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Exploring the Experiences of ECD Practitioners Pre-and Post Covid-19 Pandemic in Diepsloot, Province

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Abstract

The COVID-19 virus was initially detected in late 2019 in Wuhan, China. COVID-19 continued to spread relentlessly, necessitating the World Health Organisation (WHO) to characterise it as a pandemic and emphasise the gravity of the situation so that countries could put measures in place to curb the scourge of this new, vicious pandemic. The Early Childhood Centres (ECD) were among the services adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. This study explores the experiences of ECD practitioners pre- and post-COVID-19 in Diepsloot, Gauteng Province. Theoretically, the study is informed by the Systems Theory and Person-in-environment approach (PIE). To gather data, the researcher used a qualitative research method. Ten participants were purposively sampled from the population of ECD Practitioners who were employees in the ECD sector pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. Data was collected through focus group discussions; field notes and recordings were taken. A thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret the data collected. The main findings were that transitioning from face-to-face to online learning happened haphazardly with minimal resources, and no training was provided. The COVID-19 pandemic brought so much distress into the lives of ECD practitioners at a professional level and increased the workload with minimal resources. COVID-19 had a dire impact on ECD practitioners as they could not observe the learning process, as a result, child and teacher interaction were compromised. It is recommended that the Department of Basic Education consider strengthening its oversight of the ECD, capacitate the ECDs to be more marketable and develop tools to generate income to ensure that they are self-sustainable in the future.

Keywords

COVID-19, experiences, ECD, ECD practitioners

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The outbreak of novel severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), also known as COVID-19, surfaced in late 2019 with its origins in China (Güner et al., 2020). The vicious disease quickly spread across the globe, causing the World Health Organisation to declare the COVID-19 virus a pandemic. At that stage, South Africans were observing the deadly virus at a distance, in countries like China, Italy, and other parts of Europe, so many lives were taken away within a short time. It was only a matter of time before COVID-19 reached South Africa. The first case of the coronavirus in South Africa was confirmed on the 05th of March 2020 when it was reported that a South African male who travelled from Italy was confirmed positive for COVID-19. Coronavirus was not easy to contain due to the way it presented itself; there were people reported as asymptomatic, and these are people who lack symptoms of SARS-CoV-2 (Savvides & Siegel, 2020). The COVID-19 infections kept rising and forced the South African government to enact a national lockdown, which was announced from 27 March 2020. This was a huge shift for all South Africans. The Early Childhood Centres, too, were forced to change their way of doing things into a new normal, and that included the way they delivered their services. The learning process had to happen during the lockdown, and therefore, new methods of

teaching and learning, such as online services, had to be introduced and implemented (Ferri et al., 2020). Face-to-face or classroom learning came to a halt as countries went on lockdown. With this study, the researcher will identify and describe the challenges experienced by the ECD practitioners pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. The main aim is to explore the experiences of ECD practitioners pre- and post-COVID-19.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 outbreak has created educational disruptions and global health concerns that have proved difficult for global health systems to manage. The situation that the countries experienced was difficult to bear; it brought so much distress across all sectors of the world. The COVID-19 pandemic paralysed the education sector and remained the most affected sector by the COVID-19 pandemic. About 80 % of children worldwide were affected by school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lancker & Parolin, 2020). The pandemic has pushed the early childhood sector to the verge of collapse. Simultaneously, many professionals rapidly moved towards remote instruction to support young children experiencing the disruption of the public health crisis (Shin & Puig, 2021). The practitioner functions, such as promoting learning and providing a safe learning environment for the children, were changed during the COVID-19 pandemic to a new normal way of living, which society was never accustomed to.

Experiences of ECD practitioners pre and post COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, countries authorised that learning and teaching be done remotely. Early childhood development utilised different methods of online learning with the usage of smartphones or computers with internet. This learning process was flexible in such a way that the teachers and the learners were able to access it wherever they were. “The shift to remote teaching and learning has meant a complete re-thinking of the delivery of early years programs, whereby teachers needed to examine how they would meet the four conditions for learning in a remote context” (Timmons et al., 2021, p. 888). The ECD practitioners had a challenge of how to continue offering interpersonal activities within a remote teaching context. The unanticipated transition to distance education due to the pandemic created “ emergency e-Learning” (Murphy, 2020, p. 492). Learning environments where children play, learn to use their imagination, work together with peers, communicate, and think critically are preferred (Almon, 2003). Further, Van Laere et al. (2012) reported that teachers in early childhood education have multifaceted roles, such as supporting the child’s whole development, monitoring children’s development, and learning, and creating a connection between parents and preschool. According to Ebrahim et al. (2021, p. 211), COVID-19 also exposed vulnerabilities in the social, digital, and economic ECD systems that, in turn, impacted the kinds of provisions that were offered to children and parents. Yildirim (2021, p. 957) says, preschool teachers have to deal with inaccessible or noisy students with short attention spans, Internet connection issues, financial difficulties, and reluctant and inaccessible parents who intervene in education and give no feedback. The ECD practitioners seemed to struggle to engage young children in online lessons. They also questioned the appropriateness of remote learning for children under 5- year- olds, recognising that young children could not work fully independently in an online environment without a parent’s help” (Shin & Puig, 2021, p.258). The COVID-19 pandemic created confusion among teachers and learners because they did not know what to do or how to manage the situation that led to the closure of schools (Jena, 2020). Teacher stress Teaching work is stressful, which implies experiencing negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration, and depression (Jakubowski & Sitko-Dominik, 2021). Stress is not only related to mental abilities or internal state of mind, but also affects a person’s behaviour (Groen et al., 2012). In addition, the more the teachers felt that families were suffering from COVID-19 and had difficulties with remote learning, the more likely the teachers were to feel stressed or even burned out (Reimers, 2022). The impact of the pandemic goes well beyond the direct consequences of the viral infection, adversely affecting the global and domestic economy, the environment, local living conditions, and the incidence and course of numerous chronic conditions (Falgas-Bague et al., 2023, p.2). Many early childhood programmes could not afford to meet safety standards and were unable to continue staff contracts and sustain operational requirements, the lower attendance due to caregiver’s inability to pay user fees, fear of children becoming infected, and reduced capacity led to financial difficulty, loss of large numbers of trained and experienced Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practitioners and permanent closure of several services (McNair et al., 2022).

Given the limited direct contact with teachers, parents and guardians had to take over much of the role of the supervision of their children’s education, including instruction during the period of school closures (Reimers, 2022). COVID-19 has changed daily life, forcing parents to work from home while caring for their children; many parents attempted to keep their children busy and safe at home (Li et al., 2022). The home learning environment became significantly more challenging because of homeschooling, especially for children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families and families with migration backgrounds (Hemmerich et al., 2021). Through education, individuals are equipped with technical and technical skills necessary for production (Kibirige, 2022). However, a research conducted in the United States and several Latin American countries revealed that among the challenges experienced by educators during COVID-19 was a lack of preparation for distance teaching, including deficiencies in the pre-and in-service training to address the educational needs of young children distantly; lack of preparedness for the transition from in-person to distance teaching; and the need to work with caregivers who, at the time, did not have the skills to help their young children (Atilas et al., 2021).

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theoretical frameworks, systems theory and person-in-environment theory, were deemed a perfect fit to help understand the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Early Childhood Development Practitioners. Kast & Rosenzweig (1972) say a system does not work in isolation but is interdependent with other systems. A person in the environment framework was utilised to get a better understanding of the holistic environment of the ECD practitioners. The study placed the ECD practitioners at the upper layer of the ecological systems model, as per systems theory. The ECD practitioners cannot function on their own but are interlinked or connected with the whole education system, which includes the involvement of families, communities, and stakeholders, the entire society, and other systems such as Health, which work in collaboration or as a supporting structure to the ECD programme. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire education system was severely impacted by the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Pattnaik & Jalongo (2021), the services rendered by ECD childhood centres were disrupted, and the learning process came to a standstill. To better explain the concept of systems theory, Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed an ecological systems framework that identifies layers of contexts that shape development from the most proximal (and thus, most important) to the more distal, with each additional layer shaping and influencing the layers it encompasses (Buell et al., 2020). This model considers the entire system in which families are functioning to understand their interactions with the environment better (Turner, 2017, p. 244). Four systems, which include microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem and exosystem, were defined. Hare (2004) argues that person-in-environment demonstrates the coherence of pro-fessional activities by linking micro, meso, and macro practices into a continuum. As per the study, the microsystems were defined as the systems that involves a child's relationships and interactions with her immediate surroundings, mesosystem defined as linkages between the systems that influence the development of the child, the exosystem focused on the issues of policies and guidelines that address the processes that the ECD practitioners should follow and lastly macro system comprised of cultural values, customs, and laws (Berk, 2000). The researcher must understand the ECD operations holistically, the space that the ECD centres operate in, the systems that describe their operations, the way they do things (culturally/traditionally), their associates, the political dynamics that impact the ECD centres, their economic position, the beneficiaries and most importantly the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on their operations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, new regulations and procedures had to be speedily implemented in respective cultural values, principles, and practices. The researcher utilised the person-in-environment theory because there is an interconnection between the person and the services offered, be it at the micro, meso, or macro level. COVID-19's existence not only affected the ECD practitioners but also the larger groups, families, communities, and societies at large, be it in social, political, or economic environments. The theoretical frameworks adopted for this study complement each other and allow the researcher to build a strong argument about the study at hand.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in Diepsloot in the Gauteng Province. A qualitative research method was used to discover the experiences encountered by Early Childhood (ECD) practitioners pre- and post-COVID-19. Qualitative research detects, describes, interprets, and translates how people view, experience their social environment and the challenges they are faced with. The qualitative method was the most relevant method to the study because it provided an opportunity for the participants to narrate their own experiences of COVID-19 and how it changed and or impacted their livelihood. A collective case study design was used. Starman (2013) says a case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy institution, program or system in "real life". The researcher utilised this design to explore in detail the events that ECD practitioners encountered during COVID-19, in both the private and public ECD sectors. In the study, the researcher draws attention to similarities and differences of ECD that are registered and unregistered ECD practitioner's experiences during COVID-19 and makes comparisons. Flyvbjerg (2006) says case studies can be "close in" on real-life situations and test views directly about phenomena as they unfold in practice. The COVID-19 virus affected so many lives in different ways, and so with this design, the researcher was able to gain evidence of how deep or complex the impact of COVID-19 was from the ECD practitioners.

The population considered for the study was Early Childhood Practitioners who were employees at the Early Childhood centres when the country was hit by the COVID-19 virus. The researcher chose this group of practitioners because they were the most hit sector by the COVID-19 pandemic. The ECD sector had to shut down and rapidly change its operations into something they had never imagined. About 100,000 ECD practitioners were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Nkomo et al., 2023). This high number includes the Early Childhood practitioners across the 9 provinces of South Africa. Due to the vast population of the ECD sector, the researcher sampled a small group of ECD practitioners who participated in the study. The researcher sampled only a small number of ECD practitioners who took part in the study. The term sample always implies the simultaneous existence of a population or universe of which the sample is a smaller section or set of individuals selected from the population Roostenburg et al., 2021). The purpose of sampling is the selection of suitable populations or elements so that the focus of the study can be appropriately researched (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). Out of thousands of ECD practitioners affected by COVID-19, the researcher sampled 10 practitioners from 5 organisations, namely: Oratile ECD, Need Kids, Kganya Day Care, Mother Touch and Little Sands. Each organisation had two (2) ECD practitioners who participated in the study. Overall, ten (10) participants took part in the study. This excludes the 2 ECD centres, which were part of the pre-test of data collection instruments. All the ECD centres chosen are situated in Diepsloot, in the Gauteng province in South Africa. Non-probability sampling was

evaluated as the most effective and suitable procedure for this study. With Non-probability sampling in qualitative research, the researchers recruit only specific populations to investigate a specific topic or when the population is unknown or unavailable (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). According to Roestenburg et al. (2021), there are various types of non-probability sampling techniques in qualitative research; however, for this study, the researcher utilised the purposive technique. Purposive sampling technique, also known as judgmental sampling, is a form of non-probability sampling in which decisions concerning the individuals to be included in the sample were taken by the researcher (Rai & Thapa, 2015).

With this sampling strategy, the researcher decided on the number of participants to be involved in the study and deliberately chose a small size of the group to be able to manage and continuously encourage the participants who are ECD practitioners to share their experiences, how they felt about the sudden change of their operations, and to also reflect on the support services they have received if there was any. A sampling of the participants solely lies on the researcher's judgment and could create biases. It can also be difficult to convince the reader that the judgment made to select units to study was appropriate (Rai & Thapa 2015:10). The purposive sampling served as a guideline for stringent criteria to be utilised in this study and was inclusive of the following: The participants should have worked in the ECD sector as practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The practitioners should have worked in an ECD situated in Diepsloot, Gauteng, pre- and post-COVID-19. The participants should have been at least 18 years of age and above. The participants should have been at least 18 years of age and above. The participants who were excluded were those with no ECD background. Participants from other provinces. Persons under the age of 18 were excluded and regarded as children. Lastly, participants with no qualification in ECD were excluded from participating.

The instruments that the researcher used for the study are the focus group discussion guide and a tape recording. Research instruments refer to the tools that the researcher utilised in collecting data from the participants. According to Bloor (2001) Focus groups are organized group discussions centred on a topic and monitored and potentially guided by a researcher. The researcher conducted a pretest with two (2) participants chosen for the study. The main reason for the pretest was that the researcher wanted to assess the feasibility of the study and whether the methods and techniques proposed would likely be successful (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). The data collected from the pretrial or testing is not included in the article or the final findings of this article. To collect data, the researcher utilised focus group discussions. The researcher opted for focus group discussions because more and richer data may be generated from the discussions and because they are cost-effective. The researcher had three (3) participants for the 1st group and seven (7) participants for the last group. The researcher deviated from the initial plan that was set in a research proposal that the group would be divided equally. The process of recruitment began in January 2024, and it allowed the ECD centres time to recruit suitable participants for the study. The recruitment process was from January- March 2024. Data collection started in May 2024 to July 2024. The session took sixty (60) to ninety (90) minutes and was prolonged by the lengthy discussions of participants. All the information collected was digitally recorded, and handwritten notes were made and kept safely in the diary as a backup. For the interpretation and analysis of data, a thematic analysis was used. Thematic analysis is a method for analysing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyse, and report repeated patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher chose this method because its elements sound more related to the research question, it seeks to understand the experiences that the practitioners have undergone during the COVID-19 period, their thoughts, the impact it had and the behaviour that it sets across the ECD sector.

The researcher adopted an inductive approach, and Kiger and Varpio (2020) say this approach provides a broader, more expansive analysis of the entire body of data. The approach is flexible because it does not restrict the researcher to only prepare questions but can rather expand the question to the participant to get richer data. The data collected was analysed in six (6) steps: (a) Data familiarisation, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes and (f) reporting. During this stage of analysis, information was processed in order to understand the meaning of it, what it meant for the study and so it took a lot of going back and forth took place in trying to digest the data presented by the participants, and in some instances, the researcher re-wrote what was recorded on the audios. The information or data collected was rewritten (transcribed) as it was said by the participants. Recordings are transcribed into written form so that they can be studied in detail, linked with analytic notes, and or coded (Bailey, 2008). All the handwritten data was typed and saved safely on computers. There is a backup for all the data collected. The information analysed was then coded. A code is defined as 'the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon' (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). During the initial coding process, the researcher identified the areas that were significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic on the traditional operations of practitioners. The researcher also assigned codes to the data. Construction of the themes was conducted based on the data gathered during the coding process. Once the data was completely processed, the researcher began conducting in-depth research on the themes identified. A theme is a pattern that captures something significant or interesting about the data and or research question (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The themes were identified and verified to determine whether they have meaning to the study and their relevance. A mind map was created to identify the similarities, patterns, and/or trends identified during the identification. The researcher analysed the themes and established subthemes or subtopics related to the main themes identified. The themes were defined; the researcher applied a concise and straightforward name to each one. In presenting the final report, the researcher has identified and analysed the commonalities, similarities, and differences in the effects or impact of ECD practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collected was verified and evaluated. The evidence gathered during the process of investigations is recorded and kept in safe storage as a backup and assurance of the quality of work. For the trustworthiness of the data

collected, the researcher considered that researchers should establish protocols necessary for a study to be considered in four ways, such as transferability, and this was ensured by providing context-rich, meaningful, thick descriptions with verbatim quotations of participants and descriptions of the research methodology. The analysis was credible, as enough data was presented for the reader to be satisfied with the trustworthiness of the analysis. Secondly, credibility whereby different techniques such as listening, probing, reflecting, recapitulating, explaining, summarising, recording the data, confirmation of the field notes was used to ensure the credibility of the data collected. The researcher was able to verify the experiences of each participant, explaining steps taken during data collection and data analysis. The researcher made an audit trail, and the findings were examined by the supervisor. Peer debriefings and transcripts of data also confirmed the credibility of the study. The supervisor reviewed data transcripts and data analysis to detect errors. Thirdly, dependability and this is evidence-based, meaning the researcher recorded and took notes of all the communications done or data collected from the onset of the study until the final product. The researcher conducted an audit trail and peer debriefing to ensure the good quality of the study. The researcher information reported is solely gathered through the process of group discussions with the participants, and all the records were kept safe. Lastly, confirmability, which is an audit trail that involves field notes, memos, and journals, was utilised as evidence and can confirm the origins of the study. According to Roestenburg et al. (2021), the audit trail should display the interaction between the researcher and the participants in such as such a way that the research can be understood not only in terms of what was discovered but also how it was discovered.

FINDINGS

The chapter on findings begins with the participant's demographic characteristics, followed by the experiences of Childhood Practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings also reflect on the availability of support provided to Early Childhood practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1 Demographic information of the participants

Participant Number	Age	Gender	Race	Qualification	Work experience	Position	Name of organisation
Participant 1	47 years	Female	Black	ECD level 4&5	26 years	ECD Practitioner	Oratile ECD Centre
Participant 2	50 years	Female	Black	ECD level 5	30 years	ECD practitioner & principal	Kganya Day Care Centre
Participant 3	35 years	Male	Black	ECD Level 4&5	15 years	ECD Practitioner	Mother Touch Academy
Participant 4	40 years	Female	Black	ECD Level 5	4 years	ECD Practitioner	Needy Kids ECD Centre
Participant 5	29 years	Female	Black	ECD Level 4	4 years	ECD Practitioners	Oratile ECD Centre
Participant 6	40 years	Female	Black	ECD Level 4	7 years	ECD Practitioner	Kganya Day Care Centre
Participant 7	49 years	Male	Black	None	15 years	ECD practitioner & chef	Mother Touch Academy
Participant 8	35 years	Female	Black	ECD Level 3	10 years	ECD practitioner	Little Sands ECD
Participant 9	32 years	Female	Black	ECD level 5	5 years	ECD Practitioner	Needy Kids ECD Centre
Participant 10	24 years	Female	Black	Grade 12 & A4 level	5 years	ECD practitioner	Little Sands ECD

The table above show the age distribution of the participants who attended the focus group discussion. The table indicates that two (2) of the participants are between the age(s) 20-29 years old, three (3) participants are between 30-39 years old, four (4) participants are between 40-49 years and only one (1) of a participant is between the age (s) 50-69. The age group 40-49 is the most dominant as four (4) participants fell within that age group out of ten. The study was dominated by females as two (2) males and eight (8) females participated. The data reveals that the ECD practitioners are mostly females with fewer males. Ten (10) participants took part in the discussion groups. All ten participants belonged to the same race, Black. As per the information in Table 5.1, one (1) participant has ECD level 3, two (2) participants (with ECD Level 4, Five (5) with ECD Level 5, 1 participant with grade 12 and A 4 qualification and a chef. The information indicates that most ECD practitioners have ECD level 5 qualifications. Regarding the work experience, there were two (2) participants with 4 years as ECD practitioners, two (2) of the practitioners have worked for 5 years as ECD practitioners, one (1) participant has 7 years of experience, one (1) participant with 10 years of working experience, one (1) with 26 years of working experience and one (1) with 30 of working experience. The data on the abovetable reveals that the years of working experience for the participants varies from 4 – 30 years in the field of ECD. According to the data, 100% of the participants are ECD practitioners, however during the group discussions two (2) participants indicated that they are playing double roles, teaching, and doing other work activities such as cooking.

Theme 1: Experiences of Childhood Practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unpleasant changes to the functioning of ECD practitioners. The working environment drastically changed to accommodate the measures that were put in place to minimise the further spread of the virus. These changes came unexpectedly and therefore brought so much pain and suffering to the ECD practitioners. During the discussion groups, ECD practitioners have expressed and shared the in-depth challenges they have

experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Four subthemes emerged from the above-mentioned theme: challenges relating to teaching and learning environment, challenges relating to mental health and emotional well-being, challenges relating to professional development and training and lastly, challenges relating to communication between parents and ECD practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Subtheme 1.1: Challenges in transitioning from face-to-face to online learning

According to the participants in this study, the education system was significantly disrupted, ECD centres had to shut down with no learning process taking place. ECD centres shifted from the normal way of learning to the new normal and introduced learning lessons through technology to accommodate COVID-19 pandemic measures. ECD practitioners confirmed utilising WhatsApp groups to post learning lessons to the children so that the learning process does not stand still. There were no longer interpersonal relationships between the ECD practitioners and the children as it used to be.

Participant 2: *"We had to close and not work at the time of COVID-19, the children were at home safe."*

Participant 3: *"Mostly working with children there is much need for interpersonal relations as a teacher with kids and that was disrupted."*

Participant 9: *"We created a WhatsApp group with the parents. For those who did not have WhatsApp group, we had small books inside the children's bags, something like a diary we would write the message in the book and tell the children to show mommy when they got home."*

Participant 8: *"We changed our method, we have to incorporate COVID-19 into teaching lessons so that children can know, learn and practice COVID-19 teachings. Even back at home, they had to practice washing hands, sanitising, and keeping masks on. We changed themes in our chart display so that they can see and keep their distance".*

Almon (2003) confirms that learning environments where children play, learn to use their imagination, work together with peers, communicate, and think critically are preferred.

Ostrosky and Meadan (2010) argue that during the early childhood years, children learn to interact with one another in positive and successful ways. Roussou (2004) confirms that play, in particular, can unite imagination and intellect in more than one way, and help children discover things at their own pace and in their own way. In line with the ecological theory, each microsystem offers opportunities for children's development. Early Childhood Development centres are therefore in existence to ensure that the needs of the children are met. Yet, how such opportunities will be availed and experienced as such building blocks for learning is dependent on the child and his/her unique abilities (Buell et al., 2020). Bronfenbrenner maintains that because the child develops, the interaction with the environment requires a complex nature (Härkönen, 2001). Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) admit that the COVID-19 pandemic brought a major disruption to education systems worldwide where educational settings had to close for months. The learning environment that the practitioners and children were accustomed to was no longer the same. The ECD practitioners in the study concurred that the education system was disrupted, and changes had to be implemented which were in line with curbing the spread of the virus.

Subtheme 1.2: Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and well-being of practitioners.

Findings revealed that COVID-19 existence brought emotional pain, and there was a loss of lives across the globe. The shutting down of the economy had a bad impact on the ECD practitioner's finances and that brought so much stress and created anxiety because the ECD practitioners would not know where their next meal would come from. Participants revealed that the ECD centres had to shut down, after the opening of the schools the number of children accessing the centres remained very low and they received reduced salaries. The ECD practitioner confirmed the loss of their loved ones and the loss of children in the centres.

Participant 4: *"It was difficult because we could not afford to support our families, to take care of ourselves. Even after COVID-19 some of the kids are very few and the salaries are less, and we did not get an increase."*

Participant 9: *"We lost our family members, and our loved ones, it affected us a lot, we were always in shock, counting how many people passed in a day and worried about who could be next."*

Participant 6: *"COVID-19 messed up a lot, even in our centre we have lost some of our teachers, and we lost some children due to COVID."*

Most participants shared that their workload and administration became more overwhelming. They were expected to ensure that all COVID-19 protocols were met, that children were sanitised, social distancing and wearing their masks.

Participant 8: *"Even back at home, they had to practice washing hands, sanitising, and keeping masks on. We changed themes in our chart display so that they can see and keep their distance".*

Jakubowski and Sitko-Dominik (2021) attest to the statement that teaching is stressful, which implies experiencing negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration, and depression. Kim (2020) says that educators reported frustration associated with adapting programs based on changes related to the pandemic, however, no further evaluation of the mental health impacts of the pandemic on educators was mentioned. It is the context that contributes to the holistic and more accurate understanding of the individual; i.e., the systems view is holistic and attuned to targeted interpersonal relationships and stresses the reciprocity of behaviours between the people (Turner, 2017). Kwon et al. (2022) confirm that teachers reported worries related to financial and job security as well as the sustainability of their centre during closure. Lower attendance due to caregivers' inability to pay user fees, fear of children becoming infected, and reduced capacity led to financial difficulty, loss of large numbers of trained and experienced Early Childhood Education and Care (ECCE) practitioners, and permanent closure of several services (McNair et al., 2022). Generally, good health represents a state of positive interaction among the various spheres, and ill health represents a disruption of that satisfactory interaction (Weick, 1981).

Subtheme: 1.3 Professional training of ECD practitioners during COVID-19

The participants revealed that as ECD practitioners, they were not accorded any formal training in preparation for the changes that were brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most practitioners confirmed that they migrated to technology, however, there was no formal training provided to them they relied solely on social media for what needed to be done, and they would develop their ideas to add on what they had learnt from media to implement it in the classrooms. The ECD practitioners were challenged in the sense that they were not taught what to do, but the expectation was that they had to continue sending educational material to the parents and explain what to do; the parents themselves struggled with some not knowing what or how to do the schoolwork of their children. In essence, there was no training provided to the ECD practitioners.

Participant 5: *"We were not provided with any training, but social media greatly helped us".*

Participant 6: *"We will watch TV with the 5 children that we had at least they can see how to prevent or do social distancing".*

Participant 7: *"There was no training, but we shared ideas with other principals from other preschools and came up with ideas on what to do".*

A study conducted by Jones (2020) reveals that for preschool teachers, issues of technology and the internet were the dominant challenges. Hemmerich et al. (2021) say that many Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) professionals lack knowledge and competencies in dealing with pandemics in professional practice, including adopting information and communication technologies (ICT) for educational purposes. According to Buell et al. (2020), the ability to create a classroom environment that makes curricular content accessible for all children is essential for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Well-trained, highly qualified and engaged practitioners are instrumental contributions to a rich, meaningful educational environment (Sollars, 2022). Weick (1981) says recognising one's ability to change as a personal power reinforces the notion that people can act upon themselves in a way that strengthens them. The educational profession is a complex profession that implies continuous professional development, autonomy and responsibility, and educators are expected to have developed various competencies (Vekić-Kljaić & Mlinarević, 2022). This contrasts with what has happened with the ECD practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Professional development or training was at its lowest level to almost non-existent, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ecological system is the closest environment to a child and includes the structures that the child has direct contact with (Berk, 2000). Therefore, the ECD practitioners as a supporting structure to the child's development must be well equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, at the height of COVID-19, such services were scarce.

Subtheme 1.4: Communication challenges between parents and ECD practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic

The data reveals that the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unexpected changes across all sectors of the globe. Participants indicated that there was a shift in ways of communication, how children were engaged in the lesson plans and how the practitioners could reach parents and children to ensure continuous learning and development of children during the COVID pandemic. The ECD practitioners found it very hard to reach out to the parents for assistance in the learning and development of the children.

Participant 5: *"The education did not stop, it continued, we continued teaching and we would send lessons to the parents, and they had to give feedback and show us videos when we came back, we polished even though we were continuing with COVID-19 regulations."*

Participant 9: *"We created a WhatsApp group with the parents. For those who did not have WhatsApp group, we had small books inside the children's bags, something like a diary we would write the message in the book and tell the children to show mommy when they got home."*

Participant 3: *“Well, it was such a difficult moment or time but that was the only way to communicate with parents, teachers, as well as children. We just continuously sent work to parents for kids to do during that moment and we created WhatsApp to use it as a way of communication.”*

Chen (2016) confirms that effective teacher-parent communication has been recognized as a building block of positive teacher-parent partnerships. In systems theory, “feedback loops” (circles of response from which there is a return flow of information into the system) are operating, and information is being processed through the system (Turner, 2017). However, Jones (2020) confirms that preschool teachers found it difficult to connect with students and keep them engaged with online schooling/remote learning. It is the power of communication which decides whether the postal system is functioning as an administrative system built on norms or not (Kihlström, 2012). Buell et al. (2020) confirm that, although ongoing informal communication is necessary, formalizing communication mechanisms increases the likelihood that communication occurs over time and circumstance. Timmons et al. (2021) say moving to remote teaching and learning contexts means that if social interactions are happening, they are only occurring through online video meetings, where it is difficult and arguably impossible to develop the pro-skills for which a play-based early learning environment naturally allows.

Theme 2: The availability of support provided to Early Childhood practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was never anticipated. Many countries, including South Africa, were never ready for such a pandemic, preventative measures were implemented to curb the spread of the virus; however, the resource allocation to the ECD practitioners was not satisfactory. Teachers and children in advantaged areas were advanced in terms of resources for teaching and learning during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas the disadvantaged schools suffered a loss as they could not access the resources needed at the time.

Subtheme 2.1: Resource allocation

It was indeed a difficult time for the ECD practitioners, particularly those working for unregistered ECDs. The financial and digital support resources seemed to have been the most scarce in the profession during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ECD practitioners, however, acknowledged the food parcels from the government which they received as community members. Some ECD centres had enough resources in such a way that they would not find it hard to reach out to their beneficiaries. Some ECD centres received donations of smartphones, but it was not for everyone and therefore most centres had to use their phones for the lessons with the children.

Participant 7: *“Yes, we did receive support. I thank God because we would share with others what we were getting. We used to receive food parcels and distribute them to the parents and community so had such support and appreciated that support from the Government”.*

Seemingly the ECD centres that were unregistered suffered the most whereas registered ECD centres endured support throughout the pandemic.

In contrary **Participant 9** stated that: *“Yes, there was nothing at all, even the food parcels, anything, any support, there was nothing at all. We were supposed to wait for small salaries”.*

Furthermore, **Participant 6** said: *“The money to buy data would be a challenge.”*

Participant 5: *“The support that we got from our principal was that when they cook, they will cook enough food then if we go home, we can just pack the food and then we go with it to home. That was a support.”*

The teachers and children in the advantaged contexts were well equipped with the necessary digital infrastructure, digital devices, and human resources to cope with online learning (Ebrahim et al., 2021). Saavedra (2020) confirms that the new method of learning is also widening the level of access to education between the poor and the rich through the digital divide. Ryan (2001) says that technology has changed our society, and while we are taking great pains to safeguard the physical environment from damage done by technology, we have spent no resources to provide similar safeguards to the damage done to our societal environment. Härkönen (2001) argues that at the time when we are so much engaged in defending our physical environment against the curses of technology, we have not done a thing to reach a similar state of security in the environment of our social life. The study findings reveal that the ECD practitioners suffered emotional, physical, and financial with no relief provided by the SA Government. In some ECD centres, resources can come in various forms, but at the foundation, a lack of sustainable funding can demotivate and make ECD teachers frustrated a lot (Ngumbi, 2022). According to the person-in-person-in-environment approach, the issues of resources experienced by the ECD practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic may not necessarily be resolved in isolation and therefore it's important to know and understand the connections between systems within the environment that can assist in creating a sustainable intervention for all the practitioners.

Subtheme 2.2: Community and parent involvement in support of the ECD practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic caused so much panic, stress, and anxiety for everybody. The parents, too, were taken by storm by the existence of this virus. The parents had to play many roles, that of parenting and teaching. It became a big challenge because some parents were not well equipped with the Early Childhood programme and were not emotionally ready to do home-learning lessons with their children. The learning environment was compromised in such a way that even the parents could not provide sufficient support to the ECD practitioners as was needed at the time.

Participant 9 *“There was a challenge because some of the parents were not responding”.*

Participant 6: *“With us, some of the parents that were still working at that time would provide sanitisers for their kids, they knew that we did not have money to buy sanitisers so they would buy them.”*

Participant 10: *“From my centre what we did was that we contributed funds and asked parents to get colourless masks with shade because we did not have the support that you are talking about. That was better for us because we did not have dividers. We used it as our divider”.*

Tyilo et al. (2017) say that more often than not, ECD practitioners encounter challenges in providing quality access to ECD since the parents, as the primary support structure, often distance themselves from participating in children’s education. Families function within a complex system in which they impact and are impacted by interrelated components, including characteristics of individuals, the context in which individuals develop, and time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The findings confirm lack of parental involvement in the child’s education was minimal during COVID-19. Buell et al. (2020) confirm that understanding the family’s connections in the community and the other services and support they receive will also allow the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) professional insight into ways to support the family. Similarly, (Dini, 2021) emphasizes that parents must not only be educators as parents but also act as teachers in formal education. Jones (2020) reports that balancing working from home and supporting children was the number one challenge for parents.

Subtheme 2.3: Initiatives by colleagues in support of the ECD practitioners

The COVID-19 pandemic was the most difficult time for everyone, however, some thought about others. During the discussions, it came out strongly that the ECD practitioners were supporting each other, not only for the educational material but also in other ECD centres, preparing meals for everybody, including the practitioners. Standard operating procedures were developed during the pandemic in support of the ECD centres. The teaching lessons had to incorporate some of the standards recommended for the ECD practitioners, the expectation was that they had to do temperature tests on the arrival of the children at the centre, sanitize and ensure regular hand washing, they had to ensure that the children are social distancing and wearing their masks all the time.

Participant 1: *“I was not working, not putting something on the table, it was difficult, so my principal created a cooking group at the creche, and she organised us to come and cook for the community.”*

Participant 5: *“The support that we got from our principal was that when they cook, they will cook enough food then if we go home, we can just pack the food and then we go with it to home.”*

Participant 7: *“The support that we received was meant to be distributed to the community and parents because some of the parents were not working. Instead, we would tell them to tell someone to collect the parcels.”*

The need for social relief increased dramatically during the COVID-19 crisis when families were unable to generate income or rely on their networks for support, and endured for longer than anticipated (Van Der Berg et al., 2022). Hedegaard (2009) says a person contributes to his institutional conditions and the perspective of his society; therefore, institution and person both must be conceptualized as contributing to practice in a theory of children’s development. Transactions between systems also have a marked influence on the realities of children and families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The findings confirm that ECD policies were seen to be in favour of ECD centres that are already in the system and have excluded many which have been deemed unregistered at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic radically restricted mobility, with almost every country requiring children to remain within households during lockdowns: education and other services were either stopped or, if available, often only through online learning (OECD, 2020). Arndt et al. (2020) say that a struggling economy contracted further, exacerbating poverty and food Social Inclusion, particularly for the most vulnerable sectors of society.

DISCUSSION

The ECD practitioners indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to transition from face-to-face learning to online learning, however, the medium of online interaction available to them at the time was WhatsApp through group

calling. The COVID-19 pandemic brought so much distress into the lives of ECD practitioners at a professional level, it increased the workload and administrative tasks (screening, sanitization, and maintenance of social distancing) and at a personal level, it reduced financial income with high costs of living and caused emotional pain due to loss of loved ones. The communication processes were significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic with the transition from face-to-face to online learning, which became a barrier to the learning process as the practitioners struggled to reach out to the parents who were either unable to receive the WhatsApp messages or were unable to do so due to the lack of smartphones. The practitioners were distressed with their livelihoods at stake. Based on the study findings, practitioners received minimal support from the parents and community during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Aid that the ECD practitioners can recall was from their colleagues in the form of soup kitchens and food parcels. The study reveals that the parents lacked knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning during the pandemic and thus could not provide sufficient support to the ECD practitioners. The ECD practitioners were strained throughout the pandemic, self-equipping themselves with the knowledge and skills to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The practitioners confirmed that there was no means of generating income, which exacerbated the poverty amongst the ECD practitioners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on findings highlighted in the study, the following recommendations are made

- The Department of Basic Education should strengthen its oversight of the ECD, capacitate the ECDs to be more marketable and develop tools to generate income to ensure self-sustainability in the future.
- The Department of Education should consider extending the employee wellness programme, aiming at enhancing the mental health and wellbeing of employees to the ECD practitioners.
- The Department of Basic Education should develop an emergency/disaster framework that will guide undesirable future events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and training should be provided to the ECD practitioners and relevant stakeholders.
- A child-friendly hybrid teaching system, for example, a technological and classroom environment, to be developed for all Early Childhood Centres. This should be rolled out to the ECDs to enable them to continue operating in case another disaster like that of COVID-19 strikes again.

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of the ECD sector. The quality of education significantly deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic; the lack of interpersonal relations as ECD practitioners could not observe the learning processes at their optimal level. Teacher and child interactions were compromised during the COVID-19 pandemic, with no formal training provided for the ECD practitioners. The communication processes were flawed, causing more frustration and stress to the already burdened ECD practitioners. The ECD practitioners were not pleased with how the government handled the distribution of resources, it was an unfair process which favoured certain groups and excluded others. There was unequal distribution of resources, with the registered ECD centres being prioritised. The services provided were not accessible and rather excluded many, only accessible to the ECD centres that were already on the system at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The issue of the registration status of the ECD centres remains a stumbling block to accessing the resources meant for the ECD practitioners.

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