

"Do they see me as a Professional?": Narratives of an Early Childhood Teacher in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article analyses the experience of a Chilean early childhood (EC) teacher in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Part of a broader qualitative and narrative research, this article is a case study based on her professional experience during the pandemic. The results reveal four phases in the process: (1) initial confusion, (2) proposal, (3) disappointment and action, (4) balance and dialogue. The narrative shows a series of situations experienced by the EC teacher in her relationship with the children's families, where identity negotiation emerged linked to the revalidation of her professional role. In addition, developing teaching and collaborative skills to respond to emergency situations is highlighted. Based on this experience, the need to elicit cultural changes that articulate care and pedagogical fields in EC education in Chile is analysed.

Keywords : Early childhood education; teacher identity; professional development; covid-19: pandemic

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Introduction

COVID-19 has brought unprecedented changes and transformations to the educational system, where different educational agents should develop a series of pedagogical responses. In Chile, despite the suggestions made by different international organizations, the Ministry of Education decided to apply centralized and unilateral actions (Gelber et al., 2021). Despite difficulties in internet access, most of the actions were implemented exclusively in an online mode, especially during the first year of the pandemic.

In that scenario, teachers were forced to carry out their work remotely, which implied a challenge for the pedagogical processes of children specially those who attend early childhood education (ECE). At this educational level, children require direct interactions with other people as it is difficult to replace the face-to-face experience with remote education alternatives (Valenzuela et al., 2021). Additionally, Fernandes et al. (2023) have acknowledged the lack of digital skills in early childhood educators to effectively use digital platforms and technologies. This underscores the crucial need for training and skill development in this domain.

Furthermore, remote education has led to shifts in the roles of education professionals, placing greater emphasis on the engagement of children's families as intermediaries or observers in the educational process (Jalongo, 2021; Moreno & Lluch, 2020; Su et al., 2021; Timmons et al. 2021). This situation reshapes the vital collaboration between families and teachers, especially for children under six years old who rely on family support to participate in pedagogical activities (Fernandes et al., 2023; Quinones et al., 2021; Steed & Leech, 2021). This is particularly significant as many young children have not yet acquired proficiency in reading, writing, or using computers, presenting challenges to their direct engagement in online learning (Jalongo, 2021). However, it is reported that families did not have enough time to support their children, during this period (Valenzuela et al., 2021), due to emotional concerns, economic difficulties, and dual job problems, among other factors (Su et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic produced a high emotional impact on teachers (Eadie et al., 2021; Patiño, 2020; Salas et. al., 2020; Wiltshire, 2023) and a distressing experience associated with the perception of neglect by educational institutions and authorities. Teachers perceived improvised responses without providing resources and formation to develop their

pedagogical work (Molina & Pulido, 2021).

This reflects a growing research interest in various subjects, such as teaching experience, distance education, emotional consequences, institutional support, and professional skills among other issues (Eadie et al., 2021; Fernandes et al., 2022; González, et al., 2020; Molina & Pulido, 2021; Ramos et al., 2020; Ruiz et al., 2021; Quinones et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, further exploration of the subjective experiences of Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers and their adaptation to the complex and unforeseen context of the pandemic is needed, with a specific emphasis on the identity tensions that have arisen (Figueroa-Céspedes et al., 2022b). Research on professional identity during the COVID-19 pandemic is scarce, with existing studies primarily concentrating on ECE initial teacher education experience during COVID-19 (Kim, 2020), teachers' coping strategies in this challenging period (Gelir, 2023; Quinones et al., 2021), or the interplay between ECE educators' professional identity, stress, and career decisions (Wiltshire, 2023). The educators' adaptation to the pandemic has been a complex process that warrants examination from various perspectives and methodologies.

The field of Early Childhood Education (ECE), particularly in Chile, faces significant challenges that are especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. ECE teachers' professional identity is perceived as delicate, shaped by a dual maternal and religious image (Poblete, 2018). Despite their unwavering commitment to children, educators persistently contend with adverse conditions, such as low salaries and marginalized social status, persist (Arteaga et al., 2018; Figueroa-Céspedes et al., 2022a; Pardo & Opazo, 2019; Pardo & Woodrow, 2014). Furthermore, a comprehensive exploration is necessary to understand the intricate link between these conditions and the construction of identity in crisis contexts.

These specific features of ECE in Latin America, which are also evident in the rest of the world (Quinones et al., 2021; Timmons et al., 2021; Wiltshire, 2023; Wong, 2022), have not been extensively addressed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, research focused on the COVID-19 pandemic is relevant not only as a particular and exceptional situation but also might provide valuable insights into how educators navigate critical and demanding situations. This study contributes to the body of knowledge during this period of educational transformation, highlighting the significance of heeding the voices of early childhood educators (Wiltshire, 2023).

To address this issue, the objective of this article is to understand how an ECE teacher experiences the complexities of her professional practice during the COVID-19 pandemic identifying the main challenges for her professional identity and practice.

To this end, the research questions are:

- What were the stories and experiences lived by a Chilean ECE teacher in her professional work in the context of a pandemic?
- What are the main professional challenges that a Chilean ECE teacher has to face in the context of a pandemic?

Literature Review

Teacher Professional Identity in Early Childhood Education

Professional teaching identity is neither fixed nor stable but is constructed through a process that incorporates biographical experiences, contextual and relational elements (Akaba et al., 2022), and is understood as the result of various processes of socialization, subjective and objective, individual and collective, which construct individuals and institutions (Dubar, 2000). According to Beijgaard et al. (2004), identity is fluid, changing and accounts for a continuous process of interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences and answers the recurring question: "Who am I at this moment?" (p. 108).

Professional teaching identity, according to Bolívar et al. (2005), is constructed in interaction with the work context, situated in a social space with specific interpersonal relationships. Thus, for Dubar (2000;2002), the basis of the professional identity construction process is the confrontation between the *identity defined for oneself* and the *identity for others*, which implies a series of demands on the person and leads to identity crises or, in other cases, to reconstruction or conversion. This leads us to the concept of epiphanies or turning points, which according to Denzin (1989) describe situations that alter and transform the meanings that people give to themselves and their experiences, modifying their ways of thinking and perceiving things and influencing their own professional identity.

A relevant issue in the construction of the professional teaching identity, according to Pinzón (2016) is based on the historical role assigned to female educators, given that teaching in EC education is a highly feminized profession closely associated with care (Poblete, 2018), an aspect that generates tension with the expectation of an educational policy that promotes early formal schooling processes (Scherr & Johnson, 2017).

These ideas are supported by Pardo and Opazo (2019), who mentioned that ECE teachers' professional identity is based on a tension between a child-centred pedagogy and increasingly formal schooling within a context of limited capacity to resist that tension. The authors argue that ECE teachers perceive the classroom as the only context where they can preserve play-based pedagogy, without being able to influence public policy. In this way, educators' interpretations of their roles will depend on their subjective experiences and how they define themselves within a specific interactional context. Following Dubar (2000), their professional identities are built in a process of continuous negotiation between the subjectivity and objectivity of their work.

This situation coexists with problems such as low salaries and the social and professional status of Chilean EC educators (Arteaga et al., 2018; Pardo & Opazo, 2019; Robinson et al., 2018). This generates a strong impact on self-esteem and professional confidence as well as on job satisfaction, producing passive professionalism (Pardo & Woodrow, 2014).

Pandemic and Teacher Professional Identity

Under regular contexts, the work of the ECE teacher is carried out in daily interactions with children and other educational and community agents, stimulating emotional development. According to Fu (2015), this implies a high workload, including a permanent regulation of their emotions themselves, which became a component of their psychological capital. In this sense, educators faced not only the challenges related to gender issues but also struggled for professional recognition, experiencing high emotional demands, which were associated with the societal value placed on their pedagogical work and had a negative impact on their wellbeing during this period (Quinones et al., 2021; Wiltshire, 2023). This kind of situation, following Hanna et al. (2019), might imply identity tensions. In a general context, professional identity tensions encompass a feeling of discord or tension that emerges when

there is a mismatch between one's perceived expectations of the teaching profession and the actual experiences in the pedagogical practice (Hanna et al., 2019; Pillen et al., 2013). In this sense, contextual demands (like the pandemic) can produce crises or new identity elaborations.

Method

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretative perspective was adopted since its focus is to understand the experiences of an ECE teacher in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. A narrative case study (Riessman, 2008) was used. This allows us to delve into the story of an early childhood educator, facilitating the interpretation of meanings from an inquiry that addresses her memories linked with their subjectivity.

Participant

This case was part of a larger study focused on exploring the construction of the professional identity of EC educators. The case was selected following these criteria: EC teacher works in a public institution, has more than five years of experience working in the classroom, and works in a region of Chile far from its capital, which provides an opportunity to understand the variation and contextualisation of practices in different types of institutions and demographic features. The participant was recruited based on her involvement in a professional development program in which the principal researcher was one of the teachers. At the conclusion of the training program, she was asked about her interest in participating in the research, to which she responded positively.

The participant is an ECE teacher named Andrea, who worked with children during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of the interviews, she was 37 years old, and she was employed at an early childhood education centre located in a medium-sized city in the Aysén region in the south of Chile. The centre's curricular project was dedicated to offering high-

quality, free public early childhood education to children. Their educational approach had a strong emphasis on fostering dialogue, embracing diversity, building a sense of community, and instilling values such as empathy, respect, environmental consciousness, gender equality, and social justice.

Her educational centre had an enrollment of 180 children aged 0-4 years, with 8 teachers and 28 assistant teachers, led by a head teacher. In her classroom, there were 20 children aged 12-24 months, with two assistant teachers. In the educational centre, there were two levels: one that attended 5-11-month children and one that included 5-24-month children, called the heterogenic level, due to mixes children of different ages. At the time of the interviews, she had been working as an early childhood educator for fourteen years, with the last five years spent at her current educational centre in Aysén.

Andrea lived a large part of her life in the city of Concepción, a city located in the central south region of Chile. When she began preservice education at the University of Concepción, an ECE program was a second option after having unsuccessfully studied engineering for one year. Although at that time ECE was not among her interests, she felt that the educational area was challenging and was complemented by an interest in the artistic field, in particular handicrafts. Her first year in preservice education coincided with her first pregnancy, resulting in a difficult period since she did not receive support from her family, so she put her career on hold during her second year in preservice education. Upon returning to her studies, she reaffirmed her vocational choice through practice experience in ECE educational centres. This situation was relevant to connect with her passion for teaching.

Andrea feels that she received a solid preservice education in the theoretical and practical fields. Her teacher educators were a model of affectivity, always developing a positive bond with students and colleagues. Regarding her teaching experience, she highlighted her first job in a private educational centre in Concepción where she reached a certain conformity. This was a comfortable place, with material needs covered for the children, but she felt an absence of professional challenge. Subsequently, she joined her current job in Aysén, where she perceived an increased pedagogical decision-making ability and interesting challenges. Over the years, she has evolved, adapting her teaching style and approach to become more empathetic and understanding. Andrea's pedagogy was based on creativity, emotional connection with children, authenticity, adaptability, cognitive mediation, and professional

growth. Her approach is focused on providing children with a positive and meaningful learning experience, particularly in challenging situations such as the pandemic.

Context

As a contextual aspect, in Chile, COVID-19 emerged within the initial two weeks of the academic year. During the pandemic, educational centres' functioning was regulated by authorities based on health indicators defined geographically, which determined periods of lockdown when distance education was implemented. In addition, in Chile ECE corresponds to the level of education that provides education to children 0-6 years old. The level has a curricular framework built in 2002 and updated in 2018 (Ministry of Education, 2018). Over the past decade, there has been a sustained effort to enhance access to educational programs by expanding enrollment capacity, funded through public funds. However, significant challenges persist in the professionalization of this educational level.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured narrative interviews (Riessman, 2008). These interviews were designed to explore and describe the life and professional trajectory of the educator. The thematic script of the interview was structured following the proposal of Sarceda (2017), which includes questions and interactions related to different life stages of each educator: childhood/adolescence, decision-making and university experiences, years of teaching, and professional development. The focus of this article is on the period of the pandemic, so special emphasis was placed on this moment. The questions aimed to address the educator's subjectivity in the context of the pandemic. Some examples from the interview script include: "What experiences did you go through since the beginning of the pandemic, in terms of your professional practice and performance? How did it impact you? What happened from that time until now?"

The interviews took place in a virtual format. The first two interviews were held during April of 2021, in which major topics were addressed, focusing on the participant's story in the pandemic context. Following these two sessions, the narrative production was constructed,

which emerged from a hybrid text created dialogically between the researcher and participant, with a focus on the study topic (Balash & Montenegro, 2003).

A third session was conducted in October of 2021 with a focus on validating the narrative production and analysis developed. The sessions lasted a total of three and a half hours. The dialogue between participant and researcher made it possible to negotiate meanings, facilitating the emergence of situated and relevant knowledge, and identifying the narrative chronology and the participant meanings and emphasis. This process pursues analysing, thinking, and making sense of the experience, delving into the subjective meanings and emphasis of the participant.

Data Analysis

This article reports an emerging result in the broader research process in which it is included, related to the research of the biographical traces that construct the professional identity of experienced EC educators in Chile (Figueroa-Céspedes et al., 2022ab; Figueroa-Céspedes & Guerra., 2023). In this way, the pandemic became a significant biographical moment in the analysed case, generating insights that should be incorporated into the professional learning and development of ECE teachers.

The analytical method employed in this study was focused on the creation of narrative productions (Balasch & Montenegro, 2023), which allowed the educator's experiences to be eloquently expressed in the form of a third-person narrative. However, in cases where the first person was employed to emphasize Andrea's textual contributions, quotation marks were judiciously applied.

After the first two virtual sessions, the researcher transcribed the meetings and carefully synthesized the collected information into a chronological narrative that artfully encapsulated the prominent themes that emerged during the period. This narrative approach enabled a thorough examination of emerging themes, patterns, and insights gleaned from the educator's experiences amidst the pandemic. The temporal structure of the educator's narratives served as the foundation for data organization and analysis, in line with a thematic approach (Riessman, 2008). Every effort was made to faithfully retain the original textual expressions from the educator.

Additionally, to uphold the integrity and robustness of the analysis, the participant was actively engaged in reviewing and validating the narrative content before its incorporation into this article. This collaborative, thematic analysis approach co-constructed with the participant facilitated a profound exploration of the educator's subjective meanings and emphases concerning her journey during the COVID-19 pandemic. The value of this methodology lies in acknowledging the active role of the researcher in knowledge production and their participation in the narrative construction, which is inherently situated and political (Haraway, 2004).

Ethics

The research was approved by the University Ethics Committee considering the principles of confidentiality and anonymity of the participant using informed consent that explains the conditions of the research.

Results

First Stage: Initial Confusion

The pandemic was a highly complex experience for Andrea, involving a range of emotions, biases, and professional fears. On a personal level, at the onset of the pandemic, she experienced a decline in mood, leading to a passive attitude. The fear of contagion further contributed to this sense of unease. She mentioned: "I thought that everything had to be sanitised, I was psychotic, worried about a possible contagion, my husband arrived, and I bathed him in chlorine disinfectant, he had to cover his eyes (laughs)...". During those initial moments, it was Andrea's husband who took on the responsibility of grocery shopping and managing basic activities. As some restrictions were lifted by the authorities, and Andrea was able to go outside, she perceived a shift toward a more positive mood.

About her pedagogical practices, she pointed out that no one was prepared to face a pandemic through distance education, particularly in EC education. The educators began

working with enthusiasm but without enough knowledge of how to carry out the adaptation to remote modality. She reflected that ECE requires presence and physical contact since at this level affective bonds and trust are prerequisites for learning. She spent three weeks in a kind of limbo, feeling unclear about the process and disoriented: "I didn't know what to do (...) whether to evaluate or not to evaluate, how to contact the families, how to communicate with them if I had no idea who they were. I was just getting to know them (they have just started the educational year), there was no connection, no trust, nothing, nothing". This uncertainty was magnified by an institutional requirement to carry out some activities to accompany the children's pedagogical process.

She notes that, in this context, a portion of the team (assistant teachers) couldn't participate in remote education. This was because they lacked access to a computer or internet connection provided by the institution and did not bear the primary responsibility for the educational level. Under those circumstances, teachers assumed a more active role in the pedagogical process. For Andrea, her pedagogical work during the pandemic carried a significant ethical responsibility. She expressed the need to avoid complacency, stating, "I cannot simply 'be happy with my life' while knowing that children need to continue learning, even in the context of remote education". She openly criticized the decision of her colleagues because they did have their connectivity conditions and equipment, which allowed them to work remotely and contribute ideas and proposals during planning.

Second Stage: Proposal

After that phase of initial confusion, there was a phase of enthusiasm and euphoria for Andrea, which meant preparing pedagogical materials as a proposal for distance education. She prepared three pedagogical activities per day through videos, which families at home had to develop with children. This modality was a decision from the team allowing children's families to know the work they do. They planned pedagogical activities, recorded videos intuitively, and embraced innovation despite the fear of the unknown.

She also pointed out that it was important to address other aspects, especially those related to socio-emotional support. She thought that despite physical distance, through body expression, gestures, and different expressions, it was possible to transmit joy and affection

to children. Andrea knew that with these types of performances, children understand that “the teacher is so happy, my teacher is my rockstar; and that the families see that, they know that the children are happy, that is how they learn. And the work we do is not a chore, it is work that you do with affection”.

Andrea believed that their initial expectations concerning the roles of families were problematic, as teachers observed a lack of feedback on the materials provided. This situation generated strong disagreement and discomfort in Andrea:

“I do this every day in my house with my children, so if the family is not able to develop three educational activities, it is nothing compared to what children do all day in the educational centre. So how do the families see me as a professional? Do they see me as a professional, am I the babysitter or am I here to provide a welfare service while they work in peace?”

Andrea highlighted the importance of socio-emotional support, emphasizing how, despite physical distance, her expressive performances conveyed joy and affection to children. She recognized the power of these interactions in fostering a positive learning environment. Additionally, she raised concerns about the initial expectations regarding families' roles and the lack of feedback on the materials she provided. These challenges and questions highlighted the evolving dynamics of education during the pandemic, where educators like Andrea continued to adapt and navigate new territory while striving for the recognition of her essential role in children's development.

Third Stage: Disappointment and Action

Andrea felt that her work was not valued by the families and thought that her professional effort could be better used by her own family in this uncertain circumstance: “Wow, why do I work so hard, instead of being at home with my daughters, because it is also difficult for them”. At the beginning of the pandemic, one of Andrea's daughters was in first grade at primary school, developing reading and writing skills. She could support her, instead of spending her time generating materials that were not valued by families.

This tension was projected to the value that the children's families give to ECE. Andrea questions whether ECE was understood as a care service, like babysitters, or as an educational context. This situation generated wide discomfort, reflected in the following text: "I finished

my degree with a daughter (...) Instead of dedicating myself to motherhood, I continue studying. So, with all the effort I made, who validates my practice?

After reflecting on this fact, Andrea pondered this event and considered that this might be because families do not know her very well since it was her first year with these families. Also, this low reciprocity was explained from a professional point of view, thinking that the experiences were not significant for the children and families.

Also, the educator reflected on the barriers that emerge to communicating in a distance mode, addressing the most used form of communication in the pandemic: WhatsApp.

"(...) WhatsApp groups are sometimes annoying, they lead to gossip, to fights, to talk about unimportant things, I participated in three WhatsApp groups from different courses and I already left (laughs), because I no longer tolerate some things, but what hurt me was that this WhatsApp group was purely informative, it never led to problems and conflicts, and even that... there was no response, (...) an ok, yes I read it, nothing..."

The educator expressed concern about the detrimental aspects of WhatsApp groups, including gossip and conflicts, prompting their departure from several course-related groups. Notably, the educator was surprised and disappointed by a WhatsApp group intended for information sharing, which, despite its absence of issues, lacked engagement and interaction. This emphasizes the significance of responsiveness and dialogue in digital educational communication.

Andrea felt demoralized about her work, a situation shared with the EC educators in her educational centre, which she perceived as a good team during the pandemic. She points out that when they noticed that families' fragile communication was shared among them, they decided to record a video to reframe themselves. Andrea remembers that the video started like this:

"Hello families, we are... – (...) we introduce ourselves - we are ECE teachers, our job is a professional job -, in a kind of ironic way but with respect, always with respect, from the "good energy", like you are telling something hard but implicitly..."

This *reframing video* was a release experience for Andrea and her colleagues since they were able to address the situation and clarify the meaning of their teaching practice. This work requests families' participation, connection, and feedback. In the video, the teachers

explained that they understood the families' difficulties during the pandemic, but at the same time, they pointed out that they were available to listen and support them. They also encouraged families to respond by offering critiques on the materials sent: "If the pedagogical plans sent do not seem pertinent (to the families), they should report to us, give us feedback, tell us: - teacher, you know what?, the truth is that I don't like it, I feel that my child requires other things, more play, more fun -, (and) we change (the material)".

Andrea felt that through the video they were able to express that the pedagogical process developed in the pandemic required feedback. In fact, after the video, they got more responses from the families, not 100% of the parents, but going from 5% to 40% of responses, which was perceived as a great improvement.

With this video a new stage began with the families, developing a better relationship with families, also fostering an adjustment of pedagogical practices. Andrea was proud of her colleagues' response to this tension with families in this context of uncertainty. She pointed out that they were flexible, involved in the context of each family, adapting their pedagogical proposal, adjusting the intensity of the activities, sending only one activity per day, attaching videos and pictures, and increasing contact with the families through WhatsApp.

The collaborative efforts among colleagues endured, encompassing both the technical-pedagogical aspects and the emotional dimensions within this stressful context. Andrea perceived a mutual bond of support and complicity in being actively engaged in their tasks. She felt that the three educators *validated themselves professionally*, enabling them to break free from the inertia and uncertainty as a *cohesive group*. However, Andrea harboured resentment over the absence of assistant teachers at that time, as she believed they could have contributed to distance education.

Fourth Stage: Balance and Dialogue

The final phase in this narrative, implied a process of balance and dialogue because of the activities' regularization, with face-to-face education during the first semester of 2021. This phase was marked by agreements on the modalities for in-person education and adjustments to sanitary conditions, necessitating flexibility in pedagogical activities while adhering to a defined institutional framework for both education and health.

Andrea believed that the pandemic turned out to be an opportunity for teachers to connect. She pointed out that in a normal year, each one was an island since "it is so much work every day that luckily, they meet in the building's hallways".

Contingently, the possibility of returning to in-person education arises, either in small or large groups of children, depending on the interest and willingness of the families. To collect information on this matter, a survey was conducted. Attendance started slowly and improved gradually, adhering to strict health security protocols. Andrea reported that, with more knowledge of the virus, there was a higher level of control over the situation, addressing the preventative norms more clearly.

During 2021, the assistant teachers had to return to their work, which generated a kind of initial shock with the teachers, who, in Andrea's opinion, felt alone assuming responsibility during the first year of the pandemic. She pointed out that there was a catharsis in the educational centre, releasing the emotions experienced, to start a new process, which allowed the pedagogical work. Also, children's families became more involved. Some children continued with online modality, so they continued preparing videos for families.

In addition, she thinks that the pandemic allowed her to develop different pedagogical skills. She noted that the learning of technological tools was *self-learning*, a *self-managed* process, without institutional support. She felt happy with her achievements, being able to create a virtual classroom, edit videos and create PowerPoint presentations, a new aspect of her practice. Andrea felt extremely fulfilled because in this process it was not only personal learning, but also *collective learning with her colleagues*.

She also reflected on the importance of self-care and wellbeing during this process. This is observed on different levels, such as implementing spaces for relaxation, requesting help and collaboration, or being able to not get involved with external problems. In this sense, setting boundaries regarding connectivity was important. Andrea mentioned that it is not mandatory to be connected to WhatsApp all the time, because it is exhausting. She highlighted that it is important to be able to correctly set times for connectivity to look after social relationships and mental health in this context.

Throughout this transformative process, characterized by the essential role of creativity and innovation, Andrea emphasized the significance of reconnecting with one's *inner child* to be an effective ECE teacher. This entails embracing a childlike perspective to better

understand, empathize with, and establish an affective bond with the children, approaching them as equals and fostering trust. For Andrea, it was important that when she recorded videos, she genuinely enjoyed herself and conveyed that enthusiasm in the content.

Additionally, she highlighted the importance of maintaining a warm attitude, smiling, and using expressive eye contact and gestures to create a strong emotional connection with the children. On several occasions, she even invited her daughter to participate in some activities with her in the videos.

Discussion

Andrea's narrative allows us to understand a series of elements that describe her experience in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Four stages are defined in her narration: (1) initial confusion, (2) proposal, (3) disappointment, and (4) balance and dialogue.

In the first stage, the pandemic situation disrupted Andrea's daily life as an ECE teacher, evoking feelings of anguish and discomfort emerged, causing surprise and inaction. This, according to Patiño (2020) and Quinones et al. (2021) is linked to the *experience of uncertainty* as a central aspect of the pandemic. For Patiño (2020), this uncertainty creates a representation of the future that generates the feeling that the pandemic will be a permanent situation. Andrea described this initial phase as a state of *inaction and uncertainty*, which she partially addressed by adopting an active and ethical stance of advocacy or activism for children (Kamenarac & Gould, 2021), transitioning to a stage of developing a pedagogical proposal.

Despite the lack of institutional support in terms of materials, equipment, and connectivity, Andrea decided to face this situation of uncertainty by planning online pedagogical resources for learning. This situation could be interpreted as an ethical commitment to her professional role, but it could also be representative of a sacrificial teacher identity, a phenomenon described in Chile by Poblete (2018). The researcher states that EC "educators are expected to deal with a lack of resources, infrastructure and organisational support while maintaining a stoic attitude of servitude and humility and being strong, loving, and grateful, thereby making it difficult to improve working conditions" (p.14). These systemic deficiencies were

exacerbated during the pandemic (Eadie et al., 2021) and led to heightened tensions between teachers' professionalization and the precarity of their workplace.

During the *proposal phase*, Andrea had to face the improvisation from the educational system (Molina & Pulido, 2021). In response, Andrea had to rely on the resources at her disposal. This meant drawing on her theatrical skills and playful attitude (Singer, 2015) and their media and technological skills (Iriarte et al., 2020; Fernandes et al., 2023). Andrea's proficiency in these skills allowed her to create attractive educational materials and strengthen her bond with the children she attended to.

This proposal phase also implied that ECE teachers have to re-elaborate relevant aspects of remote emergency education: the body, expressions of affection, play, and mediation as central elements of the praxis of ECE. In this context, to achieve effective communication with children, it was necessary to extend teaching to the family (Jalongo, 2021; Moreno & Lluch, 2020; Timmons et al. 2021). This was problematic due to material issues, like technological device availability or families' double role as workers and parents (Steed & Leech, 2021; Su et al., 2022), but also, there was a symbolic issue about the relationship between education and caregiving at this level.

As the pedagogical function of EC education was not able to be carried out face-to-face, the care function was displaced to the children's families. This implies, following Pardo and Opazo (2019), that the teacher loses the classroom as a setting for the preservation of play-based pedagogy, which is required to explain and validate these principles to families. This explains Andrea's discomfort, observing few validations of her pedagogical work in remote modality and the difficulty of continuing that practice in the children's home. In that context, emerges disappointment due to the low response of the children's families.

This disappointment was not only directed at her work but also at the value that families place on the pedagogical role of an EC educator, creating discomfort. In this way, the educator engages in a dispute for recognition in which she seeks to demonstrate the relevance of the educational level for the comprehensive development of children. Aligned with Dubar's thinking (2002), Andrea exhibits a loss of meaning in her work, leading to a crisis in the identification process, caused by the disconnection between her perceived professional - pedagogical- role (self-identity) and the role expected by the children's families - as caregivers - ("identity for others"). Therefore, the reported experiences illustrate what Hanna

et al. (2019) and Pillen et al. (2013) describe as identity tension. This tension emerges from the conflict between the emergency and the conventional professional identity of an educator, internalized by Andrea.

This situation led her to an agentic phase, involving collaborative efforts among teachers to reaffirm their professional role, as evidenced by the *reframing video*. This process involves an identity negotiation, in which the educators make their professional voice known to the group of the children's families they are working with. This aligns with the findings of Quinones et al. (2021) regarding the importance of constructing a supportive response rooted in solidarity when confronted with a perceived lack of recognition. Furthermore, the video is linked to the necessity of reframing the pedagogical approach as an urgent matter, calling for flexibility and a fresh understanding of the pandemic's impact on teachers, children, and their families (Patiño, 2020).

After this phase, there was a process of *balance and dialogue* because of the activities' regularization, with face-to-face education during the first semester of 2021. This process is characterized by agreements with the children's families regarding the modalities for face-to-face education and changes in sanitary conditions, which require flexibility in pedagogical activities, but with a defined institutional framework.

Andrea thinks that the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged her professional identity, marking a *turning point* (Denzin, 1989) or a *biographical trace* (Figuerola-Céspedes & Guerra, 2023). In other words, the pandemic has left an indelible mark on her trajectory, modifying her approach to work and her conceptualization of her profession. For her, it has been necessary to innovate and expand the pedagogical space, implying the challenge of transferring methodologies, and giving tools to the family to empower them as emergency educators. In this sense, the experience related by Andrea of turning to her *inner child* to develop her pedagogical work implies, as Blake (2019) points out, applying and sharing her personal experience from the perspective of her *playful guide* and feeling comfortable with her child self. This is linked with the optimism (Fu, 2005) demonstrated by Andrea, showing a mediating effect on the relationship between emotional labour and work engagement.

Regarding the emotional dimension, Andrea and her colleagues had to regulate their emotions and postpone, on many occasions, their wellbeing to provide support to children and their families. These postponements are related to emotional labour (Fu, 2015), which

implies articulating the development of wellbeing conditions for children and dealing with the pressures of working in EC education, particularly considering gender characteristics (Pinzón, 2016). This situation gives rise to a dichotomy for the educator-mother, as she is faced with the challenge of balancing the education of her own children with that of "other people's children". This ethical-professional dilemma arises within the context of a care crisis (Rojas et al., 2021), where the normal functioning of educational and care institutions has been disrupted, resulting in a shift from educational centres to home-based learning (Su et al., 2022). This transition has caused additional stress and discomfort for female educators (Rojas et al., 2021; Salas et al., 2020). Furthermore, these challenges are exacerbated by the lack of institutional support to address work-from-home arrangements during a pandemic (Gelber et al., 2021), as well as the unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities based on gender (Salas et al., 2020).

The stories shared by Andrea show the need to broaden the exercise of pedagogical practice by validating the important work of articulation and emotional receptivity, but also identifying the limits of the professional role and the importance of teacher wellbeing and mental health (Quinones et al., 2021; Wiltshire, 2023), especially considering the stressful situations experienced during the pandemic (Eadie et al., 2021; Su et al., 2022; Wiltshire, 2023). For Eadie et al. (2021), being able to support and maintain the wellbeing and mental health of early childhood educators is a key aspect of their professional development. Thus, improving the wellbeing of EC educators will "help to ensure a sustainable and high-quality workforce, with benefits for children, families, and communities" (Eadie et al., 2021, p. 904).

Conclusion

Andrea's narrative illustrates her journey through four distinct stages during the COVID-19 pandemic, each revealing unique challenges and responses. At a micro-level, each of these stages exposes the experience of identity tension, where the pandemic crisis compels Andrea to reevaluate and defend her professional role as an educator and adapt her teaching methods to a new context.

In the initial stage, Andrea grapples with uncertainty, anxiety, and limited institutional

support but demonstrates a strong commitment to children's well-being and learning. During the second stage, Andrea's optimism and innovative use of communication technologies enable her to create virtual teaching methods that engage students. The third stage reveals Andrea's frustration, disappointment, and gender-related challenges, stemming from low family engagement and questions about the value of early childhood education.

In the final stage, Andrea emphasizes the importance of a playful attitude and children's rights while acknowledging the need for a balance between her pedagogical work, care and personal well-being.

Unrecognized efforts by Andrea impact her work and professional identity. In this way, Andrea's experience shows us that, by acting with agency and collaborating with other colleagues, it is possible to address -at least partially- the signs of devaluation presented by the families of the children they educate. It underlines the need for cultural, political, and institutional changes to address early childhood educators' working conditions and recognition issues in Chile (Figuerola-Céspedes et al., 2022ab; Pardo & Opazo, 2019; Poblete, 2018; Robinson et al., 2018).

Finally, it is important to identify the contribution of the narrative production methodology (Balasch & Montenegro, 2003; Haraway, 2004) as a method that allows us to investigate teachers' lives, promoting reflection on the practice, and giving agency to the participants regarding their professional experiences. This methodology, rooted in a situated perspective and co-construction, offers a deep and reflective form of inquiry into the intricacies of teachers' lives. Nevertheless, future research endeavours should consider the triangulation of methodologies, including collaborative and self-ethnographies, classroom observation, and exploring the theme of professional identity tension. The inclusion of longitudinal studies and investigations into educator well-being, policy adjustments, and institutional support is also highly recommended to gain a comprehensive understanding of educators' encounters during times of crisis. By addressing these limitations and research gaps, we can enrich our insights into the challenges educators face and their responses to future crises, thus informing public policy.

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