







Early Childhood Education in Times of Pandemic: The Lived Experience of Children in Latin American Countries

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Abstract

This research is framed within this context, emphasizing the concept of childhood as a social construct, historically and geographically redefined. The daily experiences and relationships of children worldwide have been significantly affected by the Pandemic. It is essential to understand these transformations through the voices of children. The primary aim of this research was to interpret the educational experiences of young children in Latin America during the Covid-19 health emergency. Data was collected through four strategies based on the mosaic approach: face-to-face interviews, virtual interviews, audio recordings, and drawings, involving a total of 46 children from 7 countries: Chile, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Costa Rica, Brazil, and Argentina. The results show that during the pandemic, there were limitations on play, communication was primarily directed by teachers in virtual settings, children expressed a need for contact with peers, family mediation was crucial for learning, movement was restricted, and here was a greater emphasis on content of the didactic processes. This study aims to contribute to the positioning of participatory research with children as a necessary paradigm for addressing issues that concern them.

Keywords

early childhood education; childhood interests; child language; qualitative research; covid-19

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A educação da primeira infância em tempos de pandemia: a experiência vivida pelas crianças nos países latino-americanos

Resumo

Nos últimos anos, a pandemia alterou as relações cotidianas e as experiências sociais. Esta pesquisa está inserida nesse contexto, enfatizando o conceito de infância como uma construção social, historicamente e geograficamente redefinida. As experiências e relações diárias das crianças em todo o mundo foram significativamente afetadas pela pandemia. É essencial compreender essas transformações por meio das vozes das próprias crianças. O objetivo principal desta pesquisa foi interpretar as experiências educacionais de crianças pequenas na América Latina durante a emergência sanitária da Covid-19. Os dados foram coletados por meio de quatro estratégias baseadas na abordagem mosaico: entrevistas presenciais, entrevistas virtuais, gravações de áudio e desenhos, envolvendo um total de 46 crianças de 7 países: Chile, Venezuela, Equador, Peru, Costa Rica, Brasil e Argentina. Os resultados mostram que, durante a pandemia, houve limitações no brincar, a comunicação foi predominantemente dirigida pelos professores em ambientes virtuais, as crianças expressaram a necessidade de contato com seus pares, a mediação familiar foi crucial para o aprendizado, o movimento foi restringido e houve uma maior ênfase nos conteúdos nos processos didáticos. Este estudo busca contribuir para o posicionamento da pesquisa participativa com crianças como um paradigma necessário para abordar questões que lhes dizem respeito.

Palavras-chave

educação infantil; interesses infantis; linguagem infantil; pesquisa qualitativa; covid-19

Educación de la primera infancia en tiempos de pandemia: La experiencia vivida por los niños en los países latinoamericanos

Resumen

En los últimos años, la pandemia ha alterado las relaciones cotidianas y las experiencias sociales. Esta investigación se enmarca en este contexto, enfatizando el concepto de infancia como una construcción social, histórica y geográficamente redefinida. Las experiencias y relaciones diarias de los niños en todo el mundo se han visto significativamente afectadas por la pandemia. Es esencial comprender estas transformaciones a través de las voces de los propios niños. El objetivo principal de esta investigación fue interpretar las experiencias educativas de niños pequeños en América Latina durante la emergencia sanitaria del Covid-19. Se recolectaron datos a través de cuatro estrategias basadas en el enfoque mosaico: entrevistas presenciales, entrevistas virtuales, grabaciones de audio y dibujos, involucrando a un total de 46 niños de 7 países: Chile, Venezuela, Ecuador, Perú, Costa Rica, Brasil y Argentina. Los resultados muestran que, durante la pandemia, hubo limitaciones en el juego, la comunicación fue principalmente dirigida por los profesores en entornos virtuales, los niños expresaron la necesidad de contacto con sus pares, la mediación familiar fue crucial para el aprendizaje, el movimiento estuvo restringido y hubo un mayor énfasis en los contenidos de los procesos didáticos. Este estudio busca contribuir al posicionamiento de la investigación participativa con niños como un paradigma necesario para abordar temas que les conciernen.

Palabras clave

educación infantil; intereses infantiles; lenguaje infantil; investigación cualitativa; covid-19

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Introduction

Recently, the pandemic has significantly altered everyday relationships and social experiences. It is in this context that this research is framed, highlighting the conception of childhood as a social construct that is historically and geographically reconstructed. To speak of childhood, therefore, implies unveiling the social, cultural, and moral dimensions that shape children's experiences. This premise raises questions about the impact of various social phenomena on children's lives — particularly in relation to the ongoing social and health crisis we are currently experiencing. On this point, it is essential to consider the pandemic within the context of what has been described as the subfield of education in emergency situations (García-Gutiérrez, 2011).

From this perspective, this study aims to offer a broader framework for understanding how the unfolding events have altered the lives of children, their families, and their educational contexts, with potential medium- and long-term consequences.

Early Childhood Education in Times of Pandemics

The arrival of the pandemic prompted sudden and dramatic changes in the daily routines of families. In addition to their usual responsibilities, many parents were suddenly thrust into the role of primary educators—duties that had previously been carried out by early childhood professionals.

In recent years, numerous studies have examined the pandemic's impact on early childhood learning, with much of the data gathered from parents and teachers. From the parents' perspective, the primary concerns have centered on the disruption of socialization processes due to the loss of contact with peers or other significant adults. Additionally, difficulties in emotional regulation have manifested in increased anxiety, tantrums, aggressive behavior, heightened adult dependence, and boredom, alongside delays in the development of school-related concepts and skills (Yildirim, 2021; Egan et al. 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Wen Kok & Yang, 2021).

From the teacher's perspective, findings reflect that teachers had to rapidly adapt their pedagogical approaches, with a notable emphasis on increasing their digital competencies. This development has, in turn, enhanced their professional skills for interacting with students in a virtual environment (Gomes et al., 2021; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020; Mckenna et al., 2021). However, these adaptations have also taken a toll on educators' emotional and mental well-being. Many teachers report feeling caught between the demands of delivering early childhood education and the risks to their emotional health (Park et al., 2020; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020). Furthermore, internet connectivity and access to devices were identified as critical for effective

pedagogical interaction, responsiveness, and the introduction of new solo or small-group activities (Gomes et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the success of these virtual learning experiences has been contingent on parents' availability to support their children's participation in online lessons (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020; Otero Mayer et al. 2021; Yildirim, 2021; Fernández-Ruiz, 2021).

While it is necessary to understand the perspectives of teachers and families regarding how children have experienced the pandemic in different aspects of their lives, it is even more relevant to hear from the children's own voices what they have to say. However, so far, the available literature on children's firsthand accounts remains scarce. A few publications can be distinguished at the global level (Pascal & Bertran, 2021; Nikiforidou & Doni, 2022; Castro & Valcárcel-Delgado, 2022; Zorec & Pecek, 2022) and others in the Latin American region (Godoy, 2021; Etchebehere et al., 2021). The purpose of this study is to amplify the perspective of Latin American children, highlighting their experiences since the beginning of the pandemic.

Globally, research shows that children have integrated Covid-19 into their lives, recognizing how their daily routines have changed. They also understand that these changes are not solely for their own safety but for the well-being of their families, especially their grandparents (Godoy, 2021; Nikiforidou & Doni, 2022). Undoubtedly, these findings should be carefully considered as children return to the classroom, as their expressed needs allow educators to rethink and adapt their practices as necessary.

At the Latin American level, the findings of Etchebehere et al. (2021) and Godoy (2021) are similar in terms of how children perceive loss and gain during the pandemic. According to Etchebehere et al. (2021) in Uruguay, changes in routines and confinement have generated emotional ambivalence among children. In the research conducted with 159 children aged 3 to 5 years, children expressed feelings of joy, especially when linked to play and family activities. However, they also reported feelings of sadness, anger, and fear due to the loss of playtime with peers, inability to participate in outdoor activities, and the separation from family members. Similarly, Godoy (2021) conducted a study with Chilean children aged 4 to 6 years, which revealed that children valued the opportunity to spend time with family, play together, and learn new things related to home routines. Nevertheless, the lack of physical contact with extended family saddened them. In addition, the children understood the need to stay at home for health reasons and acknowledged that school experiences had to be modified due to confinement.

These investigations demonstrate that there is growing evidence about children's position in research on educational experiences during emergency situations. In this regard, our research aims to contribute with both similar and distinct findings.

Positioning of Children in Educational Research

This research emphasizes the active participation of children in understanding their experiences throughout the pandemic. Hence, we consider it important to continue advancing the positioning of participatory research with children as a necessary paradigm to address issues that concern them. This epistemological and methodological approach seeks to promote participatory practices with children, which should consider the developmental specificities and experiences, and recognizing the child as a social agent (Rouyer et al., 2020; Goulant & Rafael, 2020). This approach is also known as “research with children” (Barratt et al., 2013).

For the authors, the child is considered as "worthy of study", capable of collaborating in some parts of the research from an active role. Emphasis is placed on listening to their voices and ensuring that the findings represent their perspectives. However, children's levels of participation remain limited, as they do not have leadership in the development of research plans.

The International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and theoretical contributions from various disciplines (e.g., pedagogy, psychology, sociology of childhood), particularly from a postmodern perspective, recognize children as experts in their own lives. This understanding has led us to adopt the Mosaic Approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) as our methodological framework. This approach shifts the perception of children as subordinate subjects in the adult world and instead promotes listening to their voices and fostering their active participation in the research (Christensen & James, 2000; Brito & Dias, 2017; Melis et al., 2020).

Methodologically, there are numerous strategies to ensure children's genuine participation. Examples include children-guided tours (Urbina-García, 2019), educational and recreational workshops that explore their representation of the world (Carmona-Toro & Ospina-Alvarado, 2022), and the use of writings, drawings, photographs, or models constructed with tangible objects (Green, 2015). Additionally, interactive methods of data collection and analysis have been used, such as the creation of art, role-playing, constructing representations with natural objects, and making books (Green, 2017).

Moreover, some researchers have successfully adapted traditional social science techniques to make them more accessible to children, particularly interviews and focus groups (Urbina-García, 2019). These techniques have been enriched with photographs (Matsui, 2020), drawings (Fermín-González & Domínguez-Garrido, 2021; Spiteri, 2022), play-based methods (Koller & San Juan, 2015), and maps (Beasley et al., 2021). Recently, open-ended virtual interviews (Koller et al., 2022) and game-like conversations facilitated by mothers (Posada, 2021) have also been employed.

During the pandemic, various research methods involving children were used. These included face-to-face group interviews guided by both researchers and children (Etchebehere et al., 2021); individual face-to-face interviews in outdoor settings, and

drawing activities (Nikiforidou & Doni, 2022). Additionally, Froebelian storytelling techniques and sequenced games were employed in observations (Pascal & Bertran, 2021). In virtual settings, research methods included assembly-type group interviews combined with graphic representations (Castro & Valcárcel-Delgado, 2022), individual interviews, drawings, and photographs (Godoy, 2021), as well as semi-structured interviews with modality-specific questions (Zorec & Pecek, 2022).

In light of the above, our research incorporates the active participation of children, multimodal strategies to listen to their voices, and adopting a multinational approach to interpret the educational experiences of young children in Latin America during the Covid-19 health emergency.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach aimed at explaining the significance of the pandemic as experienced by children. Accordingly, a participatory, multinational, and multimodal research design was proposed, considering crucial aspects to develop processes of scientific reflection.

Making participation a core methodological dimension implies, first and foremost, emphasizing the voices of children and allowing their interpretation of reality to emerge through data collection. Thus, children were positioned as key informants in the study. The multinational scope was established by focusing on Latin America, recognizing the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and networking between universities and specialized public and private centers involved in knowledge production.

The multimodal aspect of the study enhances child participation by offering diverse ways of engaging with the research. The multimodality in this study refers to the use of alternative methods for data collection allowing each child to participate according to their preferences and capacities. This approach draws on strategies from the "Mosaic Approach" (Clark & Moss, 2001), enabling flexibility and adaptability in the research process.

Participants

Children in early childhood, aged between 5 and 7 years old, were invited to participate in this study. We selected children who have had formal educational experiences during the pandemic lockdown. This selection was based on two main criteria: i) at this age, children's language development levels allow for more effective interaction, making it easier to understand their expressions; and ii) they have previous schooling experience, enabling them to compare both pre-pandemic and pandemic educational instances.

As the study sought to explore the experiences of Latin American children, we were supported by the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP). Each national committee assisted us in disseminating messages and infographics related to the study. A non-probabilistic case sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants from different countries (Flick, 2007). In total, 46 children from 7 countries participated: Chile, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Costa Rica, Brazil, and Argentina.

This research was approved by the University Finis Terrae's Scientific Ethics Committee. The participatory methodology, respectful of children's rights, followed the guidelines of Dockett et al. (2012). These guidelines allowed for children's assent, ensuring their right to voluntary participation in addition to parental consent. We used images, text and interactive elements to make the process understandable for children.

Data Collection

To gather the information, four strategies from the Mosaic Approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) were used: face-to-face interviews, online interviews, audio recordings and drawings. For each strategy, a semi-structured script was designed to guide conversations with the children. Given the diverse realities across countries, three scripts were developed with filter questions tailored to each child's modality (face-to-face, hybrid, virtual). The questions addressed three dimensions of formal education experiences during the pandemic and previous schooling: relationships with school actors, the didactic process, and evaluations of these experiences. These strategies were implemented in different phases, as shown in Figure 1 and described below.



Figure 1. Application phases and strategies.

Note. Number of participants in parentheses. Source: own elaboration.

Phase 0 involved the preparation of the interview script and its validation through two ways: (1) consultations with experts in early childhood education and (2) face-to-face and online interviews with five children to corroborate the level of understanding of the questions. In *Phase 1*, 18 interviews were conducted in person in the capitals of Venezuela and Chile. During these interviews, children had the opportunity to talk and draw what they liked and disliked about learning during the pandemic. *Phase 2* was carried out in parallel to the interviews across different countries in the region. An online platform was used, allowing children to record audio responses and submit drawings of their

experiences. Virtual interviews were also offered as an option. Finally, in *Phase 3*, with the aim of reaching more countries, facilitating family access, and exploring questions that provided new information, a limited version of the questions was elaborated for instant messaging. It is important to note that the questions eliminated in this phase were considered saturated, as they did not provide new insights.

Given that young children's participation can be understood as emergent and unpredictable, we consider Chesworth's (2018) proposal, which encourages researchers to embrace uncertainty in research processes with children and understand them as dynamic and representative.

To ensure the fidelity of the children's accounts, all strategies from the Mosaic Approach were audio or video recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Additionally, the children's graphic productions were incorporated into the study.

Data Analysis

A content analysis (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017) was used for this study, as it allows for the reconstruction of lived experiences based on what is expressed through language. The coding process was emergent and carried out using Atlas-Ti © software. This analysis followed the guidelines suggested by the authors: a) the conversations were transcribed in full and read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the content; b) units of meaning were identified and then condensed to generate codes; c) codes were grouped into categories; d) themes were identified that integrated the previously established categories; and e) finally, given the non-linear nature of the analysis, the categories were reviewed and adjusted based on the results that emerged.

It is important to acknowledge the challenge inherent in this analytical process — moving from merely listening to the voices of the children to truly understanding and interpreting them as closely as possible from their perspective, rather than an adult-centric view (Rouyer et al., 2020).

To ensure the validity of the study, we applied criteria of accessibility and regional location, which allowed us to meet the principles of transferability and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through the reflexivity process, which involved continuous exchanges between members of the two research organizations involved (Sandín, 2003).

Analysis and Discussion of Results

Based on the guidelines established for the analysis process, the results are explained according to the emerging categories, which also facilitated a comparison with the findings of other studies on the subject.

"I didn't like that we couldn't play with my friends"

Regarding interactions with various school actors, the limitation of play during home-based activities stood out. The children state that they preferred playing in person at school, where they could interact with friends, and felt that the possibilities of playing online were greatly reduced.

Reviewing on their online school activities, they shared: "One, it was the most boring thing in the world, and two, I couldn't play with my friends" (I.13); "I didn't like that we couldn't play with my friends" (I.8). They also recalled the face-to-face play experience: "Because there I can play with my friends" (I.11). Despite the limitations, some children adapted by using their teachers' instructions to create play opportunities. For example: "...you could also hide. When I said 'hide', I put myself under the table, in reality, it was to turn off the camera" (I.6).

As illustrated in Image 1, the children also expressed their desire to share time with friends and fondly remembering the play activities they had at school, as depicted in their drawings.

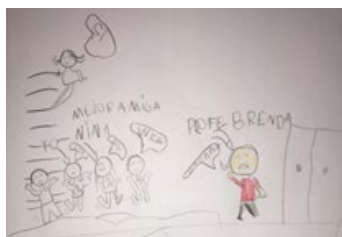


Image 1. Friends and activities at school.

Note. Classmates doing physical education activities at school with their teacher. Source: Phase I (I.6).

Those children who have returned to in-person schooling emphasize the importance of being able to share time together, despite the ongoing precautions to protect themselves from Covid-19. This approach is evidenced in statements such as: "In the classroom, in the playground, we play together, we do many things together. Of course, we still can't lend each other things or be close, but now we do see each other in person" (I.3). They also highlight the significance of interacting with friends through play and the importance of it for having fun.

"I play with some friends of mine, there we can gather bushes, we put things together and put them underneath. Look, this is the roof of the little house to play on (pointing with her hands) and we put things here, in the middle and make food and everything. And we can also draw with chalk on the floor, that's at the school where I am now. Oh, I love my school where I am now! It's so much nicer and bigger. Besides, I have more friends." (I.5).

Playing is a fundamental right; it is part of life itself and reflects the naturalness and spontaneity that characterize early childhood. Through play, children interact, share, learn, have fun, and much more. For this reason, even under conditions such as those experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is crucial that "they play and that this is their main occupation, both in terms of duration and importance" (Tonucci, 2020, p. 37). Similar findings have been reported by researchers who have listened to the children's voices, noting their desire to return to play and share with various school actors (Etchebehere et al, 2021; Castro & Valcárcel-Delgado, 2022; Godoy, 2021).

"Answering the questions, the teacher asks and waiting for her to finish speaking before I speak"

In early childhood, communication with peers and teachers is a fundamental element for children to learn and develop successfully. For children, communication with teachers is especially important, and they associate it with the education they have received, as shown in expressions like:

"...What I remember, (*laughs*) well I don't remember so much, but I shared love, I shared homework, well sometimes yes, well sometimes no, [*the teachers*] always let my friends talk first before I could talk..." (I.1).

"...we sang, sometimes we danced and of course, we did homework together. Well, of course, all because of the Tablet obviously..." (I.3).

Additionally, in the same dimension of relationships with school actors, the children agreed that communication with teacher during virtual school activities was restricted. It was evident that they mainly received information and instructions, to which they had to respond within a set time to complete their assignments. In this regard, one of the interviewees stated: "answering the questions asked by the teacher and waiting until she finishes talking so I can talk" (I.1) Another interviewee, linking communication with their teacher to the educational process, stated: "Because they can explain it better and show us with their hands how to use it" (I.13).

Similarly, communication among classmates was also restricted when working remotely. The tools used did not foster meaningful interaction between students. When describing the communication process during school activities at home, the following expressions stand out:

"Well, a little bit... we told each other about our mom, our dad, our brothers." (I.1).

"...you could see them in zoom, virtual classes and once when there was no quarantine, I loved to play..." (I.1).

"...at recess sometimes they would leave us connected, but sometimes we would disconnect and wait for the classes to come back, but when we were at recess and they left us with the camera off we would turn it on and start talking and we had the audio free." (I.11).

The reviewed research does not delve deeply into aspects of communication or the children's experience during Covid-19 confinement. However, our results show that communication between teachers and classmates was mediated by virtual tools, which limited opportunities for fluid and spontaneous communication. This interaction was largely dependent on the opportunities provided by the educators and the capabilities of the platform, as depicted in Image 2.



Image 2. *Classes on platforms.*

Note. View of companion "Amparo" on virtual platform. Source: Phase I (I.10).

"...but, now I can see them, and we play and run more."

Linked to the previous units of analysis is the children's expressed need for contact with their peers and teachers. This need is reflected in various comments about the limited interaction with others, emphasizing the restriction of play—a fundamental right—and the lack of constant communication with their educators. In one interview, a child stated his preference for in-person learning: "Because there I can play with my friends" (I.11).

It is important to note that this need for contact was specifically highlighted during the confinement period of the pandemic. When discussing their return to in-person schooling, the children emphasize that they enjoyed it primarily because they could once again play with their friends and interact with them and with adults outside the family. As noted in the previous quote and in the following statements: "I just remembered, that I did not like not hugging and kissing my friends, and what I liked the least was not playing with my friends and I could not play in the park." (I.1); "now we do more sports, we play in the playground" (I.4).

When asked if she preferred doing activities via Zoom or at school, she answered: "well, we used to do the same ones, but now I like it more". (Interviewer): Why? If they are the same activities. "But now I can see them, and we play and run more" (I.4).

In addition to the expressed need for social contact, the children also revealed that the lack of physical movement during the confinement made them miss activities, such as Physical Education, where physical movement is fundamental. While some children had opportunities for physical exercise at home, many found it insufficient. This is evident in different expressions that highlight their evaluation of the experience:

"What I liked was to run around the classroom because we were not allowed [in the pandemic]." (O. 5).

"We could not interrupt, or play, or run..." (I.M. 4).

"I remember that it was different in P.E. because in the Coliseo (name of the school) they gave us no virtual (class) and we didn't have to do those difficult exercises." (O. 3).

"Now that we are back, we do everything, we play at recess, soccer..." (O. 2).

"I like my classes, especially physical education and taekwondo." (I.M. 6).

"When asked if they played in the online classes? "Yes, they did too. But it was very lame" hahaha and now how do you play, is it not lame anymore? "No, it is not. It's a lot of fun. We run, we jump. We go to the playground, we playhouse. We are all together"..." (I.3).

"Sometimes I do it in the physical education park, but sometimes I also do it in the school gym. It's super cool. The gym has those like climbing things, it has mats. For example, there's a mat here and there's like a climbing thing, you can go higher and whew..." (I.6).

Contact and movement are key themes in the reviewed literature, which underscores the limitations and restrictions during the confinement period (Castro & Valcárcel-Delgado, 2022; Nikiforidou & Doni, 2022) and highlights the importance of contact with nature (Pascal & Bertran, 2021). At the same time, confinement allowed children to develop other physical skills, such as learning to ride a bicycle or dancing (Godoy, 2021).

"...I am with my family, accompanied, to help me do my homework"

Another unit of analysis was the role of the family and its relevance in school activities conducted remotely. The family plays a fundamental role in the educational process of their children and is co-responsible for it. During the pandemic, the family home became a "school house" (Tonucci, 2020), replacing traditional educational establishments. Listening to the voices of the interviewees further reinforces this notion, highlighting the need for support and accompaniment. The children specifically mentioned their homework:

"...well, that I was here with my parents or with Celia and not there." (I.5).

"Yes, it was fun, I did different things and they bought me a Tablet and I spent more time with my parents. My grandmother and my dog." (I. 3).

"With my sisters and my mom and dad." (I.2).

"Because my mom, like a forgetful person, didn't do the things she was supposed to do, I was very embarrassed, and my brother was scolding me because of my mom." (I.1).

"...Well, because my mom used to read to me because at that time I was learning to read, so I would... my mom would read to me, and I would answer..." (I.11).

"...I like to do them (homework), I like to do them at home...Why?...Because I have my family with me, they help me to do my homework." (I.14).

The children's expressions reflect two key aspects. On the one hand, different family members participated in the school activities assigned for the home. On the other hand, the children themselves assigned responsibility to their parents for helping them complete their homework. Image 3 below highlights their enjoyment of being with their family, while Image 4 shows that the relationship with the family was not always smooth. In some cases, they experienced their "aggressive mom" during virtual classes.

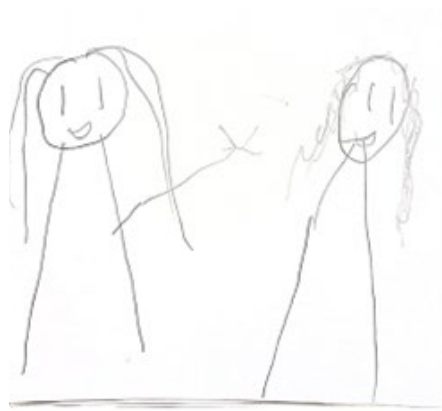


Image 3. Girl and mother during homework.

Note. The interviewee draws herself and her mother smiling during tasks during the pandemic.
Source: Phase I (I.12).



Image 4. Like and dislike.

Note. A side is shown that likes classes with platforms and does not like it when he does not understand the class with his "aggressive mother". Source: Phase 1 (I.1).

These results provide new evidence of the importance of family mediation in the didactic processes during the pandemic, as expressed by the children themselves. However, they also reveal instances of family conflict during the pandemic, which caused sadness in children, as evidenced by Etchebehere et al. (2021), as well as a series of evident difficulties and challenges (Mantovani et al., 2021, p.13).

For that reason, it is crucial for educators to recognize that, in addition to supporting children's educational process, they must also guide parents in effectively fulfilling this role. In this regard, there is a need for "well-qualified early childhood educators with the potential to make an exceptional contribution to support young children and their families during the pandemic and to build on the overall post-Covid-19 recovery" (Murray, 2020, p. 300).

"...that the face-to-face one is that you have to go to school and the other one is that you have to be in the camera and do it at home".

All educational resources require constant updating and adaptation according to the developmental characteristics of the students, as well as their needs, interests, and learning contexts.

Although the pandemic situation called for this type of adaptation, the children's accounts of their didactic experiences show minimal changes in the activities. The school tasks carried out virtually resembled those designed for a face-to-face context rather than being specifically designed for distance education, focusing primarily on content transmission. As the children noted, they found little differences: "The face-to-face one is that you have to go to school, and the other is that you have to be in the camera and do it at home" (I.14).

Regarding this, Tonucci (2020) considers that placing children in a passive school situation through online platforms, merely reproducing the same activities as in school and using them to transmit homework, was the "most transcendent and, at the same time, most inappropriate choice of the school" (p. 23). The following expressions illustrates this:

"Ok, I remember, like writing letters and numbers and so on. And also other tasks, like a task in a little bag like this (pointing with your hands) where there are little squares and where there are letters up to z, I think, and you have to take one out and you have to know which words start with those letters up to Z. Ah! also. When I was in online classes I used a lot of materials, to fill in what the guides said. My mum would tell me: in this class, you are going to use this guide with these materials; and when I went online for the class, that's how it was!" (I.5).

As Image 5 shows, the tasks carried out during the pandemic were still limited to school-based content rather than focusing on skill development that was contextualized to the home or the confinement situation.



Image 5. Tasks during the pandemic.

Note. Calculation of the distance between the earth and the moon. Source: Phase I (I.13).

In this sense, the children expressed exhaustion from the large amount of homework and homework and assignments given, as reflected in statements such as:

"Yes, I'm looking at letters in the alphabet class, but I've already learned to read, so it's kind of boring. But, the activities that I mostly do are cutting out, in the letters class, I cut out some things and I have to paste them where the word begins..." (I.12).

"I remember that we filled in the sheets, we painted, we glued homework (I.3).

...when we went online the teacher would tell us, to take the guide A, B, C and so on. And then she would tell us today we were going to need colours, so I would look for my colours..." (I.3).

"We made drawings, cut-outs, paints, letters, and also numbers." (I.4).

“As well as practicing the letters a, e, i, o, u. Learning to read. Learning the numbers, which I think I did 20 numbers. We did things to glue, like drawing.” (I.5).

“Learning how to make crafts with paper” (I.9).

“I remember one day I made like a little person out of plasticine, I made myself sitting in my classroom, but I didn't make the classroom because it could be anything, but I just wanted to make a table, a chair and me.” (I.11).

“We did sums, we painted. We did sports and religion classes.” (I.13).

The school tasks assigned at home, mediated by technological resources, did not differ significantly from those carried out in person, adhering to the traditional role of the schools: transmitting knowledge (Tonucci, 2020). These results align with other research that has identified a focus on content delivery related to literacy, numerical concepts, handicrafts, habits, and the use of mobile devices (Godoy, 2021; Castro & Valcárcel-Delgado, 2022; Etchebehere et al., 2021).

Learning scenario: "At school I feel that I understand much more, at home I feel that I understand the lessons less when they are taught from the classroom, and I see them from home"

It is important to highlight the children's expressions, which reflect their learning process during confinement and their gradual return to face-to-face learning. These reflections provide a perspective that cuts across the different dimensions explored in the interviews.

The first thing to note is that most children expressed a preference for face-to-face learning over remote learning. This is largely due to their need for contact, play, and communication, which, when combined, influence how they learn and interact within the educational environment:

“Obviously now, because I see my friends, we play in the playground a lot. And we can go ouuuuut.” (I.3).

“I like it more in person, because there are games, and we can have fun.” (I.14).

“What I like most about school... learning more and making new friends.” (I.M.1).

It is evident that the children associate learning with the aforementioned factors, especially play and their felt need for contact. They also express that the school environment is where they learn more easily and with greater enjoyment:

“At school I feel that I understand much more, at home I feel that I understand the classes less when they are taught to me from the classroom, and I see them from home.” (I.M. 2).

“At school, a thousand times. I didn't like it online, it was boring.” (O.2).

“At school there are many friends, we have fun, we play a lot and at home we only see each other through the screen.” (I.M. 5).

“I like mathematics, the way my teacher teaches it. My mother doesn't have patience. I did not like the internet.” (I.M. 4).

While they find learning at home less enjoyable, they also acknowledge new forms of learning. For example, they highlight learning to communicate with teachers and complete school activities through online platforms:

“At first, I didn't know about the zoom platform because it was a bit difficult.” (O. 9).

“There were some applications with virtual pencils, they were pressed to do the activities... Sometimes my teacher scratched my screen.” (O. 3).

“...is that I go into the Teams application, I go to the calendar and I click on the class I have and there I get to join or cut, I put join, then I get my camera and my microphone on and I turn it off if I want to turn it off. And then I press join and I can also put a background.” (I.12).

When discussing learning, children highlight the important role of the educator in both distance and face-to-face activities, emphasizing the value of direct contact with educators. In addition, children consider in-person interaction with teachers to be essential for their learning process. In this regard, Zorec & Pecek (2022) found that, during confinement, children who continued attending educational centers had more toys and greater access to interact with their teacher. Similarly, our findings show that the following aspects of the educator's role were crucial to the children's learning: direct contact, mediation, presence, and availability to attend to each student. The children yearn for this teacher-student interaction in the classroom, without undermining support they received during confinement:

“When we were with Covid I used to see some children and the teacher. Now we all see. At school it is more fun to learn.” (I.M. 4).

“At school. I like school very much. I learn with my friends, my teacher.” (O.1).

As shown in Image 6, a girl expresses her happiness about being back in school. However, during confinement, she missed having her school desk, emphasizing her longing for the physical school environment.



Image 6. *I don't like being without my desk.*

Note. The interviewee draws herself sitting at a desk with the word "no", which means he doesn't like to be without his school desk. Source: Phase 1 (I.12).

The children's voices reflect the drastic change in the educational process due to confinement and subsequent gradual return to the classroom. This shift required a process of adaptation for the children, which they are still assimilating, and requires the accompaniment and mediation of the teacher.

This situation presents a new challenge for contemporary society and early childhood education. In this context, Vidal (2021) points out the significant challenges and impact on students, who have had to adapt to learning from a physical distance and confinement at home. This shift disrupted traditional face-to-face systems, validating a new form of education delivery that, although it has existed for years, became, alongside technology, the most widely used communication tool for teaching and learning during the pandemic.

Conclusions

The present time calls for greater attention to be given to children, ensuring space is provided to listen to their voices regarding situations that concern them. To this end, a comprehensive agenda for child participation has been developed, emphasizing the importance of listening to their opinions. This requires the application of techniques tailored to this age group, with the goal of understanding what they know, what they propose, and what they wish to explore (Melis et al., 2020). This aligns with the participatory research approach with children, which adopts a human rights perspective, viewing children as subjects of rights. It reinforces their perceptions and opinions as active participants. Such studies aim to give children a voice and a visible presence (Brito & Dias, 2017). Although the growing recognition of this importance is evident, and studies that adopt this perspective are increasing, it remains an emerging area of research, particularly in the Latin American context.

This study provided an opportunity to hear the voices of children and learn about their experiences during the pandemic. While there is extensive research on children's experiences through the reports of educators and parents, few studies globally report on the children's own voices and how each of them experienced the pandemic. In this context, the analysis highlights the importance children place on social relationships with other school actors, especially with their peers. Families and teachers played a mediating role in educational processes. The pandemic also limited opportunities for play and open communication, leaving many decisions in the hands of adults. The children's voices reveal their need to move, be in contact with outdoors, and engage in games that incorporate physical activity.

In relation to the didactic processes implemented during the health emergency, the children identified that learning was transferred to virtual platforms with a focus on content delivery, rather than adapting to the lived context and the opportunities it provided.

This study contributes from two perspectives. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of incorporating children's voices into research. Secondly, it is hoped that the results will be considered in future emergency educational contexts, ensuring the right to play, social interaction, and a reflexive, contextualized education.

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