

THE UNPRECEDENTED STRESSORS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS DURING
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC RESTORATION: A CASE STUDY

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to describe the unprecedented stressors of early childhood educators (ECE) during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic restoration at two early childhood education centers (ECEC) in a midwestern state. The central research question was: How did the COVID-19 pandemic's unprecedented stressors impact ECE in the post-pandemic era? Data collection included structured interviews with open-ended questions, focus groups, and documents. The three data sources were triangulated for themes, perspectives, and interpretations, and coding was used to help gain a deep understanding of the stressors experienced by early childhood educators. The conceptual framework guiding this study is Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which views a child's development as connected to their immediate environment or microsystem. Bronfenbrenner's theory aligns with this study by informing ECE how stressors can impact the learning microsystem. The microsystem is the immediate environmental setting containing the developing child, including family and school. Purposeful sampling was used to interview ECE and educational leaders. Interviewing ECE who were directly involved in navigating the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a deeper understanding of the stressors they encountered and strategies for the future. The findings were grouped into three themes: sustainability, wellness, and responsible restart.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, microsystem, early childhood, unprecedented stressors

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God, my Creator, my keeper from whom all good things flow and Who called me to this Kingdom assignment, to Jesus Christ, my redeemer and giver of salvation, and the Holy Spirit, my comforter and dwelling friend.

I dedicate this dissertation in memory of my mother, Lubertha Lewis, my baby sister, Alice Lewis Love, and my brother, George Cobbins, who were always in my corner and believed in me to the end of their journey on earth.

I dedicate the dissertation to my wonderful daughter, Phaedra Ka'Riyma Lewis. I pray this legacy will inspire her to continue to pursue her passions in life and to live a life that is always pleasing unto God, our Father.

I also dedicated this dissertation to the many friends and mentors God assigned to me at different life stages and career paths, who inspired me to pursue my dreams consistently and reminded me to remember to “pay it forward.”

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List of Abbreviations

Center for Disease Control (CDC)

Early Childhood Education Centers (ECEC)

Early Childhood Educators (ECE)

Early Childhood Learning (ECL)

Early Learners (EL)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Institute for Early Education Research

National Traumatic Child Stress Network (NTCSN)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this case study is to describe the unprecedented stressors of ECE during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic restoration at two early education centers in a midwestern state. In March 2020, the World Health Organization announced COVID-19 as a global pandemic (Barnett, 2021). The U.S. government mandated a shutdown of every academic institution and educational learning facility in the country, and billions of children worldwide experienced disruptions in their educational programs. Early childhood education is an essential component of the academic and developmental infrastructure for early learners (EL) and lifelong learning (Lafave et al., 2021; Swigonski et al., 2021). The shutdown became demanding for ECE, administrators, staff, and parents. The lack of resources, including technology, the disparity in technology or internet access, and a lack of proactive planning created tremendous stressors for ECE, administrative staff, and parents. The responsibility of addressing the problem wore heavier on the ECEs, and in addition, tremendous trauma, illness, and death forever changed many families' structures and ecosystems (Lafave et al., 2021; Swigonski et al., 2021). Chapter One presents a foundation for the research for this study, including the historical, social, and theoretical contextual background information. The problem and purpose statements are provided to give context and focus of the study, as well as the significance of the study and critical terms and definitions applied throughout the manuscript.

Background

Before COVID-19 pandemic, ECEC provided effective classroom interaction. ECEC were experiencing an increase in the enrollment of EL between the ages of three to five (Murry, 2020). Early childhood education is the infrastructure for lifelong learning. The reopening of

ECEC has been different for many states. Forty-five states (88%) operated some government-run early learning programs, and 19 states' governments offered guidelines for reopening (Weiland & Morris, 2021). More technology and proper funding have been the most significant hindrance to reopening (Murry, 2021).

Furthermore, approximately 97% of the United States' ECE are female, are significantly underpaid, and are often employed without health care insurance (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Consequently, ECE struggle financially as they often live below the poverty level.

Furthermore, their living circumstances were exacerbated by the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 370,000 ECE resigned between February and April 2020, and by the end of 2020, the early childhood education workforce experienced a 17% decline (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Historical Context

There has not been a world health crisis or disaster that has been as vast and disruptive to society as the COVID-19 pandemic (Pattnaik & Jalongo, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has been more impactful than the Great Depression, the Tsunamis in Indonesia or Japan, Polio, Ebola, or Yellow Fever. In March 2020, governments across the globe, without hesitation, initiated emergency pandemic measures and mandates to enforce physical distancing to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (Murry, 2020). Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic mandates led to the abrupt closing of schools and ECEC across North America and changed the delivery of educational services for over two years (Timmons et al., 2021; Steed & Leech, 2021). The shutdown created significant disruption worldwide, and governments in many countries mandated wearing masks and physical distancing mandates during daily routines, work, school, and social engagement (Murry, 2021).

Consequently, 40,000,000 young children across the globe still needed to experience an opportunity to complete the kindergarten developmental process before moving on to first grade. Unfortunately, these missed opportunities cannot be replaced (Khalifaour, 2021). The early years of a child's life are a window of opportunity for human development physically, biologically, socially, and emotionally; therefore, early childhood education is vital in providing a safe, stable, and nurturing environment (Maguire-Jack et al., 2022). Current and future research on EL and COVID-19 will continue to emerge, and the impact will continue to evolve as COVID-19 appears to linger in society (Weiland & Morris, 2021).

Social Context

Social interactions are critical elements of early learners' lives. Early childhood education is the foundation for children's growth and development (Murray, 2020). When EL do not get the foundational human growth and development they need, it could impact their future academic and pro-social performance in school, family, and community (Khalifaour, 2021). School is essential as the teacher-student relationship, peer interactions, and teacher-family trust are essential to healthy boundaries (Khalifaour, 2021; Visnjic-Jevtic et al., 2021). Many parents, grandparents, and other family members became ill during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many continue to have physical and mental challenges. Many families experienced the death of loved ones, which changed the family ecosystem forever (Weiland & Morris, 2022). Young children need help processing the deaths of loved ones and how the death impacted the child's home environment (Visnjic-Jevtic et al., 2021). There are two post-pandemic realities presented here. First, early childhood trauma can impact adolescents' decision-making and self-regulation, which may lead to thinking errors and prosocial behaviors in school, home, and the community (Adegboye et al., 2021; SAMHSA, 2014). Secondly, educators experienced several stressors

initiated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic mandates to close all schools across the country (Bigras et al., 2021). The outcome is that educators reported poor psychological and physical well-being due to the stressors. The impact of COVID-19 is emerging daily as new research unfolds with evolving outcomes (Lafave et al., 2021).

Theoretical Context

The study includes seminal research conducted by an American psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1974), on the ecological systems theory. The study supports and contributes to the underpinnings of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner posits that the early learners' microsystem is the most influential and immediate environmental setting critical to the developing child, including the child's parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and school. Bronfenbrenner (1974) posits that human development interactions are effective only if the interaction is consistent over a protracted period, as in a family and school. As in the mesosystem, good relationships, student to teacher and student to peers, are essential to teaching and learning. Bronfenbrenner's theory aligns with this study by informing ECE how their stressors can impact learning in the microsystem. The microsystem is the most influential and immediate environmental setting critical to the developing child, including the child's parents, siblings, peers, and school or teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

COVID-19 school closures and associated restrictions created quick shifts and stressors to the learning environment for EL and changed how educators taught, and how EL learned. The two environments in the child's microsystem that were impacted the most by EL are the family environment and the school environment, which includes the child and teacher (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). During the COVID-19 school shutdown, the family and school experienced similar stressors and disruptions. Unfortunately, these two environments often conflicted in their efforts

to provide remote early childhood education (Joseph & Trinick, 2021; Kwon et al., 2022). The relationships in a microsystem are dual-directional; therefore, the child can be influenced by others in the environment, and the child can also influence others in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

Some researchers have addressed the COVID-19 pandemic impact on early childhood education using theories other than Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory (Benner & Misty, 2020; Lang et al., 2020; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). Rowe's (1987) design thinking theory focuses on give-and-take problem-solving in natural world situations (McNair, 2022). The design thinking theory focuses on employees' ability to reimagine pedagogy using virtual instructional strategies for early childhood education, pre-service, and kindergarten curriculum in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic (McNair, 2022). The design thinking theory does not address education and childhood development and the importance of relationships in the development process for young children (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

The life course theory posits that historical events (i.e., the Great Depression, 9/11, the Great Recession of 2008, and health pandemics) are forces that shape the social trajectories of families, education, work, and inadvertently, these events influence behavior and particular lines of development (Benner & Misty, 2020). The life course theory does not address the importance of relationships in child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). In addition, the pro-social classroom theoretical model posits that childhood educators' social and emotional competence correlates significantly with classroom outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Thus, effectively managing COVID-19 pandemic stressors caused effective classroom success and the teacher and students' relationships, leading to young children's social and emotional development and social and academic success (Lang et al., 2020). However, the pro-social

classroom theoretical model does not address the significance of family and the education environments essential to early childhood development (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

Problem Statement

The problem is that the unprecedented stressors of COVID-19 negatively impact ECE in the post-pandemic era (Kwon et al., 2022). Many other post-pandemic realities may be expressed in literature or emerging studies; however, only two are present here (Lafave et al., 2021). First, early childhood trauma has impacted adolescents' decision-making (Adegboye, 2021; Kwon et al., 2022; Lafave et al., 2021). There are correlations between childhood trauma, adolescents' decision-making, and their involvement in the juvenile justice system (Weiland & Morris, 2022). The correlation does not infer or posture that EL who experienced trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic will make poor decisions leading them to criminal activity (Adegboye, 2021; Williams, 2020). However, there are strong correlations between the three life events (Adegboye, 2021; Lafave et al., 2021). These present realities explain gaps in current research as the outcome of early learners' trauma from the COVID-19 pandemic continues to emerge (Faulstich et al., 2022; Lipin & Crepeau, 2022; Williams, 2020). Educators need appropriate training, such as trauma informed care, and new pedagogies that support early childhood trauma (Adegboye, 2021; Weiland & Morris, 2022).

Furthermore, many educators experience several stressors initiated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic mandates to close all schools across the country (Bigras et al., 2021; Lipin & Crepeau, 2022). The outcome is that educators reported poor psychological and physical well-being due to the stressors (Lipin & Crepeau, 2022). Some educators reported low commitment from themselves and co-workers due to the uncertainty of COVID-19's impact on employment stability and the fear of health challenges (Bigras et al., 2021). Educators reported stressful and

challenging work environments due to COVID-19 because there is documentation that the pre-COVID commitment among ELE reported high levels of commitment to their work (Barnett et al., 2021; Benner & Mistry, 2020; Lipin & Crepeau, 2022).

Another post-pandemic reality is the challenge of educators demanding higher salaries, better or more benefits, and resources (Barnett et al., 2021; 2020; Lipin & Crepeau, 2022).

Unfortunately, ECEC and many small school districts struggle to retain qualified employees; therefore, educators have additional stressors regarding budgets (Benner & Mistry, 2020).

Educators reported that they did not feel supported by their leadership or parents as they endeavored to meet the needs of the children under their care (Barnett et al., 2021; Benner & Mistry, 2020; Bigras et al., 2021). Many educators reported other challenges in supporting EL to recover academically and developmentally (Barnett et al., 2021; Benner & Mistry, 2020; Bigras et al., 2021). The interruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic have short-term and long-term effects in academic, social, and emotional areas.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study is to describe the unprecedented stressors of ECE during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic restoration of ECEC at the two locations in a midwestern state. The term ‘unprecedented stressors’ is generally defined as any abrupt, unusual, and difficult alternatives ECE were forced to make or endure because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These abrupt, unusual, and difficult alternatives impacted the delivery of early childhood pedagogy and services to children and families (Pattnaik & Jalonga, 2021). This case study documents the lived experiences of ECE employed at ECEC in a midwestern state between March 2020 and April 2022. When schools across North America closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most ECEC needed more expertise in technology due to low budgets and limited

resources (Dayal & Tiko, 2020; Eadie et al., 2021). The theory guiding this study is Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1974), which views a child's development as connected to their immediate environment or microsystem. Bronfenbrenner's theory aligns with this study by informing ECE how stressors can impact the learning microsystem. The microsystem is the immediate environmental setting containing the developing child, including family and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it describes the early childhood educators' lived experiences in delivering early childhood education under a student-centered pedagogy during the global disruption of the education industry. Adhering to the national and global pandemic guidelines and restrictions was essential to hindering the spread of the pandemic virus while at the same time exacerbating the early childhood pedagogy. This research supports the significance of consistent relationships to the growth and development of children. Thus, this study will add to the emerging body of knowledge on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early childhood education.

Theoretical Significance

Bronfenbrenner posits that the early learner's microsystem is the most influential and immediate environmental setting critical to the developing child, including the child's parents, siblings, peers, and school or teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). In this study, the educator is placed at the core microsystem. The study describes how the unprecedented stressors impacted educators and how the unprecedented stressors adversely impacted their ability to help EL learn during the pandemic and post-COVID-19 restoration (Dayal & Tiko, 2020; Eadie et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2021; Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Lafave et al., 2021). Early

childhood development is significantly impacted by the child's relationships in the microsystem (Guy-Evans, 2020; Lafave et al., 2021). This study explores and describes how the unprecedented stressors of ECE affected the educator-child relationship during the global shutdown (Giner-Gomis et al., 2023; Hill & Reimer, 2022; Tebben et al., 2021; Weiland & Morris, 2022).

Furthermore, the study supports and contributes to the underpinnings of Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory. In this study, the educators' experiences describe how COVID-19 disrupted an early learners' microsystem and the adverse effects or trauma on the early learners' cognition and social and physical development (Atilas et al., 2021; Guy-Evans, 2020; Lafave et al., 2021). The body of knowledge provided by this study on childhood trauma and how essential a stable microsystem lends to reducing the impact of social or global crises on EL may add knowledge to the education industry (Lafave et al., 2021; Tal, 2021).

Empirical Significance

In March 2020, a global pandemic caused a worldwide shutdown of the education industry (Huck & Zhang, 2021). Unlike hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, or other global events, COVID-19 has unprecedented significance (Pattnaik & Jalonga, 2021). The impact of COVID-19 globally continues to evolve, and studies like this qualitative case study provide a deeper understanding of how COVID-19 created stressors and trauma for ECE and EL (Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Dayal & Tiko, 2020; Eadie et al., 2021; Khalfaoui et al., 2021). Research that continues to provide rich, deep data is essential to understanding the impact of an event that is so vast as COVID-19 on individuals and systems that reach across every cultural, socioeconomic, religion, race, ethnicity, and gender line of distinction (Creswell & Poth, 2018;

Timmons et al., 2021; Yin, 2018). The rich data of lived experiences are essential in developing policy, pedagogy, and maintaining professional standards in early childhood teachers' preparation (Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Harlow, 2022; Harper & Neubauer, 2021).

Practical Significance

The impact of COVID-19 prompted transformation worldwide, especially at all levels of the education system (Wistoft et al., 2022; Yildiz et al., 2022; Zimmerman, 2021). There are many lessons learned from actions taken to address the immediate learning needs of students, leveraging technology to re-imagine pedagogy, and innovative education pre-service curriculum for new teachers and ongoing professional development (Markowitz & Bassok, 2022; Mphahlele & Jikpamu, 2021; Nurhasanah et al., 2022; Tal, 2021; Tang et al., 2021; Webb et al., 2021; Wistoft et al., 2022). This study also gives a voice to early childhood trauma in education and adverse childhood experiences' impact on early childhood development (Adegboye et al., 2021; Chudzik et al., 2022; Williams, 2020). In addition, this study presents how unprecedented stressors impacted ECE and the importance of the education industry investing in the well-being of ECE (Crawford et al., 2021; Eadie et al., 2021; Koch, 2022; Logan et al., 2021; Tebben et al., 2021).

Research Questions

Interviewing ECE who were directly involved in navigating the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a deeper understanding of the stressors they encountered and strategies for the future (Gritzka et al., 2022). The central question was designed to align with the purpose of the case study and drive the study to pursue a deeper understanding. According to Yin (2018), the "how" and "why" questions are appropriate for case study research because they are more explanatory of perspectives and information over some time, and the key is to ensure the

questions have substance and form. The following research questions were designed to align with the purpose of this study and the problem identified for future research (see Appendix E).

Central Research Question

How did the COVID-19 pandemic's unprecedented stressors impact early childhood educators during the pandemic and post-pandemic era?

Sub-Question One

How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact early childhood pedagogy during the pivot from school to home-based education?

Sub-Question Two

How did early childhood educators mitigate unprecedented stressors to provide education services to early learners and families during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic era?

Sub-Question Three

How did prior training or experiences prepare early childhood educators to mitigate unprecedented stressors during the pivot from center-based education to remote-based education?

Sub-Question Four

How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact strategic planning for the future?

Definitions

- **COVID:** An acute respiratory disease or syndrome coronavirus2 (SARS-CoV2); an ongoing pandemic (CDC, 2022)
- **early childhood:** The human development stage between birth to five years old is significant in cognition, social and physical growth, and development (Lavfave, 2021).

- **early childhood trauma:** Adverse childhood experiences such as violence, abuse, and neglect that often occur between 0-6 years of age, and these experiences undermine young children's sense of safety, stability, and bonding. They cannot communicate and share their reactions or experiences to threatening and dangerous events. When trauma impacts a parent or caregiver, the relationship between the child and the parent or caregiver becomes strongly impacted. A growing body of research has documented these symptoms (Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Scott et al., 2021; Williams, 2020)
- **mesosystem:** The second level of the five environments influencing a child's development. The mesosystem encompasses the interaction of different microsystems, such as relationships with peers and teacher and student relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Guy-Evans, 2020).
- **microsystem:** The first level of the five environments identified in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The microsystem influences a child's development. The microsystem is the smallest and most immediate environment where a child lives. The microsystem comprises the home, school or daycare, peer group, and community environment. Personal relationships evolve in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Guy-Evans, 2020).
- **National Child Traumatic Stress Network:** is an organization that provides education and training to improve the care and services for traumatized children, their families, and those who work with them in their communities (<https://www.nctsn>, 2023).
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA):** is an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The office was

established in 1992 to make substance use and mental disorder information, services, and research more accessible (American Institute for Research, 2020).

- **trauma informed care:** A strength-based approach to responding to the impact of trauma on the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of individuals (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.; Williams, 2020).

Summary

The purpose of this case study is to describe the unprecedented stressors of ECE during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic restoration at ECEC in a mid-western state. The unprecedented stressors of COVID-19 negatively impacted ECE in the post-pandemic era, and post-pandemic realities are expressed in literature or emerging studies (Atiles et al., 2021; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021). Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic realities must be acknowledged and addressed as the country continues to move into the post-pandemic era (Harper & Neubauer, 2021). Furthermore, many educators experienced several stressors initiated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic mandates to close all schools across the country (Bigras et al., 2021). The outcome is that educators reported poor psychological and physical well-being due to the stressors, and some transitioned to other careers (Bigras et al., 2021; Wistoft et al., 2022). The body of knowledge provided by this study on childhood trauma and the importance of a stable microsystem lends to reducing the impact of global crises on EL and ECE (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Tal, 2021) may have a positive influence on the education industry (Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021). Finally, this case study describes how the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown created unprecedented stressors for ECE and the negative impact on ECE and post-pandemic restoration (Khalifaoui et al., 2021).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two provides the theoretical dimensions of the research and describes how ECE encountered unprecedented stressors in mitigating the tremendous impact of COVID-19 on ECL and post-pandemic restoration (Atilas et al., 2021; Steed & Leech, 2021). In addition, the chapter provides an analysis of current research and investigates the outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic mandates that directed the abrupt closing of schools and ECEC across North America and changed the delivery of educational services for over three years (Davies et al., 2021; Steed & Leech, 2021; Timmons et al., 2021). This chapter introduces the theoretical framework that guides the research and the literature review on COVID-19's impact on early childhood learning (ECL) as shared through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory. Next, through a comprehensive review of related literature, this chapter describes how the COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented stressors in almost every area of life for over three years, disclosed opportunities for changes, and directed new paths for a new normal in many systems worldwide. The final section of the literature review is the summary.

Theoretical Framework

The seminal theory guiding this study is Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory, which posits that human development does not reach its total capacity in a vacuum with their parents only. Bronfenbrenner described child development as a multifaceted system of relationships shaped by various levels of the surrounding environment, including the immediate surroundings of family and school to a much broader culture, values, beliefs, rules, and traditions. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory posits that a child's development has a significant connection to its immediate microsystem. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems

theory sheds light on early childhood development and how the microsystem subsequently impacts the child's development (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Bronfenbrenner (1974) was critical of other child development theories. He argued that the study of child development could not be created by observing a child in a laboratory in an unfamiliar environment with unfamiliar people. Bronfenbrenner called these studies unidirectional because a laboratory does not have the characteristics of an environment where a child lives and develops. Bronfenbrenner recognized multiple aspects of a developing child's life. He proposed the ecological system theory based on the dynamic interaction of multiple environments that influence child development. Bronfenbrenner's perspectives on childhood development were appealing and became the framework for psychologists, sociologists, and teachers to study childhood development. Several researchers used Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory to support their research on child development and COVID-19 (Dalli & Urban, 2012; Guy-Evans, 2020; Hayes et al., 2017; Tal, 2021).

Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory aligns with this study because it explains the importance of balance and harmony between a child's family and school environments. The child's microsystem and mesosystem are critical to the child's development (Guy-Evans, 2020). Bronfenbrenner's study places great value on family and environment as critical factors for human development. Thus, according to Bronfenbrenner (1974) a child's development is also ecological.

Bronfenbrenner (1974) explained that humans have five environments that shape their development: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. The five systems are interconnected; therefore, each system significantly influences the other (Dias et al., 2020; Guy-Evans, 2020). The microsystem is the first level and

comprises the immediate environment, such as parents, siblings, teachers, and school peers (Davies et al., 2021; Hayes & O'Toole, 2017). The mesosystem includes the child's interactions in the microsystem, such as with parents, teachers, and peers (Hayes & O'Toole, 2017). The two environments in the child's microsystem impacted the most are the family and the school, which include the children's and teachers' microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). The microsystem is the most influential and immediate environmental setting critical to the developing child, including the child's parents, siblings, peers, and school or teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). During the COVID-19 school shutdown, the family and school environments experienced similar stressors and disruption and, unfortunately, were often in conflict (Dias et al., 2020; Steed & Leech, 2021).

Related Literature

This literature review synthesizes current research related to the unprecedented stressors experienced by ELE due to the COVID-19 pandemic school shutdown. Research occurred early in the pandemic, but the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to emerge. Therefore, new research continues to provide strategies for early learning in the post-pandemic era (Gritzka et al., 2022; Logan et al., 2021). There are ten overarching themes recognized by the literature presented in this chapter. The following themes are described in the review of literature: early childhood education, unprecedented stressors, global impact, cultural shift, food insecurity, education pivot from school to home, pre-service teacher's and early childhood education pedagogy, early childhood educators' stressors and well-being, distance learning, communication barriers, insufficient resources, early childhood trauma impact on development, trauma impact on education, the implication of children during COVID-19, post-pandemic realities, and the new normal.

Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education is vital for developing young children, families, and communities (Kim et al., 2022; Koch, 2022). ECEC provide a safe and supportive learning environment to shape children's cognitive development, language skills, social competency, and emotional growth while supporting families by providing opportunities for parents and caregivers to work and meet the needs of the family (Atilas et al., 2021; Egan & Pop, 2021). The learning environment fosters early learners' imagination, creativity, teamwork with peers, communication, and critical thinking skills (Atilas et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020). Approximately two-thirds of all three- to five-year-old children in the United States participated in some childcare and education program (Atilas et al., 2021; Bigras, 2021). Bronfenbrenner (1979) posited that early childhood programs augment the family ecosystem by providing caring relationships, high academic exposure, and expectations and opportunities for participation and contribution to the microsystem and macrosystem (Egan & Pop, 2021).

The status of early childhood education in the United States was magnified by the demands of the COVID-19 nationwide school shutdown (Black et al., 2020; McKenna et al., 2021). Data predicts that 43% of all children under five are at risk of not reaching their reasonable developmental level (Lafave et al., 2021). Many ECE were leaving their profession; however, the adverse circumstances were created by the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the school's shutdown, the shelter-in-place orders, and other employment challenges (Black et al., 2020; McKenna et al., 2021). At the same time, many early childhood educators, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, endured and struggled to meet the demands of early childhood education and continued their careers amid the pandemic and unsure future (Lafave et al., 2021; Murray, 2020). Childcare educators are indispensable to children's cognitive, social, emotional,

and expressive development. Approximately 56% of children under the age of five attend an organized care facility (Carson et al., 2017; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). During their early development stage, children require ongoing nurturing care with good health, food, nutrition, safety, security, and responsive individuals to provide care and exposure to early learning (Khales, 2022; Murray, 2020). There is significance in recognizing the vital role of ECE in fostering children's well-being and understanding that educators' well-being is vital to providing a nurturing environment for young children to thrive (Murray, 2020; Markowitz & Bassok, 2022).

The impact of the pandemic and the adverse challenges faced by ECE were consistent in private childcare centers and public schools' early childhood programs (Kim et al., 2022). The compound challenges and adjustments educators experienced in their personal lives, and the educational adjustment to meet stringent health and safety protocols enforced by the CDC Operational Guidance for K-12 Schools and Early Care and Education programs were immense (Jalonga, 2021; Murray, 2020). The effort to support in-person learning was often hindered by programs and educators being either unprepared or underprepared to sufficiently comply with the CDC's demands and remain healthy (Jalonga, 2021; Murray, 2020).

In addition, training and professional development were two other critical issues amplified by COVID-19 as stress factors for ECE (Jalonga, 2021; Murray, 2020). The lack of or limited technology training made it difficult for ECEC to immediately transition from in-person learning to online learning and manage digital documents and Zoom classrooms (Jalonga, 2021; Murray, 2020). Many ECEC needed a technology plan to guide the administration in selecting the best equipment and software to meet their needs (Jalonga, 2021; Murray, 2020). Also, many technology companies provide online training and tutorials to avoid direct or in-person training

and technical assistance (Jalonga, 2021; Murray, 2020). The learning curve was challenging due to limited equipment and often shared equipment due to insufficient budgets and the inability to purchase additional equipment (Haseltine, 2021; Hill et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020).

Technology is not the only area of training identified as a deficit; crisis management, trauma-informed care, and blended pedagogy development training are also areas in which most ECE have not been adequately trained by qualified trainers (Haseltine, 2021; Hill et al., 2021). CDC issued the Operational Guidance for K-12 and Early Childcare and Education Centers protocols, and the ECE were required to develop a plan to comply with each protocol (Haseltine, 2021; Hill et al., 2021). The CDC Operational Guidance Protocol is a comprehensive document requiring a detailed Emergency Preparedness Plan of Action and Compliance (Haseltine, 2021; Hill et al., 2021). ECE are responsible for preventing and controlling the COVID-19 virus in the classroom between EL and ECE (Haseltine, 2021; Hill et al., 2021). ECE play a significant role in supporting children and families during a crisis; however, they cannot provide the necessary support without proper preparation (Haseltine, 2021; Hill et al., 2021).

The National Center for Health Statistics posits that 65% of children from Hispanic, Black/African American, American Indian, or Alaska Native homes had a primary caregiver die due to COVID-19-related complication; however, these children only comprise 39% of the U.S. population (Haseltine, 2021). COVID-19 exacerbated the existing disparities in problems with poverty, food insecurity, residing in remote areas, and families or communities marginalized by mainstream society (Haseltine, 2021; Martin et al., 2022). Low-income parents and teachers experienced a spike in food insecurity (Adams et al., 2020; Farrer et al., 2022, 2023; Haseltine, 2021; Martin et al., 2022). Unfortunately, food insecurity was a real issue for many families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unprecedented Stressors

The COVID-19 pandemic is not the first health crisis or a pandemic the world has ever experienced (Pattnaik & Jalonga, 2021). There have been several infectious disease crises, such as polio and the Ebola virus, and many natural disasters with significant fatalities (Pattnaik & Jalonga, 2021). However, the differences between the COVID-19 pandemic and previous world health crises are scope, duration, and impact (Jackson et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic impacted 200 countries, infected over 153 million people around the globe, and there have been over 3.5 million fatalities worldwide (Murray, 2020). Three years later, society is still confronted with the challenges of COVID-19, and no end is in sight. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted 1.6 billion children in the education system across the globe (Jalonga, 2021; Pattnaik & Jalonga, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic caused an immense simultaneous shock to all education systems in our lifetime (Pattnaik & Jalonga, 2021). Unfortunately, the pandemic has placed ECE on the verge of collapse globally (National Association of Education of Young Children, 2020).

The impact of COVID-19 is vast and impacts every aspect of society. The mandates of the great shutdown of businesses, government, and school systems across America shifted the entire culture (Adegboye et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2021; Guerra et al., 2022; Steed & Leech, 2021; Timmons et al., 2021). The ripple effects of the mandates became wide and deep, and impacts continue to emerge in this early post-pandemic era (Adegboye et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2021; Guerra et al., 2022; Timmons et al., 2021; Steed & Leech, 2021). Understanding the psychological and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying lockdown on primary school children is crucial to their development (Adegboye et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2021; Guerra et al., 2022). The school systems in America were ill-prepared to manage an

urgent response to the advent of COVID-19 without well-developed plans to include technology for remote and online pedagogical strategies and plans to ensure the well-being of educators and students (Huck & Zhang, 2021; Joseph & Trinick, 2021). The psychological and social impacts of COVID-19 created stressors for educators, families, and young children, especially high-risk children with special needs such as autism and socioeconomic factors (Adegboye et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Joseph & Trinick, 2021). There are multiple ways that individuals cope with stress and trauma; however, strategies are different for young children, adolescents, and adults. Adults' strategies include meditation, time away from the environment, exercise, hobbies, counseling to help manage emotions, disappointments, or mistakes, and positive, healing relationships. Adolescents do well with counseling to address self-regulation competence and identify triggers, high-risk factors, and coping strategies because they often experience community violence, such as bullying, fights, gangs, and teen shootings. However, traumatic experiences may affect children at high familial risk of developing mental health problems and children impacted by other health pandemics, medical procedures, or the loss of a parent or caregiver (Adegboye et al., 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Joseph & Trinick, 2021).

Global Impact

Countries across the globe faced similar stressors in early childhood education programs due to COVID-19 and school closures (Alharthi, 2023; Atilas et al., 2021; British Journal of Education Technology, 2021; Chen & Hamel, 2022; Hu et al., 2021). Countries other than the U.S. faced similar difficulties, such as Austria, Turkey, Canada, and Great Britain (Alharthi, 2023; Atilas et al., 2021; British Journal of Education (Technology, 2021; Chen & Hamel, 2022; Hu et al., 2021). ECE need to improve their technological competencies and need more resources at their disposal and access to user-friendly educational platforms designed for early learners.

ECE need better resources to serve the psychological well-being of parents and families (Alharthi, 2023; Atilas et al., 2021; British Journal of Education Technology, 2021; Chen & Hamel, 2022; Hu et al., 2021). Many obstacles interfered with distance learning. The teachers' degree of experience determines the resources they perceive to be sufficient in delivering early education pedagogy (Alharthi, 2023; Atilas et al., 2021; British Journal of Education Technology, 2021; Chen & Hamel, 2022; Hu et al., 2021.) Teachers' psychological well-being was also a significant concern that surfaced under the demands of COVID-19 (Alharthi, 2023; Atilas et al., 2021; British Journal of Education Technology, 2021; Chen & Hamel, 2022; Hu et al., 2021).

In countries such as Indonesia and Germany, the research disclosed that many ECE needed to prepare for social, technical, and cultural factors (Alharthi, 2023; Atilas et al., 2021; British Journal of Education Technology, 2021; Chen & Hamel, 2022; Hu et al., 2021). ECE need more online teaching competencies, and managing the difficulties and stressors was significant due to a lack of professional development (Alharthi, 2023; Atilas et al., 2021; British Journal of Education Technology, 2021; Chen & Hamel, 2022; Hu et al., 2021). Educators endeavored to create lessons online without any formal training, and this was critical for kindergartners as the educators were challenged with ensuring their readiness for primary school (Alharthi, 2023; Atilas et al., 2021; British Journal of Education Technology, 2021; Chen & Hamel, 2022; Hu et al., 2021). Children were sent home, and families were struggling because they did not have access to the internet and technology to communicate with the schools effectively (Alharthi, 2023; Atilas et al., 2021; British Journal of Education Technology, 2021; Chen & Hamel, 2022; Hu et al., 2021). Parents need to have the necessary technical skills to access educators or assist young children in connecting with their teachers (Alharthi, 2023;

Atiles et al., 2021; British Journal of Education Technology, 2021; Chen & Hamel, 2022; Hu et al., 2021). Families had cell phones, and some families had only one cell phone, which was the limit of their technical devices and skills (Alharthi, 2023; Atiles et al., 2021; British Journal of Education (Technology, 2021; Chen & Hamel, 2022; Hu et al., 2021).

Cultural Shift

The cultural shift created a new normal for managing every aspect of life and new policies to reduce virus transmission (Adegboye et al., 2021; Harper & Neubauer, 2021). The immobilizing supply chain issues limited food and household items, leaving bare shelves for weeks (Adegboye et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2022). Almost every household became the workplace as employers reduced the number of employees in the building to avoid spreading the virus. This led to installing computer software like Zoom and Teams and upgrading Wi-Fi. There was a significant shift in communication with limited person-to-person exchanges and mandated state-wide curfews (Adegboye et al., 2021; Harper & Neubauer, 2021). Most restaurants transitioned to a “to-go only” menu but slowly moved to limited seating for eating-in restaurant meals, which changed socialization throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Adegboye et al., 2021; Harper & Neubauer, 2021). Every commercial and public establishment had strict physical distancing policies, six feet apart, face masks, and waiting in lines for a limited number of customers inside the store simultaneously (Spadafora et al., 2023; Timmons et al., 2021). Unfortunately, hospitals and healthcare delivery changed for families and overburdened first respondents (Adegboye et al., 2021; Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Morse et al., 2022; Timmons et al., 2021). There was sheer chaos and waiting lines everywhere. The abrupt shift was stressful for adults and even more devastating for young children (Shah et al., 2022; Timmons et al., 2021). The COVID-19 restrictions had significantly higher levels of distress and work and social impairments (Morse et

al., 2022; Timmons et al., 2021; Harper & Neubauer, 2021). Information continues to emerge as the country moves further into the post-pandemic era (Adegboye et al., 2021; Harper & Neubauer, 2021).

Food Insecurity

Mealtime at ECEC and schools presents teachable moments for developing healthy and nutritional literacy and good eating habits with EL (Adams et al., 2020; Farrer et al., 2022; Farrer et al., 2023; Lafave et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020). The EL spend a structured mealtime with educators, and usually, these meals are served family style, thus providing opportunities for teaching prosocial mealtime behaviors. These meals are free or at a reduced or low cost for most families (Adams et al., 2020; Farrer et al., 2022; Farrer et al., 2023; Lafave et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020). Low-income families depend on these meals as a supplement and, most of the time, as a meal replacement for meals and food consumption at home. Thus, mealtimes at the center or school five days a week is a cost-saving opportunity for families. When schools and early childcare centers across the country were closed due to COVID-19 to prevent the spread of the virus, free meals were no longer available during the shutdown, and families no longer had access to the free meals. If a low-income family had several small children on free meals, the lack of these meals became a new high cost to the family. The reality of the need for free meals became apparent on the national level when schools closed due to COVID-19 because no one could predict when the students could return to school (Adams et al., 2020; Farrer et al., 2022; Farrer et al., 2023; Lafave et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020).

The need to control obesity is another health concern in the U.S. (Adams et al., 2020; Lafave et al., 2021). Children in school receive fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, and well-balanced nutritious meals and snacks (Adams et al., 2020; Lafave et al., 2021). Many low-income families

struggle with low food security in their homes, which refers to a lack of fresh fruits and vegetables (Adams et al., 2020; Lafave et al., 2021). Food insecurity occurs when there is limited access to fresh, nutritious, and safe food (Adams et al., 2020; Lafave et al., 2021). The research presents that families with high food security experience a reduction in take-out food and an increase in home-cooked meals during COVID-19 (Adams et al., 2020; Farrer et al., 2022, 2023; Lafave et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020). However, families with low food security experienced limited access to fresh food such as fruits and vegetables (Adams et al., 2020; Farrer et al., 2022, 2023; Lafave et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020). Families on limited budgets usually purchase cheaper food, and these food items are usually in cans, prepackaged, high in sodium, and high in sugar and fat (Adams et al., 2020; Farrer et al., 2022, 2023; Lafave et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020). Some schools arranged to deliver meals to small children's homes and worked with the parents to secure fruits and vegetables for the younger children (Adams et al., 2020; Farrer et al., 2022, 2023; Lafave et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020). During the summer months, community parks and recreation programs provide free meals to low socioeconomic communities to help provide fruits and vegetables five days a week when schools are closed (Adams et al., 2020; Farrer et al., 2022, 2023; Lafave et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020).

In addition to meals, a lack of physical activity is another concern, especially for children dealing with obesity (Adams et al., 2020; Lafave et al., 2021). The World Health Organization recommends that children between the ages of three and five should spend 180 minutes a day engaging in some physical exercise or activity (Adams et al., 2020; Lafave et al., 2021). COVID-19 also impacted early childhood educators' teaching and instruction on physical literacy (Adams et al., 2020; Lafave et al., 2021). The children's indoor recreational activities and outside play were limited to ensure masking and proper distance (Adams et al., 2020; Lafave et

al., 2021). Health, nutrition, and physical activity are just as critical to the overall development of EL because childhood obesity is a risk factor that leads to many health-related illnesses and poor self-esteem issues in young children (Adams et al., 2020; Farrer et al., 2022, 2023; Lafave et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020).

Education Pivot From School to Home

Shifting the educational responsibilities to home created stressors for parents and caregivers (Goldberg et al., 2021; Morse et al., 2022). Parents and caregivers experienced challenges as they tried to balance work and household duties and increased teaching responsibilities to ensure the young learner's continual development (Goldberg et al., 2021; Ramaswamy & Seshadri, 2020). Some parents were fortunate to work from their place of employment and created telework policies to limit the transmission of infection (Bigras et al., 2021; Goldberg et al., 2021; Morse et al., 2022). Thus, they were home with their early learners, but the parents had work assignments simultaneously to ensure the young learners were engaged in positive activities (Logan et al., 2021; Goldberg et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2021). However, many parents, especially first responders, could not stay home and had to make critical decisions quickly (Barnett et al., 2021; Goldberg et al., 2021; Morse et al., 2022). Finding someone to provide childcare in their home is a stressful challenge for working parents as their concerns for their children's well-being and safety are critical concerns (Bigras et al., 2021; Tebben et al., 2021). Many families do not generally have an emergency preparedness plan for the home; however, lessons learned are an emerging factor of the post-COVID-19 pandemic (Bigras et al., 2021; Goldberg et al., 2021). Thus, the parents' stressors significantly impacted the family environment or the child's microsystem (Bigras et al., 2021; Goldberg et al., 2021; Guerra et al., 2022).

The immediate and abrupt school closure, especially for early learners, had significant ramifications for the school system, educators, families, employers, and children (Hill & Reimer, 2022; Lew-Koralewicz, 2022). The school closures triggered unprecedented disruption and stressors for everyone's lives, especially for families and younger children (Palmer et al., 2021; Dayal & Tiko, 2020). The decision to close schools was made immediately. It forced school administrators, daycare center directors, and teachers at every level with a concise timeline to prepare for this significant shift in teaching the curriculum or learning plans, engaging with their students, as well as their planning for their school-age children at home (Eveleigh et al., 2022; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). Many ECE had young school-age children who were also at home, and their EL needed care and intellectual stimulation (Eadie et al., 2021; Spadafora et al., 2023). Families experienced a significant change in their ecosystem (Quansah et al., 2022; Barnette et al., 2021; Eadie et al., 2021). Regardless of academic abilities, parents had to become the new school for their children (Eadie et al., 2021; Hill & Reimer, 2022).

Pre-Service Teacher's and Early Childhood Education Pedagogy

Colleges and universities across the globe, such as in the U.S., as well as South Africa, and Canada, were challenged with designing a shift in the education and training of pre-service teachers (Anderson et al., 2022; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Gomes et al., 2021; Giner-Gromis, 2023; Shorty & Jikpamu, 2021). COVID-19 affected the teaching and training of preservice teachers at the end of their college course of study and participating in practicums and internships (Anderson et al., 2022; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Giner-Gromis, 2023; Shorty & Jikpamu, 2021). Trained ECE understand early learners' development stages, diverse backgrounds, and specific needs (Giner-Gromis, 2023; Shorty & Jikpamu, 2021). Early learners' basic needs include positive relationships that lead to attachment and emotional connection

(physical, emotional, identity, safety) and a sense of belonging and purpose (Giner-Gromis, 2023; Shorty & Jikpamu, 2021). Before COVID-19, ECE participated in training programs that provided relevant competencies and expertise in hands-on training and real-life experiences with infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergartners programs (Anderson et al., 2022; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Giner-Gromis, 2023; Kim, 2020; Koch, 2022; Spadafora et al., 2023; Szente, 2020).

Observation is essential to exploring learning engagement in EL (Giner-Gromis, 2023). Observing them in play is significant for documenting and assessing reflective teaching practices in childhood learning and development (Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Giner-Gromis, 2023). Early childhood training is essential to developing proper skill sets to support children's development in critical life domains: physical, cognitive, language, communication, social, and emotional (Blewitt et al., 2020; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Spadafora et al., 2023). These domains are critical to young children's development and overall well-being (Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Spadafora et al., 2023). A play-based ecosystem promotes basic learning skills for young children to help them learn self-regulation and to help with their social and emotional development (Blewitt et al., 2020; Shorty & Jikpamu, 2021). The approach during the pandemic was for educators to redesign lessons to work through physical distance, masking, and observation from a distance, and situations like these made it difficult to understand children's growth and development (Blewitt et al., 2020; Mickells et al., 2021; Shorty & Jikpamu, 2021).

In addition to physical, emotional, and social development, ECE are trained to employ teaching strategies to promote mathematical and scientific reasoning (Blewitt et al., 2020; Shorty & Jikpamu, 2021). Research confirms that development in one area is strongly associated with development in another; thus, positive, supportive relationships and interactions with teachers

foster strong social and emotional development and language and literary abilities (Blewitt et al., 2020; Shorty & Jikpamu, 2021). Consequently, the abrupt changes in the early learner's microsystem pose a more significant impact that may have a more profound impact than presented in current research (Blewitt et al., 2020; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Shorty & Jikpamu, 2021; Spadafora et al., 2023).

Across the globe, at colleges and universities, logistical shifting in preparing early childhood education teachers was cause for immediate changes (Blewitt et al., 2020; Gomes et al., 2021; Shorty & Jikpamu, 2021). Practicum is where teachers apply their pedagogical knowledge in the early centers under supervision and evaluation as the final phase of their training (Anderson et al., 2022; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Giner-Gromis, 2023; Kim, 2020; Koch, 2022; Spadafora et al., 2023; Szente, 2020). Student teaching practicums were already on course for the semester and immediately pivoted to online teaching and learning platforms, which was challenging for many students. On a global level, some colleges did not have the proper funding to make the pivot to a virtual platform (Anderson et al., 2022; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Giner-Gromis, 2023; Gomes et al., 2021; Kim, 2020; Koch, 2022; Spadafora et al., 2023; Szente, 2020). However, students adjusted to the poor-quality delivery of lessons, and the quality of education was significantly dependent on the quality of technology for virtual learning and measuring students' performance (Anderson et al., 2022; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Giner-Gromis, 2023; Kim, 2020; Koch, 2022; Spadafora et al., 2023; Szente, 2020; Tal, 2021; Webb et al., 2021). In many situations, the preservice teachers did not have digital literacy skills or access to the digital technology required for virtual learning and equipment for printing documents and study materials, and in some communities, internet cafés and libraries were closed due to COVID-19 restraints (Blewitt et al., 2020; Shorty & Jikpamu,

2021). Some studies have attempted to summarize current literature into five fundamental challenges to early childhood virtual teaching: a) low participation from parents, b) lack of knowledge and skills from virtual teaching, c) appropriate way to engage EL for proper development, d) lack of access to technology, and e) technology barriers for low-income families (Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Giner-Gromis, 2023; Ford et al., 2021; Kim, 2020; Jin, 2023).

Early childhood program administrators in the U.S., Turkey, and other countries endured challenges navigating through the unprecedented stressors of COVID-19 and ensuring the infrastructure of the early learning programs and centers were functional to deliver quality educational services and support to teachers, families, and the community (Kim et al., 2022; Neilsen-Hewett et al., 2022; Yildiz et al., 2022). Many early childhood program administrators did not have a pandemic emergency plan. Therefore, many program administrators had to make quick decisions to acquire technology devices for the staff to use to maintain contact with students, as well as work with food companies to distribute food to families; and provide psychological support and ongoing communication to families to maintain connectedness during the crisis (Kim et al., 2022; Yildiz et al., 2022). Program administrators' quality and quantity of resources depended on their program type and funding sources (Neilsen-Hewett et al., 2022; Yildiz et al., 2022). In the U.S., family childcare homes experienced the most significant financial impact due to low attendance and very low staffing; private centers had significant financial difficulties to unplanned expenses, but early childhood programs like Head Start, with state contracts, had the minimum financial impact in their budgets (Kim, 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Yildiz et al., 2022).

Early Childhood Educators' Stressors

Well-being equals happiness, pleasure, and honesty about your experience and purpose (Bruening et al., 2022; Logan et al., 2021; Swigonski et al., 2021). When ECE experience poor well-being, their state of being can negatively impact the learning environment and instability in pedagogy interaction and personal stress. ECE were distressed at the time of the national closure and again during the initial re-opening of the early childhood education centers. Unfortunately, the CDC guidelines set forth the 6-foot spacing requirement, which downsized the capacity of children the centers could serve. During both events, ECE reported being overworked and filled with uncertainty, social disconnectedness, powerlessness, and financial stress. Research also shows that ECE experienced physical and mental health barriers (Batt et al., 2022; Bruening et al., 2022). The literature also calls for future research exploring strategies to reduce healthcare barriers for ECE during the pandemic (Batt et al., 2022; Bruening et al., 2022).

Educators with strong resiliency successfully used cognitive, emotional, and behavioral adaptability skills as an alternative to supporting the learning process (Scott et al., 2021; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022; Swigonski et al., 2021). Many lessons were learned during this traumatic time in history (Hill & Remer, 2022; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Koskela et al., 2020; Quansah et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2021). An emergency preparedness plan with adequate resources and training to support educators may have eliminated many COVID-19-related stressors (Swigonski et al., 2021; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). Schools would have been prepared with age-appropriate blended curriculums and lessons for the in-class instructions and activities, remote and online delivery methods of education services, as well as adequate technology (Hill & Remer, 2022; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Koskela et al., 2020; Quansah et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2021). Many ECE were thrust into modifying the ECL curriculum and lesson

plan without proper training and preparation (Hill & Remer, 2022; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Koskela et al., 2020; Quansah et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2021). EL required adult assistance beyond the caregiver's skills, and educators communicated at least two to three times a day with parents, which became time-consuming (Spadafora, 2023; Quansah et al., 2022). During the shutdown, educators fostered innovative ways to partner with families and parents for a collaborative approach to learning (Hill & Remer, 2022; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Koskela et al., 2020; Quansah et al., 2022). Unfortunately, educators had to accommodate for the economic lines of division among the EL as some families were able to thrive through COVID-19 stressors because they had better resources (Hill & Remer, 2022; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Koskela et al., 2020; Quansah et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2021). The home-to-school collaboration starts with the family's decision on how to engage children in learning. How the parents and the educators perceive their roles is critical to creating a culture of efficacy for helping children and helping them succeed academically (Hill & Remer, 2022; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Koskela et al., 2020; Quansah et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2021).

Parents frequently contact educators with questions and technical issues, such as uploading and downloading documents and activities (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022; Spadafora et al., 2023). Parents also had pedagogical questions, such as how to teach letters, numbers, and vowels, and online learning was more challenging for educators because they could not control the learning environment in every student's home, and the caregiver had limited technology skills (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022; Spadafora et al., 2023). Furthermore, the challenges in working conditions, the well-being of early childhood educators, and the impact on post-pandemic restoration continue to emerge, thus, creating gaps in future research (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022; Spadafora et al., 2023). COVID-19 became a complex barrier

when the parents, siblings, and other family members became ill with the virus or experienced death and disrupted the child's microsystem; the family members were not physically capable of assisting EL with activities and learning opportunities (Bruening et al., 2022; Logan et al., 2021; Swigonski et al., 2021; Spadafora, 2023). In these situations, days may have passed before the child had a healthy adult to help with online programming with the ECL center (Bruening et al., 2022; Logan et al., 2021; Swigonski et al., 2021).

Early childhood professionals include teachers, coordinators, directors, managers, education leaders, nominated supervisors, trainees, and apprentices (Berge et al., 2022; Chudzik et al., 2022). Unlike primary and secondary educators, early childhood teachers work with young children during the earliest stages of development and have more direct interaction with parents and caregivers (Berge et al., 2022; Chudzik et al., 2022). ECE report that there is little professional development training to gain more knowledge about childhood trauma and limited professionals qualified to serve as mentors to help support the learning process (Berge et al., 2022; Chudzik et al., 2022).

Additional stressors for ECE were their concerns for the EL with special needs such as autism, visual impairment, developmentally delay, and physically challenged because they missed crucial learning opportunities (Melnick et al., 2022; Wild et al., 2022). EL with special needs were challenging for parents working from home and endeavoring to assist with educational goals on Zoom calls with the teachers (Melnick et al., 2022; Rosenblum et al., 2020; Wild et al., 2022). Teachers and parents reported that special needs children missed quality educational services during the shutdown (Melnick et al., 2022; Rosenblum et al., 2020; Wild et al., 2022). The delivery of special education services could have been more capable of evaluating and measuring skills and resources (Melnick et al., 2022; Rosenblum et al., 2020). Many apps

and websites do not accommodate visually impaired children and other special needs (Melnick et al., 2022; Rosenblum et al., 2020). Children with special needs could not focus on the Zoom calls and were easily distracted by being at home. Children with specific special needs lack the logical reasoning abilities to make the adjustments (Melnick et al., 2022; Rosenblum et al., 2020).

Distance Learning

Several researchers reported that educators had to adapt to emergency remote teaching, which refers to a temporary shift of instruction and a modified delivery of education (Gritzka et al., 2022; Harlow, 2022; Joseph & Trinick, 2021). Educators immediately changed the learning plan to accommodate distance learning (Tang et al., 2022; Moran & Marlatt, 2022). Remote teaching may have included calling learners on the phone or stopping by their homes to drop off activities to ensure proper stimulation of EL for proper development (Ramaswamy & Seshadri, 2020; Thomas et al., 2022). Educators reported that they were concerned that EL would forget them and their developmental progress during the previous months if there were an extended engagement break (Gritzka et al., 2022; Ramaswamy & Seshadri, 2020; Thomas et al., 2022). Interacting with and engaging an early learner over the phone was difficult, stressful, and frustrating for educators (Ramaswamy & Seshadri, 2020; Tang et al., 2021). Educators mostly used personal vehicles to locate families and deliver activities to the home. Many parents or families needed access to printers or appropriate games for learning specific skills (Koskela et al., 2020; Smith, 2020; Tang et al., 2021). Furthermore, families who lived further or in rural areas may have been the most difficult to reach (Koskela et al., 2020; Smith, 2020; Tang et al., 2021). The answers to these issues are emerging into what is currently described as digital equity or bridging the digital divide (Harlow, 2022; Webb et al., 2021). However, within two months of

participating in remote learning, preschool children's participation dropped to less than half (Ramaswamy & Seshadri, 2020; Tang et al., 2021). Thus, distance learning was not an effective alternative to addressing the impact of COVID-19 (Ramaswamy & Seshadri, 2020; Tang et al., 2021).

Online learning also has challenges, including socioeconomic barriers (Crawford et al., 2021; Spadafora et al., 2023). First, it was surprising that many families' homes lacked working technology and Wi-Fi access (Hu et al., 2021). Some families choose not to have the added expense because they could barely provide the necessities for their homes (Hayduk, 2021). Many families living in rural American communities did not have internet services to make a connection (Palmer et al., 2021). The only technology in their homes was cell phones. Some children had to share one phone to complete online homework (Hu et al., 2021). Secondly, online learning created a learning curve for all people involved (Smith, 2020; Moran & Marlatt, 2022; Palmer et al., 2021).

Additionally, online teaching has privacy concerns (Crawford et al., 2021; Spadafora et al., 2023). Keeping EL focused was challenging (Crawford et al., 2021; Joseph & Trinick, 2021). EL would switch off the cameras; educators could not attend interactive sessions with early learners, making it very difficult to foster paralinguistic communication, which is critical to measuring their understanding or cognition (Crawford et al., 2021; Joseph & Trinick, 2021). Thus, learning from home became highly challenging for educators (Crawford et al., 2021; Harper & Neubauer, 2021).

Young children using technology has many pros and cons (Hu et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2021). Technology, when used purposefully, can be a powerful tool for learning (Hu et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2022). The concern is that uncontrolled screen time is a sedentary activity, and young

children need purposeful interaction with others, especially peers, parents, and caregivers (Hu et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2022). On the other hand, technology provides students with multiple ways to connect with the world around them globally (Hu et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2022).

Communication Barriers

Effective two-way communication is vital to early learning (Benner & Mistry, 2020). Learning centers are very interactive; therefore, learning remotely or online made effective communication between educators and EL challenging (Huck & Zhang, 2021; Gritzka et al., 2022). The shutdown took away educators' ability to rely on physical interactions to evaluate the early learner's development (Gritzka et al., 2022; Swigonski et al., 2021). The ability to walk around the learning environment to observe the early learners' behavior and listen to their conversations with each other as they shared their understanding of concepts and the world around them was no longer an option for educators (Lew-Koralewicz, 2022; Gritzka et al., 2022). In addition to these types of hands-on interaction and observations, educators no longer had the opportunity to ask questions to assess cognitive development and observe physical development (Lew-Koralewicz, 2022; Gritzka et al., 2022). This was not possible on Zoom or over the phone as it was challenging to manage because the children were talking all at once, and the EL would get upset if they could not understand the educator's instructions or the learning cues (Gritzka et al., 2022; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Lew-Koralewicz, 2022).

Educators recall being surrounded by books, resources to help children learn, a library, children's records, and planning documentation, and suddenly, the learning environment was gone (Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021). Their lesson planning now included cameras, microphones, computer software upgrades, and daily endeavoring to stimulate

learning without face-to-face classrooms (Lipkin & Crepeau-Hobson, 2022). Educators learned to adapt cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally to support a new learning process (Gritzka et al., 2022; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). Educators are learning to focus on lessons learned during the traumatic time and learning innovative ways to partner with families for better collaboration (Eadie et al., 2021; Gritzka et al., 2022). Educators' negative emotions and anxiety stemmed from the evolving demand and increasing challenge of distance learning, especially for special-needs learners. (Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Heyworth et al., 2021; Joseph & Trinick, 2021; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022).

Insufficient Resources

All schools do not have equal access to resources (Harlow, 2022; Gritzka et al., 2022). The budget determines the resources available for the schools, especially primary schools and day centers (Harlow, 2022; Gritzka et al., 2022;). In most areas, daycare centers operate on small budgets and low employee salaries. Most educators are not in the early childhood education industry for the money, and enrollment drives the budget (Harlow, 2022; Shah et al., 2022). Therefore, most primary public schools and daycare centers needed more basic technology and training to support online infrastructure during the shutdown (Harlow, 2022; Gritzka et al., 2022). Digital literacy among most adults and educators was insufficient and became a barrier to sustaining a quality distance learning process (Heyworth et al., 2021; Read et al., 2022). Educators did not have the technology and training to facilitate ongoing access to early learners, which created unprecedented stressors that impacted their psychological and emotional well-being (Harlow, 2022; Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Spadafora et al., 2023). Some educators were required to use their personal or home technology to create an ongoing connection with their EL (Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Shah et al., 2022). Unfortunately, some daycare centers lost essential

staff, and their enrollment decreased, and the government bailout only helped some centers survive the COVID-19 shutdown (Harlow, 2022; Tebben et al., 2021). Daycare centers and schools must collaborate with stakeholders to get the necessary support to build a sound fiscal footprint to manage future crises based on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic (Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Harlow, 2022). Additionally, the new crisis of staff shortage emerged, which created new stressors for daycare center educators. Recruiting new staff is a residual stressor and a reality of the post-pandemic era (Gritzka et al., 2022).

Early Childhood Trauma on Development

The CDC published documents to address the concerns about the trauma associated with COVID-19 and the significant number of fatalities that contributed to an immense number of young children experiencing the death of a close loved one (Haseltine, 2021; Hill et al., 2021). Every fourth COVID-19-related death in the U.S. led to a child losing a parent or grandparents (Hill et al., 2021; Jalongo, 2021). Early childhood trauma generally refers to the traumatic experiences that occur to children aged zero to six. Approximately 1,562,000 children experienced COVID-19-related deaths of a loved one, and this rate and type of death rate can be acute in young children and create a fear of separation and abandonment (Haseltine, 2021; Hill et al., 2021).

Traumatic events render victims helpless by overwhelming force, involving threats to life or bodily integrity or close personal encounters with violence or death (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2021). Trauma disrupts a sense of control, connection, and meaning (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2021). Research shows that when children are exposed to trauma at a very young age, the trauma affects brain development (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2021). The brain responds to trauma in three actions: fight, flight, or freeze. In a

fight, the brain demonstrates aggression; in flight mode, the brain urges the individual to run away and avoid the conflict; and in a freeze, the brain causes individuals to withdraw and become emotionally numb to the pain (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2021; Statman-Weil & Hibbard, 2020). Children who have experienced trauma have trouble processing and remembering information, differentiating between safe and unsafe situations, connecting to and trusting adults, and regulating their feelings (Statman-Weil & Hibbard, 2020). Research also shows that 48% of children have experienced at least one of ten types of adverse experience; children with histories of traumatic experiences are two times as likely to have chronic health conditions; children with traumatic experiences are two and a half times more likely to have repeated a grade in school; and finally, exposure to violence in the first years of childhood deprives children of as much as 10% of their potential IQ (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2021; Statman-Weil & Hibbard, 2020).

COVID-19 Trauma and Education

Much literature has been published on childhood trauma to confirm that it is a significant public health problem with acute outcomes for many children, families, schools, and communities (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2021). Young children are at high risk of being exposed to trauma because their brains are underdeveloped enough to process traumatic events (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Bergen, 2021; Whittbrodt et al., 2019). Young children are exposed to various adverse events such as abuse, neglect, violence, loss of parents, natural disasters, and the stressors stemming from COVID-19 (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2021). Early childhood programs provide care for many traumatized children, and ECEC have the most significant opportunity to promote recovery and well-being for young children (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Bergen, 2021; Whittbrodt et al., 2019). When young children

are overwhelmed, they rely on the adults around them to help calm them and to make them feel safe. Children learn about the world around them through their caregivers (Benner & Mistry, 2020; Scott et al., 2021). Unfortunately, policymakers often overlook childhood trauma and their needs because these children have an underrepresentation in empirical literature; therefore, more research on childhood trauma and education is needed (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; SAMHSA, 2014).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic realities must be acknowledged and addressed as the country continues to move into the post-pandemic era (Harper & Neubauer, 2021). COVID-19 realities demand that the education industry overhaul the primary and secondary education system and look for new ways of teaching and mentoring students, including EL (Kwon et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2021). Emphasis on pedagogy, structure, and format of our teaching has been leading topics for discussion (Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Hayduk, 2021). Lessons learned from COVID-19 suggest using a trauma-informed approach as the infrastructure to better prepare primary and secondary education, including students and educators, during public health emergencies such as the current COVID-19 pandemic (Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Hayduk, 2021). Many facets of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our socio-ecological systems creating many levels of pandemic-related trauma and stressors (Scott et al., 2021; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). Psychology posits that childhood trauma impacts early learners' brain development (Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Hayduk, 2021).

Furthermore, there are growing concerns for educators to recognize the risk of secondary traumatization or re-traumatization. Trauma-informed care is supported by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the model for trauma-informed education and administration (Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Hayduk, 2021; Mphahlele & Jikpamu, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic-

related childhood trauma, the present trauma factors that already exist in society, and the outcomes for EL continue to emerge. Future studies may address how early learning centers are taking the necessary actions to address the impact of these stressors post-pandemic restoration in early childhood education (Benner & Mistry, 2020; Scott et al., 2021).

Furthermore, children who have experienced significant trauma may not realize they see the world differently because their world is the only world they know (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Statman-Weil & Hibbard, 2020). Traumatic experiences impact the brain and cause the brain to change its shape and alter its response to the world around it. In a crisis, a child may experience increased fear, anger, frustration, energy, anxiety, heart rate, blood pressure, and sweating (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2021). Unfortunately, children exposed to trauma experience an inability to control concentration, reasoning, attention span, coping skills, problem-solving communication, listening, and comprehension (Statman-Weil & Hibbard, 2020; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022).

Therefore, ECE need appropriate training in trauma-informed care and crisis management and training on fostering a trauma-responsive learning environment for EL (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Bergen, 2021; Whittbrodt et al., 2019; Statman-Weil & Hibbard, 2020; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). A trauma-responsive learning environment accommodates small children who have post-traumatic stress syndrome. ECE create warm and nurturing environments to provide emotional and physical safety so children can learn new ways of experiencing and seeing themselves and the people around them (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Bergen, 2021; Whittbrodt et al., 2019). ECE in trauma-responsive learning environments believe children are valuable, worthy, and capable. ECE are committed to connecting to individual children and their families and

essential community support. ECE recognize that a child's social-emotional development is essential to learning (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Statman-Weil & Hibbard, 2020).

The Implications of Children During COVID-19

Early research identified some implications of COVID-19 for early learners' mental and physical aspects (Barnett et al., 2021; Benner & Mistry, 2020; Yang & Zhang, 2022; Heyworth et al., 2021). The impact of stressors presented by the pandemic is more significant for children according to their socio-economic background and vulnerable communities. The home environment is essential as it has direct access to EL and the most significant exposure. School is essential for development and academic success. Safety is another implication for early learners due to increased domestic violence. Health and nutrition are a significant concern as many EL have limited access to well-balanced meals at home and usually receive their best meals in educational settings. Lack of physical activity is also a concern as parents either work from home or must go to work; therefore, they often rely on a caregiver to supervise. The lack of socialization and playtime can also be stressful and frustrating for early learners. Another critical implication is that EL lost the knowledge and academic development they gained before the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown (Barnett et al., 2021; Benner & Mistry, 2020; Heyworth et al., 2021).

Post-Pandemic Realities

Previous studies have reported many post-pandemic realities in emerging literature. Only two of the realities are presented here. First, early childhood trauma impacts adolescents' decision-making (Scott et al., 2021). There are correlations between childhood trauma, adolescents' decision-making, and their involvement in the juvenile justice system (Koskela et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2021; Williams, 2020). There are strong connections between the three life

events (Koskela et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2021; Williams, 2020). These present realities explain gaps in current research as the outcome of early learners' trauma from the COVID-19 pandemic continues to emerge (Faulstich et al., 2022). Educators need appropriate training, such as trauma informed care and new pedagogies that support early childhood trauma (Koskela et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2021).

One major issue in early research identified stressful and challenging work environments due to COVID-19. Pre-COVID documentation shows high-level commitment among early learners' educators to their work, but the impact of the pandemic caused an increase in frustration and fear of job security and respect for their jobs (Bigras et al., 2021; Benner & Mistry, 2020). Another post-pandemic reality is the challenge of educators demanding higher salaries, better or more benefits, and resources (Bigras et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2021). Unfortunately, ECEC and many small school districts struggle to retain qualified employees; therefore, educators have additional stressors regarding budgets. Educators report they did not feel supported by their leadership and parents as they endeavored to meet the needs of the children under their care (Bigras et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2021; Benner & Mistry, 2020). Furthermore, the most critical issue was that educators reported other challenges in supporting EL to recover academically and developmentally (Barnett et al., 2021; Benner & Mistry, 2020). The interruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic have short-term and long-term effects in academic, social, and emotional areas (Bigras et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2021).

New Normal

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped policy and the country's early childhood education experiences of young children and their families. The National Institute for Early Education

Research developed the 2020 Preschool Learning Activities parent survey (Barnett et al., 2021). Early learners' enrollment in some learning programs in the U.S. has dropped by 61% since the COVID-19 pandemic (Webb et al., 2021). The enrollment decline is mainly due to the closure of daycare centers and preschool programs. Many ECL centers have adopted an innovative approach to parent engagement and admission (Barnett et al., 2021). Education equity is another significant element or challenge for ECE (Barnett et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic effectively highlighted the lack of digital equity in many of America's communities, especially rural ones (Barnett et al., 2021). Therefore, EL have access to technology in a learning center or school but do not have the same access levels at home (Webb et al., 2021). Learning outside the classroom takes on a different shape in situations like these. Learning outside the classroom requires a different learning plan or curriculum than students with access to technology outside the learning center or school (Webb et al., 2021). Consequently, educators will have to take on the challenge of redefining early learning and identifying a new learning model that will unfold. The research will continue to emerge to fill the gap (Barnett et al., 2021).

Secondly, the new normal will require additional in-service and specialty training for ECE (Barnett et al., 2021; Berger, 2022; Williams, 2022). New training for ECE must include more than standard classroom management and early childhood development (Berger, 2022; Williams, 2022). The new training should include identifying the aspects and signs of trauma in EL and crisis management (Berger, 2022; Ramos et al., 2023; Williams, 2022). Educators can also benefit from Trauma training because many adults suffer from trauma (Berger, 2022; Ramos et al., 2023). Specialty training can also include classroom safety, not just protecting EL from the COVID-19 virus (Williamson et al., 2020). Still, violence permeates our society, and too often, it

spills over into our primary and secondary schools (Dias et al., 2020). Again, the new normal will continue to emerge in future research (Berger, 2022; Prusinki et al., 2022; Williams, 2022).

Summary

Chapter Two presented a theoretical framework using Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory and a literature review on the unprecedented stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the government calling for an abrupt closure of schools and early childhood centers worldwide. The literature affirmed that in March 2020, the shutdown changed the delivery of educational services across North America for over three years (Batt et al., 2022; Berger, 2022; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Chudzik & Wolowiec, 2022; Farrer et al., 2022; Gritzka et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2021; Jin, 2023; Koch, 2022; Pattnaik & Jalongo, 2021; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022; Spadfora et al., 2023). The abrupt closures of early childhood centers initiated unprecedented stressors for ECE and negatively impacted ECL and the post-pandemic restoration (Steed & Leech, 2021; Timmons et al., 2021). According to the literature, the unprecedented challenges include food insecurity, lack of technology and technology training, education pivot from school to home, insufficient teacher's training and professional development, unprepared early childhood education pedagogy, a threat to early childhood educators' well-being, inadequate resource barriers, early childhood trauma impact on development, and trauma impact on young children's education and development (Batt et al., 2022; Berger, 2022; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Chudzik & Wolowiec, 2022; Farrer et al., 2022; Gritzka et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2021; Jin, 2023; Koch, 2022; Pattnaik & Jalongo, 2021; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022; Spadfora et al., 2023.) Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory posits that the teacher-student relationship is an essential factor that influences early learners' development in the child's microsystem. Therefore, when educators'

well-being is threatened, it impacts the educator's relationship with young children and inadvertently has more significant potential to have adverse cognitive and traumatizing effects on young children (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Berger, 2022; Harlow, 2022; Martin et al., 2022; Whittbrodt et al., 2019).

Current research cites the need for future studies on how ECEC choose to use technology, how ECE use hybrid teaching approaches and early childhood educators' concerns, and the use of precautions returning to in-person teaching (Gritzka et al., 2022; Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Steed & Leech, 2021; Timmons et al., 2021). Pandemic research continues to emerge, recognizing the psychological and emotional distress and academic challenges of COVID-19, and the need for continual research outcomes creates a gap for future research (Berger et al., 2022; Koch, 2022). Furthermore, the challenges in working conditions, the well-being of early childhood educators, and the impact on post-pandemic restoration continue to emerge, thus identifying gaps for future research (Batt et al., 2022; Berger et al., 2022).

Investigating these stressors may increase the understanding of the ever-evolving aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic on the teacher-student microsystem (Atiles et al., 2021; Bigras et al., 2021; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Gritzka et al., 2022; Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Maguire-Jack et al., 2022). Furthermore, this chapter seeks to add to the evolving body of literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early childhood education, educators, and learners. The COVID-19 pandemic is a vast and current phenomenon, and more research is essential to facilitate the world's comprehension of the depth of this real-life experience (Atiles et al., 2021; Bigras et al., 2021; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Gritzka et al., 2022; Harper & Neubauer, 2021).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this case study was to describe the unprecedented stressors of ECE during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic restoration at the two ECEC in a midwestern state. The case study was the best practice to explore the experiences of ECE directly involved in the education industry when the schools shut down, this was vital. Gathering data from those with firsthand knowledge of the early childhood education industry during the COVID-19 pandemic provided original vital data, a rich understanding of the unprecedented stressors experienced by ECE and identified and compared themes and patterns to add to the emerging literature (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). Qualitative research promotes the understanding of the contexts, which empowers the participants in the study to address the complexity of a problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher collaborated with participants to develop an insider perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). Leveraging inductive inquiry promoted the exploration of COVID-19 through a case study design (Yin, 2018). This chapter describes the design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, researcher role, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations employed in this study.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was appropriate for this study because qualitative research permits unconventional approaches to encapsulating the lived human experiences of individuals that are not achievable through quantitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research relies on the researcher as the vital instrument for data collection, assumptions, and an interpretative theoretical framework to guide the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Quantitative research involves fixed and universal data, seeks to be

conclusive, and addresses connectedness. In contrast, qualitative research is more inductive than deductive. It lends opportunities to describe a phenomenon in detail and provide a deep understanding of a single focus, concept, event, or contemporary phenomenon in natural or real-life settings. Furthermore, qualitative research allows the researcher to understand how people interpret their experiences, perceive their worlds, and ascribe meaning to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Subsequently, the best method of acquiring this information or knowledge is to solicit the information from the individual directly involved (Yin, 2018).

Therefore, leveraging a case study approach sets the stage for conducting a study in a real-life modern setting where participants are bound by a time, event, place, or a bound system (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). The participants in this case study were bound as ECE employed at ECEC in a Midwest state during the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 through March 2023. A case study comprises an array of strategies and techniques and is the most frequently used qualitative methodology used in education research (Yin, 2018). A distinct feature of a case study is the design to draw extensive data and in-depth understanding by answering the “how” and “why” questions. The data is acquired primarily by interviews; however, multiple sources (e.g., interviews, observation, audiovisual resources, artifacts, documents) are necessary for triangulating purposes as the data analysis strategy (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, a case study is a qualitative research approach to acquiring accurate life data from individuals directly involved in a phenomenon and providing a deep understanding of its complexities (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018).

An instrumental case study approach focuses on one specific problem, event, or phenomenon, such as the unprecedented stressor caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Instrumental case study methods permit addressing a focus issue through a

thick and rich examination (Stake, 1995). The thick, rich examination will occur by interviewing early childhood educators, conducting a focus group, and document analysis (Yin, 2018). The instrumental case study allows one to select a case and fully understand the one focus event (Stake, 1995). Yin (2018) states that case study data is more compelling, robust, and extensive. The participants are ECE employed at ECEC in a mid-western state during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, a bounded system is in place to collect rich data properly (Yin, 2018).

Research Questions

Interviewing ECE who were directly involved in navigating the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a deeper understanding of the stressors they encountered and strategies for the future (Gritzka et al., 2022). The central question was designed to align with the purpose of the case study and drive the study to pursue a deeper understanding. According to Yin (2018), “how” and “why” questions are appropriate for case study research because they are more explanatory of perspectives and information over time, and the key is to ensure the questions have substance and form. The following research questions were designed to align with the purpose of this study and the problem identified for future research.

Central Research Question

How did the COVID-19 pandemic’s unprecedented stressors impact early childhood educators during the pandemic and post-pandemic era?

Sub-Question One

How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact early childhood pedagogy during the pivot from school to home-based education?

Sub-Question Two

How did early childhood educators mitigate unprecedented stressors to provide education services to early learners and families during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic era?

Sub-Question Three

How did prior training or experiences prepare early childhood educators to mitigate unprecedented stressors during the pivot from center-based education to remote-based education?

Sub-Question Four

How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact strategic planning for the future?

Sites and Participants

The sites for this qualitative study were two ECEC in a mid-western state's metropolitan area. The same company operated the two centers, and the day-to-day operations are under the facility directors' span of oversight, facility coordinators, and early childhood teachers. The centers had been operating for ten years. The third center operated under a different leadership.

Sites

The sites for this case study were two ECEC in a midwestern state (pseudonym). The ECEC provide services to infants (6 weeks to 17 months), toddlers (18 months to 3 years), preschoolers (3 to 4 years), and pre-k (5 years). The early education center's capacity is 25 early learners. The mid-western city's population is 905,748 and children under the age of five account for 2.7% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). According to the 2020 census, the racial breakdown for the midwestern city is White (57.4%), Black or African American (29.2%), American Indian and Alaska Native (0.2%), Asian (5.9%), two or more races (4.9%), Hispanic or Latino (6.3%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The ECEC are open Monday through Friday from

7:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. The ECEC are in areas accessible to diverse families and cultures.

Participants

The participants for this study were ECE employed at the ECEC during the COVID-19 and post-pandemic era. The leadership structure of the centers includes the chief executive officer, the director, and the lead teacher. The sites' leadership and the ECE were participants, all identified as educators. The ECE were full-time or part-time staff, including teachers, assistant teachers, directors, coordinators, support staff, and owners. The educators were at least 18 years of age and met the state requirements and credentials to care for infants, toddlers, and preschool education at the ECEC. In this case study, 10 educators participated in the structured interviews. The participants represented the diversity of the center's staff and children. Participants in a case study were bound by a time, event, or place, and the research was conducted in a real-life modern setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Therefore, the interview included ECE employed at the identified sites in a midwestern state during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 2020 and May 2023.

Researcher Positionality

This qualitative case study evolved from my desire to capture the perturbing events of COVID-19 and to understand the impact of the pandemic on culture and society. In addition to a 30-year career with the juvenile justice system, a previous early childhood education career, and children protective services, I am concerned about the trauma caused by COVID-19 and the difficulties it may have presented for EL and their families. Furthermore, being in a graduate program at this specific time, I knew my dissertation was my opportunity to capture the perturbing events of this modern-day phenomenon. I still remember my early childhood education experiences, and I continue to be inspired by the encouragement from the early

childhood education staff. I have many concerns about the impact of COVID-19 and the challenges and stressors ECE must bear as they endeavor to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and their efforts to ensure learning continues for early learners.

Interpretive Framework

Social constructivism is the interpretive framework that best aligns with my research posture. In education, we believe learners actively construct or create their knowledge and experiences and subsequently influence their reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, previous knowledge is the infrastructure for future knowledge because knowledge builds on top of knowledge; thus, each person's life experiences, and knowledge, make them unique (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I understood that participants' postures, beliefs, or interpretations emerge from their backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe the participants' meaning of life as subjective, and I, as the researcher, focused on the complexity of their perspectives. My study focused on the specific context where the participants lived, worked, and engaged in their communities. Therefore, I used broad, open-ended questions to permit the participants to construct the significance of their experiences and knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Philosophical Assumptions

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), researchers consider three philosophical assumptions when conducting qualitative research. These assumptions help to shape the research and formulate the problem or research questions that inevitably add knowledge to a specific discipline. These philosophical assumptions are crucial in establishing the relationship between the researchers and the participants in the study as they require the researcher and participants to express their personal beliefs and perspectives.

In addition to being spiritual beings, I believe the culmination of life experiences shapes every person; because of this, everyone has a story to tell. I value people and am grateful for the opportunity to give them a voice to express their professional experiences and the challenges they experience amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The research participants shared their experiences through structured interviews and focus groups, which are valid resources for qualitative research. I also value the participants' trust in me as a researcher and that I am obligated to handle their personal experiences with dignity and respect. The philosophical assumptions of qualitative research are ontological, epistemological, and axiological (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption is an idea or concept in qualitative research that examines the nature of reality or being, in short, the belief that there are multiple realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a qualitative researcher, I believe the word of God is the only "truth," God's "truth" is my reality, and God's "truth" is immutable; it never changes. There may be multiple or many facts, but not multiple truths. For example, there is a pandemic in the land, which is a fact. However, the Bible provides the truth about the protective power of God. The scripture reads, "There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways" (King James Bible, 1763/2017, Psalm 91:10-11). I also believe we experience negative things because we live in a fallen world. As a qualitative researcher, I can accept participants' interpretations of their experiences and give them space to share their understanding of reality without losing sight of the truth. I need to understand and respect the participants' beliefs about the nature of reality because it shapes their beliefs about life and the world around them. However, my role as a researcher is to understand

and document their perspectives, not assimilate their beliefs.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption is a concept in qualitative research about acquiring knowledge or subjective evidence, interpreting knowledge, and measuring knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, the researcher collects knowledge about the participants within the context of their culture, where they live, and where they work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a Christian scholar, I am called and commissioned to go out among the people to let my light shine by demonstrating Christ-like character and extending Grace to those who do not believe what I believe. I also understand that I must remember that Christ was rejected if I am rejected. Furthermore, I must trust God to open the right doors to conducting my research. God always confirms His word and His will. “The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakened my ear to hear as the learned” (King James Bible, 1763/2017, Isaiah 50:4). As I stated in the previous paragraph, my role as a researcher does not require me to conform to the culture of my participants.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption is the third philosophical assumption, which involves the role or utility of values in research, which is significant. This assumption requires the researcher to reduce the distance between himself and the research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The axiological assumption requires the researcher’s presence and voice, values, biases, and social or political position to be expressed in the report (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My values are embedded in Judo-Christian beliefs based on a Biblical Worldview. I believe in the triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and all scripture are given by the inspiration of God. I believe that

my character and my lifestyle should represent a Holy God. My convictions and my posture are based on the word of God.

Furthermore, I understand that my critical thinking skills are essential in writing and expressing my Christian values and personal biases without disrupting the research process if my values and the participants' values are in opposition. I also understand that we cannot control and mitigate the results or outcome, but we need to have a plan to know where the researcher draws research lines. However, I will not compromise the word of God or my Christian values because God always has a plan. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (King James Bible, 1763/2017, Romans 1:16).

Researcher's Role

A key aspect of qualitative research is that the researcher is considered a human instrument, responsible for leading the research, implementing and managing the research plan and procedures, and analyzing all data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I am solely responsible for collecting the information, analyzing the information, and presenting the findings. I certify that I do not have any personal or professional relationships with the participants. As the qualitative researcher, I was responsible for facilitating the interviews, conducting the focus groups, conducting a document analysis, ensuring the confidentiality of all information, and ensuring the research design worked well in the environment (Yin, 2018). However, to mitigate any potential bias or assumptions, I utilized various coping tasks such as journaling the experience and self-reflecting to address any inadequacies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research did not include participants that the researcher supervises. My role in the research setting is solely that of the researcher working with permission granted by the chief executive officer of the centers (see

Appendix C).

Procedures

This case study encompassed ten steps. First, all appropriate documents were submitted for approval from the institutional review board (IRB) (see Appendix A) at Liberty University before initiating the research. Secondly, written approval was acquired from the ECEC's leadership to use the centers as the study sites, including conducting interviews, document analysis, and focus groups. The IRB approval initiated the data collection. Recruitment of participants was pursued via email. Third, a recruitment letter was emailed to the ECEC's leadership and all educators. The recruitment letter invited educators to participate in the research and provided three screening questions at the bottom.

However, the interview procedures changed because the end of the school year was occupied with special programs and events. I was asked to call back later. The summer was filled with vacations and staff vacancies, which impacted educators' availability. After several unanswered phone calls, the time had advanced, and deadlines had passed. Finally, there was a breakthrough with the first center, and the owner apologized as she had official business that took priority. However, she had not forgotten about the research; she wanted her center involved. Therefore, a change in the interviewing procedure was implemented. The fourth step consisted of conducting the interviews onsite at the early education centers, a significantly different environment than initially planned. I stepped over spilled food on the floor to get to a tiny table, sat in small chairs with my knees up to my chest, and even had to speak loudly over the white noise machine used to help the children sleep. The semi-structured interviews were held on separate days covering four weeks. I coordinated the interviews visits with the center's leadership. Each participant received an email with time slots for an interview and there were

visits where I interviewed the educator who was available when I arrived on site.

The fifth step was structured interviews with the participants. During the data analysis, each participant was given pseudonyms to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality. The interviews were recorded on Zoom.com. The participants received a consent form (see Appendix B) to read, sign, and return it to me before the interviews were conducted. The interviews were recorded to ensure that backup data was available to validate that the participants' experiences were captured accurately. The interviews were transcribed using Zoom.com and handwritten transcription. The transcripts were uploaded onto the Microsoft table. After the data was collected, it was analyzed and coded to identify patterns, themes, and other significant outcomes that emerged during the data collection process (Saldana, 2021; Yin, 2018). Coding was used to analyze the interview data (Saldana, 2021).

The sixth step included analyzing the documents, including agency reports, financial records, curriculums, purchase orders, notices to staff, and other relevant documents, such as a daily schedule before and after the shutdown, to understand the challenges in meeting the financial and resource demands associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Document analysis was also a valid source of rich case study data (Yin, 2018). After the data was collected from the interviews and documents analysis, data was analyzed and coded to identify patterns, themes, gaps, and other significant outcomes that emerged during the data collection process (Saldana, 2021; Yin, 2018).

The seventh step included a focus group with the same participants but using a different set of questions. After the interviews, each participant was informed about the focus group, and I coordinated the day and time for the focus group with the centers' leadership. When I arrived for the focus group, some educators had scheduling conflicts and could not participate; therefore, the

focus group included participants who were available on the day and time. The focus groups were recorded on Zoom.com and videos with the virtual transcription activated for backup purposes. There were two focus groups with six participants and the sessions lasted approximately 60 minutes. The focus group data were analyzed, coded, and displayed in Microsoft table for coding or categorial aggregation and compared to interview and document analysis data.

The eighth step was to triangulate the data from all sources. Triangulation of the interview responses, the document analysis, and the focus group helped to identify patterns, themes, emerging data consistency, and consistency in the research findings and emerging ideas. In addition, the point where data diverges often brings great insights or understanding into the data and the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, each interview, the focus groups, all field notes, and the document analysis result were coded during and after data collection. Coding and triangulation were employed to develop pre-categorical themes. After all pre-categorical themes were developed, member checking was step nine. All themes, patterns, and trends that emerged from triangulation were emailed to the participants, and they had three days to ask questions and provide additional feedback. I did not receive any feedback. This process provided an opportunity to reexamine the data pre-categorical themes to confirm or reject a specific theme (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Once member checking was concluded, I began writing Chapter 4.

Permission

Before the data collection process, permission from Liberty University's IRB and the permission form from the chief executive officer of the ECEC was acquired. Informal conversations were held about the feasibility of a potential research site and the need for a document granting permission for the centers to become research sites. Furthermore, as required,

an IRB application was submitted to Liberty University's IRB for approval, and data collection was prohibited from being initiated before receiving approval from the IRB.

Recruitment Plan

Ten ECE were selected using purposive sampling strategies. Purposive sampling is primarily used in qualitative case study research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method or a process where the researcher selects participants with rich information about the contemporary phenomenon (Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2018). The participants in this study, the ECE, engaged with the researcher in a structured interview using open-ended questions. In this study, the ECE shared their perspectives and gave meaning to their experiences with mandates and the complexities of navigating COVID-19.

Data Collection Plan

A comprehensive data collection plan is essential to qualitative research (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) also shared that the data collection plan can be highly complex. It is ethically critical that the data collection does not start until a detailed plan and protocols are established (Yazan, 2015). The trademark of a sound qualitative case study is presenting an in-depth understanding of the case(s) or participants' experiences (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) identified six sources of evidence or data appropriate for a case study: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. For this study, the three sources of evidence for data collection in this case study were interviews, document analysis, and focus groups. The three sources meet the requirement for triangulation as the data analysis strategy (Yin, 2018).

Individual Interviews

After IRB approved the case study, the ECEC was contacted to schedule interviews. The centers' leadership confirmed their site's participation and provided a list of staff members. The staff did not have work emails; therefore, all interviews were held onsite at the ECEC. I arrived at the center on the interview day and interviewed available staff. The ECE received an interview protocol explaining the process from the beginning to the end and a consent form agreeing to the interview and granting permission to record the interview session. The questions were structured and open-ended to extract rich data and an in-depth understanding of the ECE's experiences in navigating the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic (Yin, 2018). In addition, the case study interviews guided the conversations rather than a formal inquiry (Yin, 2018). The structured interviews were recorded as backup data to revisit and to re-check for clarity and accuracy.

The interview consisted of 18 questions, and each interview took approximately 60 minutes. Four questions, numbers 11, 14, 15, and 16, required some interpretation to help the participant understand what the questions were asking. The interviews were recorded on my phone and were re-recorded in Zoom to create transcriptions. During the re-recording, I could make notes and listen for similarities in the data. The following interview questions were utilized for interviews (see Appendix F)

Individual Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching early learners? (background/demographic) CRQ
2. Please describe the interactive method used at this center for each age group.
(background/demographic) CRQ
3. Please describe the initial stressors you experienced when the school shutdown mandate was initiated. CRQ

4. Please describe the stressors or challenges you experienced during the school-to-home learning process. CRQ
5. Please describe the process for your centers or the leadership to design a plan to provide remote-based educational services that help alleviate your stressors. CRQ
6. Please explain the challenges or stressors you experienced during the COVID-19 shutdown. CRQ and SQ2, 4
7. How did you alleviate the unprecedented stressors of the school shutdown to meet the needs of the early learners? SQ1
8. How did you provide remote services to the parents and families? SQ1
9. Please describe the associated stressors to providing remote services to the parents and families. SQ3
10. How did the shutdown impact food services for children and families? SQ1
11. Please describe the changes you were required to make to the curriculum to ensure continual learning for each age group. SQ1
12. How did changing the curriculum create significant stressors for you? Why? SQ1
13. How would you describe the quality of education services you/your center could provide to the early learners during the COVID-19 shutdown? SQ1
14. What were the short-term challenges or stressors in transitioning to remote-based education? SRQ2
15. What were the long-term challenges or stressors in transitioning to remote-based education? Why? SRQ2
16. What resources, including technology, did the center have to help mitigate the transition to remote-based teaching? SQ3

17. What resources, including technology, had to be acquired by the center and yourself after the shutdown to help transition to remote-based teaching? Why? SQ3

18. Please describe the professional development training in emergency preparedness you received before the COVID-19 shutdown. SQ3, 4

Questions 1 and 2 were designed to generate background and demographic information about the ECE and aid the researcher in developing a connection to the ECE and better understanding each educator's perception of the COVID-19 shutdown. Questions 3 through 6 were designed to support the central research question and acquire data related to the educators' stress levels and challenges. Questions 7 through 8 were designed to gather data on stressors relating to meeting the needs of the early learners, parents, and families. Questions 9 through 15 specifically address the challenges in delivering education services and the impact on early childhood pedagogy. Questions 16 and 17 target technology and challenges educators experienced in delivering remote-based education services to EL and families. Finally, question 18 inquiries about training and professional development opportunities for ECE before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

The best time to analyze the data is immediately after each interview (Yazan, 2015). Pattern matching is a more desirable technique (Yin, 2018). However, coding is the best process for analyzing qualitative data (Saldana, 2021; Yin, 2018). Coding is an analytical technique that categorizes qualitative data by descriptive words or short phrases (Saldana, 2021). These descriptive words or short phrases are used to capture or identify and group similar information or data acquired from interview transcripts, participant observations, field notes, and documents during the qualitative data collection process, such as a structured interview. Saldana (2021)

designed a code datum to display the data accordingly: codes, sub-codes, and themes are in capitalized letters, subthemes are set in italicized capitalized letters, categories are in bold, and subcategories are in bold italicized letters. A pattern is identified when the evidence is repetitious or there is a continual presence of the action and how people handle, perceive, or process a situation or experience. Evidence becomes more trustworthy when this particular action or response is consistently identified. Patterns occur when things are done repetitively and similarly. Frequency is determined by how often things occur, and the sequence is determined by the order in which things occur. Subsequently, patterns can demonstrate themes and significant evidence. Coding is a cyclical technique; multiple coding cycles are usually necessary to acquire rich data.

Theme development was achieved through a qualitative data analysis process known as coding. A code is a word or phrase with a summative description or relevant data (Saldana, 2021). Codes are analyzed and consolidated into categories; streamlined categories associate the data into themes and subthemes. Coding allows the researcher to analyze and synthesize vast data acquired through interviews and focus groups into symbolic summation or the simple and fundamental components known as reduction (Saldaña, 2021). Coding helped convey vast data and complex stories people experienced during a global event in the most straightforward format. Coding is designed to cause rich data to surface without the impact or bias of the researcher.

Therefore, the interview responses were examined to ensure adequate data were drawn to satisfy the question. If the data required a follow-up inquiry, the inquiry would have occurred within five days to ensure the participant was available to clarify the data. Thus, each was assigned a three-digit identifier number to protect the ECE identity. The data from the interview transcript was analyzed and coded to look for patterns, insights, and concepts (Yin, 2018)

according to a code datum outlined by Saldana (2021). The second coding cycle was conducted by grouping and matching the initial structure codes in additional categories, themes, and patterns through deeper coding (Saldana, 2021). Examining the data from different charts and graphs allowed me to garner themes that could be coded by color, related code words, or phrases and to drill down the information for rich data and a deeper understanding of the ECE experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Documents Analysis

Record-keeping is vital for any agency or institution; therefore, reviewing hard copies or electronic documents was explicit in any data collection plan (Yin, 2018). I sought prior approval and obtained consent to protect the confidentiality of early learners. These guidelines or protocols were established and agreed on before initiating the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2018). For case study research, documents are used to substantiate and strengthen data from other sources, such as interviews (Yin, 2018).

Documentation analysis was valuable for collecting data (Yin, 2018) generated due to the COVID-19 pandemic closure. A paper trail provided essential information and demonstrated how educators and other center staff captured essential data. Documentation included the need for immediate decision-making, such as work schedules, modified lesson plans, program modifications, written communication to staff, families, and parents, and reports to business partners (Yin, 2018). Thus, the documentation analysis provided in-depth, rich information that may only sometimes emerge during the interviewing or observation processes (Yin, 2018). The financial records and budgets can provide a detailed picture of how the COVID-19 pandemic closure impacted the early childcare centers' finances and payroll for their staff and the impact on families (Yin, 2018). For this case study, I collected documents copies to include but not

limited to attendance records, early learners' participation records, curriculum, curriculum modifications due to the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency plans, COVID-19 plan and program modifications, budgets, financial records, unexpected technology purchases, letters, and memos to parents, staff, and stakeholders (see Appendix H).

Each document requested is aligned with at least one of the interview questions and research questions. I created a documentation table (see Appendix H); the first column has each research question. The second column delineates the requested document(s). The third column has the detailed notes and data from the document(s) review that connect to the interview questions and add validity to the interview responses. The documentation table allowed me to capture any special notes or follow-up items in the fourth column of the table.

Document Data Analysis

Before the interview, the early childcare centers' leadership received a list of documents to review, with the understanding of requesting additional documents later in the research. Each document was reviewed in detail, assigned a three-digit identifier number, and was uploaded as a PDF document in a Word folder. The document identifier number and a brief description of the document contents was entered into an Excel database. Each document number was hyperlinked to the corresponding interview question number, and each interview question number was hyperlinked to the aligned research question.

Focus Group

The third data collection method was a focus group. The focus group was an opportunity to capture additional insight and perspectives omitted during the interview and to observe participants interacting with others with the same real-world lived experience. The focus group was an opportunity to clarify gaps in the data gathered from the interviews and the analysis of

the documents. A focus group was an excellent opportunity to address other issues that emerged during the data analysis. The focus group can expand on a factor that emerged during the focus group's interactions (Creswell, 2013). Focus groups are an opportunity to observe and capture the emotions and sincerity of participants as they share their experiences and validate each other's experiences. During focus groups, conversations become mutual reflectivity (Yin, 2018). The focus group used questions to focus on one aspect of the case study (Yin, 2018). The following focus group questions were used for this study (see Appendix G).

Focus Group Questions

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic post-pandemic restoration impacted your life as an educator? CRQ.
2. How would you describe your mental and emotional status when hearing about the school shutdown? CRQ, SQ3
3. How did you find personal healing, resolve, or solace during the post-pandemic restoration? SQ3
4. How has early childhood education changed negatively due to the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ1, 2
5. How has early childhood education changed positively due to the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ1, 2
6. Why did you remain in early childhood education after the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ3, 4
7. How did your leadership manage the challenges and stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ4
8. How well prepared were you to help young children cope with the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ3

9. How did you manage the changes in your own family? CRQ, SQ2
10. Why did you choose to participate in this case study? SQ4

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The focus groups were held in person and recorded on the Zoom platform to preserve the transcript of the conversations. Listening to the recordings was an opportunity to clarify notes while writing the results. The data analysis for the focus groups included Saldana's (2021) code datum model. The focus groups' transcripts were uploaded onto a Word document and compared to the interview questions data for emergent themes to evaluate the data to look for errors and contradictions that needed clarification.

Data Synthesis

Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings; data analysis is the art of interpreting data for meaning (Yin, 2018). The researcher, the main instrument in the study, stands between the data and the findings (Yin, 2018). The study relied on data from interviews, documents, and focus groups. A case study created a connection between the researcher and the participants. The comfort level made it easier for participants to share as much information as possible about their experiences. The study relied on audio recordings, transcription notes, interviews, and focused group notes. The data from the three sources were perused, triangulated, and categorically aggregated using coding to identify significant themes, patterns, and emerging theories from the data analysis, evaluated the data, synthesized outcomes that emerged during the data analysis, and addressed rival explanations or interpretations (Saldana, 2021). Finally, a description of the case study described how the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown created unprecedented stressors for ECE and the negative impact on ECL and post-pandemic restoration (Saldana, 2021).

The data analysis for the interviews, documents, and focus groups were coded and uploaded on a spreadsheet. Focus group notes were analyzed using the same coding process designed by Saldana (2021). The data from the three sources were analyzed using the code datum: codes, sub-codes, and themes are in all capitalized letters, subthemes in italicized capital letters, categories in bold, and subcategories in bold italicized letters (Saldana, 2021). Multiple code cycles were used to acquire deep, rich data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldana, 2021). The deep-rich data was displayed on a spreadsheet to present the outcome of the ECE's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) published the standards for trustworthiness in qualitative studies, especially for credibility. Qualitative case studies have historically been challenged in trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, Lincoln and Guba (1985) established the criteria for trustworthiness to justify qualitative studies on a similar level as quantitative studies have internal and external validity. I was responsible for conducting the case study and building the participants' trust so I could subsequently trust them to provide accurate data. I demonstrated trustworthiness by adhering to my research plan and sharing the results with the participants.

Credibility

Credibility is equivalent to internal validity or confidence in the truth of a study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2018). To achieve credibility, I triangulated data drawn from the three sources of evidence: interviews, documents and focus groups. The purpose of triangulation was to corroborate the evidence and test for data consistency (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2018). According to Yin (2018) and Creswell and Guetterman (2019), triangulation strengthens the validity of the research findings. In addition to

triangulation, my prolonged engagement in the field was essential to developing a good rapport with the participants, understanding the bounded system, and acquiring an in-depth understanding of their experiences during the pandemic (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

In addition, member checking is another method for building credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2018). The interview participants reviewed the themes, patterns, and trends that emerged during the analysis, provided feedback, and confirmed accuracy. After the research ended, all documents associated with the research fell under Liberty University's document retention policy.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research is equivalent to external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Findings are generalized in another context outside the current case study for other case studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My responsibility as the researcher was to ensure readers had access to a sufficient description of the case study to ensure they understood the issue and the procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I was also responsible for providing sufficient contextual information to make transferability feasible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2018).

Dependability

Dependability is equivalent to reliability in quantitative research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A compelling qualitative case study has explicit rich details, produces consistent findings, and is replicable by other researchers (Yin, 2018). Comprehensive procedures delineate the methods and steps required to replicate the study, including how to collect, analyze, and synthesize the data. One strategy of dependability is an inquiry or case study audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The dissertation committee and the

qualitative research director at Liberty University thoroughly reviewed the case study process and all associated products and documents.

Confirmability

Confirmability requires a detailed paper trail documenting all actions taken during the case study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability includes confirmability audits, audit trails, triangulation, and reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal for me, as the researcher, is to demonstrate a compelling case study and ensure all data collection records, including reflection notes throughout the case study and a log of actions associated with the case study, are well organized and maintained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2018). In addition, the triangulation of all sources of evidence was an essential data analysis process for the qualitative case study; therefore, the source evidence triangulation allowed an opportunity to assess consistency and accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2018). I followed the case study's procedures and documented detailed and accurate findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical research practices were followed in every project or process phase. Creswell and Poth (2018) posit that ethical issues are not just associated with data collection and are limited to plagiarism, although plagiarism is a significant violation. Various ethical considerations must be adhered to before conducting the study, beginning to conduct the study, collecting data, analyzing the data, reporting the data, and publishing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I completed the CITI training and have a working knowledge of federal regulations, laws, and rules associated with my role as a professional researcher in human subject research. I printed several documents from the training to create an operating manual, and I referred back to this training at each phase of the research and reviewed various topics as needed.

I followed all expectations outlined by the IRB. I demonstrated transparency and honesty with all research findings, provided the consent forms with a confidentiality statement, and ensured that all names and documents associated with this case study were confidential (Yin, 2018). The interview participants' personal identification information associated with the interviews, including recordings of interviews, participants' observation notes, and document analysis, were electronically stored and password protected.

Summary

The purpose of this case study was to describe the unprecedented stressors of ECE during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic restoration at the two ECEC in a midwestern state. Emerging research about the COVID-19 pandemic continues to reveal literature gaps; therefore, additional studies are needed to ascertain if the results of earlier studies transitioned or intensified throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Barnett et al., 2021; Benner & Mistry, 2020; Yang & Zhang, 2022; Heyworth et al., 2021). A qualitative case study using a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions allowed the researcher to record the experiences of the ECE directly involved in navigating the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Chapter 3, detailed procedures were provided to delineate the steps of the case study, the research design, and the analysis used in this case study. This case study's data collection and analysis aligned with Yin's (2018) design and methodology. This chapter concluded with a description of trustworthiness and guidelines for ethical considerations that ensured the study has credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this case study is to describe the unprecedented stressors of ECE during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic restoration. Chapter four describes the 10 participants, who are ECE from two ECEC in a midwestern state. The educators shared rich data from their experiences as educators during the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown from March 2020 through June 2020 and the reopening of the centers in June 2020 through March 2023. The results of this case study transpired from the triangulation of three data sources: semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Coding was the qualitative method of data analysis applied in this study. Themes and subthemes, including in vivo quotes, are presented to support the findings. The answers to the research questions are presented, and the chapter ends with a summary.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used in this study. A final sample of 10 ECE participated in an in-depth individual interview and two focus groups. The participants' identities are protected by using pseudonyms. A general description of each participant is provided; however, descriptive data is limited to protect their identity. In addition, not associating the names of the participants to a specific center will also protect their identity among their co-workers and from any breach of confidentiality. The participants' responses were too significant to omit from this study and would thus diminish the participants' experiences and the research outcome. The in vivo quotes were used to help share the participants' stories and to solidify the themes that emerged from the rich data. The 10 participants were passionate about their roles as ECE, and their careers ranged from three to 30 years.

Table 1*Educators Participants*

Educator participant	Years taught	Employment status
Alana	1-15	Fulltime
Chelsea	15-30	Fulltime
Gabrielle	1-15	Fulltime
Isabella	1-15	Fulltime
Jada	15-30	Fulltime
Montana	15-30	Fulltime
Noelle	1-15	Fulltime
Patience	1-15	Fulltime
Precious	1-15	Fulltime
Zenobia	1-15	Fulltime

Alana

Alana has been in early child education between the 1–15 years range. When she first heard about the shutdown, her first thoughts were about her finances and how to keep a home for her family. She shared, “I begin my day with prayer. It was very stressful to manage work and concerns about my family.”

Chelsea

Chelsea has been an early child education professional for many years and has several years of leadership in various educational areas. Chelsea’s years of experience have equipped her to be grounded and not so emotionally impacted by the unrest of the COVID-19 pandemic. She is resourceful and sought ways to help parents navigate through the stormy climate of the

COVID-19 pandemic. Chelsea is kind, and her staff admires her as being confident.

Gabrielle

Gabrielle is in leadership. She has been in the early childhood career in the 1–15 years range. She was the first participant interviewed. She presented a positive outlook. When she heard about the shutdown, she expressed that financial well-being was her immediate concern. She was concerned that the Zoom approach did not have a good outcome because the students were not paying attention and were distracted by being outside the standard setting. She was also concerned that the parents would not be satisfied with what they provided as they were paying good money for their children's care.

Isabella

Isabella is in leadership. She is an out-of-the-box strategic thinker. She wrote a letter to stakeholders and shared the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on early childhood education and represented ECE as a highly essential profession. The educators at her center give her credit for being hands-on and accessible during the COVID-19 pandemic. She was creative in maintaining connections between the educators and the families. Isabella stated, "As a leader, I must be intentional when building community in the centers. I am intentional about building culture, and there are things COVID interrupted, but we are going back to community building. It was important for the students."

Jada

Jada has a long career in early childhood education and extensive experience in childcare. The center she works at takes children beginning at six weeks and continues to provide families with after-school services for students up to the fifth grade. She was promoted to leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. The educators were laid off, and Jada has two young children,

so she took time off during the global shutdown (March 2020–June 2020) to care for her children and her personal education goals. Jada has a strong work ethic. Jada shared, “My main concern was maintaining a connection with the parents.” She expressed, “I am looking for new educators and it seems no one is passionate about working with children like they used to.”

Montana

Montana currently works in an administrative position in the early education center but works closely with the educators. She has dedicated over 25 years to early childhood education. She acknowledged that the center’s owner is hands-on, provides support, and keeps them updated and encouraged. Montana expressed, “We were paid the entire time, and I did not lose my income and my ability to care for my family.”

Noelle

Noelle is young and energetic. She is creative and enjoys doing craft projects to help children learn. When asked about the impact of COVID-19 on the quality of services, she replied, “I do not believe the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the quality of services we provided because we continue to offer the parents help and we used Zoom and Hi Mama to stay in touch with the students.” Noelle believes that her previous training in family intervention provided the skills necessary to sustain her ability to manage through the industry shutdown.

Patience

Patience is in leadership. Her initial stressor during the mandated school shutdown was payroll. Patience shared, “I wondered if we would meet payroll and retain the educators and the additional cost of operation, including acquiring the health and safety resources mandated by the CDC.” Closing the center was a significant stressor for Patience. She shared, “I became ill with the COVID-19 virus twice, my newborn tested positive, and I was concerned for her health and

keeping my baby safe.” Patience also stressed connecting with everyone and remaining relevant, and the educators were unsure they would return to the center. She also shared that most of the families did not participate in Zoom. Patience shared, “I still do not feel that the parents and community involvement are back at the level it was before the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Precious

Precious is another young, energetic educator who is also passionate about her career in early child education. Her story is deep but will reveal her identity to her colleagues. She pushed past her situation to meet the needs of the students and parents. She acknowledged behavior challenges when the students returned after the shutdown. She added, “Babies were no longer potty-trained and back in diapers and this was stressful because the work we put in on development was gone, but we love our children and began working with them in those areas.” Precious is passionate about what she does as an educator and enjoys her time at home with her children.

Zenobia

Zenobia exudes passion. She is a single parent and takes her roles as a mother and an educator very seriously. When the center closed, she lost childcare for her child and income. She provided personal childcare services for families during COVID-19 so that the families could go to work. Zenobia is concerned about the parents' welfare and their students' advancement. Zenobia expressed, “COVID changed me as a parent and as an educator!”

Results

This study utilized a qualitative case study approach to explore the lived human experiences of the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic (Yin, 2018). This case study allowed educators to engage in research and share the challenges they experienced. These ECE

experienced unprecedented stressors in navigating an essential service for many professionals, including first responders, during the uncertainty of the global shutdown between March 2020 and June 2020 and post-shutdown through March 2023. The educators shared about the impact of the shutdown, the months following, the slow reopening that created significant concerns for the health and safety of their families, the cognitive development of early learners, and the sustainability of employment and financial instability that impacted everyone. As one participant, Jada, said, “COVID-19 changed everyone in many ways.” The central research questions and sub-questions focus on the unprecedented stressors and how the stressors impacted ECE and learners. The data collected from the interviews, the focus groups, and the documents are distinct and identify the personal and professional challenges that lead to their stressors. The data were analyzed, and coding allowed themes to emerge from the data.

Theme Development

The outcome of the data analysis resulted in the identification of 30 codes, nine sub-themes, and three themes gathered from three data collection methods: interviews, focus groups, and documents. The coding process produced three themes: sustainability, wellness, and responsible restart. The themes are not listed in any order of significance. Each theme has sub-themes that are significant in answering the central research questions and the four sub-questions. Below is the table of themes, sub-themes, and codes.

Table 2

Themes Development

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Sustainability	Employment	Lost income, Money management, Jobs,
	Family Retention	Family retention, Engagement, New equipment, In-home childcare,
	Budget / Finances	Disconnection, Barriers, New procedures
Wellbeing	Health & Safety	Personal Challenges, Health concerns,
	Trauma	Safety, PPE, Trauma for students & parents,
	Child Development	Trauma for teachers, Compassion Fatigue,
	Regression	Communication, Vacancies
Responsible restart	Planning to Restart	Teaching strategies, Montessori, Learning
	Community Building	Beyond Paper, Technology, Equipment,
	Family & Educator	Stakeholders Engagement, Extended
	Connection	Practices, Curriculum, Coming back, Post COVID, New processes

Sustainability

The first theme identified in the data was sustainability in every area impacted by the shutdown, including employment, family retention, and budget/finances. The urgency of sustainability was reiterated multiple times during the interviews and the focus groups. Fifteen of the 18 interview questions and three focus group questions captured approximately 350 responses throughout the research that aligned with sustainability. In addition to the interviews and focus groups, the documents, such as the budgets and specific line items, grant awards

criteria, the funding allocations, and the expenditure demonstrated supporting efforts. These budgetary and grant awards documents demonstrated efforts taken to provide sustainability to the centers and supported the efforts taken by the centers' leadership to deploy sustainability efforts. Therefore, the centers took immediate action in areas that needed sustainability.

The shutdown mandates distressed the education industry as they were unprepared for this magnitude of disruption. Like most entities, the centers were not equipped with an approved pandemic emergency plan to execute. The centers' leaders did not have definitive dates for reopening as they waited on instructions from the CDC and other governmental entities. During the interviews, the educators shared that they were immediately concerned about their employment and their ability to care for their families, and they were concerned about the welfare of their students and parents. At the time, the impact seemed insurmountable. Chelsea shared in her interview, "How do I provide for my family? I thought about how to help my family; that is what I do, but how can I help? How will parents work if they do not have childcare?" Isabella explained, "At the moment, it was terrifying. I was going to close the center, but my husband told me not to give up." A focus group participant said, "I was worried about my kids' missing days from school, and it was hard to provide face-to-face encounters, and online virtual was hard." During the focus group, a leader shared an innovative strategy, "I wrote to the state legislature because I felt they needed to understand what we were experiencing and to ascertain the posture of our leaders and the need for action." Sustainability was inevitable for survival. During the interview, Isabella said, "Soon after the news of the shutdown, everyone took a deep breath, survival mode kicked in, and the fight was on to protect early childhood education." The centers needed immediate action for survival. The three sub-themes emerged as the more significant areas that required immediate action.

Employment

One of the sub-themes of sustainability is employment. Four codes were categorized to form employment as a sub-theme: lost income, money management, jobs, and family retention. Again, the responses to the 15 interview questions during the focus group solidified employment as a sub-theme. There were approximately 205 employment-related responses from the participants. They presented their experience relating to employment concerns with significant emotions. Hence, employment is a significant finding.

When the shutdown occurred, ECEC were unlike the school districts with large budgets and allocated resources and contracts to sustain payroll and operational needs. Early childhood educators' employment depended on parents' childcare fees, and no students equals no childcare fees. Therefore, maintaining employment was a significant stressor. Patience shared in her interview, "My first thought was how can I make payroll and pay staff." Noelle, in her interview, shared, "It was very stressful. I needed money and was not sure if I had a job." Most participants shared during the interview that they thought they would lose their jobs and could not provide for their household and children. Precious shared in her interview, "I am a single mother, and money and not knowing if I will have a job was stressful." Zenobia had very personal information in her interview, "Early childcare is my only source of income. I was afraid... I have no way to provide for my child. I was unsure when I could return to work. I applied for public assistance to sustain my family." Alana said in her interview, "It was very stressful. I was concerned about my finances and retaining my home." A few participants resorted to creative strategies to maintain employment and family connections. In their interviews, Chelsea, Gabrielle, and Zenobia shared that they provided in-home childcare to help the families to keep income in their homes and to retain families.

In the focus group, one leader shared her giant step of faith, “I called my parents and reminded them how much the educators do to care for their children with the utmost care, and I asked if they could continue their payments because the staff have families to provide for as well.” Some of the parents in her centers continued to work from home, but most of her parents are healthcare professionals and first responders. She shared, “I paid my staff and did not lose any staff during the shutdown or reopening. The parents continued to pay their childcare payments.” During an interview, Chelsea shared, “My center’s head office merged centers and provided employment opportunities to educators; in 2021, the agency restructured salaries to increase educators’ pay.” The center’s ability to pay higher salaries has been beneficial in securing educators, although they still need additional educators. The documents’ analysis of budgets and allocations of grant funding in the human capital line items also support these efforts.

Furthermore, the educators agreed that COVID-19 professionalized early childhood education. Isabella explained in the focus group, “I did not feel that the industry respected ECE and did not give us the recognition we deserved. Sometimes people forget the life of hourly paid employees and their challenges versus salary paid employees.” Montana shared in an interview, “Early childhood education is essential, and without it, many professionals could not go to work because they need a safe place for their children to go during working hours.” In their comments, Isabella and Gabrielle also expressed how essential early childhood is because it is a critical point in a child’s development, foundational learning in preparation for elementary school, and socialization while navigating the environment around them. In addition to teaching, Jada is responsible for onboarding new staff, and she shared in the focus group, “There is a shift in hiring. ECE demand higher salaries, making securing qualified educators tricky.” Therefore,

centers' directors and assistant directors are required to spend more time in the classrooms and less on operation, which has added to the stress of managing centers during the COVID-19 upheaval. Thus, sustaining employment was an imminent concern that required a strategic plan to help bring some sense of resolve for the educators and to reduce COVID-19 stressors. As presented by the data, with supplemental funding, the centers increased staff salaries, which improved the centers' ability to retain staffing levels and offer better salaries when hiring new staff.

Family Retention

Like employment, family retention is another sub-theme under sustainability. Family retention was presented with significant concerns during the interviews and focus group because it is the essence of the educator's professional service, as well as the primary source of income required to sustain the centers. Between the interview questions and focus groups, responses related to family retention were mentioned 130 times. The codes that formed the sub-theme of family retention are family retention, new procedures, and disconnection.

The shutdown was from March through June 2020, but in June 2020, the centers began to reopen to families with limited occupants slowly and eventually allowed centers to reach total capacity. Therefore, retaining families during the four months impacted the budget and sustainability. The concern of losing families, which meant losing EL during the shutdown, the aftermath, and the fears associated with the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed some educators. Hence, family retention was a concern expressed throughout the interviews with educators.

Montana, in her interview, said, "I was concerned that families would not return. It was essential to stay connected to the families." Other educators shared similar concerns and thought that this was especially true if the centers were closed for a long time. Chelsea said in a focus

group, “I constantly thought about what I could do to help our families because this is all I do daily.” Family retention emerged as a significant sub-theme, showing educators' extended approach to staying connected. These were innovative approaches to retaining family connections. Noelle shared in her interview, “I recorded myself reading books and singing songs to send to families to play for their children so that learning continues. I also created virtual field trips for students using technology.” According to the interview data, both centers communicated with families through an app called ‘Hi Mama.’ The app allowed educators to send real-time pictures, videos, and other information about the center to the parents and to send the parents educational activities to engage in with their children to keep learning ongoing. This is especially good for young children. Precious shared, “We keep families in the loop on CDC guidelines as the preparations for reopening were being discussed nationally, and we provided a real-time response to all parents at once.” Isabella explained in her interview, “Most of my parents are medical professionals and first responders, and they were anxious to secure their child’s spot in the center when it re-opened.” Unfortunately, reopening was slow, and many new procedures were implemented due to the U.S. CDC guidelines. As stated earlier, educators sought ways to stay connected to the students’ families throughout the transition, which resulted in retaining families.

Early Education Centers Reopening

The process for early education centers reopening is a significant topic for discussion under the sub-theme of family retention. The CDC and the governor granted permission for early childcare centers to reopen, but reopening was not as easy as it sounds. The leaders participating in the interviews and focus groups shared that reopening and trying to follow the new CDC guidelines and our licensing requirements were challenging and required more money. However,

Montana shared in her interview, “I was concerned that we would violate licensing requirements.” The limited capacity set by the state and the CDC was also challenging, and both centers handled the process differently. One leader shared that her center’s reopening was on a first-come, first-serve protocol because they had limited space, and when the center reached capacity, they had to stop admission for the day and send other families away. The parents were no longer allowed in the center.

The other center leader shared a document she developed for the analysis called “Responsible Restart Changes to Procedures.” During her interview, she shared, “When early education centers received official permission to re-open, the capacity was limited. It became another stressful process, and I drafted a document of restart procedures and mailed it to all parents.” According to the document analysis, the Responsible Restart Changes to Procedures comprised a summation of rules and regulations for the center’s operations under the mandated standards of the CDC and official state regulations. The centers created a pre-registered form and required parents to pre-register the night before. The registration form also required an update on family members and a wellness screening to ensure the early learner was free of the COVID-19 virus.

Both centers shared their new entrance procedures. Patience also shared in her interview, “All parents were screened prior to dropping off their children to the educators, and the educators would walk the children to their classrooms.” Parents were not allowed to enter the centers; they dropped off their children at the door, and a staff member received the child and walked the child to his classroom. It was unfortunate because the parents and educators lost that brief exchange opportunity. The educators endeavored to reopen the centers according to the state and the CDC

guidelines, which was stressful because the guidelines were new and the great responsibility of ensuring everyone's safety and addressing the impact of the long break on the students' growth.

During the focus group, Isabella shared, "We had 30 kids in June 2020, but the center admitted only 15 students every other week to ensure a slow but safe re-opening." She stated, "Our center only lost one family with two students, but we received a new family with two students because we provided virtual stations for elementary school services to a family." Therefore, the census did not change. Chelsea also shared, "We had to get the students refocused on learning again." The educators shared similar states that the general message implied that the priority was health and safety and not necessarily teaching and learning.

Budget and Finances

Budget and finances is the third sub-theme. The data reflected that COVID-19 significantly impacted early education budgets and finances. The sub-theme is comprised of four codes: money management, new equipment, barriers, and new procedures. The responses relative to having a robust budget and finance were provided in the interviews by five of the ten participants, mainly because the five were in leadership roles and had more knowledge of the financial management of the centers. They provided 65 responses related to budgeting and finance. In addition, the budget/finance data was also extracted from the document analysis, which included the budgets and specific line items, grant awards criteria and allocations, funding distributions, and expenditures supporting the efforts to provide sustainability to the centers. Unfortunately, what was occurring in the country did not come with a financial plan or robust budget to sustain payroll without the stability of childcare fees, which was challenging to accomplish during the shutdown (March 2020–June 2020) and immediately after the reopening. Early childhood education programs lack a robust budget to absorb or to accommodate

emergency expenses. In addition to writing legislature, Isabella shared, “Early education centers were able to apply for a grant through a state children's services agency. We received grants to help supplement the budget and provide the much-needed resources required to operate under CDC mandates.” The centers received Childcare Stabilization Grants to augment the budget and bring sustainability to future strategic plans. Chelsea shared, “The center they led received grant money to offset the expenses and support the expenses of health and safety products and supplies.” The grant was effective in addressing sustainability issues and assisting the early childhood centers’ leadership to mitigate some of the COVID-19 stressors.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing was another theme that emerged from the coding process. Well-being emerged mainly from the data collected through the interviews and the focus groups. The data analysis often found statements that were reiterated from the interview. Although they may not have used the exact word ‘wellbeing’ in their responses about their level of stress, other words that are associated with wellbeing were captured. Fifteen interview questions and four focus group questions allowed the participants to express their experiences. The expression of the stressful situation was mentioned approximately 105 times. The focus group was ignited during the discussion of wellness or wellbeing-related topics. Six of the ten questions drew out data about well-being. During her interview, Chelsea shared, “Early childcare became more about health and safety than learning for a moment.” The educators’ discussions on wellness grew intensely during the interviews due to the circulating and often contradictory news about the COVID-19 pandemic virus, how it spreads, the proper safety precautions, and related death rates. They endeavored to sift through what was genuine and fake news, but it became overwhelming and stressful. Some educators struggled with good mental health, a healthy sense of meaning and

purpose, and the ability to manage stress. Patience expressed during her interview, “I felt alone at times.” Zenobia and Patience shared about their journeys, giving childbirth during the pandemic, and managing personal losses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the social distancing guidelines, they endured these significant life incidents alone, which added to personal stress and the need for personal wellness.

In the focus group, Noelle shared, “I worked hard to keep the parents engaged.” Precious and Alana shared similar comments about keeping parents engaged so that parents had some emotional support. Leaders were vulnerable during the focus group and interviews. They shared that making the right or necessary decisions about life, family, staff, students, and community was challenging, and finding the proper perspective to fight was essential to overall wellness. Educators shared that their leaders made the difference and were available with open communication to keep everyone current. This approach helped to alleviate some of the mental stress. Montana said in her interview, “We stayed in contact and had weekly meetings with the leaders. I was afraid I would get the students sick.” Alana shared, “I was concerned for my health and the student’s health.” Noelle also shared similar concerns as Alana. Gabrielle shared, “It was stressful working extra hours to ensure CDC mandates were followed and going home and stripping off my clothes at the door to ensure my family’s safety.” Jada also shared in both the interview and focus group, “COVID-19 impacted many people in many ways. It is hard to find staff, and no one is passionate about working with young children.” Educators had to make tough decisions about their well-being and their families’ well-being. Jada shared during the interview that she took the layoff during the shutdown (March 2020–June 2020) and stayed home with her children because, at the time, she had a kindergarten and a third grader at home that needed her. In addition, Patience shared about her childbirth experience during COVID-19, “Because of the

COVID-19 mandates in the hospital, no one could be with me, and I had to give birth to my child alone.” This was an emotional time for her, and she could not share such a glorious experience with loved ones. Well-being emerged as a significant theme in this study.

Health and Safety

Health and safety surfaced as a sub-theme under wellbeing. Data surrounding health and safety emerged from the interviews, mainly from the focus groups. Health and safety are a sub-theme that drew expressions from the participants because they were concerned about their health and safety and the students' and their families' health and safety. There were approximately 105 responses related to health and safety. Chelsea shared, “It became evident that the fight was about health and safety, not teaching or learning.” As a leader, Isabella was responsible for implementing a plan for reopening, and her concern was, “The new regulations had not been tested...we were in the face of the unknown, and it was difficult for us to take some of the recommendations that the state was giving us.” The centers were required to set up barriers to separate the EL into small groups, and each area had to install portable sinks to accommodate hand washing and a fogger to sanitize the whole space. In her interview, Montana said, “The guidelines mandated the separation of the students and educators.” State regulations prohibited portable sinks until the COVID-19 pandemic, but Isabella shared that she appreciated them and has retained them in her classrooms. Jada shared that her center retained some dividers because it is beneficial to have them in some of the learning areas of the centers.

Remaining health and safety conscious requires making decisions. Leaders shared that some decisions were uncomfortable for parents and staff, which was tough, depending on the situation. For example, in June 2020, centers were allowed to reopen. Isabella reported to her families that she would only take 30 families and increase by 15 students at a time until total

capacity. Therefore, some families started while others could not because of the limits. The slow opening allowed the centers time to manage the centers and the students according to the CDC and state guidelines in small groups. Leaders admitted that this was a challenge and a risk, but fortunately, it did not impact the families' connection to the centers. No one wanted to get sick with the virus and take it home or create a situation in the center that caused a student to become ill and pass it along to the family. Thus, outstanding levels of concern for staff and families required a balance of mental wellness, health, and safety.

Trauma

Trauma emerged as a sub-theme under well-being throughout the study through the interviews and focus groups. The sub-theme trauma comprises the following codes: trauma for students and parents, trauma for teachers, compassion fatigue, communication, and vacancies. The word trauma may not have been specifically used each time, but the description of the impact of COVID-19 is trauma-related. There were approximately 95 expressions shared throughout the study related to trauma. Early childhood trauma generally refers to the traumatic experiences that occur to children aged zero to six (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2021). Children who have experienced trauma have trouble processing and remembering information, differentiating between safe and unsafe situations, connecting to and trusting adults, and regulating their feelings (Statman-Weil & Hibbard, 2020). According to Zenobia in her interview, “There were clear signs of trauma identified in our children when they returned to the centers.” During the interview, Zenobia was passionate and disappointed because she invested time in developing material to send home so parents could continue stimulating the student’s development. However, the student's development had declined, which is also supported by data gathered from the other participants.

Educators' well-being was crucial as well. Their ability to function amid such chaos was imperative and they often performed exemplary. During the focus groups, Isabella shared, "There were times co-workers had to extend grace to each other. We provided time for staff to process emotions due to the trauma they experienced, and we let them have some space at work." Chelsea shared during the focus group that she sent notes of encouragement to fellow educators and provided lunch to show appreciation and other kind gestures. Isabella shared that students manifest their trauma in different ways, such as rage, fear, and inability to self-soothe. In the interview, a leader shared, "It appears that some parents were dealing with 'parent paralyzes,' and they have taken their hand off the wheels, and students are doing their thing." During the focus group, Patience shared, "Some students regressed and had fallen to a level of development they had excelled in before COVID-19." Developing strategies to address regression issues like these while engaging students who are on target created a more stressful situation for educators to manage in the learning environment. Therefore, a strong support system was essential for ensuring the well-being of educators, students, and families who had experienced trauma. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2021) offers a plethora of resources to assist and train educators in the identification of trauma, how to build a trauma-sensitive environment in their centers, and how to ensure well-being and resiliency for self-care.

Childhood Development Regression

Childhood development regression is a sub-theme under the theme of well-being. This data was primarily captured during the interviews and focus groups, with approximately 95 responses to development regression. Unfortunately, when the EL started to return to the centers, the educators identified noticeable differences in the students. Because the centers retained their families, the educators could easily see the shutdown's impact on the students' development.

Zenobia reported, “The young students who were potty trained came back in diapers, students who were off the bottle came back on the bottle, and the same students were loud and cried more than before the shutdown.” Noelle shared in the focus group, “I was surprised and was expecting to see the students more advanced, but we were starting over!” One leader shared, “The students also presented significant separation issues, which was not an issue prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.” One leader shared during the interviews, “Some students had declined in fine and gross motor skills, and some were very loud and struggled to follow instructions.”

Another factor was that babies born after the shutdown came to the early education centers with different challenges. An educator shared that the babies born during COVID-19 were 8–9 months old but had little socialization because they spend most of their time at home and with only the mother. These children had little to no social cues and did not know how to sit and play. Students who are 2–2.5 years old are just coming into their personality, and some of their deficits would have been identified previously. Hence, the data supports that the shutdown had a substantial impact on young children's development.

Responsible Restart

Responsible restart is the third theme that transpired during the coding process. Data related to responsible restart was collected in the interviews and focus group, and the document analysis presented support. Approximately 52 expressions related to responsible restart were identified in the responses. Significant data was presented mainly by the centers’ leaders and administrative staff. Montana explained during her interview, “Returning the centers to total capacity was challenging. The preparation required new procedures to accommodate new or modified strategies that benefitted the centers’ required permanency. However, wearing a mask and the parent drop-off procedures and similar procedures continued as requirements. In 2023,

there is a workforce shortage, and the early education centers are being challenged with maintaining staff and filling vacancies. A copy of the center's responsible restart plan delineated the strategic approach to reopening and building the community simultaneously. When the education industry was allowed to reopen, addressing educators, families, and students' needs and concerns was a slow and methodical process.

Planning to Restart

Planning to restart is a sub-theme to responsible restart. The participants responded to the interviews about how they restarted; however, the document analysis provided data to support the responsible restart. Five codes were merged to form planning to restart: stakeholder engagement, extended practices, coming back, post-COVID, and new processes. From late 2021 through 2022, the centers were ramping up for reopening at an increased capacity. There were many moving parts to restart the centers, eventually getting the operation at total capacity. The centers designed a which delineated the many changes and mandates necessary to comply with CDC guidelines and state and local licensing requirements. Alana shared, "The leadership provided a detailed plan for reopening and managing the center and meeting the CDC guidelines." Implementing a well-thought-out plan still caused stressors for educators because the plan called for changes that were difficult to implement in the center with the early learners.

The Responsible Restart Plan outlined the hours of operations extended to accommodate the CDC mandates. The Responsible Restart Plan called for the morning registration of students, and a staggered schedule at the front entrance pick up and drop off, described in an earlier section of this chapter. Patience shared, "This plan outlined the new shoeless environment that required the parents to provide a new (not yet worn) pair of shoes or socks with gripper bottoms to leave at school. Students would change shoes daily once they arrived at school." The center

stopped serving breakfast, and parents could bring a morning snack for their child in a disposable container to be eaten upon arrival. Parents or caretakers were recommended to wear a mask for pick-up and drop-off. According to the document analysis, this plan outlined the mask policy that educators must wear masks and gloves throughout the day, and students must wear them as well. There were new procedures to manage the receiving, storing, and retrieving blankets, toys, backpacks, infant carriers, and strollers. Subsequently, the plan delineated COVID-19 pandemic protocols for educators, students, movement, daily activities, sanitation requirements, and schedule.

According to the document analysis, the restart plan was designed to meet the *Operational Guidance for K-12 Schools and Early Care and Education Programs to Support Safe In-Person Learning* (www.cdc.gov). The leadership was mandated to implement a core set of infectious disease prevention strategies in their everyday operations. The center closed during the initial shutdown in March and reopened in June 2020. Moreover, during the shutdown, educators were relocated to other centers designated as COVID-19 centers. By August 2020, they were getting to capacity, and the educators worked above and beyond to provide services to our families. Isabella shared in the focus group, “The most significant stressor was when a staff tested positive for the virus.” The center was mandated to initiate a 72-hour shutdown of the classroom, and the exposed educators were off work and followed the CDC guidelines before returning to work. Thus, not enough educators remained to manage the center when an exposure occurred. The corporation created student Wi-Fi to ensure students had digital access to the center and educators while away. Some educators do not believe early education centers will ever return to their full potential; however, they concur and believe that society now sees their value and respects them as education professionals. Planning to restart is a significant sub-theme.

Community Building in Early Education

Community building is a sub-theme to responsible restart. The 10 participants shared about the disruption to the center learning environment and the need for something different. Two interview questions and the focus groups provided 120 responses related to the disruption to the learning community in the centers. Community building is a significant sub-theme comprised of five codes of teaching strategies: Montessori, learning beyond paper, technology, and curriculum identified in this study. Isabella's educators emphasized in her interview, "Community building must be intentional and explain how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the early education center's community." Before the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the early education centers operated under the Montessori philosophy, and at the center of Montessori education is self-direction. Instead of a traditional model, the students are encouraged to make their own choices in the classroom, with a teacher to guide them along the way. Most Montessori education is hands-on and encourages plenty of play and collaborative activities with the other kids. Thus, working together in a community is essential. The students shared meals like a family, shared resources, and learned together like a community. The second early education center's approach, while embracing the Montessori philosophy, believes it is exceptional to have the flexibility to offer independence and structure for kids who need one, the other, or both. The students have space for self-led play, explore at their pace during open-ended experiences, practice leadership as classroom helpers, and sharpen self-help skills and strategies.

However, the mandates under the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the early education centers community. Isabella said, "The shared community quickly became individualized and isolated." The learning spaces were divided, small groups of students were separated from other students, and the educators could no longer work together with the students. Jada added in the

focus group, “The students’ school materials were divided, and each had a zip bag of supplies.” The educators explained that everyone wore masks, which was a challenge and became a barrier to communication. Gabrielle shared, “The students could not hear, the educators had to speak loudly, and the students had difficulties understanding each other, which led to frustration for both the educators and the students.” The educators understood that when communication is hindered, so is learning.

In one center, each group of students had one teacher, and one teacher was relieved by administrative staff to eliminate and limit the virus's spread among the educators if a child was ill. Thus, administrators had to spend more time in the classroom. Gabrielle shared, “I worked many hours, probably experiencing compassion fatigue as she worked from 6:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.” Isabella expressed, “Our kids failed behind our standards during 2021-2022, and we are just now getting back to the level we were at before the disruption.” She was excited to share that they are bringing back some of our programming, such as yoga and healthy food choices, because some of our food changed to meet CDC and COVID-19 pandemic guidelines. The centers’ educators and leadership are working intentionally to recover the loss experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and continue looking for innovative ways to keep early learning relevant.

Connection Between Family and Educators

The connection between family and educators is a sub-theme to responsible restart. During the interviews and focus groups, responses relative to the connection between family and educators occurred in approximately 92 responses; this was a significant finding. The connection between family and educators includes three codes identified in this study: stakeholder engagement, extended practices, and new processes. The case study results substantiate the

importance of balance and harmony between an early learner's family and school environments. The findings support that the disruption causes a disconnect between the educator, the student, and the family, impacting the child's development. Zenobia shared in her interview, "When the kids came back, they demonstrated signs of regression in development." As stated previously, they had returned to wearing diapers, back on the bottle, and separation crying. For the babies born during COVID-19, educators shared that the COVID-19 babies came to the centers having no social cues such as eye expressions and eye gaze, facial expressions covering a range of emotions and feelings, tone of voice, and voice inflections, to name a few. However, trained educators would have identified these critical child development elements, while the parents may not; however, when they work together, they complement each other in meeting the child's developmental stages. Educators in this study shared how they created lessons and learning activities for the students and sent them to the parents. Gabrielle shared in her interview, "It was important to keep the student learning and the parents satisfied. It was important for parents to know their students are learning." Thus, the findings support that the connection between the family and educators is a valuable foundational relationship in a child's early years of development. The connection between family and educators is essential.

Outliers Data and Findings

Two unexpected findings emerged but were not factors within the scope of my research and did not align with specific research questions. First, the data showed an overrepresentation of single mothers in the sample of participants. Some had young children who are students in the center where they worked, and some of the mothers' children were students but have now moved on to higher grades in elementary or middle school. When educators were asked why they

remained in early childhood education after the reopening, they shared that they loved working with young students because it was their passion and calling.

Secondly, the data shows that educators with 30 years of experience in the early childhood education profession shared that they did not experience personal stress during the transition; however, they were concerned for the parents, but they realized that they needed to do what was needed until the center reopened and the students returned. Therefore, they appear more grounded and not as easily moved by a crisis. They appeared more confident in providing effective services to parents and students. Experience speaks volumes for their abilities to navigate the upheavals of the shutdown.

Research Questions Responses

The purpose of this case study was to describe the unprecedented stressors of ECE during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic restoration. Through interviews and small focus groups, participants shared their real-life encounters and ascribed the value and significance of their experiences that fostered emergent themes from this study. This section presents succinct responses to the research questions that directed the course of this study. This presentation begins by sharing the participant's experiences relevant to the central research questions. Next, it describes how the participant experiences through the lens of three themes produced the responses to the three sub-questions.

Central Research Question

How did the COVID-19 pandemic's unprecedented stressors impact early childhood educators during the pandemic and post-pandemic era? Three themes emerged from the data to describe the unprecedented stressors that impacted ECE during the pandemic. The three themes, sustainability, wellness, and responsible restart were generated from the three data approaches:

interviews, focus groups, and documents. First, sustainability was urgent due to the immediate shutdown of the education industry. The foundations of early childhood education had been disrupted and were functioning in disarray. During the interviews, educators were experiencing immeasurable stress over the availability of future employment and the inability to provide a home and basic needs for their families. The educators' concerns for their students and parents and meeting their needs were also challenging. The second theme, well-being, including managing stress, personal trauma, and managing the students' trauma, added to the educator's level of wellness and self-care. Thus, the immediate stressor was personal economic concerns and concerns about the care of the students. Zenobia said in an interview, "I lost everything." Therefore, Zenobia and other educators in similar situations were challenged in securing other employment because she did not have access to childcare, especially during the shutdown between March 2020 through June 2020. Some educators had the opportunity to provide in-home childcare for the parents who were medical professionals or first responders. The third theme is responsible restart; the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the learning environment. The learning community transitioned from a shared community where students share spaces and resources during the learning interventions or activities to an individualized and isolated environment. The centers had inadequate funding to meet the new national, state, and local mandates, which were untested procedures. Early education centers' leaders endeavored to plan for the immediate future.

Sub-Question One

How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact early childhood pedagogy during the pivot from a school to home-based education? Responsible restart is the theme that responds to this question, mainly generated through document analysis, interviews, and some focus group

responses. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the learning environment in ECEC that embraced the Montessori philosophy. The Montessori philosophy requires intentional community-building in the centers. Therefore, the pivot was a significant disruption. The learning community transitioned from a shared community where students share spaces and resources during the learning interventions or activities to an individualized and isolated environment. Educators were challenged with regrouping students according to skills and starting over with teaching them to perform at their development level. Isabella said, “Our students failed behind our standards.” This was a challenge for centers as they were now repeating goals and training with the students to eliminate development deficiencies. This was one of many challenges. Educators and center’s leadership spent many days and hours re-designing lesson plans and sending them to students’ homes for the parents to ensure learning. During the shutdown, educators tried using Zoom to have circle time with the students; however, this was ineffective due to young learners' attention span, change of environment, and home distractions. When centers re-opened in June 2020, one center transitioned to a new curriculum called Learning Beyond, and both centers purchased an app called “Hi Mama.” This app allows educators to communicate in real-time with parents and share pictures and videos of their children engaged in activities. Technology was excellent and beneficial, but there were some downsides as well. Grants provided additional funds for the center’s leadership to purchase iPads for educators; however, education technology literacy was at different levels of efficiency.

Sub-Question Two

How did early childhood educators mitigate unprecedented stressors to provide education services to early learners and families during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic era? Sustainability is the theme that responds to sub-question two. Isabella shared, “I felt it was

necessary for the state legislature to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young children and early childhood education in their state. I wrote a letter to the state senate.” She connected with parents and asked them to continue to pay and hold their child’s place in the center so that she could pay the educators. Jada said her center realigned the PayScale to increase educators’ salaries. Some of the educators provided in-home childcare for parents who were medical professionals and first responders. Both centers pursued grants to supplement the center’s budget and purchase the necessary equipment and supplies to sustain operations, employment, and health and safety for educators, students, and families. The grant award was analyzed during the document analysis. The centers implemented restart plans offering new curriculums, technology, and operating procedures. In other words, the centers are organized for success and provide unconventional services to parents. The centers’ leaders and educators are more comfortable advocating for and planning for early education and educators’ current and future professional status.

Sub-Question Three

How did prior training or experiences prepare early childhood educators to mitigate unprecedented stressors during the pivot from center-based education to remote-based education? Responsible restart is the theme that responds to sub-question three. Most educators responded that they have engaged in Communicable Disease Training, First Aid, CPR, and Communication Training. The participants’ longevity in the early childhood education space ranged from three years to 30 years, which is remarkable. I envision future professional development will include more teaching strategies and training on Trauma, Social and Emotional Learning, Emergency Evacuation, Critical Incident Management Training, and other associated training.

A few educators could not identify any prior training that could have prepared them for the stressors they encountered. Longtime educators such as Gabrielle, Montana, Jada, Chelsea, and Isabella agreed that their years as professional educators prepared them to mitigate unprecedented stressors during the pivot from center-based education to remote-based education. Chelsea said, “My years of experience in the industry keep me grounded.” Educators such as Noelle said that her previous training in family intervention provided the skills necessary to sustain her ability to manage through the industry shutdown. Montana said during her interview, “We have a plan and will be ready for the next pandemic.” The educators were concerned about the well-being of the students and their own families. The participants who were in leadership stated that they provided emotional support to struggling staff and made referrals for educators to reach out to community resources to secure their well-being.

Sub-Question Four

How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact strategic planning for the future? Sustainability and responsible restart are the themes that answer this question. One center reached out to legislators to address her concerns for her early childhood education during this time of distress and the stability of the future of this profession in this state. Thus, future strategic planning will employ the active participation of community stakeholders, acquiring additional funding to maintain compliance to meet CDC mandates to reopen the early childhood education centers. In the focus group, educators were asked why they stayed in this field. “This is my passion, and this is my calling” was the most stated reason given by the educators. Isabella shared, “The COVID-19 pandemic did not change my love for these kids.” Strategic planning for the future has already begun with responsible restart plans, realigning educators' salaries, and expressing that ECE are professionals, and their work is essential. In future professional development, Isabella shared that

she would include more trauma-informed care, social-emotion learning, and community-building training. Future planning will be futuristic and embrace technology, including more significant connections with local and statewide stakeholders in pursuit of sustainable funding. One center's leadership belongs to a Childcare Trade Association with over 200 resourceful owners who offered many recommendations and alternative methods for surviving the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, Isabella, Chelsea, Jada, Patience, and Gabrielle envision more networking for best practices, which is needed to help build a more robust infrastructure to sustain more challenging times.

Summary

This chapter presents the results of the data collection and analysis. The data collection was triangulated using semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. The deep, rich data presented by the participants were coded and analyzed. Utilizing every data provided during the case study is impossible for a coder to manage (Saldaña, 2021). However, as the rich data was reviewed, codes were highlighted, sorted, and categorized. The following themes emerged from the categories: sustainability, well-being, and responsible restart. During the interviews and focus groups, the participants addressed the central research question and the four sub-questions. Subsequently, the themes summarize the impact of unprecedented stressors on ECE during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this case study is to describe the unprecedented stressors of ECE in a mid-western state during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic restoration. This chapter draws from the data shared by ECEs' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter Five consists of five subsections the discussion, interpretation of findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Data collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and documentation analysis emphasized and described the unprecedented stressors experienced by ECE during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following themes that emerged from the coding are sustainability, well-being, and responsible restart. The themes are not listed in any order of significance. Each theme has sub-themes that are significant in answering the central research questions and the four sub-questions.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The following themes emerged from the results of this study: sustainability, well-being, and responsible restart. The education industry was saturated with fear, unrest, and institutional upheaval after the shutdown from March 2020 through June 2020. The need for sustainability in every area, primarily in employment, family retention, and finances, was necessary as the immediate shutdown created a panic with little information for the next steps. Sustainability required making immediate tough decisions about employment, family retention, and responsible restart to ensure the center's staff and families could navigate through the impact and stressors

related to the shutdown and eventually have some resolve that stability and survival were inevitable. In other words, educators were concerned about future employment and provision for themselves and their own homes. Centers' leaders were concerned about payroll, retaining educators, retaining families, meeting CDC guidelines, and meeting budget requirements. A robust financial infrastructure was detrimental to the survival of early childhood education because the COVID-19 mandates were not in the centers' budget. However, the centers secured some grants that provided sufficient resources to accommodate the CDC requirements and supplement other operational needs. Furthermore, families were concerned about having a space in the center and how the center would keep children safe. Finally, everyone was concerned about transmission of the virus. Again, sustainability requires making tough decisions.

Another theme is well-being. Wellbeing pertains to individual health and safety, managing trauma in students and educators, and children's cognitive development and threat of regression. Educators, students, and families were experiencing varying stress levels associated with the shutdown. The families and the students also manifest their trauma in different ways. Subsequently, the trauma impacts the child's development, a significant phase of their lives. Unfortunately, when the students returned in June 2020, many had regressed in their development, such as wearing pampers when potty trained before COVID-19 or crawling when they had just begun walking before the shutdown. In addition, students advancing in language, separation, and following rules showed significant signs of regression. It appeared that perhaps parents were experiencing stress or personal trauma, working from home, and could not keep their young children engaged in cognitive development.

Finally, the third theme is responsible restart. This is a positive phrase to the many moving parts to managing COVID-19 and reopening the centers under various guidelines. These

moving parts created additional levels of stress for educators and families. Thus, the planning for reopening, although stressful, had to demonstrate a level of responsibility for educators, students, and families. The reopening required a strategic plan to address the implementation of untested procedures and guidelines to ensure health and safety while disrupting the centers' learning community. However, the greatest challenge was to keep the children, staff, and families safe from COVID-19 while sustaining an influential learning community in the early childhood education centers. Furthermore, building community is intentional.

Interpretation of Findings

My evaluation of the data presented in Chapter 4 of this case study leads me to the interpretation of my findings. The themes that emerged from the participants' experiences in this case study are sustainability, well-being, and responsible restart. My interpretation includes understanding the rich, deep data from the participants' experiences, including unprecedented stressors, professionalism of early childhood education, and microsystems.

Unprecedented Stressors

The education industry shutdown impacted educators globally. The stressors from the COVID-19 pandemic are classified as unprecedented because of the global and longevity – almost three years of the impact (Pattnaik & Jalonga, 2021). I have concluded that most early childhood education programs were already struggling due to inadequate funding, low compensation, and lack of professional recognition as significant contributors to the distress and stress experienced by educators, and the system was exacerbated by the COVID-19 shutdown. Early childhood centers usually lack a robust budget to sustain an extensive closure period without weekly or monthly childcare payments. I have concluded that any sudden changes would have created a loss of personal stability, increased stress, and even traumatic experiences for

educators. Therefore, the unprecedented stressors of COVID-19 caused job insecurity and other economic losses for educators providing one of the essential services to families and children but are inadequately compensated for such an essential role in the community. These unprecedented stressors were the lived experiences of many early childhood professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Professionalism of ECE

I have concluded that leaders in the education industry should continue to challenge the status quo, saturate legislators in writing campaigns, and demand more federal and state dollars to supplement the early childhood budget so that educators are adequately compensated as professionals contributing to the development and growth of children and recognized as professional educators. Childcare is a critical time for the development and growth of children, and childcare is essential because it allows many people to work and contribute to the economy, attend school, attend church, and even participate in recreational activities. ECE are essential professionals who make it possible for other professionals to achieve their career goals. I have concluded that standardizing the credentialing process and increasing funding for ongoing professional development is necessary to professionalize their roles in the education industry. Educators believe that COVID-19 professionalized ECE, and they are getting the respect they deserve. This is yet to be seen, but future policy should have specific requirements.

I have concluded that ECE are not only creative, but they are also resourceful. Understanding how to take material or an object created for one purpose and restructure the material and object into another educational and fun object takes a unique set of skills. This same level of creativity was exhausted during COVID-19 in exploring ways for centers and educators to maintain connections with the students and parents. Secondly, I have concluded that ECE are

compassionate about their careers and the students they serve. Many educators have been part of the industry for over 30 years, even though they are not given respect and recognition as professionals in the education industry.

Microsystems

I have concluded that the findings of this case study align with the theoretical framework of this case study. Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory posits that a child's development has a significant connection to its immediate microsystem. The family and educators create a microsystem essential to the child's cognitive development and growth. The findings show the significance of the connectivity between the parents and educators sustained during the shutdown in March 2020 through June 2020 and beyond. I remember my early childhood education and my mother was immensely engaged in the parent-teacher association and constantly engaged in activities at my center. Thus, families with young children in childcare took a loss during the COVID-19 pandemic; the distance destroyed the learning, and still today, the drop-off procedures and parent engagement in the center are still limited and continue to create a separation between the two microsystems that are significant to the development of young children. Hopefully, many centers will extend their versions of responsible restart and move back to learning communities that existed before the shutdown.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The findings of this study have implications for policy and practice related to early childhood education and industry leadership. This section discusses policy implications specific to early childhood education. Next, this section will make recommendations for practitioners in the early childhood education profession.

Implications for Policy

The National Traumatic Child Stress Network (NTCSN) and Substance Abuse and the Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) have produced confirming research on how adverse childhood experiences significantly impact cognitive development. The findings in this study strongly suggest implications for policymakers and the need for more trauma and early childhood education policies. The findings of this study confirm that COVID-19, a global pandemic, presented a significant impact on the education industry, including unpredictable levels of trauma for young learners, families, and educators. ECE play a significant role in facilitating healthy development and identifying challenges in young children's development; therefore, policies must address advanced training in trauma and early childhood education and educator well-being and the effectiveness of employing trauma-informed practices. Policy should call for higher training and skills development, leading to higher credentialing and professionalism.

Policy should also address the inadequate funding for educators, not for institutions or organizations, but specifically for those on the frontline fighting for the children they serve and their biological children. Additionally, future policy should also call for a particular tax incentive for ECE. All participants in the study are female; 50% are mothers, and approximately 50% of the mothers have minor children. Most females are the head of the household, so the stressors of employment, family retention, and well-being significantly impacted them differently.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study provide evidence of a global crisis presenting trauma that impacts young children's cognitive development. Findings from this study also provide evidence that some ECE and parents experienced varying levels of stress and trauma during the COVID-

19 pandemic. Thus, the education industry must take a crucial step to ensure educators at every level of systems are trained and equipped to trauma-informed practices. According to research, trauma-informed practices provide techniques that educational industry leaders should consider sustaining educators' well-being during academic disruption (NTCSN, 2020). Findings from this study also provide evidence that some educators experienced stress assisting their students in a crisis while balancing work and their own family life. NTCSN (2020) published research supporting that educators experience what is called “second-hand trauma” through assisting their students and families in a crisis. Subsequently, employing trauma-informed practices can be a practical approach to addressing educators' well-being and trauma-informed practices to address personal trauma. Annual professional development should include skills development in trauma-informed practices.

The findings also show that educators with the most years of service shared that they were least stressed about their situation and more stressed about the families they served. They also presented more grounded when sharing their experiences. Thus, an implication for practice is encouraging mentoring and coaching strategies among early childhood educators. Educators can support each other through coaching strategies. There are various training curricula on effective coaching strategies. Educators should be encouraged to participate. Also, the continual use and exploration of technology in early learning or parent communication is encouraged as a practical implication.

A final implication for practice is that every early childhood education center needs a detailed emergency plan for future shutdowns and evacuations. All parents need a copy of the emergency and evacuation plans and a signature on file to confirm that they have been informed. The plan should be available to the appropriate community stakeholders.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

The purpose of this section is to address the theoretical and empirical implications of this study. The emerging literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educators and young children calls for more studies to investigate the impact of the global event. Furthermore, the differences between the COVID-19 pandemic and previous world health crises are found in the event's scope, duration, and impact (Jackson et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Therefore, the COVID-19-related stressors are described as unprecedented.

Empirical Implications

The shutdown interrupted academic systems, disrupted the educators' and families' livelihoods, and impacted young children's cognitive development, which resulted in a traumatic experience for most people (Pattnaik & Jalonga, 2021). In this case study, ECE in a midwestern state provided childcare in the parent's home during the initial shutdown. Children regressed during the shutdown and returned to the center with significant cognitive delay and regression.

Furthermore, there has not been a pandemic with the scope of impact of COVID-19; this is the first health-related crisis to have a global impact for a significant length of time (Pattnaik & Jalonga, 2021). The emerging research on the impact of COVID-19 called for additional research. This qualitative case study was designed to answer the call for additional research. This case study confirms that the shutdown created major disruptions that impacted educators, students, and families. Literature suggests that America's education system was ill-prepared to manage an urgent event (Huck & Zhang, 2021; Joseph & Trinick, 2021). In this study, the ECEC did not have a sufficient budget to sustain the unexpected demands of the pandemic; in comparison to the global stressors related to COVID-19, the themes that emerged from this case study, such as sustainability in employment, and finances, wellbeing, and responsible restart. The

educators endured significant stress levels related to the unknown factors and outcomes of COVID-19. The fear of losing employment or income and the ability to provide for their household were significant stress factors for the centers in this study. The U.S. and state governments also provided grant money, and the ECEC applied for the grants. The centers in this case study were also awarded generous dollars to supplement the existing budgets, allowing centers to purchase PPE, masks, gloves, foggers, movable walls, portable sinks, and other operational needs.

Research supports that early childhood education is crucial to the physical, emotional, and social development of young children, and thus, disruption to the learning environment as imposed by COVID-19 has an adverse effect on young children's development (Blewitt et al., 2020; Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; Shorty & Jikpamu, 2021; Spadafora et al., 2023). Early research revealed that EL lost the knowledge and academic development they gained before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down (Barnett et al., 2021; Benner & Mistry, 2020; Heyworth et al., 2021). Comparably, this study's findings described the same outcome in the centers' students when learning was disrupted. A lack of ongoing interaction can result in development regression when the learning environment is disrupted. The educators in this study described regression and its impact on the young students when they returned to the center. The findings from this study delineate how young children had regressed in their development when they returned to the centers after the shutdown. For example, regression manifested in young students who were potty trained but were returning in diapers or students who had separation issues and were not having these issues before the shutdown. Current research addresses COVID-19's impact on well-being and trauma for young children and educators. Young children are exposed to various adverse events such as abuse, neglect, violence, loss of parents, natural disasters, and the

stressors stemming from COVID-19 (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2021). The findings of this study comparably supported these findings. Unfortunately, children exposed to trauma experience an inability to control concentration, reasoning, attention span, coping skills, problem-solving communication, listening, and comprehension (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022; Statman-Weil & Hibbard, 2020). The data presented in the current literature describes the same outward manifestation of trauma that was present in young students enrolled in the ECEC participating in this study. Thus, this research validates that COVID-19 created adverse childhood experiences.

Several researchers have reported that educators had to adapt to emergency remote teaching, which refers to a temporary shift of instruction and a modified delivery of education (Gritzka et al., 2022; Harlow, 2022; Joseph & Trinick, 2021). Furthermore, distance learning was not an effective alternative to addressing the impact of COVID-19 (Ramaswamy & Seshadri, 2020; Tang et al., 2021). The data presented by educators in this study support the challenges of learning and teaching strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The educators in this study presented the same results and confirmed that distance learning was ineffective and, therefore, supports the current literature. However, technology was not as effective either. The findings show that endeavoring to hold academic exercises with EL on a virtual platform was too distracting and was; therefore, ineffective.

Current literature reveals that many ECE have young school-age children who were also at home, and their EL needed care and intellectual stimulation (Eadie et al., 2021; Spadafora et al., 2023). This was evident in this study as most participants were mothers with young children. Thus, this finding is supported as well. In addition, the immediate shutdown forced school administrators, daycare center directors, and teachers at every level to prepare for this significant

shift in the curriculum or learning plans, engaging with their students, as well as planning for their school-age children at home (Eveleigh et al., 2022; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). This data is supported as well by the findings from this study.

There were two areas of divergence from the current literature. In some literature, educators struggled with technical literacy and lacked online teaching competencies (Alharthi, 2023; Atilas et al., 2021; Chen & Hamel, 2022; Hu et al., 2021). However, this was not the finding in this study. The educators in the study were skilled in technology and online teaching competencies; therefore, this was not supported. Secondly, food insecurity was not an issue in the study. When schools and early childcare centers closed, free meals were no longer available during the shutdown. If a low-income family has several small children on free meals, this is a significant saving for the family, and providing additional meals could create more stress for the family (Adams et al., 2020; Farrer et al., 2022; Farrer et al., 2023; Lafave et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020). There was a question related to food insecurity presented in the interviews, and the educators shared that they did not have any families struggling with food insecurity. Therefore, this finding was not supported by this study's findings.

The research design for this study did not present any challenges in collecting and analyzing the data. Furthermore, the interview and focus groups were sufficient in facilitating an understanding of how people interpret their experiences, perceive their worlds, and ascribe meaning to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). This study contributes to the field because the literature search did not identify any studies describing the impact of the unprecedented stressors of COVID-19 on ECE in this mid-western state.

Theoretical Implications

Sustaining the connection with the parents was essential for the educators as they were

invested in the well-being of their students and parents and looked forward to seeing their students again. The parent and educator connectivity is crucial as the two entities create the microsystem, which is imperative for young children's learning and development. Furthermore, the sustainability of the parents' and educators' connection theme aligns with the study's theoretical framework. Gabrielle expressed, "We had to do what we could to keep the parents engaged." This was the sentiment of most educators. Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory posits that a child's development has a significant connection to its immediate microsystem. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory aligns well with this study because it explains the importance of balance and harmony between a child's family and school environments. The child's microsystem and mesosystem are critical to the child's development (Guy-Evans, 2020). Bronfenbrenner's study places great value on family and environment as critical factors for human development. Thus, a child's development is also ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). The educators endeavored to maintain connectivity with the parents and the students. The centers endeavored to keep in touch with Zoom. However, it was unsuccessful with younger children, and the centers purchased an app to allow real-time communication between educators and parents. During the COVID-19 school shutdown, the family and two school environments experienced similar stressors and disruption and, unfortunately, were often in conflict (Dias et al., 2020; Steed & Leech, 2021). The microsystem is the most influential and immediate environmental setting critical to the developing child, including the child's parents, siblings, peers, and school or teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Therefore, the theoretical framework for this study is appropriate and sufficiently supports this study.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. There were only 10 participants in the study.

Scheduling interviews during the summer months were interrupted by vacations and vacancies. Conducting interviews when school was in session may have been a better strategy. Another limitation is that all the participants were females. However, they were of mixed ethnicity. Many participants have young children and second jobs; therefore, the online interviewing was unsuccessful, and interviews were conducted at the center during lunch and nap time with the available staff.

Delimitations

I selected the research design, a qualitative case study, which includes gathering data from people who had a direct real-life experience with the event. A case study requires defining the study's boundaries. I selected two centers, one in an urban area and one in a city suburb. There was no specific reason for selecting the two centers because they responded to my request to participate. New educators who joined post-COVID restoration were not included in the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Considering the study's findings, limitations, and delimitations of the study, it is recommended that future research should be conducted utilizing rural early childhood centers to determine if similar distractions and levels of stress and trauma exist in a different setting. This study included only female participants; however, future research should include male educators to capture the impact on male educators' well-being and trauma experiences during COVID-19. The findings from this study show that sustainability was essential to survival. Many early childcare centers did not reopen after June 2020; therefore, I recommend research to investigate the factors that led to the closure, the devastating challenges, and the impact on the community. The findings outlined in this study also revealed the shutdown's impact on the cognitive development of early learners. Therefore, I recommend research to investigate the student's

cognitive functioning one year later and identify any ongoing cognitive development delays. Finally, I recommend researching centers that changed their curriculum to engage a trauma-sensitive environment in their early childhood center. This research will also investigate strategies the education industry utilizes to address early learners' trauma from environmental factors, such as COVID-19.

Conclusion

The purpose of this case study was to describe the unprecedented stressors of ECE in a mid-western state during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic restoration. This study used a qualitative case study approach of ECE employed in the field between March 2020 and March 2023. Data were collected via semi-structured open-ended interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. The participants included a diverse sample of 10 female educators. Coding was used to organize the data, and the following three themes emerged: (a) sustainability, (b) well-being, and (c) responsible restart. Each of the themes had additional subthemes. The data findings revealed that the educators in this study experienced some of the same trauma and concerns as educators interviewed in previous studies. The immediate concern for the participants was income stability and concern for students and parents. Not only were all participants females, but they were also mothers, and approximately 50% of the mothers had young children in the home, which presented another challenge for educators with minor children. One of the most critical implications is trauma and the impact of adverse experiences on the cognitive development of young children and the trauma ECE experience in helping young children and managing the adverse impact on their biological children and families. Therefore, the implications for policy and practice are to elevate the urgency of providing advanced training in trauma and early childhood education, trauma and educator well-being, and

the effectiveness of employing trauma-informed practices in an early learning environment.

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Appendix A

IRB Application

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 2, 2023

Ida Lewis
Christine Saba

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1519 A CASE STUDY ON THE UNPRECEDENTED STRESSORS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC RESTORATION

Dear Ida Lewis, Christine Saba,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Consent

Title of the Project: THE UNPRECEDENTED STRESSORS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC RESTORATION: A CASE STUDY

Principal Investigator: Ida M. Lewis, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age and were an educator at an early childhood education center between March 2020 – March 2023. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to describe the unprecedented stressors of early childhood educators (ECE) during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic restoration at two early education centers in a midwestern state.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

1. Participate in an individual interview with the researcher. The interview will take place virtually using Zoom.com or Microsoft Teams and the interview will be recorded. The interview will take approximately one hour and will be scheduled at an agreeable time between the interviewee and researcher. The interview will be transcribed by the researcher.
2. Participate in a focus group with the researcher and other educators. The focus group will take place virtually using Zoom.com or Microsoft Teams and the focus group will be recorded. The focus group will take approximately one hour. The focus group will be transcribed by the researcher.
3. Participate in member checking by reviewing the data themes, patterns and trends and provide feedback to either confirm or reject the themes. Patterns and trends. The participants will receive the data for member checking via email to ask questions and provide feedback. Member checking will take approximately one hour to complete.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants may not receive a direct benefit from participating in the study other than having an opportunity to share your story as an early childhood education professional and offer strategies

for other professionals in future pandemics. Participants will also get to participate in a case study on the greatest worldwide phenomenon in years.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- The name of the early childhood education center and the participants responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted on Zoom.com in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with people outside of the group.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and a password protected external USB drive and private password protected One-drive cloud file. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the interview and focus group each participant will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card. Any participant who chooses to withdraw from the study after beginning but before completing all study procedures will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card. Email addresses will be requested for compensation purposes; however, they will be collected by email at the conclusion of the study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please inform the researcher that you wish to discontinue your participation, and do not submit your study materials. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Ida Lewis. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [REDACTED] or email her at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix C

Permission Request

Mrs. _____
Founder
ABC Early Education Center

Dear Mrs. _____

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is “A CASE STUDY ON THE UNPRECEDENTED STRESSORS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC RESTORATION,” and my research aims to describe the unprecedented stressors of early childhood educators (ECE) during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic restoration at two early education centers in a midwestern state.

I am seeking your permission to conduct my research at your early childhood education centers and invite your staff to participate in my research study. The data collection process could take up to several weeks.

Participants will receive the attached *recruitment letter*. The data will be used for my dissertation only. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Participating in this study is entirely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to _____ as soon as practical. A *permission letter* document is attached for your convenience.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at _____ if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Ida M. Lewis
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix D

Recruitment Letters

Dear Potential Participant,

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to conduct a case study to describe the unprecedented stressors of early childhood educators (ECE) during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic era, and I am writing to invite early childhood educators to join my study.

If you are a full-time or part-time educator (teacher, director, coordinator, teacher's assistant, facilitator, etc.), at least 18 years old, and were employed at your early childhood education center between March 20, 2020, to March 20, 2023. If willing, participants will be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire; once approved, they will participate in an audio-recorded, in-person interview and participate in a video-recorded focus group. It should take approximately three hours for you to complete the procedures requested of participants in this study. Your name and personal information will be requested as part of your participation; however, they will remain confidential.

To participate in my research, please email me at [REDACTED] to confirm that you want to participate. A consent form will be emailed to you to complete and return. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Once the consent form is signed and returned, you will be scheduled for an interview and a focus group. The focus group will be held after all interviews have been conducted.

After you have read the consent form and agree to participate in the study, please reply to this email, complete the brief survey at the bottom of the page, and return the email to me. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to participate in the study.

Sincerely,

Ida M. Lewis
Doctoral Candidate

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Appendix E

Research Questions

Central Research Question

How did the COVID-19 pandemic's unprecedented stressors impact early childhood educators during the pandemic and post-pandemic era?

Sub-Question One

How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact early childhood pedagogy during the pivot from a school to home-based education?

Sub-Question Two

How did early childhood educators mitigate unprecedented stressors to provide education services to early learners and families during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic era?

Sub-Question Three

How did prior training or experiences prepare early childhood educators to mitigate unprecedented stressors during the pivot from center-based education to remote-based education?

Sub-Question Four

How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact strategic planning for the future?

Appendix F

Individual Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching early learners? (background/demographic) CRQ
2. Please describe the interactive method used at this center for each age group.
(background/demographic) CRQ
3. Please describe the initial stressors you experienced when the school shutdown mandate was initiated. CRQ
4. Please describe the stressors or challenges you experience during the school-to-home learning process. CRQ
5. Please describe the process for your centers or the leadership to design a plan to provide remote-based educational services that help alleviate your stressors. CRQ
6. Please explain the challenges or stressors you experienced during the COVID-19 shutdown and rate each challenge on a Likert Scale of 1-5, with five being the worst.
Why? CRQ and SQ2, 4
7. How did you alleviate the unprecedented stressors of the school shutdown to meet the needs of the early learners? SQ1
8. How did you provide remote services to the parents and families? CRQ
9. Please describe the associated stressors to providing remote services to the parents and families. SQ3
10. How did the shutdown impact food services for children and families? CRQ
11. Please describe the changes you were required to make to the curriculum to ensure continual learning for each age group. SQ1

12. How did making changes to the curriculum create significant stressors for you? Why?
SQ1
13. On a Likert scale of 1-5, with five being the best, how would you rate the quality of education services you/your center could provide to the early learners during the COVID-19 shutdown? Why? SQ1
14. What were the short-term challenges or stressors in transitioning to remote-based education? SRQ1
15. What were the long-term challenges or stressors in transitioning to remote-based education? Why? SRQ1
16. What resources, including technology, did the center have to help mitigate the transition to remote-based teaching? SQ3
17. What resources, including technology, had to be acquired by the center and yourself after the shutdown to help transition to remote-based teaching? Why? SQ3
18. Please describe the professional development training in emergency preparedness you received before the COVID-19 shutdown. SQ3

Appendix G

Focus Group Questions

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic post-pandemic restoration impacted your life as an educator? CRQ
2. How would you describe your mental and emotional status when hearing about the school shutdown? CRQ, SQ3
3. How did you find personal healing, resolve, or solace during the post-pandemic restoration? SQ3
4. How has early childhood education changed negatively due to the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ1, 2
5. How has early childhood education changed positively due to the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ1, 2
6. Why did you remain in early childhood education after the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ3, 4
7. How did your leadership manage the challenges and stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ4
8. How well prepared were you to help young children cope with the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ3
9. How did you manage the changes in your own family? CRQ, SQ2
10. Why did you choose to participate in this case study? SQ4

Appendix H

Document Analysis

The second method of data collection was reviewing several documents. I interviewed one center's owner, and she emailed me the documents. During her interview, we reviewed the documents together, which allowed her to share the story associated with each document. She provided me with a copy of the COVID-19 pandemic grant award document, which delineates the resources acquired to secure the much-needed health and safety-related items. Grants, specifically for COVID-19 pandemic impact, were secured from state government entities. These grants were available in December 2021, months after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This funding augmented a stressed budget that could not sustain the operational needs, compacted by the unexpected expenses related to CDC guidelines, licensing requirements, and state codes. Isabella said, "Health and safety became the priority, not teaching and learning." The grant money provided for the following: personnel and benefits cost, Capital expenses – building renovation and modifications, PPE, sanitizers, classroom dividers, cleaning supplies, temporary or portable sinks, thermometers, and other expenses to facilitate business practices consistent with safety protocols. Additional funding was provided for workforce recruitment/retention and to create a substitute pool and administrative support. Funds were available for coaching and training educators, background checks, and increasing technology. Jada shared that her center acquired grant money and realigned the payroll to increase educators' salaries. The center's leadership also purchased iPads, room dividers, plastic barriers to secure or isolate classrooms and health and safety items such as masks and sanitizers. Below is the table of items reviewed during the document analysis.

Table 3*Document Analysis*

Documents	Research questions	Interview questions
Budget Adjustments (Grants) 2019 - 2023	SQ3	14–18
Monthly Attendance Rates 2019 - 2020	CQ	4
New Equipment- including technology from 2020 -2023	SQ3	11,12, 16, 17
Early Childhood Curriculum or Learning Plan 2019	SQ1, 2	2, 5–9, 11, 12
Changes made to Early Childhood Curriculum or Learning Plan 2020-2023 – Responsible Restart	SQ1, 2	2, 5–9, 11, 12
Remote services to families. 2020-2023	SQ1, 2	8, 9, 10
New Staff Hires 2020 -2023	SQ3, 4	18
Type of Training Between 2020 - 2023	SQ3, 4	18
Vacancies 2020 - 2023	SQ3, 4	18

Appendix I

Audit Trail

The audit trail comprises of the following steps. The first step was to conduct the interviews. I emailed several ECEC the recruitment letter (see Appendix D), followed up with a phone call, and spoke to someone in leadership. This was in May 2023, comprised of a holiday, and the end of a school year was occupied with special programs and events. I was asked to call back later. The summer was filled with vacations and staff vacancies, which impacted educators' availability. After several unanswered phone calls, the time had advanced, and deadlines had passed. Finally, there was a breakthrough with the first center, and the owner apologized as she had official business that took priority. However, she had not forgotten about the research; she wanted her center involved. Therefore, a change in the research procedure was implemented. The interviews were held onsite at the early education centers, a significantly different environment than initially planned. I stepped over spilled food on the floor to get to a tiny table, sat in small chairs with my knees up to my chest, and even had to speak loudly over the white noise machine used to help the children sleep. The semi-structured interviews were held on separate days covering four weeks.

The third step was conducting the two focus groups on two separate days over ten days. The first group included two participants, and the second focus group included four people. The other participants at both centers had conflicting schedules, or their workload hindered their availability, and they could not participate in the focus group. Therefore, I arrived at each center and conducted the focus groups with the participants who were available at the time. The focus groups consisted of ten questions, and the participants were recorded. Later, the data was re-recorded in Microsoft Team to produce transcription.

Finally, all data from the transcription were perused, and identified codes were highlighted or underlined. The data were derived from triangulating the three sources: interviews, focus groups, and documentation analysis. I used Saldaña's (2016, 2021) coding methods to guide the interpretation and analysis of data. The first step to organizing the data was Nvivo coding. Nvivo quotes refer to using participants' direct responses, words, or word phrases to represent significant data. This method minimizes the influence of the researchers' bias and perspectives in exploring this real-life event. The codes were displayed on a table created using Microsoft Word. The table expanded across multiple pages. The second coding step was assigning a highlight color to similar codes, which led to organizing the codes into similar categories, thus creating pattern coding. After grouping the categories, the same and similar colors were aligned together. The column to the far left of the codes was used to document the themes and sub-themes representing the combined categories. This process led to the creation of 25 codes. Using a thesaurus and a dictionary, the 25 codes were pursued, defined, and sifted for similarity.