



Perspectives of Parents and Teachers on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children's Socio-Emotional Well-Being

Rachel Watts¹ · Jyotsna Pattnaik^{2,3}

Accepted: 7 September 2022

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Abstract

The negative impacts of COVID 19 on children's holistic development have been reported by researchers around the world. This qualitative study explored teachers' and parents' perspectives on the impact of physical/social distancing and school closure policies on children's socioemotional development. The study was conducted in fall 2020. The sample included four U.S. Preschools teachers (for 4-year-olds), four international preschool teachers (for 4, 5-year-olds), three U.S. Kindergarten teaches (for 5-year-olds), and 4 U.S. parents of 4 and 5-year-olds. Interviews were conducted over Zoom. Participants shared that the social deprivation experienced by children such as lack of friendships, absence of peer learning and peer communication, loss of play time, and lack of socialization impacted their children's socialization skills, higher order thinking development, mental health, and activity levels. Participants also shared that their children exhibited externalizing behaviors such as acting out, throwing tantrums, seeking negative attention, aggressiveness, lying, and showing disrespect. Participants reported children's life skills acquisition issues such as their over reliance on parents and difficulty in performing routine tasks. Participating teachers who taught 5-years-olds reported lower levels of fine motor skills among their students. The findings of the study suggest that although children have experienced severe academic learning loss during the pandemic, the post-pandemic ECE curriculum must keep a strong socio-emotional and practical life skills focus which contributes to children's overall well-being. Future studies may adopt a mixed method design in multi-country contexts to evaluate the impact of interventions implemented by early childhood programs on children's socioemotional health.

Keywords COVID-19 pandemic · Socio-emotional development · Practical life skills · Qualitative research · Preschool and kindergarten teachers · International contexts

Pandemics and epidemics can cause countries to shut down their operations, impacting the lives of individuals, institutions, and society at large. One area that suffers significantly during such times is young children's learning and development. Traditionally, children learned in person with their peers. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, countries took various measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus, including school closures. By mid-April 2020,

school closures affected 1.5 billion children and young people from pre-primary to higher education in 195 countries (UNESCO, 2020). It was later found that coronavirus spread, severity, and mortality rates were much lower among children than in adults (Pavone et al., 2020). UNICEF (n.d.) rightly states, "Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims, as children's lives are nonetheless being changed in profound ways" (para. 1). Researchers maintain that a lack of or minimal access to essential services compromised young children's holistic development during the pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020).

Keeping in mind the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young children, this qualitative study aimed to explore the impact of school closure on young children's socio-emotional development and acquisition of practical life skills during the pandemic from the perspectives of parents and teachers of children ages four and five.

✉ Rachel Watts
rachelwattsresearch@gmail.com
Jyotsna Pattnaik
jyotsna.pattnaik@csulb.edu

¹ Lake Forest, USA

² College of Education, California State University, 1250 Bellflower Blvd., Long Beach, CA 90840, USA

³ Long Beach, USA

Defining Socio-Emotional Skills

It is important to define socioemotional skills from the perspectives of experts and organizations in the field of education. Darling-Churchill and Lippman (2016) define socio-emotional skills as children's ability to understand, express, and manage feelings in socially and culturally appropriate ways as well as to build and maintain relationships and interactions within themselves and with others. Practical life skills are daily life activities (such as how to lace shoes, button shirts, or sweep the floor) that children observe in their environment, practice on their own, and/or learn through explicit teaching by adults. According to the Association Montessori Internationale, these activities give children a "sense of being and belonging" and Montessori termed them "purposeful movements" (Phillipart, 2022). Quality early childhood programs, such as Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and Waldorf deliberately integrate these skills into their curriculum because these activities build children's independence and self-esteem.

Impact of the Pandemic on Children's Socio-emotional Development

Young children represented a smaller percentage of COVID-19 cases for infection and fatality (Pavona et al., 2020), yet became victims of the social distancing mandate of the state. Most of them were asymptomatic or showed mild symptoms (Jiao et al., 2020). However, children were identified as potential carriers to spread the disease faster among peers, families, and communities. Therefore, in addition to the stay-home order, most countries also imposed school/preschool closures in March 2020 (Idoiaga et al., 2020). After a few months of preparation, many preschool and primary grade programs offered remote instruction to prevent disruption to children's schooling. Additionally, governments around the world allowed some early childhood education programs (ECE) to offer in-person classes, especially if they served children of essential workers. These programs followed physical distancing guidelines inside the classroom and allowed a limited number of children at a time. Children did not participate in small or large-group activities such as circle time or learning center activities in these programs. The social distancing restrictions included all enclosed community places including worship places, shopping malls, swimming pools, etc. So, most children worldwide stayed home. A rapid review of 12 studies published between January 2020 and February 2021 by Liu et al. (2021), traced the social contact patterns among different age groups during the pandemic and reported a significant reduction in social contact among children.

Researchers have documented the impact of social isolation and school closures during the pandemic on the psychological well-being of children in all age groups (Pizarro-Ruiz & Ordóñez-Cambor, 2021). Based on their systematic review of seven studies that focused explicitly on children and adolescents (age range 3–18 years), Nearchou et al. (2020) reported associations between COVID-19-related emotional reactions and psychosocial health outcomes among children in their sample. They also maintained that children's COVID-19-related emotional reactions, such as worry and fear about contracting the virus and stress, predicted their mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, obsessive–compulsive disorder symptoms, and intensified behavioral problems. Researchers have also reported children's feelings of isolation/loneliness during the pandemic, either from children themselves or from their parents, such as the studies by Idoiaga et al. (2020), Egan et al. (2021), and the cross-cultural study by Save the Children (2020).

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to explore the perspectives of participating teachers and parents on the impact of the pandemic on children's social, emotional, and practical skills development. This section includes the study's research questions and methodology.

Research Questions

- How do participants perceive the impact of COVID-19 on their children's social development?
- How do participants perceive the impact of COVID-19 on their children's emotional development?
- How do participants perceive the impact of COVID-19 on their children's development of practical life skills?

Design

The study used the phenomenological inquiry method to collect and analyze data. Phenomenologists make efforts to understand social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people who have lived those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The study aimed to capture the essence of a phenomenon, the impact of COVID-19 on children, by exploring the commonality of lived experiences of selected members of two major groups involved in children's lives: teachers and parents. The small sample size and semi-structured interview protocol also engaged participants fully and freely in conversations about their experiences during the pandemic.

Participants and Settings

The study used a purposeful sampling procedure and recruited participants by posting recruitment flyers on social media groups for teachers and parents. The study also used the snowball sampling technique. In the snowball sampling technique, researchers first contact a few known people and then recruit other participants through them. The sample for the study included 15 individuals, all females; 11 ECE teachers (four preschool teachers in the U.S., USPT; four international preschool teachers, IPT; and three kindergarten teachers in the U.S., USKT), and four parents in the U.S. (USP). The term international preschool teachers, or IPT, refers to teachers who teach 4 and 5-year-olds because preschool programs, sometimes called kindergarten programs in other countries, enroll both 4 and 5-year-olds. Kindergarten programs in the U.S. include only 5-year-olds. The IPTs were from three countries: India, China, and Scotland. All parent participants in the study were from the U.S. and had at least some college-level education. Except for one parent who was Caucasian, the others were Latinas. The study did not include international parents because of a lack of response from international parent groups on social media from countries where English is the primary language or is widely spoken so that the interviews could be conducted in English. The study received IRB approval from a large public university in the Los Angeles county, California.

It will be appropriate to describe participants' teaching contexts. All four U.S. preschool teacher participants taught in private schools, one U.S. kindergarten teacher (out of three) taught in a private school, and two international preschool teachers (out of four) taught in private ECE programs. At the time of the data collection, which started in fall 2020, all teachers, except two, taught remotely. Two teachers, who taught 5-year-olds, one in the U.S. and the other in China, taught in person. In January 2020, the Chinese participant's

school stopped in-person instruction. In February 2020, her school started providing lessons and resources to children through the Cloud platform, and in-person classes began in August 2020. For all other teacher participants, their schools stopped instruction in March 2020. Their schools resumed remote instruction at different times, starting in May 2020. In fall 2020, all participants were teaching, either remotely or in person. In the case of the U.S. kindergarten teacher who taught in person, it was mandatory for students to wear masks and to separate student desks six feet apart. Teachers and students in the Chinese teacher's school tried to maintain some distance inside the classroom; however, mask-wearing was optional. It is important to note that during the interviews, while kindergarten teachers referred to their current kindergarten children who started the school year in fall 2020, preschool teachers referred to the 4-year-olds that they taught in the past academic year, fall 2019–summer 2020. Tables 1 and 2 provide participants' background information.

Participant Demography

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The study used a semi-structured interview protocol as the data source. An in-depth literature review and consultations with an early childhood educator and a county-level COVID-19 specialist in California contributed to the development of the interview protocol. The interview protocol included items that focused on the impact of COVID-19 on children's socioemotional and life-skills acquisition during the pandemic and a comparison of children's development before and after the COVID-19 school closure. Interviews were conducted via zoom and were transcribed using Otter ai, an automated transcription app, and checked for accuracy through multiple readings by two readers. Two university

Table 1 Teacher demography

Teacher code/age	Gender	Level of education/type of degree	Grade taught/years taught	Type/country/mode of instruction
USKT#1/51	Female	Graduate degree/early childhood education	Kindergarten/20 years	Public (Title 1)/U.S./remote
USKT#2/32	Female	Master's/best practice studies and teaching	Kindergarten/5 years	Public/U.S./remote
USKT#3/64	Female	Bachelor's/not specified	Kindergarten/30+ years	Private/U.S./in-person
USPT#1/27	Female	Bachelor's/child and adolescent studies (master in progress)	Pre-k/7 years	Private/U.S./remote
USPT#2/36	Female	Bachelor/child development	Pre-k/9 years	Private/U.S./remote
USPT#3/51	Female	Not specified/early childhood education	Pre-k/27 years	Private/U.S./remote
USPT#4/30	Female	Master's/early childhood education	Preschool/15 years	Private/U.S./remote
IPT#1/24	Female	Master's/education- early childhood care	Nursery/Kindergarten 1 years	Private/India/remote
IPT#2/48	Female	Ph.D/not specified	Preschool/7 years	Private (non-profit)/China/in person
IPT#3/28	Female	Master's/education	Preschool/6 years	Public/India/remote
IPT#4/54	Female	Post graduate/not specified	Preschool and primary/23 years	Public/Scotland/remote

Table 2 Parent demography

Parent code#/age	Gender/marital status	Level of education	Race/ethnicity	Working status/socioeconomic status (SES)	Type of school child attended
USP#1/30	Female/single	Associate degree	Latina	Working/middle SES	Public
USP#2/25	Female/single	Some college	Latina	Working/middle SES	Public
USP#3/38	Female/married	Master's	Caucasian	Working/middle SES	Private
USP#4/33	Female/live-in partner	Some college	Latina	Stay-at-home mom/upper SES	Private

professors and a county-level COVID expert provided feedback on the research report.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using deductive and inductive coding. For deductive coding, a few predetermined codes were identified based on the research questions and a codebook was established. The codebook included excerpts that fit under the appropriate codes. The study mostly used inductive coding that emerged from the data set. Some sample codes include: attention-seeking behavior, anxiety, loss of activity, and emotional regression. From inductive coding, multiple and specific themes were identified, which helped understand the phenomenon being studied (Thomas, 2006). Both readers double-checked the codes for accuracy.

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of teachers and parents regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the socioemotional development of children ages 4 and 5. All participants mentioned that they noticed socioemotional challenges in their children after the pandemic. Considering differences in parents' and teachers' relationships with their children, we present the findings separately for teachers and parents in each theme.

The Impact of the Pandemic on Children's Social Development

Teachers

Preschool teachers were asked to describe the impact of the school closure on their students' social skills and to compare the social skills of their students before and after the school closure. Kindergarten teachers were asked, "In your opinion, how did the school closure impact children's social skills required to enter kindergarten, if any? Please compare your

current students' social skills with those of entering kindergartners in past years."

Participants' responses referred to phrases such as "lack of friendships," "absence of peer learning and peer communication," "loss of playtime," and "lack of socialization opportunities with peers." All USKTs, 75% of USPTs, and all IPTs expressed that their students experienced social deprivation. All USKTs shared that they noticed signs of socialization deprivation in their beginning kindergartners compared to the same group of students in past years. USKT#3, who teaches in-person stated:

The kids have verbalized how much they did not like being at home. They wanted to see their friends, they wanted to come to school. Because they were not socializing for a long time, really are having trouble getting along with each other in class, like the sharing, the grabbing, and 'I want this now' kind of thing, not interacting as a group. I think because everybody was home doing their own thing.

USPTs also discussed how social distancing during the pandemic impacted children's social as well as higher-order thinking development. For example, USPT#1 shared:

Everyone was socially distancing and quarantining. And so, there were not many opportunities to work on building social skills that we would be able to in the preschool environment, like conflict resolution and problem-solving, creative thinking, and things like that. And being in a reciprocal conversation.

All the IPTs also shared how the absence of social interactions impacted the skills that typically result from children's participation in social environments. IPT#1 mentioned:

They just missed their friends. And we know that in the early years, everything is based on play, their learning is happening through play, their language development is happening through play, and their social-emotional development is actually happening during play. So, the main thing is that the courting of their life has been stopped.

Parents

Parent participants were asked to describe their child's social behavior since the school closure and to share the differences that they have noticed in their child's social behavior after the school closure if any. They were also asked to describe the types of social activities in which their children participated during the COVID-19 school closure.

All parent participants expressed that their children experienced social deprivation during the pandemic. Parents referred to their children's happy social life before the pandemic and how the pandemic deprived them of interacting with friends and how it made them feel anxious and lonely. For example, USP#2 stated:

Before COVID, super happy and always around people, wanted to just be a little social butterfly. And then once COVID hit, she got a little bit more reserved... She was able to socialize, burn that energy, be tired at the end of the day, and then after COVID she was not able to do that stuff once and she was anxious, gets a little bit more nervous and just as more frustrated that she cannot do everything she was doing before.

All parent participants discussed how the social distancing policy during the pandemic affected their children's activity levels. They shared their child's active behavior before the pandemic such as going outside, having play dates, seeing family members, burning energy, and engaging in sports and extracurricular activities. USP#2 stated, "She became a lot more antsy she was not around a lot of other kids, she was not able to burn energy." USP#1 and USP#2 had similar responses on how their children's activity levels had dropped tremendously when COVID happened. USP#4 further discussed her child's loss of activity due to COVID-19 and stated, "So, before COVID, he obviously was very friendly and socially active, and we were going places and birthdays every weekend and things like that. And then after COVID, we kind of became hermits."

The Impact of the Pandemic on Children's Emotional Development

Teachers

Preschool teachers were asked to describe the impact of the school closure on their students' emotional skills and to compare the emotional skills of their students before and after the school closure. Kindergarten teachers were asked to provide their perspectives on the impact of the school closure on children's emotional skills that are necessary for beginning kindergarteners. They were also asked to compare

their current students' emotional skills with those of beginning kindergarteners in past years. Participants from all four groups (75% of USP, 33% of USKT, 75% of USPT and 50% of IPT) mentioned that they noticed emotional issues among their children. These issues included being scared, apprehensive, sad, lost, stressed, cautious and not being able to regulate one's emotions. USKT#1 stated, "One thing that I have noticed, at this site, is that I have some children that seem a little less mature. If they are struggling, they will start to pout, and they will not want to continue." All USPTs said they had noticed emotional issues in their students during the pandemic. They discussed the insecurities and sadness that the pandemic brought to their students. USPT #3 mentioned:

They still did not feel secure enough to let go of mom and dad, you know, like they were scared...They just cried a lot. They were a lot more emotional. They just back slid emotionally, because they just, wanted to feel more secure...I do not want to say whiny, but just very emotional.

Parents

Parent participants were asked to describe their child's emotional behavior after the school closure and to describe differences that they noticed in their child's emotional behavior after the school closure. Parent participants (75%) shared similar emotional issues as the teacher participants, such as children showing sadness, stress, attention-seeking behaviors, and a lack of self-regulation.

All parent participants discussed how their children were happy and excited before the pandemic and that they noticed depression and trauma in their children during the pandemic. For example, USP#4 discussed how the emotional states of her two sons changed after the pandemic happened and social distancing regulation was implemented. She shared, "With COVID it was kind of traumatizing for them. I feel like the boys were kind of lost because they did not have structure. Even though we were home. They were very much wanting to sleep in."

Parent participants (50%) also viewed emotional regression as a socio-emotional challenge for their children during the pandemic. Participants shared examples of emotional regression, such as the child regressing to a former state of overreacting, being lost, and displaying baby talk. Half of the parent participants discussed how their children went from being able to regulate their emotions and acting their age to being overly sensitive and reverting to behaviors that they grew out of. USP#1 stated, "She talks like a baby sometimes. And I think that is a kind of regression thing."

The Impact of the Pandemic on Children's Externalizing Behavior Issues

Teachers

About 67% of USKTs, 75% of USPTs, and 75% of IPTs expressed that their students exhibited externalizing behaviors. Participants referred to behavior issues such as acting out, throwing tantrums, seeking negative attention, showing aggression and disrespect, and lying. All the USKTs shared that they noticed behavioral issues among their incoming students after COVID, more so than in the incoming students in previous years. USKT#1 stated, "I have some that are receiving counseling now, because of the anger that they felt that they were not able to come to class in person, they were so looking forward to it, that is really hard for them." All preschool teachers, national and international, noticed behavioral issues in their students after the pandemic occurred. They discussed how the pandemic contributed to tantrums, poor listening skills, and acts of aggression.

USP#1 stated, "I think the biggest one was the resistance. There would be a couple of zooms where they would be there, but not really there. Like they would be messing around, or they leave their camera." Furthermore, IPT#2 explained how her students could no longer communicate properly, "They struggle with sharing; they struggle with using words to express themselves and so they tend to use fists instead."

Parents

All parents expressed that their children displayed similar behavioral issues to those stated by teachers. Parents also compared their children's behavior before and after the pandemic. They shared that their children did not display extreme attention-seeking and some other negative behaviors before the pandemic, such as hitting, biting, or spitting on a sibling. USP#1 stated:

When the schools closed, she definitely had a huge change in behavior just because her activity level had dropped immensely. She had a lot of stuff pent up, and lacked structure. Behaviorally, hits her brother, acts out for attention, does things on purpose, and then lies about it. Almost like just out of boredom. She and her brother were wrestling, and she bit him super hard, she spits on him recently, which are things she has never done before. She will purposely tighten her seatbelt super tight and then act like she does not know what is going on and needs help. She is still kind of having like, wants attention, so she does things she should not.

Challenges to Life Skills Acquisition

All participants were asked to share how did the school closure impact their children's development of practical life skills and if they had noticed any differences before and after the school closure. Participants' responses reflected life-skills acquisition issues in children during the pandemic, such as overreacting, relying on parents, delay in fine motor skills, and loss of independence. Responses to two of the sub-themes, out of three, under this theme, delayed fine motor skills and difficulty in performing routine tasks, emerged from teachers only.

Over-Reliance on Parents

Teachers

Participants (USKTs and IPTs) shared about their students' over-reliance on parents due to the pandemic. Over-reliance on parents led to things such as poor hygiene, lack of independence, pouting, needing help in getting ready and showing laziness. Most USKTs mentioned that their beginning kindergartners were overdependent on their parents after the pandemic. USKT#3, who taught in-person, mentioned:

I would imagine that their moms and their dads did a lot for them. Those little cutie oranges. Nobody knew how to peel one of them. Their parents did for them, but when they got to me, they were lost being independent that way. I had to teach them.

USKT#1 also shared a similar sentiment and stated, "They will start to pout and they will not want to continue. And I think it is because their parent is there, they want to turn to that parent for nurturing." IPTs also discussed how the pandemic had resulted in their students' overreliance on their parents. IPT#1 stated,

What parents have told us is that their children are becoming more and more dependent on their parents. From clothing up, they used to do everything on their own initiative. But now all these things have stopped. There is a change for sure a lot more dependency on parents now, as everyone is at home.

Referring to how teachers prepared children for their transition to kindergarten in the last few months of preschool in the pre-pandemic era, USPT#4 shared, "The last few months, we would have them do everything on their own for the most part. I am a little worried that when schools are back in session, they are going to struggle".

Parents

Participating parents (50%) mentioned that their child over-relied on them during the pandemic. Over-reliance on parents had led some of these children to behaviors such as following poor hygienic practices, lack of independence, pouting, needing help in getting ready, and showing laziness. For example, USP#1 stated:

I think she definitely became a lot more reliant just because we were spending so much time. Oh, I have been noticing that she will come out of the bathroom, and I am like, “Did you wash your hands?” And she goes, “Oh, I forgot.”

Difficulty in Performing Routine Tasks

This sub-theme emerged from the responses of two teacher participants who taught 5-year-olds in person. They mentioned how the pandemic impacted their students’ performance of routine tasks such as setting up their lunches or packing their backpacks. Here are two excerpts.

When they came to me, setting up their own lunch was difficult for them, because they did not have to set up their own lunch or pack up their backpack, And it was really odd because usually by the time they reach me, they can do all that stuff. (USKT#3)

Parents have shared that their children would not get up from bed. In our school, we focus a lot on life skills here. So, we actually include free cooking because it also includes physical development and all these things. (IPT#2)

Delay in Fine-Motor Skills

This sub-theme emerged from the responses of teachers only. About 67% of USKTs and 25% of IPTs attributed children’s low level of fine-motor skills, such as writing, drawing, and grasping, to school closures during the pandemic. Preschool teachers shared that children started practicing these skills in preschool. However, they lost these skills due to a lack of practice during school closures. USKT#1 and USKT#3 shared that their current kindergartners showed delayed fine-motor skills compared to their beginning kindergartners in previous years. USKT#3, who is teaching in-person, stated, “They do not have those fine motor skills. And I also want them to learn how to hold a pencil, to cut and paste, and how to write.” IPT#2, who was teaching in-person, shared that she had been practicing fine motor skills repeatedly in her class and stated, Buttoning up. So, we are actually trying to increase these skills.”

Discussion

The findings of the study showed that the responses of parents and teachers converged on questions related to the pandemic’s impacts on the social and emotional development of children. Participants shared that the lack of opportunities for children to practice these skills during the pandemic resulted in children’s sense of loneliness, anxiety, and lack of development of important skills such as conflict resolution, problem-solving, and creative thinking. They also shared that these skills mostly emerge through spending time and interacting with peers. Kindergarten teachers compared the social and emotional maturity of their current kindergartners with beginning kindergartners in past years and shared that their current students showed a delay in the expected social, emotional, and practical life skills. Parents also compared the social-emotional changes in their children before and after the pandemic. There were some differences between participating parents’ and teachers’ responses. Teachers’ responses did not explicitly focus on the regression of socio-emotional skills in their students. However, parents’ responses specifically pointed to children’s display of behaviors such as whining, spitting on their siblings, and attention-seeking behaviors which they had already left behind before the pandemic. Moreover, while parents’ responses did not point to delays in fine motor skills in their children, such as holding a pencil or a crayon or grasping small objects, this theme surfaced in teachers’ responses. Kindergarten teachers also shared that their beginning kindergartners in fall 2020 had difficulty holding pencils and crayons and cutting papers with scissors compared to entering kindergartners in past years. Typically, preschool teachers focus on these skills explicitly and provide individualized guidance to children during the spring and summer months of the preschool year before children start kindergarten. In March 2020, participants’ schools stopped all instructional activities. After a short period, all teachers of 4-year-olds in the study transitioned to remote instruction in the summer 2020. However, they had limited opportunities to provide individualized support during their remote instruction sessions before their students transitioned to 5-year-old classrooms in fall 2020. Two participants, one in the U.S. and the other in China who were teaching 5-year-olds in person, shared that their students had difficulty in performing routine tasks, such as setting up tables and packing their backpacks. The findings of the study are not surprising keeping in view the scholarly foundations and practices of the field. ECE experts maintain that the early childhood years are critical years during which children’s socio-emotional and self-help skills flourish through explicit and implicit teaching of these skills. Therefore, quality ECE programs design their curriculum carefully to foster these skills in children through

developmentally appropriate activities. However, during the pandemic, children did not receive in-person teaching and could not take part in group activities or hands-on activities to develop these skills during remote instructional sessions. ECE programs that received permission to provide in-person learning could not offer group learning opportunities to promote socio-emotional skills in their students because of social distancing regulations. The findings of the study are also not surprising because researchers have reported issues such as increasing frequency of child behavior problems (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020); externalizing behavior issues (Giannotti et al., 2021); anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues (Nearchou et al., 2020); and a feeling of loneliness (Egan et al., 2021) among children worldwide after the onset of COVID-related confinement. The study with a national sample of 1000 parents in the U.S. by Lurie Children's (2021) highlighted parental (71%) concerns about the pandemic's impact on their children's mental health. When asked about which pillars of mental health have been compromised, "socializing" topped the list. Participants (65%) in the Lurie Children's study also believed that the mental health consequences would be greater for children than adults and 68% of participants wished that they had allowed their child to socialize more and regretted that they prioritized social distancing over their child's mental health. Cost et al. (2022) also reported that most of the Canadian children between the ages 2 and 18 in their study with or without pre-existing psychiatric diagnosis experienced deterioration in at least one domain out of the six domains: depression, anxiety, irritability, attention, hyperactivity, and compulsions during the pandemic. When asked what they missed the most after the school closure, children in Zorek and Pecek's (2022) study responded that they missed their friends the most. The psychological and educational implications of the pandemic's impact on children's socio-emotional well-being are immense. Researchers suggest that young children need frequent interactions with peers because such interactions can lead to important social skills among children, such as building friendships, maintaining positive peer relationships, solving problems during play, and gaining peer acceptance (Stanton-Chapman, 2014). These preschool gains in social-emotional skills contribute significantly to reading achievement and learning engagement in kindergarten (Nix et al., 2013). In addition to the long-term impacts of childhood socio-emotional issues on children's later life, young children's positive socio-emotional skills are also major predictors of their later academic achievement (Nix et al., 2013). Researchers suggest that children's inability to regulate their emotions can physiologically inhibit their use of higher-order cognitive processes such as working memory, attention, and planning which are prerequisites for success in an upper-grade classroom (Blair, 2002). Researchers report that children who can successfully manage their emotions in

face of multiple stressors fare better academically compared to their peers who could not (Webster-Stratton et al., 2008). Participants in the present study shared examples of regression in children's socio-emotional state after school closure. The topic of regression has been discussed widely by psychologists. According to Freud and Strachey (1977), regression is a defense mechanism that allows an individual to cope with stress and traumatic situations. Clinicians accept regression as normal behavior in childhood and as a form of communication in response to distress (Lokko & Stern, 2015). During the pandemic, when young children were cut off from their routine social activities quite unexpectedly, it was natural for them to resort to an earlier stage of development to express their frustrations. Researchers have reported emotional regression in children in their studies as well. For example, according to Sonnenschein et al. (2022), responses such as "my child is regressing across all academic and social metrics" (p. 266) were typical responses of parent participants in their study and some parents shared their willingness to take the risk of sending their children to school during the pandemic to address such regressions. Such regressive behaviors have been reported by physicians during the pandemic as well. According to Dr. Nancy Close of the Child Study Center at the Yale School of Medicine, children's behaviors that showed emotional regression, such as baby talk, difficulty with routines, and needing help with sleeping and toileting, have been quite common after the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021).

Implications

The findings of the present study and other related studies highlight the need to restore the socio-emotional well-being of all young children worldwide after the reopening of schools. Based on their systematic review of 36 studies from 11 countries, Viner et al. (2022) reported that child protection referrals were reduced drastically in number suggesting a reduction in the ability of the health and social care systems to protect children in many countries. Therefore, policy-makers need to acknowledge the connection between children's mental health and quality of life and create a national strategy to address children's mental health issues through the implementation of effective school-based mental health services (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). To achieve this goal, schools need to strengthen their assessment, referral, and intervention measures for children with socio-emotional issues and partner with families to receive relevant input. In May 2021, the U.S. passed the Mental Health Services for Students Act of 2021, which allowed funding support to projects that facilitated children's access to school-based comprehensive mental health services. Such school-based services are needed for children in all age groups around

the world. International donors and corporate sectors may provide funding support for such services, especially to pre-schools and schools in developing countries.

In the post-school closure context, schools play a critical role in restoring children's socio-emotional health. Although children have experienced severe academic learning loss during the pandemic, the post-pandemic ECE curriculum must keep a strong socio-emotional and practical life skills focus. Preschool teachers need to implement child-focused play and instructional activities even while maintaining proper hygiene and social distancing practices. Teachers need to maximize outdoor activities as well as art, movement, and music activities by skillfully integrating these activities into their curriculum. The findings of the present study and studies by other researchers suggest a need for training teachers and parents in restoring children's socio-emotional well-being (Davis et al., 2022) by implementing curriculum and assessment strategies targeted specifically for this purpose. Experts also suggest that schools collaborate with local community centers and train mentors who can work directly with children to provide some relief to parents who have faced tremendous stress during the pandemic (Abramson, 2022). Researchers report the mediating role of parenting practices and home environment on children's psychosocial well-being (Andres-Romero et al., 2021). Hence, ECE programs may provide training to parents on positive parenting practices to speed up the recovery process.

Strengths, Limitations, and Recommendations for Future Research

The study explored a topic that has gained a significant empirical base in the last 2 years. The present study will contribute to this growing research repertoire. It is appropriate to note the uniqueness of this study. First, most of the studies that focused on children's socio-emotional well-being during the pandemic either used parents as the sample in their studies, such as the study by Wang et al. (2021) in China and the study by Kim et al. (2021) in Ethiopia, or children as the sample, such as the study by Larivière-Bastien et al. in Canada (2022). Only a handful of studies included both parents and children, such as the studies by Cost et al. (2022) and Timmons et al. (2021) in Canada. Researchers of the present study did not find any study that explored both U.S. teachers' and parents' perspectives on the socio-emotional development of children during the pandemic. The participation of both parents and teachers added diversity to the study sample and also served as a triangulation strategy in the study.

Second, a review of the literature showed that studies that focused on the pandemic's impact on children's socio-emotional development did not include teachers from both

spectrums of the field of early childhood education, i.e., teachers who taught 4-year-olds and teachers who taught 5-year-olds, during the beginning months of the pandemic. In the U.S., kindergarten programs enroll 5-year-olds and are housed in public and private elementary schools. Both groups of teachers provided their perspectives on the social, emotional, and practical life skills impact of the pandemic on children. By including both groups of teachers, the study included a wider representation of early childhood teacher voices.

Third, because of the global scope of the spread of COVID-19, it was considered important to include international participants in the study. All four countries included in the study resorted to similar steps after the pandemic, such as physical distancing, school closures, and transitioning to remote instruction. A review of the literature showed that there were very few studies that included teachers from different countries. In studies that included a multi-country sample, the purpose differed from that of the present study. For example, the study by Anderson et al. (2022) focused on parental engagement and perspectives on distance learning and the study by Rothe et al. (2022) compared early childhood policies in different countries. These studies also adopted different research designs. However, in the present study, participants from different countries responded to the same questions in a common methodological format. Therefore, the study design contributed to the consistency and credibility aspects of the study's findings. Researchers consider the inclusion of multiple diverse perspectives across informants as an important strategy to enhance understanding of a complex phenomenon (Benzer et al., 2013). Fourth, a vast majority of the studies that examined the impact of COVID-19 on children were conducted after the pandemic had continued for some time. There were many uncertainties over the course and treatment of the virus when studies, such as this study, were conducted in the earlier stages of the pandemic. Teachers also struggled to balance the new pedagogical approaches with pandemic regulations and children's needs. These early studies are important for comparative purposes and for establishing a trajectory of the pandemic's impact on children.

However, as with any research study, this study has some limitations. The sample size in each category of participants is small. So, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to other settings. Additionally, interviews served as the only source of data for the study. However, the study used teachers in different contexts (preschool, kindergarten, international), as well as parents to add diverse perspectives and analyzed the divergence and/or convergence of these perspectives. Teachers and parents in the study had at least a bachelor's degree and were mostly from middle-class backgrounds. So, the study suffers from a lack of wider socio-economic representation in the sample. Future studies

may adopt a mixed-method design to evaluate the effectiveness of socio-emotional interventions implemented by early childhood programs to support children's socio-emotional development. Researchers may also investigate the mediating effects of parental mental health, parenting practices, and home environment on children's socio-emotional well-being after the reopening of schools.

Conclusion

The socio-emotional loss that resulted from COVID-19 is immense and will require ECE programs around the world to design and implement creative and targeted intervention programs to recover the loss as well as prevent long-term damage to children's socio-emotional health. COVID-19 has taught families and programs serving young children to accept the uncertainty of life situations, to be proactive, and to address the damage to children's holistic development as soon as possible. Most young children are resilient (McLaughlin et al., 2021) and can bounce back if intervention is implemented on time, progress is monitored periodically, and support is continued. However, how early childhood programs around the world make efforts to recover children's socio-emotional well-being in the post-school closure era will serve as a testimony of their resiliency and commitment to the well-being of children and families.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Research Question: RQ #1. How Do Participants Perceive the Impact of COVID-19 on Their Children's Social Development?

Interview Questions for Preschool Teachers: (please add some concrete examples to support your response).

- Please describe your students' social skills after the school closure due to COVID-19.
- Please share the differences that you have noticed in your students' social skills before and after the COVID-19 school closure.

Interview Questions for Kindergarten Teachers: (please add some concrete examples to support your response).

- In your opinion, how did the school closure impact children's social skills that are necessary for beginning kindergarteners?
- Please compare your current students' social skills with that of beginning kindergarteners in past years.

Interview Questions for Parents (please add some concrete examples to support your response)

- Please describe your child's social behavior since the school closure due to COVID-19.
- What differences have you noticed in your child's social behavior after the school closure if any?
- Please describe the types of social activities that your child has been participating in after the COVID -19 school closure.

RQ: #2: How do participants perceive the impact of COVID-19 on their children's emotional development?

Interview Questions for Preschool Teachers: (please add some concrete examples to support your response).

- Please describe your students' emotional skills after the school closure due to COVID-19.
- Please share the differences that you have noticed in your students' emotional skills before and after the COVID-19 school closure.

Interview Questions for Kindergarten Teachers: (please add some concrete examples to support your response).

- In your opinion, how did the school closure impact children's emotional skills that are necessary for beginning kindergarteners?
- Please compare your current students' emotional skills with that of beginning kindergarteners in past years.

Interview Questions for Parents (please add some concrete examples to support your response)

- Please describe your child's emotional behavior since the school closure due to COVID-19.
- What differences have you noticed in your child's emotional behavior after the school closure?

RQ #3. How do participants perceive the impact of COVID-19 on their children's development of practical life skills?

Interview Questions for Preschool Teachers (please add some concrete examples to support your response).

- (a) Please share how did the school closure impact your students' development of practical life skills?

Interview Questions for Kindergarten Teachers (please add some concrete examples to support your response).

- (a) Please share how did the school closure impact your students' development of practical life skills that are necessary for beginning kindergarteners?
- (b) What differences did you notice in your current students' development of practical life skills compared to that of beginning kindergarteners in past years?

Interview Questions for Parents (please add some concrete examples to support your response)

- (a) How did the pandemic impact your child's use of practical life skills after the school closure?
- (b) What differences did you notice in your child's use of practical life skills before and after the pandemic?

References

- Abramson, A. (2022). Children's mental health is in crisis. 2022 Trends Report, 53(1). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/special-childrens-mental-health>
- Anderson, K., Kim, J., Aslam, M., Baum, D., Hailu, B. H., Jeffery, D., Rose, P., & Saeed, S. (2022). The COVID-19 pandemic and early childhood education in Ethiopia, Liberia, and Pakistan: Perspectives of pre-primary school teachers. In J. Pattnaik & M. R. Jalongo (Eds.), *The impact of covid-19 on early childhood education and care: International perspectives, challenges, and response* (pp. 333–349). Springer.
- Andres-Romero, M. P., Flujas-Contreras, J. M., Fernández-Torres, M., Gómez-Becerra, I., & Sánchez-López, P. (2021). Analysis of psychosocial adjustment in the family during confinement: problems and habits of children and youth and parental stress and resilience. *Front Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.647645>
- Benzer, J. K., Beehler, S., Cramer, I. E., Mohr, D. C., Charns, M. P., & Burgess, J. F. (2013). Between and within-site variation in qualitative implementation research. *Implementation Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-8-4>
- Blair, C. (2002). School readiness: Integrating cognition and emotion in a neurobiological conceptualization of children's functioning at school entry. *American Psychologist*, 57(2), 111–127.
- Brooks, S. K., Webster, R. K., Smith, L. E., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G. J. (2020). The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: Rapid review of the evidence. *The Lancet*, 395(10227), 912–920. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30460-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30460-8)
- Cost, K. T., Crosbie, J., Anagnostou, E., Birken, C. S., Charach, A., Monga, S., Kelley, E., Nicolson, R., Maguire, J. L., Burton, C. L., Schachar, R. J., Arnold, P. D., & Korcak, D. J. (2022). Mostly worse, occasionally better: Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Canadian children and adolescents. *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 31, 671–684. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01744-3>
- Darling-Churchill, K. E., & Lippman, L. (2016). Early childhood social and emotional development: Advancing the field of measurement. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 45, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2016.02.002>
- Davis, C. R., Baker, C. N., & Osborn, J. (2022). Understanding teacher self-efficacy to address students' social-emotional needs in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Urban Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859221099834>
- Egan, S. M., Pope, J., Moloney, M., Hoyne, C., & Beatty, C. (2021). Missing early education and care during the pandemic: The socio-emotional impact of the covid-19 crisis on young children. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49, 925–934. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01193-2>
- Freud, S., & Strachey, J. (1977). *Introductory lectures on psychoanalysis*. Norton.
- Gassman-Pines, A., Ananat, E. O., & Fitz-Henley, J., 2nd. (2020). COVID-19 and parent-child psychological well-being. *Pediatrics*, 146(4), e2020007294. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-007294>
- Giannotti, M., Mazzoni, N., Bentenuto, A., Venuti, P., & de Falco, S. (2021). Family adjustment to COVID-19 lockdown in Italy: Parental stress, coparenting, and child externalizing behavior. *Family Process*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12686>
- Idoiaga, N., Berasategi, N., Eiguren, A., & Picaza, M. (2020). Exploring children's social and emotional representations of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Front Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01952>
- Jiao, W., Wang, L., Liu, J., Fang, S., Jiao, F., Mantovani, M., & Somekh, E. (2020). Behavioral and emotional disorders in children during the COVID-19 epidemic. *Journal of Pediatrics*, 211, 264–266. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2020.03.013>
- Kim, J. H., Araya, M., Hailu, B. H., Rose, P. M., & Woldehanna, T. (2021). The implications of covid-19 for early childhood education in Ethiopia: Perspectives from parents and caregivers. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49, 855–867. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01214-4>
- Larivière-Bastien, D., Aubuchon, O., Blondin, A., Dupont, D., Libenstein, J., Séguin, F., Tremblay, A., Zarglayoun, H., Herba, C. M., & Beauchamp, M. H. (2022). *Children's perspectives on friendships and socialization during the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative approach*. Child: Care, Health, and Development. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12998>
- Liu, C. Y., Berlin, J., Kit, M. C., Fava, E. D., Grow, A., Zagheni, E., Melegaro, A., Jenness, S. M., Omer, S. B., Lopman, B., & Nelson, K. (2021). Rapid review of social contact patterns during the covid-19 pandemic. *Epidemiology*, 32(6), 781–791. <https://doi.org/10.1097/EDE.0000000000001412>
- Lokko, H. N., & Stern, T. A. (2015). Regression: Diagnosis, evaluation, and management. *Primary Care Companion for CNS Disorders*, 17(3), 10. <https://doi.org/10.4088/PCC.14f01761>
- Lurie Children's (2021). Children's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://www.luriechildrens.org/en/blog/childrens-mental-health-pandemic-statistics/>
- McLaughlin, K. A., Sheridan, M. A., Humphreys, K. L., Belsky, J., & Ellis, B. J. (2021). The value of dimensional models of early experience: Thinking clearly about concepts and categories. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691621992346>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage.
- Nearchou, F., Flinn, C., Niland, R., Subramaniam, S. S., & Hennessy, E. (2020). Exploring the impact of covid-19 on mental health outcomes in children and adolescents: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(22), 8479. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17228479>
- New York Life Foundation (2020). *New York Life Foundation and American Federation of Teachers Grief in School survey: Key findings and topline results*. <https://www.newyorklife.com/assets/foundation/docs/pdfs/key-findings-and-topline.pdf>
- Nix, R. L., Bierman, K. L., Domitrovich, C. E., & Gill, S. (2013). Promoting children's social-emotional skills in preschool can enhance academic and behavioral functioning in kindergarten:

- Findings from head start REDI. *Early Education & Development*, 24(7), 1000–1019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2013.825565>
- Pavone, P., Giallongo, A., La Rocca, G., Ceccarelli, M., & Nunnari, G. (2020). Recent COVID-19 outbreak: Effect in childhood. *Infectious Diseases and Tropical Medicine*. https://doi.org/10.32113/idthm_20203_594
- Phillipart, H. (2022). *An introduction to practical life*. <https://montessoriguide.org/an-introduction-to-practical-life#:~:text=By%20Heidi%20Phillipart,skills%20in%20a%20purposeful%20way>.
- Pizarro-Ruiz, J. P., & Ordóñez-Cambor, N. (2021). Effects of Covid-19 confinement on the mental health of children and adolescents in Spain. *Scientific Report*, 11, 11713. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-91299-9>
- Rothe, A., Moloney, M., Sims, M., Calder, P., Blyth, D., Boyd, W., Doan, L., Dovigo, F., Girlich, S., Georgiadou, S., Kakana, D., Mellon, C., Opazo, M.-J., O'Síoráin, C.-A., Quinn, M., Rogers, M., Silberfeld, C., & Tadeu, B. (2022). Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative study of government policies relating to the early childhood sector: Across ten countries. In J. Pattnaik & M. R. Jalongo (Eds.), *The impact of covid-19 on early childhood education and care: International perspectives, challenges, and response* (pp. 67–88). Springer.
- Save the Children (2020). *Protect a generation. The impact of COVID-19 on children's lives*. https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/c3cf8443-37bc-4420-b53b-de6800d4dbaa/ProtectAGeneration_1189391475.pdf.aspx
- Sonnenschein, S., Stites, M. L., Grossman, J. A., & Gaalczyk, S. H. (2022). It just does not work. Parents' views about distance learning for young children with special needs. In J. Pattnaik & M. R. Jalongo (Eds.), *The impact of covid-19 on early childhood education and care: International perspectives, challenges, and response* (pp. 253–274). Springer.
- Stanton-Chapman, T. (2014). Promoting positive peer interactions in the preschool classroom: The role and the responsibility of the teacher in supporting children's sociodramatic play. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 43, 99–107. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-014-0635-8>
- Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 27(2), 237–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748>
- Timmons, K., Cooper, A., Bozek, E., & Braund, H. (2021). The Impacts of COVID-19 on early childhood education: Capturing the unique challenges associated with remote teaching and learning in K-2. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49(5), 887–901. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01207-z>
- UNESCO (2020). *School closures during COVID*. <https://en.unesco.org/news/13-billion-learners-are-still-affected-school-university-closures-educational-institutions>
- UNICEF (2021). *Is my child regressing due to the COVID-19 pandemic?* <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/regression-and-covid>
- UNICEF (n.d.). *Covid-19 and children*. <https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/>
- Vaillancourt, T., Szatmari, P., Georgiades, K., & Krygsman, A. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of Canadian children and youth. *FACETS*, 6, 1628–1648. <https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0078>
- Viner, R., Russell, S., & Saulle, R. (2022). School closures during social lockdown and mental health, health behaviors, and well-being among children and adolescents during the first COVID-19 wave: A systematic review. *JAMA Pediatric*, 176(4), 400–409. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.5840>
- Wang, J., Wang, Y., Lin, H., Chen, X., Wang, H., Liang, H., Guo, X., & Fu, C. (2021). Mental health problems among school-aged children after school reopening: A cross-sectional study during the COVID-19 post-pandemic in East China. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 773134. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.773134>
- Webster-Stratton, C., Reid, M. J., & Stoolmiller, M. (2008). Preventing conduct problems and improving school readiness: Evaluation of the incredible years teacher and child training programs in high-risk schools. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 49(5), 471–488.
- Zorec, M. B., & Pecek, M. (2022). Preschoolers' perceptions of the COVID-19 epidemic: An interview study with children in Slovenia. In J. Pattnaik & M. Jalongo (Eds.), *The impact of COVID_19 on early childhood education and care: International perspectives, challenges, and responses* (pp. 105–128). Springer.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.