

From Stuck in a Dark Tunnel to Shining New Light: The Stories of Early Childhood Practitioners During the Pandemic

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Abstract

South Korea was one of the few countries in the world to face a major outbreak in the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study portrays the lived experiences of Korean early childhood practitioners striving to thrive between 2020 and 2021. Their stories offer their reflections on their challenges, struggles, and lessons learned throughout the pandemic. Findings reveal that, as time passed, there were longstanding struggles and newly emerging challenges. This study sheds light on early childhood practitioners' experiences of teaching during the unique and uncertain time of the pandemic, which can offer in-depth understanding for the betterment of future teaching.

Keywords: teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, Early Childhood Practitioners, South Korea

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought changes to education that impacted teachers, children, and parents globally. WHO launched an international public health emergency alert for the spread of this virus on January 20, 2020 (Santos & Lacerda, 2020). According to UNESCO (2020), there were 1.5 billion learners in 165 countries whose educations were disrupted by the spread of COVID-19, meaning that 9 out of 10 students worldwide were out of school temporarily.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea was one of the few countries to face a major outbreak in the first phase. Following the country's first confirmed case in January 2020 (Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, 2020), the Korean government raised the national alert level and issued school closures to prevent the spread of the virus on February 23, 2020 (J. Yu et al., 2021). Afterward, school openings were postponed five times through May 27th, 2020 (N. Hwang, 2021). Several school closures led to unprecedented challenges for children, parents, and teachers (Byun & Slavin, 2020). During these school closures, at the elementary level and above, classes were able to run via a national system of online educational tools and curricula. However, as there were no national programs or guidelines regarding online learning in early childhood education (Byun & Slavin, 2020), early childhood practitioners made continuous efforts to develop a remote curriculum relevant to the age group of children, communicate with families, and provide educational and play materials to families to continue their services to students (Y. Hwang, 2021). For a while, children, parents, and teachers possessed their own struggles and challenges due to the absence of in-person classroom experiences. Early childhood institutions governed by the Korean Ministry of Education gradually reopened in-person classes, adopting different attendance systems such as one day a week, two days a week, or three days a week. After the schools reopened, there were dramatic changes in the communities, changing the landscape of early childhood education and care. Indeed, a growing number of voices have highlighted how the pandemic changed early childhood educators' daily practices, roles and duties, and the standpoint of the teaching and caring system. Many researchers (Baek & Kim, 2021; Y. Kim, 2021; Kim, Woo, & Lim, 2021; Lee & Hong, 2021; Park & Cho, 2020; Son, Kim, & Lee, 2020) embraced the voices of

directors as leaders, business managers, and supervisors in coping with the global pandemic. The long-term shut-down in early 2020 brought more than 10,000 student withdrawals and made it difficult to budget, operate, and manage centers (Baek & Kim, 2021). Not only for directors but also for teachers, the 2020 spring semester was not at all easy. The semester was supposed to introduce the new Nuri-curriculum nationwide. Instead of a structured and teacher-centered curriculum, to the new curriculum was child-centered, play-based, and emergent curriculum. Teachers thus grappled with the fact that building a safe learning environment and play with social distancing contradicts children's collaborative play (Choi & Kwon, 2021), which is pivotal in the new Nuri-curriculum. This caused increased burdens and stress for them (Kim, Myeong, & Kim, 2022; S. Kim, 2021). Indeed, many researchers (Choi, 2020; Im, 2021; Lee, 2021) found that COVID-19 seriously impacted early childhood educators' emotional difficulties, burn-out, and anxiety. Since the spring semester of 2020 till present, as important stakeholders, both directors and teachers have had to adapt to rapidly changing educational environments. Considered as essential workers, they faced fear of a serious contagious illness and adapting rapidly to new work demands in an unstable work environment collaboratively (Crawford et al., 2021). After long disorientation in a dark tunnel, educators have had to find solutions to provide educational services to children. As time has passed, there have been longstanding struggles and newly emerging challenges. To overcome these challenges, they had to work collaboratively and closely each other as COVID warriors. However, the existing research mentioned above has mostly been done separately by either directors or teachers, not altogether.

Therefore, in this research, we hear Korean early childhood teachers' and directors' lived experiences and ongoing reflections about how they responded to the crisis in the process of their adaptation. Moreover, through their stories, it closely examines the factors that overcome the difficulties between 2020 and 2021. Aligned with this goal, this research aimed to address the following questions:

RQ1: What did Korean early childhood teachers and directors experience during two years of teaching during the pandemic?

RQ2: What challenges and struggles did Korean early childhood teachers and directors have?

RQ3: What didt Korean early childhood teachers and directors reflect on and what lessons did they learn throughout this experience?

Methods

Participants

Twelve teachers and eight administrators in private preschools were recruited for interviews in D city in Korea. To recruit the participants, we shared the purpose of this research at the professional development meeting event and collected their contact information for focus interviews. To avoid possible power dynamic between director and teacher, we limited only one participant from one site either teacher or director.

For administrators, they were either directors or assistant directors who had more than 20 years of teaching experience, late 40s ~early 60s.aged, and held master's degrees. For teachers, in order to hear diverse teaching experiences, we selected teachers whose teaching experience ranged from 3 years to more than 20 years, mid 20s~early 40s aged, and held

Table 1. *Research Participants*

Teaching Experiences	Participant Information
1~5 yrs	Teacher 2 (Public kindergarten, bachelor's degree) Teacher 3 (Private kindergarten, bachelor's degree) Teacher 4 (Private kindergarten, bachelor's degree)
6~10 yrs	Teacher 5 (Privatekindergarten, associate's degree) Teacher 6 (Private kindergarten, bachelor's degree) Teacher 7 (Private kindergarten, associate's degree) Teacher 8 (Public kindergarten, bachelor's degree, pursuing master's degree)
11~20 yrs	Teacher 1 (Public kindergarten, master's degree) Teacher 9 (Private kindergarten, bachelor's degree, pursuing master's degree) Teacher 11 (Private kindergarten, bachelor's degree)
More than 20 yrs	Teacher 10 (Private kindergarten, bachelor's degree) Teacher 12 (Publickindergarten, bachelor's degree) Director 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 (Private kindergarten, master's degree) Director 7, 8 (Public kindergarten, master's degree)

associate, bachelor's degrees, or master's degree. To know and listen to their stories of teaching and experience between 2020 and 2021, they should have been in the field for two academic years.

Research Procedure

We explained participants that this participation is voluntary and if they wish, they can withdraw anytime. We received their signed consent before conducting focus interviews regarding their participation. To reveal participants' lived experience during pandemic.

We conducted focus interviews to get information from multiple participants at the same time. Through this method, participants could share their experience in an unstructured manner, interact with other participants by exchanging their thoughts, and hear from others as well (Morgan, 2018), we could get abundant data. They could also compare and contrast their situations while they listened to other participant's sharing, which helped them to reminisce about things they could not think of (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

We held a total of three focus group interviews, and each focus group interview lasted 90 to 120 minutes between October and December 2021. Before the interview, a pre-interview questionnaire was sent to the participants via email and text message. To listen carefully their lived stories and to avoid possible power dynamic between teachers and directors, we conducted focus interview separately. Followed by Krueger (2013), we divided half for administrators (four each) and three groups for teachers (four each) considering each participant's sharing opportunities as well as hearing divergent stories from others, therefore, each of the interview was conducted with four participants per each.

In order for researchers to understand the lives of research participants, it is necessary to form a close relationship with the research participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). When we conducted the focus interviews, we paid particular attention to not evaluating the participant's teaching, rather, we were trying to hear their lived experiences, including struggles, challenges, and trials and errors. The focus interview was conducted with semi-structured questions that were shared before focus interview to fully reflect the opinions of interview participants. Adapting Krueger & Casey (2014)'s suggestions, we proceeded the interviews including four steps. To create rapport and feel relaxed within the focus group,

we had an ‘opening’ to check in and introduce each other. As a ‘transition,’ we explained the purpose and direction of each focus interview. As a main ‘key’ section, we had conversations to answer the research questions. As a final step of ‘ending,’ we had a short time to debrief and ask clarifying questions, if necessary. For a smooth process, we made sure that they could feel free to comment on participants’ opinions, and there were no right or wrong answers as they shared their experiences.

For the first interview, our questions centered on sharing their challenges/difficulties and experiences through the lockdown until their opening of schools. For the second interview, our focus shifted to their experience in 2020, after the re-opening of school, what changes they faced, their online teaching, and how children’s play and activities changed with social distancing. For the last interview, we wanted to hear about their stories after 2021, focusing on their reflections on teaching and the silver linings of COVID-19 for future teaching.

Data Analysis and Warranty

Analysis of data as an important part of qualitative research methods is a concept that includes a method of thinking, and it is a process of systematically reviewing the relationship between parts and parts and the whole. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition, participants shared some pictures, text messages, newsletters, official documents, and guidelines from the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. These were also collected and analyzed. In order to ensure the integrity of the data, after done with each focus interview, the transcribed data was sent via email for review so that the contents were recorded according to their intentions. The collected data were analyzed through a thematic approach and grounded theory to find or create topics or terms that meet the implications of the data to best reveal its meaning (Charmaz, 2014). First, the first initial coding was performed by repeatedly reading the transcripts with fellow researchers to line up sentences that revealed the meaning of the data and parentheses. Next, we identified focused codes by comparing and contrasting themes and patterns in and across the data. Throughout this process, eight focused codes were finalized: Providing educational materials to homes, emerging needs toward hybrid learning platform, witnessing learning setbacks after returning to school, observing the need of psychological

and emotional well-being, fighting with uncertainties and less secured job, increasing workload and stress, gained adaptability, resilience, and responsiveness, and focusing on humanizing and healing/caring practice for future teaching.

To ensure the reliability of the study, triangulation was used so that the intentions of the participants were accurately reflected and analyzed the official documents, guidance materials, and news issued by the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as reference materials. Furthermore, the analyzed codes and categories were reviewed for validity and interpretation through peer review with co-researchers, and regular research meetings were held to discuss the direction of the research.

Findings

Throughout their narratives, we were able to hear the ways in which their lives were impacted by the social context of COVID-19 as administrators or teachers within the early childhood education setting.

Education Must Be Continued: I am Not Fully Equipped!

Providing educational materials to homes

Due to anxiety over COVID-19, many parents chose to keep their children at home, and children's rights to attend school and learn in-person were taken away. Life in the early childhood education center shifted to home, and educators made sure that similar learning could happen at home (Baek & Kim, 2021). Therefore, there was an increasing demand to provide home support systems to prevent missed learning opportunities and to minimize the learning gap.

At first, centers provided educational materials, including worksheets and crafts materials, for children (Baek & Kim, 2021; Kim, Woo, & Lim, 2021). In addition, centers provided some educational websites—including play materials, reading stories, sing alongs, and YouTube sources—that children could watch. However, children had difficulty completing work independently without parental assistance (Moore, 2022).

Even though we wrote the weekly lesson plan for guardians, including the goal of the activity, connected to the theme, focusing on children's expansion through material inquiry...not all guardians read all the directions and it did not go as well as we planned. After receiving several complaints, we had to instead provide just fun activities that children could easily create without much help (Teacher, 3).

Children's living conditions were quite varied in terms of family background, expectations, and available educational resources (Aslan et al., 2022). Accordingly, parental availability to help them and digital competency skills became critical factors, and some of the children became marginalized (UNICEF&UNESCO, 2021). Therefore, centers had to prepare lessons that parents could easily help with and use materials readily available at home (Kim et al., 2020).

Using hybrid learning platform

As children missed their teachers and wanted to see them on screen, centers started to create a hybrid learning platform by recording teachers' lessons. For this, teachers received basic training regarding online learning, but they did not have enough skills and experience to create and implement online teaching right away (UNICEF& UNESCO, 2021).

Even though there were some guidelines or resources available for teachers to learn in terms of several virtual tools or recordings, it was all new to us. Given the stressful situations, it added to our burdens to prepare hybrid learning or record their lessons (Teacher, 8).

Compared to in-person class, these recorded lessons did not have any dynamic interactions between teachers and children. Centers gradually increased the hours of synchronous teaching, utilizing different platforms for children's social connection and engagement (Aslan et al., 2022). Ironically, depending upon teachers' digital competency became an important factor in remote teaching. Just taking online tutorials or professional development trainings were not sufficient. Instead, to feel confident and have smooth virtual teaching, teachers went through continuous trials and errors (S. Kim, 2021).

Glad to See You Again: Struggling Children

Teaching while following strict social distancing rules

Between February 2020 and December 2020, there were nine editions published by the Ministry of Education that preschools had to follow, including rules for the infection prevention process and the reporting system for Covid cases in centers (Y. Hwang, 2021). However, educators expounded on how these guidelines and policies did not align with the daily routines of young children (Baek & Kim, 2021; Park & Cho, 2020; Son, Kim, & Lee, 2020). Teachers kept children's social distance and silence under surveillance (Lee, 2021) following government guidelines that consistently emphasized that children should play apart from peers, forcing solitary play.

In social distancing, you need to minimize interaction with others. There are not many things they can do in the classroom. Lunch time is a very important social event for children that many children liked. However, I had to keep checking their behaviors, saying "Don't talk, don't go over the partitions." The younger kids who could not play by themselves really had a hard time. So, they kept asking "When do I go home?", as they felt the school is not a fun place anymore. Whenever I had to tell them "We can't play together. You need to play by yourself, it really broke my heart (Teacher, 9).

They used to touch each other, closely play with peers, hug each other, and chat a lot with people at school. Now, these were not going to happen in the same way they did before. We had no choice but to watch their play very cautiously. We had no choice but to stop them from playing each other. As teachers made them play apart, they were so bored and bored (Director, 6).

Being in the same space but play individually

Play is very important medium for children to get to know about their surroundings, connect with others, and actively explore and investigate with hands-on experience. During school closures, children were really eager to return to school to play with peers. Most verbal conversations and physical touches that are very important to young children were strictly limited. After returning to school, children did not find much space left to play freely, limiting rich social experiences and interaction with their peers. They became not

only physically distanced, but also socially and emotionally distanced.

Within the limited space, we tried to keep reminding them regarding no more than three people in one center and refraining from physical contacts and group activity. Therefore, building a relationship and being close to people can be taken negatively. Everything is blocked and prohibited in the name of safety and prevention (Teacher, 5).

Witnessing the impacts of pandemic

This situation negatively affected children's social and emotional development. Teachers had to remind children to adhere to the classroom expectations and rules regularly. Many teachers addressed the fact that children were having a hard time settling into class routines and not listening to the teacher's directions.

The hardest thing is they do not LISTEN. I even wondered if that child has an auditory problem. For example, in March, the first month for students, 1/3 of the students were not in the classroom. They were outside of the classroom without permission or asking, and they were in the hallway, running and screaming (Teacher, 2).

Teachers mentioned that they took a lot of time to work on students' basic life skills such as lining up, listening, keeping hands to themselves, being quiet during group gatherings, and self-regulation. They observed increased emotional turbulence such as anxiety, discomfort, and irritation among children.

Even experienced teachers and administrators thought that the spring semester of 2021 was the hardest. They noticed that a year-long home stay hugely impacted on children.

How can there be such a difference? I didn't expect that an absence of center experience would be so catastrophic to children's development. I think it was a lack of trust. For the new students, they didn't have any experience with the school in the past year, and it was getting harder for them to establish the relationship with teachers and peers by wearing masks, in social distance (Teacher, 1).

Our kindergarten teachers were crying so hard in March. They had more than 10 years of teaching experience. No matter how much teachers taught, they could not reduce the gap between new and

returning students. They wondered about the impact of COVID-19 deficiencies in the year. Early childhood education period is critical for children for their language, social, emotional, and physical developments (Director, 1).

They witnessed the impact of the societal crisis on children's development, seeing a lot of learning setbacks (Sullivan, 2021). While guidelines force distance in the classroom, if these rules' enactment became strict, children's learning and social, and emotional benefits disappeared and teachers felt stressed out due to limited options and their new roles as a custodian.

Practitioners' Dilemma: Insecurity and Burdens

Facing financial crisis

Since the spring semester of 2020, practitioners had been fighting over uncertainty. When the first lockdown order was issued, centers had a lot of confusion and worries among staff members, as there were a lot of grey areas such as reopening guidelines, availability of federal relief, and health and safety measures (Sullivan, 2021). During lockdown, as many parents chose to keep their kids at home, parents received childcare subsidies from the government (Choi, 2020). As many students were withdrawn, centers faced a financial crisis (Byun & Slavin, 2020), which resulted in a lack of job security among staff. As the closure was extended, registered parents canceled their registrations, and there were several classrooms that were not fully enrolled. Most educational institutions operating with government financial support that depends on the number of children enrolled. A steep drop-off means a surplus of teachers, so directors resolve to pay off their teachers (Y. Kim, 2021; Son, Kim, & Lee, 2020).

At first, there were 26 students in the class and it dropped to 15. And it became less and, eventually, I had to let newly hired teachers quit to reduce the burden. It was almost an advisory resignation. We could not have 50% of the enrollments, which means I had to cut half of the teachers. There were so many teachers who lost their jobs overnight (Director, 7).

Unlike public preschools, which receive funds from the government, private preschools

rely upon children's tuitions for their main income source. So, it became critical for directors and teachers to keep enrollments, and this fostered too much competition with each other.

Preschools became competitive against each other. I had to stop them from quitting preschool, so I even made side dishes to relieve mom's burdens to feed kids at home, three meals. One preschool sent a kickboard as a gift. Other teachers visited the kids every week and even sang for them to entertain them. Mothers began comparing the packages and posted them on social media, saying "Which one is flashier?" My car filled with all the packages, and I felt like I was a delivery man (Teacher, 4).

Especially private preschools had to compete with other institutions for enrollment, especially English institutions. Compared to preschools, which are governed by the Ministry of Education, English institutions had more freedom to run programs, even during the pandemic.

As our center is located in the wealthiest neighborhood, it was hard to compete with other centers, even harder with English institutions. They provided special services such as 1:1 with native speakers through Zoom or had 1-2 hours of English classes. Parents who kept their kids at home considered that their kids just played with the materials given by the center, and their neighborhood kids who went to English institutions studied and learned, "Why do I have to pay for the tuition, even though I kept my kids at home? Eventually, they quit the center and finally sent their kids to the English institution (Director, 2).

Regardless of their countless efforts, there was nothing they could do to prevent students from quitting the centers. Administrators were pushing teachers to keep their children out. It was a battlefield, and this led to the educator stress due to a lack of job stability and deteriorating mental health (Sullivan, 2021). For, if they got confirmed as COVID-19 positive or if they were considered an immediate contact, they were worried about being stigmatized by society.

Increased stress and anxiety

Further job stresses included infection prevention pressures, strict social distancing, and

increasing hygiene at work. At first, they were faced with anxiety over infection (Im, 2021).

I felt a lot of pressure from my students' parents, and I did not have any privacy. And especially in the first phase, if teachers were identified as a close contact, they had to have two weeks' strict quarantine and, when they returned to school, they got stigmatized. They did not appreciate much that I went to work in spite of the high risk of exposure during working with their children (Teacher, 2).

Beyond a generic phobia of viruses, teachers were feared by the public, who lashed out when they would have a positive case. Since teachers worked with young children, the public's moral expectations for them were high. Many teachers were afraid to go outside and meet strangers in case they might be infected. Teachers' emotional uneasiness brought sadness and a sense of helplessness, causing heavy stress and leading to psychological atrophy (Choi, 2020).

Overwork and burn out

Along with anxiety about the virus, teachers endured increased stress from overwork that came from activities such as heavy paperwork and disinfection of classrooms, furniture, and play materials (Sullivan, 2021). There was the establishment of standards and methods for the operation of schools and remote classes in stages, according to Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They had to conduct daily prevention education and monitoring of sanitation, based on the prevention protocols (Yu et al., 2021). Every morning, teachers sanitized every corner of the classroom during the daytime and before dismissal. Since government guidelines required teachers to take children's temperature three times a day, it became another burden within an already busy daily routine. Moreover, if children were absent, teachers had to call their parents and make sure of the reason for their absence (Choi, 2020).

As guardians felt difficulties to take care of their kids, more students came to school in the name of emergency care. Students were having difficult times wearing masks, especially infants. We always felt like it was more like care, not education, which gave us a dilemma (Director, 3).

This heavy load hindered teachers in their attempts to spend time on lesson preparation. In addition, as preschools were required to follow the orders of the Ministry of Education, which imposed stricter rules on them than on childcare centers supervised by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, they felt some of the government's guidelines and orders needed adequate consideration for and from the centers (H. Yu et al., 2021). Accordingly, symptoms of depression and other mental health conditions increased considerably among educators during the pandemic, who were often without resources. These and other factors led early childhood educators to report being more anxious, overwhelmed, and stressed, all of which they felt negatively impacted their ability to work.

A Dim Light Begins to Show!: Enter the “Leapfrog” Stage

In two years of teaching experience from 2020 - 2022, educators faced countless disruptions that hugely impacted their working environments and conditions. As the pandemic dragged on, they had to fight to keep their doors open (Sullivan, 2020), and the long-lasting pandemic disrupted every facet of education for both children and teachers. One of the directors mentioned that even experienced teachers struggled and that educators felt tired and became more sensitive as they continued to limit their daily activities.

Increased attention to safety and health

In spite of the challenges, they were able to move on to the “leapfrog” stage by adopting effective strategies and practices that helped them reshape and reimage their future teaching. Firstly, based on the precaution and continuous education for physical health inside and outside of the schools, children became acutely aware of the importance of wearing masks and handwashing. This raised children's awareness of the importance of maintaining healthy habits and public safety and helped children develop self-care skills.

I think children's' washing hands and brushing teeth thoroughly has definitely gotten better. Since COVID-19 started, it has become a daily routine for them. They no longer play with soap. They know over 30 seconds of washing hands. I am guessing because they wash their hands at home, [and] it might be helpful to get used to it (Teacher, 11).

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Every year from May to June, there was a season for hand-foot-and-mouth disease, and it is actually transmitted so fast. But because children and parents thoroughly wash their hands well as a precaution, even during the flu season, the number of cases was really fewer this year. It is a true saying that just washing your hands can prevent 70% of all diseases (Teacher, 12).

As schools provided regular health education and practice for children, there was a reduced number of illnesses such as hand-foot-mouth, flu, stomachache, and cold compared to the previous year.

Rebuilding reciprocal relationships

Secondly, all participants noted that they learned about the important role of building a relationship with children and parents, as well as the critical role of effective communication. Teachers had difficult times understanding students' verbal comments due to masks and vice versa.

I thought making a tight connection would be crucial. Sometimes, parents were super touchy and, at first, teachers were more than concerned about social distancing policy and prevention of COVID-19 duties. Parents got anxious from a lack of accessibility and close contact. Because of anxiety, parents showed their anxiety to teachers more often and asked them questions. Then the tension increased. One day, one of the mothers called and asked "Hey, what do you know about my child?; How is she doing in the classroom?" By that time, the teacher couldn't give a clear answer because there was no chance to observe that child much during the pandemic. So, the teacher just mumbled. Then that mom thought that the teacher was not taking care of her child sincerely (Director, 5).

The disconnected relationship due to reducing in-person interaction with parents and indirect conversation via apps or newsletters caused misunderstanding and distrust. The relationship between teachers and children widened, much like the physical distance. However, they learned the importance of building a sense of emotional safety and trust between the teacher and students, as healing could occur otherwise (Shea & Awdziejczyk, 2021).

I deeply experienced "teaching as a relational practice." Teaching is not something that can

proceed as planned by the instructor, but it is a relational practice that is continuously carried out in a relationship with students, and thus changes are inevitable. Before, I was just thinking more about delivering the information, but I noticed that teaching goes beyond that. I need to take care of my children's emotional well-being to be successful (Teacher, 10).

For caring & healing practice

Participants acknowledged that children were experiencing negative feelings such as isolation, uncertainty, anxiety, depression, and loss during the pandemic, causing harm to children's mental and emotional health (Calderon, 2020). This experience made them understand and highlight the importance of the human connection that recognizes them as humans. They acknowledged the positive impact of emotional support on learning outcomes prior to the pandemic, but it was not their priority (Hadar et al., 2020). Ironically, the pandemic allowed teachers and directors to remember that they are humans who want to be connected.

Discussion and Implications

Our time with COVID-19 is unexpectedly extending, moving now toward the third year. Despite unpredictable and distressing situations, directors and teachers have upheld the social value of early childhood education and care service. Their responsibility, a sense of duty, and striving efforts have kept the learning and caring system in society alive and provided not only a new portal for the future learning of children, but also a support community for children that makes efforts to ensure everyone's safety and well-being.

Thus, we need to acknowledge early childhood practitioners' varied and indigenous ways of responding to and coping strategies in the new normal of life with COVID-19. As they develop resilience (Rodriguez et al., 2021), they can access new opportunities towards innovative pedagogy and the re-conceptualization of the nature of education (Mutton, 2020). Based on their know-how gained from their lived experiences during the pandemic, their struggles and hurdles and their lessons and insights will provide a valuable source and asset for future teaching (Aslan et al., 2022).

The pandemic was initially disastrous for children and early childhood stakeholders

(Sullivan, 2021). As discussed in the findings, early childhood practitioners were not prepared for the transition to new teaching methods using online platforms and resources. Students' low engagement, inability to socialize and interact, lack of hands-on activities, play, and exploration of their respective curricula made them feel more challenged. There were limited chances for online teaching, as well as limited support from schools and families (Aslan et al., 2022). We realized the importance of physical space and in-person interaction among teachers, children, and families—one we perhaps took for granted before the pandemic. Similar to the result of Crawford et al. (2021)'s research,, teachers have utilized online platforms, technologies, and different teaching and learning modalities to maximize children's learning experiences and development. They have made tremendous efforts to provide alternatives.

Therefore, a comprehensive professional development program for distance learning is needed, as well as resources and ideas for hybrid lessons (UNESCO & UNESCO, 2021). Kim et al. (2020) has interviewed early childhood educators about their need for a high-quality online learning curriculum led by the Ministry of Education, which could reflect in-service teachers' needs and children's interests and development. In addition, it has been suggested that online teaching content (filming, editing, and video sharing) and various online platforms and resources should be included in preservice teacher education.

Furthermore, it is critical to pay attention to the socioemotional development of young children, as many participants expressed concern. Due to the long quarantine period and school closures, many institutional experiences and human interactions among young children were lost. Most children have lost the equivalent of a year or more of peer interaction (Jalongo, 2021). According to Bahn (2020), closing schools possibly contributes to mental health issues among young children. Indeed, they have experienced fear and anxiety due to infectious diseases, and school closures has taken away the opportunity to interact with peers and have a daily routine. Children who went through unexpected disasters need a variety of physical, social, psychological, and emotional support based on their individual needs (Peek, 2008). According to the research of H. Yu et al. (2021), the government guidelines during COVID-19 did not provide enough support for children's social and emotional needs. Thus, we need to work on restoring a trustful relationship between teachers and children by showing more affection and caring towards them and

seeking a more supportive system for our children. Finally, we should also pay attention to creating safe learning communities that foster a sense of belonging and connectedness for children and our communities.

Furthermore, due to myriad workloads, early childhood practitioners have accumulated mental and physical fatigue, which has negatively impacted their well-being. In an interview study with directors in Daegu, South Korea, Baek and Kim (2021) reported that many directors had to work additional roles and hours to handle burdensome responsibilities that suddenly appeared. According to the findings of Kwon et al. (2022), a significant number of teachers reported acute concern about poor physical and psychological well-being, as well as stress, anxiety, and fear of becoming ill. As Sokal et al. (2020) suggested that there is a great need for more research and support on mental health for early childhood educators and caregivers in order to promote their well-being.

In the 2020 Spring semester, the revised Nuri curriculum, which is play-based and child-centered, was introduced for the first time in South Korea. The new curriculum, however, was poorly implemented by many teachers due to the strict mandatory mask and social distancing policies imposed during the semester. Since this study intends to investigate general challenges and overcoming strategies of early childhood stakeholders, future research might explore how COVID-19 has impacted the application of a new Nuri curriculum in South Korea, as well as how teachers coordinate with the implementation of that curriculum in their classrooms.

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