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Navigating the Pandemic: The Experiences and Perceptions of Preschool Teachers and Directors Working During Covid-19

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Abstract: This capstone examines how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted both preschoolers and early childhood educators. To achieve this, I interviewed preschool teachers and directors to get their first-hand insight into whether children's behavior differed from previous classes and how it changed with Covid -19 policies like masking and social distancing. I asked preschool teachers and directors about their perceptions and experiences while working from March 2020 to June 2022, specifically, those related to student behavior, parental involvement, and teacher well-being. I use literature on the importance of early childhood education for children's social, cognitive, and emotional development to emphasize why looking at the impacts of the pandemic on this age is so important and to structure my analysis of the interviews. This project aims to emphasize early childhood education's vital role in society and why the field needs more support.

Table of Contents

Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) a global pandemic. By the end of the month, officials in all 50 states closed schools to in-person instruction to try to stop the spread of the deadly, unpredictable virus (Baker, 2022). Many officials were mandated to close schools for just two weeks to slow the spread. (Baker, 2022). However, as the cases and the death toll kept rising, governors across the US issued for schools to be closed for another two weeks until mid-April (*School Responses to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic during the 2019-2020 Academic Year*, n.d.). From late March through April 2020, more than 90% of the children enrolled in school experienced state-ordered school closures and at-home quarantine in response to Covid-19 (Jalongo, 2021). The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act was passed on March 27, 2020, allowing schools to cover emergency costs for remote learning (Baker, 2022). However, preschool education is not compulsory, and many preschool programs are private or run by small business owners. Therefore, though they could apply, it was burdensome, and many of these programs were not guaranteed funding from the relief acts, such as the CARES Act, in order to financially support this transition. Additionally, there were major racial and economic disparities in the transition and success of remote learning due to disparities in technology access (Herold, 2020). Furthermore, there were major concerns about children's loss of learning because of how much instruction they were missing or how different it looked from "normal" instruction (Ford et al., 2021).

The pandemic hit early childhood programs especially hard because of the increased challenges of implementing remote learning or social distancing with younger children, such as having more difficulty virtually sustaining their attention. On top of this, early childhood

educators already face increased stress compared to K-12 educators due to lower wages, longer hours, and less administrative support (Eadie et al., 2021; Spadafora et al., 2022). Looking at the impacts of the pandemic closures and what occurred in preschools during that time can also help emphasize early childhood education's vital role in society. Therefore, I am researching the immediate impacts Covid-19 had on preschool programs. While the long-term effects of the pandemic on these children cannot be assessed yet, I asked preschool teachers and directors, because many directors oversee daily activities, if they noticed any immediate differences from March 2020 to June 2022 in how the children interacted with each other, their teachers, and the classroom or in their behavior compared to previous class years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

My interest in this topic comes from personal experience with the importance of high-quality education to support child development. I worked at a preschool during the Fall of 2020 when all the children had to wear masks and practice social distancing. There were so many things that the teachers tried to do to normalize the kids' experience, such as making games out of putting on hand sanitizer or making up songs about social distancing. At the same time, they had to constantly explain to the kids that they were not allowed to do the things they longed for, such as hug one another. When I would talk to people outside of school, they would tell me how bad they felt for the children because they had to wear masks. They questioned whether kids would be able to read emotions on people's faces in the future and wondered if masks would stunt their social development. I read so much about how people felt like children were losing social, emotional, and cognitive development because of social distancing. However, when I was with the kids, I noticed they were much more aware of my nonverbal expressions than children I had worked with before. Many of them could tell what emotion I was feeling or expressing by

the slightest changes in my eyes or eyebrows. This experience made me curious whether the pandemic could have had both positive and negative effects on preschool children.

My capstone explores whether preschool teachers or directors observed patterns in child behavior resulting from social distancing between children. Specifically, I looked at how children may have modified their interactions with each other and how children adapted to social distancing. I also looked at how the pandemic impacted parental and educator stress. This is necessary because the stress of both groups can negatively impact children's mental health and behavior (Hanno et al., 2022; Dillmann et al., 2022). Additionally, parental involvement is positively associated with children's academic achievement and behavior, so understanding how parental involvement changed during the pandemic will also provide context for changes in children's behavior in the classroom (Topor et al., 2010). For the project, I interviewed preschool teachers and directors to get insight into their perceptions of whether children's behavior differed from previous classes and how it changed with COVID-19 policies like masking and social distancing.

Scope of Research & Research Question

This capstone project focuses on the question:

> *What were the experiences and perceptions of preschool teachers and directors working from March 2020 to June 2022, specifically as they relate to student behavior, parental involvement, and teacher well-being?*

This paper does not compare individual students before and after the pandemic but rather examines if there are overall patterns in how teachers perceived preschoolers' behavior before and during the pandemic's peak. I look at how the implications of stress, uncertainty, danger, and other pandemic stressors contribute to teachers' experiences and perceptions during this time. Additionally, I am distinguishing between the experience of program directors and classroom

teachers, as directors had much more control and stress about the opening and closing of schools and following pandemic guidelines. In contrast, the teachers had to deal with the stress of adhering to and adjusting to those guidelines. The directors helped me better understand the decisions made during the pandemic and the general stress of early childcare programs and educators.

There are a few limitations to my project. My sample size is too small to be representative of all the experiences of preschool educators in the United States. I only interviewed people who work in schools in the Northeast, where the Covid-19 regulations are fairly similar, and my interviewees were similar to each other in political beliefs, which narrows my scope (Hart et al., 2020). Also, I am primarily interviewing teachers from private preschools, which often have lower student-to-teacher ratios and more autonomy in school decisions (Fuligni et al., 2009; *Private Preschool vs. Public Preschool: Does It Matter?*, 2021). Private preschools also tend to have different demographics, such as income, social class, race, and ethnicity, than public preschools, as they require parents to pay tuition, which factors into the overall experience for the children, teachers, and directors. This decision was made mostly because of the teachers and directors I had connections with and thus was able to reach out to for interviewing. There is also a lack of statistical analysis of private and public preschools, which makes it harder to understand the differences in characteristics and enrollment. Additionally, the teachers and directors I interviewed made educated assumptions about child behavior and parental stress based on what they observed and were told. Therefore, since I am not interviewing the children themselves, I cannot know precisely how the pandemic changed children's behavior.

Methodology

For this project, I rely primarily on interviews. I conducted interviews on Zoom and audio recorded using Otter.ai voice recording and transcription. I interviewed teachers for the in-the-classroom experience and directors to better understand the decisions made to close schools, conduct school virtually, and eventually reopen. I interviewed five teachers and five directors with an average of over 28 years in the field and were working during the pandemic. My participants were recruited via personal contact with teachers and directors from schools where I have worked in Brooklyn, NY, and New Haven, CT. I recruited participants through snowball sampling from contacts my advisor knows in New Haven, CT. All teachers and directors were asked to share their personal experiences and perceptions of changes in children's behavior, teacher and director well-being, and parental involvement. I also asked directors questions about the district- and school-wide decisions made throughout the pandemic regarding policy changes and mandates, as the directors I spoke with said they followed district-wide mandates as a form of guidance. The interview scripts that I used are in Appendix A.

The teachers and directors I interviewed are from Connecticut and New York schools. These interviews are understood in conjunction with studies and articles about preschools during the pandemic, but the interviews are the main data of the project. I used literature on the importance of early childhood education for children's social, cognitive, and emotional development to emphasize why looking at the impacts of the pandemic on this age is so important. I also incorporated literature about pandemic-era policy changes and mandates to track the changes during the pandemic.

For my IRB, I received exemption category 2 because I de-identified all my participants' names and schools. Because of this and the nature of my questions, my project presents minimal to no risk to my participants.

Background Research

In May 2020, 48 out of 50 states announced that all school buildings would remain closed for the rest of the academic year (Baker, 2022). This meant that what was supposed to be a two-week period of pause to "stop the spread," had turned into months of remote education. The pandemic continued well into the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, creating high anxiety and instability in education globally, impacting about 155 million preschool-aged children (Aslan et al., 2022). Moreover, with the politicization and polarization of the pandemic during the first three months of Covid-19 news coverage, there was even more uncertainty about how schools would move forward safely (Hart et al., 2020). A lot of the research on schools during the pandemic focuses on K-12 schools which operate differently from early childcare programs; however, the research still can explain and provide background for the general experience of schooling during Covid-19.

Educators experienced intensified stress as they attempted to combat the anticipated learning loss of their students. They rushed to manage unfamiliar technologies, reinvent all their lesson plans to work remotely, and deal with the worries and demands of their students, parents, and principals (Baker, 2022; Gewertz, 2020; Spadafora et al., 2022). Additionally, educators had to weigh their and their family's safety with the needs of their students. Many educators worried about their students and their families mental and financial health because Covid-19 exacerbated existing inequalities (Gewertz, 2020). The pandemic has magnified inequalities as it disproportionately increased unemployment rates, worsened working conditions, and limited access to healthcare for low-income and racial minority families, which takes an extreme toll on those families' mental and physical health (Hu, 2022). Early childhood educators faced even greater stress as many completely lost their jobs due to the decrease in parent tuition payments

since class sizes were reduced or parents kept their children at home; thus, many centers shut down or reduced staffing (Spadafora et al., 2022). They also faced heightened stress because navigating remote learning was especially challenging with younger students (Spadafora et al., 2022).

In July 2020, President Trump threatened to withhold federal funding from schools that did not open in-person instruction. This action did not directly impact all early childhood centers since their funding often comes from grants and parent fees, but the CDC did stress the importance of in-person learning (Kasmin, 2016). The CDC explained that without the normal support children receive at school, students' mental and nutritional health would plummet (Baker, 2022). Thus, in the Fall of 2020, some schools began to reopen with cautious policies and regulations regarding social distancing, masking and disinfecting routines that significantly changed how in-person instruction operated (Baker, 2022). Schools and classes shifted between in-person and remote instruction depending on the number of Covid-19 cases in the school or classroom. This led to the periodic shutting down of schools or shifting to online until students and teachers tested negative.

Panda et al. (2021) systematically reviewed the literature on the psychological and behavioral impact of the Covid-19 quarantine measures on children, adolescents, and caregivers. The studies included in the final analysis are from Asia and Europe and were conducted from December 2019 through August 2020. They found that 34.5%, 41.7%, 42.3%, and 30.8% of children suffered from anxiety, depression, irritability, and inattention, respectively, and 52.3% and 27.4% of caregivers developed anxiety and depression, respectively (Panda et al., 2021). While these studies were conducted outside the United States, where the governments and policies are different, the findings still provide context and background for how much impact

Covid-19 had on children globally. According to Glynn et al. (2021), preschoolers displayed more conduct problems during the pandemic than pre-pandemic. This data showed an increase in conduct problems compared to pre-pandemic levels, as reported by the children's mothers. The data and previous research also suggest that the increase in conduct problems could be because of how parental stress affects children rather than a direct cause of the pandemic. Furthermore, this increase in behavioral issues could be because caregivers are not necessarily used to being with their children all day because they would typically be at school, which is why I am particularly interested in the teacher reports.

Additionally, parents in Italy and Spain reported that their children were using screens more and spent less time performing physical activity, as many playgrounds were temporarily closed. Many children, especially in urban areas, had limited access to private outdoor spaces, which made engaging in outdoor activities more challenging (Goldfeld & Sewell, 2021; Panda et al., 2021). This is crucial because less outdoor activity has been linked to increased attention and emotional difficulties in children. Many parents in this study stated that their children displayed increased difficulty concentrating, irritability, and boredom which could all impact children's behavior at school in a way that differs from previous class years (Panda et al., 2021). Aslan et al. (2022) found that about 75% of employed caregivers had children at home while working, and many of these families were especially reliant on screens to keep their children entertained.

Furthermore, González et al. (2022) conducted a study in Uruguay. They found that the impact of the pandemic differed based on the family's socioeconomic status (SES), which emphasized how changes observed during the pandemic could dramatically differ depending on SES. González et al.'s (2022) study also suggested that the Covid-19 context might have even increased the quality and frequency of interaction between higher SES family members.

Furthermore, they suggested that those children might have benefited from this context by constantly being in a high-quality home environment with items such as literacy practices and age-appropriate toys and materials. Meanwhile, children in lower SES families might have been hit twice as hard because of exacerbated parental stress on top of the already documented negative impact that routine school closures, such as summer break, have on children in lower SES families, according to González et al. (2022). Researchers have found that routine school closures have a more significant impact on children in lower SES families due to limited learning opportunities outside the school environment to sustain their learning and a lower likelihood of having the aforementioned high-quality home environment (González et al., 2022). Based on this research, I think that it is possible that some teachers noticed positive changes in children's behavior and well-being during the pandemic, while others primarily noticed negative changes due to how the pandemic exacerbated inequities.

Low-income households often faced difficulty with learning online because of a lack of access to computers and the Internet (Aslan et al., 2022). Underfunded or under-resourced schools could not equip these families with the tools to engage in online learning. And many children living in extreme adversity also lost their access to meals, social services, and educational interventions provided in some schools as well as their safe havens, which is incredibly important in accounting for why children's behavior might have changed (Jalongo, 2021). Additionally, many teachers noted that they had difficulty teaching young children remotely (Ford et al., 2021). They struggled significantly with virtually sustaining children's attention. Because of this, most of the virtual time was spent supporting parents and their questions rather than virtual interaction with the children; therefore, even with remote

instruction, children still might have missed out on early childhood instruction (Ford et al., 2021).

Kwon et al. (2019) found that the psychological distress of preschool teachers is positively associated with teacher reports of students' behavioral problems and the emotional support they provide to children. They also hypothesized that children react and learn from their teacher's negative effect on behavioral issues and self-regulation. Because of these findings, I think it is likely that students in classes where teachers experienced worsened mental health due to the pandemic might have shown more negative behavioral changes. This finding makes it crucial to ask about the teacher's mental well-being during the pandemic, the stressors they felt, and if these factors affected their ability to respond to the children or how they interacted with them.

Additionally, parent-teacher relationships are crucial in ensuring that the child gets all their social, emotional, and academic needs met at school and is supported at home (Bigras et al., 2021). These relationships are important in establishing context for the child's behavior, how they interact with other kids, and figuring out their learning styles and needs. Also, these relationships are vital to ensuring that the child is adequately cared for at school and home (Bigras et al., 2021). However, during the pandemic, this relationship was affected in many ways, which could significantly impact the child's behavior at school. Caregivers were often not allowed inside the classroom because of social distancing rules, which meant there were less frequent natural interactions between parents and teachers. Caregivers and teachers had to make an extra effort to communicate during the pandemic; however, not all parents or teachers had the bandwidth to do so because of the new and exacerbated challenges and concerns. These caregiver-teacher relationships were especially important for schools conducted remotely

because at-home caregivers often do not have the training to support young children's development (Jalongo, 2021). Therefore, the pandemic had the highest toll on previously struggling families (Jalongo, 2021).

This project fits into the literature by looking more specifically at the teacher's perspective. Most of the data from studies conducted on preschoolers' behavior during the pandemic covers the parent's perspective and is from earlier in the pandemic when many schools were closed, and some continued remotely. Additionally, I focused on a specific region where the regulations were fairly similar to each other to look at how much variation in experience there still was in early childhood education. Based on my literature searches, I do not think anyone has examined how the teachers perceived preschoolers' behavior in school settings from March 2020 to June 2022 and how teachers addressed and supported these changes. I only asked teachers to recall their experiences from March 2020, when schools originally closed, to June 2022. This time frame captured when the pandemic was at its peak: school closures, online school, hybrid learning, and in-person school, as well as different mandates surrounding health protocols and vaccine eligibility for teachers and caregivers.

Literature Review

Early childhood educator well-being

Early childhood educator well-being is critical for early childhood education and care (Hanno et al., 2022). Being an early childhood educator requires extended focus, patience, and quick-thinking skills to provide emotionally responsive teaching strategies and high-quality interactions with children (Markowitz & Bassok, 2022). In addition to nurturing children's academic needs, teachers are responsible for supporting children's social, emotional, and cognitive development by providing them with safe and nurturing environments from which they

develop these non-academic skills. Teachers with low levels of stress and high levels of well-being are better equipped to have the effective skills and tools to be high-quality educators (Eadie et al., 2021; Hanno et al., 2022). They are more likely to have high sensitivity in response to children's behavioral issues, develop respectful teacher-student relationships, support children's confidence and engagement with learning, and have higher levels of classroom organization (Eadie et al., 2021; Hanno et al., 2022). In addition, previous research has shown that high levels of financial stress and depression have been linked with poor-quality interactions with students because educators are less able to provide children with emotionally responsive and cognitively stimulating interactions that are crucial for their ability to thrive in the classroom (Hanno et al., 2022). Persistent stress, burnout, or depression can increase the likelihood that one will respond abrasively to children's behaviors or the actions of other adults (Hanno et al., 2022). Because of their responses, children in classrooms like these are more likely to exhibit behavioral challenges and poorer skill development than other children because of how the educator interacts with their behavior.

Early childhood educator stress rates were already incredibly high compared to K-12 educators pre-pandemic due to low wages, long hours, managing children's challenging behaviors, and unsupportive management (Eadie et al., 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic significantly exacerbated the stress of early childhood educators, with 91% of them feeling emotionally affected and 35% of whom felt that the effect was extremely negative (Chen, 2021). The pandemic brought about worries around safety, danger, and uncertainty, creating new stressors that educators had to tackle daily without much preparation or guidance. Educators had to abruptly transition to remote teaching or deal with the aftermath of school closures and/or job/wage losses because of the pandemic. Many childcare centers closed down (at least

temporarily) because many children stopped attending these programs for personal safety or because of increased childcare costs caused by Covid-19 safety regulations (Markowitz & Bassok, 2022). Thus, many early childhood educators experienced financial instability, decreased earnings, reduced hours, or complete job loss, contributing to their heightened stress levels (Markowitz & Bassok, 2022). Furthermore, many educators faced social isolation and loss of support in their lives and the classroom. This can have detrimental effects on physical and mental well-being, especially since the isolation was combined with increased stress and anxiety during the pandemic (Banerjee & Rai, 2020).

Additionally, the early childhood education field is predominantly women of color. This demographic faced exacerbated injustices during the pandemic in the form of white supremacy, xenophobia, police brutality, and racialized disparities in access to healthcare. They also experienced higher infection and death rates from Covid-19 (Manning & Melvin, 2021; Markowitz & Bassok, 2022). Experiences of racialized injustices and trauma and higher rates of death and sickness are consistently linked with mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Schouler-Ocak et al., 2021). Therefore, I find it critical to understand how Covid-19 impacted teacher stress and well-being and how it impacted their ability to be emotionally and responsively present for their students during such an unpredictable time.

Parental stress effects on child behavior

Nearly half of the parents reported higher stress levels during the pandemic than before (*Mothers — and Fathers — Report Mental, Physical Health Declines*, 2021; Dillmann et al., 2022). Typical stressors that can negatively influence how parents interact with their children include external and internal stressors like economic hardship, lack of social support, or

depression (Dillmann et al., 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated parental stressors due to the radical disruption of our daily routines, causing rapid and dramatic shifts in parental roles (Johnson et al., 2021). Parents had to manage the stress of navigating new pandemic challenges such as sudden school closures, demands related to children's online schooling, and the need to work from home along with worries of physical health and financial situations as well as any previous stressors (Dillmann et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2021). Furthermore, in the United States, the unemployment rate increased from 3.8% in 2019 to 8.6% in 2020 due to the pandemic, further exacerbating stress levels due to financial instability and safety concerns (Bennett, 2021). Additionally, the social isolation of the pandemic increased parents' stress levels due to the lack of social support to help mitigate the effects of dealing with such high stress (Banerjee & Rai, 2020). This is especially important to consider when examining how children's behavior differed during the pandemic because of parental stress's strong effect on children.

Research has indicated a strong relationship between parental stress and children's negative behavioral and emotional outcomes (Dennis et al., 2018; McQuillan & Bates, 2017; Thompson et al., 1993). This finding might be because parents who are more stressed perceive their children's behavior as more negative than parents who are not stressed (Crnic et al., 2005). However, parents' chronic stress presents a risk for children's negative behavioral and emotional outcomes regardless of whether the effect is direct or indirect (Crnic et al., 2005). Parents who report greater stress levels, whether directly related to stressors due to parenting or other factors, are often more authoritarian in their parenting style, more negative in interactions with their children, more restrictive, and have an insecure attachment with their child (Crnic et al., 2005; Ward & Lee, 2020). Therefore, this increases the likelihood that children will exhibit more behavioral issues because these parent-child interactions are unresponsive, meaning that they do

not make the child feel safe and cared for since their needs are not being positively or quickly

responded to. With authoritarian parenting, an extremely strict parenting style characterized by

high expectations and low responsiveness, there is a greater focus on discipline and control

rather than nurturing and validating the child (Li, 2022c). Parents who engage in this style are

more likely to be dismissive or respond negatively to emotional expressions causing children to

develop more destructive emotional regulation techniques or to be more regularly in a state of

fight or flight (Li, 2022c).

Additionally, even when negative interactions are consistently mixed in with positive

interactions, this inconsistency in responsiveness can lead to insecure attachment in children,

putting them at risk for more emotional and behavioral issues, such as anxiety, depression, and

increased aggression (Li, 2022a). Parents who are consistently stressed might overly restrict their

children's behavior because of a lack of emotional availability to tolerate behavioral excesses

(Assel et al., 2002). However, they are typically met with increased non-compliance in their

children's behaviors (Assel et al., 2002). Furthermore, children learn how to regulate their

emotions and behavior from their caregivers (Li, 2022a). If their parents expose their children to

greater distress, frustration, or anger in their interactions, they will begin to behave similarly

because of how children mimic and internalize their parent's behaviors (Crnic et al., 2005; Li,

2022a). Thus, it is highly plausible that children's social-emotional development was negatively

impacted during the pandemic due to the increased stressors on parents, thus negatively affecting

their behavior in the classroom (Dillmann et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2021).

Role of childcare in a developmental context

High-quality early childhood education is crucial for supporting children's social,

cognitive, emotional, and physical development. These programs often lead to positive gains in

vocabulary and receptive language skills, reading and math skills, development of thinking and learning, motor skills, and social-emotional development during the preschool years (Bitler et al., n.d.; *Early Childhood Education*, 2023; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011; Tominey et al., 2017). Additionally, foundational research on high-quality early childhood education, such as the Abecedarian Project and Head Start, have found that children who attended high-quality programs were more likely to perform well on achievement tests, graduate high school and college, have a job, and be in better health and are less likely to report depressive symptoms (Bitler et al., n.d.; Schazenbach & Bauer, 2016; *The Carolina Abecedarian Project*, n.d.).

One of the most influential parts of a high-quality program is the interaction between the teacher and the child (Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011). High-quality teachers can provide ample verbal and cognitive stimulation, be responsive and sensitive to children's emotions, and give them copious attention and support. This gives children in their classroom more tools to advance in their development compared to peers who do not have these adult-child interactions (Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011). These interactions are incredibly stimulating for cognitive and verbal development, so a high-quality program can help close the opportunity gap between students of color and white students already present when children start kindergarten (Solano & Weyer, 2017). The opportunity gap refers to the idea that there are arbitrary circumstances that people are born into, such as race, ethnicity, zip code, and SES, that determine their opportunities in life, such as academic achievement, because of inequitable systems. High-quality programs produce long-term effects on children's language ability, math ability, memory, and attention skills that can help close the opportunity gap; these effects and skills last through kindergarten and even through middle school in some cases (Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011).

Multiple research studies on Head Start – a program that provides comprehensive high-quality early childhood education, health and wellness, and family engagement services to low-income children and families – have shown that high-quality programs can reduce the number of parent-reported behavior and hyperactivity problems in preschoolers (Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011). In part, this is because high-quality educators can model emotional regulation and emotional intelligence in their classroom, which gives children more guidance on how to deal with their own emotions, thus reducing behavioral issues (Tominey et al., 2017). For example, by recognizing, discussing, and workshopping emotions with children or sharing stories about how they felt a specific emotion and dealt with it, they teach children how to regulate and communicate their own emotions (Tominey et al., 2017).

Furthermore, a high-quality early childcare program provides children with a safe and nurturing environment for them to interact with while they learn the social and emotional skills they need for life. There have been many studies done on how preschool is important for children, especially those without siblings or cousins close in age, to learn and practice all of these development skills from their peers (Mavilidi et al., 2021). Children build up their social and emotional worlds by interacting with and learning from their peers through play, which is crucial for child development. Play allows children to learn about the world and themselves by giving them a chance to study and work on their social skills, curiosity, ability to cope with challenging situations, explore their feelings, and build up their confidence (Li, 2022b). Early childcare programs enable children to have unstructured, freely chosen play with the ability to receive scaffolding from their teachers to learn how to deal with more challenging situations. Additionally, when playing with other children or adults, children develop their language and vocabulary skills by listening to them and practicing communicating effectively (Anderson-

McNamee & Bailey, 2010; *Play in Preschool: Why It Matters*, 2013). Play also strengthens

children's imagination and creativity, problem-solving and mathematics, and gross motor

development (*Play in Preschool: Why It Matters*, 2013).

<u>*Childcare during the pandemic*</u>

During the pandemic, the typical structures of school and interaction completely changed.

UNESCO found that the closure of schools and other institutional spaces during the pandemic

posed major threats to the development of young children in terms of health, learning, and

social-emotional development (Aslan et al., 2022). Many educators had to completely change

what early childhood education looked like and figure out new ways to support children's

development and functioning via distance learning (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2022). According to

Miller's 2021 study, many teachers were concerned that socialization and proper interactions

were not occurring during virtual learning. A lot of typical elements teachers use to effectively

connect with their students did not quite translate in virtual classrooms, as teachers often rely on

seeing their student's body language and facial expressions to maintain meaningful and

responsive interactions (Aslan et al., 2022).

The use of digital technologies in early childhood education has been debated and

criticized. Some teachers and scholars feel strongly concerned about the risks and dangers of

digital learning and reliance on technology for emotional regulation with young children (Dong

et al., 2020). Furthermore, because of their professional training or in-person teaching

experiences, many teachers have strong beliefs about what it means to be an effective early

childhood educator and what is developmentally appropriate for children that age to be spending

time doing, which added to the difficulty of transitioning to an online classroom (Aslan et al.,

2022). Additionally, due to the difficulty of keeping children engaged via Zoom, I wanted to

understand what teachers and directors did to maintain their classroom and teaching quality while adhering to personal pedagogical beliefs and parents' expectations.

Furthermore, even when everyone returned to the classroom, teachers still had to reimagine their classroom and how they interacted with their children. Teachers had to rethink the play environment to maintain physical distance between the children as well as spread out tables and create alternative seating arrangements during meeting time, meals, or any table-based play (*Creating Developmentally Appropriate Learning Environments During the COVID-19 Pandemic for Early Childhood Programs (Preschool up to Grade 3)*, 2020). They also had to reimagine interactions between and with the children because of social distancing suggestions. In an EdSurge interview, early childhood educators talked about how they often stopped to think twice about holding a child who needed to be consoled because of safety precautions, which affected their normal teacher-child interactions. They also had to stop doing things such as bringing in guests or parents to read to their classrooms or do a special project with their students, which also meant they had to make schedule adjustments and explore different ways of teaching their students to engage with each other in community while also trying to practice social distancing.

Christina O'Keefe and Sinead McNally (2022) conducted a study where they interviewed early childhood teachers on how they facilitated play while adhering to Covid-19 restrictions to highlight how educators have reshaped their classes. Some teachers in this study stated that, in order to preserve the nature of playing in groups, they would put children into playing 'pods' so that they could still play in groups and reap the same overall benefits of play from these groups, such as increasing their social development skills. However, there was still a noticeable difference in how these pods operated, as their 'pods' were not allowed to mix. Children had to be

reminded to stay with their groups, which is vastly different from previous years when children were often encouraged to play with different groups to maximize their social skills development, explore opportunities, and demonstrate autonomy (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2022). Teachers also noted that play was a major priority in their classrooms when they returned to in-person instruction. They felt it gave children a sense of normality and the social connection and interactions they had missed out on for so long. It was the best way to reintroduce children to the idea of developing and existing in a community.

Additionally, compared to pre-pandemic, teachers spent much more time planning around spatial and material resources and developing hygiene routines, such as sanitizing play materials during and after school (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2022). This meant that on top of restructuring their classroom and reimaging what preschool teaching looked like, many teachers were working even longer hours than usual, with an increased abundance of stressors to deal with as well. Furthermore, in order to adhere to social distancing guidelines and attempt to decrease the need to sanitize as often, many teachers were guided to create art boxes for each child with their own set of markers, crayons, scissors, etc., rather than having them use communal supplies like normal (*Creating Developmentally Appropriate Learning Environments During the COVID-19 Pandemic for Early Childhood Programs (Preschool up to Grade 3)*, 2020). I was curious to ask teachers how they managed to do this and how many of them committed to doing this since it reduces children's independence and initiative and can be quite hard to maintain as young children often lose, drop, and want to share their materials. Additionally, as many preschools had mask mandates, I was curious to see how teachers felt masks impacted their teaching habits and ability to interact with students, especially because children have a lot of difficulty with keeping their masks on correctly. A study by Mitsven et al. (2022) stated that face masks might pose

barriers to language learning, especially in noisy language environments such as preschool classrooms that may intensify any difficulties in accessing and understanding language that occurs while wearing a mask. This is especially important to understand as preschool age is a crucial time for language development and learning to read other people's emotional expressions and cues.

Interview findings

I interviewed five preschool directors and five preschool teachers about their experiences in the classroom during Covid-19 from March 2020 through December 2022. I talked to teachers and directors from seven schools in the ten interviews I conducted. For the sake of anonymity, I will be using a number system to track the interviews, with "T1" for teacher 1 and "D1" for director 1 and so on. One school is in Brooklyn, NY, and the other six are all in New Haven County in Connecticut. Out of the seven, only one school continued in-person teaching from March-June 2020 because they provided care for the children of many first responders who relied on this care to keep the community safe during the pandemic.

However, the other six all recalled the excitement that the directors, teachers, parents, and children expressed and felt when returning to school in the Fall of 2020. In general, these preschool teachers and directors had a very different experience during the pandemic than their counterparts that they mentioned in K-12 education, as all of their programs returned to in-person teaching in the Fall of 2020, even if the rest of their school did not. While their experiences and perceptions of children's behavior ranged greatly, they all commented on their decision to return to in-person teaching, coming from a deep commitment to their students and their pedagogical beliefs on what early childhood education should look like. Furthermore, many of them discussed various health concerns that put them at higher risk for getting Covid-19 but

how their dedication to their children's education and development was more important. It was fascinating to see how much range in experience there was, even from teachers and directors from the same school, and what parts of teaching or directing during the pandemic stood out to them.

Initial school shutdown

When schools were initially mandated to close in March 2020, there was a general sense of urgency for supporting families and maintaining a sense of normalcy for the children. In describing their experiences during the initial three months of the pandemic, teachers and directors expressed how active they were in ensuring parents were provided with sufficient information and support to structure their students' days. One teacher spoke about how their center "...would do zooms and call our families to read stories to them over zoom just so they won't forget who we were, or to answer questions with parents"(T3). Some teachers described crafting art boxes to give to all the children, while another teacher recalled organizing a drive-by to visit all the families. One director in New Haven stated the importance of caring for the children and the families simultaneously. She spoke about how her entire team felt that supporting the families helped to ensure their wellbeing.

This importance of supporting families was echoed in many other interviews, with educators citing how parental wellbeing affects children's wellbeing. As the teachers focused on creating daily learning opportunities for the children through live Zoom classes and recorded YouTube videos, administrators focused their energy and resources on the emotional and physical well-being of the parents. One director describes the impact of addressing potential food insecurity during lockdown:

> The first thing we did is we started checking in with families on the phone weekly, immediately after the shutdown we started checking in by asking what do they need?

Food, housing, etc., and we just put supports into place. We did an emergency rent program and a food equity program where we immediately found families food who had lost their income and things like that. We were delivering food and offering mental health services. We spent time managing landlords who were trying to evict people illegally. We just became whatever the family needed at that time (D5).

The actions of this director and her school show how instrumental early childhood educators are in maintaining the well-being of the children and families they serve. These educators are working on getting the basic needs for their students, housing, food, justice, and more, which goes beyond their job descriptions of providing stimulating and engaging learning opportunities. The extreme dedication of these teachers and directors towards their students and families was evident across these interviews and emphasized how vital early childhood educators are for the functioning of society, as they offer the support and basic needs for their families so that parents can work and children can receive a high-quality education.

Many of the teachers also described providing between one to four hours of virtual instruction with the preschoolers a day in order to maintain community and give the children developmentally appropriate education virtually. For instance, one teacher shared, "when the preschool class virtually resumed, it was twice a day for 45 minutes. We started out with a little morning yoga and exercise. We generally had two projects for them to do; one they could do by themselves and another that they had to work with their parents to fulfill"(T5). They also recalled that the parents, while probably stressed, seemed grateful for the resources that teachers provided throughout the day. "I would always email parents first," one teacher explained, "so they knew [Zoom classes were] happening. We did a Facebook page during the first shutdown where, like, we would try to record things so they could come when they were ready. Like, we recorded books, and we would give, like, activity ideas [to the parents]"(T4). Also, it should be emphasized that, according to two of the directors I spoke with, some teachers were doing this

important work while on unemployment, particularly in the early stage of the pandemic (March-August 2020).

Returning to the classroom

While the teachers provided the most developmentally appropriate virtual education they could, the teachers and directors from the schools closed in the spring of 2020 described a sense of relief and gratitude felt by their school community when they re-opened back up the Fall of 2020. Many affirmed how everyone's collective excitement at being back in person drove the energy of the 2020-21 school year. When I asked if there was a change in children's behavior in the 2020-21 school year in comparison to previous years, the general sentiment was very similar to the experience of this New Haven teacher: "I think that I've seen a difference, but not that first year for whatever reason. We just had this magical group of families and children. It really was it was so much better than I thought it was going to be and I had been nervous about it"(T4). Three teachers said there were fewer separation issues than anticipated and possibly fewer than they had seen in previous years. One teacher from Brooklyn said that she felt that this was likely because parents were not allowed inside the building in order to comply with Covid-19 regulations, which meant that a lot of the "messy goodbyes" and "emotional upheaval" that usually happened at drop off happened outside of the school "So by the time they walk through the big room and down the hallway to the classroom it was done, and they were fine and their classroom was theirs"(T1). She explained how this minimized emotional disruption outside of the classrooms and eased transitions, which is often when more challenging behavior comes up in young children.

Parents' behavior also echoed the desire to be back in the classroom, with both teachers and directors expressing: "Our parents were rockstars; they just basically plugged into whatever

the protocol was. Because again, they were very good, interested in ensuring that their child was

safe, and the other children are too"(D4). Another educator shared, "I think parents were just so

happy to be able to bring their children here"(D3). The overall sense of gratitude that came from

the parents reflects how vital early childcare is for their lives.

All of the teachers returned to in-person as soon as possible, despite many sharing that

they have health conditions that made them part of the high-risk population for Covid-19. From

March 2020-March 2021, directors were still receiving very clear, structured guidance from the

CDC and the local and state government on how to proceed. Directors also shared that they

received funding to follow all of the suggested guidelines and protocols, which included things

like electrostatic cleaners or air purifiers in all classrooms, proper cleaning equipment and

chemicals, creating new entrances in the building so all classes had their own door, etc.

However, unlike the literature suggested, all of the teachers and directors explained that they did

not enforce social distancing rules between the children other than mask mandates, spreading

them out during nap and lunchtime, One teacher discussed their feelings toward social distancing

and the difficulty of enforcing it with preschool-aged children:

> In the beginning, we had these plastic barriers at lunch tables, which I found to be quite
> ridiculous. Because if you know anything about three and four-year-olds [plastic dividers
> are] not going to stop them from touching their friends, touching their friends' food
> touching. It just made extra work for us. We would have smaller groups in an area, so
> only three kids could be in the block corner instead of five, and only four kids could be at
> the market table instead of six. Also, initially, everybody was supposed to have their own
> markers, their own scissors, etc., but that didn't last long with us because the minute
> somebody dropped a marker, somebody else would pick it up for them, so what was the
> point? And it was frustrating because we weren't about to go, "Oh, no, don't touch that,"
> that's alarming to a little kid (T5).

This shows how the reality of working with young children conflicted with social distancing

guidelines. Many interviewees also said that the idea of enforcing social distancing rules with

these children felt developmentally inappropriate For example, a major part of the job was

providing comfort to the children, which is often done through touch. One teacher explained her frustration with the expectation that they were not supposed to hold the children during this time. "There was a moment where a kid got pushed and he just needed comfort," she explained. "It wasn't enough just to say, 'You know what, you're okay; you didn't like that, so just tell him you didn't like that.' No, he wanted that human touch, and you got to do that sometimes. You just can't be on the outside"(T3).

Regarding masks, one teacher said that while masking did not seem to bother the children or affect how they socialized with each other, she felt that "masks just made everything a little bit more cryptic. I think children's reactions to something were a little bigger than they would have been otherwise because they needed to really show that they were angry"(T1). She talked about how masks also made it a bit more difficult to get to know the children at the beginning of the school year because it was harder to connect names with faces and also learn how they spoke with their voices muffled. Also, she said that half of teaching preschool is being a performer and being expressive, and it was harder for her to be really animated and expressive while talking to them or reading a story with just her eyes. Another teacher said that masking made it more difficult to understand the children; she had not realized how much she relied on reading lips in previous years and that she missed quite a bit of what the children were saying and was not able to help them build language skills as easily. She elaborated, "I really had a lot of trouble understanding the kids like, my hearing is not so great for one thing, and then with the masks, you know, for kids who have like language, speech issues, it was just frustrating, because I would say what, what, what and it was frustrating for the kids, and it was frustrating for me"(T2).

Preschool "post" Covid-19

A common theme that emerged as teachers and directors described their experiences during Covid-19 was that, collectively, all of them reported that the 2021-22 school year was much harder than the first year and a half. As the pandemic prolonged, the state, local, and CDC guidelines became less clear. Therefore, protocol decisions were left in the hands of the directors, who consulted with parents who worked in healthcare, their nurses, health consultants, and other directors on how to proceed. Additionally, there was much more uncertainty and dread about the pandemic as Covid-19 variants started to cause spikes in cases again, causing classes or schools to shut down on a case-by-case basis. Teachers and directors expressed feeling that from March 2020- June 2021, there was a certain "forgiveness in the world"(T4) and understanding that everyone was experiencing a time of uncertainty that made all of the decisions that they made come with more ease and less push-back than it did the second school year. Teachers remarked that they noticed much more parental stress and exhaustion in the 2021-22 school year, which often translated into frustration with teachers on Covid-19 regulations and also seemed to have more of an effect on children's behavior. One teacher discussed how part of the increase in parental stress and frustration, especially regarding a class or school needing to shut down, stemmed from parents' jobs being less forgiving. She said, "we still would close, but that stressed out parents because the world and their jobs weren't as understanding. [The school] already shut down and [employers] gave [parents leeway] last year. [The 2020-21 school year] was a transition. But now [employers had] the same expectations as they did pre-pandemic, even though [their] children's schools still had all these safety measures"(T4).

Furthermore, all of the teachers said they felt that the 2021-22 school year children had much more emotional and behavioral difficulties in general than in their previous classes, which one teacher attributed to the increase in parental stress. "The needs of the children are much

greater than they were prior to the pandemic. And it shows up in less emotional regulation, less ability to share, less ability to manage any upset, right, anything that changes becomes a huge piece because [the children are] sort of on edge,"(T5) remarked one of the New Haven school directors. A few of the teachers also noticed a sense of underlying anxiety in the children, especially as parents' stress levels increased. The increase in emotional difficulties could also be attributed to the increased stress on the teachers and directors themselves, as they experienced more Covid-19 cases and class shutdowns due to Covid-19 variants in the 2021-22 school year.

Socialization and the children's ability to be in the community also came up in quite a few interviews. This was highlighted mostly by the two teachers who work with four-year-olds, which could be because 4's teachers expect their children to have started learning how to be in community and regulate their emotions—as that is what all of the 3's teachers said they spend most of their time focusing on. One of the 4's teachers said, "social stuff is harder for kids. We're starting almost at a younger developmental age than before. We have a peace corner over here, and kids definitely are utilizing it more"(T4). Teaching children to learn how to be in community with each other seemed to be an even more essential part of the education they provided than before, as one director talked at length on how "some of them were born in the pandemic, so [school is] their first [real social] experience. They didn't have the when you're born, and 20 people come over to hold, touch, and talk about you. They missed all that. So there's a huge difference academically and socially"(T5).

Outside classrooms

Every school I talked to relied heavily on creating outside classrooms. Teachers talked about the increase in sanitizing and cleaning routines that they did to ensure children's safety:

> We were sanitizing all our toys at the end of the day, so we would put them in bleach, and then we would lay them out on towels to dry overnight and then put them away in the

morning. We were doing that every single night. And anything we could put in the dishwasher. We were putting in the dishwasher to sanitize and clean, and it made for a lot of extra work. And whenever kids were in the bathroom, after anybody used the bathroom, we would wipe down everything after each individual child (T5).

Teachers and directors from five of the seven schools explained how they utilized outdoor classrooms for as long as possible, particularly in light of research expressing how open-air circulation both hindered virus outbreaks and created space for the children to play (*Safe Outdoor Activities during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 2020). "We opened in the morning outside and spent a good chunk of the day outside. We would bring out anything we were studying and any other learning tools. We were outside everything unless it was too cold,"(T4) one teacher said. She also talked about how there were so many exciting learning opportunities, such as hands-on learning about nature, animals, and seasonal changes, while they conducted class outside that they continued to spend as much time outside as possible.

Another director similarly talked about the outside classroom saying, "We created an outdoor classroom with picnic tables, a big bench with a story corner, outdoor bookshelves, and cubbies. We spent pretty much the whole day outside except for naptime"(D1). She also said it was a great way for children to release a lot of energy and "ease transition anxiety." One teacher discussed the joy of the outside classroom by sharing with me how the teachers created more interesting curricula and learning opportunities based on what the children observed happening around them.

We had put up a jar of acorns, and we were counting with them the day before. When we came back to school the next day, the jar was broken and the acorns were gone. A little boy came up and said, "What happened," I'm like, "I'm not sure what do you think happened?" So then he went around to each of his friends, almost taking a survey of what they thought happened to the acorns. His friends would say, "Oh, I think it was a squirrel, or a bear or monster that came in," so he would draw those things, and we made this chart to figure out what it could be. And then we said, how can we find out for sure? So our crafty teacher taught them how to make squirrel traps (T5).

Also, outside classrooms made it so that children were able to take off their masks for a larger majority of the day once CDC officials said that it was okay to unmask outside, which also seemed to be a major relief for the teachers.

Recommendations for supporting early childhood education/educators

As mentioned, one of the seven schools never fully shut down. The director of this school explained that Connecticut schools were mandated to shut down except for the children of certain workers. So rather than completely closing, her school stayed open for the families of essential workers and emergency responders. Importantly, this school was one of two schools that served the majority of children of color. During the pandemic, the ratios of students of color were even higher because they were predominately from essential worker families. While she and her teachers were incredibly panicked about Covid, many stayed teaching in person to support those families and the greater community because "there would have been no way that the emergency responders would be able to respond if they did not have childcare. There is no way that the doctors were going to be able to respond to the health crisis if they did not have childcare" (D4).

At the beginning of the pandemic, this school went from having 75 to 30 children in their classroom in a week because that was the maximum number of children they could serve due to restrictions. Surprisingly, she described these first few months as a "period of incredible rest," (D4) even though there was major concern about the possibility of contracting the virus and best practices to keep the children safe. This feeling of rest came from the fact that there were not even half as many children in the center. She could keep most of her teachers because the federal and state government were making money and funding available to keep childcare facilities open. This made it so that "for the first time [they] had more than enough staff to cover all the children that were in the center" (D4). So not only were they able to have the ideal teacher-

student ratios, but they also had "no stress about finances and covering the bills" because the federal relief funds were able to keep them afloat, which alleviated a lot of stress. She said that she and her staff could give children the high-quality care they have been working to achieve because of the increased funding and lower teacher-student ratios. Her experience speaks to how critical allocating more funding for early childcare is to reduce teacher stress and improve the overall quality of education, especially for children of color.

This one example represents the struggles that plague so many early childhood education programs: lack of funding, staffing, and financial government support. Every one of my ten interviewees emphasized that having more funding and support from the government was an instrumental part of strengthening the field and, thus, helping each child reach his or her potential long-term; importantly, increased government support is particularly beneficial for children of color. With more funding dedicated to supporting early childhood education, teachers and directors would have access to more material resources to provide for their students. In addition, because this would allow for early childhood educators to be paid a living wage— which would significantly increase their mental health and wellbeing—they would be better equipped to support the socio-emotional development of their students. More funding would also allow for enhanced teacher training programs and access to resources beyond their own institutions, which could enable all early childhood programs to offer comprehensive, family-based support on par with the school that addressed food and housing insecurity during the pandemic.

Furthermore, this director's story highlights the need for lower student-teacher ratios through increased staffing, which is only possible through expanded funding. A lower student-teacher ratio will allow teachers to provide the highest quality of care to every student and family, making for even greater preschool education outcomes. Additionally, her story

accentuates the need to push for universal preschool so that all children and families can benefit from high-quality, early childhood education, despite socioeconomic disparities. Universal preschool would allow families to continue working and building income while their children are in school, without the financial burden of losing an income or paying tuition, making this especially important for low-income families. The increase in early childhood education funding must come from a coordinated, organized effort that offers and ensures a long-term plan for allocating more funding and resources to these programs. There must be a nationwide movement toward recognizing the crucial value of early childhood education for America in terms of growing the American economy and cultivating the long-term success of future generations. Furthermore, the movement towards increasing high-quality early childhood education needs to be individualized and tailored to the needs of each community, as this is the only way policy can create lasting and equitable change.

Conclusion

High-quality early childhood education programs are vital in supporting young children's social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development. These programs are also essential in leveling the playing field for children of color, lower socioeconomic status, or with adverse childhood experiences. By providing amble verbal and cognitive stimulation, responsive and sensitive interactions to children's emotions, copious attention and support, these programs give their children more tools to advance in their development compared to children who do not have these same stimulating adult-child interactions likely due to parents work schedules, parental stress, and many other factors that affect parents ability to interact with their children in these ways. Additionally, high-quality programs have been shown to produce long-term effects on children's language ability, math ability, memory, and attention skills.

These programs were especially important during Covid-19 as the pandemic exacerbated all existing inequities in education and beyond. However, the pandemic completely disrupted early childhood education, which is often overlooked and unsupported since early childhood education is not compulsory for children in the U.S. Furthermore, parental and educator well-being significantly impacts a child's behavioral and emotional responses, and well-being was also challenged during this time. While some early childhood programs were able to access more funding during the pandemic due to crisis funds, those have already gone away, and educators are feeling the extreme effects of the inadequate funding again. On March 8th, 2023, New Haven early childhood educators and community members rallied to protest against Governor Ned Lamont's budget regarding early childhood education and care (Brauner, 2023; Mongkol, 2023). The community came together to show what a morning without childcare looks like and repeatedly stated that parents pay too much for tuition, yet educators make poverty-level wages. Furthermore, the lack of government funding has made it difficult for programs to hire and retain teachers because of the extremely low wages (Brauner, 2023; Mongkol, 2023). Thus there are increases in teacher shortages and burnout for those still in the profession, which has the most negative impact on children and families, making it even more evident that the government needs to support early childhood education soon and adequately.

This paper examined preschool teachers' and directors' experiences and perceptions of their children's behavior during the pandemic. Through my interviews, I gained insight into what changed and what was impacted by the pandemic. This capstone project has shed light on the importance of early childhood education and cemented why supporting early childhood programs and educators is crucial for the well-being of children, parents, and educators.

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Appendices

Thank you so much for being willing to participate in an interview about being a preschool teacher/ director and how it has been impacted or changed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

We'll be talking for about an hour, and I'll be asking you a series of questions about your experience. Know that you can always skip a question if you don't feel comfortable or stop at any time.

First, let me introduce myself and tell you a little about my background...

Interview Script for Teachers:

1. Tell me about how you got into teaching / why you decided to become a preschool teacher
   a. How long have you been teaching in a preschool?
   b. What're your goals in teaching preschool/ what is the most important for you/when it comes to teaching?
2. Can you tell me about your personal experience during the pandemic?
   a. Can you describe any stressors that you experienced during the pandemic?
3. Can you describe your teaching experience during Covid-19 and how it might compare to previous years?
   a. Were you in the classroom or teaching virtually, or both?
      i. For how long were you virtual or in person?
      ii. When did you return to in-person teaching?
   b. Were there precautions set up to follow the Covid-19 policy?
      i. What were the environmental changes that were necessary and expected?
      ii. Who set those up? Who was responsible for these changes?
      iii. What was your approach to social distancing with young children?
   c. Can you describe children's behavior and how they interacted with each other and their teachers?

      i.   If you did both virtual and in-person teaching, can you describe both of those experiences and how they were different?

    d. Did you feel that there were more signs of anxiety, inattention, hyperactivity, etc., in these classes than in previous years?

      i.   If yes, what signs/patterns did you notice?

    e. Did that have any impact on the classroom?

4. Did your school have a vaccination mandate or mask mandate?

5. How did Covid-19 policies or precautions impact how you managed your classroom?

    a. How did normal routines change due to Covid-19 precautions?

    b. What decisions were you allowed to make in your classroom?

6. How did those (referring to the two previous questions) changes impact how the children could interact with each other and with teachers?

    a. What do you think the implications of these changes were?

    b. Did you notice any positive or negative changes in their interactions?

    c. What was the play and learning environment like?

      i.   Was there any impact on children's sense of community?

      ii.   Was there any impact on children's autonomy/ independence?

7. How were your coworkers reacting to everything during the pandemic? Did that affect how you interacted with children or parents?

8. What were the experiences like with parents? Was there any parental involvement?

    a. How did teachers and directors communicate with the parents?

    b. Did you experience any tension with parents because of Covid-19 regulations?

    c. During virtual learning, did parents support teachers at home?

    d. Did you notice more parental stress than in previous years?

9. Was there a sense of community within your school throughout the pandemic?

    a. Did you feel supported by the administration?

    b. How could you have been more supported?

10. What is it like now? What are the changes, if any?

    a. Were there any changes you saw during Covid-19 that you would like to be permanent?

      b.   What are some changes or policies you would like the state and national

government to make to support early childhood education and the work you do?

11. Is there anything else you would like to add/share?

12. Demographic questions:

      a.   Can you describe the student body of your school?

           i.   Race, gender, SES, community

      b.   Racial/ethnic identity - how would you identify your race/ethnicity on a US

census form?

      c.   Gender identity/preferred pronouns

"Thank you for interviewing with me," etc.

Interview Script for Directors:

1. Tell me about how you got into being a director / why you decided to become a

preschool director

      a. How long have you been directing a preschool?

      b. What're your goals in directing a preschool/ what is the most/ important for

you when it comes to directing/ being an administrator?

2. Can you tell me about your personal experience during the pandemic?

      a. Can you describe any stressors that you experienced during the pandemic?

3. Can you describe your directing experience during Covid-19 and how it might

compare to previous years?

      a. Was your school in person or virtual, or both?

           if. For how long were you virtual or in person?

           ii. When did you return to in-person school?

      b. Were there precautions set up to follow the Covid-19 policy?

           I. What were the environmental changes that were necessary and

expected?

           ii. Who set those up? Who was responsible for these changes?

4. Did you have any experts or consultants helping you with enacting these new

strategies?

      a. What kind of support did you get?

bow did you make decisions about new policies and practices?

      i. Who helped you make these decisions?

c. What informed the decisions to stay open or close?

d. What was the protocol for opening and closing the school?

e. What were the rules for parents, teachers, and the classroom environment, and what happened when people got sick?

f. Who paid for everything needed to keep up with Covid-19 regulations and mandates?

g. How did the pandemic affect the school economically?

5. Did your school have a vaccination mandate or mask mandate?

6. How did Covid-19 policies or precautions impact how you managed your classroom?

a. How did normal routines change due to Covid-19 precautions?

b. How did your role as director change?

      i. Were you able to interact with the children?

7. How were your coworkers reacting to everything during the pandemic? Did that affect how you interacted with children or parents?

8. What were the experiences like with parents? Was there any parental involvement?

a. How did teachers and directors communicate with the parents?

b. Did you experience any tension with parents because of Covid-19 regulations?

c. During virtual learning, did parents support teachers at home?

d. Did you notice more parental stress than in previous years?

9. Was there a sense of community within your school throughout the pandemic?

10. What is it like now? What are the changes, if any?

a. Were there any changes you saw during Covid-19 that you would like to be permanent?

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11. Is there anything else you would like to add/share?

12. Demographic questions:

a. Can you describe the student body of your school?

      i. Race, gender, SES, community

2. Racial/ethnic identity - how would you identify your race/ethnicity on a US census form?

3. Gender identity/preferred pronouns

"Thank you for interviewing with me," etc.

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