lead to perception of early childhood as *a waiting room* - for school, adulthood, life. This is contradictory to the image of childhood as a period with its own values, norms, and cultures (Babić, 2014). Visković and Višnjić Jevtić (2019) see early childhood as a period of intense (active and participatory) learning, development of personality, skills, and socialization, and emphasize a role of a child as a co-creator of his/her own development.

Cultural-Historical Wholeness Approach

Learning doesn't happen without children's agency. Rather, it is a construct of children's interactions with material and social environment. Constructivist conception of learning is rooted in the works of, amongst others, Bruner (1961) and Vygotsky (1962). Founded on socio-constructivist theory, Hedegaard (2012) discuss cultural-historical wholeness approach, highlighting the influence of life conditions on every person involved in the learning process. Hedegaard (2012) systematizes the contexts significant for a child's development by categorizing them in three planes:

- "a *formal societal* plane reflecting historically evolved traditions in a society that is formalized into laws and regulations as *conditions* for the existence of an institution (in the model depicted as cultural traditions in a society for different institutions, reflecting different value positions);
- a *general institutional* plane reflecting informal conventional traditions and demands (i.e., related to school and home), taking form as practices (in the model depicted as, respectively, home, school, and day care practice);

- a *specific* plane reflecting the shared activity settings of persons in a specific institution (i.e., a specific home or a specific school, depicted as activity settings in the model)." (Hedegaard, 2012, p. 129–130)

The presented planes are interconnected and influence learning and development. To analyse children's learning situation all above mentioned planes must be considered. Hedegaard (2012) pointed out that children's activities happen in various institutions (i.e. families, ECE settings) and meet different traditions and values, and result from different social situations. *Formal* societal plane usually focused on regulations establishing family as community (defining family, divorces, fostering the child,…) but rarely on upbringing practices in family (Hedegaard, 2012). Regarding the ECE institutions formal societal plane may be seen in various regulations. The general institutional plane and a specific plane occur in various activities within both, and families and institutions.

In Republic of Croatia formal societal plane might be seen in various acts and guidelines. Family law (Republic of Croatia, 2019) states that parental care presupposes the responsibility, duty, and rights of parents to promote the rights and welfare of the child. It states that the care and education of the child must be in accordance with the child's age and maturity, without any further guidelines. It may lead to different interpretations of the children wellbeing and/or appropriate care practices. ECE institution practices are regulated by National curriculum of early childhood and education (MZOS, 2015) and gives a framework for appropriate practices. Both abovementioned documents recognize the need for respecting different educational practices.

Respecting the differences arising from this approach, it is not possible to determine only one practice that would suit all parents and institutions in the Republic of Croatia. Every family and every institution are unique and should be approached as such.

Learning Trough Play

The process of learning in the early childhood education is closely connected to playing. Because of its importance in a child's development, play is an integral part of the early education curriculum worldwide i.e. *Early Years Foundation Stage* (Department for Education, 2017), *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), *Curriculum for the pre-school: Lpfö 98*. (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010), *Aistear* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009). Although, playing is not related exclusively to a period of early childhood, learning through play is usually associated with a period of early childhood. Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson (2008) throwing into question, how playing and learning are often generally separated in the context of early and preschool education. Thus, they state that playing is associated with free-time activities, and learning with the organized activities. The authors McInnes, Howard, Miles and Crowley (2011) have similar thinking, associating playing with child led activities, and learning with adult led activities. This way of thinking is contrary to the contemporary understanding of a child as a naturally curious and enterprising organizer of its own learning (Carter & Roe, 2013). The play gives children possibility to construct (new) knowledge based on their previous experiences and new understanding of previous ideas.

Pramling et al. (2019) emphasizes, how indisputable is learning through play, but the content of learning is questionable unless, there is an adult intervention. It is the role of adults to facilitate children's play by providing a supportive environment (Baumer, 2013; Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). Such interventions represent an encroachment on the context of development, and therefore, the responsibility of providing time and space for playing. If adults organize play activities, it is possible to throw into question, whether it's a free or didactic play we're talking about. Some scientists (i.e. Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019) emphasize, how learning happens during a free play, while the others (Pramling et al., 2019) emphasize, a didactic play is a prerequisite for learning. Both agree on the benefits that play has for the overall development of a child. Most research into children's learning starts from an adult perspective. Adults create expectations about desirable (required) content, and ways of learning it, and according to that, expected outcomes of learning. It is possible that the adult's perspective on a child's needs may differ

from a child's actual needs. It is also possible, for adults to misinterpret a child's capabilities, and to organize the learning environment in accordance with the desired, rather than actual developmental capabilities. This approach probably resulted in marginalizing the role of play in learning and focusing on academically measurable skills. Although, measurability can provide a clear definition of one's success according to certain criteria, the question is who determines the criteria.

van Oers (2003) concludes that complete development cannot be measured uniquely. The promotion of measurable results possibly influenced the reduction of playing time, regardless of the scientific knowledge of the values that playing brings. It is possible, that imperatives of successfulness, have led to perception of success as academically measurable achievement.

Parents' Perspective – A Child-Oriented or Outcome-Oriented Perspective

A child-centred approach starts from an environment that is organized for a child to develop according to his or her interests and abilities. Chung and Walsh (2000) define child-centred approach from a few standpoints, (a) a child in the centre of the world; (b) a child in the centre of learning and (c) a child as an active creator of his/her own learning. Speaking of the first two standpoints, (a child in the centre of the world, and a child in the centre of learning) they might be seen as perspectives of adults in relation to the position of a child. It is possible that the standpoint, of a child in the centre of the world, more often refers to parents than to educators. Partly because of the trend of parental overprotecting, that is, subordination of the world to a child. This trend has led to the appearance of new terms in parenting, such as, over parenting (Bernstein & Triger, 2011), helicopter parenting (Cline & Fay, 1990) or curling parents (Hougaard, 2004). All these terms refer to parents who uncritically place children at the centre of their worlds and try to shape it in a way that cannot harm a child, with its potentially risky environment. Approach to a child in the centre of learning, refers to learning aligned with a child's interests and needs. Considering that educators usually organize a learning environment, it is probably about being a child-centred, but from educators' perspective. Educators' professional competences presuppose an understanding of how children learn and understanding of different learning strategies (Campbell-Barr, 2019; Visković & Višnjić Jevtić, 2019). Therefore, an approach in which child is in the centre of learning might be part of an educator's professional habitus. Considering different responsibilities for children's development and learning, parents' and educators' approaches to children's learning are likely to be different from each other. Contemporary society emphasizes the need for mutual support, two-way communication, and the sharing of responsibilities between parents and educators (Višnjić Jevtić, 2021). De Vries (2013) emphasizes, while a clear division of the responsibilities is (still!) present in the context of primary education (the school is primarily responsible for education, and the family for upbringing), in early and preschool education institutions' attitudes and expectations are changing. It is assumed that educators can influence the development of pedagogical competence of parents, especially understanding how children learn. Despite the changes, some research concluded that parents do not want their children to learn through play, rather, they want early and preschool education institutions to focus on teaching academic skills (Yahya, 2006). Kehily (2013) quotes, that the upbringing of children today is a compound of romanticism, consumerism and the science promoted in the media. At the same time, the media provide guidance on how it's possible to increase the IQ of a child in prenatal period, implicating cognitive abilities as obligatory for child's development (Hardyment, 2007). Kluczniok, Anders, Sechtig and Rosebach (2016) start from determining the quality of institutions of early and preschool education, in terms of securing high development achievements, with an emphasis on early reading and numeracy. This reflection is on the trace of Shumow (2001) research, which showed that 61% of parents expect traditional transfer of knowledge in the fields of reading, writing and mathematics from educational institutions. O'Gorman and Ailwood (2012) emphasize, that although parents show an understanding of the value of play in their child's development, they still do not consider it sufficient to prepare a child for future education. However, construction of the (good) parenthood and appropriate parental behaviour is related to the society and the culture. Therefore, parental behaviours differ across the societies. It is possible that parental attitudes toward the ways in which children learn in early childhood can present a challenge for educators. The challenge for educators is even greater considering how contemporary understanding of the partnership

between parents and educators, assuming an active parental role in creating curriculum of early and preschool education.

Method

Considering the image of a child as an active and competent person who learn trough play and in interaction with material and social environment, it is justified and necessary to explore parents' view on children's learning and competences in early years. The aim of the conducted research was to find out more information about parent's perspectives and understanding on children's learning (i.e. how they define learning in early years; what skills they see as necessary for the child's participation in society; how they perceive success in relation to their own child). Parent's perspective was explored in the field research, within the framework of the qualitative paradigm, by means of a photo diary and focus group. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Teacher Education in 2017. Participants were informed and agreed with the purpose and procedure of the research.

The research was conducted from November 2017 to May 2019, with parents whose children were attending the same kindergarten class. The research was conducted in two cycles. The first cycle lasted from November 2017 to May 2018, and fourteen parents participated in it (N=14). The second cycle lasted from September 2018 to May 2019 and twenty-two parents participated in it (N=22).

The research was based on the concept of photo diaries (Chaplin, 2011). Photo diary is recognized as auto ethnographic method that represent authors' own voice on research problem. Although the described research does not fully correspond to autoethnographic method, it is possible to connect it in a broader sense with research procedures that are close to this type of research. For example, parents themselves record their own perception of children's learning, in situations that they themselves consider significant. The research included an initial parent meeting with a lecture on children development. Afterwards, over two months the parents documented with photographs how their children were learning. They also described in their own words, what a child learns in the photographed situation. After completing the documentation cycle, photographs were analysed. To facilitate analysis of collected photographs, they were categorized according to two keys - the type of activity, which described learning (academic activities, life-practical activities, play, research, and creative activities) and social environment (whether a child is alone, or with family members in a learning situation). After this part of the research, a focus group was held with the parents, followed by a lecture and the results were presented. In the beginning of a new school year, a new cycle of monitoring and documenting children started, with an emphasis on children's competencies. The research ended with a presentation of the parents' opinions of their children.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the photographs showed that parents most often perceived life-practical and work activities (N=6) such as cooking, tidying up and participating in family rituals as learning situations. Parents related these activities to learning, as follows:

Photograph 1 Child bakes cookies.

She was taught organization, patience, creativity, and satisfaction which follows after completing a successful job (baked cookies).

Photograph 2 Child bakes and prepares tortillas with her mother.

Rearranges colourful vegetables in dough, decorates with ketchup, sour cream, and dips. This activity enhances emotional, cognitive, social activities… and as the child says "our bellies are very happy!"

Photograph 3 Child walking with a little brother.

Being outdoors, identifying with the role of big brother, protector, and mom's sidekick. A child develops self-esteem and confidence.

Photograph 4 Child tightens the screws.

Develops hand motions - turns screws, develops working skills.

The next activity, which was recognized as a stimulus for learning, was playing (N=5). Most parents, who decided for playing as a learning activity, documented a free play (N=4), while one parent documented a social play. One of the parents clarified the children's learning, describing the symbolic play of "a fruit shop":

> The game started so that we played fruit shops, the child prepared the fruit, distributed the coins, but then realized that some fruits were bigger (heavier) and some smaller, "so that they did not have to be paid the same".

A parent explained how a child learned to cope with victory and defeat in the social play, which is important for functioning in society, and in addition learned colours and numbers. Three parents (N = 3) concluded that their children learned different creative activities. Only one parent emphasized reading and writing as activities he recognized, as a learning one. Analysing the social environment, it was possible to conclude that most parents (N = 10) estimated that their children were learning with another person. Although there were equal number of photographs showing only children (N = 7) and photographs showing children with families (N = 7), to provide a more detailed insight into the situation parents' written statements were also used to analyse this criterion. Based on the results of the first part of research it is visible, that the parents who participated in the research, do not associate learning exclusively with academic skills, unlike in some earlier research. (i.e. Kluczniok, Anders, Sechtig & Rosebach, 2016). At the same time, research has shown that parents understand the value of playing in their child's learning, which confirms the results of O'Gorman and Ailwood (2012).

A group interview was held for further clarification of parents' understanding of the importance to stimulate skills. An interview was attended by twenty parents (N=20). Through conversation, they identified a group of different skills, which should be stimulated. The skills were divided into five categories - social skills, emotional skills, self-care skills, motor skills, and academic skills. Parents ranked skills according to their assessment of importance. They rated social skills as the most important, following the self-care, emotional and motor skills. Academic skills were assessed as the least important. It is possible, that these assessments were influenced by lectures that emphasized a different approach to the previously known concept of school readiness. It is also possible, given the years of the previous research, that standing point towards upbringing and educating children is changing on behalf of socio-emotional skills.

Changes in understanding of contemporary parenting are precisely what induced the third part of the research. Assuming, that most contemporary parents are overly protective of their children, and even complete tasks instead of them, there was a need to research the parental opinion of children and their competences. To determine the parental opinion of their children, the parents photographed and documented the activity in which their child was successful, that is, an activity that demonstrates a child's competence. The photographs were divided into categories, according to common features. The categories were, social competence (N = 3), emotional competence (N = 1), cognitive ability (N = 3), motor skills (3), creative expression and creativity (N = 8), the play (n = 2), and work ability (N = 2). Analysing a child's competencies, one child's parents emphasized the interest in participating in jobs that he/she is interested in. They consider a child to be able to use the knife in situations that require it (documented with a photograph of a child cleaning a fish after fishing, independently). One of the parents stated that his/her child is competent *in all forms of play and playing*. A photograph that demonstrated these competencies showed a child doing handstand **activity**. It is very interesting how a lot of parents, especially parents of girls', described their children as successful / competent in various forms of creative expression. In this part of the research, only two collected photographs showed children in potentially risky activities (using a knife and a drill). Given that most of the photos showed children as the centre of family life (for example, four photographs showed children during a musical performance, while other members of a family applaud them), it is possible to take a stand that parents truly see their child as the centre of their world. A parent of the youngest child who was part of the research, was the only one who gave a photograph of his/her child participating independently in decision making:

> As the youngest member of our family, K. loves being independent, and that reflects the most on her ability to choose and make decisions. These are small things that do not affect our family responsibilities or our schedule, but they mean a lot to her: for example, choosing a t-shirt, choosing apples or bananas for a snack, choosing a bath or shower,

choosing a song before bedtime. She is proud when she makes her own decisions.

Previous research (Nikiforidou, 2017) states, that the parents see a child as precious and fragile, and in need of protection. This kind of parental thinking is on the trace of the contemporary concept of parenting. It is possible, that the results are consequences of systematic work with parents to strengthen their parenting competences. Parents allow children to use different tools and materials that were not intended solely for playing. It can be assumed, that this is one of the ways in which they show that they accept and promote the various interests of children. They also recognize competencies as a development category *(A child reads the draft independently and stacks the dice towards it. He used to do this with someone helping him!)* Parents also show how they are willing to provide children with different sorts of experiences. It is possible that previous thought may confirm parental understanding of how children experience a meaning based on their own experience activities (Bašić, 2011).

Although this research included a smaller group of participants, the results may provide a basis for future research on parental opinions about children. The limitation of this research is that the concept of the research did not predict individual interviews with parents, only their statements, which were in a form of brief written notes. This prevented a deeper understanding of their children's learning of concepts and children's competencies, and ultimately their opinion about them.

Conclusion

The conducted research showed how parents involved in the research understand how children learn. In doing so, they value social and emotional skills as a prerequisite for successful functioning in society and a precondition for the acquisition of other skills. Research participants (parents) see a child as competent, motivated, curious, successful, and willing to learn in different ways. It can be concluded that they are the ones who provide an enabling environment for the development of such children.

Even though the research focused on the assessment of children, it provided insight into the participants' parenting competences. Parental considerations can be used by educators, to better understand the family culture of children and to provide an environment for each child individually. The research was conducted with parents whose children are involved in ECE settings; therefore, it is likely that they had professional support in their parenting. By repeating the research in a different form, for example by collecting parental narratives, a more complete insight into parental understanding of children's learning would be obtained. The results of the research provide insight into the understanding of learning within a particular socio-cultural community. While it is certain that the results would be different within other growing communities, similar research could clarify the understanding of children's learning in families at risk of social exclusion. Given that ECE settings are obliged to support parents, such research can give them insight into parental understanding of child development. Consequently, professionals can provide parental support in accordance with modern scientific knowledge about the child's development.

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Research Article

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health and wellbeing, and beyond: A scoping review

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Abstract: The major threat of COVID-19 has become a priority to education and health systems worldwide. This scoping review reports on, and analyses, the literature pertaining to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health and wellbeing, and the resources needed to assist them in these difficult times. The findings of this literature review point out the impacts of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of children hailing from different socio-economic backgrounds, as well as the impacts on families and schools. They also highlight how lockdown, quarantine, social distancing, social media and the measures needed to prevent the spread of infection can negatively affect children's mental health and wellbeing. Consequently, cautionary measures that minimise these impacts on children, and recommendations for policy, research and practice are discussed.

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Children; COVID-19; Pandemic; Mental health; Wellbeing

Introduction

Historically, major disease outbreaks, such as pandemics, have burdened humanity. Pandemics are infectious disease outbreaks that threaten human health on a global scale (Fong & Iarocci, 2020). On March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), known as COVID-19, a pandemic (WHO, 2020). In response to this declaration, many countries have imposed lockdowns and other social distance measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus within the community (Fong & Iarocci, 2020).

Quarantine and disease contamination measures are considered unpleasant by most (Brooks et al., 2020), and can be traumatising to many (Sprang & Silman, 2013). This is mostly because lockdown and social isolation are especially hard on individuals, particularly for children and their parents, and these have been shown to trigger symptoms of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020a). This has led to the recent growing interest in the psychological manifestations of the pandemic (Ashikkali, Carroll, & Johnson, 2020; Sprang & Silman, 2013). Indeed, strong evidence confirms the profound psychological impacts lockdowns and isolation on humanity (Brooks et al., 2020; Garcia de Avila et al., 2020; Hawke et al., 2020; Roy et al., 2020; Yue, Zang, Le, & An, 2020). Prior research has consistently shown that families who were either isolated, or quarantined, during the H1N1 pandemic, in the United States, experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and anxiety (Sprang & Silman, 2013). Similarly, following a review of the psychological impact of previous quarantines during SARS, the 2009 and 2010 H1N1 influenza pandemic, MERS, Ebola, and equine influenza, Brooks et al. (2020) reported the harmful psychological effects of quarantine, which included symptoms of PTSD, confusion, and anger. Simply put, quarantine, fear of infection, frustration, boredom, financial loss, inadequate information, stigma and lack of support, can have long-lasting effects on individuals (Brooks et al., 2020).

Few months into the COVID-19 pandemic, humanity has come to the realisation that disease

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prevention measures, such as lockdown and social distance, coupled with the direct effects of the pandemic, such as illness and mortality, and the indirect effects on the economy, workplace, schools/day care and social life, have generated significant stress on communities, leading to a multitude of psychological challenges to many, including children (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Major mental health issues reported by children during a pandemic included stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, insomnia, denial, anger and fear (Roy et al., 2020). This is not surprising considering the bidirectional relationship between mental health issues, such as depressive disorders and anxiety, and poverty, destressing life events and physical illnesses (WHO, 2017).

Understanding the complexity of the psychological and mental health impacts of COVID-19 on different segments of the population is vitally important if children (from birth to 17 years of age) are to be provided with the appropriate support to safeguard their wellbeing. As a vulnerable group of society, children are experiencing the psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. These can potentially have longstanding implications for their health outcomes (Kang, Lim, Ragen, Tan, & Aishworiya, 2020), and their social and economic future (Prime, Wade, & Browne, 2020). We now know that the number of new infections and the death rate are likely to increase unless the community has been vaccinated. Therefore, understanding and addressing the stressors caused by the pandemic are essential first steps towards promoting and protecting the wellbeing of children (Prime et al., 2020).

The Present Study

Despite the dire impact of COVID-19 on humanity, particularly on children, there is paucity in research related to the effect of the pandemic on children's mental health and the resources needed to assist children in these difficult times (Fong & Iarocci, 2020). Furthermore, "the precise extent to which COVID-19 is shaping children and family functioning is largely unknown" (Prime et al., 2020, p. 639). It is important for professionals working with children and families to understand the impact of COVID-19 on children and how these are influenced by family dynamics (Prime et al., 2020).

This paper fills this gap in the literature by drawing on the literature to describe the mental health issues experienced by children (from birth to 17 years of age) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The preliminary observations reported here serve as an informed basis to understand some of the impacts brought about by the uncertainly and the disruption caused by COVID-19. The primary focus is on children's wellbeing and the characteristics that may heighten the risk of the negative consequences of the pandemic. As such, this paper draws on the literature across topic areas, including education, health and crises, to examine the potential consequences (short- and long-term) of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health within a context. In doing so, it presents a unique perspective, written from a particular part of the Western world, and a particular position, in relation to children's wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, it acknowledges that it is revealing experiences of the pandemic that might be strikingly different to some as it leaves out the perspectives and shared experiences (linguistic, cultural and geographical), voices and particular challenges which are uniquely shared by other communities from different parts of the world. Most striking though, is the recognition of the global impact of the pandemic on children.

In doing so, this paper provides a baseline of the literature and research moving forward, by synthesising currently available literature from a limited number of publications. More importantly, this paper initiates a dialogue about how unforeseen local and global crises, such as pandemics, might be managed in the future. In saying that, the author is mindful that drawing recommendations for children can be problematic as any recommendations made are likely to be influenced by context. Importantly though, when considering any recommendations and applying them to differing contexts, these need to be challenged and adapted to the environment in which it is being implemented. Finally, research strengths, gaps and implications are discussed.

Method

In light the above, the current study adopted a scoping review of the literature to inform research related to the impact of COVID-19 on children's mental health. Scoping review of the literature provides the framework for the identification and analysis of this article (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac, Colquhoun, & O'Brien, 2010). A scoping review assesses the potential size and scope of the availability, and extent, of the literature related to particular research questions (Grant & Booth, 2009). Like systematic reviews, scoping reviews are useful for addressing research questions, in methodical and replicable ways (Arskey & O'Malley, 2005).

A goal of the current study is to illustrate the mental health issues children experience during the pandemic. Hence, a scoping review methodology was considered optimal to address the broad questions guiding this paper, while making room for the inclusion of various publications. Furthermore, a scoping review allows for reflection on, and reconsideration of, articles relevant to include. This is highly desirable and relevant when considering the articles included in this review.

Identifying the Research Questions

The present study reports findings of a scoping review of the literature published during the COVID-19 pandemic, between 2020 and 2021. İt was conducted to examine contemporary knowledge about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health and wellbeing. Specifically, it aimed to map the different ways in which children's mental health and wellbeing have been impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, to help advance knowledge and educational practices. Consequently, this review addressed the following questions: (1) What is known about the impact of COVID-19 on children's mental health? (2) What prevention measures or procedures can be implemented in schools and at home?

Identifying Relevant Studies

Consistent with Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) recommendations, in this scoping review, broad search criteria were applied to identify studies related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health and wellbeing. Key databases were identified and searches were performed in each of the following databases: HyDi, ERIC, ProQuest Social Sciences, PsycInfo, PubMed, SCOPUS, Social Work Abstracts, and Web of Science. The search strategy included a combination of key words and subject headings that were conjoined using the Boolean operation AND/OR. Keywords included mental health, wellbeing, children, school, family, COVID-19, and pandemics. In this scoping review, "children" refers to all minors, from birth up to 17 years of age.

An iterative process influenced the article search process, where the diverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health and wellbeing have been considered (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Inclusion criteria were that each study was: (a) published between 2020 and 2021; (b) related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health and wellbeing; (c) electronic sources; and, (d) published in English. Exclusion criteria were: (a) articles detailing intervention studies not related to the COVID-19 pandemic; (b) editorials; (c) opinion articles; (d) articles focussing on youths and adults; and (e) abstract not provided.

Study Selection

Since literature from diverse disciplines was considered for this scoping review, there was a number of articles that made room for comparisons and contrasts, a decision that offered balance between the number of articles found and the issues of feasibility of this scoping review (Levac et al., 2010). In line with a scoping review methodology, all relevant literature was included during the research design process. A decision was made to limit articles to those using data collected in 2020 or later, to ensure that only studies related to COVID-19 were included.

Charting the Data

An Excel worksheet was used to categorise the data. The collected data were charted in the Excel table, in the following categories: (a) an annotated bibliography of each article; (b) year of publication; (c)

type of study; (d) database; (e) discipling of the first author; (f) participants and their age; (g) the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the participants' mental health and wellbeing; (h) authors' assumptions about their findings; (i) abstract of the study; and, (j) country of origin.

Collating, Summarising and Reporting the Results

Using the Excel table described above, the charted data were compared and contrasted by two reviewers who were not involved in the data collection. They examined the full-text review articles and excluded those that contained data collected before 2020. Their review enabled the rigour of the analysis. During this process, articles with similar perspectives were grouped together and descriptive summaries were written for each. Next, additional analysis led to the differences and similarities to emerge, both within each perspective and across categories. The final synthesis produced the impacts identified. A total of 22 articles were selected.

Results

The initial search strategy, shown in the flow diagram in Figure 1 below, outlined the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA), yielded a total of 150 articles. After removing duplicate and ambiguous articles, and going through the inclusion and exclusion criteria by relying on the titles and abstracts, 22 articles remained.

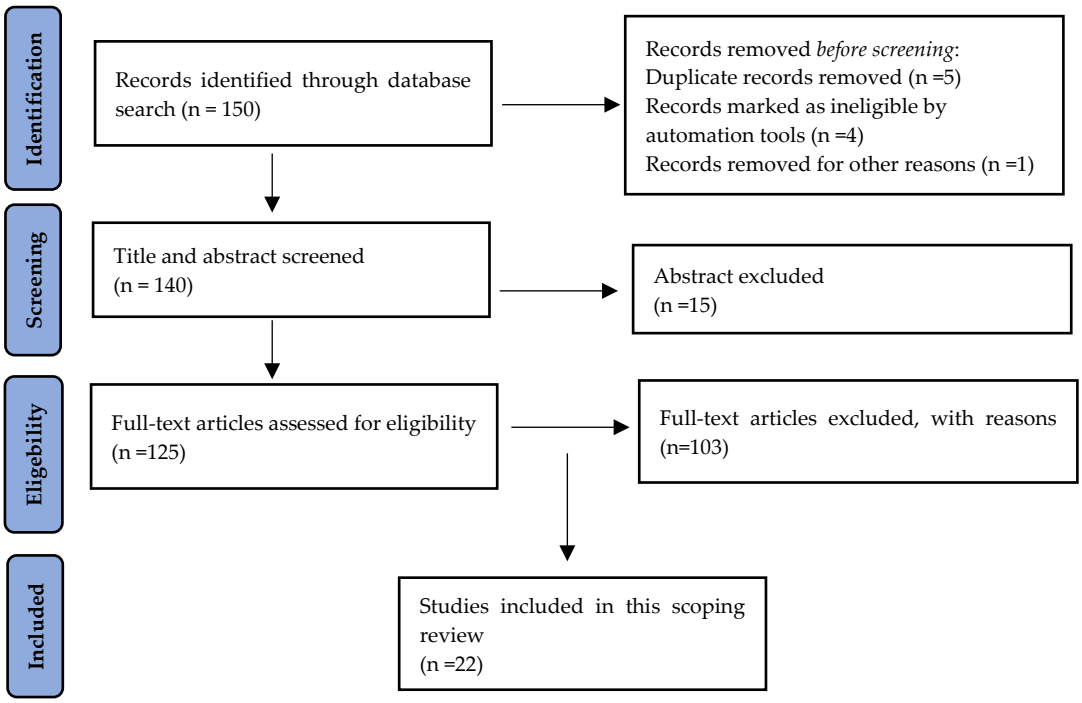

Figure 1. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) flow chart depicting the identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion of studies within this scoping review.

One limitation of this scoping study that is worth noting is the fact that since it relied only on electronic sources, relevant documents published in a different format, or the ones published at a later date, have been excluded. Another limitation is the fact that it only considered articles published in English, thus leaving out valuable research published in languages other than English.

Discussion

Given the link between mental health and physical health, both are affected during a pandemic, and both can impact children's wellbeing (Ashikkali et al., 2020; Fong & Iarocci, 2020). Clearly, during the COVID-19 pandemic children have been exposed, directly and vicariously, to some form of psychological

distress, leading many to become stressed and anxious. Hence, children's mental health and wellbeing merit some investigation.

This scoping review aimed to identify and critically review published literature related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's (from birth to 17 years of age) mental health and wellbeing. The analysis of the 22 studies selected revealed eight broad categories: children's wellbeing; children with pre-existing mental health conditions; family relationships; school relationships; socio-economic backgrounds; lockdown, quarantine and social distancing; social media; and, psychological support services. The approach to discussing the results of each category draws on the narrative review, a common strategy to reporting findings of scoping reviews (Grant & Booth, 2009).

Children's Wellbeing

While research shows that children's physical health is less likely to be impacted by the COVID-19 virus (Bond, Dibner, & Schweingruber, 2020; Castagnoli et al., 2020; Ludvigsson, 2020; Spaull, 2020), new evidence is starting to emerge indicating that in a situation characterised by constant change, such as a pandemic, children are reporting unpleasant symptoms. Recent research suggests that anxiety, depression and mood disorders have been the most common mental health issues reported by children during the COVID-19 pandemic (Courtney, Watson, Battaglia, Mulsant, & Szatmar, 2020; Kang et al., 2020). In fact, an escalation in physical symptoms experienced by children, including tummy aches, headaches, feeling sick and panic attaches, have reported by medical professionals despite the fact that these were otherwise healthy children and had not been infected by the coronavirus. Anxiety in children is manifesting itself as physical symptoms because children are more vulnerable to the negative impact of sustained stressful situation (Courtney et al., 2020; Garcia de Avila et al., 2020). It likely that while social distance measures have been effective at reducing the number of new infections, this has led a rise in anxiety, depression and other ailment, even in children (Gromada, Rees, & Chzhen, 2020; Parsons, 2020; Xie et al., 2020).

Most studies exploring the role of gender in the management of anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic found that gender was a risk factor for depression and anxiety symptoms (Fong & Iarocci, 2020; Yue et al., 2020). Preliminary findings indicate that girls and women were hit harder during the pandemic (Fong & Iarocci, 2020; Yue et al., 2020). Perhaps this is because during the pandemic women had to cope with the stress created by the pandemic itself, and the care responsibilities bestowed on them (Yue et al., 2020). However, literature has emerged that offers contradictory findings. For example, while Garcia de Avila et al. (2020) reported that girls experienced higher levels of anxiety than boys, Yue et al. (2020) reported that age and gender were not predictors of psychological distress in children. Definite conclusions cannot be drawn yet especially since studies related to the impact of gender on the management of anxiety and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic are scarce. In fact, this is an area that merits further investigation (Fong & Iarocci, 2020).

Children with Pre-Existing Mental Health Conditions

To date, the literature on children with pre-existing mental health conditions has highlighted an increase in the prevalence of anxiety (Garcia de Avila et al., 2020; OECD, 2020a; Parsons, 2020; Roy et al., 2020). Research by Roy et al. (2020) has established that children with pre-existing mental health issues had harder time coping with school closure, and the lack of contact and recreational activities outdoors. Reasons for this included fear of the disease, stigma, lack of awareness of risk, diminished personal protection, confinement in psychiatric wards during the pandemic, discrimination, and fear of social isolation (Roy et al., 2020). Similarly, Hawke et al. (2020) confirmed the significant risk posed by the pandemic for the exacerbation of symptoms of distress, such as anxiety, which are both painful and debilitating, in children with pre-existing mental health issues.

Surprisingly though, the disruption caused by the pandemic has improved some of the pre-existing anxiety disorders in children, even if only temporarily. Courtney et al. (2020) found that children who had been affected by social and performance anxiety and agoraphobia before the pandemic, did better during the pandemic, even if such improvement may be short-lived. Courtney et al. (2020) explained that children

with pre-existing anxiety disorders may have felt less anxious during lockdown because the events that caused them anxiety before, such as separating from their parents, were gone and they felt they were in a safe space. The fact that these children had to maintain social distance measures and had to stay away from school may have helped ease their school anxiety. Similarly, Papetti et al. (2020) found that children and adolescents with primary and chronic headache disorders reported a significant improvement in the prevalence, intensity and frequency of headache attacks during the lockdown compared to the previous two months. As school anxiety and effort diminished, headache improvement was reported, indicating that lifestyle modification, as in the case of school closure, represents the main factor impacting the course of mental health issues (Papetti et al., 2020). Overall, in these studies, a reduction in school-related stress as a result of school closure was the main factor explaining the general improvement in the participants' mental health issues. Therefore, in these cases, school closure helped to improve the children's mental health.

Family Relationships

Central to children's wellbeing is the influence of the family system and the interactions therein (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Parents are in a good position to help their children buffer everyday stress and help them manage their feelings effectively (Courtney et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2020). In fact, time and time again, research has indicated a correlation between parental mental health and children's wellbeing, suggesting that caregivers' mental health is important to protect children's wellbeing (Fong & Iarocci, 2020). During a pandemic, parents play a crucial role in providing emotional and psychological support to help their children deal with the uncertainty of the crisis, particularly by providing a stable and secure environment (Fong & Iarocci, 2020).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the stress families are experiencing, high parental anxiety can be projected onto children, negatively impacting their wellbeing (Kang et al., 2020; OECD, 2020a; Parsons, 2020; Sprang & Silman, 2013). The mounting rates of unemployment during the pandemic have caused an abrupt and major upheaval in the daily lives of many families. Parsons (2020) argued that during the first lockdown, parental stress and worries over financial insecurities, and the pandemic itself, even if unintentionally, have impacted children's understanding of disaster, family tragedy and their resiliency. Loss of employment is a significant life stressor that can take a psychological toll on individuals, and can take years to recover (Infurna & Luthar, 2016). Economic adversity and job loss cause stress, a major risk factor for increased family violence, psychological and physical maltreatment, and child abuse (Fong & Iarocci, 2020; Lawson, Piel, & Simon, 2020; WHO, 2020; Yeasmin et al., 2020). Since these uncertainties, coupled with the extra burden on parents by the pandemic, limit the parents' abilities to meet their family's needs, parental mental health may suffer. As a result, parents may be less able to help their children deal with emotional issues (Courtney et al., 2020; Fong & Iarocci, 2020; Pittinsky, 2020). Under such circumstances, child psychological problems are likely to worsen (Sprang & Silman, 2013), a situation encapsulated in the shadow of fear caused by the fact that children were restrained from attending school and extra-curricular activities, meeting relatives and peers, for fear of contracting the coronavirus (Courtney et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2020; Parsons, 2020).

Strong evidence suggests that parental educational level could be conducive to lower levels of anxiety in children during the COVID-19 pandemic (Garcia de Avila et al., 2020; Yeasmin et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2020). In a study by Yue et al. (2020), parents with higher income and higher educational attainment were reported as having lower levels of psychological distress probably because these attributes provided the family with more resources to understand and deal with the stressors created by the pandemic. Similar findings have been confirmed by Garcia de Avila et al. (2020), who reported that highly educated parents seemed to be in a better position to offer a range of support to their children, such as talking and listening to children's concerns over COVID-19, and providing further information, safer environments and emotional support, thus helping in minimising the children's anxiety levels.

In contrast, Yeasmin et al. (2020) reported a higher percentage of mental health issues in children whose parents were highly educated. The authors attributed this incidence to the fact that highly educated

parents were still expected to work despite the lockdown and they did not have time to meet their children's demands and nurture them. As a result, children of higher-income parents experienced more psychological distress than children of low-income parents (Yeasmin et al., 2020). Based on the findings Yeasmin et al. (2020) concluded that it is likely that parents who are able to manage their emotions and depression, will be good role models of resilience for their children. Nevertheless, what seems to be more important for children during a pandemic is that parents are able to model healthy ways of dealing with anxiety triggers, particularly during stressful times like a pandemic (OECD, 2020a). In addition, financial support and flexible childcare provisions could ease the burden on families, thus enabling them to cope with their responsibilities during the pandemic, by increasing the chances of better mental health outcomes (Fong & Iarocci, 2020).

School Relationships

In an attempt to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, many educational institutions worldwide were closed and learning has been transferred to home-based learning, which has been mostly carried out online. It is estimated that mass school closure has affected approximately 91.3%, or 1.5 million students, worldwide (UNESCO, 2020c). This has created global repercussions, impacting economic, educational and health systems, and the lives of children worldwide (UNESCO, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Indeed, many education experts have sounded the alarm numerous times about the detrimental effects of school closure on children's learning (Martin et al., 2020; OECD, 2020b; UNESCO, 2020d; United Nations, 2020). It is now clear that school closure has caused major interruptions to children's learning, and perhaps even worse, it has impacted children's social and emotional wellbeing.

Anxiety in children has increased exponentially following school closure, particularly because it has influenced family structures and the children's daily routines (Kang et al., 2020). With school closure and lack of socialisation, children's sense of belonging to the school community may have been lost, unless they kept abreast with online learning and activities (OECD, 2020a). The lack of social contact is impactful for all students, particularly the most vulnerable, who may suffer from social exclusion, physical violence, lack of family support and proper housing, and food insecurity (OECD, 2020a).

Age has been found to be an influential psychological stressor experienced by children. Existing research confirmed that primary school children were stressed and anxious because of school closure, particularly because the resources which they usually had access to through schools were no longer available when schools closed (Yue et al., 2020). Aware of this need, the OECD (2020a) has called for education systems worldwide to ensure children's social and emotional wellbeing, especially the vulnerable. To address the disruptions in children's education, UNESCO (2020b) developed ten key recommendations for learning, including wellbeing and educational needs of children, the emotional needs of educators, and the need for common directions/guidelines for educational institutions, to ensure that learning remains relatively uninterrupted during the pandemic.

Eventually, schools reopened but nervousness about COVID-19 began affecting some children once more (Pittinsky, 2020). Educators have an important role to play in reducing children's anxiety during the pandemic by providing a sense of stability to help children process, adjust, and develop new coping skills to deal with the uncertainty amid rapid change. Towards this end, educators can discuss COVID-19 has changed their school routine, rather than dismiss children's emotions as this may increase anxiety. In this regard, Pittinsky (2020) suggested that educators can discuss with children what is known and what remains unclear about the pandemic, help them understand the risks of new infections, ask them how they are doing and feeling, and emphasis positive ways of taking care of themselves, their family and friends – hand washing, mask wearing and physical distancing.

Socio-Economic Backgrounds

Socio-economic background has been identified as a major contributing factor to the way children have been impacted by the pandemic. The impact of the economic crisis brought about by the pandemic had a significant impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of many children worldwide (Courtney et

al., 2020; Garcia de Avila et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2020; Keshri, 2020; Parsons, 2020). The impact of the pandemic on children living in inadequate housing in low-income neighbourhoods and those experiencing domestic violence has been profound (Garcia de Avila et al., 2020; OECD, 2020a; Parsons, 2020). Detailed examination of the impact of the pandemic on children living with their parents in urban areas by Yeasmin et al. (2020), showed that these children were more likely to have poorer mental health when compared to the rural area's child. Yeasmin et al. (2020) attributed this finding to the fact that children living rural areas were forced to stay indoors, whereas children in urban areas were still able to play outside and they had stronger immune systems. Therefore, being mindful of context is key to meeting the psychological needs of children during a crisis.

Lockdown, Quarantine and Social Distancing

Much of the available literature has confirmed that government-imposed lockdowns and social distance measures impacted children in different ways, often increasing the likelihood of mental health issues (Garcia de Avila et al., 2020; Urbano Agbing et al., 2020; Yeasmin et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2020). Over a sustained period, these losses are likely to negatively impact children's mental health (Courtney et al., 2020). The research is clear in this regard. Yeasmin et al. (2020) reported an increase in depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbance during lockdown amongst children living in Bangladesh. Similarly, Garcia de Avila et al. (2020) confirmed that Brazilian schoolchildren who were socially distanced from both parents, children living in households with higher number of inhabitants, children living with young parents, and parental low-education level, had lower test scores than children who were socially isolated with a person other than their parent. Together, these findings highlight the crucial human need to reconnect with others and the role parents play in children's lives, particularly in times of crises. Yue et al. (2020) reported that children confined within the home during the COVID-19 lockdown in China developed symptoms of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression and PTSD. In Parsons' (2020) study, preschool children were unable to verbally express their feelings around what was going on, mostly because they could not understand what was happening, had sleep and appetite disturbances, and also behaviour problems. In addition, Parsons (2020) reported that school children were more disorganised and exhibited more disruptive behaviour at school, and consequently their academic performance suffered. These findings suggest that while younger children tend to worry because they may find it hard to fully comprehend the situation; older children worry about their future prospects and the financial situation within the family. Nevertheless, research has confirmed that children of all ages seem to be afraid of what the coronavirus might do to them and to their loved ones (Pittinsky, 2020; Roy et al., 2020). Taken together, these studies confirmed that mental health issues remained fairly elevated among children in different countries around the world.

Even though for most children, the pandemic and school closure have led to disruptions in their routines, and social isolation may have led to increase in feelings of boredom, frustration and fear, this was not always the case. Yue et al. (2020) also reported that even though Chinese children suffered from higher levels of anxiety than their parents, they suffered significantly lower levels of PTSD than their parents during the outbreak. Such differences could be attributed the differences in cognitive abilities between children and adults, where children's cognitive abilities were still developing. However, higher levels of anxiety in children could be a result of lack of understanding of the issue and lack of coping strategies (Yue et al., 2020). Yue et al. (2020) attributed three factors to the increase in anxiety in children: first, at the time of data collection, the coronavirus outbreak was under control and this could have alleviated some of the destress caused by the pandemic; second, there has been an increases in online mental health services during quarantine which helped people cope better under these circumstances; and third, quarantine increased the time families spent together and this could have brought them closer to each other, thus improving family relationships and easing psychological distress. Similarly, in a study by Urbano Agbing et al. (2020), children in the Philippines, described the coronavirus as a deadly, dangerous, contagious, a disease which kills people worldwide; and they expressed sadness, fear, boredom, anger, disappointments about their experiences during these difficult times. Urbano Agbing et al. (2020) reported that while children expressed mixed emotions (both positive and negative) about lockdown, they also expressed hope

and faith in God and prayers. Consequently, the children employed various coping mechanisms, such as taking up new hobbies and interests as acts of mindfulness. Urbano Agbing et al. (2020) suggested that such strategies can assist children during critical events, but the researchers also called for longitudinal research to explore the effects of pandemic, and its aftermath, on health outcomes of different children.

Despite the conflicting evidence, lockdowns and quarantine are difficult for children. In this regard, Brooks et al. (2020) suggested that whenever quarantine cannot be dismissed, it should be as brief as medically possible, and medical officials should provide clear rationale for quarantine, enough information about protocols, ensure sufficient supplies and support in order to minimise the psychological impact of quarantine and isolation. Undoubtedly, in order to reduce psychological stress for children some sort of structure or routine and social interactions are recommended (OECD, 2020a). Parents also have a pivotal role in this regard. Parents can create a learning routine at home and engage children in creative and mentally stimulating indoor activities to help them manage their anxiety and meet their emotional needs (Garcia de Avila et al., 2020; Roy et al., 2020), particularly by creating fun activities during the pandemic (Garcia de Avila et al., 2020). Engaging children with school work and chores, and allowing them enough time for daily exercise have been reported to reduce depression and anxiety (Kang et al., 2020; Yeasmin et al., 2020). Additionally, parents can find ways to help children stay in touch with friends so that they do not feel lonely and isolated.

Social Media

Measures to restrict the coronavirus transmission in the community, such as lockdowns, social distancing, and restrictions in movement, have often resulted in increased screen time, particularly for children, but not only (Roy et al., 2020). The way information about the coronavirus is presented to children can impact their ability to adjust to the situation (Fong & Iarocci, 2020). Moreover, the younger the children are, the less likely they are able to process the information correctly and they may over- or under-estimated the threat of the virus. This means that constant misinformation on social media portals may increase the incidence of children experiencing panic and anxiety attacks (Roy et al., 2020). In fact, research confirmed that frequent social media exposure during the COVID-19 outbreak was positively associated with high prevalence of mental health issues (Gao et al., 2020; Roy et al., 2020) and put children at higher risk of experiencing anxiety and PTSD (Yue et al., 2020). Together, these findings call for a different discourse around COVID-19 and children on social media as a necessary tool in addressing fear of the coronavirus in children (Roy et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2020). More importantly, these findings highlight the need for a reduction in children's exposure to social media and negative news (Roy et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2020).

More importantly, Pittinsky (2020) cautioned that shielding children from the truth or having very high expectations of them during the pandemic could be more harmful. Parents have a role to play in this regard in that they need to monitor the children's use of social media and teach them how to rely on reliable sources of information about the pandemic. Certainly, children need to be provided with clear, accurate and meaningful explanation of the current situation. By using age-appropriate tools, vocabulary and communication strategies about the pandemic, which neither over-estimate nor minimise the dangers, parents will ensure that children do not feel guilty about the situation and so that parents do not heighten children's fears (Fong & Iarocci, 2020; Garcia de Avila et al., 2020; OECD, 2020a; Pittinsky, 2020; Roy et al., 2020). As evidenced by an array of recent research (Garcia de Avila et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2020), providing children with accurate and meaningful explanations about the coronavirus may help alleviate their worries and anxiety. Nevertheless, parents need to monitor children's reactions with care and caution.

Psychological Support Services

Major events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, influence development over the lifespan and even across generations. Therefore, the burden of the COVID-19 pandemic makes a strong case for promoting the wellbeing of children and families. Children who experience trauma during the pandemic may require a supportive structure that is closely aligned with both educational and mental health services (Firestein, 2019), a need that cannot be overlooked (Fong & Iarocci, 2020; Sprang & Silman, 2013). It is likely that

interventions and strategies to address mental health issues during the pandemic (Hawke et al., 2020) and the need to strengthen families in order to help children feel safe (Garcia de Avila et al., 2020) are vital ways of supporting children's mental health and wellbeing.

In these difficult times, psychological support services are essential more than ever to detect and treat anxiety disorders and emotional distress in children (Courtney et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2020), and child maltreatment (Lawson et al., 2020; Yeasmin et al., 2020). However, psychological support services in the form of face-to-face meetings can be costly for many families who are already facing financial hardships, and availability can be problematic in face of social distancing measures (Parsons, 2020). This is especially true of low-income families who are less likely to have access psychological support services due to lack of financial resources to meet these needs. To overcome these financial constraints, governments should legislate to provide technology-based psychological interventions to children and parents, which could be a useful alternative in the current circumstances (Fong & Iarocci, 2020). Indeed, recently developed effective approaches to providing psychological support services during the pandemic range from psychological intervention strategies (Lawson et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020; Yeasmin et al., 2020) to telemedicine as a means of supporting the mental health needs of individuals, including children (Ashikkali et al., 2020).

Given the associated economic benefits of improved mental health issues, social and medical services, counselling and socialisation opportunities should be provided to children and their families during the pandemic (OECD, 2020a). Consequently, understanding the most effective combination of support in different population is an important next step. Next, policies need to be put in place to reduce barriers to psychological support services in order to strengthen both the children's and the family' mental health and wellbeing (Fong & Iarocci, 2020).

Limitations and Future Directions

The limitations of this scoping review highlight the paucity in the literature related to children's mental health and wellbeing in times of global crises. Based on the evidence reviewed here, the majority of the literature reviewed targeted the COVID-19 pandemic as a medical issue rather than as an issue that could trigger mental health problems. In fact, only a limited number of studies proposed appropriate interventions to improve children's mental health and wellbeing during these difficult times.

The lack of available research suggests that there remain several aspects of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health and wellbeing about which relatively little is known. First, further research would benefit from intervention evaluations that provide support to children's mental health, during and after the pandemic. Second, there is a need for the exploration of new and effective strategies that help children and their families cope with the direct and indirect effects of the stress caused by the pandemic in order to ensure their wellbeing, during this and future outbreaks. Third, research to further explore the impact of the pandemic on girls' mental health and wellbeing is also required.

Conclusions

This study reviewed the results of published literature to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's (from birth to 17 years of age) mental health and wellbeing. Collectively, these studies indicated that globally, children have been exposed to severe and unprecedented events that have disrupted their routines. The pandemic has posed severe economic hardships on the entire planet, that have social consequences for people of all ages. Clearly, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's holistic wellbeing are numerous and go beyond the risk of acquiring a severe acute respiratory infection. All this has repercussions for children, which if not addressed, are likely to be longstanding and could have even worse outcomes in the future. In this regard, this scoping review is an important first step towards holistically evaluating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health and the resources need to help them overcome these challenges, an area in which exiting quality research is scarce (Fong & Iarocci, 2020). This paper marks the starting point from which informed conversations around children's emotional and social wellbeing during a major crisis can evolve.

Lastly, the findings from this scoping review have practical implications for policymakers and educators. It is recommended that governments, non-governmental organizations, educators, healthcare and psychosocial professionals adopt a collaborative approach towards preventing further mental health issues caused by the pandemic. Thus, interventions with children and families should be considered as a way of preventing the potential negative effects from the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this, professionals need to work with parents and children to provide them with strategies to lower the negative impact of the pandemic on their mental health. Governments, employers and policymakers clearly have a useful role to plan in financially supporting families to reduce the stress and mental health issues caused by the pandemic.

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Defining turn taking in intervention for young children with autism: A review of the literature

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Abstract: Turn taking is a form of preverbal, dyadic, reciprocal communication that may support key areas of development, such as language and joint attention, and may serve different functions depending on each communicative partner's intent. As such, it has been incorporated in interventions targeting various outcomes in young children with autism. However, there is inconsistency in how researchers define turn taking and explorations on how turn taking is defined across these interventions have not yet been reported in the current literature. Therefore, the purpose of this review was to investigate how turn taking is operationally defined based on communicative intent in the current literature on interventions for young children with autism and to explore additional intervention content to provide fuller context to how turn taking has been promoted. A search was conducted across databases to identify intervention studies for young children with autism that incorporated an embedded turn-taking component. Peer-reviewed articles were then coded based on turn-taking communicative intent, and additional intervention content was categorized. Findings across 14 studies indicate variability among turn-taking definitions both in communicative function and form. The results also reveal that turn taking has been promoted through different intervention approaches that incorporate diverse agents, settings, and methodology. Researchers and practitioners should consider specificity and clarity when defining turn taking to most optimally meet the developmental needs of young children with autism in future interventions.

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Introduction

Children with autism often display core challenges in social communication and restrictive repetitive behaviors (RRBs) that may be present throughout the lifespan (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2012; Moriuchi, Klin, & Jones, 2016). Symptom severity levels vary among individuals with autism, who may have symptoms ranging from mild to more severe manifestations that may require varying degrees of support (APA, 2013; Kim et al., 2019). The most recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 1 in 54 children in the United States has autism, a prevalence rate that has been increasing since 2002 (Maenner et al., 2020). As the prevalence rate increases, so too does the need for developing early interventions that support the unique needs of young children with autism.

For many young children with autism, the core challenge in social communication is evident early in life, before children with typical development begin using verbal communication (Moriuchi et al., 2016; Poon, Watson, Baranek, & Poe, 2012), and is often one of the first indicators that a child has autism (Curcio, 1978; Mundy, 2016). Infants who later receive an autism diagnosis have been observed exhibiting challenges in preverbal forms of social communication, such as eye gaze and head orienting to parents' bids for attention (Moriuchi et al., 2016; Poon et al., 2012). These challenges may become more distinct as children progress in development, when important milestones that are seen in children with typical development, such as competency in joint attention and use of expressive and receptive language, are not

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reached (e.g., Delehanty, Stronach, Guthrie, Slate, & Wetherby, 2018; Mundy, Sigman, Ungerer, & Sherman, 1986).

Preverbal Turn Taking in Intervention

To support their social communication needs, various interventions have been developed that promote outcomes in young children with autism who require support in key areas, such as play, relationships, and language (e.g., Greenspan, & Wieder, 2006; Rogers, Dawson, & Vismara, 2012). A commonly embedded intervention component is turn taking, a form of dyadic, reciprocal, preverbal communication that children begin using early in life with other people (Clifford & Dissanayake, 2009; Schertz, Odom, Baggett, & Sideris, 2018). An example of turn taking might be observed when a child is stacking blocks on a playroom floor and their parent sits next to them, stacks a block, and then allows the child to take a turn stacking another block. In this example, the child and their parent are engaging in a simple, back-and-forth turn-taking exchange centered around a certain activity. Turn taking may have important implications in supporting later developmental outcomes, and some researchers theorize that dyadic, preverbal turn taking may help children develop competency in more complex, triadic forms of preverbal communication (i.e., joint attention) and later language (Schertz, Odom, et al., 2018; Trevarthen & Hubley, 1978). It may also help children share in the perspectives of others (Harrist & Waugh, 2002). For many young children with autism, however, engaging in dyadic turn-taking exchanges may be challenging, particularly for social purposes (Chiang, Soon, Lin, & Rogers, 2008; Clifford & Dissanayake, 2009). Chiang and colleagues (2008), for instance, found that, when compared to children with typical development, children with autism showed fewer instances of turn taking when it centered around actions with another person (e.g., teasing, or tickling games). Because of this potential challenge in turn taking, children with autism may have difficulty learning it on their own and may require support in this form of preverbal social communication. Given its importance in childhood development, turn taking has been incorporated as a component of multiple interventions for children with autism, such as Floortime (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006), Joint Attention Mediated Learning (Schertz, Odom, et al., 2018), and behavioral approaches (e.g., Isaksen & Holth, 2009). In a study by Isaksen and Holth (2009), for instance, children received intensive behavioral training in turn-taking use. Schertz, Odom, and colleagues (2018) also incorporated a turn-taking component in intervention to promote joint attention learning in toddlers. In addition to being a component of intervention, turn taking is a defined task on the Early Social Communication Scales, which is used to measure children's use of preverbal communication and helps in identifying potential developmental delays (Mundy et al., 2003), further indicating the importance placed on this form of preverbal communication in childhood development.

Distinguishing Turn Taking by Function

Turn taking at its broadest definition is a simple, back-and-forth communicative exchange between partners (Lee & Schertz, 2020); however, it may also serve varying functions (i.e., social, or instrumental) depending on the intent behind the interaction (e.g., Alpert & Kaiser, 1992; Greenspan & Wieder, 2006; Isaksen & Holth, 2009; Schertz, Odom, et al., 2018). The social function has been defined as a sharing of attention through common interests with another person, such as can be observed during joint attention overtures, or while commenting (Cochet & Byrne, 2016; Schertz, Call-Cummings, Horn, Quest, & Steffen Law, 2018). The social function may be observed, for instance, when a child engages in block building with a parent, during which time the child shows playful intent by smiling and clapping their hands with excitement. In this example, the child is displaying signs of active, meaningful engagement with the parent. The instrumental function, on the other hand, is marked by requesting or following the request of a communicative partner and serves the purpose of achieving a goal for the purpose of the self, rather than the partner or for mutual interest sharing (Cochet & Byrne, 2016; Schertz, Call-Cummings, et al., 2018). The instrumental function may be observed, for example, when a child points to request a desired toy from a parent and the parent responds to that request by handing the toy to the child. In this scenario, the child is

seeking to obtain the toy for their own purposes and is not pointing to share interest or to engage socially with the parent.

Although the instrumental and social communicative functions are distinguishable, there is limited research exploring the differences in turn-taking functions. Other forms of preverbal communication, such as eye gaze and pointing, have been differentiated by social and instrumental function (e.g., Cochet & Byrne, 2016; Mundy et al., 1986). Cochet and Byrne (2016), for instance, analyzed the differential relationship of social vs. instrumental pointing on later language and symbolic gesture use and found that the social function was related to later development, but the instrumental function was not. Determining the function behind a turn-taking exchange in intervention may be especially relevant for children with autism, who have a core challenge in social communication and who may also have less difficulty with and who may favor instrumental over social communication (Adamson, McArthur, Markov, Dunbar, & Bakeman, 2001; Klin, Lin, Gorrindo, Ramsay, & Jones, 2009; Mundy, 1995; Sigman & Ruskin, 1999). While not all interventions for children with autism employ the same strategies or follow the same approach and design, when the goal of an intervention is to support social communication outcomes through a turn-taking component, how turn taking is being used by the child and their partner (i.e., its function), should be carefully considered.

Even though turn taking is well established as a component of intervention and is regarded as having important developmental implications, there remains general inconsistency among the current intervention literature in how turn taking is defined based on function, with some interventions defining turn taking socially (e.g., Greenspan & Wieder, 2006; Schertz, Odom, et al., 2018) and some defining it instrumentally (e.g., Isaksen & Holth, 2009; Koegel et al., 1989), warranting a need for further, more exhaustive review of how turn taking is operationally defined by function in the current autism intervention research. Prior to the present study, there have not been any such reported explorations of current literature. Therefore, the purpose of this review is to determine how turn taking is operationally defined based on communicative function in studies on interventions for young children with autism. Similar review methodologies have revealed key variations across study terminology that ultimately affect study transparency and replicability for future research and practice (Kamenopoulou, Ali, & Ockelford, 2021). A secondary purpose is to explore other intervention content, including participants, autism assessment data, settings, agents, design, strategies, and target outcomes to provide context to how turn taking is promoted in each identified intervention study.

Method

The authors searched the online databases PsychINFO and Academic Search Premier, two of the foremost databases in the social sciences, to identify relevant peer-reviewed journal articles published in English. Additionally, online first articles were searched on the following journal sites: *Autism, Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, Journal of Early Intervention, Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, and *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education.* Dates of publication were limited to the 10-year span between 2010 and 2020 to ensure that the most recent research was included in the review, particularly studies that define autism under the current diagnostic criteria published in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-V (APA, 2013). Specific keywords used in identifying potentially relevant studies include *autism* or *ASD* and *intervention* and (*turn taking* or *reciprocal* or *dyadic).* The terms "reciprocal" and "dyadic" were searched since not all researchers use the same terminology to describe back-and-forth exchanges. This initial search yielded 439 potentially relevant studies.

Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

After an initial search of the chosen keywords filtered by the initial inclusion parameters, the first and second authors independently screened articles for adherence to additional inclusion criteria. To be included in the current review, identified literature must meet the following criteria: a) be an intervention study involving young children diagnosed with or at risk for autism between the ages of 0 to 8 (following

the definition of early childhood provided by the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children [DEC] 2014); b) include an embedded preverbal turn-taking component; c) describe turn taking between two communicative partners and not between a child and a non-human entity (e.g., a robot or a tablet application); and d) present turn taking in the methods section as an operational definition, such as in study coding criteria, measures, or the intervention description, and not in the introduction or literature review. For the present study, a turn-taking component is defined as any use of turn taking in the intervention for the promotion of targeted outcomes. For example, in the study by Schertz, Odom, and colleagues (2018), turn taking was promoted in conjunction with other components in intervention to help children build their competency towards joint attention.

Of the 439 originally identified studies, most were excluded because they were not intervention studies (e.g., literature reviews or essays), did not have participants with autism, or had participants that were older than 8 years of age (n = 359). To maintain consistency with inclusion criteria, studies with children older than 8 years of age were excluded, even if some of the children were under 8. Fourteen studies were excluded because children engaged exclusively with a non-human entity during intervention; however, one robot-involved study had a human turn-taking condition and was included (David, Costescu, Matu, Szentagotai, & Dobrean, 2020). If a study was a replication of another identified study, only the most current study was included; however, if the replication study referred to the original study regarding specific intervention procedures and definitions, the definition of the original study was considered for this literature review. Studies included in this review were not limited by research design if the intervention had a turn-taking component. It is important to note that turn taking may be defined as verbal communicative acts that involve children initiating or responding to turns verbally (McFadden, Kamps, & Heitzman-Powell, 2014); however, the present study focuses on preverbal turn taking. Therefore, interventions that only used a verbal turn-taking component to promote later outcomes were excluded from the review. Studies that incorporated both preverbal and verbal turn taking were included, however. Numerous studies (n = 74) were excluded because only a verbal turn-taking component was defined and/or preverbal turn taking was not an embedded intervention component. After independent screening procedures were conducted, the authors met and conducted additional screening for duplication, and agreed that a total of 14 studies met the inclusion criteria for this review.

Coding

The first and second authors independently reviewed and coded each of the 14 articles based on the following established coding criteria. We then met virtually to discuss our findings and address differences in coding until agreement was met, a coding method commonly reported in rigorous literature reviews (e.g., Cooper, 2010; Pennington & Delano, 2012; Schertz, Reichow, Tan, Vaiouli, & Yildirim, 2012). To code turn taking by function, the authors followed the definitions of social and instrumental communication as described by Lee and Schertz (2020) and Schertz, Call-Cummings, and colleagues (2018). Studies with operational definitions describing back-and-forth exchanges for the purpose of sharing interest, such as in an object or activity, and engaging socially with a communicative partner were coded as "Social" (Lee & Schertz, 2020; Schertz, Call-Cummings, et al., 2018). Indications of the "Social" function may include positive affect (e.g., smiling, or facial excitement), child-led interactions, and a lack of agent instructions or requests (Lee & Schertz, 2020; Schertz, Call-Cummings, et al., 2018). Studies with operational definitions describing back-and-forth exchanges for task-oriented purposes, such as by following or initiating a direct instruction or request, or to acquire something without consideration of the communicative partner's interests were coded as "Instrumental" (Schertz, Call-Cummings, et al., 2018). The "Instrumental" function may be identified by a focus on completing a task, such as taking turns as part of following rules in a board game or responding to an agent's directions (e.g., "Your turn" or "My turn") (Schertz, Call-Cummings, et al., 2018).

For the current study, a third coding criterion was applied. Studies in which the turn-taking function was unclear were coded as "Undetermined." The turn-taking function was unclear if the study: (1) described a back-and-forth exchange without indicating if the purpose was for instrumental or social

purposes or (2) the term "turn taking" was used, but the form (i.e., the back-and-forth nature) was unclear. Additional intervention features, including participants, autism assessment data, settings, agents, design, approach, and target outcomes, were explored in the literature to give fuller context to each intervention study.

Results

The findings from the 14 studies coded for the present literature review are presented in (Table 1).

Table 1. Intervention content and turn-taking functions

Study	Intervention features							Turn-taking Function
	Participants *n* (age)/M:F	Settings	Assessments	Agents	Design	Approach	Target outcomes	
David et al. (2020)	5 (3-5 years)/3:2	Clinic	ADOS 7.2 (1.7)	Therapist	Multiple baseline alternating treatments	Behavioral	Turn taking (Undetermined); Preverbal social communication (e.g., positive affect, engagement, eye contact); Changes in some behaviors	Undetermined
Dawson et al. (2010)	24 (18-30 months)/3.5:1[a]	Home	ADOS 7.2 (1.7)	Parents and therapists	RCT	Combined	Reduced symptom severity (including improved overall social communication); Changes in cognitive & adaptive behavior; Language	Social
Gengoux et al. (2019)	22 (2-6 years)/18:4	Clinic	ADOS 7.7 (1.4)	Parents and therapists	Uncontrolled trial	Developmental	Reduced symptom severity (including improved overall social communication, & changes in RRBs); Language	Social
Green et al. (2017)	28 (7-10 months)/12.5:1[a]	Home	AOSI 10.04 (4.6)	Parents	RCT	Developmental	Turn taking (Social); Reduced symptom severity (including improved overall social communication, & changes in RRBs)	Social

Study	Intervention features							Turn-taking Function
	Participants *n* (age)/M:F	Settings	Assessments	Agents	Design	Approach	Target outcomes	
Kemp, Stephenson, Cooper, & Hodge (2019)	3 (all under the age of 5)/3:0	Childcare centers	N/A	Peers	Multiple probe across participants	Behavioral	Turn taking (Instrumental)	Instrumental
Kim & Clarke (2015)	2 (4 years)/2:0	Home	N/A	Researcher	Multiple baseline across participants	Behavioral	Turn taking (Instrumental)	Instrumental
Raulston, Hansen, Frantz, Machalicek, & Bhana (2020)	3 (3-6 years)/2:1	Home	CARS-2 35 (4.44)	Parents and peers	Multiple probe across participants	Behavioral	Verbal & nonverbal communication (e.g., mands & response to mands)	Instrumental
Rieth et al. (2014)	6 (ages 2 to 4)/4:2	Clinic/ Home	ADOS 2 ASD & 4 Autism[b]	Therapists	Multiple baseline alternating treatments	Behavioral	Requesting; Commenting; Play	Instrumental
Rollins, Campbell, Thibodeau Hoffman, & Self (2016)	4 (All under 36 months)/4:0	Home	CARS-2 44.62 (3.54)	Parents	Multiple baseline across participants	Combined	Turn taking (Undetermined); Eye contact; Social engagement; Verbal turn taking	Undetermined
Schertz, Odom, et al. (2018)	73 (ages 16-30 months)/ 58:15[a]	Home	ADOS-T 16.36 (3.45)	Parents	RCT	Developmental	Preverbal social communication (i.e., facial focusing, turn taking, & joint attention)	Social
Shire, Shih, Bracaglia, Kodjoe, & Kasari (2020)	50 (mean age 32.42 months)/40:10	Childcare centers	N/A	Paraprofessionals and peers	RCT	Combined	Preverbal social communication (e.g., joint attention, joint engagement); Play; Language	Instrumental
Therrien & Light (2018)	5 (3 to 6 years)/5:0	Childcare centers	CARS-2 34.9 (5.85)	Peers and interventionist	Multiple probe across participant	Behavioral	Turn taking (Instrumental); Preverbal social communication (e.g., joint engagement)	Instrumental
Thompson, McFerran, & Gold (2014)	12 (mean age 43.92)/8:4	Home	SRS-PS 87.42 (15.84)	Parents and therapists	RCT	Developmental	Social interactions & responsivity; Improved parent-child	Undetermined

Study	Intervention features							Turn-taking Function
	Participants *n* (age)/M:F	Settings	Assessments	Agents	Design	Approach	Target outcomes	
							relationships; Language	
Wang (2017)	4 (2-4 years)/3:1	Home	N/A	Parents	Multiple baseline across participants	Behavioral	Turn taking (Undetermined); Decreased refusal behaviors	Undetermined

Note: RCT = Randomized controlled trial; RRB = Restrictive and Repetitive Behaviors; Combined = contains aspects of both behavioral and developmental approaches; ADOS = Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule; ADOS-T = Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule-Toddler; AOSI = Autism Observation Schedule for Infants; CARS-2 = Childhood Autism Rating Scale; SRS-PS = Social Responsiveness Scale-Preschool; N/A = Assessment data not provided.

[a]Approximate ratio, actual numbers not reported

[b]Only ADOS classification available

Intervention Features

Participants & Autism Assessment Data

Among the 14 studies reviewed, children ranged in age from 7 months to 6 years at the start of intervention. Most child participants (*n* ~ 195) were male, but exact figures could not be determined across studies since not all articles reported the exact participant numbers (i.e., Dawson et al., 2010; Green et al., 2017; Schertz, Odom, et al., 2018). While all studies included children in the early childhood stage of development (up to 8 years old), only eight of the studies would be classified as early interventions (i.e., included children under the age of three) under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), a United States special education law that mandates rights and protections for children with disabilities. All studies indicated that child participants had or were at high risk for a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder as determined by one or more of the following tools: the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) (Lord et al., 1999), the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule-Toddler (ADOS-T) (Lord, Luyster, Gotham, & Guthrie, 2012), the Autism Observation Schedule for Infants (AOSI) (Bryson, Zwaigenbaum, McDermott, Rombough, & Brian, 2008), the Childhood Autism Rating Scale, Second Edition (CARS-2) (Schopler, Van Bourgondien, Wellman, & Love, 2010); the Social Responsiveness Scale-Preschool (SRS-PS) (Constantino & Gruber, 2005), and clinical expertise (i.e., Kemp et al., 2019; Kim & Clarke, 2015; Shire et al., 2020; Wang, 2017).

Agents & Settings

Most of the interventions were implemented by parents to some degree (i.e., as the sole agent or as a co-agent) (n = 8). Peers as intervention agents were involved in four of the studies as sole agent or co-agent. Five studies incorporated therapists as agents. One study was partially implemented by classroom paraprofessionals (Shire et al., 2020), one study was partially implemented by an interventionist (Therrien & Light, 2018), and another study was conducted by the researcher (Kim & Clarke, 2015). The agents of one intervention included therapists and a robot (David et al., 2020); however, for the purpose of the current review, only the human therapists were considered intervention agents. Most interventions took place in participants' homes (n = 9). Of those, one study was conducted in the home setting and the clinic setting (Rieth et al., 2014). Two interventions were conducted exclusively in clinical settings, which included therapy clinics and autism treatment centers (David et al., 2020; Gengoux et al., 2019). Three interventions were conducted in childcare centers, which included early childhood classrooms and day care settings (Kemp et al., 2019; Shire et al., 2020; Therrien & Light, 2018).

Design

Most of the studies in this review (*n* = 8) used single subject designs to test interventions. Of these, three reported the use of a multiple baseline across participants design (i.e., Kim & Clarke, 2015; Rollins et

al., 2016; Wang, 2017), three used a multiple probe across participants design (i.e., Kemp et al., 2019; Raulston et al., 2020; Therrien & Light, 2018), and two used an alternating treatments design (i.e., David et al., 2020; Rieth et al., 2014). Five intervention studies were randomized controlled trials (i.e., Dawson et al., 2010; Green et al., 2017; Schertz, Odom, et al., 2018 Shire et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2014), and one study was an uncontrolled trial (i.e., Gengoux et al., 2019).

Approach

The majority of studies reviewed (n = 7) implemented behavioral approaches to intervention, which follow the principles of applied behavior analysis (i.e., David et al., 2020; Kemp et al., 2019; Kim & Clarke, 2015; Raulston et al., 2020; Rieth et al., 2014; Therrien & Light, 2018; Wang, 2017). Of these, two studies employed prompting and reinforcement to elicit turn taking from participants (i.e., Kim & Clarke, 2015; Therrien & Light, 2018). David and colleagues (2020) implemented Discrete Trial Training, a technique that breaks down behaviors into smaller components, to teach turn taking to children with autism. In Raulston and colleagues' study (2020), parents used a coaching model to encourage turn taking in their children during game play (e.g., while pretend fishing or in proprietary games that require give and take) while at playdates with peers. Rieth and colleagues (2014) used Pivotal Response Training to increase use of turn taking, communication, and play through a turn-taking component. In one study, peers with typical development were trained on how to teach children with autism to engage in turn taking through a peer mediated intervention (Kemp et al., 2019). Wang (2017) utilized video modeling supplemented by book reading in intervention to demonstrate turn taking to parents and their children with autism.

Developmental approaches follow the principles of developmental science, are designed to follow the developmental trajectories of young children, and emphasize the importance of child-centered approaches to learning (Rogers & Wallace, 2011). Of the studies reviewed, four followed a developmental approach. Specifically, developmental parent mediation was solely implemented in two studies (Green et al., 2017; Schertz, Odom, et al., 2018). In Schertz, Odom, et al. (2018), parents were supported with the guidance of an interventionist on how to promote turn taking in their young children in daily routines. Green and colleagues (2017) used a video program to guide parents in promoting social communication, including turn taking, in their young children. In conjunction with parent mediation, therapist modeling was used in one study to demonstrate intervention procedures to parents, who then implemented what they observed with their children (Gengoux et al., 2019). Only one study reported the use of music therapy that followed a developmental approach to intervention. Specifically, Thompson and colleagues (2014) promoted turn taking through family-centered music therapy sessions which alternated between highly structured sing along sessions to less structured activities that involved playing music to elicit turn taking.

Combined approaches, also known as comprehensive program models, integrate aspects of developmental and behavioral approaches in intervention (Odom, Boyd, Hall, & Hume, 2010). A combined approach was used in three studies. One study combined behavioral intervention with parent training under a comprehensive program model called the Early Start Denver Model (ESDM) (Dawson et al., 2010). Rollins et al. (2016) combined parent mediation and an early intensive behavioral intervention. Finally, children engaged with peers as one condition of intervention and with paraprofessionals in another condition in a classroom-based setting in one comprehensive program model (Shire et al., 2020).

Target Outcomes

Interventions that included turn taking varied in their targeted outcomes. Most interventions (n = 9) targeted improvements in preverbal forms of social communication, such as eye gaze, joint engagement, joint attention, and turn taking, all of which serve the purpose of sharing interest with a communicative partner and engaging socially (i.e., David et al., 2020; Dawson et al., 2010; Gengoux et al., 2019; Green et al., 2017; Rollins et al., 2016; Schertz, Odom, et al., 2018). One study sought to improve verbal commenting, which also serves a purpose of sharing interest with another person (Rieth et al., 2014). Through three of the interventions, researchers targeted increased instrumental turn-taking frequency (i.e., Kemp et al., 2019; Kim & Clarke, 2015; Therrien & Light, 2018). Instrumental verbal and preverbal forms of communication, including requesting, and responses to and initiations of mands were sought in two studies (Raulston et

al., 2020; Reith et al., 2014). Turn taking with an "Undetermined" function as an outcome was sought in three studies (i.e., David et al., 2020; Rollins et al., 2016; Wang, 2017).

Two interventions targeted play competencies, such as pre-symbolic play and cooperative block building (Rieth et al., 2014; Shire et al., 2020). Improvements in expressive and receptive language were targeted in four studies (i.e., Dawson et al., 2010; Gengoux et al., 2019; Shire et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2014). Five interventions addressed behavioral outcomes as well, such as avoidance and aggression, and outcomes associated with restrictive and repetitive behaviors, another core challenge for individuals with autism (i.e., David et al., 2020; Dawson et al., 2010; Gengoux et al., 2019; Green et al., 2017; Wang, 2017). Wang (2017), for example, used video modeling not only to promote turn taking in children with autism, but to also decrease refusal behaviors. Lastly, Dawson and colleagues (2010), in addition to their other targeted outcomes, sought improvements in cognition.

Turn-Taking Function

Social. Of the 14 studies reviewed, four defined turn taking as having a social function. Schertz, Odom, and colleagues (2018) defined turn taking as synchronous, back-and-forth engagement between a child and their parent for the purpose of sharing social interest. Turn taking in this study was child led and parents encouraged reciprocal engagement by following the child's interests and using positive affect (e.g., smiling, excited facial expressions, and praise), rather than directly instructing children in what to do (Schertz, Odom, et al., 2018). Similarly, Gengoux and colleagues (2019) define reciprocal turn taking as being child led and based on child interests, is supported by use of positive affect and praise, and as occurring in natural play settings. Dawson et al. (2010) implemented the ESDM in their replication study and the definition of turn taking was not directly quoted in the article; however, the ESDM defines it as having a social function, in which turn taking is not prompted or requested, but is natural, synchronous, and often play-based with children (Rogers et al., 2012). Finally, Green et al. (2017) defines turn taking, which they term "dyadic interaction," as back-and-forth synchronous engagement, that is nondirective (i.e., unprompted and occurring naturally), and is child led.

Instrumental. Most of the reviewed studies (n = 6) defined turn taking as having an instrumental function. Kemp and colleagues (2019) defined turn taking as a back-and-forth exchange involving opening and closing graphics of animals in a tablet application; therefore, the goal of the exchange was to accomplish a specific task (i.e., using the application) rather than sharing interest with a communicative partner. Additionally, children in this study could be verbally instructed to take turns by peers. Similarly, Kim and Clarke (2015) utilized a tablet to encourage turn taking with different toys in their participants; however, children were not allowed to touch the tablet and it was only used for prompting purposes. Like Kemp et al. (2019) and Kim and Clarke (2015), Raulston and colleagues (2020) defined turn taking as part of engaging with toys or taking turns in a game with the main purpose of completing a task. In Therrien and Light (2018), interventionists implemented continuous prompting (e.g., "Your turn") and modeling to teach children how to initiate and respond to turn taking with their peers, the focus being on accomplishing the back-and-forth exchange rather than on social engagement. Rieth and colleagues (2014) also used modeling and contingency to teach turn taking to children, such as by requesting a turn from the child and then asking the child to respond with a turn, rather than having the children initiate and respond for their own interest and volition. Finally, Shire et al. (2020) used modeling, prompting, and fading to teach children to take turns with the help of their peers. The authors use the following example to illustrate what their turn-taking component may look like, "if a peer were to hand a block to the child and the child did not notice, the (paraprofessional) may point out the peer's initiation and provide environmental, verbal, or physical support for the child to receive the block from the peer" (Shire et al., 2020, p. 2145). In this example, the child is engaging in a back-and-forth exchange, but for the purpose of achieving a task-oriented goal of taking a turn rather than for engaging socially and sharing interest with a peer.

Undetermined. Turn taking was coded as "Undetermined" in four studies because the function of turn taking could not be determined based on the operational definition provided. Wang's (2017) study, which was further categorized as "function unclear," defined turn taking as "a pair of one initiation, either

verbal or non-verbal interaction, and one response, either verbal or non-verbal interaction" (p. 7). This operational definition of turn taking is defined as back-and-forth engagement, but the purpose behind the interaction is unclear.

Three of the four undetermined studies were categorized as both "function unclear" and "form unclear" (i.e., David et al., 2020; Rollins et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2014). Rollins and colleagues (2016) defined their nonverbal turn-taking coding criteria as any instance "when the child took a turn with an object following the partner's initiation" (p. 224). From this definition, the function, or communicative partners' intent, could not be determined and the child's initiation, which completes the reciprocal exchange, was not included. Thompson and colleagues (2014) defined turn taking in a music therapy context, in which turn taking was defined as instances when "the music therapist would play a predictable harmonic structure that ended with an unresolved cadence, and then pause to wait for the child to respond" (p. 844). Again, the function behind the exchange, or why the child is responding to this initiation, is not clear, and the child's initiation is not defined. Similarly, turn taking as defined by David et al. (2020) was categorized as "Undetermined" because their definition only considers the child's response to the partner's initiation. Turn taking in this study was primarily defined as "the performance of the child to wait his or her turn" (David et al., 2020, p. 34). From this definition, neither the form nor the function is clear.

Conclusion and Discussion

Previous studies have explored the differential effects and relationships of instrumental vs. social preverbal communication on later developmental outcomes, such as language and joint attention, and identified differences in each function, thus indicating the importance of considering communicative intent (e.g., Cochet & Byrne, 2016; Mundy et al., 1986). The present literature review focused on turn taking, a form of preverbal communication that is incorporated in intervention for children with autism, and how it is operationally defined based on communicative function across studies. The results of this review indicate that there is variability in how turn taking is defined in the current literature on interventions for young children with autism.

Specifically, most of the studies provided clear definitions of instrumental turn taking. Social turn taking was also clearly defined in four of the reviewed studies. However, four of the studies included in this review defined turn taking in ways that left the function undetermined. For instance, the author of one study defined the form of turn taking (i.e., a back-and-forth exchange), indicating that turn taking required both an initiation and response from the child, but the function, or the intent behind the interaction, was not clear (Wang, 2017). Additionally, although the term "turn taking" was used in David et al. (2020), Rollins et al. (2016), and Thompson et al. (2014), their definitions only consider the child's response and not their initiation. Turn taking involves a level of give and take from both communicative partners and may be a form of dyadic synchrony that promotes children's awareness that their partners have their own thoughts and interests, and, through intersubjectivity, children may share in their partner's interests (Harrist & Waugh, 2002). Therefore, consideration of each partner's response, as well as their initiations, should be accounted for when defining and including turn taking in an intervention for children with autism, who may have inherent difficulty in turn-taking exchanges, particularly for social purposes (Chiang et al., 2008; Clifford & Dissanayake, 2009). These findings indicate that greater clarity and specificity is needed when defining turn taking not only by function, but also by form in intervention research. Clarifying turn taking by form (i.e., the back-and-forth exchange) can be accomplished by defining how children initiate turn taking with a partner and how they respond to a partner's turn-taking bid. To clarify turn taking by function, researchers should detail if the child and their communicative partner are engaging in a turn-taking routine for social or instrumental purposes based on the coding criteria presented in this article and by other researchers who have studied communicative intent (e.g., Cochet & Byrne, 2016; Schertz, Call-Cummings, et al., 2018). Additionally, among the articles on intervention for young children with autism published within the last decade, only 14 incorporated a preverbal turn-taking component defined as an exchange between two human communicative partners. Of these, only four defined turn taking socially. Given the developmental implications of turn taking on

later outcomes, especially those related to social communication (e.g., joint attention) (Schertz, Odom, et al., 2018), socially defined turn taking should be included more often as a component of interventions for children with autism in future research.

Among the studies reviewed, the intervention approach seems to correspond with how turn taking is defined by function. Five of the 6 interventions that defined turn taking instrumentally followed a behavioral approach to intervention (i.e., Kemp et al., 2019; Kim & Clarke, 2015; Raulston et al., 2020; Rieth et al., 2014; Therrien & Light, 2018). Three of the 4 interventions that defined turn taking socially followed a developmental approach to intervention (i.e., Gengoux et al., 2019; Green et al., 2017; Schertz, Odom, et al., 2018). These findings are not unanticipated given the nature of each intervention approach. Behavioral interventions are primarily designed to increase an observable skill and/or decrease some behaviors (Rogers & Wallace, 2011), which aligns well with the task-oriented nature of the instrumental function (Schertz, Call-Cummings, et al., 2018). Developmental approaches, on the other hand, focus on how children develop naturally and have an especial importance in helping them to gain competency in preverbal social communication, such as social turn taking (Wetherby & Woods, 2008). The interventions that followed combined approaches varied in how turn taking was defined, with one defining it socially (i.e., Dawson et al., 2010), one defining it instrumentally (i.e., Shire et al., 2020), and one defining turn taking with an undetermined function (i.e., Rollins et al., 2016). This variation among the combined approaches to intervention in how turn taking is defined is also expected given that these interventions contain aspects of both behavioral and developmental approaches (Odom et al., 2010). In addition to the variability in intervention approach, research designs varied across the studies we reviewed. Our search was not limited by research design and could have included qualitative studies, but research following qualitative designs was not identified. Qualitative research has numerous benefits to understanding social phenomena (Mohajan, 2018) and could enrich our knowledge of how children engage in turn taking through in-depth studies of the individual child and their communicative partner. Future qualitative investigations can further our insight into children's use of the different turn-taking functions. Most studies in this review (n = 8) followed single subject designs, and five were randomized controlled trials. Although randomized controlled trials are often considered the "gold standard" in intervention research, studies with single subject designs have the potential to be evidence-based practices (Hume et al., 2021; What Works Clearinghouse, 2020). In the future, explorations of the literature should consider the efficacy of turn-taking interventions and which interventions may be considered evidence based to better inform practice.

While this review was not concerned with intervention results and effects, it identified other intervention content. Most children included in the interventions were male, an expected finding given the current prevalence estimates of autism (Maenner et al., 2020). This finding may also be attributed to sex and gender differences in meeting current diagnostic criteria (Wilson et al., 2016; Wood-Downie et al., 2021). All studies reported that children had or were at risk for autism; however, four studies did not report diagnostic focused assessment data (i.e., Kemp et al., 2019; Kim & Clarke, 2015; Shire et al., 2020; Wang, 2017). Researchers should consider clear reporting of participant characteristics, such as formative assessment data at pre-intervention, which may provide further understanding of the study and can help to inform directions for future intervention research. Although a variety of settings and agents were identified across studies, most interventions were conducted in participants' homes and with some level of parental involvement. Additionally, most interventions sought social communication outcomes to some degree, indicating consistent awareness of the importance of supporting this competency in young children with autism. The DEC (2014), an internationally recognized organization that provides guidance for early childhood intervention and special education, recommends a series of practices when working with young children who have or who are at risk for disabilities. The DEC (2014) recommendations most relevant to the present literature review are family involvement, natural environments, and practices that promote social emotional development through active learning. Family-centered interventions recognize the family as important agents, experts, and decision-makers in their child's life (DEC, 2014; Wetherby & Woods, 2008). A natural environment, most notably the home setting, is one in which children engage in everyday routines and activities and are most comfortable and familiar with (DEC, 2014; Wetherby & Woods, 2008). In intervention, children should be actively engaged in their own learning and encouraged to initiate and

respond to meaningful, social communication with others, such as may be found in a turn-taking routine (DEC, 2014; Wetherby & Woods, 2008). This recommendation is especially relevant to children with autism given the core challenge they have in social communication. Many of the interventions reviewed in the present study meet the recommended practices of the DEC (2014) to some degree. However, only three studies, which defined social turn taking (i.e., Dawson et al., 2010; Green et al., 2017; Schertz, Odom, et al., 2018) most optimally incorporate the DEC (2014) recommended practices indicated above. Future turn-taking interventions should endeavor to fully incorporate these recommended practices to optimally promote outcomes for young children who have or who are at risk for autism.

In sum, the results of the present study indicate that turn taking may serve different functions depending on how it is being promoted in intervention and the intervention approach being followed. Furthermore, there remains a need for eliminating ambiguity in defining turn taking by form and function when incorporated in interventions for children with autism and to align intervention content with developmentally appropriate practices. The study findings should be interpreted cautiously because of the limited number of articles that were included in the review. More exhaustive, systematic reviews of the literature that incorporate additional methods, such as manual screening of reference lists and searching numerous databases, may have resulted in the identification of other relevant studies. The current review also used limited search terminology to keep the scope narrow; however, search terms were carefully chosen for relevance to the present study. Additionally, the authors served as independent coders in the present study, which may increase risks for inter-rater bias, and including coders who do not serve as authors may decrease these risks. However, because authors commonly serve as coders in literature reviews (e.g., Kamenopoulou et al., 2021; Pennington et al., 2012), we see this as a minor limitation. Finally, because this review relies on how turn taking was defined by researchers in published articles, unpublished materials, such as intervention protocols and coding manuals, which may offer more insight into the intended turn-taking function of an intervention, could not be explored. Overall, this literature review provides valuable information on the current state of turn-taking components in intervention and potential areas of study in future research and practice.

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Research Article

In-between spaces of policy and practice: Voices from Prince Edward Island early childhood educators

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Abstract: Over the course of the past decades, the discourse, pedagogy, scope, and delivery of early learning and child care (ELCC) has undergone myriad significant changes internationally, nationally, and at local levels. Prince Edward Island (PEI), the smallest Canadian Province, has not been exempt from these transformations. By situating early childhood educators (ECEs) at the centre of ecological multilevel environments (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), this qualitative study explored how a system-wide change implemented through the Prince Edward Island Preschool Excellence Initiative (PEIPEI) has impacted and is being impacted by ECEs over time. Purposive sampling was used to invite seven early childhood educators working on provincially regulated early years centres (EYCs) to participate in individual interviews. Findings indicated that ECEs have been striving to navigate and merge the space in-between policy and practices and that after ten years, they remain in this liminal space where they continue to navigate unravelling transitions as they search for their professional identity.

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Introduction

Over the course of the past decades, the discourse, pedagogy, scope, and delivery of early learning and child care (ELCC) has undergone myriad significant changes internationally, nationally, and at local levels including massive government financial investments, changes of ELCC government responsibility from health and social services to education portfolios, and an effort to connect childcare with education which has resulted in the creation of curriculum frameworks and an intent to standardize educators' training. Prince Edward Island (PEI) has not been exempt from these transformations. Located on Canada's east coast, the country's smallest province has emerged as a leader of the shifts that have started to transform the Canadian ELCC context (Akbari & McCuaig, 2017).

In 2006, the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) revealed that Canada's public expenditure on early childhood programs were the lowest of the twenty developed countries that were part of an international review (OECD, 2006). At the same time, an investment narrative that challenged the underfunded and forgotten Canadian ELCC sector started to emerge. This narrative was supported by economic-returns paradigms (Bennet & Newman, 2004; Heckman & Cunha, 2000; Mitchell, Wylie, & Carr, 2008; OECD, 2011) and by new understandings about neuroscience and brain development, which sustained the brain's malleability, experienced a peak during the first five years of human development (McCain & Mustard, 1999; McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007).

The investment narrative resonated strongly in PEI and as a result, unprecedented and rapid transformations reformed the early childhood sector from a focus on childcare to a system with a focus on early learning (Arias de Sanchez, Doiron, & Gabriel, 2012). Some of the initial changes included moving early childhood programs from the departments of Social Services and Seniors to Education and Early

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Learning and transferring kindergarten to the school system (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012). This last move was fundamental for the overall early childhood structure, mainly because close to over half of certified early childhood educators (ECEs) who worked in kindergarten at that time were provided the option to move to the school system and to obtain a Bachelor of Education degree. Given that this transition resulted in experienced ECEs leaving the early childhood sector, provincial Government authorities recommended that an exhaustive review of early learning be conducted to devise "a plan for a sustainable, high quality, accessible early childhood system" (Mella, 2009, p. v). The Early Years Report (Flanagan, 2010) was a response to that call. The report gathered data from families and parents as well as from some leaders and educators to develop a vision for PEI children and a framework for early childhood.

The plan to re-design and re-vitalize the early childhood system across the province was then put forward and in May 2010, the Government announced the Prince Edward Island Preschool Excellence Initiative (PEIPEI). According to the Provincial Government, "The plan provides[ed] the Island's largest ever increase in investment in early learning for children from birth to age four" (Government of PEI, 2010, p. 2).

The PEIPEI was set forth changes across the sector, including a designation of and funding for Early Years Centres (EYCs). While EYCs remained privately delivered, either for-profit or non-profit, this major change resulted in new provincial policies that managed centres in a more public manner (Government of PEI, 2010; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012). The new policies included regulated fees for parents, required spaces for children from infancy to school entry age, children with special needs, a compulsory parent advisory committee, a wage scale and benefits for staff, a new provincial early learning curriculum, revisions to certification and training requirements for early childhood educators, and a formula-based funding approach for centres with an early years designation (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012).

Changes to the ELCC system have been extensively examined across Canada, particularly concerning their impact on young children and parents (Arias de Sanchez et al., 2012; Heydon, Moffatt, & Iannacci, 2015; Leherer, 2012; Peterson, Morrison, & Morrison, 2012; Vogler, Cravello, & Woodhead, 2008) and on the system's professionalization (Baldacchino, Gabriel, Doiron, Roach O'Keefe, & McKenna, 2015; Roach O'Keefe, Hooper, & Jakubiec, 2019). However, little is known about how system-wide changes have impacted ECEs practices and their roles. This study explored this void.

The study is framed within Bronfenbrenner's theoretical work (1979, 2005), which proposed that development cannot be separated from social and cultural multi-level environments. Bronfenbrenner represents these multi-levels through concentric systems- chronosystem, macrosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem- that impact and are being impacted by an active individual at a particular historical time. This bidirectional dynamic implies that individuals experience shifts when changes happen at any layer of the multilevel environments. We also draw from (Tilleczek, 2011 2014) cultural nesting approach to interpret the shifts and transitions described by participants. Rooted in Bronfenbrenner's work, Tilleczek (2012) understands that "transitions often imply issues of identity fit and development" (p. 13) or what this author described as processes of being, becoming, and belonging (2011, 2014). By situating ECEs at the centre of ecological multilevel environments, the study explored how the PEIPEI impacted and is being impacted by these educators as they navigate the transitions within system-wide changes over time, which Bronfenbrenner asserted was important in understanding proximal processes and the complex reciprocal interactions between systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Roach O'Keefe, 2018).

The following questions guided the study: (1) What has changed in PEI early learning and child care during the last ten years? (2) What are the strengths of the PEI early learning and child care system? (3) What limitations still exist in the PEI early learning and child care system? and (4) What are the opportunities for the early learning and child care system to continue to develop?

By critically examining the experiences of ECEs who have worked within the PEIPEI for the last ten years, the study also provided a space for better understanding how their silent voices of knowing (Basler

Wisneski & Reifel, 2012; Canella, 2005) permeate early childhood education's history. With a focus on strengths and limitations, the study will contribute to unpacking and better problematizing how system-wide decisions influence the evolving Canadian and international early learning and child care agenda.

Method

This research employed a qualitative research design (Sandelowski, 2010). After receiving ethics approval, purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) was used to invite PEI early childhood educators to participate in individual interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Tierney, 2002). Recruitment took place through the PEI Early Childhood Development Association (ECDA) membership list. A letter of invitation was sent to 10 ECES who held the following participation criteria: (a) that the educator has been working in the PEI early learning and child care for at least ten years, and (b) that the educator worked in a provincially regulated Early Years Centre, and (c) that the educator held at least a two-year diploma that was certified under the Provincial Government's Regulatory Board. Additionally, recruitment compromised at least one participant from each of PEI counties, in order to garner a wide variety of perspectives from educators representing the Island rural and urban areas. Seven ECEs (six female and one male) from different EYCs agreed on participating; three of them held a Supervisor role.

Researchers considered a post-modern interviewing stance (Fontana & Frey, 2000) in which the interview allows for co-construction of understanding, and the enrichment of the data, between participants and researcher (Tierney, 2002). Two of the researchers developed separated interview protocols that aligned with the study's purpose and the research questions. With the understanding that each other's feedback increases the opportunity to comprehend how well participants might understand the interview questions and whether their understanding is close to what the researcher intends or expects (Patton, 2015), the two researchers revised and refined the individual interview protocols and together, constructed the final one. Supported by Krueger and Casey interviewing model (2009), the final protocol included introductory questions (i.e., "Tell me about your professional background"); transitory questions (i.e., "Ten years ago when the PEIPEI was announced, what was your initial reaction?"); key questions (i.e., "In your opinion, what are the strength of the PEIPEI?"); and closing questions (i.e., "How would you like to see the early childhood field evolve in PEI?"). Participants signed a written consent form and also provided verbal consent prior to the interview. Each interview lasted approximately one to one and a half hours and were fully recorded and transcribed. Participants were provided with a copy of a transcript of the interview to check for accuracy and to provide credibility to the study.

Researchers also made detailed and descriptive notes concerning their observations, reactions, direct quotations, insights, inspirations, and questions (Patton, 2015) promptly after the interviews. Researchers worked independently to conduct a thematic analysis approach (Babbie, 2010). Recurring consistencies and inconsistencies (Patton, 2015) were then identified and organized in individual shared folders for each of the study questions. Researchers then compared their analysis to identify trends, similarities, and differences (Patton, 2015) across the interviews. The University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) Ethics Board approved this study research protocol.

Results

The PEIPEI initiative was built to provide the youngest Islanders with "the strongest start possible" (Government of PEI, 2010, p.10). Undoubtedly, the PEIPEI also offered fundamental changes for children, families, early childhood centres' owners and operators, and early childhood educators. With a focus on strengths and limitations, the goal of this study was to unpack how the PEIPEI system-wide decisions have impacted ECEs practices and roles. In response to our research questions, our analysis resulted in the emergence of two main themes: (a) Unraveling transitions, and (b) searching for professional identity.

Unraveling transitions is discussed below and responds to research question (1) What has changed in PEI early learning and child care during the last ten years? (2) What are the strengths of the PEI early learning and child care system? Highlights include reflections on infant care services, the curriculum document, and curriculum implementation.

Professional identity is subsequently discussed in response to research questions (3) What limitations still exist in the PEI early learning and child care system? and (4) What are the opportunities for the early learning and child care system to continue to develop? Reflections are discoursed on expectations and professionalism, loss: leadership and mentorship, wage grid, recruitment and retention; and opportunities for advanced learning and development.

Unraveling Transitions

Participants discussed the unravelling and negotiation amongst several transitions, including: horizon of change, infant care services, and negotiating the curriculum and its implementation. These transitions are described below.

Horizon of Change

"The PEIPEI was the right thing to do. Yes, it's been a long journey...the process is going on and on, and there is no finish line... but we are on the right path" (ECE 3, February 2021). The launching of the PEIPEI was accompanied by the feeling that something "good" was happening in Prince Edward Island. Consensus existed among participants that the assurance of receiving financial support was a fundamental turn-around point for most early childhood centers when deciding to become provincially regulated. Participants agreed that with the PEIPEI, values and beliefs about equity, sustainability, and accessibility were finally "put on paper" (ECE 1, January 2021). "Finally, … It was kind of like a 'finally'... I was very excited" (ECE 2, January 2021). As a sector that has long experienced transitions, government effort to redesign and revitalize the early childhood system sparked a sense of empowerment and pride amongst ECEs.

While participants reflected on some of the challenges-that accompanied the implementation of the PEIPEI, they also pointed out that they soon adapted and that they "were up for the challenge" (ECE 7, March 2021). For example, when asked about the announcement of the PEIPEI initiative, ECEs agreed that the implementation happened rapidly and felt like "a whirlwind" (ECE 1, January 2021) that created panic and a certain level of discomfort. "PEIPEI came quickly, and it had to be implemented fast…The intent at that time was to make it smooth… but it was chaotic" (ECE 6, March 2021).

> It was kind of like a two-fold. We were excited about some positive changes coming our way but we were terrified at the same time because we were losing a massive component of our programming and we were losing a lot of educators (ECE 5, February 2021).

Participants' quick adaptation to the changes was also indicated regarding pedagogy: "All of a sudden they were telling us we have to do emergent curriculum" (ECE 1, January 2021). While participants shared that training sessions, workshops, and centre visits by the then Department of Education and Early Childhood Development supported that shift, a sense of urgency permeated the process through those initial months. "I definitely remember there was a lot of training sessions… I remember doing a lot of the training around the ELF and going to various workshops." (ECE 2 January 2021).

Infant Care Services

Prior to the implementation of the PEIPEI, access to quality infant care services was reported as a primary challenge for parents and families (Government of PEI, 2010). The *Early Years Report* noted that at the time, "of the 2948 estimated full time spaces, only 192 full time equivalent spaces [were] available for children younger than two years of age" (MRSB Group, 2009, as cited in Flanagan, 2010, p. 76). Given this, a key feature of the PEIPEI brought about changes to infant care services to provide new and expanded options to parents for infant care and learning in licensed EYCs and Infant Homes (Government of PEI, 2010). Under PEI's *Early Learning and Child Care Act Regulations* (Government of PEI, 2018), "the maximum group size for infants receiving services at a licensed centre is six infants" (p. 16). These changes have increased the number of infant spaces across PEI from 192 reported in 2010 to 407 reported in 2020 (Akbari, McCuaig, & Foster, 2020). According to participants, even though this inclusion raises particular challenges, the policy was and continues to be one of the strengths of the initiative,

> The infants, there's always been a little bit of a challenge because it dramatically changes how the centre runs in the sense that all of a sudden, if even it's only six children, they can only be with these ones for a certain amount of time. So, it changes how your staff, the shift times, who can go where, and when… But at the same time, it's also enriching (ECE 1, January 2021).

> Taking in infants was a change because we hadn't had infants before. I mean, it wasn't really a big deal. There was a little bit of figuring out about how we would do that and where, for the space and all that. But it worked for us (ECE 3, February 2021).

The Curriculum Document

The creation of the early years' curriculum document was consistently highlighted as the most critical strength of the PEIPEI. Rooted in social pedagogy, the PEI Early Learning Framework (ELF) (Flanagan, 2011) became the first early childhood curriculum guidelines for the province. Rather than prescribing pedagogy, the ELF curriculum design offers a broad and holistic model, and its emergent approach allows and challenges educators' reflexivity. The PEI ELF three learning principles are built around relationships, the consideration of the environment, and children's experiences (Flanagan, 2011). Rooted with a social pedagogical approach, the ELF promotes the idea that young children's learning is influenced by quality interactions between children and adults and by the experiences that children have through play and exploration.

Participants pointed out that the ELF gave a common language to the field and created a certain level of consistency about pedagogy. ECEs indicated that since its implementation, the ELF had deepened their understanding of the whole child and provides a sense of credibility among parents and the overall community, "We have something with substance that we can show and use to show this is why we're doing what we're doing" (ECE 2, January 2021);

> The curriculum has changed the public perception.... We are somebody that has a specialized base of knowledge. We're not babysitters, we don't just provide supervisory care, we are actual teachers who have a clue [about] what we're doing (ECE 2, January 2021).

Despite recognizing the importance of having a curriculum framework for the first time, participants also indicated that the lack of prescriptive statements in regards to goals, strategies and assessment still creates confusion. Overall, ECEs agreed that this confusion jeopardizes the provision of quality practices as educators are challenged to make pedagogical interpretations; this issue seems to become more complex when practitioners do not hold a two-year diploma.

Curriculum Implementation

Struggles with the implementation of an emergent curriculum were reported in regards to planning, documentation, and assessment. As the ELF indicates, ECEs working in Early Years Centres are required to plan and develop emergent programming that is relevant to the children and their interests, create learning stories and portfolios to document children's ongoing learning and growth, and develop and carry out assessment strategies such as continuous and thoughtful observation of children's interests and development (Flanagan, 2011). To effectively engage in this iterative process of emergent planning, ongoing documentation, and authentic assessment, ECEs must also meaningfully and thoughtfully reflect on their pedagogical practice both individually and as a team (Flanagan, 2011, p. 173)

While participants spoke positively about the shift to emergent curriculum and acknowledged the importance and necessity of the iterative planning process, even ten years later, they explained further that time and resources to engage in and complete this essential work is a persistent issue. One participant reported that while ECEs are meeting the requirements laid out in the ELF regarding planning, documentation, the creation, and maintenance of portfolios, and engaging in reflective practice, "it's always been a challenge to allow staff to be off the floor [to complete these expectations]" (ECE 3, January 2021). When asked about the logistics of scheduling planning time for ECEs, another participant expressed that "[ECEs] get an hour and a half a week… you pray that the kids will sleep for at least 30 or 45 minutes… because that's [their] paid planning time. When do [they] get [their] supplies? Just on the run?" (ECE 1, January 2021).

The ELF also indicates that, ECEs are to "... reflect on their observations at a later time, and… analyze their observations based on their knowledge of the child, and their professional interpretation of what they see" (Flanagan, 2011, p. 155). Findings from this study reveal that the time required for ECEs to meaningfully and intentionally engage in reflective practice is an ongoing struggle. As one participant shared, "You need to reflect on your own pedagogy, on your own work… and that's again, more time. And we don't have that… there's not a lot of time for that sort of reflection" (ECE 2, January 2021).

In discussing a solution to the pressing issue of time, one ECE suggested that additional funding should be made available to hire and pay an additional staff person to relieve ECEs for their paid planning time each week. From this ECEs perspective, additional funding would ensure that ECEs are treated "... like professionals within the model so that they have time for planning, observation, [and] documentation, just like other educators do for other children" (ECE 3, January 2021). Aligned with previous research (Roach O'Keefe, Hooper, & Jakubiec, 2019), these sentiments connect to the broader issue outlined previously concerning the disconnection that ECEs feel between the Early Childhood sector and the Public-School System in PEI,

> I think that there's a disconnection with all the work that we're doing here. When the children go to school, I feel like there's a disconnect between what we're doing here and what is going on in the school system… I've always felt that that was kind of a disconnect and disservice to the children that we've had here (ECE 2, January 2021).

Searching for Professional Identity

Participants discussed how they continue to search for professional identify amidst the transitions, and they discussed: an increase in their work expectations, a loss of leadership and mentorship, the wage grid, recruitment and retention, and the appetite for advanced learning and development. These points will be described in subsequent sections of the paper.

Expectations and Professionalism

Since the PEIPEI implementation, expectations for the early learning and child care field rapidly grew. Despite that accountability was perceived as necessary, ECEs concurred in that paperwork and pedagogical demands escalated, "They want more, and more, and more from us, but the financial resources were not put there (ECE 7, March 2021). Interestingly, ECEs also reported that parents' expectations have also increased, "Parent expectations have gone up a lot… because we told them "Hey, we're professionals! We're available to you…" (ECE 1, January 2021); "... the expectations keep growing because we keep, rightly so, building ourselves up as being absolutely fabulous" (ECE 5, February 2021).

After ten years of the PEIPEI implementation, most participants explained that the initiative is still in transition. Participants agreed that despite of consistently having to experience sudden changes they are always ready for new challenges, "You get things thrown at you all the time. So, I always say, and it's terrible, "adapt or die". As a profession, you either adapt or you leave, right?" (ECE 5, February 2021);

> You have to be able to take things on a moment's notice. And I feel like that's really stayed in the sector. They made an announcement today; we have to implement it by two weeks from now… We're all pretty quick on our feet (ECE 2, February6 2021).

Loss: Leadership and Mentorship

The PEIPEI initiative was parallel to two significant changes in the early childhood workforce: a massive movement of certified and experienced ECEs to the school system, and a new wage-grid for ECEs who stayed within early learning and child care services.

Participants shared the same upsetting discomfort when talking about losing the most experienced educators, who were often described as mentors and leaders,"... all of a sudden all of these new changes were coming in and that people that we looked up to were gone" (ECE 7, March 2021); "I feel like some of our pedagogy was lost because some of our long-standing members left and then it was a lot of newbies" (ECE 6, March 2021). This finding is consistent with previous research exploring the professionalization of the field (Roach O'Keefe et al., 2019).

Wage Grid, Recruitment, and Retention

The PEIPEI described ECEs as professionals and indicated that the implemented measures were going to maintain a stable workforce (Government of PEI, 2010). One of the most important changes was the creation of a new wage grid for those ECEs who stayed in early childhood. This particular change encompassed a sense of excitement but also nervousness, "The idea was great because it didn't matter where you work across the Island but you knew that we were having the same working situation" (ECE 3, January 2021).

In 2010, the wage grid proposed a five-year strategy that combined ECEs education and job position. The 2010 wage grid included: (a) Entry level (which included three courses); (b) Level 1 (which included a one-year certificate); and (c) Level two (which included a two-year diploma) (Government of PEI, 2010. Between 2010 and 2017 the language of the wage grid changed to ECE level 1 (entry level), ECE level 2 (one-year certificate), and ECE level 3- (two-year diploma). By 2019, two new levels were included at the bottom of the grid: a 3 three 30 hours course level, and an uncertified staff level (Government of Prince Edward Island, 2019).

Since 2010, Directors have always been paid the highest at the top of the grid. The impossibility to move beyond that step was certainly manifested as a serious concern, and limitations on ECE's career development and progression, which has the potential to impact recruitment and retention of staff.

Overall, participants agreed that the grid and its amendments appear to better fit the new staff, "Is good to have a grid…but for people with more training and experience it is a slap on the face... we are capped" (ECE 5, February 2021);

> I think it's good that ECEs were given raises. I think it's good that there are levels. The frustration is for those of us who have been in the field for a very long time, it meant we were capped right away… the wage grid did not reflect anyone that has been in [the field] for a long time (ECE 4, February 2021).

In fact, ECEs retention and recruitment have fallen since 2010 and continue to be a serious struggle for the overall system (Flanagan, 2019; Flanagan & Beach, 2016). "They thought we were having new people, we were going to attract more people...well, it did not happen, on the contrary…" (ECE 7, March 2021). Participants pointed out that despite being part of the Department of Education and Life Long Learning, the early childhood working situation is fragile and unequal, "Yes, we are now under the government umbrella, but we're not in the same position like the schools are"(ECE 5 February 2021);

> There's a fair bit of inequity in terms of how ECE is treated within the whole PEI education system when you compare their training and level of responsibility. All of the ECEs here have the two-year College diploma, yet they're paid less than educational assistants in the school system, who have the same level of training. Even though we're all part of the Department of Education [and Life Long Learning], there's a lot of inequity there. And the staff is aware of that… They say the department says that they recognize the importance of early childhood education and yet there's a pay inequity there. Mixed messages. (ECE 3, January 2021).

Participants also indicated that issues with recruitment and retention affect the consistency and the quality of their services,

> I think when there's always that turnover you're always training someone new. So, it makes really hard to get into a good rhythm. And then all of a sudden somebody's gone and then you have to train somebody new. I feel like that's something. And then the children always have to get used to somebody new. And you're starting over with building those relationships (ECE 4, February 2021).

The interviews revealed that ECEs feel empowered about their work, particularly when discussing their pedagogical role, "what we do might change a child's life" (ECE 2, January 2021). Yet, there was also a need to consistently having to justify and advocate about the importance and the professionalism of their work, "You can't be a so-called professional if you don't have the work environment that supports that professional practice" (ECE 3, January 2021).

Advanced Learning and Development

In 2010, the PEIPEI introduced revisions to ECEs and Directors' certification and training requirements: "With Government's assistance, new training programs are being developed to allow all

program staff to become certified over the next several years and to create an integrated career ladder for staff from the entry level through to post-diploma and degree training. This initiative will put Prince Edward Island at the forefront of Canadian provinces" (Government of PEI, 2010, p. 3).

However, revisions to Director's training were not followed up and as participants indicated, "... they're not requiring the person who is in charge of the whole centre to have any more education than the people they're supposed to be mentoring" (ECE 1, January 2021); "You can meet the requirements and have 30 years of experience but still get paid the same as another director on their first day on the job" (ECE 7, March 2021).

Participants noted the need to develop their professional training further. Even though they enormously appreciated the possibility to participate in the local early childhood conferences twice a year, participants also concurred on the need to have different options for ongoing training, particularly for experienced ECEs,

> Workshops are great for our novice teachers, the people who are still learning, who are still struggling, who need those ideas. But when we get up to the teachers who are at the expert [level]... we need something deeper than two and a half hour workshops. We need time to dig deep (ECE 3, February 2021).

Having more levels of non-certified staff was also pointed out as a struggle for quality and service provisions, "I would love to see a minimum of a diploma but headed towards a degree. No more of these three courses or one year or whatever.... It's got to go to a minimum of two years" (ECE 1, January 2021).

Overwhelmingly was the claim for a career path, "The thing about ECE… beyond being a director, it doesn't feel like there's any place to go. It feels like, okay, I'm an ECE, but what next?" (ECE 6, March 2021); "There's not really room to move up. I think that's frustrating for a lot of people" (ECE 4, February 2021).

> Sometimes I feel that there's not a big career ladder in this field. You're kind of an active floor staff or you're a director, or you move up maybe to a higher position such as working with the department as a coach. But… there's no in-between (ECE 4, February 2021).

Discussion

For decades authoritarian perceptions that viewed ECEs as unskilled practitioners (Basler Wisneski & Reifel 2012; Osgood, 2011; Urban, 2010) rested unexamined within the social and multi-level environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005) that framed early learning and child care services. The investment narrative that emerged in the early 2000s provoked a disruption of these historically constructed perceptions and brought hope and optimism to a sector that started to be described as professional (Brock, 2012; Dalli, 2008; Lazzari, 2012; Urban, 2008). With these changes in the discourse, early learning and child care emerged as a panacea for solving social problems (MacTavish, 2012; Moss, 2008) while ECEs were pushed to forge a new identity (Arias de Sanchez et al., 2012; Roach O'Keefe & Moffatt, 2013; Shaw, 2015).

Although system-wide changes happened quickly in PEI, ECEs indicated that after ten years these changes continue to be in transition. Although transitions are recognized as processes rather than events (Peters, 2010), statements such as "there is no finish line" revealed feelings of incompleteness and frustration. Tilleczek (2012) described these motions as "nested transitions" (p. 12) and explained that they create constant tensions in individuals' processes of being, becoming, and belonging. Our findings indicated the existence of unrevealing tensions faced by ECEs as they try to negotiate their status within the contradictory discourses of becoming professionals while still working in a system that offers precarious employment conditions. What was particularly concerning were the ways in which our experienced participants manifested the feeling of walking *in-between* policies and opportunities, which in turn conflicted with their professional processes of being, becoming, and belonging (Tilleczek, 2011, 2014).

This *in-between* experience emerged within the policy expectations to *become* professionals while at the same time having (*being*) to advocate for what their profession entails. In our study, ECEs showed

the consistent need to have to validate and justify who they are and who they can be (*being and becoming*); this theme emerged as an exhausting endeavour that reveals a fragile sense of *belonging* within a system that keeps changing and asking them for more. Statements like "We are not babysitters" and "What we do matters and affects children's lives day-by-day across the country" are evidence of this conflict. Paradoxically, our data also indicated that educators felt empowered by their ability to figure out how to accommodate change and by consistently demonstrating that they were resilient and "up for the challenge" (ECE 2, February 2021). We questioned if this sense of resilience has become a taken-for-granted discourse that plays against the profession by sending the message of being "absolutely fabulous" and by promoting the idea that "whatever happens, we will make it work."

Similarly, the *in-between* paradox emerged also when participants discussed the curriculum guidelines. Although the PEI curriculum framework provided a common pedagogical language that empowered educators and aimed at fostering their critical thinking, reflective practice, and professional autonomy, participants pointed out that the alternatives for these professional demands are limited and create the never ended feeling of "be a so-called professional, but without having the work environment that supports that professional practice" (ECE 1, January 2021). While participants made clear that the PEI Early Learning Framework is one of the key strengths of the changes over the past ten years, their reflections indicated that there remains a disconnect between the pedagogical demands of working with an early learning framework and with the supports made available to ensure professional reflexivity. Undoubtedly, this ongoing tension continues to blurry the pathways for developing (*becoming*) a highly qualified professional workforce.

Data also demonstrated that educators felt a sense of *being in-between* when discussing their working conditions. The experienced ECEs who participated in this study understood that changes in the provision of "honourable" (ECE 4, February 2021) wages and benefits are a must for the system's improvement. However, they also understood that an increase in wage policies alone would not solve the overall "early childhood problem" (ECE 5, February 2021). Working conditions, including ECE wages, have been recognized as important indicators of quality in early childhood education programs (Atkinson Centre, 2017). Highlighted as a positive change within PEI's early childhood sector, the introduction of and amendments to the wage grid (i.e., in 2016 and 2019) provided ECEs with a pay increase based on education and years of experience. However, challenges remain as pay is still low (Flanagan, 2019) and as wage increases stop after five years. For directors, this is compounded as there is only one pay step. As a result, recruitment and retention of trained ECEs persists as ongoing issue which in turn problematizes quality and program consistency as early years centres are continually hiring and training new educators.

The limited possibilities for educators' career pathways present a serious issue of professional equity when comparing educators that have chosen to work in early learning and child care to those that work in the formal education system. Once more, our data presented how ECEs move *in- between* paradigms as it is debatable to be called a professional if the career pathway stops in a grid that only focuses on five years of work experience with no options for additional education or future career development. It also exemplifies the lack of recognition of lifelong learners – those who want to continue learning and contributing to the creation of new knowledge, which goes beyond in-service skills training (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011).

As this study has illuminated, the positive aspects of the PEIPEI have been met with persistent challenges. Notably, and despite ECEs consistent efforts for having to validate their professional being, becoming, and belonging (Tilleczek, 2011, 2014), the experienced educators that participated in our research showed little compliance and offered professional suggestions to the many issues they faced daily in their practices. The participants of this study have demonstrated that their individual and collective experience and knowledge offers important insight on a path forward. These educators have also provided a glimpse of the bidirectional dynamic of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) multi-level environments: they were at the centre of many of these changes, and while they experienced these on a microsystem level, they were also using their voice to influence their exosystem (what had influenced them on a societal/ policy level) and through the chronosystem. They were both influenced by the changes and they were exerting their

power to potentially influence their future in the system.

At the outset of the PEIPEI implementation, the transition of experienced kindergarten teachers to the public-school system resulted in a sense of loss for the field; however, those that continued and those have since joined the sector have themselves grown and flourished as mentors, pedagogical leaders, and advocates for the system. Not surprisingly, their recommendations focused on the improvement of the work conditions, particularly regarding wages and benefits. But they also offered suggestions pertinent to their daily needs, such as adding a full-time staff that allows educators to take time off the floor to complete the heavy demands of planning and documentation. Participants also offered important insights in regards to professional qualifications and training for directors and educators,

> I believe that if you're going to be a director, you should have to have a degree; I would love to see a minimum of a diploma for ECEs but headed towards a degree. No more of these three courses or one year or whatever. It has to get to a minimum of two years (ECE 1, January 2021).

Conclusion: Navigation of the Space in Between

The findings from this study have shed light on the strengths and limitations of the Preschool Excellence Initiative as reported by early childhood educators working in Early Years Centres across PEI. Participants of this study expressed that the sector and those that operate within it (e.g., ECEs, ECE supervisors and directors) are still experiencing this transition. As a result, ECEs described that the changes brought about by the introduction and implementation of the PEIPEI have resulted in an ongoing tension between the strengths and limitations of the initiative; tension that has and continues to impact the early learnings and childcare system across the province. The participants' reflections revealed further that as these changes unfolded and expectations rose over the past decade, those working within the early learning and childcare system have been striving to navigate and merge the space *in-between* the strengths and gaps of the Preschool Excellence Initiative. At present, ECEs describe feeling that they remain in this liminal space where complex and contradictory systems and discourses continue to build barriers and interrupt the fluidity of a system-wide change.

While the PEIPEI impacted and changed the day-to-day reality and practice of early learning and childcare across the province, ECEs have equally impacted this system-wide change, effecting a bi-directional dynamic between policy and practice (Bronfrenbenner, 2005). For instance, the PEIPEI brought about rapid changes to areas such as funding, accessibility, and curriculum. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, passionate, knowledgeable, and experienced ECEs across PEI also impacted these shifts as they carried out the new PEIPEI system, embraced a new pedagogical approach, and became advocates for themselves and the sector at large. Yet, as the participants of this study have demonstrated, the limitations of the PEIPEI have kept ECEs in this *in-between* space as their individual and collective capacity to impact the policies that guide their practice has been hindered and their voices unsought.

This study presents some limitations. A small sample was chosen for this study, however this is the norm in qualitative studies. The investigation represents the responses from a small sample of educators who live in PEI. In addition, a second limitation of this study is the lack of culturally diverse representation by participants; while PEI has become very diverse in the last decade, sample of participants does not represent the diverse nature of educators living on the Island. Readers from elsewhere must read this research with their own context in mind, to determine if results might be applicable in their environment.

The findings from this study may contribute to the discourse and approach to system-wide decisions and may further influence the evolving early learning and child care agenda both in Canada and around the globe. As the experienced ECEs who participated in this study have suggested, the changes first set in motion by the PEIPEI must continue to progress and promote equity and growth within the early learning and childcare system. With the recent announcement by the Government of Canada (2021) regarding plans to create and implement a national childcare system over the next five years in mind, we hope that the findings from this study have demonstrated that the voices and perspectives of ECEs must be meaningfully sought, heard, and considered going forward as they offer significant insight, knowledge, and suggestions

for an equitable path forward.

Declarations

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Research Article

Are grandparents raising grandchildren receiving the services they need?

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Abstract: Grandparents play an important role in the upbringing of grandchildren and face increased levels of stress. Using family stress theory, the present study examined the effectiveness of service programs for grandparents raising grandchildren. Data were collected through focus group interviews and audiotaped from a sample of four custodial grandparents living in Ohio U.S.A. To better understand grandparents that are raising their grandchildren, we asked the following questions: 1) What support is needed for grandparents raising grandchildren? 2) At what stage is the support needed: beginning, middle or late stages of caregiving? 3) What are grandparent caregivers' perceptions of service programs? The audiotape was transcribed verbatim and analyzed for themes relevant to the research questions. The findings from these questions are examined and implications discussed.

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Introduction

Today, many grandparents have taken on the role of raising their grandchildren (Bigner & Gerhardt, 2019). When grandparents raise their grandchildren, they offer nurture instructions, morals, ethics, wisdom, backup support for parents, and values to their grandchildren (Bigner & Gerhardt, 2019). Grandparents may also provide support, attention, time, special outing, and privileges to their grandchildren during divorce (Brooks, 2013). The roles do not have clear-cut boundaries or definitions but can be viewed as having diverse aspects with regards to the nature of each grandchild relationship (Bigner & Gerhardt, 2014).

In some cases, grandparents accept the responsibility of raising their grandchildren for cultural reasons (Lewis, Boyd, Allen, Rasmus, & Henderson, 2018). However, others accept the responsibility to raise their grandchildren because they believe it is the right thing to do compared to the alternatives, such as using the foster care system (Peterson, 2018). Grandparents contribute immensely to the development of our society by alleviating the expenses associated with the placement of children in foster care or non-kin households. In some instances, some grandparents go back to work to provide adequate support and needs, while others take early retirement to take care of their grandchildren (Gardiner, 2015). Experiential research has revealed the need for assistance for grandparents raising grandchildren and others involved in kinship care (Collins, Fruhauf, & Bundy-Fazioli, 2016; Lee & Blitz, 2014; Dunn & Wamsley, 2018). In response, many service programs, both public agencies and non-governmental organizations, have emerged to help these grandparents. With such efforts being directed towards these programs, there is a need to determine whether these programs are helping grandparents raising grandchildren (GRG). The current study aimed to explore GRG's perceptions about these service programs, identify their everyday needs, the stages at which they are needed, and factors that can ensure self-sustenance. It is important to

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understand the family systems where grandparents are raising their grandchildren. This study uses the family stress framework to help bring awareness and to better understand such families.

Roben Hill (1958) proposed the ABC-X model and the family stress theory "to explain why some families struggle in response to stress whereas other families thrive" (Smith & Hanon, 2017, p.129). Other researchers later modified the ABC-X model (Boss, 2002; McCubbin & Paterson, 1983; Patterson, 1988). Drawing from the family stress theory, Sands and Goldberg-Glen (2000), found low stress when they receive support from their community and family. Sands and Goldberg-Glen (2000) mentioned that African Americans tend to grandparent caregivers than Whites. In comparison, GRG reflects a multicultural perspective in our society. According to Peterson (2018), custodial grandparents tend to be American Indian, Alaskan Natives, and African Americans; however, evidence shows that African Americans grandparents are more involved in raising their grandchildren than any other ethnic group.

This study will help to understand the perspectives of grandparents raising grandchildren, their views and experiences of service programs, and the coping and adaptive strategies they use in overcoming family stressors by giving in-depth information about the phenomenon. Therefore, our study will answer the following question. 1) What support is needed for grandparents raising grandchildren? 2) At what stage do GRGs need support: beginning, middle or late stages of caregiving? and 3) What are grandparent caregivers' perceptions of service programs? The results of this study will be used to help create more effective programs for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren and extend the literature on grandparenting.

Literature Review

Research has shown in the U. S. that the number of grandchildren living in grandparent-headed households in 1970 was about 3 percent (Ellis & Simmons, 2008). By 2011, this number escalated to about 7 percent although, this percentage reduced to 6 percent in 2012 (Ellis & Simons, 2008). In 2018, 8 million grandchildren lived in households headed by grandparents, and 2.7 million parents were primary caregivers for grandchildren. A classic study by Casper and Bryson (1998) explained five kinds of grandparent-maintained households namely: (1) both grandparents in residence, (2) some parents present and both grandparents in residence, (3) no parents present and grandmother in residence, (4) some parents present and grandmother in residence, (5) no parents present and grandfather only in residence. Some researchers refer to GRG as kinship caregivers (Monahan, Smith, & Greene, 2013). Kinship care is defined as circumstances where blood relatives, godparents, or close family friends care for children on a full-time basis. Kinship caregivers tend to be older, single, unemployed, poor, and less educated (Casey, 2012). Two major kinds of kinship care exist (1) informal/private and (2) formal public. Informal or private kinship in cases where extended family members raise children without the involvement of child protective services Casey, 2012). Public or formal kinship care includes the involvement of the child welfare system and formal placement of children with their family members. In some cases of public kinship care, the child remains in legal custody of the state but is placed (fostered) with their relatives. In Ohio, there are 86,502 grandparents raising grandchildren out of the total of 117,000 children being raised by kinship caregivers (Ohio Grandfacts, 2021). For every child being raised by kinship caregivers in foster care, about 34 children are being raised outside of the foster care system. The prevalence of formal and informal kinship care is worth mentioning because being a formal kinship care or establishing legal adoption, guardianship or custody enables caregivers to access services such as health care, school enrollment, daycare and sports activities as well as obtain affordable housing (Cooper, 2012). This means that more informal kinship caregivers are raising children in Ohio without the needed support, and the number of informal caregivers continues to increase, according to researchers (Amorim, Dunifon, & Pilkauskas, 2017). Apart from the time and financial obligations associated with the process of adoption, which can be a problem for grandparents, many grandparents avoid adoption because it could negatively impact the family dynamics and terminate parental rights (Cooper, 2012). Gibson and Singh (2010) proposed de Facto custodian legislation as an approach to help informal GRG. De facto custodian legislation would allow informal grandparent caregivers an option to present their caregiving history at custody hearings since many grandparents do not have legal custody of grandchildren.

Challenges Facing Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren

Grandparents face several realities following the decision to become second-time parents to their grandchildren. Researchers who study this phenomenon have indicated challenges related to role conflict (Backhouse & Graham, 2013), health problems (Butler & Zakari, 2005; Grinstead, Leder, Jensen, & Bond, 2003), finance issues (Collins, 2011), legal issues (Van Etten & Gautam, 2012), and psychological well-being of both the grandchildren and the grandchildren involved. Landry-Meyer and Newman (2004) conducted a study and reported that grandparent caregivers have the challenge of role timing, role ambiguity, and role conflict. Additionally, GRG experience psychological concerns about themselves and the grandchildren they are raising. Some grandparents may worry about being better parents to their grandchildren, especially if they feel that they failed with their first experience (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006). Others may worry about their health and physical wellbeing whether they will live long enough to continue providing care for their grandchildren until they are old enough to gain their independence. Grandparents can also worry about the emotional and psychological problems of their grandchildren and be concerned about how they are going to turn out to be when they grow up. GRG is also associated with grief due to high levels of depression and stress (Backhouse & Graham, 2013). In another study conducted by Rausch (2016), maintained that housing is one of the crucial challenges of GRG as well.

Some GRG may not have access to affordable housing programs due to their legal relationship status with their grandchildren. Using a nationally representative sample of 700,000 households, Fuller-Thomson and Minkler (2003) researched grandparents' housing issues and the realities facing grandparent caregivers who are renters. Fuller-Thomson and Minkler (2003) reported that, out of the total number of GRG their grandchildren in the United States, 26 percent were renters. Many renters lived below the poverty line and used 30 percent or more of their income on rent. Fuller-Thomas and Minkler (2003) added that GRG who are renters have a unique vulnerability, and this vulnerability needs more investigation and intervention. The researchers called for the creation of public policies to address housing vulnerability among grandparents raising grandchildren. Rausch (2016) conducted a study that looked at grandfamily housing focusing on the pilot project in Kansas City, Bronx, and Phoenix. Rausch (2016) found that grandparents raising grandchildren who participated in these pilot programs still found it hard to make ends meet, which hindered their ability to benefit from the program entirely. In addition, eligibility criteria of having legal custody of the grandchildren these grandparents are also raising could serve as a barrier to the program. Rausch (2016) added that these affordable housing staff members must treat residents with respect and be committed to enhancing the well-being of GRG.

Coping and Adaptation Process

The process of caring for grandchildren fulltime can be problematic for both grandparents and the grandchildren because they both have to find ways to make things work in the new environment of caregiving and care for themselves. They both have to deal with new roles and new identities, and they have to find ways to cope and adapt to caregiving. Coping and adaption are closely related, and Pandialagppan and Ibrahim (2018) explained the family adaptation theory noting that it is a fluid process where families adjust and expand efforts to tolerate as well as reduce conflict and stress within families. Pandialagppan and Ibrahim (2018) posited that grandparents raising grandchildren take on multiple roles and experience stress with adaptation and parenting demands. Bailey, Letiecq, and Porterfield (2009) studied 26 GRG and how grandparents cope and adapt. They found out that these grandparents are able to cope using strategies such as shifting their roles, identities, relationship, resources, and the way they perceive the situation. According to the researchers, further studies are needed to identify and support coping strategies that GRG use to adapt and cope within the complex family transitions and stressors in which they find themselves. In another study, Porterfield (2007) utilized McCubbin and Patterson's (1983) Double ABC-X model and focused on the coping and adaptive strategies of GRG. In the ABC-X model, Porterfield (2007) noted that in the family, A reflects demands, B reflects resources, C reflects perception, and X reflects the family crisis. Therefore, by using the family adaptation as a central concept, the Double ABC-X model attempts to explain the outcomes of a family effort to overcome crises and attain a balance after those crises. Porterfield (2007) maintained that coping and adaptive strategies could be affected by

external, internal, cultural, historical, economical, developmental, hereditary, psychological, and structural factors. These findings were consistent with the results of the research by Bailey et al. (2009). The results suggested that grandparents must deal with shifting roles, identity, relationships, community relationships, resources, and perceptions. The author added that grandparents caring for grandchildren must delay retirement and utilize their resources to engage in primary caregiving.

Available Resources

Recently there has been an increase in services and service programs for grandparents raising grandchildren. GRG can now apply for assistance and receive benefits from programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needing Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medicaid (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Through non-profit advocacy organizations such as Generations United, public policies that address the needs of grandparents raising grandchildren are changing and expanding to bring more assistance and services to such families. According to the American Association of Retrieved Persons (AARP) several resources in Ohio can benefit grandparents raising grandchildren. These programs include, The Area Agency on Aging (for referrals on legal assistance), The Ohio Grandparent Kinship Caregiver Coalition, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (2017) (provides at toll-free helpline), The Ohio Family Care Association, and The Kinship Caregiver Navigator Grant-Public Children Services Association of Ohio.

One of the major challenges facing GRG is that they need education on where and how to find community services and service programs. Gardiner (2015) noted that grandparents raising their grandchildren could benefit from family life education as a resource that provides grandparents with education regarding finding resources. In addition, Gardiner (2015) suggested that collaboration among service organizations may be beneficial and enable GRG to reach the services they need. As a result, GRG can have resources available to them from different sources, including the government, non-profit organizations, state and federal programs. The Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act was passed to help grandparents raising their grandchildren (Generation United, 2018). This new Ohio law will establish a council that will support the affairs of grandparents and other family members who are raising grandchildren. This council will be overseen by the Department of Human Services (Generation United, 2018).

Despite the availability of resources and service programs, Sutphin (2015) reported low participation in state services by kin caregivers involved in raising grandchildren. Low usage of state services occurs because kinship caregivers do not want to interact with child welfare agencies. In addition, some services users, including grandparent caregivers, report being disrespected and mistrusting child welfare agencies (Sutphin, 2015). Therefore, these state service agencies must train their employees to treat service users with respect and remain consistent with the quality of services to gain trust from their service users (Sutphin, 2015).

Family Stress Theory

Boss, Bryant, and Mancini (2017) defined family stress as "a disturbance in the steady-state of the family system" (p. 2). Family stress is also referred to as a disturbance that takes place in family life organization and process (White, Klein, & Martin, 2015). Hill (1958) proposed the ABC-X model of family stress known, and it is the foundation upon which the family stress theory is formed, which helps us to illustrate the processes in which individuals and families experience stressor events. The revised ABC-X model was modified by Boss (2002) to include the coping component. At the same time, McCubbin and Patterson (1983) modified the ABC-X model known as the double ABC-X to reflect additional stressors. Later, Patterson (1988) included the family adjustment and adaption response model (FAAR), thus, focusing on the family's adjustment after a stressor. Arditti (2015) highlighted that the "modern variations of the family stress theory often focus on intervening psychological and relational process that determines in part how a particular stressor event connects with family outcome" (p.6). Sands and Goldberg-Glen (2000) used stress the stress theory to explain GRG relationships. The study was conducted in the U.S. and consisted of 129 grandparents (i.e., 32 middle age 50-59 African American, 32 White and 34 older 60 to 90

African American and 31 White). The participants were recruited from various community organizations e.g., churches, social service agencies, Big Brother/Big Sister clubs, grandparent support groups, and public and private schools and preschools. Sands and Goldberg-Glen (2000) found "a correlation between the grandchildren's psychological and physical problems and the grandparents' stress" (p.104). In another study, Whitley, Lamis, and Martin (2016) investigated 679 African American grandmothers between 33 and 83 years old and raising their grandchildren. Whitley et al. (2016) showed that 406 of the grandmothers in their study had a high school degree, while 273 did not. At the same time, only 279 of the grandmothers were employed, whereas 400 were retired or unemployed. The results revealed that the interventions that they provided to the grandmothers who were displaying low verses. High stress contributed to a reduction in psychological distress. Additionally, the "grandmothers with high stress at baseline appeared to have benefited more from improved access to family resources, as indicated with reductions in distress, compared with grandmothers with low stress" (p. 574).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our study is to examine the perspectives of grandparents who are raising grandchildren and their views and experiences of support programs in Ohio. To better understand grandparents that are raising their grandchildren, we answer the following questions:

1) What support is needed for grandparents raising grandchildren?
2) At what stage is the support needed: beginning, middle or late stages of caregiving?
3) What are grandparent caregivers' perceptions of service programs?

Method and Participants

In order to attain rich in-depth, descriptive data on the perceptions and experiences of grandparents raising grandchildren, we used a qualitative approach. Grandparents were recruited through the Kinship Navigator Program (KNP) of Ohio which provides support services to relative or kinship caregivers. Grandparents willing to participate in the program met at the study site on a scheduled date for the focus group interview. Prior to the beginning of the focus group interview, the objectives of the study were explained to the participants and they were provided with the consent forms. The focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis. The session was about 90 minutes long, and each participant received a gift card and refreshments from the KNP staff. The participants were asked a variety of questions regarding kinship caregivers. The researchers were guided by Braun and Clarke's (2012) six thematic analysis procedures, including familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and defining before reporting the themes. The thematic analysis broke down the data into individualized concepts, labeled by content and organized into more prominent themes in response to each of the research questions; 1) What support is needed for GRG? 2) At what stage do GRGs need support: beginning, middle or late stages of caregiving? And 3) What are grandparent caregivers' perceptions of service programs? Ravitch and Carl's (2016) three-step process of "data organization and management, immersive engagement, and writing and representation" (p. 238) were used to interpret the data. Trustworthiness was established through discussions between the researchers to refine and clarify themes. Disagreements around themes were reviewed and clarified.

The participants in this study consisted of four grandparents. Other grandparents were recruited to participate, but only four showed up for the focus group interview. One of the four grandparents in this study was at the beginning stages of raising their grandchildren, while the others had as much as 18 years of grandparenting experience. Some of them were informal caregivers who did not have a legal relationship with the grandchildren they were raising. Also, others were formal caregivers with full custody of the children that they were raising. Some of them were still employed, while others were stay-at-home parents that are raising their grandchildren. They also had varying income levels ranging from middle to low and even below the poverty line. All of the participants in this study were living in Ohio, females and Non-Latino White. To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, the results below were presented in an aggregated summary form, and pseudonyms were used when referring to individual participants.

Results

The first interview questions focused on the types of ongoing support needed for grandparents who are raising grandchildren? All four participants agreed that they need varied support, including financial and emotional support. Our results revealed that service programs for kinship care are most effective for grandparents who are raising grandchildren. We also learned from our participants that they need support at all stages (beginning, middle, and end) of caregiving. Additionally, our study shows that grandparents raising grandchildren experience stress and need family and community support and confirm with (Pandialagappan & Ibrahim, 2018; Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000) work. Thus, our results showed that the family stress framework is associated with grandparents raising grandchildren as they experience stress (i.e., financial hardship, challenges) in their caregiving roles. Some of these areas that they need support include legal assistance, support groups, affordable public housing, and social support. Further details of our findings are discussed below.

Support Groups

All of the participants reported that they needed support of others. They maintained that they need support groups to share ideas, recommendations, education, and emotional support since they are going through the process of raising their grandchildren. One of the participants said:

> "this is what we need. What we need is each other to talk to about because we are all in the same calling, in the same boat, we are like in the same journey."

All four participants also added that they need service programs to assist them with the many challenges they face in raising grandchildren. Accessing children's clothing was a prominent theme during the interviews, and three of the participants noted that children grow very fast and easily outgrow their clothes. One of the grandparents also added that she needed after school programs for her grandchildren to help with mathematics. The after-school programs enable grandchildren to get caught up with the school curriculum. Due to the abusive situations that some grandchildren were in before living with their grandparents, one also wanted counseling services for the grandchildren. Two of the grandparents mentioned that some of the grandchildren they are raising have Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and most of their children are emotionally unstable. Support for extra-curricular activities, including sports programs and summer camps, was also among the ongoing needs of two of the grandparents. One of the participants said:

> "I need "support to help my grandchild with extra curriculum activities."

Legal Assistance

All of the participants reported that they need assistance in the legal process of gaining custody or guardianship for the grandchildren they are raising. All four of the grandparents posited that the legal process could be time-consuming and costly. In addition, two reported that they have challenges with attaining of custody for the grandchildren they are raising because the parents refuse to give them custody. Three of them reported not accessing public assistance because they do not have legal custody over the grandchildren they are raising. One participant said:

> "I have no spouse, no second income it's just me and this lady and she helped me crib, a car sit, she listened. She helped me with like all the legal stuff I'm like cos I don't know what I was doing, like I knew what I was doing but I didn't. So, she was a great support but then it's like I'm kind of stuck in the middle now because it's a children services case and mom still want custody back but and I can't get any money at all."

Another participant said:

> "I think a huge part of this and the stressfulness you know where can we get more support you know on the end. Ahh you know sharing our frustrations of we have these babies we're taking care of some of us don't even have legal rights to them."

Affordable Public Housing

One of the four grandparents reported the need for affordable housing services. She explained that

the inability to access affordable housing leads to frequent interruptions in living situations, which can be difficult with grandchildren. Therefore, it would be better if there was affordable public housing for grandparents who are raising grandchildren. It would provide grandchildren with stable housing. Three grandparents agreed that once they assumed custody of their grandchildren, they were essentially responsible for housing---there was no follow up on their living situation. In many cases, grandparents did not have stable housing and continue to move around with the grandchildren they are raising. One of the participants stated, "I've been depressed since I lost my home. I was living in a van with three kids at the park cause I was scared of my son." Another participant revealed:

> "…I think that would be helpful is that like parents or caregivers or grandparents, there should be a program to where they should be able to maybe like have a home, the kids know oh the is my home and I'm not going anywhere. I don't have to move no more, and then once the kids are grown; they can give it back to the state."

Policymakers should follow the recommendations made by researchers and develop affordable housing policies that will alleviate GRG of this burden to enhance the quality of life and well-being of grandfamilies.

Informal Social Support

Two of the grandparents shared that they have family and friends who give them some emotional support sometimes. However, when it comes to financial needs, they bear the full burden. One of the grandparents maintained that if family and friends could take the grandchildren sometime to provide respite opportunities for GRG, this would be very helpful. One also shared that it would be great if they could receive some support from the other grandparents of the children. However, they maintained that interference from the parents of the grandchildren causes a lot more harm than good because most parents are not consistent in their offering of support. One of the participants said:

> "They say they'll come but they don't. …So that now they stop the weekend visits cos he used to go there every weekend. He never missed meeting… halfway and now they stopped it and my grandson is run into depression...and we had a big old party for him for Halloween/birthday party cause his birthday is on the 25th and he didn't know that his big brother was coming down and then when Mary pulled him to the backyard on the side then he says that's my big brother, my dad. And he's got that same one. I think they need more support like that too. You know."

The second research question asked at what stage grandparents raising grandchildren need support, i.e., in the beginning, middle or late stages of caregiving. All four of the participants of the focus group interview agreed that they need support at all stages. They all insisted that it is essential for them to have someone (e.g., case manager) who is trustworthy and reliable, especially during difficult times. One of the participants said:

> "You should be able to have that support person that you can trust capital letters TRUST that you could call on and say hey I'm having this issue or they can you give me just five minutes of your time and talk to me, or hey can we meet up somewhere and let me show you how their behaviors is and can you direct me."

Three participants added that they need all kinds of support, including clothes, because they grow very fast and quickly outgrow their clothes. Three grandparents agreed that they could not get their grandchildren registered for any of these extra-curricular activities due to limited income. One of the grandparents stated that she does not like the school in her area, so she considered homeschool or a private school for her grandchild because most of the children who attend the school are from low-income and dysfunctional homes. She was concerned that her grandchild would be negatively influenced by other children from dysfunctional homes at her current school. Another grandparent immediately recommended a different school that her grandchildren attended and added that the school is designed to work well with children from low-income families who are high-risk students. She said the school has summer school and counseling programs for the students as well.

The third research question focus on what are grandparents' perceptions of service programs? The grandparents shared that the KNP has been beneficial to them, and they appreciate all the support they have received from the program. According to the grandparents, KNP has assisted them with education, connecting them to community resources and accessing tangible goods such as baby cribs, car seats, pull-

up diapers, and clothes. One of the grandparents shared that she received support from the KNP to gain custody of her grandchild. While sharing about the KNP, the grandparents focused on a particular employee of the kinship program known as "Bev." All four participants shared how wonderful she has been to them and the tremendous support she has been to them through the KNP. For participants to access the service program, they needed someone they can trust and rely on, and "Bev" was labeled as this person. The grandparents described "Bev" as kind, patient, knowledgeable, reliable, and accessible. They added that some of the organizations that run service programs for GRG are not easy to access. According to participants in this study, some organizations say they will come, but they never show up. Even though the KNP has been extremely helpful to the grandparents, they also agreed that the program has its limits. Some of the participants said:

> "Kingship can only do so much they can help us with certain things; she gets us what she can. She did get Maxine she did get us a car sit. Bev helped me she helped me a big supply of pull-ups and a new car seat."

Another participant shared:

> "I know that I have received help from kinship from Bev for probably eighteen years… she's been nothing but support; whether emotional, if I need something for my son or one of my grandkids umm. It's an amazing program kinship is, and I don't know what I would have done without Bev. Yeah, Bev has been a huge support for me."

Discussion

We investigated GRG and service programs. At the same time, we used a qualitative approach and three main questions.

Our first research question addresses the ongoing support needed GRG. The findings of this study suggest that GRG's unmet needs include support groups, service programs, legal assistance, affordable housing, and emotional support from family and friends. Our results also showed that some service programs like the kinship navigator program for grandparents are effective and helpful. The participants shared their perspectives of what makes service programs effective. These results are consistent with existing literature on the ongoing needs of grandparents raising grandchildren and those providing foster care for grandchildren. Even though the focus group interview was not organized to function as a support group, participants could share and talk about their challenges in that safe environment and receive feedback from other participants who have had the same experience and were knowledgeable about what to do in such circumstance. Thus, we further clarified how important and beneficial support groups could be to grandparents raising grandchildren.

Many factors such as the financial burden, time, and negative family dynamics make it difficult for grandparents to gain legal custody of the grandchildren they are raising (Cooper (2012). Without legal custody, GRG's ability to access public assistance is impeded. However, this study highlights the need for increased support services for GRG. Without increasing support, grandparents will continue to experience the stressors associated with the care of grandchildren which can have adverse outcomes for all involved. Social workers must engage in policies and legislation at the state level, to increase funding for GRG and by other relatives to improve child well-being outcomes.

As attested by other researchers such as Rausch (2016), housing continues to be one of the crucial challenges of GRG. For many grandparents providing a stable home for their grandchildren is important as unstable housing situations can impede custodial placement. However, many barriers exist including, rising costs associated with rentals and mortgage rates which make access to affordable housing out of reach for GRG.

Our second research question addresses what stage grandparents are raising grandchildren need support, beginning, middle or late stages of caregiving. All the grandparents agreed that they need support throughout the three stages (i.e., beginning, middle, end) of caring for and raising their grandchildren. Access to support at the beginning stage could be critical for both grandparents and grandchildren. As reported by the participants in this study and other researchers, most grandparents get called into the service of raising grandchildren without prior notice, or initial training. Most grandparents insisted that

even though they accepted the call to raise their grandchildren, they did not know how to attain custody of the grandchildren, access services or obtain information. Therefore, having access to support at the beginning stage to eliminate the confusion of not knowing what to do could be very helpful. In addition, most public support programs require grandparents that are raising grandchildren to have legal custody or guardianship prior as an eligibility criterion for receiving services. Without the legal relationship between grandparents and the grandchildren they are raising, grandparents are not eligible to receive public support for housing in New York (Boss et al., 2017). Grandparents' ability to receive services at the beginning stage of raising grandchildren is again crucial because they mostly are not prepared to take care of grandchildren when they get called into raising their grandchildren. Unexpectedly, they have to deal with additional financial and other responsibilities related to raising their grandchildren which can be overwhelming. Hence receiving services and support at this stage could bring them tremendously much needed help. In the past few years, several funding bills have been passed that could be helpful to GRGs in the state of Ohio.

Our third research question asked about grandparents' perceptions of service programs. Overwhelmingly, grandparents stated that the personality traits of the employees working with organizations that provide services to grandparent caregivers are critical to the accessibility of the program by the target population, as well as the impact and the general success of the program. The grandparents who participated in this study maintained that it is important to have a program employee whom you can trust and whom you can call in difficult times when you need someone to talk to for support and direction. Unfortunately, because of the stigma associated with grandparents caring for grandchildren, many grandparents may not even want to engage with service programs because of the stereotypes and stigma associated with their situation. Therefore, program staff must be trained to treat clients to ensure program accessibility and the success of their programs.

Recommendations for Future Research

The study shows that support groups and service~~s~~ programs that help grandparents raise grandchildren are still unmet. Therefore, future research should focus on grandparent caregivers' unmet needs and the barriers that prevent them from receiving support. Access to support groups and services during the early stages when the grandparents get the grandchildren is crucial. We should put more effort into strengthening the support for grandparents at these early stages. In addition, organizations that work with grandparent caregivers should emphasize the importance of interpersonal communication for working with vulnerable populations such as grandparents raising grandchildren. In addition, creating affordable public housing for grandparents raising grandchildren where there are non-existent is important. This could help to enhance the quality of life for both grandparents and the grandchildren they are raising.

Limitations of The Study

There are a number of limitations to the study. First, the small sample size (4) are not generalizable to all grandparents. Future studies should recruit a large sample of grandparents this will allow for more generalizability of study findings. Second, participants of this study were all white females (grandmothers) residing in Ohio. Grandfathers raising their grandchildren were not included in this study, thus we cannot account for parental experience of grandfathers. Additionally, this study consists of a homogenous sample of grandparents residing in the state of Ohio. Other states may have different regulations, support programs and policies for GRG.

Conclusion

Grandparent-headed households and grandparent caregiving are fixtures in our society. Our research findings add to the existing literature on grandparents raising grandchildren and expands the understanding of this phenomenon based on the research objectives. Despite the size of the sample, our paper can be expanded to focus on services that grandparents need while raising their grandchildren as well as to improve services for grandparents. Policy changes are required to ensure adequate resources and

support for both grandparents and the grandchildren they are raising. Our research shows that even though we are making progress towards supporting the needs of grandparent caregivers, more support is needed.

Declarations

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Research Article

Women and children's well-being in Indian nuclear families during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: The culture of living in a nuclear family setting, a norm of modernisation, has been badly shaken by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This hit has created many pauses and changes in women's lives who live in nuclear families with the responsibility of taking care of very young children. Despite the various discussions related to women during the pandemic, there seem to be negligible efforts to understand the lived reality of nuclear family women having the responsibility of child care. The idea of living in this type of family is based on the thinking that it provides ample opportunity to develop individual talents and lead an unrestricted life. However, it can have a very adverse effect on women and children during the pandemic due to the closure of essential support systems such as child care centres and schools. Thus, this situation has a negative effect on the lives of women, which in turn, affects their young children's lives too. This study explored the lived experiences of a purposively selected sample of six women regarding challenges to deal with an office job, domestic work, and child care during the ongoing pandemic. Data were generated by conducting the telephonic semi-structured interview and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Results indicate the curtailment of freedom and choices, adverse impact on the mental and physical health of women and their children.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has induced an unprecedented, uncertain, and frightening condition worldwide, including in India. Here, from March 2020 onwards, a newly chaotic world has developed where lockdown, unlock down, mounting infection cases, and human casualties all affect life and survival. The Lancet (2021) pointed out that till 4th May 2021, more than 20.2 million contagious cases have been reported here. Moreover, the slow process of vaccination and no provision of vaccination for children has created an acute panic and a grim reality for everyone. This crisis has put India in a very vulnerable situation, especially for women and children. The recent United Nations Development Programme ([UNDP]2020) "*COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker*" indicates unequal policy response to women's economic security and unpaid caring at the global level. It may moderate progress on gender equality earned in recent decades, and that work-related gender inequality may be heightened. Further, it claims that many countries are not successfully able to shield women from the negative social and economic repercussions of the current pandemic.

During all these lockdown phases, women and young children have emerged as a salient vulnerable group. A United Nations ([UN]2020) report *"Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women"*asserts that women have been carrying a heightened burden of caring in this pandemic due to the closure of early childhood care and education centres. Correspondingly, children's development and care are also on the verge of a big new crisis that may be responsible for multifarious types of changes and challenges in young

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ones' lives. These changes are atypical, create helplessness and vulnerability and jeopardise the overall well-being of individuals. A recent report of the United Nations (Gromada, Richardson, & Rees, 2020) also call this pandemic *a global childcare crisis*, where women are very less likely to receive social protection due to the closure of early childhood care centres (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020) and complex gender norms. All these circumstances have also been presenting additional tasks and challenges in families, especially to women.

In the present scenario, various forms of families exist in Indian society, where the nuclear family type is the most prominent one. Living in a nuclear family has become a norm of modern Indian society (Singh, 2003; Verma, 1995 cited in Suppal & Roopnarine, 1999). With no consensus over the definition of multilayered nature, it has emerged as a salient type of family in urban India (Chakravorty, Goli, & James, 2021; Singh, 2003); such as single-headed family, stem nuclear family, nuclear family in urban areas having a joint family as a fountainhead, represent its varied silhouette (Singh, 2003; Uberoi, 2014 cited in Chakravorty et al., 2021). The nuclear family exists in between traditionalism and modernity and highly embraces the egalitarian principle. In this type of family, individualism and personal interest diminish traditional roles and disintegrate kinship and relationship. Increased healthcare opportunities, extended control over mobility, and power resulting in safer matrimonial homes for women are some features that popularise the nuclear family concept (Allendorf, 2013; Chakravortyet al., 2021; Narayan & Bhardwaj, 2005). However, there is another side of the reality, where women are entirely dependent on outside agencies to pursue their familial and professional goals.

These women also comprise the most vulnerable group and are supposed to be filled with fluid personality characteristics every time (Scharff, 2015), even during the pandemic. Although they differ on the basis of their socio-economic status, work, and family structure; but, childcare is unanimously viewed as their sole responsibility. Therefore, women belonging to a nuclear family with young children in India can be understood as a highly vulnerable group. They have less support and totally depend on the child care centres and maidservants to take care of children, household works, and continue their profession (Tuli & Chaudhary, 2010). As these facilities are no longer available due to lockdown, women's and their children's well-being are more prone to get adversely affected by the current pandemic. Thus, a unique and urgent call is emerging to understand the impact of the pandemic-induced lockdown on women's and their young children's overall well-being. This type of exploration may help to recognise how women and children are best assisted by identifying their reciprocal nature of changes and challenges. Therefore, based on the mentioned understanding, we can operationalise that a nuclear family is the convergence of a married woman with her spouse and unmarried children, both dual earners, relied on outside agencies for childcare, external services, and support systems. A scarcity of research can be noticed (for example Tiwari et al., 2020) in understanding nuclear family women's experiences having child care responsibility during the pandemic. Given the situation of studies in this area, the present study attempted to explore nuclear family women's experiences related to childcare.

Method

The present study explored women's lived experiences with child care during this pandemic. It adopted a qualitative research design. The data were collected by using the semi-structured interviews personally by each of the three researchers. This type of interview facilitates the researcher to know about a specific aspect of participants' life or experiences (Willig, 2013). Before conducting the interview, each participant was requested to read and fill in the consent form, and permission for recording the interview was obtained from the participant before starting the data collection process. Allthe interviews were conducted using mobile phones with a recording facility.

This study is based on the lived experiences of six purposively chosen women from nuclear families (age range 30-37 years) having at least one child in the early childhood stage. These male-headed nuclear families consisted of married women, husbands, and unmarried children. Out of six families, four families consisted of four members, and two were having five and three members, respectively. Bothpartners employed and depended on outside agencies, friends, or relatives for childcare and other household

support. Out of six participants, five were from the middle social class and one from the lower social class. For ascertaining the social class of the participants, subjective indicators were used. The subjective view about social class is the perception of a person's position compared with other members of the society (Anderson, Kraus, Galinsky, & Keltner, 2012). Three participants lived in their own homes, two were residing in rented accommodation, and one was availing a government service apartment facility. These participants worked in different job sectors before the pandemic, but two out of six had to decide to quit the job due to exacerbated child caring responsibility and closure of early childhood facilities. The one participant from a lower social class, including her husband, was hit hard by job loss during the pandemic. All these women belonged to three cities of India, namely Delhi, Bengaluru, and Lucknow; Delhi is the country's capital, and the other two cities are the state's capital. These cities were severely affected by the coronavirus in the second wave in April-May 2021.

The questions for the semi-structured interviews were formulated after carefully reviewing the relevant literature. The questions were sequenced to get information about the nature of responsibilities, activities, and various management strategies these women undertook during the pandemic. As countrywide lockdown and people were practising physical distancing, telephonic interviews were considered suitable for collecting data. The researchers asked the question in Hindi and English as per the participants' needs. The participation of all women was voluntary, and they were given a complete choice not to answer any specific question or all the questions. Socially desirable responses were carefully observed, and wherever there was evidence of this kind of response, the researchers tried to get the responses based on real experiences by constructing the questions differently. Identity-sensitive words and leading questions were avoided. The pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of participants (See Table 1 for background information of participants).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Women, their Children and Spouse

	Women							**Children**				**Spouse**
No.	Pseudo name	Age	Education	Socio-economic class	State	Working status	Occupation	Number of children	Age	Class	School type	Working Status of spouse
1.	Nia	36	Post-graduation	Middle	Karnataka	Unemployed	Housewife	1	7	2nd	HFS	Employed
2.	Sana	37	PhD	Middle	Uttar Pradesh	Unemployed	Housewife	2	2, 8	2nd	HFS	Employed
3.	Joya	35	PhD	Middle	Delhi	Employed	Teaching	2	5.5, 2	1st	HFS	Employed
4.	Priya	37	Post-graduation	Middle	Delhi	Employed	Teaching	2	3,13	PP,7	HFS	Employed
5.	Rita	30	Primary	Lower	Delhi	Unemployed	Housewife	2	7,9	2nd, 4th	LFS	Unemployed
6.	Soni	35	Post-graduation	Middle	Delhi	Employed	Administration	2	3,13	PP,7	HFS	Employed

(HFS*: High fee school, LFS*: Low fee school, PP*: Pre-primary)

Data Analytic Strategy

The thematic analysis method was suitable to analyse the responses of this study as it "included questions about people's conceptualisations or ways of thinking about particular social phenomena" (Willig, 2013, p.183). It is a method of analysis that is used to understand and organise qualitative data. It has also been used to understand people's perception of other infectious diseases like AIDS and the Ebola virus (Joffe, 1999 and Joffe & Haarhoff, 2002, cited in Willig, 2013, p.183). So, it was also well suited to explore women's experiences about child care during the COVID-19 pandemic. In its six-step process, researchers identify meaningful patterns and themes by consciously interpreting, discussing codes, and keeping the central research question in mind (Braun & Clarke,2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013; Willig, 2013). Therefore, we applied all six steps suggested by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006, 2013). We transcribed recorded interviews and subsequently translated them into English. All researchers read each interview separately to understand women's experiences and backgrounds fully. Then initial codes were generated, reviewed, refined by mutual discussion. Afterwards, we generated broader themes and

subthemes and found patterns in all themes. Over a series of online meetings, we reached a consensus about three generated themes with underlying sub-themes finally chosen to discuss the findings.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we present the themes identified by us and the discussion of the same, keeping in mind the objectives of this study.

Multi-Layered Disruptions and Changes in Behaviour

The COVID-19 crisis has caused multi-layered disruptions and behavioural changes in women's and children's lives. On the one hand, numerous challenges have popped up in front of all the parents, especially women, due to the closure of the early child care centres, work from home, loss of jobs, and online classes. On the other hand, mounting infection cases and deaths in India, the spread of misinformation, poor management in hospitals, scarcity of medical resources, slow vaccination process, and news of the third wave of infection where children may be more susceptible to an infection created chaos for everyone, particularly to the women having young children. Though challenges of women about childcare are argued in various researches (Del Boca, Oggero, Profeta, & Rossi 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Weaver & Swank 2021), there is a dearth of research highlighting the challenges of nuclear family women having young children and facing the pandemic. Based on exploring these women's experiences, the study result shows that both women and children were intolerably entrapped in COVID-19 induced labyrinths. The situation becomes more complicated in the Indian urban nuclear family context, where child care is a complete responsibility of mothers, paid or unpaid, and fathers are generally late entrants in early care (Das & Zumbyte, 2017). The findings show that they have been facing manifold disruptions and changes in their behaviour. Under the theme, participants reported three types of significant disruptions: changed notion of home, exacerbation in responsibility, and unemployment, which further changed the behaviour of women and children in the play and social interaction domain. These are discussed below:

Changed Notion of Home

The COVID-19 pandemic has blurred boundaries of home, work, family life, and child care. Along with positive experiences, it has hard-pressed negative experiences. Chung, Seo, Forbes, and Birkett (2020) suggest that the working capacity of mothers who have children has dropped more than those without children. One reason for the decline in working capacity can lie in the changing concept of home due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Most women's responses show a similar pattern about the changed notion of home. In their views, due to lockdown and the threat of infection, a home has become a parallel site of office, school, and playground. In this case, they face problems ranging from the execution of multiple institutional activities at one place to the availability of limited space led to chaos, reduced discipline, and disruption of routine. They were having all activities like kitchen work, e-office of either one or both spouses, or having virtual classes of children simultaneously in the same location created hassle for the women.

As Priya, a teacher, having the responsibility of looking after two children and whose husband recently recovered from COVID -19, states,

> "The classes of my children are conducted at the same time when I have to teach online."

The availability of limited physical space and electronic devices with internet connectivity is the major challenge.Sana, a 37-year-old, migrated from Delhi to Lucknow due to COVID, left her postdoc job due to the responsibility of taking care of two children without the support of her husband, who is on COVID testing duty, states:

> "I wake up around five before the kids wake up because I have to make some arrangements, I have to clean home and sanitise groceries; I am afraid that kids may touch here and there, especially small ones. It is very tough for me to keep him away; they neither understand nor listen to my advice. So, I am very tired, very-very tired."

The majority of women show similar concerns about completing work within time in limited space, along with childcare and sanitisation of items purchased from the outside. Although home retained its safe

status during the pandemic for everyone, the pandemic has created many challenges for women who live in nuclear families and have young children. The above narration reflects how the absence of a boundary between home, work, school, and playground escalated the tensions between work and family roles and added responsibilities of the woman. When everyone, including the pet animal of the family, shares the same room, office duty, domestic works, and the responsibility of young children intrude on each other, causing disruption (Olekalns & Kennedy, 2020). It also clarifies that home is also changing its meaning to a considerable degree for women of nuclear families during the pandemic. The underlying properties of a home, as its size, structure, spaciousness, freedom, roles, responsibilities, silence and tranquillity, are responsible for making people comfortable during the pandemic (Yalçın & Düzen, 2021), are missing in the lives of the participant women.

Exacerbation in The Women's Responsibilities

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many fault lines for women with young children. During the lockdown period of more than one year, from increased pressure of childcare to absence of domestic support to increased attention andmultitasks, all have created a distrusted lifestyle for women, further painting a poor childcare picture for children. Many research and recent reports (Chauhan, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020) show that women usually share a load of childcare and domestic responsibilities. In India, societal norms of a good wife, mother, and motherhood exert pressure on women to keep their childcare responsibilities on the top. The women who cross these norms especially working mothers, are discriminated against and negatively evaluated for paying less attention to their offspring (Boudet, Petesch, & Turk, 2013). Furthermore, the pandemic has thrust more childcare burden on women's shoulders and other responsibilities with unexpected changes. The pandemic's exceptional and high risky nature has created a situation where mothers feel depleted and lacking in their childcare engagement resources.

Nia, a 36-year-old, left her job due to the responsibility of a child, states:

"I think it was a great decision for me because, during this pandemic, you know my God! What Burden increased like anything."

Considering quitting the office job as a great decision shows her conformity to existing gender norms, where patriarchy favours men and limits women's chances of returning to the job sector. The use of the word "*burden*" just at the beginning of the interview shows how much she carries the weight of extended responsibility on her head. It can be inferred that the pandemic has aggravated social structural oppression. And in a very shrewd way, it brings back patriarchy, where household and care work are only assigned to women and kept in the downgraded category. All other participants also talked about their extended roles and responsibilities. Their narration shows how they have been trapped in a labyrinth of multiple responsibilities. The imposition of different roles at the same time caused their lives almost havoc.

Women show their depository of roles as becoming a mother, wife, domestic worker, carer, child's teacher, and employee. Having young children creates more challenges for women, as Sana shared how her two-year-old child starts rolling and moving up on the bed. Along with that, children of early childhood age are less attentive, create difficulty in following safety measures, naughty and annoying, and need more energy consumption on the part of women.

Work during the night has also emerged as a new pattern for some of these women. It explicitly reflects that there is hardly any distinction between personal and professional lives as both are limited to the household, which means women have to take up their professional commitments and domestic duties concomitantly. It can have an adverse impact on women's progress and wellbeing. Consequently, women have less time to invest effectively and strategize their career-related progress (Chauhan, 2020). Mainly, all women reported increased tiredness and sometimes inefficiency in tackling multiple tasks together, including childcare. Exacerbating responsibility for a long time may take a toll on women's health where chances of less focus on tasks haveincreased and engagement in multitasks also drain cognitive resources, and reduce the productivity of human beings (American Psychological Association, 2006).

The State of Unemployment

A UN (2020) report titled *"Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women*" suggests that women's lives can be affected differently and disproportionately on finances and productivity. It is crucial to admit that women have lagged in securing formal and high-paid jobs, receiving low wages, and having low social security even before the pandemic. But the COVID-19 pandemic risks rolling back the already achieved low progress of women in labour participation and constraining their presence due to lack of childcare support and increasing care demands at home. At the same time, women belonging from the middle and lower sections of society are more prone to bear the risk of reduced income, job loss, low self-safety, and increased and unpaid child care burden, which can negatively impact their overall well-being and also affect children's development.

The findings of the current study affirm the above statement. By reviewing the data, unemployment also has emerged as another significant issue in the interview. Three out of six respondents had to experience forced unemployment due to the full-time responsibility of childcare as childcare centres were closed during the pandemic. Women respondents are facing a different degree of impact due to their socio-economic class position.

Sana, who belongs to the middle class, was working as a postdoctoral fellow, having the responsibility of two children aged two years and eight years shared her experience of leaving the job as:

> "Little, very tough to explain because it is very hard. From the past 15 years I was working continuously without a break, and it is more of financial independence for me that I am working, getting a salary. After the pandemic, if the situation goes over and even after I want to go and look for a job, there is no job first. Second, I am from life sciences, so there are only COVID testing positions in the lab. That I cannot do it because of small kids."

It shows how women from nuclear families and having no childcare support are vulnerable to economic insecurity and experience loss of self-esteem. The adverse circumstances and tortured mental health of women can harm children's care and development too.

Rita, having two children and educated at the primary level, worked in a factory, was unable to go for the job due to lockdown, and her spouse also became unemployed due to similar reasons. She shared with the researcher,

> "We are not able to go to duty, so we are even not getting the salary. Our room rent keeps on increasing as we are not in a position to pay it."

Her silence and murmuring in response to some questions during the interview indicated her hardship. Her condition reflects that she has less protection against dismissal from the job and doesn't have the benefit of paid leave due to her employment in an informal job sector (Rivera, Hsu, Esbry, & Dugarova, 2020). The narration also reflects that living without a job is an odd experience for her. Moreover, the unemployment of both parents is putting a greater risk for their children's developmental and educational opportunities as survival has become a significant issue in this case. Emerging research, for example, Finnegan (2015), also indicates that mother and father's involuntary job loss could affect children's development, such as academic achievement and future aspiration. Simultaneously parents may be less supportive and engage in children's homework and school-related activities. Mari and Keizer (2021) and Hill, Morris, Castells, and Walker (2011) also argued a similar concern about the linkage between parents' job loss and child development. Results show that income loss of parents triggers depression, and it leads to negative maternal parenting, which resulted in problem behaviour in children and reduced verbal ability during the early childhood period. It shows how lower social class, less education, and job loss have created the most brutal punch on women and children and pushes their lives at risk.

The Play During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 situation has forcefully twisted the play behaviour of all young children. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO,n.d.-a) report argues that play is a "powerful, scalable and effective" (p.1) way to maintain children's learning, health, and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, our study findings suggest that COVID-19 pandemic induced lockdown and fear of infection has served limited play opportunities, reduced physical activities, shrunk friends' circle, crafted less interaction, lack of learning, and low prosocial behaviour for children who fall

in the early childhood stage and also denoted with the age of play.

This change has affected women and children differently, where on one side, women's multiple roles have become more complex and burdensome due to additional and unpaid labour (Cook, 2021) and the absence of children's lost play space and missing support of their playmates. On another side of this, the changed and complex notion of home, loss of finances, and other aggravating responsibilities during the pandemic are concurrently meditating with children's lives and affecting their play behaviour, social interaction, and development differently. For example, a participant, Soni faced too much difficulty managing children's play behaviour when her husband was hospitalised due to the coronavirus infection. Her experience of managing children's play behaviour becomes complex due to the intersection ofmultitasks, nuclear family type, and closure of early childhood centres.

Therefore, at the primary level, the challenge of channelizing children's energy in the absence of their teachers, friends, peer group, and play space while living in a nuclear family setting has been a significant issue for all mothers. About play behaviour in the pandemic, a participant, Sana, narrates about her child that:

> "…sometimes he cries that mamma you don't allow me to play outside, but I tell him to maintain a physical distance. I allow him when there is no kid outside. If there are kids, I always say to him, 'No'."

It reflects how the pandemic has made outdoor play space perilous for children, and playing without friends and just waving hands to each other has become a new normal during this challenging time. Even an uncertain pause is to continue going on indoor play activities with friends too. The analysis also suggests that the multi-story apartment's lives further reduce the children's chances of play in the absence of extra space, even those who have availability of roofs, their congested location and fear of coronavirus in the air has deprived them of free play opportunities.

Nia observes that children starved of the playground and stared at it while standing in their balconies and reports,

> "We couldn't allow them, so that's why it's very frustrating. Twenty-four hours with the same routine, same room and all, so it is very boring for us as well as for them also."

It clearly shows children's inactivity and hopelessness, and their silence can be a worrying sign for their future. After the analysis, we can say that "*pandemic play*" has become more troublesome for all children, but children belonging to disadvantaged families face a significant threat as all the activities are operationalised under a single rented room.

In addition, younger children's play has taken a unique shape in the ongoing pandemic. Online gaming and digital mode of play have totally replaced friends and playgrounds now. The majority of participants reported how their children became more addicted to online games and videos. Moreover, the mobile phone has become a new toy for almost every child. The high indulgence in digital devices is creating health issues for children's majorly eyesight issues. One reason for increased involvement in online gaming is reportedly multitasking and the busy schedules of women.

This type of zero-free play zone or partial play, and total dependence on online play mode, can have a unique, harmful, and destructive impact on children's future lives. The ongoing pandemic situation can toll on children's physical health, social interaction, and various developments. Play with other children provides the opportunity to show off big feelings like anger and other emotions (Rushton, 2011,cited in UNESCO, n.d.-a). It helps in the development of language, learning of cooperation, and sharing (Piaget, 1999; Vygotsky, 1986), help in dealing with uncertainty, do coping with stress, learning of adult role and simultaneously also facilitates discoveries and problem even by searching some 'frivolous problems' (Chu & Schulz, 2020, p.332). Bongiorno and Quinn's (2021) statement that "play is a part of a child's resilience toolkit" has been almost missing and leaking from the pipeline in the pandemic. Stuart Brown argued that the catastrophic impact of play deprivation during the early years is linked to less flexibility in thoughts, poor anger management, and fragility in interpersonal relationships (Brown, 2014, cited in Hanscom, 2021).

The Social Interaction During the Pandemic

Children are also missing other kinds of social interaction during the pandemic with play deprivation, especially with nature and their close surroundings labelled as the "*Meso system*" in Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory. It is an established fact that peer talk, sibling talk, doing things together, going outside, observing their surroundings, and learning the symbolic language all play an essential role in meaning-making among children. The meaning-making process needs an active engagement on the part of children to transform their knowledge with the help of language. Through this process, they understand the social reality. Social interaction with others is also helpful to build social and communication competence. In social interaction and play, children resist, negotiate, and achieve a state of inclusion in the peer group.

However, the current COVID-19 pandemic has forcefully put a pause on all these types of social interaction among children, especially among younger ones. The study results show that children are experiencing unique effects of lack of social interaction in the pandemic, responsible for producing some novel social behaviour in themselves. We interviewed about children's social interaction, and participants explained the high level of decline in this domain. Almost all interviewed women mentioned a drastic change in children's social interaction during the pandemic. The findings of this study suggest that pandemic-induced social changes experienced by children are loss of their soft and friendly nature, deteriorating social skills, including no routine, poor discipline, and lacking basic etiquettes.

The lack of social interaction may generate an unusual type of social development. A participant, Sana, discussed how her two-year-old child confronted touching and showed disgust in meeting someone. She added,

> "If someone is smiling, so he is very strange, why is he smiling at me? He doesn't give a smile back. He gives a weird expression because he has not seen this. He has grown up in the pandemic."

It shows the social deprivation effect on a child's behaviour where the child has been showing irritability due to human contact. It also shows that being isolated, lonely with less interaction may have a different prospect for children. Toran, Sak, Xu, Şahin-Sak and Yu (2021) also affirm our study's findings, where researchers revealed how Turkish and Chinese parents noticed children's changed behavioural characteristics during the quarantine process. The compromised caregiving environment, cold attitude of parents, low warmth, less and unsupportive interaction may aggravate adversity for some children who may show low verbal ability and affect their socio-emotional well-being (Odgers & Jaffee, 2013).

The findings of our study show that women face multiple types of adversities that, in turn, may affect the children in the form of less support and disrupted caring and may also create an environment of low social interaction. Consequently, less support and women's overall well-being may significantly influence overall childcare patterns and children's social interaction.

It can be inferred from the above discussion that social interaction, which is part of a child's immediate neighbourhood and the child's school, has been plucked from their lives due to the pandemic. Consequently, children are not only missing classes or school but are also missing uncomplicated everyday interactions like walking to class together, eating lunch together, playing, learning and creating together. The long-term closure of educational institutions in India has put children into inexorable circumstances, leading them into unusual experiences beyond normal. As a result, they experience stress, anxiety and seized freedom.

Remote Learning: An Emerging Concern

Coronavirus pandemic has also wreaked havoc and brought education to a halt by school closures and brought new normal learning for the students, particularly remote learning. This type of learning is globally promoted and presented as an alternative to face-to-face classroom learning. Although there were specific online learning platforms available before the pandemic in India like Byjus, Meritnation, Vedantu, and more, they were optional and not forced. However, now forcibly, whether desirable or not, every child must go through remote learning to study. This no-choice approach of changing homes to classrooms in a

hurry presents mammoth challenges for parents and children, both human and technical. UNESCO(n.d.-b) also highlighted the adverse consequences of school closure.

Women with children from the early childhood stage have to face the brunt of this pandemic more. The women have to go through various challenges of remote learning as the Covid-19 pandemic has made digital technologies the only lifeline for education. However, the pandemic has not come with a hierarchical approach in spreading the infection to the privileged and non-privileged, but remote learning accompanying those socio-economic differences and thus shone a stark spotlight on the educational disparity (Gross, 2020). The pandemic induced sharp and sudden alteration in learning mode presented various concerns for everyone. Like various scholars have also insisted that online learning is not a good exposure for young children, limiting the socio-emotional readiness of children for school (Edwards, Skouteris, Rutherford, & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2012). The parents are not happy with this type of learning due to several subjective reasons. Researchers also explained that young children have a short attention span, thus unable to engage them in online learning (Dong, Cao, & Li, 2020). Most participants complained about the non-engagement of the children, talked about their inactiveness, and spoke about the "*zero discipline*" during these online classes. According to Nia,

> "…remote learning was totally a '*Flop Show*'with my son as he didn't want to sit in one place. In the beginning, we had to struggle a lot, I had to sit with him, it was really horrible".

The findings of our study confirm the above narration that most of the mothers have to sit with their children during the online classes as sometimes they are unable to understand, face difficulty noting down homework for each day, and need help in submission. Owing to the nuclear nature of the family and the existence of skewed gender norms in society that a child's education and care is a woman's responsibility, the situation becomes more typical.

The present research reports that remote learning is loosening parents' purse strings as they have to purchase an extra phone or device for online classes. Hence, the families who cannot buy an extra phone have to make their children attend classes from their phone only, so if they have to go outside, they have to wait for their work. They also have to arrange Wi-Fi, a webcam, and other necessary resources for taking the classes. Almost every school is giving now online classes on "Zoom,""Google Meet," and "Microsoft Teams" except some low fee schools providing study material for online classes through "Youtube" links and messages on "Whatsapp".

So, one can imagine the quality of education of those low fee schools that are teaching by just sending messages and study material on Whatsapp. The child is just copying the material from it and not understanding anything, nor the illiterate parents can make them understand. Thus, it is proving more typical for low SES children whose parents are uneducated, on the verge of losing their job, and have fewer learning opportunities beyond school.

In addition, prolonged screen time also has been putting a high level of strain on young ones' eyes. Emerging research also notes that the effect on children's eye vision is the most prominent one during this time (Dong et al., 2020). Another study also identified that three to six-year-old children stayed for a long time with mobile phones and electronic screens during the COVID-19 (Toran et al., 2021). Almost all the participants showed their serious concerns regarding their child's eyes due to these online classes. According to Priya,

> "…first my son started to get water in his eyes and had to put on specs and then my daughter who just took admission in the preschool started to get problems in her eyes."

So, it is clear that one has to study at the cost of eye strain, face headaches, blurred vision, and adjust to the condition of dry eyes (Peterson & Salem, 2021). The study's findings show that the online learning device is drowning the throat by the pandemic, and getting universal acceptance has also created more psycho-physical disturbances among children.

United Nations Children's Emergency Fund ([UNICEF], 2020a) report has pointed out the harmful content available on the internet, leaving the child vulnerable and tortured. Some interviewed women tried

to overcome this problem by replacing the mobile with desktop and smart TV. The reason was to give a big screen instead of a small one and check whether the child is taking the classes or opening something else. Like Soni states:

> "…now, due to smart TV, I can watch what the child has opened, as sometimes the child used to open something that is not good for their mind."

On the one hand, it shows that women have to be highly vigilant about the harmful content on the internet and the risks of unrestricted digital use to sail in this new reality. The proliferation of internet access and mobile technology is also stressing to implement the UNICEF (2020b), "*Guidelines for Industry on Child Online Protection*" which offers protection of child rights from sexually abusive material, create an age-appropriate and safer online environment, to educate children, parents, and teachers about the safe and responsible use of ICT. The other side also exposes the need for secure and appropriate age kids' content on digital media platforms in this pandemic time that can join the people instead of shutting them out (Hasinger-Das, Brennan, Dore, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Tasek, 2020). As for many women and children, it also becomes a source of engagement with their friend circles. In the long run, this type of learning will also be a challenge for low SES children as it increases the probability of pushing out more than the retention of them. It can result in much more disruptions that exacerbate the already present gap in our education system.

Mental Health and Well-Being of Women and Children

Mental Health and Well-Being of Women

The mental health and well-being of women and children have received the worst hit during the COVID-19 pandemic. All the above-discussed themes have been filled with an abundance of disruptions, typicalities, hassles, insecurities, and inefficiency in strategising on the part of women. Consequently, it may paint a poor picture of women's mental health and well-being. The causal relationship of the mentioned challenges is grounded in our society's social structure, which compels only women to bear the burden of caring responsibilities. The study's findings revolve around three central lived realities of women belonging to nuclear families. These are heightened psycho-socio-economic anxieties, compressed existing support systems, and fragile coping strategies.

For each woman we have interviewed, fear of infection, work-home balance, extended child care, education, and reduced income have taken a toll on their mental health and well-being. As Sana, unemployed during the pandemic, having two children, states,

> "…for the first time in my life, I have to depend on anxiety tablets, even during the hardest times I have tackled it all the way, but never –ever I have seen such time, but this time I break down."

Her weepy voice during the interview shows tremendous pressure on her mind due to unexpected added responsibilities and the risky job of her spouse, which she metaphorically related to the feeling of "*constant sitting on the dynamite*".

The pandemic-induced lockdown forced all the family members to stay together 24 hours; this situation presented a panorama of challenges, especially for women. Consequently, many respondents elucidated significant changes in their mental health in the form of frustration, tiredness, disappointments, extended fear, anxieties, and aggravated conflicts with their spouses. The fear of deterioration in participants' age and unsuccessful attempts to get a job in the pandemic also exacerbates the tension level of some participants. Simultaneously, the pandemic provoked a monotonous routine, and restriction on movements also has a toll on women's psychological well-being. Most of them reported a general feeling of boredom. It shows how due to deprived social interaction and engagement, women have been facing solitude. Campbell (2020) also mentions that fear of infection, social isolation, inadequate health, less communications, and the loss of jobs or income are responsible for generating negative emotions in human beings.

Support system contributes to the psychological wellbeing of individuals (Reblin & Uchino,2008). Getting support in the time of stress can have a boosting impact on the overall wellbeing of a person. There

are various support systems that a woman having children is looking up to, like schools, day-care centres, domestic help, or help from the spouse in household chores and childcare responsibilities. However, where on the one side COVID-19 pandemic has extended the anxiety level of women, on the other side, it has restrained all the possibility of getting support.

The findings of our study reflect the grim side of support of women during the pandemic. Due to the gendered nature of housekeeping work, women are compelled to bear this burden alone. The analysis of lived experiences of nuclear family's women explicitly shows that they are not getting any institutional, family, financial, and market-based support during the pandemic.

Nia expresses the pandemic phenomena as a "*horrible experience*" just at the beginning of the interview. She states:

> "Pandemic obviously is not good, it is horrible, but we can say that all the work pressure is there on my shoulder whether it is the education of my son and the domestic work… all totally on me. I have to do it. I have to finish all the work early then only the other work starts on time."

It shows the bleak picture of women juggling many family responsibilities, and with no constant support from any source, their well-being is in danger. However, it is also an emerging fact that humans thrive for survival in any conflict setting and prolonged deprivation of support. *The Neuro P5*, power, pleasure, profit, pride, and permanency that drive the nature of a person induced a desire for human survival and extending life. These drives also make people feel good (Al-Rodhan,2019).

Given the above fact, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory also emphasised how individuals constantly change their cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage inner and outer threats and warnings. The analysis of women's narration also gives a clear picture of their thriving and surviving through the use of fragile coping strategies.

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, all women were learning to use approach-avoidance in frightening situations, taking breaks from watching news stories, gradually accepting and adjusting with lockdown-induced uncertainties, connecting with close ones using digital technology, and adapting meditation practices.

Joya's expression gives the impression of her coping strategy to mitigate negative experiences and stress. She listens to music, talks to friends over the phone, gives "*me-time*" to practice self-care to maintain her fluctuating mood. Another participant, a teacher, used her acquired academic skills like role-playing with her children to minimise boredom during the pandemic. However, it is essential to admit that all listed coping strategies are only in their hit and trial phase, subjective and contextual. One of the participants, Sana, mentions,

> "I will say I don't cope with it; I am still struggling."

Her state shows how coping in the pandemic is fragile in nature, where a person is still wrestling to find a state of contentment and well-being.

Mental Health and Well-Being of Children

Not only women have faced multiple stressors which adversely affected their mental health and well-being in COVID outbreak, but also children can face more adverse effects even in the coming years of their life (Singh et al.,2020). It is a comprehensive fact that early experiences contours the blueprints of the developing brain; they also prepare the way of sound mental health (Chen, 2016). Therefore, any disruptions to this developmental process can impair a child's capacities for learning and relate to others which have lifelong implications. The National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (n.d.) (which run under the aegis of the Government of India) came up with an essential document for children's mental health; likewise, the CHILDLINE India foundation and UNICEF collaborative efforts for the production of essential children's mental health resource toolkit, signify the inevitability of crisis in some sense. Despite such interventions, various researches show the harsh truth of children's mental health and well-being. For example, a 50 percent spike has been seen since lockdown to avail pandemic-related information on the

CHILDLINE, a child service helpline of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, India (CHILDLINE & UNICEF India, 2020).

On these notes, our study findings also show various kinds of mental health-related challenges among the children. There is a noticeable change in the behaviour of children. Interviewed women inform a diverse range of psychological discomforts of their children, such as boredom, heightened anguish behaviour, increased clinging, increased disobedience, becoming much stubborn, and showing temper-tantrum. Lee (2020), Liu, Bao, Huang, Shi and Lu (2020), and Zhai and Du's (2020) study results also confirm our findings. Having two children aged 2 and 5 years old, Joya briefs how it has become too difficult for her to manage her child's crying behaviour, who every time insists on going outside. It creates more typicalities in front of the mother as the child's young age comes ahead as a barrier to understand the importance of safety measures during the lockdown. The analysis also suggests that the child's young age also creates communication barriers, making it difficult for mothers to engage in playful activities with them, leading to loss of interest and unwillingness in children, resulting in reduced interaction and indulgence with adults. The impoverished parent-child interaction may profoundly impact children's development (Odgers & Jaffe, 2013). Women also reported that children have an enhanced inactive and silent state during the pandemic that is covertly disturbing children's mental health, which is generally unrecognised and ignored by the parents due to their limited knowledge in child development.

However, it is essential to mention that even confronting such multi-layered responsibilities with tensed mental resources, women have been taking various forms of initiatives to engage their young children. Examples of such activities are reading books, gardening, cooking, baking, role-playing, yoga, meditation, and more. The online mode of learning has also emerged as an essential engagement strategy. For example, a participant's son uses email and Hangout to chat with his friends. It reflects that some children whose mothers have sound knowledge about using electronic communication quickly learn these skills and adapt to the changing environment. Nevertheless, women are not entirely successful in utilizing their greater energy levels due to their time-bound work, unconfident children engagement plan of action, and extended responsibilities.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to achieve a better understanding of nuclear family women's childcare experience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Usually, in no part of the world parents had raised their children in secluded nuclear compartments as they are compelled to do now. Due to the outbreak of this pandemic, women from a nuclear family got a barrage of responsibilities, causing confusion and feeling of helplessness in them. Undoubtedly, the pandemic weighs heavily for all of us, but it has revealed how shaky our nuclear family foundation is. This study provides an opportunity to comprehend the lived reality and significant perspective of women and is able to gauge how the pandemic situation has changed the notion of home for women and children both in different ways.

On the one hand, living continuously at home has presented different struggles for women, especially in nuclear families, where under one roof with young age children, increased diverse roles and responsibilities, heightened helplessness and vulnerability, readjustment with job loss, with less support system and spoiled mental health they are living almost a miserable life. Consequently, women's childcare trajectories are becoming gruelling and further limiting the chances of optimum development. On the other hand, children's lives also come under a tattered umbrella with the imposed COVID restrictions and the changing ecology of home and mother. Zero-free play zone reduced social interaction, forceful remote learning, vulnerable mental health, almost caged childhood, and much more disruptive behaviours are the prominent endowments of the COVID-19 to children in the early childhood stage. All these adversities are spreading their wings silently, putting little ones into caged childhood and leaving them with burdensome childcare experiences.

Our study results are meaningful in such a way that it not only understands the interconnecting and reciprocal nature of pain and gain of women of nuclear families but also maps explicitly the impact of

changing nature and nurture on developmental opportunities for early childhood during the pandemic. The outbreak realises that the demand for a stable support system for childcare is not a luxury on the women's side. However, it is essential to achieve and maintain gender equality while simultaneously providing holistic developmental opportunities to children. In this connection, remote learning has also become a new normal as it has added a new dimension in early childhood education. A complete makeover is experienced in children's play behaviour where the phone has closer proximity in children's minds. It can be inferred that the digitalised world has become more knowledgeable for children than parents. Results also show that the pandemic affects individuals differently based on their underlying social context and social class positions. Comparatively, low socio-economic security and less education have a more drastic effect on the overall well-being of women and children, reflecting the urgent need for meaningful interventions to provide sustainable support to them.

Contributing to the original knowledge, research shows that women and children are becoming more resilient even with the gruesome reality of the pandemic. They are adapting differently to the changing environment, and somewhere their capacities have also increased to handle such shocks in the future. This crucial time also provides some new choices to rethink parents, teachers, and policymakers about how early childhood education and development can be saved from the flood of digitalisation and marketisation. We suggest that there is a need to find out contextual measures to develop children's competence. Moreover, children and women's mental health and well-being emerged as an important area to be taken care of seriously, individually and collectively, by all stakeholders.

It is vital to admit that this study is not without limitations. We think three main initiatives could provide a more nuanced picture of women's and children's overall well-being. This strategy will include the need for closer observation of children's overall behaviour, direct visits to the research fields, and listen to men's perspectives.

In the end, we will say that women's lived experiences about child care provide us with a critical lens to understand the struggles of their real social world. They are also crucial for setting the foundation of a progressive society. But the big question remains: how will we really change this scenario in the coming future? One hopes that at present, lies in collective efforts and togetherness.

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Review Article

The acquisition of autonomy, through benevolence, of children who are victims of domestic violence

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Abstract: From its etymology bene (good) and volens (will), benevolence means desire to do well. Benevolence is not an arbitrary notion or a theoretical apprehension. It unquestionably reveals man's humanism, which must combine in its daily practice and management with his fellow human beings and even with himself. In education, benevolence is crucial in mother-child relations. We believe that a mother must be benevolent, at the same time as; a child who has received the love of his mother (or parents) can love himself. This is a prerequisite for the acquisition of independent thought. The true cement of any family unit is the mutual love of all those who are called to live together. Paradoxically, love is not the foundation of all families. Unfortunately, there are dysfunctional families in which there are various and varied forms of violence. Children from this type of environment find themselves victims of abuse with all the possible traumatic consequences. Based on this observation, it is easy to reason by deduction: if family love conditions the acquisition of autonomy and children who are victims of family violence do not benefit from it within their families, then children who are victims of family violence are at a disadvantage in acquiring autonomy, or even that they cannot be autonomous. Thus, one may wonder to bring a child victim of family violence to the acquisition of his autonomy? What tools can be used to help a traumatized child become autonomous? How to rebuild a child who has suffered family trauma with a view to his or her autonomy? This article offers the reader benevolence, not as an instruction manual or prescription to be applied, but as a transferable and impactable posture.

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Introduction

Whatever the type of family -sociological, poly or monogamous, endogamous, exogamous, tribal, nuclear, homoparental- the reader of this article will recognize that the family is a rather difficult institution to define. Summarizing the definition of the dictionary Le Petit Larousse Illustré (Famille, 2002, p. 420): "all persons of the same blood, living under the same roof and more particularly the father, mother and children". Poirot (1973) speaks of coexistence under the same roof and the blood ties of people. At the same time as for him, these two criteria are insufficient for coexistence; he posits love as the driving force for the coexistence of parents and children within a family. However, there is unfortunately another reality contrary to the criterion of love that should govern a family: violence within families. Among the types of families, there are so-called dysfunctional families. Within this type of family, there are various forms of violence: conjugal, physical, psychological, sexual, abandonment, rejection, parentification. The readings indicate that the family context in which a child evolves, has a profound impact on his health and well-being - being because of reproduction or imitation. This is to say that this violence alters the psychological development of child victims. The child's "I" is then shattered because of traumas suffered. However, Hoffmans – Gosset (2002, p. 27) mentions the importance of the "I" as subject and actor in the acquisition of autonomy. At this level, we then find ourselves confronted with a problem that brings us face to face

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with an "I" shattered by the traumas on the one hand. On the other hand, the same "I" is strongly solicited to acquire autonomy.

In order to get out of this dilemma that puts the child's "I" in a dualistic position, this article puts at the heart of both portraits the benevolent impulse that propels towards autonomy. It is structured in two parts. First, we will see theoretically how by a benevolent posture one transfers autonomy. Then we will see in a practical way the feasibility of our reflection through a methodology that we propose. The posture of any researcher begins with a questioning. Let us take up again the questioning that guides our work: How to bring a child victim of domestic violence to the acquisition of his autonomy? By which tool can a traumatized child become autonomous? How to rebuild a child who has suffered family traumas for his autonomy? To answer this question which is the subject of our research, we postulate that it is possible for a child shattered by family violence to rebuild his or her autonomy through the phenomenon of reproduction and transfer of benevolence or by imitating the benevolence of the guardian who accompanies the child victim of family violence, without necessarily making the child fall into a form of dependence on his or her guardian. In order to test our hypothesis, let us first define and circumscribe the field of autonomy.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: the first part deals with the theoretical construction in which the child victims of domestic violence and their consequences are first examined, the second part includes a definition and circumscription of field autonomy. In the following, the "I" heteronomy of the child victim of domestic violence is presented followed by the benevolence: Carl Ransom (1902-1987) then the benevolent and autonomous "I" of the guardian and finally the heteronomy to autonomy through the pedagogy of naive transfer. The second part is devoted to an example of the theoretical construction in which the natural method of transfer: from the bottom up is presented and the placement chart of the child by the transfer of the bottom - up naive is established. The conclusion is presented at the end of the paper and summarizes the salient points.

Theoretical Construction

Children Who Are Victims of Domestic Violence and The Consequences

For Bovay (2008) quoted in Valandro and Chalmel (2020, p. 3), "violence refers to physical behavior and actions: it consists of the use of force against someone with the damage it causes". Valandro and Chalmel (2020) write that a child who is a victim of domestic violence is a child to whom his or her family system offers conditions of survival and not of life, moreover, interspersed with violence. These include physical, psychological, sexual, abandonment, rejection, parentification...and many other forms of child abuse within the family. Cudré-Mauraux (2012) recognizes that psychological violence: verbal aggression (threats, insults...) attacks psychological integrity. Savard and Zaouche (2011) point out that exposing children to physical violence leads to disorganization in the child's life. Note also that children's exposure to violence has traumatic consequences Valandro and Chalmel (2020). Cyrulnik and Jorland (2012, p. 175) defines psychological trauma as all the psychological and physiological damage resulting from an event suffered, where any form of violence experienced physically or morally varies individually, being linked to personal history.

Autonomy: Define and Circumscribe the Field

The word autonomy comes from the Greek word autonomia, which means the power of one who is autonomos, that is to say, who determines for himself the law (nomos) to which he obeys. For Lafon 1905 -1980) quoted by Hoffmans - Gosset (2002, p. 15), autonomy consists in making oneself - even one's own law and self-determination in values. The "I" is the principle of autonomy and we can only speak of autonomy when there is self-awareness. Connac (2017) even evokes different types of autonomy: functional, moral, legal and intellectual. As for our work, we will follow in the footsteps of Hoffmans - Gosset (2002, p. 30) and speak of affective autonomy. Hoffmans - Gosset (2002) explains in this regard that this type of autonomy is translated into being, that is to say that it is a state, it is experienced bodily, it is valued and is gratifying. She writes clearly that "a pleasant, satisfying state seems to come from a practice

of autonomy". In order for autonomy to exist, it must be experienced, it cannot be given just as one cannot speak of someone else's autonomy when one is in the order of affectivity. Autonomy touches something in us in the order of vitality and survival. It explains that it cannot be given as a manual, in which case it is no longer autonomy. And the person claiming it is not an autonomous person.

The "Me" Heteronomy of The Child Victim of Domestic Violence

To understand this logic of Hoffmans - Gosset (2002), affective autonomy is an evolutionary construction. It is constructed, in the same way as the "me" is constructed. It must be built within a framework that is empowering or favorable to the construction of identity. Let us specify that the empowering environment is an environment that offers an affective basis to a child for his identity construction and development. With this in mind, we call again on the reader of this work to remind him/her of the living conditions of a child victim of family violence. He/she (reader) will recognize that the family is supposed to be a favorable environment for the construction of identity. However, we are in the sad reality that the family is not an enabling environment for the construction of the autonomy of a child victim of family violence due to a lack of affectivity. In the same way that the child's "I" has not been built, his autonomy has not been built either. Fortin (2010), and even Cyrulnik (2017) show that the environment has a strong impact on the child's entire personality. The more favorable this environment is, the more stable and constructed the child is. It conditions the child's education and autonomy. However, for Connac (2017), heteronomy is a constraint which consists in acting under the law of another, the will is determined by an external object. It results in the exercise of submission (whether consensual or not) to a power and leads to forms of assistance where the commitment is triggered by constraint or an external impulse. This "I" is opposed to any logic of autonomy as we have developed it.

Benevolence: Carl Ransom (1902-1987)

In this paper, we choose to refer to the philosopher Carl Ransom and to treat benevolence from an educational perspective. He speaks synonymously of empathy to bridge the gap between psychology and pedagogy. It (benevolence) calls upon human sensitivity, humanism towards others and a spirit of openness towards others. In the same spirit, the psychologist Carl Ransom (1995, p. 21), taken up by Chalmel (2018), places empathy at the crossroads between Christianity and psychology. He therefore uses the same terms such as "to *feel the emotions of the student, to share his feelings...*" Chalmel (2018). He goes on to say that in education, the concept of empathy does not take shape if the teacher initially examines himself and his examination is confined to his repeated questions Chalmel (2018): *Am I authentic and am I aware of who I am? Am I capable of positive relationships? Do I have the strength to be distinct from the other? Do I have enough inner security to leave the other free?* The interest of these questions lies in the thinking subject: the teacher, whom we call the child's companion. From his reflection emerges his posture, his way of being which must be based on what he embodies and on what he is. We would even say that he must be confident in what he is. In this regard, Chalmel (2018) specifies that *"tutoring is based on trust. Any other constraint produces mistrust"*.

The Benevolent and Autonomous "Me" of the Guardian

The guardian, which we develop in this article, is the one who does what he says, who is what he says. He is the one whose discourse is the practice, a coherent tutor. His behavior must bear witness to the responsibility of the one who carries out his work as a tutor. Freire's (2006, p. 80) requirement of teachers is such that he writes: "If one cannot expect his agents to be angels and saints, one can and must nevertheless demand from them righteousness and a serious attitude". In fact, when we read Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of Autonomy (2006) which is a key book on the acquisition of autonomy, we come across a strong anaphoric repetition of the verb "to demand", evoking the different attributes of the teacher. He writes, for example, that "Teaching requires humility..." Freire (2006, p. 81). Also, he writes: "Teaching requires joy and hope", Freire (2006, p. 86). The verb "to demand" challenges us in such a way that it must be an ethically imposable posture. This demand is the one we want to transfer to the guardian of benevolence with regard to a child who is a victim of domestic violence.

From Heteronomy to Autonomy: Through the Pedagogy of Naive Transfer

For professional training, we based to the inspiration of the pedagogue Paulo Freire, we allow ourselves to establish the naive transfer as a suitable method to accompany a child victim of domestic violence towards his autonomy, or at least to build the autonomy of a child victim of domestic violence. This naive transfer is built around an ethical positioning in which we situate this article. Indeed, Freire (2017, p. 48) speaks of epistemological knowledge and naive knowledge. He explains that naive knowledge is made up of pure experiences and attributes it to the curiosity of analgabetes persons. Moreover, there is no break between naïve knowledge and epistemological knowledge. We want to highlight the fact that the transfer that is going to take place will be a transfer based on imitation of the behavior of the tutor supervising the child.

Stakes of The Pedagogy of Naive Transfer

Through this model of accompaniment by transfer of naive knowledge, we want to highlight the posture of the accompanier of a child who has suffered trauma within his family. This pedagogy is built around two instances, the "me" of the tutor and the "me" of the child. The pedagogical action is only the tutor's "me": all that it is and embodies as values. The "me" of the oppressed is invaded by the shadow of the oppressor; the oppressed has the duty to expel this shadow and replace it with his or her autonomy. Through this pedagogy, we want to invite the transmitting "me" to incarnate the values it claims to embody so that through its behavior, its teaching will echo. The heteronomous "me" of the child is influenced by outsiders. In order for this child's "self" to become autonomous, he will simply have to imitate his tutor. Therefore, the tutor must embody a good posture so that the child imitates him in a natural way. The tutor therefore does not need to teach the child autonomy as a lesson to be studied. The tutor must be natural to transmit his natural posture to the child. Clearly, we situate this passage in the paradigm of "such I am and such you must be". Given that "imitation is the fundamental conduct by which the child accomplishes his conquests", Nadel and Zazzo (1986, p. 21). Naive transference is a natural method that makes practical use of the guardian's posture. The child's "me" will be imitated.

Example of the Theoretical Construction

We believe that all scientific reflection should aim at a plan for putting the theory developed into practice. This step is only the feasible or living part of the ideas developed. Moreover, in his praxeological approach Freire (2006, p. 48) clearly writes that "*Critical reflection on practice becomes a requirement of the theory/practice relationship, without which theory can turn into blah-blah, and practice into activism*". Thus, in our work, we have thought about the autonomy of a child victim of domestic violence. We propose, as a practical example, a type of accompaniment towards the construction of the autonomy of this type of child. For this accompaniment, the tutor in charge of the child's care must embody a posture, the said posture will be transferred to the child by what we have called: the pedagogy of naive transfer. That is to say, from the autonomous "I" of the tutor to a heteronomous "I" of the child, this heteronomous "I" which, by imitating the values of the tutor, will become autonomous.

Natural Method of Transfer: Bottom Up

The naive transfer pedagogy that we have developed in our theoretical approach will be confined to what we will call in our methodology the "bottom up" approach.

Definition

Bottom-up is an ascending approach (from the bottom to the top) that will bring out theories of practice. Our theories put us in front of two instances: a shattered and heteronomous "me". This "me", in our methodology, will be identified with the position of the bottom, because of its lack of autonomy following the various traumas it has undergone. We recognize that this unfulfilled instance is the "me" of the child victim. The second instance of our theories is also an "me" that opposes the unfulfilled "me". This "I" is that of the guardian, benevolent and autonomous. In our bottom-up method, the autonomous "me" of the guardian occupies the position of the top. This high position is recognized because of its construction,

its autonomy and its benevolence. The bottom-up methodology, as we conceive it, is unconscious or naive because of the type of transference we have evoked in our theories. Let us acknowledge, however, that this method is inspired by the pedagogical experience developed by Pestalozzi (1799) in Neuhoff and quoted in *Lettre de Stans* (1996, p.30).

Indeed, the pedagogue opens an institute that takes care of orphans, the poorest and most abandoned children. For these little orphans he opts for a purely family approach, from which he believes that *"Every good education requires that the strength of the educator be no other than that of a father, animated by the presence of all the circumstances of domestic life"*, Pestalozzi (1985, p. 18). His method is based only on the benevolence he intends to transmit to this public. *"My way of proceeding in this regard was based on the following principle: seek first to enlarge the hearts of your children and to bring their sensitivity, experience and activity into contact with love and benevolence..."*, Pestalozzi (1985, p. 30). In the pedagogue's approach, two important things attract us: the creation of a family context and benevolence as a pedagogical tool for the acquisition of autonomy. Also, in Pestalozzi's experience, children, whose "I" is completely destroyed, were asked to rebuild themselves according to the Pestalozzi model itself. In this approach, we find the bottom-up method of unconscious transference which is the basis of this part of the work.

In concrete terms, there is talk of setting up a type of care for children who are victims of domestic violence within a caring family.

Placement Chart of The Child by The Transfer of the Bottom - Up Naïve Method

Table 1 shows the transfer of the child from two institutions: from an institution in his or her biological family environment to a foster family. The placement is subject to legal proceedings following a report. With regard to the child's problems, the choice of foster family is based on a family composition close to the child's family. The main objective is to enable the child to build his or her emotional autonomy. This can be verified when the child unconsciously inspires the adoptive parents to set up a support program for his or her follow-up. In other words, through observation in gestures, words...the child will express desires about his activities. These desires will be studied and analyzed by the tutors, who will judge by this language a certain freedom of the child to build himself and be autonomous. *"Respect for the autonomy and dignity of each person is an ethical imperative and not a favour that we may or may not grant to one another"*, Freire (2006, p. 75)

It should be noted that guardians do not coerce the child in any way. They leave him a certain freedom of action with, of course, advice, guidance, guidance, adjustments, to avoid falling into the trap of letting him go. They live with the child as they are.

Table 1. Table of placement chart of the child by the transfer of the bottom - up naive

	Child	**Family**
Institution	Legal Placement at Home	Is selected by the juvenile judge
Criteria	Non-autonomous From a dysfunctional family	Capable of operating autonomously. Caring. Stable.
Type	10 to 15 years	Identical to the composition of the biological family.
Objectives	1/ At the end of the stay, the child must be able to demonstrate independence in daily activities. 2/Express your wishes and desires gradually, freely and unconsciously	to lead the child to build his autonomy. Translate the child's requests into a support tool.
Methodology	Bottom up (Imitation) Pedagogy of freedom	Bottom up by naive transfer
Requirements		Orientation-Adjustment – Freedom to behave
Expected results	Autonomy	

Conclusion

The work we have done is aimed at two very important players. On the one hand, a person, or at least a child, who is a victim of violence and who wants to rebuild his or her life. And on the other hand, a tutor to accompany them towards reconstruction. It presents benevolence as a tool for acquiring autonomy. He opts for a transfer of benevolence in a natural way: from a "senior "I" benevolent" to a "Junior "I" benevolent". With all that we have developed, it is possible that the autonomous benevolent being creates autonomy through human contact.

The reader of this article will have quickly understood the positioning or ethical dimension in which we situate our work. Or better still, he or she will have understood the challenge or awareness of the values that underpin human dignity, which are at the heart of everything we have developed. The discerning reader will have quickly understood that there is a pressing challenge to benevolence for any accompanying tutor. This article advocates an embodiment of benevolence that goes beyond professional constraints. The reflection we have conducted also invites professional actors in caring for people who want to be part of a neo development process to a critical examination of their values. Far from being a work of accusation, our work makes a point of saluting the nobility and humanity of their profession and also saluting the efforts they make to reintegrate others into a beautiful life expectancy.

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Review Article

Policies and practices of early childhood education and care during the COVID-19 pandemic: Perspectives from five countries

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic, which affects all areas of life, has also affected children in need of education and care. It is of great importance to develop policies that take into account the best interests of children in this process. In this review article, the policies developed for early childhood education and care during the pandemic period in five countries (Australia, Croatia, Hungary, Spain, and Turkey), how they are implemented, the problems that arose, and the solutions produced are discussed. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that we need to focus on eliminating the educational inequalities, set policies for the welfare of children on foundations that are more realistic, rebuild teacher training, and improve the welfare of families. Priorizating the best interests of the child in the policies to be developed and building the social ecology on justice will ease overcoming the crises that will be faced.

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Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) forms the basis for the acquisition of lifelong competencies. The disadvantages of children who cannot access a qualified environment and education in the early years continue throughout their lives, and to overcome this, practices that consider the best interests of all children should be a priority in the country's policies. According to United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) reports, it is stated that 175 million children between the ages of 3-6 do not benefit from early childhood education at all, and one out of every four children who is one year younger than the compulsory education age does not benefit from early childhood education at all (UNICEF, 2021a). Moreover, these are data prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and it is not yet known how children are affected by early childhood education as the pandemic continues. However, according to UNICEF's estimates, the global economic crisis caused by the pandemic negatively affected families in developing countries, and it is estimated that the number of poor children could exceed 725 million, with 142 million more children already facing poverty (UNICEF, 2021b). Undoubtedly, the increase in poverty leads to the restriction of children's access to education and health, and to a decrease in healthy nutrition resources. Furthermore, poverty causes parents to face difficulties in creating economic resources and experience psychological problems, and it disrupts family dynamics. This poverty not only directly affects the family and the child, but also negatively affects the budget allocated by the countries for education, which is an indicator of social welfare. This negative effect on the education budget causes interruptions or a decrease in the quality of the education services provided. Economically, psychologically, and

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sociologically fragile societies are facing major crises in this sense, along with the pandemic.

As a result of the rapid spread of the pandemic and became life-threatening, schools at all levels were closed in 191 countries, and 1.7 billion students continued their education based on the policies and practices that were promptly developed by their countries (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021) in line with the policies to combat the pandemic (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020) announced by the WHO on March 11, 2020. According to the report prepared by UNICEF in September 2020, while the rate of countries that switched to distance education at primary and post-secondary levels was 90%, this rate was 60% in early childhood education (UNICEF, 2021c). In the report, it is stated that despite these rates, not all children have equal access to education, educational inequality has become more evident with the pandemic, teachers' technology literacy and competent use are low in underdeveloped and developing countries, and there are difficulties in providing and accessing digital tools (UNESCO, 2020).

The fact that inequality in access to ECEC has become apparent during the pandemic is due to the policy uncertainties and investing in ECEC not being a priority. In addition, the suspension of education of 40% of children benefiting from early childhood education because of the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021c) contains important clues that larger crises will occur. These clues make it important to evaluate the educational policies and practices of the authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this review article, the policies developed for ECEC during the pandemic in five countries (Australia, Croatia, Hungary, Spain, and Turkey), how they were implemented, the problems that arose, and the solutions produced were discussed.

Australia: Policies and Practices of ECEC during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In Australia, ECEC services comprise child care and preschool services. They provide education and care for over 1.3 million children (Department of Education, Skills and Employment [DESE], 2020a). Types of ECEC programs include long day-care (often called Early Learning Centres), family day-care services, and preschools. Children's attendance to an ECEC program in the pre-school year is not compulsory. However, since 2008 the Australian Government has committed to universal access to ECEC in the year before full-time schooling (Parliament of Australia, 2014).

The first case of COVID-19 in Australia was recorded on 25 January 2020 and it was linked to an overseas traveler from China. As the number of daily COVID-19 cases increased steadily over the following weeks, Australia introduced an international travel ban, border closures, quarantine, high testing rates, rapid case isolation, and contact tracing (McAnulty & Ward, 2020). On 27 March 2020, the Australian Government declared the ECEC sector 'essential' to the economy (Parliament of Australia, 2020a). That means ECEC services were required to remain open. This declaration highlighted ECEC as a fundamental service for supporting parent participation in the workforce (Thorpe, Staton, Houen, & Beatton, 2020).

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ECEC sector experienced the devastating impact of COVID-19 when the demand for ECEC services declined dramatically. Many families pulled their children out of ECEC services in Australia. Some families unenrolled their children because they could provide care to their children at home due to losing employment or working from home and some families had health concerns (Parliament of Australia, 2020b).

Lockdown restrictions were implemented to monitor the COVID-19 outbreak across the country between late March and mid-May 2020. During the outbreak, the health officials considered ECEC services were essential. These services were able to operate by paying attention to hygiene, physical distancing, cleaning surfaces at least daily (e.g. tables, chairs, light switches) and washing resources such as play items and toys (Early Childhood Australia, 2020). It was suggested that young children were less likely to catch the virus. Families were encouraged to keep their children in ECEC services, while they were given the option to keep their children at home.

In April 2020, the Australian Government announced an Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package to support families and the ECEC sector. The Relief Package (also referred to as 'free' childcare)

provided $1.6 billion to the sector for three months (DESE, 2020b). Families were not charged any fees between April and July 2020. Priority was given to working parents, disadvantaged and vulnerable children who needed to access ECEC (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020c). In the landscape of Australian ECEC, the Relief Package has been one of the most effective policies to open up a new space for caring for children during a pandemic (Lee, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed many practices in ECEC settings. Educators implemented strict hygiene measures which minimized the number of parents during their children's arrival and departure times. Children were dropped off and picked up at the centre entrance to enforce social distancing (Early Childhood Australia, 2020). The reduced contact with parents made educators establishing new forms of communication with them through apps, email or phone.

Many early childhood educators provided regular communication and resources to support families and children who stayed at home through online teaching and learning (Park, Logan, Zhang, Kamigaichi, & Kulapichitr, 2020). This led to changes in teaching practices including developing digital learning materials to engage with children and supporting families who remained at home. Early childhood educators had to provide play-based educational programs remotely. Some early childhood settings used online portals (e.g. *Storypark*) or sent newsletters about online resources (e.g. *Victorian Government Education and Training*). Families could access to '*learning from home'* resources for early childhood education on the state departments' website.

In July 2020, the Australian Government has implemented a Transition Package which provided a Transition payment to the ECEC services until the end of September 2020. During this period, except Victoria, attendance to ECEC services returned to pre-COVID levels nationally. ECEC services have been required to have a COVIDSafe plan with risk mitigation measures (i.e. hygiene and health measures).

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected Australian states and territories unevenly. Victoria has been Australia's worst affected state with over 68% of the COVID-19 cases and 90% of the deaths that occurred across the country (Department of Health, 2021). Victoria's second lockdown lasted almost four months. During Stage four restrictions in August 2020, ECEC services remained open only for vulnerable children who cannot learn at home and children whose parents work in essential services in Melbourne[1] [ECEC services remained open to all children in regional Victoria]. This was a major change from Australia's first lockdown period. Many families faced challenges in the closure of ECEC settings. Working parents had to work from home while providing care for their children for approximately 11 weeks. In order to support Victorian ECEC services, the government announced the Recovery Package which provided a $305.6 million Recovery Payment for Victoria until the end of January 2021 (DESE, 2020b). The aim was to ensure that ECEC services remain open while providing financial support to families. Since November 2020, ECEC settings in Victoria have resumed their regular programs with a COVIDSafe Plan[1].

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic shows that ECEC is an essential service for working parents however it is also important to recognise and support ECEC educators who provide this service (Thorpe et al., 2020). During this time, they prioritised the well-being of young children and families. More attention should be given to the experiences of ECEC educators in supporting children and their families.

Croatia: Policies and practices of ECEC during the COVID-19 Pandemic

ECEC in the Republic of Croatia is not part of the compulsory educational system. The exception is the preschool program intended for children in the year before starting school. The preschool program, lasting 250 hours, is mandatory for school-age children (children aged 6-7, who start primary school in the next school year). It usually takes place in ECEC settings or primary schools if there are no ECEC settings nearby. This position determines how the ECEC system itself and its organization are perceived in public. Although it is a system that is part of the Ministry of Science and Education, aimed to ensure the wellbeing (personal, emotional, physical, educational, and social) of the child (Ministarstvo Znanosti, Obrazovanja i

[1] As of 1st of June 2021, Victoria is currently in its fourth lockdown. Primary and secondary schools are currently closed while ECEC remain open.

Sporta [MZOS], 2015), the public more often perceives it as a system for caring for children so that parents can work. This attitude is also promoted by certain projects (for example, *Improvement of services for children in the system of early and preschool education*) funded by the Ministry of Labor, Pensions, Family and Welfare, which are founded on the idea of social policy (ensuring reconciliation of family and business life). In practice, this means, among other things, providing a kindergarten for all children in accordance with the needs of parents. It is therefore questionable whether this is an idea that is in line with the basic goal of ECEC in the Republic of Croatia - ensuring the well-being of the child.

This position of ECEC in the Republic of Croatia partly determined the attitude towards the openness/closeness of ECEC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. In mid-March, a pandemic of Covid-19 disease was declared (Ministry of Health, 2020), and the Government of the Republic of Croatia (Vlada Republike Hrvatske) (2020) passed a *Decision to suspend teaching in higher education, secondary and primary schools and the regular operation of early childhood education institutions*. The pandemic resulted in the closure of many institutions, restrictions on movement and, where possible, remote work. The new family and work structure were somehow improvised. Višnjić-Jevtić and Visković (2021) conclude that a new daily rhythm and schedule of activities had to be organized, mutual obligations (jobs, roles) and ways of solving problem situations had to be harmonized. The closure of educational institutions and the transition to a virtual work environment indicated unequal opportunities for participation due to technical and social issues. While lower primary classes were organized through television (*School on 3rd*) and upper primary and secondary classes were organized through various learning platforms, early childhood education was not organized at the state level. Somolanji Tokić and Vukašinović (2020) find that organization of early childhood education work depended mostly on the intrinsic motivation of teachers, while there wasn't official support from the state. This has led to various solutions - from opening kindergartens for first-line workers, through designing group communication with children and parents on different communication platforms to creating an online kindergarten. Therefore, early childhood education during the pandemic in Croatia faced with several issues: organization of the work; the wellbeing of the children due to digital exposure; digital competencies of teachers; and wellbeing of the teachers. Due to the closure of kindergartens, it was questionable how to organize work for teachers (what they could do when there are no children in the settings) and children (to ensure continuity in education), and at the same time help the parents. Research in Croatia shows that activities organized by ECEC settings for children most often required the joint involvement of children and parents (Višnjić-Jevtić & Visković, 2021). Parents who continued to go to work had to organize time and space for children, while parents who worked from home had to organize time and space for both – themselves and their children.

In ECEC settings that remain open for first-line workers teachers faced a new way of communicating with parents which made it difficult to support each other. Regarding the well-being of young children, it is questionable whether viral activities contribute to the well-being of a child. The most common challenges of the viral environment for children are the absence of play (Schmitt, Pempek, Kirkorian, Lund, & Anderson, 2008; Setliff & Courage, 2011), difficulties in social and emotional functioning of children (Radesky, Schumacher, & Zuckerman, 2014), slower language development (Mendelsohn et al., 2010; Zimmerman, Christakis, & Meltzoff, 2007) and insufficient physical activity (Marshall, Biddle, Gorely, Cameron, & Murdey, 2004). Anderson and Subrahmanyam (2017) point out that the impact of the screen depends on the age of the children, and for children under the age of two it is mostly negative, while for preschool children it has negative and positive aspects. As a result of the above research, it is possible to problematize the organization of ECEC settings through various digital platforms. To organize an appropriate learning environment for young children, ECE teachers should have certain digital competencies. Kim (2020) states that the quality of online learning in early childhood depends in part on the digital competencies of ECE teachers. Somolanji Tokić and Vukašinović (2020) stated that due to the non-mandatory status of ECEC, ECE teachers in Croatia doesn't have the possibility to master their competencies requested in the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators: DigCompEdu. Working in changing conditions, which required new competencies, reflected on the well-being of ECE teachers. Professional responsibility requires adaptation to new conditions and continuous support for children and parents. On the other hand, many educators are parents themselves which can

pose an organizational challenge to their family life. Given the specificity of work in which it is impossible to ensure distance, educators are also exposed to health risks. In preparation for the reopening of ECEC settings, a *Recommendation for working with early and preschool children in kindergartens* (Ministarstvo Znanosti i Obrazovanja [MZO], 2020) was adopted, which was to provide guidelines for work after reopening. The recommendation is guided by health and epidemiological guidelines relating to the protection of health in the first place.

A year after, kindergartens are open, but that brings new challenges. The environment that supposed to be enabling, full of possibilities for playing and learning became equipped only with materials that may be disinfected. Therefore, loose parts or natural materials are forbidden just as soft, cuddling toys. The absence of toys and other stimulative material may lead to exploration of a new play(s), and experiences of new learning strategies in cooperation with peers. Unfortunately, play with peers should be organized to avoid close, physical contact and teachers were suggested engaging children in activities that give possibilities of distancing. One of the teachers try to explain the new situations:

> New challenges are emerging. Parents do not tell us that they are infectious and bring their children to kindergarten, despite that. In this way, the trust we have been building for many years is lost. Cooperation with parents has been reduced to a minimum due to epidemiological measures, and continuity in care and education between family and institutions is being lost. There isn't continuity in educational work with children due to frequent absences and the self-isolation of children. Teachers are overworked and exhausted due to frequent sick leave and consequently, the replacement of sick colleagues (VB, 37 years, ECE teacher).

Working in COVID conditions caused new challenges on many levels. More than a year later, there is no signs or strategies that should help teachers to strengthen children and parents in the new normal.

Hungary: Policies and Practices of ECEC during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In Hungary, kindergarten education has a long tradition. The first kindergarten opened its doors in 1828, while the first crèche opened in 1852. Since September 2015, attendance to the kindergarten has been compulsory from the age of 3, the aim of which is to minimise disadvantage and to ensure equal opportunities and life chances for all children.

The disease, referred to as COVID-19, was declared a pandemic by the UN health organization on 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2020). The Hungarian Government created the Operative Staff in order to fight the new coronavirus, their information about official measures appears on koronavirus.gov.hu website. The Hungarian Government (Government Decree 40/2020) declared an emergency situation for the entire territory of Hungary in order to prevent the consequences of a human pandemic causing a mass illness endangering the safety of life and property and to protect the health and life of Hungarian citizens of the Government Decree, the mayor of the local government providing nursery and kindergarten[2] may order an extraordinary break in the case of nursery and kindergarten institutions from 16 March 2020. The mayor shall inform the Minister of Human Resources of ordering the break. According to the government decree, domestic kindergartens could not accept children, they had to suspend their educational activities for an indefinite period (The Hungarian Government, 2020a).

The regulation has put early childhood institutions and stakeholders in an unprecedented, unexpected situation. In the new situation, central, uniform measures did not help the institutions concerned, according to the government decree, the maintainers ordered the institutions to do non-educational work and then to do home office work for their employees. Families were particularly weighed down by the situation, with some parents continuing to work from home in a home office, while others lost their jobs. In addition, they had to solve the care of younger children without institutional support and help digital education for school-age children. The placement of the child during the day, while the parent is working, is a vital issue for parents, regardless of social affiliation, and a basic function of the institution.

[2] In English we use the word "kindergarten", those who work there are the "kindergarten pedagogue", or "early childhood educators", that can be used for both genders. These are according to the Hungarian approach to Kindergarten. According to the same approach, in Hungary, the phrase "preschool" is not correct as it does not mirror the local specialties of this field of science. Samely, the pedagogue who works there are not at all "preschool teachers" as not even Kindergarten pedagogues call themselves teachers as they do not teach in a direct and controlled way in the Kindergarten. Kindergarten workers deal with children 3-6, school starts at the age of 6 in Hungary.

In the crisis caused by the virus, the relationship with the kindergarten was severed to a large extent. In Hungary, the number of disadvantaged children is high in public education institutions, contact with their families is inherently more difficult and research proves that disadvantaged parents prefer a personal, trusting relationship with the early childhood educators (Vargáné Nagy & Molnár, 2017). There were disadvantaged areas where the head of the kindergarten visited the families personally and informed them of the emergency and the closure of the institution, as they sometimes did not have even a telephone.

In state-run, municipal kindergartens, the employer envisaged digital work for kindergarten pedagogues in kindergartens, similar to public education institutions (schools), in order to ensure that employees' work was justified and thus paid. Changed employment rules were declared in Government Decree 47/2020 (The Hungarian Government, 2020b). Educators either visited the institution regularly or kept in touch with parents from home. They had to perform the work tasks set out in the document regulating the operation of the institution and had to certify the work from home with a weekly report to the maintainer.

Families were hard hit by the regulation, as they had to take care of their children overnight, knowing that the possible illness of the older generation could easily be caused by the reorganization of childcare within the family and at the same time transforming their lives. After the changeover, the need for support for children's personal development at home required reconsideration (Balogh & Szerepi, 2020).

Teleworking was a completely unknown concept for kindergarten pedagogues. Their work includes a loving reception of children, physical contact, hugging, and daily verbal contact with parents. This was replaced by an Information Technology (IT) tool that required a completely different form of communication and competencies. In general, kindergartens are not well equipped with Information and Communications Technology (ICT) tools either. The ability of kindergarten pedagogues to innovate has brought forward innovative efforts and the use of ICT tools, although a video, audio file or PowerPoint presentation cannot replace personal contact. Embrace, kind words, facial expressions and gestures, nonverbal gestures for children who understand speech even less, group cohesion cannot be replaced by such means.

It has become common practice for kindergartens to create closed Facebook groups to reach parents. Knowing the development level of the children and the kindergarten group, the parents were mainly recommended offline, mobile home play activity forms and experience opportunities that can be performed together with the children. The methodological recommendations took into account the children's personality, interests and individual abilities. Thus, they wanted to provide online help to all parents using the ICT tools at their disposal. Their helpful intentions were to support parents with their pedagogical knowledge and ideas to help families spend the increased common time at home. This period created an opportunity for educators to strengthen their individual pedagogical competencies and to be professionally renewed. They told the children video tales, played with puppets, sang songs, said poems, and sent parents creative craft activity ideas and games that could be done at home. Game ideas that could be played together with the family were collected and passed on to parents. The pedagogues tried to smuggle mental health, situational games into the life of the group, thus helping to process and accept the experiences.

In the use of online distance education, kindergartens sought to uphold the principle of supporting parental education, which is also a cornerstone of the kindergarten's child image, so they supported parent's child-rearing with activity recommendations that were based on personal advice, common activities, experiences and memories (Balogh & Szerepi, 2020). At the same time, based on parental feedback, it was also found that kindergarten pedagogues asked parents for tasks that could not be performed at home due to lacking conditions and specific tools and went beyond the abilities of a preschool child. Parents responded in several ways to the activity ideas offered by kindergarten teachers. There were those who were constantly active from the first minute, performed the requested tasks, and provided feedback to the educators. There were families who did not take advantage of the suggestions offered by the kindergarten due to IT tools or lack of interest, lack of time, digital education of the older, school-age sibling. The development of different level special needs children has also been pushed into the online

space, the effectiveness of which cannot be compared to personal contact activities.

Parental digital access did not work in all cases. IT knowledge and access to digital tools are uneven. (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2021). It is irrelevant to talk about online help in disadvantaged regions where families do not have the tools that online education assumes. Most of the disadvantaged parents have a pre-paid electric meter, and towards the end of the month there is no more money to recharge, and there is no electricity for a few days. There is no digital device and no internet connection at all. The school children also received the lesson on paper and the parent was usually unable to help. Contact with parents was not limited to previously used working-hours contact. The parents needed the help and feedback of the kindergarten pedagogue in the late evening and many cases on the weekends as well.

Kindergarten pedagogues also helped each other online through professional renewal and exchange of methodological experiences through the use of kindergarten pedagogical professional community sites. With the consent of the maintainer, cleanliness packs were distributed to families in need to comply with hygiene rules that are of paramount importance in the fight against the pandemic. In the institution, they made decorations, scrapped, cleaned, and performed administrative tasks. In addition to these, textiles were repaired, bean bags were sewn, and they also helped to make face masks for the employees of the municipality and those working in health care. There were institutions where, according to the order of the maintainer, the tasks related to the renovation of the building were also performed by the pedagogues, e.g. fence painting, group room renovation, painting. Due to the pandemic, more families needed home help. There was an example of kindergarten staff helping social institution staff, e.g. post office, pharmacy or day-to-day shopping. The kindergarten nurses cleaned and disinfected the institutions.

In institutions that also have kitchens, kitchen workers packed cold food for children on a weekly basis. According to 1997. XXXI Act § 21-21 / B on guardianship administration, it is necessary to provide institutional food provide for children. Children receiving regular child protection benefits received food free of charge, but could also be claimed by others for a fee. The home delivery of food for kindergarten and school-age children was coordinated by the kindergarten staff, at which time they had the opportunity to talk to the parents, as neither the nurse nor the family caregiver visited the families in the segregation at the time of closure.

According to 152/2020. Government Decree, the maintainers appointed kindergartens on duty in the settlements; during the extraordinary break, the mayor was obliged to organize day-care for children of nursery and kindergarten age. Day-care service was to be provided for children without an infectious disease whose parents or other legal representatives required it for work. According to the Regulation, the submission of a request for day-care service was not subject to any formalities and could therefore be submitted either by e-mail or by telephone. The parent had to declare in writing that the child did not suffer from an infectious disease. The municipality had to organize the day-care service in small groups, and a maximum of five children per group could be supervised (The Hungarian Government, 2020c).

On May 20 in 2020 a new government decree was published in the Hungarian Gazette. The 215/2020. Government Decree on the reopening of kindergartens and nurseries (The Hungarian Government, 2020d). Before reopening, institutions assessed families need for kindergarten care and asked them to declare their children's health status. Most families demanded kindergarten care.

The 2020/2021 school year has brought further changes in the lives of institutions raising young children. According to Government Decree 431/2020 on protection measures, no person other than those working there and children could enter the territory of the public education institution (The Hungarian Government, 2020e). From September, parents could not enter the institution, the nurses and pedagogical assistants accompanied the children from the entrance to the group rooms. The body temperature of children and adults entering the institution was measured and recorded, an entry record was introduced, and adults wore masks indoors. Kindergartens tried to protect the health of children and workers with this defence as well. In everyday life, it is difficult to follow a rule, so e.g. use the face mask as it makes speech comprehension difficult. Hand sanitisers were installed in several rooms of the kindergarten, and children were also taught how to use them. They pay attention to the frequent correct hand washing, as well as the

cleanliness and disinfection of the institution. The nurses keep a cleaning record. Parents may enter the institution only in justified cases, respecting the rules. Parental meetings were cancelled, daily contact with parents was reduced, and was limited to a previously created Messenger group or phone.

According to Government Decree 431/2020 on the protection measures of the epidemiological preparedness period, the body temperature measurement of employees and children upon arrival became mandatory from 1 October 2020. In case of coronavirus infection or coronavirus involvement, only the Education Office could order an extraordinary break in the given institution (The Hungarian Government, 2020e).

According to 509/2020 Government Decree, among other things, it ordered regular examinations and screening suitable for the detection of SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus for educational employees working in educational institutions. It was organized by the capital and county government offices and it was done with an antigen rapid test capable of detecting the coronavirus in the order that was specified by the Operational Staff. Participation in the examination was voluntary (The Hungarian Government, 2020f).

The institutions have drawn up an epidemiological action plan (which is a constantly changing protocol according to the epidemiological situation), which contains epidemiological rules for workers and parents (parents do not enter the kindergarten building, all parents have filled in a declaration - only healthy children can come to kindergarten, COVID-19 in the family should be reported, fever and hand disinfection should be performed at the door, and the use of a mask in the open air on the premises of the institution is mandatory according to the current government decree). Parents are still exercising their right not to require kindergarten for their child due to the virus.

Another difficulty was the illness of kindergarten pedagogues and kindergarten workers (nurses, pedagogical assistants). The continuous operation of the kindergarten in these cases requires great organization and perseverance. The situation caused by the COVID 19 virus has transformed the relationship system of the family institution. In the crisis caused by the virus, the parents' direct contact with the kindergarten daily was broken. The basic availability of institutional education for families has become uncertain. This faltering relationship affected both middle-class families, where the parents worked in the home office and disadvantaged families, for whom institutional education also played a complementary, mitigating role for children. Parents' IT skills, their resources and their attitudes towards educational institutions are not uniform either. In general, a traditionally well-functioning family-kindergarten partnership is not benefited by the fact that parents cannot enter the institution, just as a child's community life is not well affected if the parent does not take him or her to kindergarten. In the case of effective communication with parents, the moments of personal encounters are appreciated. The situation caused by the virus has also greatly contributed to raising awareness of the importance of healthy lifestyle education from the areas of kindergarten education among parents and children. Adherence to security measures requires self-discipline.

This period was a serious burden for parents with small children. The consequences of the virus (loss of parents' jobs, difficulties in working from home, difficulties in placing and caring for a child, difficulties in digital education of a primary school child, hopeless life situation, insecurity, stress, difficulty in contacting grandparents, relatives, friends) made life difficult for families. In the case of children, another disadvantage was the lack of living conditions at home, play equipment, drawing tools and parental competence. The development of children with different developmental stages and delayed development (various movement developments, special pedagogical developments, etc.) has also been pushed into the online space, the disadvantages and consequences of which are not even measurable.

Educators were mentally and psychologically overwhelmed, everyone experienced the pandemic, insecurity, hopelessness and fear of illness differently. Kindergarten pedagogues said their IT skills have increased significantly since the outbreak began. This was mostly through autonomous learning and they have consciously updated their methodological knowledge adapted to the given situation and they have done professional renewal.

In the case of educators, the long-term effects include the move towards the digitization of documentation, and further training and conferences can also be extended to the online space in a cost-effective way. The consequences of the situation caused by the COVID-19 virus and its long-term effects on the situation of families and ECEC institutions will be investigated later. The impact of the pandemic situation on out-of-institution education requires new pedagogical competencies. Communication between parents and kindergarten pedagogues is changing, and effective forms of help that can be provided online are becoming more valuable. The consequences for children's social relationships, development of speech and movement skills, and mental health are still unpredictable.

Spain: Policies and Practices of ECEC during the COVID-19 Pandemic

ECEC is essential to promote positive long-term learning outcomes (Paz-Albo, Cvencek, Herranz, Hervás, & Meltzoff, 2017), as well as children's cognitive, language and social development in both the short- and long-term (Melhuish et al., 2015), but not all children have an opportunity to enjoy early experiences. In Spain, increasing children's participation in ECEC provides early access to learning experiences across the country, but these experiences differ depending on each region. In fact, Spain has implemented national and regional reforms in ECEC to enhance the educational needs of 0- to 6-year-old children, fuelling debate about the nature of ECEC and, specifically on the significance of the provision for children under the age of three. Moreover, Spain has one of the highest enrolment rates of 3-5-year-olds (97%) in ECEC across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] countries, and higher for children under the age of 3 (36%), compared to 26% of the OECD average (OECD, 2019).

This situation is the result of the expansion of ECEC services in Spain. However, over the last decade, the childcare provision has experienced a surge of policy attention in Spain, as improving quality in the ECEC sector is a priority (Paz-Albo, 2018). In fact, the provision of ECEC in Spain has a regulatory framework established at the national level in which the purpose of ECEC is established as to contribute to the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of children (Orden ECI/3960/2007, 2008). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has an impact on how ECEC is organized and a variety of resources has been used to support children's learning.

By the middle of March 2020, ECEC institutions closures had been implemented across Spain. During the lockdown the *Aprendo en casa* (Learning at home) and *Recursos para el aprendizaje en línea* (Resources for online learning) educational sites were designed by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training in order to provide educators, students and families access to online resources, materials and educational apps designed specifically for 0-6-year-olds and beyond. These resources supported learning continuity during the full school closures, stimulating curiosity and creativity to enhance learning, and strengthening learning through play and reading in addition to promoting autonomy, key aspects of ECEC in Spain. Furthermore, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Spain supported remote learning and offered guidance for parents in supporting learning for their children at home since every child is entitled to an education (Celaá, 2020).

After the lockdown, many children in ECEC started to return to in-person learning as the government encouraged schools to reopen buildings adopting several educational measures (see Orden EFP/561/2020, 2020). In fact, all 0-3-year-olds were required to return to in-person learning to start the new school year in September 2020, while complying with the preventive, hygiene and health regulations established by the Spanish Ministry of Health. However, to secure support the reopening of schools for on-site learning 3-6-year-olds returned to school a few weeks later to be taught in small group bubbles for social distancing purposes. Within the ECEC context, this means reducing contact between groups of children and maintaining a safe distance of 1.5 meters. With regard to these policies and practices, the Interterritorial Council of the Spanish Health System (2020) admitted that respecting the social safe distance was harder for younger children and, also, that it was difficult to ensure their proper use of the masks for a long time. On the other hand, these children needed greater interaction and closeness in order to ensure successful development and to accomplish the proposed educational goals.

Bearing in mind the particularities and needs of the ECEC years, the establishment of stable coexistence groups was proposed as the best alternative to solve the situation. These groups were made up of a reduced number of students and a tutor; ideally, with a maximum of 15 children and, if necessary, a maximum of 20. However, the maximum number of students might be settled by the Department of Education of each Autonomous Community with the permission of corresponding public health authorities. Following the instructions published by the Spanish Ministry of Health (2021), when a case of COVID-19 was detected, the students and tutor belonging to the stable coexistence group were considered as close contacts and, consequently, all of them must comply with the quarantine (10 days after the last contact with the confirmed case).

With the return to in-person learning, concerns arose from families and educators about the possibility that children were carriers of the disease and, consequently, the potential increase of COVID-19 cases. However, the situation of ECEC centres and educational institutions was positive, with just 0.73% of the groups temporary closed by the end of September (RTVE Noticias, 2020). In this sense, the preventive, hygiene and health measures (ventilation of classrooms, hand washing, stable coexistence groups, social distance, etc.) have permitted in-person learning as the educational approach mainly used at the present academic year. In fact, nowadays (about the end of the academic year), the data has confirmed that the Spanish ECEC and educational centres are safe spaces: 99.6% of the classrooms are open, whereas only 0.4% are in quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the data provided by the autonomous communities to the Ministry of Education (Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2021).

Despite the low percentage of groups temporarily closed for the COVID-19, KSNET and Spanish UNICEF (2020) have published the results of a survey showing that 86% of the Spanish entities affirm that children have suffered difficulties to continue with the academic year. According to this study, the main obstacles have been the digital gap, the lack of space to study at home, and the absence of accompaniment (KSNET & Spanish UNICEF, 2020). Apart from the academic consequences, several studies with Spanish population have pointed that the lockdown has hampered children's development, including negative consequences in their physical health (Valero, Martín, Domínguez-Rodríguez & Grupo Confisalud, 2020), an increment on sedentary time (Alonso-Martínez, Ramírez-Vélez, García-Alonso, Izquierdo & García-Hermoso, 2021; Arufe-Giráldez, Sanmiguel-Rodríguez, Zagalaz-Sánchez, Cachón-Zagalaz & González-Valero, 2020), and an exacerbation of their internalizing and externalizing problems (Alonso-Martínez et al., 2021).

In this line, we cannot forget that, although it seems that the worst scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, ECEC will be crucial to overcoming the aforementioned negative effects of the lockdown and social distance measures. As it has been pointed, educational and care institutions not only promote physical activities, appropriate diet, and good sleep habits (Brazendale et al., 2017) which, in turn, might help to mitigate the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in children's development, but also Spanish ECEC centres might play a critical role providing safe environments to children to be able to interact with peers and teachers, and develop their socioemotional skills.

Turkey: Policies and Practices of ECEC during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In many countries, including Turkey, one of the precautions taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 has been the closure of schools and other educational institutions. On February 3, 2020, more than five weeks before the first COVID-19 case was detected in Turkey, a pamphlet titled *Coronavirus Information Note* had been prepared for Turkish children and parents, detailing some precautions that had to be taken to prevent the virus from entering the country (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2020a). It also mentioned ways to prevent respiratory tract infections and described the correct hand-washing procedure to be followed by children in ECEC institutions.

Soon after the detection of the first COVID-19 case in Turkey, on March 11, 2020, schools across the country were closed for two weeks, i.e., from March 16 to March 30 (MoNE, 2020b). During that period, on March 23, Educational Informatics Network run by the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT),

known as EBA TV, started broadcasting to the primary, secondary and high schools in cooperation with MoNE and TRT (MoNE, n.d.). However, no channels or broadcasts appear to have been aimed at ECEC children at that time.

At the beginning of the following month, a program for parents named *Bizden* (literally 'from us') was launched on EBA TV to provide effective role models for child development during the distance-education process, alongside practical information about that process (MoNE, 2020c). The show's underlying purpose appears to have been to encourage parents to deal with their young children more consciously (Sak, Şahin-Sak, & Nas, 2020).

During the ensuing extraordinary time that parents spent at home with their children, a printed set of daily-activity recommendations titled *Distance Education, Close Interest* was prepared and shared with parents to guide them in establishing close relationships and strong ties with their children. The guide was aimed at families with children of up to secondary-school age, and its core message was "in this process, we are with you and close to you. We will survive together" (MoNE, 2020d). Then, another guidebook titled *Play in Crisis* (MoNE, 2020e), emphasizing the importance of play and how families could contribute to it was added to the same series.

Based on recommendations from the Turkish government's Scientific Committee at the end of April 2020, it was decided that distance education would continue until May 31, 2020 (MoNE, 2020f). During this latter period of homeschooling, MoNE (2020g) recommended that parents and their children play three games together, called "And Walk Like This", "Tell Me About Me" and "Don't Step on Paper". Additionally, at the beginning of May 2020, Turkey's General Directorate of Special Education and Guidance Services published a booklet titled *Elif and Alp*. This publication featured activities aimed at helping ECEC and primary-school children adapt to pandemic conditions and lockdown by ensuring that they understood and expressed their feelings (MoNE, 2020h).

At the end of May 2020, as part of a planned easing of lockdown, it was announced that nurseries and daycare centres would until further notice only serve households where all parents/carers had returned to working outside the home (Resmi Gazete, 2020). Subsequently, as the implementation of precautions had proved successful throughout the country, the normalization process continued as planned. Therefore, the General Directorate of Private Education Institutions circulated a letter authorizing private ECEC institutions to reopen beginning on June 1, 2020, if requested by their heads and the parents of the children. A similar official letter was also then sent to public ECEC institutions by MoNE, though in this case, it was not school heads but the Education Directorate of each of the nation's provinces that had to make the request, again with parental consent. All public and private ECEC institutions that reopened were required to observe strict COVID-19 safety rules, including the wearing of medical masks, hand hygiene, and social distancing (MoNE, 2020i).

In September 2020, schools that had been closed March 2020 due to the pandemic were opened to ECEC children and first graders. During the first week of school, which was September 21-25, 2020 in all regions, a one-day face-to-face education orientation program for these children was implemented. In ECEC settings, the orientation week consisted of a single day featuring five 30-minute activities, expanding in the second week to two days, with the same number and length of activities (MoNE, 2020j). After the resumption of face-to-face schooling, the MoNE released *Contactless Play Book* (Erdoğan, 2020), as a fun means of helping ECEC children and primary-school students internalize the wearing of masks, social distancing, and personal-hygiene rules, and more generally, adapt to the 'new normal' way of doing things. The book's 60 games covered skills such as meeting someone, communication, attention, movement and cooperation, none involving any physical contact (MoNE, 2020j).

October 12, 2020, marked the start of the second stage of face-to-face education in Turkish schools, in which the two-day weekly education process that had been implemented in ECEC institutions in September 2020 was increased to five days (MoNE, 2020k). Then, beginning in December, *TRT-EBA Kindergarten* was broadcast on EBA TV's Primary School channel every weekday at 8:00 a.m., and 7:30 p.m. Its original content was divided into three sections: "Calendar", "Activity Zone" and "As a Family".

"Calendar" was aimed at helping children start the day as if they were already at school, and thus explained concepts including dates, seasons, days of the week, colours and shapes. In "Activity Zone", ECEC teachers conducted Turkish-language, math, science, music, drama, art and play activities, relying on many a wide range of materials, toys and visual documents in line with the MoNE-approved preschool curriculum. Lastly, the "As a Family" section provided important advice to parents of ECEC children, including what should be considered when communicating with their children, domestic rules, and personality-development processes (TRTHaber, 2020).

Due to an increase in the number of coronavirus cases in Turkey, a new weekend lockdown was enforced in December 2020, and ECEC institutions were again closed (Ministry of Interior, 2020). In a press release dated March 1, 2021, MoNE (2021a) also announced that, based on decisions made in a recent meeting of the Presidential Cabinet, face-to-face education would resume the following day in all ECEC institutions, primary schools, and 8th and 12th-grade classrooms across the country. The plan was to restart face-to-face education in all ECEC institutions on a full-time basis, both in provinces defined as at low/medium coronavirus risk and those defined as at high/very high risk. Via press releases on March 29 and April 13, MoNE (2021b, 2021c) announced changes to practices at various educational levels but confirmed that face-to-face full-time education would continue in ECEC institutions.

In line with decisions made in the Presidential Cabinet on April 26, the whole of Turkey is – at the time of writing – in a three-week period of strict lockdown, expected to end on May 17 (Ministry of Interior, 2021). In this context, face-to-face education has been suspended in all institutions, and distance education has resumed (MoNE, 2021d). Also, in a press release dated May 12, 2021, it was announced that distance education might continue after the lifting of the lockdown *per se*, with the decision about that to be made on May 17 (MoNE, 2021e).

Unsurprisingly, given these circumstances, pandemic conditions – and especially lockdowns – have been a challenging experience for ECEC children. They have become more aggressive and anxious and exhibited more misbehaviour. Negative effects on children of spending lengthy periods looking at TV screens and mobile devices have also emerged (Toran, Sak, Xu, Şahin-Sak, & Yu, 2021). That being said, however, activities conducted by teachers through eba.gov.tr have become very important to young children, and some of them have been effective educationally. It has also been noted that many parents organized various activities for and with their children, in line with their teachers' recommendations, which as well as boosting the children's sense of well-being enabled them to continue preparing for primary school (Duran & Ömeroğlu, 2020). However, it has also been argued that distance education has not been effective enough for either ECEC children or primary-school students (Demir Öztürk, Kuru, & Demir Yıldız, 2020). This is thought to be related to their ages, as children in these years still have difficulty using distance-education tools and other technology on their own. Similarly, play and hands-on activities that are effective in supporting young children's learning are not easy online (Kim, 2020). In short, children of primary age and below appear to only benefit from distance education if under close supervision by their parents or other adults. Thus, in cases where the relevant adults' willingness or ability to offer such supervision is low, young children cannot make efficient use of the EBA portal or other popular educational applications such as Zoom (Sak et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected all life on a global scale, has caused the reorganization of all areas of life. Although emergency policies were developed against the pandemic at first, it can be said that more effective policies were developed with a better understanding of the pandemic over time. At the first stage of the pandemic, schools were closed worldwide, and then distance education started with the emergency solutions developed later on. For more than a year, education has been tried to be continued with distance or hybrid (online and face-to-face) teaching models all over the world. Nevertheless, policies developed in the field of ECEC differed among countries, and this situation prevented the development of a standard in education. This review article focused on the policies developed for ECEC, the situation of children, teachers, and families during the COVID-19 pandemic in the countries (Australia, Croatia,

Hungary, Spain, and Turkey) included in this article.

The countries which faced the pandemic have managed ECEC differently. The reasons for this difference are the importance given to early childhood education and the resources allocated. Although schools were closed at first due to the pandemic, some countries provided resources and support for the sustainability of education. However, it has been observed that there are countries where early childhood education is ignored when compared to the other educational levels. Especially countries with insufficient technological infrastructure have left the distance education process of children mostly to the competence of teachers and the capacity of accessible digital tools. It has been stated that the groups most negatively affected by this process are disadvantaged groups and that these groups have very limited access to education and teachers.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic directly affected adults as a disease, the measures such as the closure of schools and the quarantines directly affected children negatively. For instance, the time children spent in front of screen has increased, their movement area has been limited, and the home environment has been insufficient in supporting children's development. In countries where face-to-face education was started during the pandemic, children were expected to comply with the measures taken against the pandemic and the protocols that were prepared. However, radical changes in the educational environment and materials along with the reduction of class sizes made it difficult for children to adapt to the process.

While discussions about how education can be continued with the pandemic, the importance of teachers' role in education has brought teachers to the fore. In this process, it can be said that teachers show a great effort to reach children and make education sustainable. In some countries, teachers were supported to use and access digital tools, while in others this was ignored. In other words, it has been seen that teachers try to continue the education with their professional competence and the digital tools and applications they can access. The COVID-19 pandemic has also brought up the discussion of teacher education to provide professional competencies in preparation for possible crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which directly affects social life, has caused radical changes, especially in the lives of families with children. The interruption of children's school life has left the responsibilities of education and care to the parents. The parents who had to work from home tried to take on their children's education and care responsibilities in coordination with the teacher. However, disadvantaged families had difficulties in carrying out their child's education and care due to the interruption of social support opportunities. During this process, parents have experienced serious economic, social, and psychological difficulties. In addition, the fact that the responsibility of children's education and care is mostly undertaken by mothers has made invisible gender inequalities visible.

As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that we need to focus on eliminating educational inequalities, placing policies for the welfare of children on more realistic foundations, rebuilding teacher education, and improving the welfare of families. Priorizating the best interests of the child in the policies to be developed and building the social ecology on justice will ease overcoming the crises that will be faced.

Declarations

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