

Early care and education after COVID-19: A perspective

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cie**Taren Swindle** 

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Abstract

This perspective highlights the experiences and observations of an early care and education researcher reentering the field after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions in the USA. Specifically, this perspective highlights the struggles of children, teachers, early care and education leaders, and the system itself as early care and education attempts to return to normal post COVID-19. Children exhibit behavioral, social, cognitive, and physical challenges. Teachers are burned out from grueling cleaning and safety protocols and caring for children who have missed the benefits of early care and education socialization during the pandemic. Leaders are struggling to keep a stable workforce and fill many roles in the childcare site. This perspective details first-hand experiences and recent relevant literature to describe these struggles.

Keywords

child health, COVID-19, early care and education, teacher well-being

The teacher is crying as I come in the door. The director catches my eye and tells me to help anywhere I can today. Children are also wailing and screaming. Drop-off is a stressful time. Sure. But this feels different. I start my observation in the corner as usual, but my humanity will not let that last long. I set down my clipboard and approach the teacher: “This looks like a really hard day. I was an early childhood teacher too. I understand. I am not here to judge you today. I want to help.” She softens a little and smiles slightly through her tears, and we begin to work together to settle the children. The day is a hard one for us both. It is a constant battle for the two of us to keep the children safe and at a volume below ear-bleeding. In my 17 years of work and research in the early care and education (ECE) context, I have never seen anything like it. Has COVID-19 impacted ECE this much?

In March 2020, my US-based research projects with ECE partners ground to a sudden halt, like research studies across the globe, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted remote projects until restrictions for visitors were lifted and we could reenter classrooms with our partner

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sites in the fall of 2022. We were eager to revive our work and meet our funding milestones after 31 long months away from the field, to be back in the classrooms we love so much, and to answer our research questions about nutrition and physical activity in ECE. I do my work in ECE centers in the southern USA, where 75% of children are in non-parental care each week. Between October 2022 and January 2023, I completed nine immersive encounters in Pre-K ECE classrooms; they were half-day structured observations where I recorded key physical activity and nutrition practices in the classroom. These were paired with focus groups with teachers, where we discussed their current challenges and initiatives. Starting in August 2023, I have also been a part of a team that launched a 27-site trial for the promotion of evidence-based practices in nutrition. I visit several of these sites monthly as their implementation coach. I talk to the staff, directors, and food-service personnel. Across these post-COVID-19 experiences in ECE, one thing is clear: COVID-19 *has* impacted ECE that much.

Children in ECE are struggling. Many families kept their children at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, separated from normal peer-to-peer interactions. For the children who remained in the classroom, their days were far from normal. Children had to learn to wear masks and shields, to attempt to play with their friends at a distance or across plexiglass, and to try to avoid giving and receiving physical touch from their teachers. Regular screenings were missed, and needed developmental services were delayed (Macy, 2022; Shapiro and Bassok, 2022). The result of these disruptions is palpable in the ECE classroom. In most of the classrooms I have entered post-pandemic, at least one child will cry for most of the day. This is not the drop-off cry that settles down. I know that cry well. This is an inconsolable dysregulation with urgency that persists while the teachers do their best to comfort for hours on end. In 2021, parents in Ireland described that the lack of socio-emotional support from childcare was contributing to tantrums, anxiety, and clinginess (Egan et al., 2021:). Cognitive performance is also lagging, especially for children in families with a lower income (Deoni et al., 2021). Increased screen time and lower physical activity (López-Bueno et al., 2009) have contributed to the increased prevalence of child obesity during the pandemic years (Lange et al., 2018). The literature and my firsthand experience agree: no area of child development has been untouched by COVID-19.

Teachers in ECE are struggling. The teacher I found crying in her classroom that October morning was the third teacher that classroom had seen since the beginning of the school year in August. She sobbed as she told me how powerless she felt in her classroom. ECE teachers have been frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, risking their health, exacting grueling cleaning protocols, enforcing distancing and safety guidelines among tiny humans, and responding to constantly changing rules and regulations (Kwon et al., 2022)—all without the fanfare, banners, and public appreciation of health-care workers. Most childcare centers closed for only brief periods compared to schools (Bassok et al., 2021d), and the extensive safety protocols are only now beginning to lighten. Teachers are stressed, tired, and burned out (Pressley, 2021; Souto-Manning and Melvin, 2021). One teacher said to me: “It’s just been me all this time. I cried when they finally hired an assistant teacher. I can take a break during the day now.” Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, about one in four teachers left their position during a school year (Bassok et al., 2021a; Jeon and Wells, 2018). Post-pandemic rates are now greater than one in three teachers leaving each year (Bassok et al., 2021b). Many teachers are deciding that the pay is not worth the load and are leaving the profession entirely (Bassok et al., 2021b). Although I helped the teacher make it through that one challenging day, I doubt she is still in that position, just as so many others are not. If she is still there, I worry for her well-being.

ECE leadership and the system itself are struggling. In my time in the field post-COVID-19, I have seen ECE leaders pulling double or triple duty—continuing in their service as director while adding cooking, cleaning, and teaching duties. With the staff shortages created by COVID-19, the majority of ECE leaders have described scrambling to fill the gaps (Bassok et al., 2021c; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2021), both through continuous efforts to attract, interview,

hire, and train new candidates and by taking on any and all roles needed on a given day to make it through. Many of these leaders have been newly promoted into the roles during COVID-19 as prior leadership left. They are learning the ropes in the hardest of times. In the midst of their increased personal stress (Hoffman and Poll, 2022), these leaders are attempting to engage and direct teachers, parents, and children who are equally as stressed. Leaders have faced lower enrollment and worries about their abilities to keep their doors open and ever attract a high-quality staff again (Hoffman and Poll, 2022; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2021). The system itself is also in peril. Many sites were closed permanently during the pandemic (Zhang et al., 2021), leaving communities with fewer childcare slots to serve the same or a growing number of children. The costs of reentry into the system will likely lead to persisting imbalance post-pandemic (Thomas, 2022), which will continue to strain the sites remaining and families seeking childcare. The director's plea to me to help in any way I could for the day resounds across the globe.

In the face of these significant struggles, the children, teachers, and leaders of ECE are the last to blame. Staff in the ECE setting have been chronically undervalued and underpaid for years prior to the pandemic. Wages for ECE teachers, for example, are at or below the federal poverty level across the country (McLean et al., 2019), and staff display high rates of food insecurity (McKelvey et al., 2018; Swindle et al., 2018), mental health concerns (Johnson et al., 2020), and physical health issues (Lessard et al., 2020). It is little surprise that they have suffered so greatly during the pandemic. When I think of the challenges they face, I am inspired by the teachers who do stay, by the teachers who share with me that this is their calling and display a fierce resilience to show up each day and serve children and families with their whole heart. Their work uplifts us all. In turn, may researchers, parents, policymakers, and community members heed the great needs of ECE for advocacy, investment, volunteerism, and kindness as the post-pandemic struggles stretch onward. The COVID-19 recovery is far from over in ECE.


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