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PRESCHOOL AND THE PANDEMIC: PERSPECTIVES ON REMOTE SCHOOLING
FROM PARENTS AND TEACHERS

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Sarah Lawrence College

Abstract

The pandemic affected many different aspects of family life, including children's education. This thesis will explore the experiences of preschool children ages 3-4 over 2020 and 2021 through interviews with both teachers and parents from the beginning of the pandemic through the current time of spring 2022. The first section addresses how teachers interviewed felt about the use of online education in a preschool setting and examines the different factors that either promoted or hindered student participation and teachers' feelings about the past two years. The second section considers how parents felt about their and their child's experience with remote preschool learning, what they felt worked or didn't work, and how they felt supported or not supported by the preschool administrators and teachers. Both of these perspectives will be analyzed for similarities and differences of thinking. The goal of this thesis is to understand how online preschool education was perceived by two of the main parties involved, and how it might be improved upon in the future if it is necessarily to switch to remote schooling again.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every person living through the past two years. It has changed everyone's way of life. For the past year, I have been working as a social work intern with a program that runs a Head Start preschool in New York City. For this reason, I have chosen to study how the pandemic has affected the education of preschool children and their families. While the program has been in person for the 2021-2022 school year, they were virtual all of last year. As a graduate student who has had to go through Zoom classes with all of the distractions and internet troubles and scheduling mishaps, I was fascinated to see what this experience was like for young children. I wanted to understand what the structure of the classes was like for virtual education, but also how both parents and teachers felt about the process. Understanding the barriers to virtual learning are important as well, such as the adults in the family's employment, internet and technology access, and even the buy-in to the process.

For this thesis, the following questions are raised. For both parents and teachers what are the things they liked about virtual preschool and thought that worked? Similarly, what are the elements that were challenging and ultimately made their lives more difficult? I believe that positive aspects of virtual learning could include not having to worry about transportation and the costs of getting to school, being able to spend more time with family, and parents having a better understanding of what their children are learning as three- and four-year-olds. Negative aspects will likely include issues of

parent or guardian employment and access to childcare, children's attention and participation dipping, and potential loss of consistent meals for the students.

Although there is research beginning to come out about the pandemic's effect on preschool education, many of these studies are being done in other countries, or in populations that do not match up with my own (Barnett, Jung, & Nores, 2020; McKegney, 2021; Pitchik et al., 2021). There could be wider relevance to my thesis because Head Start preschools exist all over the country and provide care for families who are low income. These families may have been affected more greatly by the pandemic because of high medical costs, unemployment or unstable employment, and unstable childcare. Being able to get the perspectives of both parents and teachers is important because they will reveal relationships between these two constituents of preschool programs.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic started in March of 2020, and as of November of 2021, there had already been studies done to see how COVID-19 has affected children's experiences and education. Children who are infected with the COVID-19 virus predominantly have had mild to no symptoms, such as a cough or low-grade fever (Harvard, 2022). Immunocompromised children can have a worse outcome, with higher risk of severe illness and a complication called multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-c) that can cause lasting damage to their internal organs (Harvard, 2022). These factors are important when thinking about the decision to move school to a virtual format, because even though children are not the highest risk population, there are still

students who need protection. This is to say nothing of the many adults who work with students at schools: teachers, janitors, cafeteria workers, administrators, all of whom would be at risk as well.

Some preschools have chosen not to hold preschool classes virtually. There are factors that influence the decision to stay open and in person, the decision to hold classes virtually, and the decision for a preschool to fully close. Expecting a group of two to five-year-old's to maintain attention on a screen during the day, multiple times a day, multiple days a week is a lot to ask of their attention span. I know there are preschools whose curriculum is in conflict with holding classes virtually because that curriculum values time spent with peers outdoors and activities that are hands on with the students. I know of other preschools who stayed open and held in person classes with increased safety measures against COVID-19 because the administration of those schools determined that it was the best course of action for those students. Different value systems will affect the decision of how a preschool is going to operate, and the one that I conducted my research at felt it was best to stay open virtually, and hold classes online.

In this chapter, I will be discussing the literature that exists already about the effects of COVID-19 on different populations that are relevant to my study: children and teachers, as well as parents and their relationship with their children.

The Pandemic's Effect on Children

Although the United States has gone through pandemics before COVID-19, this current outbreak is unprecedented for recent times. Irwin, Lazarevic, Soled, and Adesman (2021) discuss the many factors of COVID-19 that will affect children. They

mention that young children seem to be more likely to have indirect consequences, if they were not sick themselves, based on their dependence and proximity to adult caregivers (Irwin et al., 2021). They also mention that the experience will be different depending on factors like the family's socioeconomic status, which is a salient factor for Head Start families. Irwin et al. (2021) state that "due to the sudden closure of schools, stay-at-home orders, fears of illness and dying, periods of boredom and frustration, extreme disruptions to daily routine, and a lack of in-person contact with friends and family" children will have greater stress levels than those not living through a pandemic (p. 110). Our families were dealing with all of those above-mentioned factors, as well as issues of financial instability, parental unemployment, multigenerational housing or unstable housing, and a lack of child care.

Saltah (2021) created a list of risk factors and protective factors that affect multiple domains of preschool children's development based around the pandemic. Some of the relevant physical developmental risk factors that he listed include "mistakes in the use of masks" and "less opportunity for outdoor play" (pp. 1-2). These are relevant to my study because they all relate to a child's ability to experience school in a positive and functional manner. Preschoolers are still learning how to interact in socially acceptable ways, and it is a risk that "children do not wear the mask correctly, touch the outside of the mask, and change [masks] between them" which are all possibilities when you are working with two to five year old students. There were restrictions on how much time people could spend outside during the beginning of the pandemic, which meant that children lost out on vital outdoor time that "gives the child the opportunity to move in the fresh air and move freely" (p. 2). This also matters because families had to choose

between putting their preschooler in front of a screen for live classes during the last academic year or possibly going to a park or other outdoor activity. Some of the risk factors of the social and emotional development of preschoolers were “disturbances in the relationship with friends” and “parental stress” (pp. 3-4). Both of these factors are relevant because we now see that these were not just risks but realities that came to pass over the past two years.

Kalluri, Kelly, and Garg (2021) are pediatricians who wrote about how COVID-19 has not just affected children medically, but in a variety of other ways. They state that the virus has had effects on families in ways including “increased food insecurity, housing instability, school closures, and lack of child care” which “have exacerbated preexisting socioeconomic and racial disparities” that will last well after the pandemic is over (p. 1). The Head Start preschool where I conducted my research serves a low income population and a majority of our families are people of color, so this sentiment is particularly relevant. This article even mentions Head Start and Early Head Start as programs that were vital to families before, but even more so, during the pandemic (ibid, 2021). Kalluri et al. state that when parents have access to safe and secure child care, they are more able to participate in the labor force and work to support their families (ibid.,2021). As the pandemic disrupted that child care, with our program being fully virtual, that affected parents’ abilities to work and hold employment more than before.

The Pandemic’s Effect on Teachers and Education

We have to remember that parents and children are not the only ones affected by COVID-19 and school closures, but teachers and administrators as well. According to a survey conducted with Head Start employees in Los Angeles, they “described

challenges with the transition to remote work, most significantly, difficulty communicating with parents...maintaining parent and child motivation...and monitoring learner progress (Jeffrey, Szeftel, & Herman, 2020, p. 18). Jeffrey, Szeftel, and Herman found that teachers also reported more mental health issues, problems with their own children's education, and a decrease in healthy behaviors such as exercise and eating healthy foods (2020). This does not mean that everything reported in this survey was negative. People who took this survey also reported "being more appreciative of things they usually took for granted...more quality time with friends and family" and an increase in the creativity of ways to engage the families that they work with (2020, p. 19). Educators who work with preschoolers have to be creative in a typical year in order to engage those young minds, and so it makes sense that they would be good at coming up with solutions for problems such as distance learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many educational programs to start offering remote and online education. While this makes sense for older students who have developed agency and self-sufficiency, preschoolers were still a part of this shift. Hu, Chiu, Leung, and Yelland (2021) found that in Hong Kong, preschool teachers used digital content and online resources such as Google Classroom, YouTube, and Zoom. They also reported that educators used activities that would be completed at home with parents or other guardians, such as worksheets or tactile activities (ibid, 2021). This study also included questions about the future of online learning. Hu et al. (2021) found that "about half of the study respondents reported that they expected to teach preschool online in the future" and that "perceived difficulties, such as difficulty engaging children online or inadequate support from parents" meant that some teachers were less likely to

predict future virtual learning, whereas those who felt supported through online learning were more likely to predict future virtual learning (p. 1523).

For a study conducted in Turkey, preschool teachers were asked a variety of questions around their perceptions of online learning and the effects it had on the children they teach. Duran (2021) found that children asked their teachers questions that were mainly logistical, and that it seemed that children's anxieties were reflections of their parents' worries. In response to being asked about their own wellbeing in relation to the pandemic, teachers had both feelings of anxiety and fear, but also were grateful to be able to spend more time with their families (2021). Duran (2021) found that teachers believed "distance education did not contribute to the children's development and this education model was not appropriate for preschool education in terms of age" or developmental level (p. 257). A positive aspect of the use of online learning that came up in the interviews was parent participation. Teachers stated that "closing the schools and continuing education online increased the parents' responsibilities...to take part in their children's education process and to have opinions about preschool education" along with the simple fact that parents and children were able to spend more time together (ibid, p. 257). This study showed that teachers had mixed feelings around the use of online education based on their own mental and physical health, as well as how it affected the parents and children they were teaching through online learning.

The Pandemic's Effect on Parents and the Parent-Child Relationship

Preschoolers may not yet have the capacity to express their thoughts and emotions in entirely cohesive ways, which is why it is important to speak with parents

about how the pandemic has affected their children. Duran and Omeroglu (2022) conducted a semi-structured interview study with parents in Turkey to ask about how the pandemic has affected their children through questions about what activities they did at home, what their child's behavior was like, and how they felt. For the first category, Duran and Omeroglu found that parents mainly used play, art and drama in their interactions with their children during the pandemic (2022). They also found that "children, parents, teachers, and siblings, all played roles in determining the type of activities to engage in" while at home (2022, p. 18). For their children's behavior, parents reported that they had both internalizing and externalizing problematic behaviors while at home (ibid, 2022). For children these included "aggressive behaviors...crying...boredom" and higher anxiety levels, and for parents these included not changing their behaviors from pre-pandemic times, being anxious themselves, or trying to make the children feel better about their fears of COVID-19 (p. 20). Parents reported that they felt "terrible, bored, exhausted, tired, stressed, and scared" throughout this time (p. 23). It makes sense that living through a global pandemic would cause these types of negative behaviors and feelings in both children and adults.

Similarly, Sun et al. (2021) conducted a study to see how children's behavior outbursts were correlated with parental distress in the context of COVID-19. They found that children exhibited more externalizing behaviors than internalizing behaviors, such as acting out, at the beginning of the pandemic (2021). This could make sense because young children are more prone to externalizing their problems than internalizing them (2021). They found that "parent distress was a significant predictor for both externalizing...and internalizing child behavior problems" and that parent distress could

have been caused by a variety of factors influenced by the pandemic such as “job loss and health worries” (2021, p. 6). An international study authored by Foley et al. (2021) showed similar results. They found that parents across six countries had “indirect associations between COVID-19-related social disruption and child adjustment difficulties that were mediated by parental distress” (2021, p. 10). This means that multiple studies are finding a connection between the feelings of parents and behaviors of children during this time. It makes sense that the two factors are connected, because young children rely so heavily on their parents, and if the parents are distressed the children could feed off that energy as well. It could contribute to a feedback loop of negative emotions and behaviors between parents and children.

Because these children are not old enough to be left on their own, parents or other guardians have to be around while they are partaking in online education. Sonnenschein, Grossman, and Grossman (2021) looked at how parents helped their children with this type of learning during the pandemic. They surveyed parents of children, in preschool through 17 years old, who were learning online and asked questions about how the pandemic affected them and how they were engaged in their child’s learning throughout the process (Sonnenschein et al., 2021). The authors found that of the parents who responded, 75% of them were involved in their children’s schooling in the ways of “teaching their children, monitoring their children’s work, and providing technology support” during the day (2021, p. 12). This is relevant to my research because these all seem like activities that could be generalized to many parents in similar situations, including the ones that I will interview.

According to a study done by Pitchik et al. (2021) caregivers of children in rural areas who experienced negative consequences such as food insecurity and loss of income also reported higher mental health needs. One quote that stood out to me was “given that young children rely on their parents or other adults for care, they experience the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns through their caregivers’ ability to provide nurturing and responsive care” which means that when parents are experiencing a lot of negative effects from it, the children are being negatively affected as well (p. 765). Benner and Mistry (2020) use Life course theory to discuss how the pandemic might affect children and their development based on past historical events, and conclude that there will most likely be short- and long-term impacts across developmental domains: school, family, friends, etc.

I also found an article that talks about what Head Start has been doing for their students during the pandemic, such as providing food services, educational take home packets, and virtual learning, but does not go into detail around how it was received or how it affected children’s development so far. There is still much research to be done around how the pandemic affected families, children, and their education.

Methods

This study examines the feelings and opinions about online learning through the COVID-19 pandemic versus in person learning from the perspectives of parents and teachers of preschoolers in one Head Start program. The program was virtual last academic year, and not counting the month of January which took place online because of the Omicron variant surge, has been in person for this academic year 2022. I

conducted semi-structured interviews with Head Start teachers and parents at the same program. The questions can be found in appendix A.

Participants

Altogether, I conducted 10 interviews – five with teachers and five with parents. Of the five teachers, three of them currently teach in the four-year-old classes, and two of them currently teach in the three-year-old classes. It was a requirement to participate that they had taught at the preschool all of the 2020 to 2021 school year, the year they were remote, and have been teaching all of the 2021 to 2022 academic year as well. The participants were all over the age of 18, and received and signed a consent form explaining the study before being interviewed. See appendix B for that form.

The other half of the participants included five parents of students at this Head Start preschool. They were all currently parents of children in the same fours class, who had all been in the same threes class the previous academic year. This is because those were the parents that I had access to and were English speakers. All of the parents were over the age of 18, and received and signed a consent form explaining the study before being interviewed. See appendix B.

This whole group was a sample of convenience, based on parents and teachers whom I knew personally, and who met the above criteria. The interview questions for each group were related, but also distinct because of their different roles. See Appendix A for the interview questions.

Procedures

My study was approved as exempt by Sarah Lawrence College's IRB review. After I received approval, I worked with my supervisor at the center to choose which

teachers and parents I wanted to interview based on the criteria of the study. All possible participants received a digital and paper copy of the consent form, which detailed the purpose of the study, any potential risks, and confidentiality. The interviews were either scheduled face to face, or over email.

The interviews lasted between eight and twenty-five minutes, and were conducted either in person at the Early Childhood Center, or over Zoom. The time and setting was based on the interviewees convenience. One set of parents decided to answer the questions together on one Zoom call, because they did not have time to interview separately and they were both with their child for last year and this year, so they would be able to answer the questions together.

Results

Teacher Interviews

From the interviews that I conducted with teachers, I found various opinions on the challenges and benefits of using online school as a tool with preschool students. The five teachers I interviewed were forthcoming and open to answering all of my questions. I have categorized their answers into the headings below, which reflect the main themes which came up in the interviews. All names have been changed throughout this paper, and the teachers will be referred to as Nora, Catherine, Miranda, Laura, and Emily.

Accessibility and Inaccessibility of Online Tools

All of the teachers that I interviewed used Zoom to conduct their daily live sessions with their students. They also used Google Classroom to stay in contact with parents, and some teachers offered a variety of other online resources either during the

live sessions or for families to use on their own time. When asked about the usefulness and challenges of Zoom, the teachers had varying opinions.

Nora, a fourth teacher, told me that a positive aspect of online learning was that she had more time to plan her lessons. She said “typically in person you have a little bit less time because you have all these other in person responsibilities and so it was really nice to be able to plan for extended periods of time, and be a bit more intentional with my planning especially since we were remote.” Nora also told me that Zoom lends itself to a teacher directed style of learning and her typical style of teaching was much more student directed. She elaborated that “I’m more of a facilitator not a direct instructor unless there’s something very specific so zoom my job changes” and that “all of this inquiry based learning that would happen naturally cannot happen” because they are not in the classroom.

Miranda, a third teacher, had similar opinions to Nora around the use of time. She said “what worked well was being able to have my own time to do certain things. Since I’m in the comfort of my own home, there’s certain - you could take a break have circle time, pause, you can, you know, get something ready for the next lesson” which is not something that she could do when teaching in person. Miranda also mentions the negatives of not having a strong connection with her students through Zoom.

“What was challenging was not being able to have that connection in person with the kids when we first started you know they don’t understand they’re only three years old that that’s that person inside of a little rectangle is your teacher and you have classmates.”

This is a common sentiment among the teachers that I interviewed. She felt comfortable with tools such as Zoom and Google Classroom because she has used them previously in her own graduate school education, so that familiarity was a benefit for her.

Another teacher, Laura, who worked in a threes classroom, found positives and negatives to the situation. She liked that they were able to observe the students with their parents in their home environments, which was not something that she would have been able to do in person. As a challenge, Laura told me that Zoom does not provide “the hands on experience and connections, personal connections, with [the students]” that you would get teaching in person. She also credited her co-teacher, Miranda, for helping her to become more tech savvy:

“We use Google Classroom a lot. That was a strong tool for remote learning or remote learning experience and I gained a lot of experience and confidence with that because I'm not that savvy as her [Miranda] but she taught me a lot.

Especially with Google Classroom - how to use that tool, how to post assignments and or announcements and put live Zoom links for the families.”

The assignments posted to Google Classroom consisted of art projects or experiments that families could do at home that corresponded with any overarching themes they were using that week – such as Spring or Transportation. Laura also mentioned that she got a lot of support from the administration of the school with the online tools like Zoom and Google Classroom.

Catherine, a fours teacher, found that creating a schedule and routine helped both the teachers and parents stick to virtual learning. She said that “we surveyed parents to ask what specific times worked best for them, what activities they thought

were the most engaging, and then we set a weekly schedule that remained constant and consistent throughout the year” which she thinks led to her class’s high attendance rate for their live Zoom sessions. A challenge that she shared was around the growth of skills that preschool students learn in schools through activities that would be hands on. She said:

“There’s no sort of accountability or follow through to ensure that parents are actually doing those activities with their kids at home and so this year we’ve noticed a lot of students coming in with like needs and fine motor skills because they didn’t have that exposure last year whereas if they were in person that would have come naturally.”

These deficits she saw at the beginning of this academic year back in person, and was able to talk to her students’ teachers from last year to understand what their experience was like virtually as three-year-olds and what to expect for this school year.

Emily, a threes teacher, also found that having a schedule and sticking to it helped both the teachers and the families with online learning. She told me that “the directions [for the day] were also super clear and easy to follow...and as a result we had a lot of participation. We had almost perfect attendance most days and they were very involved,” speaking about her class’s families. None of the other teachers talked about having near perfect attendance, so it seems like Emily’s approach worked well with the families she had. She also mentioned that she and her co-teacher were lenient on the students actual participation, whether that be allowing them to eat during class, move around during class, or have their cameras off during class. Emily used Google Classroom to post the schedule of the day, the Zoom links, any activities that students

could do at home, and the recordings of the classes. She talked about the difference between in person and virtual learning, in that “virtual learning is a lot more work, like computer work, but in person learning is a lot more physical energy...but the relationships you build are just so much stronger” when teaching in person.

Parent Teacher Relationship

Another topic that came up in multiple interviews with the teachers was how the relationship between the parents and teachers differed from previous years. Miranda spoke about boundaries, saying “the parents would email you at 11:00 o'clock and at two o'clock because they kind of felt like ‘we're home so yeah I can reach you whenever’ and those boundaries were permeable.” This is compared to previous years where there was more of an understanding of the teacher's time and being reachable only during the school day hours. Emily told me how parents would “send in the student work [that she] put on Google Classroom” and that “each unit there would be a slideshow presentation where each child had a slide” so that parents and families could see the work being done. Normally, work would be done at school and sent home, so this was a reversal of that practice with parents sending work into the teachers.

The relationship between parents and teachers seemed to also be affected by the use of technology and the accessibility of teachers through email. Nora mentioned in her interview that

“parents didn't have as much of an open policy with email and teachers, we don't spend that much time talking to them through email but I think this year is different because parents are more comfortable and are allowed to email teachers a lot more.”

This is something that she expressed happiness about because it meant that parents felt comfortable with communicating with her in ways that they were not as comfortable with before school went online.

Teacher Observation of Parent Involvement

Nora spoke about the parent involvement in her class last year. When asked if parent involvement correlated with student involvement, she said “I think it definitely has some influence. I know in person that absolutely matters, but online through Zoom I think because of their age it can be difficult because parents may want to be involved but they can’t because they have to go to work” but Nora also said that the parents who were either not working or working from home seemed to be “heavily involved” and those students attended most to all of the Zoom classes that were offered during the school day. Emily believed that the relationships she built with families were not as strong as they typically are during an in person year. She said that because the children were at home with their parents or other caretakers, “the parent in that setting is really the teacher and the parent because they’re facilitating and they’re the liaison between you and the child” which would not happen during in person learning.

Catherine talked about how relaxed she was with parent involvement, which could mean parents might sign a virtual check in sheet that “could count as attendance even if they didn’t attend the Zooms or submit any work” that day. She did notice there were different levels of involvement in her class. Catherine told me that she “had families who were inconsistent about joining Zoom: maybe they didn’t wake up their child on time for the early morning zoom” but then attended the later Zoom session. Similarly, she felt that some students “weren’t even aware of what [they] were doing

because their parent didn't introduce Zoom to them: they would just sign that Google form" and would not participate any further than that. Parents have a large amount of control of their children at this age, so if the parents are not facilitating the online education, it won't get done.

Laura spoke about two specific families who had the opposite approach when it came to online learning. One student, Mary, had two involved parents who set up a classroom in their home for her. She came to all of the Zooms and excelled in their activities. Cameron, another student in the same class, had parents who were not as interested in having him on the screen all day and so he was rarely online. Miranda, who was the other teacher in this classroom, confirmed what Laura described. She added that some students were always on Zoom and did the activities posted online and shared them with the teachers, but that some were just not participating. The difference in the priorities of the parents affected the participation of those students. This is not to say either approach is good or bad, but just different in the way that they approached this online experience.

Differences Between Last Year and This Year

One of the questions in the interview was how the teachers have either changed or not changed their teaching style based on the year of virtual learning. It was interesting hearing the different perspectives the teachers had for this question because the responses were all different.

Laura told me that a concrete difference was the time she spent on Google Classroom by saying "last year I was much more, like, involved with Google Classroom but not as much this year because we've been in person mostly. So this is the main

difference.” She also told me that she appreciates being in person more now after a year on Zoom, and loves being able to be physically in the classroom with the students. Emily is still using Google Classroom with her students although they are back in person. She told me that she is “uploading pictures daily for parents to see what their kids are doing” which she thinks “helps a lot with not only transparency but with the parents not being able to drop off in the classroom and see what it’s like in there” which can foster a connection between the families and the class as a whole.

Miranda has also changed some things she does with the students. She mentioned that before the pandemic, they did not have access to projectors. During the year of online learning the teachers had access to an app that helps students learn the alphabet, and they still have access to it now that they are back in person. Miranda told me that:

“before we didn’t really have anything. It would be whatever we would come up with, right? Now we can, you know, have the projector on the wall and the kids can interact with the website where the letters are talking to them.”

She also says that she is doing a lot more science experiments and hands on activities for the students because it was something that they all missed out on the previous year being virtual.

Catherine expressed the opposite sentiment of what I was expecting. She said that she is “mainly staying away from a lot of the things that [she] did while virtual” with the reasoning that “they had a lot of screen time during the pandemic and [she is] trying to do as little screen time as I can now and have as many hands on opportunities as [she] can” during the day. In contrast with Miranda and her use of the projector,

Catherine is explicitly not using it because she doesn't feel that it is engaging to her students and they prefer to have, for example, a story read to them by a person in the room rather than being streamed in from the other room.

Teacher Reflections on Student Experience

Laura's perspective is interesting because she was a threes teacher last year and a fours teacher this year, and has the same group of children between both years. She said that "it's much more powerful overall just being in person...just having that early exposure and just having early connection personally with the children being here and working with them hands on it's been a great experience" compared to how it was teaching the same students last year. Nora talked about how being remote affected her students on a few different levels. She said that "being remote and learning virtually there was a big change and somewhat of a difference in their emotional intelligence and socialization" and that the students "who weren't socialized in school had a greater difficulty transition into school life routines" after they returned to in person learning in the Fall of 2021. As a fours teacher, a majority of her current students were at the preschool last year and learning virtually in one of the threes classrooms.

Catherine had a similar experience, and said that the students were "all kind of like fighting for the spotlight of wanting to share out and talk so then when they came to the classroom they had trouble taking turns when talking because they all wanted to talk over each other" and had to learn how to listen. She mentions that it felt like she had a class of brand new threes starting this year in person, even though most of them had been in the program virtually the year before. She said that "a typical four year old

classroom would have all of those social skills, like understanding how to sit on the carpet, how to use their words, raising a quiet hand” and that the students didn’t get taught those skills by parents at home because that is not how the home functions.

Catherine said that she was surprised at how excited the students are to be in person:

“I was expecting, I thought they would be kind of resentful and want to go back home and play with their toys. Some of the students will mention that, but for the most part they’re really so happy to be with their peers and have that social component of play.”

Many people thought that children would be behind in all stages of development: cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and that viewpoint does not seem to be entirely true looking at children now. There were some delays, but these interviews show that it was not all deficits that students will have to work hard to make up: children are resilient and in the proper environment can flourish after a hardship.

Parent Interviews

Similar to the interviews that I conducted with teachers, I found various opinions on the challenges and benefits of using online school as a tool with preschool students. I interviewed five parents who all have students in the same fourth class, and were in the same third class last year. Two of the parents are divorced from each other, two of the parents are married to each other, and one parent is a single mom, which means that the experiences of three children will be discussed overall within three different family contexts. I have categorized their answers into the headings below. All names have been changed throughout, and the parents will be referred to as Frank, Beth, Suzanne, Carol, and Richard.

What Families Were Doing During Remote Learning

Frank is the father of Cameron, who was mentioned previously in the paper during the teacher interview section under the heading “Teacher Observation of Parent Involvement”. He told me that Cameron did not previously participate in daycare setting, so being at this center was his first experience with school. Both of Cameron’s parents find it important to limit their children’s screen time, so he did not attend most of the live Zooms. Frank states that “we have a very outdoor experience. I would say we would be outdoors like for four hours or more every day” and they had other families that they would have outdoor playdates with during the beginning of the pandemic. Instead of the Zoom classes, Frank would “read to [Cameron], he would draw, we would do some letters maybe with his grandma but there wasn’t a specific curriculum that we were following.” The only Zoom that he consistently had Cameron on for was a dance class that happened on Mondays.

Beth is the mother of Cameron, who is divorced from Frank and lives in a separate apartment and who had a slightly different experience with him. In contrast with Frank, Beth “tried to put him on the computer as much as, or on the iPad or computer as much as possible” even though she herself is not into screen time either. She mentions that when he was not on Zoom, they would cook together and play outside, and then have a typical nighttime routine of brushing teeth and going to bed. While the school was using remote learning, Beth would take Cameron and his sibling to museums like the children’s museum where they could have an educational experience but also get to run around and touch all of the exhibits when they were open. Because Cameron’s parents are divorced, he and his older brother would spend

time in two households, with a variety of people: either with his father and his father's current partner, along with her two children or his mother and her current partner. His parents both lost their jobs and did not work during the pandemic.

Suzanne is the single mother of Aaron, who has been in the same class with Cameron for the past two years. Aaron's father is involved with the family, but does not live in the same apartment and is not married to Suzanne. Aaron did participate in daycare before starting at the center, so he had experience in a setting with multiple other children around before starting virtual preschool. Suzanne said that it was important to stick to a routine and make sure that Aaron had breakfast in the morning and knew what was going on for the day. Suzanne works full time from home, and her youngest child was also at home from her daycare during the pandemic. She says that "we would do circle time where I sat next to him and would work simultaneously and then we would just do that in between activities, like the center time activities, and login maybe like two or three times during the day" for the rest of the Zooms. As opposed to Cameron, who had a larger group of people around him, for Aaron, it was mainly just his mom and his younger sister. Although Suzanne's parents live with them, Suzanne said that they were not very involved with Aaron's remote learning. She was also motivated to do the activities that were posted on Google Classroom for at home completion because his teachers would post it on there for all of the families to see.

Carol and Richard, who are the married parents of Melissa, could not find time to do the interviews separately, so I completed the interview with both of them present. They spoke about how important it was to stick to the schedule that the teachers posted online each week, and they did "activities in between as if she was in school and also

keep her busy so she wouldn't get bored" during those breaks between Zoom classes. Their daughter, Melissa, was mostly with Carol during the day because she does not work, and then they slowly were able to introduce other family members into their "pod" or group of people they felt comfortable interacting with during the pandemic. They also took Melissa to the park or playground during breaks or over the weekend. Carol said this was "so that she could get a sense like 'I could still kind of see people my age' not just her mom or her parents all day" which they felt was important to her well-being.

The participation ranged for each of these families. Cameron hardly participated in the remote learning, no matter if he was at his mother's or father's apartment. Both Frank and Beth mentioned that Cameron enjoyed participating in a live Zoom dance class that happened once a week through the school, and would try to make the morning meetings, but it was not their priority. Aaron participated in the majority of live Zooms and extra activities that his teachers offered. He had a small desk that he would sit at and join the meetings or do his work next to his mother's work from home set up. Melissa participated in everything that the school offered, even extra live Zooms such as cooking classes from the school's kitchen. Her teachers described her home environment "like a mini classroom" and she seemed to enjoy the remote learning from home.

How Families Felt Supported or Not Supported by the School

I thought it would be important to get the parents' perspectives on how they felt either supported or not supported by the school during the year of remote learning. Frank did not have his son participate in most of the virtual meetings. He said that "it wasn't about that the program isn't good, it was more about, you know, I was saying like

the logistics and having other values that kind of conflicted” with the live Zoom meetings during the week. In reference to being totally virtual, he explained “there were times when it was OK to meet outside and I think there were a couple of things in the summer that were kind of like meet the new class...I just feel like there could have been a weekly thing” for students to come to the center and play on the playground. At the end of the interview, Frank also mentioned that he wished there was some sort of financial assistance that the center could have offered last year when everything was shut down.

Beth had a different experience than Frank did. When asked this question, she responded

“I totally felt supported I feel like....all of the social workers and [staff member] I have known for many years...and I feel like if I had any questions about like you know taxes like not paying rent anything like this I could ask. I feel like besides being a place where the kids can go, I also have support and like questions about what's going on in the community or how can I get support with this or so that is amazing you have all those other resources to share too.”

As someone who has been interning at this school since September, it was great to hear that Beth felt supported by all of the services the program offers.

Suzanne also felt supported by the program last year. When she found out a family member was sick and she was transitioning into a new job, she said the teachers were very flexible with her and her son not being able to show up for Zoom classes. Her son Aaron also needed speech services, and she says that she had “been trying to get him in because [she] noticed the delay so [the school] definitely made that transition, or getting those services, easier for [her]” and her son. She also mentioned that during the

remote year the center would hold food pantries and give out meals when helped her family when it was hard to get food in the height of the pandemic. Carol and Richard also mentioned the food pantries and food drives when asked this question. They stated that they did feel supported by the center but did not go into any more specifics besides the food pantry comment.

How Families Felt about Technology

Carol and Richard, when asked about the technology usage during last year, had some thoughts. Carol said that she loved that her daughter had an iPad from the school that had access to education apps that she actually still uses. She did mention that she was not tech savvy before last year and her husband Richard helped her a lot with figuring out the iPad and Google Classroom. They both talked about how they made sure that their daughter logged on to all of the Zooms, even the optional ones, and thought it was very important. Carol did mention that “some of the Zooms lacked attendance” and felt “it took a little bit longer for those who needed to get a translator or sometimes [she wished] Zoom could have like the closed caption where it could translate for you” so she wouldn’t have to wait for them to finish translating the lessons. Both parents also mentioned that they liked how the teachers used Google Classroom to communicate and post different students’ art throughout the year.

Suzanne found the remote Zoom sessions useful for both herself and her son Aaron:

“I did find it useful and also the work it kind of helped me understand where he should be and how to get him there so aside from the work that they would give me I would try to go online and look for extra stuff to kind of get him there.”

She also did have some difficult issues. Although Zoom was convenient, she was working from home and having to manage both her own work and Aaron's schooling could be challenging. She said that she "couldn't really give [Aaron] the attention that he needed while he was in school...he probably could have learned more had [she] been available or had someone been available" because even though her mother was around, she only speaks Spanish. She also found the ways Aaron's teachers used Google Classroom were effective and helped her stay up to date with the classroom.

Beth was torn when talking about technology. She said that they don't have a television in their apartment and are not "super high techie" people, but also that "it was necessary for schools and for you guys to have to do something and be doing something active for the kids and try to make any sort of participation possible" because it was not safe to congregate in person. She did not participate in any of the Google Classroom activities. Frank felt the same way when he had Cameron during the week. He said that he was "kind of open to doing it" but that a lot of the stuff that was being taught or offered they "just found that like both the flow of [their] day, you know, that [they] felt like [they] were doing a lot of these things already just in [their] own ways" and did not need to put Cameron in front of a screen all day. The one Zoom that Frank did participate with Cameron in was the dance Zoom that happened every Monday.

How the Children Reacted to In Person Learning

The last major point of conversation for many of the parents was the question about how their children transitioned from virtual learning to in person learning. Frank told me:

“He had a sense of school from his older brother and he’s really enjoyed it. He has pretty consistently enjoyed school or praised it since then and he’ll tell [Frank] stories about like other students, you know, what’s going on with them. He’ll bring things that he’s done, show me proudly. It seems really great.”

Frank was worried that Cameron might be behind the other students because he wasn’t putting him on the Zoom lessons but he said that he doesn’t believe that’s true anymore and that Cameron has really enjoyed school and meeting his classmates. He said that he thinks “this is a great program and I think the approach is really great, like it’s more child centered and there are resources like the pool or the [playground] and yeah, there’s all this great stuff” that he was excited for Cameron to get to use.

Beth agreed that it was great to have Cameron in person at the center this year. She mentioned that he did not go to any daycare before starting with the threes virtually, so he spent a lot of time with adults and his older brother, and enjoyed interacting with adults. She said “it was like him interacting with kids was a new thing” but that “it was so good to have him interacting with the kids and he seems to have grown a lot after the first few months” of the program. She also told me that Cameron was able to recognize children from his Zooms when they were all back in person and was excited to see them.

Unlike Frank and Beth, Aaron was Suzanne’s first child to attend this program, so she was not sure what to expect when he started in person. She said that she “was a little nervous for him because, you know, he had been with [her] for the past year and, you know, but [she thought] he transitioned very well, no tears...he actually loves it” at

the center. She also feels that being able to go in person and interact with his peers has helped him with his speech delays that Aaron has been working on. She also said

“I feel like it helps out a lot because I'm working still from home and I have [his little sister] so it was really difficult to manage both kids and work, so it does help me in that sense, and I feel like school also kind of helps drain his energy. I was only able to do so much at home and now I feel it's easier to put him to sleep. He's more willing because he's tired.”

Overall, it seems like it has been a positive experience for both mother and child for Aaron to be in person at the center this year.

When Carol and Richard were asked the same questions, Richard stated that “mom had most of those feelings” of nervousness but that he was fine. Carol responded that she does kind of miss having her daughter home with her during the day, “but at the same time she was really excited, she was so excited that she didn't have to see [her classmates and teachers] on a tablet and that she would get to take the train and to be in person” at the center. Carol also said that her daughter did recognize her classmates when they started in person and was excited to see them all, as well as the teachers and any staff members who might have participated in those Zoom classes. Both parents were a little worried that “in person was going to make her go a little backwards” in regards to her cognitive development but that in fact “in person pushed a little forward” and that she's doing a lot better than they were expecting.

While Melissa and Aaron had been at daycare in person before the pandemic started, all three children have adjusted well to in person schooling after a year of learning remotely. All of their parents made a point to mention how happy their children

are to be at school and that they now get to play with their classmates and learn from their teachers in person. Being physically at school seems to have improved their social and cognitive capacities.

Discussion

At the beginning of this thesis, I brought up the two guiding questions of the project: what were the elements to online learning that worked for parents and teachers, and what was challenging for both groups? I had predicted that positive aspects of virtual learning could include not having to worry about transportation and the costs of getting to school, being able to spend more time with family (for both teachers and parents), and parents having a better understanding of what their children are learning as three- and four-year-olds. The challenges I predicted were issues of parent or guardian employment and access to childcare, children's attention span and participation dipping, and potential loss of consistent meals for the students.

From the interviews that I conducted, there are plenty of factors in both camps. The things that worked for teachers were being able to have extra time to prepare for their classes, having access to technology that they did not have access to before, a flexibility around classes and communications with parents. The things that were challenging for teachers were the low attendance for many of the students, the burn out of working on a computer or tablet multiple hours a day, not being able to have a strong connection with their students, and the inaccessibility of the technology that was being used.

Some of the teachers expressed having a learning curve with all the new technology, while other technologically savvy teachers found it to be an easier transition

from their work before the pandemic. I found it surprising that although most teachers had continued to use things like iPads and the new projectors in the classrooms, Catherine has actively been staying away from those items. She explained that she wanted to keep as much distance between virtual learning and in person learning as she could now, whereas other teachers appreciated the extra tools at their disposal.

The things that worked for parents were having flexibility in the amount and type of participation that was offered, support from the center around food and other information regarding the pandemic, spending more time with their children, and being able to access virtual learning tools. Some of the challenges parents faced were having to be physically with their child while they are online, not wanting to participate in screen time-based activities, and not feeling supported by the center around pandemic related information/feeling like the restrictions were too strict at times.

Patterns found in the parents were that all tried to support their children in the way that worked the best for each individual family, whether that be taking all of the opportunities the school offered or picking and choosing what they took from the experience. Beth and Frank preferred more hands on and outdoor activities, whereas Suzanne, Carol, and Richard focused on the live Zooms and school-based activities. Most of the parents I interviewed were either working from home, or unemployed, so they were able to give a rich description of what it was like being home with their child or children for all of the 2020 to 2021 school year.

Some of the positives and some of the challenges I predicted were not accurate to my findings. No participant, parents or teachers, brought up the idea of transportation or cost of getting to school as a positive of virtual learning. I think that parents did bring

up how they understood more of what their child was working on as they had to be with them during the live Zoom sessions. Loss of access to meals or food consistently for the students was also not a challenge, because the center offered a food pantry and meals for families, which I was unaware of before. There were not any unexpected findings, which might be related to the fact that I knew and had worked with all of the interviewees, so I had an idea of how they were feeling before I interviewed them from casual conversations in the past year.

There are limitations to this paper. I only interviewed five parents and five teachers, and there were only three children among the five parents. Because I wanted to interview teachers who had been there for the entire year of virtual learning, there was not a large pool to choose from. The parents were also limited because I wanted those who had started last fall and were still at the center this year, which was limiting. I also only interviewed parents who spoke English, because I only speak English.

Conclusion

Although other preschool programs decided to continue to function in person during the pandemic, or close completely, this Head Start preschool went fully online for the 2020-2021 school year. This decision was sure to have elicited mixed opinions from both parents and teachers, and I wanted to find out what those opinions were. Everyone I interviewed made it clear that they understood why the decision to switch to remote learning was made, even if they were not excited for the process or knew it did not fit their teaching or parenting style.

There are already research studies being published about COVID-19's effects on education, but there is still room for studies that are specifically about preschool

experiences, which is where my study fits into the larger picture. The results that I found fit into the same narrative as studies cited like Duran (2021), which discussed how teachers did not feel that distance learning was the best modality for children's development, or Sonnenschein et al. (2021) whose results show that a majority of parents stayed home and worked with their students on their schoolwork during remote learning. None of the studies I found spoke to both parents and teachers to examine the two viewpoints of the same situation and students.

Some of my hypotheses were supported, as stated in the Discussion section, and some were not. I had thought that the parents would feel supported by the school and found that was not the case for every parent. There was also the issue of Aaron's speech services being remote during remote learning, which brought up another aspect of remote learning that I had not considered. It would be interesting to see what it was like for students who needed physical therapy or occupational therapy that they would normally be receiving in person at school, but instead was held remotely or possibly did not happen at all during that school year.

Going forward, more research should be done on this topic using a wider range of participants from different cultural backgrounds and who speak other languages, as there were a large portion of Spanish-speaking parents who would have fit the description for this study, who would have made a valuable contribution. There should also be interview studies with the children themselves – four- and five-year-olds - to see how they felt about being in school online and what it is like being in person now. As can be seen in the findings, not only are children resilient in the face of a pandemic, so are the parents and teachers who are taking care of them.

Appendix A

Interview Questions for Parents:

- Did your child participate in a daycare setting or another preschool before this year?
- What kinds of activities did your child do during the past year? What was a typical day like?
- Who was home with your child during the past year? Who did they interact with the most?
- What did you do with your child last year?
- What is the experience like starting school if this is the first time?
- How did you feel supported or not supported by the center last year?
- How does it feel to have the children in school all day versus a few hours on Zoom last year?
- Were there things that worked well for you with Zoom school? Were there things that were challenges with Zoom school?
- Did you participate in Zoom school with your child last year? How often did you log on? What do you think of Zoom school?
- Anything else that you feel is relevant to this conversation that you would like to share?

Interview Questions for Teachers:

- What worked well for you? What was a challenge?
- How satisfied were you with online school (Zoom and google classroom)?
- How much did the students participate in Zoom?
- Which parents were the most involved - did that correlate to the students participating?
- What were the environments like for the students participating?
- Who did not show up - on Zoom and/or Google Classroom?
- How was the Google Classroom participation?
- How does this year compare to last year?
- Is there anything different you're doing now based on last year?

Appendix B

SARAH · LAWRENCE · COLLEGE

Experiences of Remote Schooling for Parents and Teachers during Covid.

Annie Mudick, amudick@gm.sl.c.edu, 1 Mead Way Bronxville, NY 10708

I am asking you to take part in a research study at Sarah Lawrence College. Please read through the following questions and responses and *ask any other questions* that will help you to decide whether or not to participate.

What is the purpose of this study?

- The purpose of this research study is to understand the experience of online schooling for preschool parents and teachers. This research aims to understand the benefits and drawbacks of online preschool, what worked and did not work last year.

Why am I being asked to participate?

- The participants are either parents of families who participated in Zoom school last year or teachers who taught over Zoom last year.

What will I be asked to do?

- I will ask you to answer some questions about what the experience was like for you last year regarding online school . The interviews should take around an hour per person, with only one interview needed for each person.
- I will be audio-recording the interviews to make sure that they are accurately represented in the thesis.

Is my participation voluntary?

- Your participation is voluntary! You can opt out of the study at any point and doing so will not affect your relationship with myself or Lenox Hill as a whole. You can also choose to not answer any specific questions without having to justify your reasoning.

Are there any benefits or risks associated with my participation in this study?

- There are no direct benefits to participating in this study.
- There are also minimal risks associated with your participation, including any discomfort around discussing the stressful time during the pandemic.

Will I be compensated for my participation?

- Participants will not be compensated.

Will the information I provide be kept confidential?

- Any names given during the interview will be changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants of the study.
- I, Annie, am the only person who will have access to your data (the recordings and transcriptions), and it will be stored securely on my computer.

If I have any questions or concerns after the study, how can I contact you?

- I can be reached by email at either amudick@lenoxhill.org or amudick@gm.sl.c.edu.
- My faculty advisor, Barbara Schecter, can be reached at schecter@sarahlawrence.edu.

Who can I contact if I have questions about my rights as a research participant?

- The IRB co-chairs Professors Elizabeth Johnston (203-722-3287) and Claire Davis (914-395-2605) at irb@sarahlawrence.edu.

Please indicate with your signature on the space below that you understand your rights and voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Signature of Participant	Date
Print Participant Name	
[Annie Mudick], Investigator	Date

Please indicate with your signature on the space below that you understand your rights and voluntarily agree to have your participation in this study audio- and/or video-recorded.

Signature of Participant	Date
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