Identifying the impact of Covid-19 on the early childhood education teachers in Saudi Arabia

Dr. Basma Rashed Alghufali

Assistant Professor in Early Childhood at the College of Education Department Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University – Riyadh Saudi Arabia.

Abstract

This pandemic has negatively affected teachers and young children in their early childhood education as a results of negative impact of Covid 19 .According to (UN, 2020) 40 million children have missed out the opportunity on early childhood education. Therefore, this research shed the lights on early childhood educators which faced a wide range of personal and professional challenges as a result of lockdown. This directly affected the females early childhood teachers ability to provide quality education to children. It is, therefore, advisable to adapt pedagogical approach to engage young children during lockdown. In this research will discuss a wide range of literature reviews and the implications of this study as well as the focus groups results from female teaches perspectives therefore, this paper will be concluded with the impact of covid 19 on early childhood teachers in Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Covid-19 has impacted the global education system in an unforeseen manner. School education has been highly disrupted because of the compulsory closure of schools during the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the UN (2020) report, around 40 million children worldwide have missed out on early childhood education.

Children have also missed their learning opportunities, opportunities for social interaction, opportunities to develop cognitive and learning skills as well as in some cases, children have also missed proper nutrition (UN, 2020).

A wide array of evidence has informed about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and education.

Still, there has been a gap in literature towards understanding the personal and professional challenges experienced by early childhood educators during the Covid-19 pandemic (Jalongo, 2021).

The situation has been specifically difficult for the teachers working within the early childhood education system.

Female teachers often experience a higher level of barriers and challenges in comparison to male teachers in distance learning (UNESCO, 2021).

Early childhood education systems are mainly dedicated to providing care and education to young children who come to preschools to develop cognitive and language skills with preschool numeracy skills (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021). Therefore, educators working with such young children must be more emotionally and mentally present, committed and motivated to deliver high-quality care and education (Park et al., 2020) .

Evidence from the literature has also informed that early childhood education is a complex job because educators must address the needs and concerns of young children and respond effectively to promote their overall development

through effective connection and interaction (Thorpe et al., 2020).

However, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in creating many new challenges for the early childhood education system, which has been digitally or technologically unprepared to respond to the pandemic.

Secondly, it has been identified that online teaching and learning is easier for older children to adopt than younger children.

At the same time, early childhood educators were required not only to adopt technology but also to adopt pedagogical approaches to engage children in digital classrooms (Jalongo, 2021).

However, existing literature displays a gap in understanding the impact of Covid-19 on early childhood educators.

Therefore, this literature review will focus on understanding the impact of Covid-19 on early childhood education systems and the professional and personal impact of the pandemic on early childhood education teachers.

Implications of Covid-19 Pandemic on Early childhood Education and Children

According to United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2019), early childhood education (ECE)" refers to any organised learning programs for children aged three years and above, up to the start of primary education. This covers "pre-primary education" and "preschool education" (p. 1). Early childhood education and care can be defined as the system dedicated to providing formal education and care to children under the age of 6 in the registered setting regulated by a national committee (for ex., Ofsted in England) (Hobbs & Bernard, 2021).

The centres that offer early childhood education may include nurseries, playgroups, preschools, and other children's centres.

According to European Commission (2021), early education and care are

considered highly significant and essential elements for supporting the effective development of children, lifelong learning, social integration, and later social and academic skills of children.

However, with the declaration of Covid-19 as a global pandemic, early childhood education and care also came to a halt, as the countries decided to impose compulsory lockdowns (Railienė, Merfeldaite & Prakapas, 2021). Another significant problem was that the early education and care system was neglected in the policies during and after the pandemic, as the most significant focus of the Governments and policymakers was on primary, secondary and higher education (European Commission, 2021).

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic created many social and economic challenges, as well as a major impact on the education system. Very limited research has been conducted to understand the impact of the pandemic on early childhood education (Hobbs & Bernard, 2021).

The impact of Covid-19 on households remains uncertain, yet it is known that the pandemic would have long-term consequences on the children's health, education, and overall development.

Due to the lack of evidence, it has also been argued that the impact of Covid-19 on young children is unclear, as well as the extent to which parents and caregivers of the young children have been able to support their learning and well-being is not clear (Visnjic-Jevtic et al., 2021).

Black et al. (2017) argued that young children are considered specifically vulnerable in times of crisis, specifically in poor countries.

The study further informed that 43% of the young children living in middle and low-income countries were considered to have been at risk of not achieving their developmental potential .

Prior research conducted on the impact of pandemics and disasters on early childhood education and young children has shown that there are immediate

and various long-term negative impacts. For example, there has been a clear link between childhood adversaries and later impairment in children's learning behaviour and their mental and physical development (Shonkoff et al., 2012).

Yoshikawa et al. (2020) espoused that Covid-19 will have more severe constraints on the development and learning of young children, and the effects are not limited to the direct impact of the pandemic.

However, the indirect impact of the pandemic on children would be associated with economic instability, reduced household income, and reduced healthcare and social support.

Campbell-Barr and Nygård (2014) identified that the role of the early childhood education system is highly significant in the life of young children. Evidence from the literature has informed that early childhood education institutions provide informal education and prepare children for school by enhancing their cognitive and language skills and pre-literacy and pre-numeric skills (Malta Campos & Vieira, 2021).

It has been further identified that early childhood education in the UK, USA, Spain, Canada and Netherlands is focused on developing initial cognitive and problem-solving skills in children by involving them in everyday play activities (Malta Campos & Vieira, 2021).

However, O'Keeffe and McNally (2021) argued in their research that play strategies that are considered to be most significant in early childhood education became restricted in a pandemic because of the closure of the schools, which would have a significant impact on children's coping skills, problem-solving skills, management of stress and emotions, as well as their social and emotional well-being.

Jalongo (2021) argued that face to face interaction with the teachers, engagement in play activities and relationship with peers is very important for

young children.

Still, during the Covid-19 crisis, it was very complicated for the early childhood education and care centres to ensure the delivery of appropriate learning and care delivery.

Although primary, secondary and higher education institutions quickly shifted to digital platforms and converted courses to online formats, the delivery of the education program in early education was highly complex (Jalongo, 2021).

One of the main complications identified in studies is that many young children had no access to digital platforms.

There has been a lack of remote learning opportunities in early childhood education (Mitchell, Meagher-Lundberg & Wells, 2020).

Secondly, the teaching and learning disruption caused due to pandemic has been more precarious as early childhood education systems specifically lack digital connectivity, general lack of experience in employing digital technology, lack of training and experience of educators, as well as lack of appropriate pedagogical guidance, course and resources that could support e-learning in early education (Park et al., 2020).

Furthermore, it has been identified that early childhood education systems have grappled with many other challenges that made delivering early education more difficult, such as reduced social interaction between schools, teachers, parents and children, lower preparedness of teachers to adopt digital technology, low salaries for staff and teachers while higher work commitment in digital platforms, as well as difficulty in staff retention (Marchant et al., 2021).

Researchers have also shown that early childhood education is also affected by the extent of the educational resources available for parents, parental job status, and time availability to support children's learning and play during the

pandemic (Wasmuth, 2020).

In addition, a wide array of research has analysed the health, social and economic burden of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Still, the gap is identified in the existing literature about its impact on the early childhood education system, children, and early childhood educators.

Professional Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Early Childhood Educators

A wide array of earlier research has focused on analysing the challenges experienced by early childhood educators and the working conditions in the private sector (Irvine et al., 2016; Jena-Crottet, 2017; McMullen et al., 2020). The early childhood educator's role and responsibilities are very complex and multifaceted as their role requires a continuous commitment to improving services, displaying emotional resilience, and willingness to take up challenges when dealing with young children and their parents (Beltman et al., 2019).

Cumming, Sumsion and Wong (2015) further argued that with the advancement and development of various forms of education policies in all countries, a focus on the professionalism and quality of the workforce has increased, which has resulted in exerting more pressure and demand on the early childhood educators to display better skills, capabilities, responsibility and accountability.

It is further identified in the report of OECD (2019) with increasing job demands and expectations from the early childhood educators; some other challenges that they face include long working hours, lack of recognition and public status, more workload and less pay as well as lack of opportunities for professional development.

Thorpe et al. (2020) also argued that such challenges burden early childhood

educators and increase the risk of emotional exhaustion, stress, and turnover .

Eadie et al. (2021) argued that the Covid-19 pandemic had exacerbated the aforementioned challenges.

For example, early childhood educators in Australia were required to navigate additional efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic to support learning for vulnerable children and provide ongoing support to the children's learning at home (Eadie et al., 2021).

For teachers, pandemics resulted in creating many personal and professional challenges.

The main change brought about by the teachers was the change in their roles, as they were required to shift to online classrooms and were also required to adopt digital technologies (Kim et al., 2021).

Early education teachers also experience significant stress in displaying the adaptability of online communication tools to communicate and interact with parents and children.

Časlav (2020) argued that change in the role and teaching approach brought a sudden transformation to the way of working for teachers, and this transformation had occurred without prior preparedness, training or adequate period of adaptability.

However, it is determined that children and teachers involved in the early education system were more significantly impacted as the whole education system turned to online or digital platforms for continuity of teaching and learning (Hobbs & Bernard, 2021).

On the other hand, results produced by Časlav (2020) in her research informed that early education teachers have enough ability to effectively adapt to the new education system.

Teachers also displayed a positive attitude towards the educational changes occurring during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research conducted by Alea et al. (2020) has also confirmed that school teachers have been prepared to adapt to change and use innovative strategies to support teaching and learning in the digital environment.

However, one of the most significant aspects of being highly prepared for the change is to receive appropriate and adequate support from educational institutions and organisational leaders.

Alea et al. (2020) identified that teachers who receive professional support and supervision are more likely to adapt to new teaching and learning system.

However, Davies et al. (2021) identified a significantly small number of early childhood educators that quality of education was good during the pandemic. Such results produced by the studies leave a lot of gaps and room for identifying the negative and positive factors that impacted educators and their capabilities.

Evidence has further informed that the socio-emotional and physical development of young children has been a major concern for early childhood educators, carers and parents.

For example, early education is considered to play an important role in supporting language development, physical outcomes and educational development of children, which is often supported by appropriate social interaction that children receive in early childhood education institutions (Malta Campos & Vieira, 2021).

However, due to the closure of schools, young children were considered to be vulnerable to such support and care.

Therefore, the early childhood educators experienced an increased pressure of developing educational programs and pedagogical approaches through which they could prepare parents to support children and further focus on the language, cognitive and physical development of children (Malta Campos & Vieira, 2021).

Jalongo (2021) identified that modifications in the teaching strategies increased the challenges for teachers, as they have not been prepared to work in a crisis.

Secondly, teachers find it difficult in supporting learning for children with special needs.

However, Eadie et al. (2021) identified that professional support from co-workers and effective communication was an important element in enhancing resilience among teachers.

Studies have shown that supportive structures, educators' work experience, and support from organisational leaders have been significant for teachers to display better resilience and lower staff turnover (McMullen et al., 2020).

A supportive organisational culture can support early childhood educators to meet the demand and expectations of their role during the pandemic.

A supportive work environment also increases the intentions of teachers to stay (Logan et al., 2020)

Personal Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Early childhood Educators

The covid-19 pandemic has also exerted various personal barriers and challenges on teachers that impacted their ability to provide effective teaching and learning support.

For example, Eadie et al. (2021) identified that family responsibilities on the teachers had highly increased during the pandemic and compulsory closure of schools and offices.

Apart from fulfilling their family responsibilities, early childhood educators were also required to fulfil their family responsibilities. This is mainly a gender based finding because the early childhood education system is mainly dominated by females, and most of the pre-primary school teachers are

females.

For example, a report conducted by UNESCO (2021) identified that 80% of the early childhood educators are females, thus, facing the more severe and detrimental impact of Covid-19. Preparedness to adopt technology has also been a significant challenge for preschool teachers. Studies have reported the personal experience and e-learning experience of preschool teachers (Park et al., 2020) .

According to Jain, Lall and Singh (2021), the overall job satisfaction of the teachers is important for their effective engagement and commitment to teaching.

However, during the pandemic, teachers feel less supported and overworked and highly stressed to ensure quality education is imparted.

Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al. (2021) argued that not only students but teachers have also been vulnerable to psychological stress during the pandemic.

For example, during the lockdowns, teachers were introduced to online teaching platforms, which further resulted in increasing their workload. Besser, Lotem and Zeigler-Hill (2020), with the increased professional workload and increased family and children responsibilities, school teachers have experienced higher incidents of depression, anxiety and sleep disturbances.

Secondly, teachers and parents collaboratively play an important role in the learning and development of preschool children, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, parents and teachers have experienced few opportunities for interaction with each other and in assisting children in distance learning .

Al Lily et al. (2020) emphasised the influence of social and cultural values on the abilities of school teachers to effectively deliver e-learning programs.

Al Lily et al. (2020) further informed that some of the personal problems that have affected teachers in Arab countries during pandemics include depression,

anxiety, pregnancy, domestic violence as well as divorce.

All such personal problems restrict teachers to use their complete potential and ability to teach children.

Prado-Gascó et al. (2020) conducted a study in Spain and identified that stress symptoms and the feeling of lack of support were higher among teachers, which resulted in causing psychosomatic problems among teachers.

A study conducted by Suárez (2018) also informed that working from home through information and communication technology (ICT) could become a significant reason behind feelings of tension, depression, exhaustion and decreased job satisfaction, which further impacts their teaching abilities.

Pavlenko and Pavlenko (2020) have argued that in some countries, preschool teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic has displayed unpreparedness of the institutions and educators.

For example, it was identified that teachers' digital skills, as well as the digital preparedness of the school, posed a barrier to effective early education teaching and learning .

Studies have also analysed the importance of the well-being of early childhood educators and have associated it with their ability to impart quality education (Jena-Crottet, 2017).

Logan, Cumming, and Wong (2020) have also argued that the emotional and psychological well-being of early childhood educators influences the quality of the early education programs, as well as its impacts and the learning and developmental outcomes of young children.

Mindfulness and self-efficacy of the teachers are associated with their higher engagement in teaching and better interaction with children (Jennings et al., 2017).

However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers have been overburdened with personal and family responsibilities that have affected their well-being

outcomes. According to Burić and Kim (2020), long term stress, workload and anxiety result in causing lack of self-confidence among teachers that impacts their jobs and also make it difficult for them to manage children's behaviour and their learning needs .

Swigonski et al. (2020) identified that early childhood educators work with very young children; thus, they are required to display more empathetic behaviour towards children.

Such educators are also expected to provide emotional and social support to young children in order to enhance their overall development.

However, teachers who experience workload, stress, and lack of organisational support tend to lack sensitive behaviour towards children and are also likely to withdraw from adequate interaction with children (Swigonski et al., 2020).

Studies have further identified that early childhood educators work with infants and toddlers, for which they have to be more capable of effectively responding to the different needs of young children.

However, various financial, emotional and physical challenges being personally experienced by early childhood educators increase their stress levels and reduce their level of engagement with young children.

Since studies have frequently linked the compensation that early childhood educators receive with their job performance, it is argued that the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in increasing financial insecurity for educators, as some have lost jobs while others are poorly paid (Prado-Gascó et al., 2020).

Swigonski et al. (2020) also reported in their findings that during Covid-19, 50% of the early childhood educators had been worried that they would be left with no money by the end of the month .

Studies have reported that Covid-19 disrupted the interpersonal relationship between early childhood educators with children because of the dismissal of

face to face classrooms.

This is the reason that early childhood educators have reported a negative impact of the pandemic on their relationship with preschool children.

However, findings presented by Eadie et al. (2021) informed that 88% of the early childhood educators or teachers believe that despite various personal and professional challenges experienced by them during the pandemic, they have been able to maintain a positive relationship with children because of the sense of contribution they make towards early childhood education.

This displays that the personal resilience, motivation and skills of early childhood educators can work as a positive element to help them overcome their stress.

These findings also correlate to the findings presented in a report by OECD (2019), where early childhood educators were found to recognise the intrinsic importance of their role and its impact on children despite various external challenges.

However, evidence has shown that Covid-19 restrictions affected the communication and interaction of teachers with parents and their colleagues, which further reduced the sense of support, yet the longer work experience of teachers was found to be a positive element in helping them to cope with change, work-related stress and workload (Thorpe et al., 2020). Years of experience have also been found to be associated with lower turnover rates (Kidger et al., 2020).

Research Method

The impact of covid-19 on children and families has been widely studied, but there has been comparatively limited research on the impact the covid-19 lockdown had on early childhood educators.

Learning this is crucial so the management can form policies to support early

childhood educators when such disruptions occur in future. Since this topic is quite novel and has not been explored in-depth, this research adopted an exploratory approach.

Data was collected using focus groups with early childhood educators teaching in Saudi primary schools.

In total, six focus groups consisting of 47 teachers were conducted.

Out of the 47 respondents, 30 were females, and 17 were males.

Data analysis

All of the respondents agreed that the covid-19 lockdowns have significantly disrupted their lives both personally and professionally.

Whilst some of the respondents suggested that the few days at the beginning of the lockdown came as a welcome change as they could spend considerable quality time as a family at home, as the lockdown extended, almost all of the respondents found it challenging to manage their personal and professional lives.

As one of the respondents commented: "it was a lot of fun earlier.

We could relax at home, play games and watch movies with the family, but then gradually, it started to feel like a prison.

Even my kids started to miss their school and friends. It wasn't easy later on."

Respondents were then asked to elaborate on various personal and professional challenges that they faced during and after the covid-19 lockdown.

The table below summarises the challenges mentioned by the respondents.

Table: Personal and professional challenges that early childhood educators in Saudi Arabia faced due to covid-19 lockdown as cited by focus group participants.

Personal	Professional
Mismanaged workload	Eroding skills
	Adoption of additional skills for online learning
Poor work-life balance	Managing children's interest
	Difficulty in teaching young children online
Boredom	Difficulty in interacting and bonding with children online
	Difficulty in handling children with a complete lack of primary education
Time management	The additional burden to provide ongoing support to the children's learning at home
	Difficulty in coordinating online with parents
Increased familial responsibilities	Developing curriculum for language, cognitive and physical development whilst at home
	Supporting children with special needs
Financial insecurity	Coordinating with other teachers
	Issues with digital connectivity

Personal challenges: The respondents suggested a number of personal challenges that affected them during the covid 19 lockdown.

Time management: 60% of the respondents mentioned that managing the time during covid-lockdowns was difficult for them.

According to the respondents, during regular school times, it was all organised and planned, but covid-19 disrupted their time management.

As one of the respondents mentioned: "it seems better to work from home but to be honest, it's much better when you go to work.

Everything is arranged as per the time, and I make the best of the time available.

Being at home was not at all good as I could not manage my time.

" Many other respondents also mentioned not being able to manage their time even though they had more than the usual amount of time as they did not need

to get ready and travel to work every day.

Mismanaged workload:55% of the respondents suggested that they couldn't manage their workload during the covid lockdown.

Respondents suggested that whilst they had more time, at the same time, they had far more responsibilities during the lockdown as compared to when they went out to work.

Some of the female respondents suggested that during the covid lockdown, they had to do all the housework as they had no outside help.

According to one of the female respondents: "this was the most weird time I have experienced in my life.

Even simple things like getting groceries became so complicated. My husband and I were always too stressed because we have young children and his old mom who lives with us.

" Another male respondent commented: "it seemed like we had a whole day, but in reality, we had very, very few productive hours.

Days just passed, and we couldn't get anything done.

It was an awful time really.

" According to the respondents, various restrictions hindered their ability to get things done and consequently, they could not manage their workload.

According to one of the respondents: "it was not easy to manage the work.

I could never finish.

I think I just lost the motivation to work.

And it wasn't me only.

Everyone I spoke to just lost the motivation to work. I wasn't unhappy or depressed.

Just not interested in working.

" The sudden change/disruption in people's day to day routines had a significant impact on their ability to manage their workloads.

Poor work-life balance: 40% of respondents suggested that they faced poor work-life balance during covid lockdowns.

Unsurprisingly all of these were females indicating that covid lockdowns seriously affected the work-life balance of female teachers but probably not so much of the male teachers.

In Saudi societies, females tend to do most of the housework, and with little outside help available, female teachers were overburdened with housework.

 According to one of the respondents: "Suddenly I had double the workload and family all around who needed my time.

I needed 48 hours in a day because 24 hours wasn't enough.

" Several other respondents suggested that their work and personal life got seriously intertwingled during the covid as they resorted to working from home.

One female respondent commented: "my housework was double as everyone was at home.

I was literally taking classes while cooking breakfast.

I had no idea if I was working or doing homework.

" Most of the other respondents who commented on work-life balance suggested that their familial responsibilities increased greatly as all of the family members were constantly at home.

Boredom: 34% of the respondents suggested that they felt quite bored and mentally unstimulated staying at home for a long period.

Respondents suggested that lack of socialisation and being indoors for a prolonged time led to significant boredom.

As one of the respondents commented: "I didn't even feel like talking to anyone on the phone.

It was so so boring.

I never imagined that I would be imprisoned in my own home for that long."

Another respondent commented: "I was very quiet.

In fact, most of the people I saw were quiet.

Everyone was so bored.

" Respondents suggested that staying locked in the house with no face to face socialisation affected their emotional state and led to feelings such as boredom.

Increased familial responsibilities: 43% of the respondents mentioned increased familial responsibilities as one of the negative consequences of the covid-19 lockdown.

One of the respondents commented: "I do the housework every day anyway. But everyone being at home all the time meant I was constantly doing something from morning to evening.

I could hardly find time for work." As expected, most of the respondents stating increased familial responsibilities were females.

As most of the family members were confined to their homes, female members of the house faced a sudden rise in familial responsibilities.

Financial insecurity: 32% of the respondents suggested that they feared financial insecurity during the covid-19 lockdown.

With many people losing their jobs and reduced income, there was great financial uncertainty for many families.

As one of the male respondents commented, "no one knew how long the lockdown would last, who would even survive and who will not.

I was seriously worried for my family and whether I will have my job when the lockdown ends or not.

" Most individuals suggest that they or someone they knew were facing financial hardships and increased financial uncertainty.

Professional challenges:

Eroding skills: 68% of the respondents suggested that they believe they have suffered from some decline in their teaching skills as a result of being out of school for a long period.

As one respondent commented: "when I went back to school, I was so nervous as if I was the child.

It took me many days for getting back in the rhythm.

" Surprisingly a high number of respondents suggested the same.

One of the respondents clarified, "although I was still teaching online, it's a day and night difference between teaching a group of young children in the class and teaching the same students online when they are sitting separately at home.

" Several respondents mentioned class management skills while suggesting that they feel their skills were somewhat affected by being away from school during the covid-19 lockdown.

Adoption of additional skills for online learning: 53% of the respondents suggested that during covid lockdowns, they faced the challenge of acquiring additional skills primarily related to teaching online.

As one of the respondents commented: "This was probably unimaginable before covid that we will be teaching such young children online. Early education teachers have no knowledge or experience in doing this. I had to learn these things for my husband.

" According to the respondents, their self-efficacy in using the online platform for teaching young kids was quite low.

Most of the respondents struggled to acquire skills to use online platforms for teaching.

Managing children's interests during classes: Since most of the children were

studying from their homes, it was difficult for the teachers to maintain their interest in the class.

Young kids are often distracted by things, and it is quite easier for teachers to maintain their attention in class.

However, since the kids were at their homes, teachers had little control over the environment in which they were studying, and consequently, they found it quite challenging to teach the kids online during the covid lockdown.

Young children are not used to taking instructions, and teachers need to be physically around children in order to maintain their attention. This was not possible in an online environment, and this made the task of the teachers quite challenging .

Difficulty in interacting and bonding with children online: 48% of the teachers suggested that they found it difficult to interact and bond with children as there was little personal interaction.

Personal interaction between teachers and students is quite important, especially for young children, as they learn by playing and interacting. However, there is a little one to one and face to face interaction between the teachers and the students.

This made it difficult for the teachers to interact personally with the students. As one of the teachers commented: "before covid lockdowns, most of the students recognised me personally, and I Recognised each one personally.

But online- no one knew no one.

Nothing personal.

I'm like a YouTuber giving lectures.

Nothing more. It is sad".

Difficulty in handling children with a complete lack of school education: Some teachers spoke about the challenges they started to face when they returned from covid lockdown.

According to one of such teachers: "When I started going back to school, I was shocked to see young children with absolutely no knowledge of being in class.

They were in year two but had never been to school.

We just pushed them two years behind in their development.

" 37% of respondents suggested that they were facing trouble in acclimatising young children into the school environment just because they didn't start attending school at the right age.

Consequently, the children started to get used to staying at home and studying online.

For example, "many children did not develop the socialisation skills and were completely lost when they started attending school."

Managing children who were lagging by a couple of years in their natural development cycle was a challenge for early education teachers, as per the respondents.

An additional burden to provide ongoing support to the children's learning at home: 48% of the respondents suggested that they found it challenging to provide additional support to young children through online channels.

As one of the respondents commented: "I even struggled to evaluate children properly.

I mean, when we observe children in the class, we learn a lot about them and see what can be done to boost their personality.

Online teaching is useless in that sense.

" Other respondents also suggested that evaluating children and providing ongoing support for their development was challenging as online teaching only allowed them to evaluate children for the work they did.

Another respondent commented: "in class, children play, we observe, and we test them as we go along.

We find out their strengths and weaknesses and make a plan which we share with other teachers and parents.

We couldn't do this online at all.

" Another respondent also suggested, "for children that young, exams tell you only 10% about the child's development.

The remaining 90% is through interaction and observation.

This means we were not evaluating and supporting the children".

Difficulty in coordinating online with parents: 27% of the respondents suggested they found it challenging to coordinate with parents.

When asked to elaborate, teachers suggested that whilst it made it easier for them to contact the parents, the interaction between the teachers and parents was not of the same quality as in face-to-face meetings.

As one of the respondents commented: "in face-to-face meetings, there is some warmth.

I recognised each parent and knew what to talk to them about.

In an online platform, it seemed like a formality.

I didn't develop any connection with the parents, and they too seemed least interested in interacting with me."

Another respondent confirmed her views "in the past, I became good friends with the parents.

It was like I was looking after their child, so we met like two individuals with the same purpose.

In online meetings, it was they just wanted me to finish saying.

I wonder if they even cared about what I said ".

Developing curriculum for language, cognitive and physical development whilst at home: 57% of the respondents suggested that it was extremely challenging for them to develop the required curriculum for language, cognitive and physical development.

As one of the teachers commented: "you know most of the teaching for young children involves plays and activities.

How do you do that online? There is no fun for them and for me also, really".

Teachers suggested that they are used to teaching physically in classrooms and have never really learnt how to teach young children online.

According to the teachers, young children learn most things through one-to-one interaction, so depriving them of the interaction impedes their ability to learn and develop.

Teachers have been trained to teach children in classes, especially the early education teachers who have little or no experience in teaching young children online .

Supporting children with special needs: 47% of the teachers suggested that they struggled to provide support to children with special needs.

According to the teachers, there are two problems in supporting children with special needs on online mode.

Firstly, in online mode, the teachers find it struggle to evaluate the learning needs of children, especially those of the children with special needs.

Secondly, children with special needs struggle to learn even during classroom sessions, so it is even more difficult to work with them using an online platform.

The lack of interactivity in the online platform makes it difficult for teachers to evaluate and support children with special needs .

Coordinating with other teachers: 21% of the respondents suggested that the covid-19 lockdown made it difficult to coordinate with other teachers for the development of children.

As one of the respondents commented: "usually you will meet the teachers during breaks, discuss the progress of children and all. This information sharing is a very important part of our job.

In covid, we completely lost this.

We had no update about any child from any of the teachers.

" According to the teachers, lack of interaction affected their ability to share information about the performance of children and consequently could not contribute sufficiently to their development.

Discussion of findings

The covid-19 lockdown was prolonged and significantly affected early childhood educators, both professionally and personally, as confirmed by the respondents.

The respondents suggested that during covid lockdowns, they experienced several personal problems such as poor work-life balance, poor time management, and boredom.

In addition, as all family members stayed home, it increased their familial responsibilities leading to mismanaged workload.

Many individuals also experienced financial insecurity as they and/or their family members feared losing their jobs.

Most of these issues, such as mismanaged workload additional the burden of familial responsibilities, affected female teachers more than male teachers.

These findings indicate that prolonged lockdowns increased personal challenges that exacerbated the professional challenges that they faced due to covid lockdowns .

Respondents indicate that they faced a range of professional challenges generally as a result of covid lockdowns but more specifically due to the sudden transition from an offline mode of teaching to an online mode of teaching.

Teachers suggested that they have experienced skills erosion due to being away from the traditional classroom teaching environment for a long time.

According to the teachers, they moved from offline to online mode and have stayed away from traditional classrooms for a long time.

Consequently, upon returning to work, they felt a bit of uneasiness, something like what they experienced when they started working for the first time .

The covid lockdown was sudden, and in terms of teaching, most of the respondents commented that they needed to acquire additional skills for online learning.

Their classroom skills were not useful online as they struggled to maintain the attention and interest of the young children.

This also included challenges faced in developing a new curriculum for language, cognitive and physical development for the online environment. The lack of face to face engagement with the students was particularly challenging.

Young children can easily lose focus, especially when at home and teaching them online was not easy for most of the respondents.

Respondents also indicated the challenges in bonding with children, with one particular respondent suggesting that she felt nothing more than a YouTuber presenting some video.

Children interact with their peers, teachers and different elements within the whole school environment.

This leads to the construction of knowledge.

It was particularly challenging to recreate this construction of knowledge in an instructional environment.

Young children are not skilled at learning merely from instructions; they learn even by spending time at school, playing with their friends and.

According to the respondents, they could not fill this void in the online mode of teaching .

Respondents also expressed displeasure at not being able to identify the needs

of children with special needs and provide adequate intervention.

Close monitoring and face to face interaction with children are essential in order to be able to evaluate the special learning needs of children.

Since this is not possible in an online environment, teachers could not support children with special needs .

The online platform also made it difficult for teachers to interact with parents and other teachers.

Such coordination is essential for the holistic assessment of children's development.

Teachers work as a unit along with the parents to make sure that all aspects of children's development are addressed at school and at home.

Respondents also suggested that they found it challenging for children who missed the first two years of their schooling due to the covid-19 lockdown.

These children lacked the basic skills such as group play because they missed the first few years of schooling when these skills were taught.

Teachers suggested that whilst these children have been somewhat set back on their journey, it has proved even more challenging for the teachers as they tried to bridge this educational gap.

Conclusion

Covid-19 lockdown had significantly disrupted the day to day lives of billions of individuals worldwide.

This research investigated the impact of covid-19 lockdown on early childhood educators.

This research concludes that the early childhood educators faced a range of personal and professional challenges as a result of covid-19 lockdown.

This directly affected their ability to provide quality education to children.

It is, therefore, advisable to prepare strategies to provide adequate support to

the teachers during major interruptions like the covid-19 lockdown.

Recommendations

Covid-19 lockdowns have had a significant impact on lives of individuals and this should be reflected in professional practices.

It is recommended that institutions should practice positive HR practices with respect to the work life balance of teachers.

In addition, some attention should be [aid to development of curriculums for online mediums and teachers should be adequately trained to teach both offline and online.

The extra efforts that teachers need to invest in onboarding the students who have missed early years of education should be supported by the institutions.

Further research

Further research can be conducted to identify policies and practice which can help teachers in managing the professional and personal impacts of covid-19 lockdowns. Furthermore, research can be conducted to identify policies and practices which can prepare teachers to mitigate the impacts of such severe disruptions in future.

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