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Buad Khaled

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Connecting the Dots

Reflections on Young Children's Voices During COVID-19

Buad Khales

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has affected the education system in Palestine in all respects, with perhaps the most important change being the need for a rapid transition away from in-person instruction to digital e-learning, which resulted in a months-long closure of physical schools in Palestine. While this rapid pivot to online learning had implications for all children's learning and development, this is vividly illustrated in the experiences of young children enrolled in kindergarten. As such, this study highlights the voices of 50 kindergarten children in Jerusalem, ages four and five, as they describe their responses to the shift from in-person to online learning. Drawing from interviews and analyses of synchronous and asynchronous lessons, the findings suggest that the young children selected for this study demonstrated minimal engagement and low motivation to participate in passive online learning, with a strong desire to return to in-person learning in schools.

Keywords: e-learning, COVID-19 pandemic, child development, children's voices, Jerusalem

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is the most crucial formative stage in an individual's life, when physical, linguistic, intellectual, social, and emotional growth take place in parallel with the development of self-reliance

BUAD KHALES is Associate Professor, Department of Primary Education and Kindergarten, and Director of the Child Institute, Al-Quds University. As an educational counselor, she has consulted in developing strategic plans and professional standards for early childhood teacher education for the Ministry of Education, Palestine, as well as with Alrowad, a company in Saudi Arabia, for its early childhood program (training and training kit). She is the author of numerous articles focused on child-centered teaching, reflective teaching, portfolio, inquiry, and new teaching methods in early childhood education.

and the individual's personality. The foundation for the child's personality is created during this critical stage, thanks to the interaction and integration between genetic predispositions and external or environmental factors (MOEHE, 2017).

In recent decades, the construct of kindergarten has emerged as a means to prepare children for a compulsory school experience that emphasizes language and numerical learning, sometimes (or even often) at the expense of playing, discovery, and inquiry approaches. This focus on literacy and numeracy, and not on more creative and inclusive approaches, has created a severe negative effect on the development of children (Alvestad, 2009; Broström, 2006; Hjort, 2006; Forrester, 2005; Kyriacou et al., 2009).

In response to this urgent need for a return to the focus on child-centered, creative experiences for young children, the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) created a document titled *National Strategy for Early Childhood Development and Interventions, 2017–2022*, outlining a range of important practices (MOEHE, 2017). Although the document includes recommendations for children at all ages, central aspects of the plan were dedicated to kindergarten, identified as one of the most critical stages in the upbringing of any child (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2019a), in Palestine has historically focused on the importance of enrolling the child in kindergarten in order to develop their mental, physical, psychological, and social capabilities and to qualify them to go through life experiences most effectively, often through focusing on the practical, scientific, and educational aspects of kindergarten. Modern education methods have enabled the exploration of active learning, while taking into account the physical and cognitive differences between children, inclusive of children with special needs, such as those who are disabled or gifted. In addition, in recent years, interactive methods between families and kindergarten staff have been enhanced.

In Jerusalem, there are currently a range of multidisciplinary approaches for the administration and supervision of kindergartens. Kindergartens located in public schools are supervised by the Palestinian Authority, while private kindergartens can be supervised by both the Israeli and Palestinian governments.

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, much education shifted from in-person to online contexts. For the purposes of the article, I will refer to the online learning experiences as “e-learning.” In general, e-learning during the pandemic has created challenges in supporting children's ongoing development, particularly as related to their social interactions, motivations

to learn, and emotional and communicative development. Each of these aspects can affect a child's overall growth, and this is especially vivid for young children, given their developmental needs for human engagement and interaction. In Jerusalem, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many kindergartens were closed for in-person instruction by the Israeli government. Consequently, most schools in Jerusalem moved to an online e-learning format. After seven months of this e-learning format, the schools and the governments recognized an urgent need for research on young children's experiences with e-learning. As such, the following research questions emerge:

- 1) How did Palestinian kindergarten children learn during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) What can these children tell us about their e-learning experiences?

To address these questions, I explored the experience of Palestinian kindergarten children learning online during the COVID-19 pandemic. I interviewed 50 children, ages four and five years old, who attended different kindergartens in Jerusalem. Along with the interviews, which focused on the children's voices and perspectives, I also observed their interactions during e-learning lessons and e-activities. This provided me with a portrait of the children's experiences in kindergarten during the pandemic, offering a window into their development.

I present this work in three sections. To begin, I provide a review of the literature, wherein I discuss the importance of early childhood education and kindergarten, the role of the COVID-19 pandemic, and e-learning in kindergarten in the specific context of Palestine. In the next section, I focus on the methodology, and in the culminating section, I present the results of the research, followed by a discussion of their implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of Early Childhood Education and Kindergarten

Early childhood education can play a vital role in supporting children in reaching developmental milestones. These developmental milestones include those that are cognitive, social, emotional, and psychological (Blair & Raver, 2012; Haroun & Khales, 2019; Pisani et.al., 2017; Yoshikawa & Kabay, 2015). Each of these aspects can be influenced by contextual factors and environmental conditions, and so it is crucial to provide comprehensive care, good services, a high-quality educational experience, and a safe learning environment for every child (UNESCO, 2015; Yoshikawa & Kabay,

2015). Kindergarten can be one of the most critical educational learning experiences affecting the life and growth of a child.

Furthermore, for many children, kindergarten may be the first formal educational experience, and one of the first spaces in which children engage socially with those outside their own immediate families and communities. This can be their first step toward learning, discovering, and developing emotional, linguistic, cognitive, and physical growth skills and abilities. The rate at which children interact with others increases when they are exposed to experiences that permit them to investigate, inquire, and question, hypothesize, experiment, analyze, and explore their questions through hands-on learning and experimentation. This kind of exploratory learning cannot be accomplished without considering the child as the center of the learning process (Khales & Natsheh, 2019).

Online Learning and Children

Typically, in kindergarten, when children learn indoors in their classrooms and outdoors on the playground, teachers communicate with them directly, presenting experiences that may invite or motivate children to interact with one another. Early childhood teachers understand children's learning and development and appreciate their inherent intelligence. Kindergarten teachers best serve children when they focus on each child's experience, culture, and environment in harmony with the child's needs and preferences. Teachers must be focused on activities that stimulate reflection in order to contribute to children's growth and development in a comprehensive and integrated manner.

In engaging the e-learning modality with young children, teachers have been challenged to attend to different aspects of children's well-being, including the emotional aspect, the social aspect, and the linguistic-communicative aspects. Therefore, there is a need to listen to children's experiences, voices, and stories while engaging in the e-learning process.

COVID-19 Pandemic Context

As noted previously, and as was the case across the globe, during peak moments in the COVID-19 pandemic, kindergartens in Palestine complied with lockdown protocols, and moved from in-person to online instruction. This echoed the lockdowns and distance-learning implemented in countries such as China, the USA, the UK, France, Belgium, and many others (Samuelsson et al., 2020).

The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children's Learning

COVID-19 has presented a series of complex dilemmas for communities at all levels, and across multiple aspects. The pandemic's impact has gone beyond just the health of the population to also include the economic as well as the education sectors. These concerns have pushed leaders to formulate procedures and steps to prevent the spread of the virus, as well as provide protection to the members of the communities. Governments worldwide responded with health campaigns to include practices such as physical distancing and masking in an effort to mitigate the spread of the virus (World Bank, 2020).

As was the case across the globe, the Palestinian government closed education institutions, including kindergarten, for almost seven months. In response, many (if not most) schools moved to e-learning, allowing teachers and students to remain home, and to communicate via interpersonal communicative technology, such as through computers or cell phones. Instead of meeting in person as usual, teachers provided children with instruction, stories, and assignments through Zoom or similar online video-based platforms. While the move to e-learning was a way to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19, it also introduced the possibility of detrimental effects on the social and emotional development of young children (Brady & Hill, 1984; House, 2012; Zalaznick, 2019).

During the pandemic, researchers have been studying the effects of e-learning in schools, including in kindergartens. In a 2021 study of child and adolescent mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland, O'Sullivan et al. (2021) interviewed 48 families during local lockdowns, to learn more about the impact. Parents and children discussed the negative impact of the restrictions on young people's wellbeing. Children and adolescents experienced adverse mental health effects, including feelings of social isolation, depression, anxiety, and increases in maladaptive behavior. Similarly, Dong et al. (2020) learned that Chinese parents had negative beliefs about the values and benefits of online learning during the pandemic, and preferred traditional learning in school-based classroom settings. The Chinese parents in the study tended to resist or even reject online learning for three key reasons (a) the shortcomings of online learning, (b) young children's inadequate self-regulation, and (c) the parents' limited time and professional knowledge in supporting children's online learning. Additionally, the various hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic made the children more resistant to online learning at home. The findings from both studies (Dong et al., 2020, and O'Sullivan et al., 2021) suggest

that the implementation of online learning during the pandemic has been problematic and challenging for families. Furthermore, the results of the studies support previous scholarly research and the importance of face-to-face learning, particularly for young children

The Israeli Occupation and Palestinian Education

The Israeli occupation of Palestine has severely compromised the access of Palestinian children to education. WeWorld-GVC, an NGO, reported that in Palestine,

The right to education is continuously undermined by the numerous education-related incidents, such as attacks or threats of attacks on schools, lost school time due to delays at checkpoints, military presence at school entrances, closed military areas in addition to the use of live ammunition and tear gas in and around schools, school search, confiscation of education items, detention of students and school staff, settler related violence, or school demolitions and stop work orders. (WeWorld, 2020)

The Palestinian Ministry of Education works in partnership with the Ministry of Health to license kindergartens, ensuring they meet specific international standards that guarantee public safety and provide a stimulating environment for children to develop their skills and abilities. In addition, the Ministry of Education works to update kindergartens to ensure they are prepared to support and teach all learners, including those with disabilities. Also, the Ministry of Education supports kindergartens located in marginalized areas. The Ministry of Education works on networking with private sector institutions to provide them with the needed educational materials and preparation for their faculty and support staff (Ministry of Education, 2019b).

Given the broad reach of the Palestinian Ministry of Education, particularly within the context of occupation, it comes as no surprise that challenges exist. These challenges are particularly vivid in the city of Jerusalem and include issues such as the low enrollment rate of children in kindergarten, the lack of private government training centers in early childhood education, the limited autonomy of kindergarten supervisors, and the scarcity of statistics and data related to kindergartens, especially those in the city of Jerusalem (World Bank, 2019). In the context of the global pandemic, the transition to e-learning was especially challenging, given that pre-pandemic e-learning for children in schools in Jerusalem consisted primarily of watching films or YouTube videos, PowerPoint presentations, playing e-games, and listening to recorded stories (Qsees &

Khales, 2017). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, applications such as Zoom were not commonly used.

Because of the lockdown, governments started thinking of alternatives to address the challenges in providing appropriate education. Like other educational institutions globally, the Palestinian Ministry of Education shifted to e-learning, in which children were suddenly required to sit in front of digital screens to learn and to communicate with their teachers, often without an adequate introduction or clarification around ways to best navigate this shift in the education model (Singh and Thurman, 2019; Kim, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I adopted a qualitative research methodology, focused on listening to children's voices (Rey, 2007; Willig, 2008). This research process is analogous to a conversational process, which would allow children to talk in depth about their perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. It is often a challenge to interview children, due to their still-growing abilities in verbal expressions of their feelings and thoughts. Therefore, it's beneficial to offer multiple means for children to express their thoughts, such as through stories, pictures, drawing, and the like. These can allow the researcher to bear witness to the children's voices, experiences, and perceptions in ways that are accessible (Baynes, 2008; Ellingsen et al., 2014; Khales, 2015, 2008; Khales & Natsheh, 2019). In this way, researchers may come to deeper understandings of the children's perspectives and views. It is essential to embrace children as actors who have opinions and points of view that should be respected by giving them opportunities to express themselves freely.

Children may provide the educational community, as well as researchers, with new perspectives that were not considered previously, which may affect future studies and lead to new lines of inquiry (Christensen & James, 2008; Ellingsen et al., 2014; Sommer et al., 2010). This is an opportunity for researchers to gain insight into the children's perspectives.

Participants

To recruit participants, I sent an announcement (in Arabic) to multiple Jerusalem-based kindergarten principals, program directors, and teachers, knowing that the kindergarten classes had similar curriculum offerings and typically enrolled 28–32 students. The principals, directors, and teachers

consented to permit me to contact parents to seek the participation of their children, with the assurance of confidentiality, both in keeping private the names of all children, as well as the names or other identifying information about the schools.

Upon this consent, the teachers of seven classes of kindergarteners introduced me to children's parents via the WhatsApp groups that had already been established. I then was able to recruit kindergarten-aged participants by requesting the consent of the parents. From the pool of willing participants, I randomly selected 50 children and divided them into two groups. Twenty were interviewed face-to-face, and 30 were interviewed via WhatsApp video calls. In total, the participants consisted of 50 Palestinian children, ages four and five years old, from seven kindergartens in Jerusalem.

Research Tools

For the purposes of this study, I turned to semistructured interviews. This method, which is readily adaptable for different age levels, allowed me to collect a large amount of information, and to track important emergent constructs. Furthermore, it provided the opportunity to reformulate the questioning in a way that made it easier for the participants to understand (Bryman, 2008).

Each of the 50 interviews was conducted in Arabic and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The conversations focused on the different types of e-learning, as well as stories and students' experiences in general.

All 50 of my interviews with the children were recorded, with parental consent. For the 20 face-to-face interviews, I sat outside with the children, in the gardens of their homes, mindful of the need for social distancing and wearing a mask. During the interviews, I used facial expressions such as smiling, scowling, laughing, and so on, to help the children express their feelings toward e-learning. For the other 30 children, I interviewed them using Zoom, and following the same protocol as with the in-person interviews. After completion, I translated the interviews from Arabic into English. I consulted with an English language specialist to clarify and verify my translations. The specialist reviewed both the English and Arabic texts, and ensured the translation was accurate.

As part of my data, I included 13 video recordings of e-learning lessons, with six classes sending two recorded videos, and one class sending one. In addition to observing opportunities for student interaction, the videos also offered a window into the teachers' instructional approaches

and styles. I also studied recordings that were sent to parents, as part of the learning process.

Analysis of the Interviews

I used content analysis to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2014; Joffe, 2011).

My interview analysis process included the following steps:

- Data organization and transcription: I transcribed the children's responses.
- Analysis: I reread the data more than once and noted key ideas and insights for each question.
- Data classification: I classified the children's responses, similar ideas, and other common denominators and themes according to specific categories and then coded the pooled answers.
- Defining patterns: I classified what was coded into paths according to the interview questions by creating subcategories.
- Formulation of results: I formulated the children's responses in proportion to each of the interview questions.
- Narration: I developed a narrative based on the findings.
- Contextualization: I interpreted the results in light of the study context and the literature.

FINDINGS

Again, the two research questions in this project are

- 1) How did Palestinian kindergarten children learn during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) What can these children tell us about their e-learning experiences?

To answer the research questions, I analyzed three distinct sets of data. These included my interviews with the children; the recorded videos of synchronous lessons with children; and the asynchronous materials sent to parents.

My findings center around the two main modalities of e-learning that kindergarten teachers adopted during the pandemic. The first modality is asynchronous, recorded videos that feature indirect teaching. The second modality of e-learning was synchronous, direct teaching via Zoom. Teachers followed specific process steps for teaching during each of these modalities.

For the asynchronous, recorded lessons, the teachers communicated with parents through WhatsApp messages. Teachers recorded videos with the educational materials that included the primary components of the

lesson, such as activities, songs, and stories. These videos were uploaded, along with worksheets for the parents to use with their children, via an online platform. The typical procedure was that teachers instructed parents to download the recorded videos and play these recordings for their children, following along with the teachers' instructions. Then, parents were required to access the worksheets the teachers had prepared and to provide these to their children as well. As noted, teachers also provided the parents with enrichment links for educational videos on the same topic. Parents were then asked to record their children providing responses to the materials. The parents then sent these recordings to the teachers, who provided feedback.

For the synchronous, Zoom-based lessons, the teachers shared the unique link for the Zoom meetings on their WhatsApp teacher-parents group. During the live Zoom meetings, the teachers implemented the lesson and activities, which were supported by the recorded lessons. The teachers explained and discussed the essential concepts and topics, but with minimal interaction with the children. Teachers then sent recordings of these Zoom meetings to parents as a reference and for those children who were absent, so they could watch at a later time. The teachers had the students complete post-class assignments, including worksheets on writing, matching, classification, coloring, and drawing. The teachers provided the parents with detailed instructions on how to implement the assigned activities with their children.

Given the ages of the children (four and five years old), these two learning modalities (asynchronous recordings and synchronous, computer-based lessons) were new experiences for them. Therefore, it is important for those in the education community to listen to the children's perceptions and voices regarding those two modalities.

The findings from the interviews with the children revealed that the majority (45 children) expressed overall dissatisfaction with e-learning. They wanted to go back to their in-person kindergarten classrooms, and expressed their thoughts, experiences, and desires, which I have categorized into the following five themes, which emerged from their interviews:

- communication
- interactive engagement
- emotional presence
- children's motivation
- social environment

I will address each theme in turn.

Communication

My conversations with the children in this study revealed that during the time of the pandemic they experienced difficulties in direct communication with their peers and with others, as they remained in isolation with their families indoors. The fact that children didn't go to kindergarten, stayed at home, and saw their friends only through the computer screen made them feel upset, because they missed their friends. Additionally, they indicated that communicating with their friends through phone calls, or seeing their friends during the Zoom meetings, was not enough. Examples of the ways children expressed these ideas included the following:

Child (A): I miss my kindergarten because I miss my friends. We talk together and they like to sit behind me.

Child (V): E-learning is ugly. I don't see my best friends.

Child (M): I asked my mother to take me to my friends. I missed them, but she said no because of the Corona. I hate Corona.

Child (B): Tell them to open the kindergarten. I'm tired.

Interactive Engagement

Another finding from interviews was that the children missed engaging in familiar interactive activities and events. During e-learning, the majority of the activities focused only on the formal educational and academic content. The overall lesson focus was dramatically pared down, and primarily directed toward teaching the content, rather than focusing on any aspects of the children's overall, holistic development.

Children indicated that there were activities which they missed, such as experimenting with their classmates, and morning dialogues in which they expressed their feelings and whatever they wished to share with their mates. Two children explained:

Child (S): Our teacher was letting us plant. We planted onions, potatoes, beetroot, chickpeas, and a small orange tree. I told the teacher, "Let's plant watermelon because I love it." She said not now for the next time, and the kindergarten now is closed. We didn't plant watermelon.

Child (W): I want to go back to kindergarten, so I can do better experiments with magnets. The teacher gave us a magnet, and we started looking in the yard for everything that the magnet can attract. At home, I don't love to work with magnets alone. There are no children I can share with.

Emotional Presence

Through the interviews, the children revealed that they had difficulty expressing their feelings and thoughts through the e-learning modality.

Although the teachers did indeed ask children how they felt, and the children responded to the question, this was not sufficient from the children's point of view. According to what they said, the video-based form of communication did not allow them to see their classmates' faces and expressions; it also didn't give them the chance to talk freely among themselves. The e-learning modality did not give them the opportunities to express their feelings and emotions in ways that paralleled their more familiar, in-person context.

Child (F): In morning conversation, I used to talk about the beautiful things I like, and my friends did so as well, but in the Zoom lessons, we do not talk about our feelings, nor do we talk about what we like or dislike.

The children also expressed their fear and uncertainty as related to the quarantine situation. The idea of staying at home while hearing that elsewhere there are people who have died was frightening and stressful for many children. The children also expressed their desire to share their feelings and thoughts about the situation with their same-age friends. Child C said, "I wish I could meet my friends to tell them lots of things. I want to ask them if they are happy or frightened."

Children missed the sympathy and tenderness they had shared with one another during their previous, in-person class meetings. Similarly, the children missed their warm relationships with their teachers, who during their pre-pandemic class meetings, would hug them, pat their shoulders, and greet them. The children also indicated that they would love to see their teacher's facial expressions as she laughed or smiled when they would answer correctly.

Child (L): Our teacher is lovely. She always smiles and says many beautiful words. Now she never speaks like before, and she only sends us videos and worksheets.

Child (B): I want to go back to kindergarten. Zoom is ugly, I want to complain to my teacher that my brother is hitting me.

On the other hand, four children indicated that they did not want to go to kindergarten due to previous challenges with social interactions, and specifically because they had experienced physical violence from classmates, who had previously physically attacked them.

Child (J): I want to stay at home. In kindergarten, children beat each other.

In speaking to preferred learning situations, five children indicated that for them, the asynchronous form of e-learning was preferable for reasons related to the physical experience. Specifically, they found they

preferred asynchronous e-learning because they had control over the volume of the audio. This was a particularly powerful way to avoid having to hear teachers or classmates shouting or using loud voices.

Child (X): During Zoom lessons with my classmates, children talk loudly. I put my hands on my ears to stop listening to children.

Child (F): Children and teachers always shouted in kindergarten and in Zoom. But when the teacher sends us videos, it is better. I do not want to listen to loud voices.

Children's Motivation

Children are most motivated to learn when the modality of instruction can provide them with a rich and engaging experience tailored to their unique interests and needs. This study, however, demonstrates noticeable shortcomings in meeting these goals when the principal modality is e-learning.

The children interviewed for this study indicated that in kindergarten they feel joy in response to different sorts of activities they like, such as imagination games, pretend shopping, games such as one called carpenter's corner, and playing musical instruments. However, the e-learning modality often results in children feeling disengaged and bored because they just sit in front of the computer screen listening to the teacher. This was reported by a significant number of the children interviewed for this study. For them, opportunities for engagement through e-learning were insufficient. They want to hold the materials in their hands, to play and talk to each other, and to ask spontaneous questions. For example, during one synchronous class session, the teacher explained the various types of vegetables, and asked the children to show an example of a vegetable from their house. The child became frustrated by the limitations of the e-learning system, and asked his mother to *not* open the camera, because he wanted to carry the vegetables to the kindergarten classroom, to share the full sensory experience with his teacher and classmates.

For children, play and engagement are of great value, especially when they share their play with other children, and this is precisely what the children missed while remaining at home. They did not have the opportunity to play with others. One of the children said, "I stopped playing, even during the Zoom lessons when the teacher asks us to play with someone. There is nobody to play with; my brother is young and my mother is busy as a teacher teaching her own students via Zoom."

Child (C): I want to play with my friend.

Child (E): I want to play the fisherman game, which I love the most.

Child (R): While we were in kindergarten, we played at the store corner, and I used the large scale to weigh the vegetables.

Also, children pointed out that the outdoor yard in the kindergarten is the area where many of their favorite activities and games took place, such as playing with sand, gardening, running, jumping, and playing on the slides and swings.

Child (F): The best thing in kindergarten is the giant swing. My friends and I were so happy playing on it.

Child (D): The pool of balls in the kindergarten is terrific.

Extending these ideas, several children also noted that they wished to return to their in-person kindergarten so that they could run together while holding hands with their friends. Child (M) said that “the kindergarten is close to my home, and I was used to arriving at the kindergarten early, to play with the children in the yard.” He said, “I would like to go back to the kindergarten, but now I stand at the window, look toward the kindergarten, and can’t see any of the children [he was accustomed to seeing].” This, he said, was the source of his sadness.

The Social Environment

Through the interviews, I observed that the children had expressed distress and discomfort regarding e-learning, which for these children at the time of this study, was not interactive. Other children have described their experience with e-learning as very ugly and explained that they preferred to sleep. Some other children indicated that they do not like learning in general, not even in their in-person kindergarten setting, because their teachers tended to dominate the verbal space, talking a great deal. With the shift to computer-based e-learning, the proportion of time dedicated to teacher talk only increased, which further eclipsed and silenced the voices of the children.

Through my interviews, eight of the 50 children indicated they prefer home to any form of kindergarten, be it in-person or e-learning. They expressed that they don’t want to engage in formal learning in any setting at all, and they explained that their own homes fit their needs more than school, because staying at home allows them to sleep as long as they want. They also admitted that staying at home without having to study gives them more time to play with their smartphones. Two children speak to these constructs through these statements.

Child (N): It's exciting to sit at home and play digital games. I want to play more.

Child (D): My mother said, get up, the class has started, and I do not like this class in the Zoom. I do not understand anything, and I want to sleep.

In contrast, five children of the 50 interviewed indicated that they preferred the e-learning modality, because they were allowed to use smartphones, computers, iPads, and electronic games. At the same time, however, they did not like the specific tasks that had been assigned to them.

DISCUSSION

This study explores young children's voices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study uses an inductive qualitative research design. The key findings of thematic analysis suggest that the 45 children interviewed and observed disliked e-learning for several reasons, identified above. Some reasons relate to their needs, while other reasons relate to their characters as well as their individual development trajectories.

At ages four and five, the children interviewed in this study are at early stages of their growth and development, and as such, need a space to interact and learn skills that contribute to their social, emotional, linguistic, and physical development. This, in turn, supports healthy, continuous brain development, as suggested by child development experts and researchers (Haroun & Khales, 2019).

The physical restrictions associated with e-learning during COVID-19 limited communication between children and their classmates, as well as between children and their teachers. Children missed holding their friends' hands while playing, and missed dialogue, discourse, and the participatory language typically associated with a kindergarten experience. The children also lost direct contact with the teacher, since communication was only electronic, which caused the children to be upset.

This situation deprived the children of social contact that is considered essential to their development in terms of independence, cooperation, participation, and entrepreneurial spirit, as children learn to participate with other children in groups and pair activities. Children also missed out on peer communication while playing in the outdoor areas and in the activity centers, especially the corner of imagination, where children imitate social roles and professions such as father, mother, doctor, carpenter, and other games in the corner of imaginative play.

Through the experience of e-learning, the children in this study became isolated from the kindergarten setting where they had formerly

engaged in holistic forms of social and linguistic communication, dialogue, and participatory activities. These findings matched those from previous research studies in that during the isolation of COVID-19 children and adolescents experienced feelings of social isolation (O'Sullivan et al., 2021).

Another finding is that during e-learning, children lacked active participation in the learning process, which had shifted to focus almost exclusively on literacy and numeracy, devoid of the far more engaging and enriching experiences that include avenues to incorporating general relationship building and life skills. This rigid focus on specific content during e-learning may in some ways harm children through the deprivation of access to more holistic experiences at such a crucial time in their learning and development.

Through this study, I have proposed that e-learning adopted by kindergartens during the COVID-19 pandemic has had negative impacts on children. This sudden implementation of e-learning also created short-term problems, such as weak engagement of children. Research has consistently shown the importance of a child-centered learning approach to children's development in a holistic way. Different aspects of development milestones are integrated into the phases of their development, such as emotional, social, physical, linguistic, building values, and mental. To grow in this manner, children need to have thoughtful and individualized care, robust and comprehensive services, and interactive learning environments (UNESCO, 2015; Yoshikawa & Kabay, 2015). Also, children's skills develop through age-appropriate play and discovery, not through lecture and passive observation of adults speaking (Alvestad, 2009; Broström, 2006; Forrester, 2005; Hjort, 2006; Kyriacou et al., 2009).

Another finding from this work is that the closure of in-person kindergartens shifted education from the kindergarten classroom to the homes of children, and this introduced a state of tension, anxiety, and confusion around what was happening, as the entire experience was novel for all involved, including adults as well as children. This led to children feeling upset, bored, and anxious about what was happening, and worried about the new ways their educational experiences were framed. Additionally, the separation of children from their friends and teacher caused them sadness and made many of them even more uncomfortable with the e-learning modality.

In childhood, children need psychological support and solidarity, which reflects their ongoing emotional development. This means that through the duration of the e-learning experience children began to lose

access to different experiences across a range of emotional domains, such as chances to engage sympathy, opportunities for participation with others, healthy ways of expressing and sharing their ideas, options for taking responsibility, and readiness to learn. Children at this stage of development, at ages four and five, need physical, real-time contact with their adult caregivers as well as their classmates, through things like physical touch and eye contact, their teachers' ability to pat on their shoulders, their ability to communicate physically with others, make eye contact to help them to feel secure and liked by others. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the requirements for physical separation generally resulted in limiting contact to members of the same household or family, with little or no contact with others. This isolation has created emotional emptiness for children, which may be attributed to being away from their kindergarten, friends, and teachers.

Letting fear or anger and anxiety dominate the children's minds without giving them space to express themselves can lead to increased stress and may result in children expressing their feelings through outbursts that may include screaming or violence, or perhaps leading to withdrawal, all of which can be challenging and distressing for caregivers. Although additional studies will be beneficial to further explore these responses in light of e-learning during the pandemic, the anecdotal findings from this study suggest that it is beneficial to limit the amount of e-learning young children experience, with in-person learning being preferable and better for their overall learning, as well as their social and emotional development (Brady & Hill, 1984; House, 2012; Zalaznick, 2019).

As noted, another issue to consider is children's motivation and need for engagement. Children's motivation increases when the learning context is responsive to their needs and demands and provides the children with rich experiences, which was a noticeably missing element in the e-learning modality in this study.

In terms of the ways the school administrators and teachers framed their decisions around e-learning, some educators in this study held a clear focus on a child-centered learning approach and adopted e-learning in ways that sought to center the child's role in the learning process, emphasizing the importance of integrated learning. However, other educators have adopted e-learning from the perspective of providing children with increased content, concepts, and information, as a means to help them continue to learn. In response, eight children in this study indicated that they "hate" e-learning, explaining that so many worksheets made them

feel utterly unmotivated to learn. In addition, the children in this study noted that they felt “nervous” about doing homework. During the Zoom lessons, children were generally passive listeners for the duration of their time together, as their teachers talked, without any interaction or engagement from the children. Further, in many cases, the children said they did not understand the tasks.

These results compel us, as educators, to reflect on the goals of kindergarten and focus on the broader purposes of school, which stretch far beyond preparing children to read and write. The lack of attention to children’s need to play and discover in kindergarten may lead to a marked negative effect on each child’s development in the future (Alvestad, 2009; Broström, 2006; Forrester, 2005; Hjort, 2006; Kyriacou et al., 2009).

Some kindergarten educators may view children as a kind of blank slate, where teachers can inscribe or imprint whatever they wish. This approach puts children’s learning at risk, whether it is virtual or in-person learning, all of which invites educators to reflect on their practices in teaching children, and to pay attention to the idea of learning as an interactive process (child and teacher, child and other children, child and him/herself), as well as the child’s interaction with materials. A student-focused, interactive approach can be supported by kindergarten teachers’ continuous professional development, focused not only on the competencies of digital education, but also in ways to provide a learning environment that supports the continued, healthy growth and development of each child.

CONCLUSIONS

Through this study, I have shown aspects of strengths and weaknesses in the e-learning modality. I have also documented the lessons learned from e-learning by listening to children’s voices, opinions, and suggestions. Through this research, I found that children were not initially familiar with e-learning, and they sought to return to in-person kindergarten due the lack of communication with their peers, challenges in expressing their feelings to their teachers and classmates, and their feelings of distress, boredom, and lowered motivation to learn. These responses from the children were because their experiences with e-learning lacked engagement and participation, which strongly affected their learning.

In response to the study findings, I recommend that educators focus closely on the various aspects of teaching and learning that best support young learners and hold these ideas in mind when making decisions related

to e-learning. This attention to the extant literature related to “screen time” in young children will require kindergarten administrators and teachers to carefully weigh the benefits and impacts of having children spend extended time in front of computer screens, and to consider the best use of that time (which should be as interactive, engaging, and humanizing as possible). This focus on interaction and engagement, rather than on simply listening to the teacher, will support children in becoming increasingly independent, while simultaneously strengthening their motivation to continue to learn.

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