

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Volume



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Shortly after the lockdown was lifted in our area, a young mother ventured out with her toddler daughter to purchase essential items. Both were wearing masks and, rather than placing the child in the seat of the grocery cart, the mother held her child close while scanning her surroundings for any encroachment on the recommended physical distance boundaries. When another shopper ignored the directional arrows on the floor and approached them head on, a look of panic swept over the mother's face. She raced over to a different aisle with the child bouncing along as she ran. Then the toddler put up her hands, palms out, and fingers spread, as if warding away a threat. Imagine the contrast between this experience and a pre-pandemic trip to the grocery store. Previous visits surely would have been more relaxed, with the toddler taking in sights, smells, and using her emerging vocabulary. Her mother probably would have exchanged smiles and nods with fellow shoppers. Now, thanks to COVID, an ordinary errand had become an anxiety-ridden venture into a danger zone, teeming with possibilities for infection, disease, and even death.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a disaster of the first order, and the disease persists despite monumental efforts to eradicate it. A Centers for Disease Control-led team calculated that, for every four COVID-19-associated deaths in the United States, a child loses a parent or a caregiver (Hillis et al., 2021b). Such losses can be particularly acute for the very young because separation and abandonment are major fears during early childhood. COVID-19 has not only intensified that worry but also, in an alarming number of instances, made it a reality. A study published in *The Lancet* estimated that, throughout the world, 1,562,000 children have experienced the death of at least one primary or secondary caregiver (Hillis et al., 2021a).

The children of racial and ethnic minorities and indigenous people have been disproportionately affected (Hillis et al., 2021b; Xafis, 2020). To illustrate, the

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National Center for Health Statistics data indicated that 65% of children of racial and ethnic minorities lost a primary caregiver, even though they represent only 39% of the total US population (Haseltine, 2021). Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native children accounted for over 50–67% of those losing a parent or primary caregiver to COVID-19 in different regions in the United States even though they represent minority groups (Haseltine, 2021).

Other types of loss have compounded the problem. Countries with widespread poverty and fragile education systems failed to stabilize the existing educational programs, much less innovate toward greater equity (Soudien et al., 2022). The United Nations (2020a) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020) report that more than 1.7 billion learners had their learning disrupted or even discontinued, and 99% of students in low- and middle-income countries experienced constrained educational opportunities. Even within European countries, childcare policies and responses to COVID-19 differed considerably (Blum & Dobrotić, 2020). Measures instituted to address the transmission of the virus, while necessary, have tended to increase the psychological vulnerability of children in general and further exacerbated the situation for children who were already experiencing poverty, food insecurity, abuse, neglect and maltreatment, anxiety and depression, and fewer educational opportunities to learn (Fegert et al., 2020; Fry-Bowers, 2020). For example, even in a wealthy nation such as the United States, the provision of food to 4.6 million young children from low-income backgrounds in early care and education settings faltered because most programs did not have the capacity to distribute the food, causing that “safety net” to unravel (Bauer et al., 2021).

As the United Nations (2020b) has cogently argued, COVID-19 is not only a health disaster; it is also a humanitarian crisis. To illustrate, many are aware of the disturbing demographic data that documented higher rates of infection with COVID-19 among minorities and marginalized groups than in the general US population. What is less fully appreciated is that those same inequities were played out in the early childhood sector, particularly childcare.

In the United States, nearly 2/3 of families with children between the ages of infancy and 5 years rely on early childhood education and care (USA Facts, 2020). A report from the Urban Society (Adams et al., 2021) defines the “childcare/early education workforce” as center-based staff (including directors, teachers, and aides) and family child care and home-based providers. Childcare workers are 2.5 times more likely to be either Black or Latina compared with the overall workforce (Austin et al., 2019). They also were more likely to test positive for COVID-19 (Gillam et al., 2020). Globally speaking, those employed as caregivers and educators of young children often are poorly compensated and/or without health insurance, yet many persisted at high risk to their own health and that of their families. Without the childcare/early education workforce’s support of essential workers, health care and the economy in many nations could have collapsed (Tracey et al., 2020). They were placed in the position of just “holding on until help comes” (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020), and, evidently, some of them could not prevail. In the United States alone, more than 370,000 childcare and early education

workers exited the field from February to April of 2020 and, as of December 2020, the workforce had been reduced by 17% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). The glib solution of “going online” proffered to those in other occupations or even for other groups of educators was totally inaccessible to them because their primary role consisted of in-person care for the youngest children. To make their role even more difficult, the very young children in their care seldom understood the changes instituted or the underlying reasons for them (Adams et al., 2021). Childcare personnel who remained also had to find a way to deal with stringent health and safety protocols, staff shortages, unpredictable enrolments, increased operating budgets, and fiscal uncertainty (Workman & Jessen-Howard, 2020). Any pre-existing bad situations with a few or no options for safe, reliable, and affordable early childhood care and education continued to worsen in the pandemic’s wake (Kalluri et al., 2021).

Of course, early childhood educators affiliated with public schools faced challenges as well. They were expected to quickly adjust their personal lives and home environments to the circumstances, implement new health and safety protocols, transition to emergency remote teaching, link children and families to needed services and supports, work differently with families, and implement plans for reopening—to name a few (Atiles et al., 2021).

College and university faculty members found that growing numbers of their students were understandably worried not only about the virus but also about program completion and future job prospects. Enrollment declined at many higher education institutions and, if they had been struggling financially pre-pandemic, they were now in crisis. In many instances, faculty members with the fewest resources for weathering the COVID-19 pandemic—part-timers, temporaries, and those at the bottom of the seniority list—lost their jobs. Meanwhile, some of the most senior faculty took early retirement rather than completely reconfigure their professional lives, leaving their areas of specialization uncovered and further compounding staffing problems. Working with undergraduates or graduate students, faculty members’ instruction, advisement, assessment, and field supervision had to be transformed to online formats almost overnight. Designing meaningful practicum experiences for students demanded resourcefulness, collaboration with colleagues, and new ways of working with schools. Throughout it all, members of the female-dominated field of early childhood education and care saw their household duties increase and, if they were responsible for children, the expectations for learning support at home increased exponentially. Across the entire spectrum of early childhood education and care, ranging from infant-toddler programs to post-doctoral studies, professionals confronted huge and sometimes overwhelming demands to adapt.

In the early days of the coronavirus, we had no idea about the professional and personal stress and trauma that the disease would wreak for practically everyone. Some of us associated with this project lost family, colleagues, students, friends, and community members to COVID, both temporarily and permanently. We (mostly) expected that a cure would be found and that the illness would be eradicated. Instead, at the time of this writing, we are seeing the virus mutate, persist, and break

through—in some cases, even among people who were vaccinated. Will “The COVID,” as many people now refer to it, ever be put to rest, once and for all, and in the meantime, what will humankind have to endure? More than a year later, the answers remain unclear.

About the Book Project

When Jyotsna Pattnaik first proposed an edited book on the topic, my initial reaction was that we did not yet know what the effects of COVID-19 might be. I suggested that we begin with a special issue of *Early Childhood Education Journal* because it could be produced more quickly than a book, gauge readers’ interest in the subject matter, and perhaps identify contributors of the chapters. Patricia Crawford, editor-in-chief of *ECEJ*, and our publisher Springer Nature responded promptly to the proposal for a special issue. In the spring and summer of 2020, the first manuscripts were submitted. Ultimately, 22 articles devoted to the topic of COVID-19’s impact on early childhood education and care (ECEC) were published in the September of 2021 (volume 49, number 5) issue of the *Early Childhood Education Journal*. In keeping with their enlightened policies, Springer Nature decided to make all publications about COVID-19 Open Access and free of charge. To date, articles from the special issue of *Early Childhood Education Journal* on COVID-19 have been downloaded nearly 100,000 times, with some articles at more than 19,000 downloads (Jalongo, 2021). The success of the special issue of the journal suggested that there was a need for curated information about COVID-19 and its consequences for early childhood education and care, so we redoubled our efforts with the book project. We began with a call for abstracts posted online and shared via various listservs. Our definition of the early childhood years was that used by the National Association for the Education of Young Children: from infancy up to and including 8 years of age. The audience for this book is the same as the audience for the *Educating the Young Child Series*: professionals dedicated to the care and education of very young children.

In terms of manuscript types, we indicated that we were receptive to: (1) reviews of research that included implications for early childhood practice; (2) original research that employed quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods; and (3) practical articles that critically analyzed policies and pedagogy. Of course, all research had to conform to ethical standards and the principles of informed consent, and faculty members were required to verify that the research had been approved by their Institutional Review Boards.

In our call for book chapters, we provided some direction about the content sought for this edited volume. The list was by no means exhaustive but was intended to serve as a starting point for formulating ideas. Included among the topics were such things as: the history of health pandemics and their consequences for young children, the wellbeing of children, families, and professionals; perspectives and practices of parents/families, caregivers, teachers, administrators, and teacher

educators; support for young children's learning—particularly those at-risk, in marginalized groups, or with delays/disorders; and college/university faculty members' efforts to maintain professional standards despite disruptions to early childhood courses and professional practicum experiences. We further indicated that we were particularly keen to receive manuscripts that reflected interagency collaborations to support children and families as well as global perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the diverse, international readership of Springer Nature's *Educating the Young Child Series* and the interdisciplinary implications of a global pandemic, we were particularly eager to see collaborative efforts that looked beyond the local context and involved networking with other early childhood experts, as well as professionals in related fields.

The deadline was tight yet, much to our surprise, over 100 different abstracts and articles from around the world were submitted. Considering the extraordinary personal and professional pressures that scholars were experiencing, the fact that these prospective authors had changed their research agendas and were pursuing publication was impressive. This groundswell of interest in the topic was encouraging, particularly because the submissions received represented diverse backgrounds, nationalities, and perspectives on the field, both in basic and higher education.

Unique Contributions of the Book

This edited volume, consisting of 25 chapters submitted by teachers/scholars from throughout the world has several unique characteristics.

Recency of the Phenomenon The topic of COVID-19 is exceptionally timely. Nearly everything published about the coronavirus was published within the past 2 years and much of the most recent literature is posted online in pre-publication format. The COVID-19 pandemic is both an up-to-the minute and continually evolving issue. We still cannot fathom the indelible mark this crisis will make on individuals, groups, nations, and the planet.

Focus on the Early Years Although there are many publications on the world health pandemic being published currently, most of them focus on scientific/medical evidence, public health systems and concerns, and government policies enacted to control transmission of the disease and put essential supports into place. Currently and to the best of our knowledge, this is the first book of its type.

International Perspectives Rather than present a USA perspective only, our book synthesizes theory, research, and professional practice to provide keen insights on the challenges associated with COVID-19.

Effects Across Socioeconomic Strata Although those who face the greatest challenges to survival have tended to suffer the most, it has had consequences for people at all levels of power, influence, and income. COVID-19 represents an existential crisis for all, even though some are better equipped to cope physically, socially,

financially, and emotionally. This makes it a particularly interesting educational issue because, even in wealthy countries that espouse democratic ideals, support systems faltered and failed so many people. Furthermore, individuals and groups worldwide could not, for a variety of reasons, follow even the most basic guidelines from the World Health Organization to halt the spread of the virus by doing such things as avoiding physical contact, washing hands frequently, and wearing a mask.

Profound Consequences for the Very Young Although COVID-19 is not a disease such as polio, which destroyed children's physical health, it still ravaged young children's lives as they lost their support systems, both familial and institutional. Even for children who did not suffer the loss of a caregiver, many were physically distant for more than a year. Young children had their educational experiences more disrupted than those of older students because of their need for active, play-based approaches, peer interaction, and more in-person adult guidance. For most children who relied on programs to provide health, nutrition, social services, and other forms of professional help, these interventions were disrupted or perhaps no longer accessible. If children lived in troubled, violent families where neglect or abuse occurred or parents/caregivers had substance abuse or severe mental health issues, these children became trapped indoors with these negative influences intensified, the external supervision via social services absent, and the safe havens supplied by many early childhood and care programs discontinued. The contributors to this book have the wisdom to fully appreciate that we are far from equal in our ability to summon up the human and material resources necessary to survive and thrive. Children from 0–8 years are a vulnerable group because they are reliant on others. When their basic needs are not met, families are stressed to the breaking point, opportunities to learn are restricted, and support services are denied, it does undeniable damage.

Overview of the Book

The 25 chapters comprising the volume have been clustered into five sections for ease of reference. Part I: COVID-19 and the Global Early Childhood Landscape begins with this introduction to the work (Chap. 1). Suzanne Egan's and Jennifer Pope's application of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems to the pandemic provides a theoretical perspective (Chap. 2). Part I also includes Ellen McKenzie's discussion of challenges to developmentally appropriate practices (Chap. 3), an analysis of government policies affecting young children in 10 countries headed by Antje Rothe (Chap. 4), Sunita Singh's analysis of the pandemic in India (Chap. 5), and Marcela Batistič Zorec and Mojca Peček's interview study with preschoolers (Chap. 6).

The wellbeing of early childhood personnel was another theme in the chapters accepted for publication, so Chaps. 7, 8, 9, and 10 constitute Part II of this edited

work. Included are Lisa Murray and her co-authors' chapter on Australian early childhood educators (Chap. 7), Nathalie Bigras and her colleagues' chapter on early childhood program managers (Chap. 8), Laura McFarland and her co-authors' study of early childhood educators (Chap. 9), and Lynne Lafave and her colleagues' insider perspective on wellbeing in early childhood personnel (Chap. 10).

Part III: Focus on Families consists of four chapters. In Chap. 11, Dorit Aram and co-authors provide a cross-cultural perspective on parenting during the pandemic. Marisa Macy explores the provision of services for young children with delays/disabilities, despite lockdowns (Chap. 12). In Chap. 13, Susan Sonnenschein and her co-authors investigate obstacles associated with online instruction of young children, while in Chap. 15, Laura Lee McIntyre and her co-authors offer practical guidance on using telehealth to support young children with special needs.

Early childhood personnel—childcare providers, teachers, program administrators, and college/university faculty members responsible for the education of preservice/in-service caregivers and teachers—are the focus of Part IV. Patty Hrusa Williams and Donna Karno examine the situation of family child care providers in a rural context (Chap. 15) while Crystasany R. Turner (Chap. 16) reports on her qualitative research with Black family child care providers who functioned as community mothers during the crisis. In Chap. 17, Kate Anderson and a large international team report on pre-primary schoolteachers' perspectives in Ethiopia, Liberia, and Pakistan. Natalie Schock and her co-authors share their qualitative research findings from Head Start teachers in the United States in Chap. 18. The fourth section concludes with Evan Throop Johnson, Lori McKee, and Anne Murray-Orr's design of a meaningful practicum for preservice teachers, even with stay-at-home orders in effect (Chap. 19).

The final section, Part V: Delivering Program and Services Despite Challenges, describes how early childhood professionals quickly adapted programs for the very young to make the best of an unprecedented situation. In Chap. 20, Evdokia Pittas, Inmaculada Fajardo Bravo, and Nadina Gómez-Merino analyze online learning practices as they affect young children. Kristy Timmons and her co-authors look at remote teaching and learning in the early primary years in Canada (Chap. 21). The youngest children—infants and toddlers—also had their education disrupted by COVID-19. This is the topic of Marjory Ebbeck and her co-authors' analysis of curriculum quality in Singapore (Chap. 22). Continuation of support services for children with disabilities is the topic of Chap. 23 by Elizabeth A Steed. Chapter 24, written by a large international team of authors led by Beatriz Ilari, studies how music programs for young children adapted to the difficult circumstances associated with COVID-19. The book concludes with a look toward our uncertain future as Megan Kunze and Laura Lee McIntyre reflect on the situation for young children at-risk, post-pandemic (Chap. 25). The authors of the assembled chapters have shared exceptionally diverse subject matter, yet they are unified by their stance of advocacy for young children, families, caregivers/teachers/administrators, and faculty working with preservice and in-service teachers. Collectively they represent well-reasoned responses to a worldwide panic and concerted efforts to mitigate the adverse influences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

COVID-19 and responses to it have resulted in:

The worst education crisis of the last century. The health pandemic, its subsequent massive and extended school closures, and the accompanying strain in public and family budgets (that result from one of deepest global economic recessions in history) are unprecedented triple shocks to the human capital of a generation of children. If recovery strategies are not successfully designed and deployed, the intergenerational consequences of this pandemic will be felt for several generations to come. (Azevedo et al., 2022, p. 422)

As the contributors assembled for this volume assert, COVID-19 had—and continues to have—a major impact, and the physical and psychological toll has been particularly acute for the youngest members of the global community (OMEP Executive Committee, 2020; Pascal et al., 2020). There is little question that the current global health crisis has redefined and, in some ways, jeopardized the field of early childhood education and care as we once knew it. Much of the hard-won progress that was made throughout the world in supporting young children and families could not withstand the intense pressures exerted by the crisis.

Although it may be tempting to highlight even the smallest positive changes that were instituted while living through a pandemic thus far, the truth is that much of it consisted of muddling through somehow. We had to accept that circumstances were far from ideal, relax some rules, and modify some standards. It is premature to claim that we are “restructuring” or “reimagining” education. The road to recovery necessitates a full understanding of the pandemic’s effects on systems, educators, and students across three different time frames: (1) the immediate impact of the COVID-19 crisis, (2) the aftermath as the epidemic is wrestled under control, and (3) the medium-term aftermath that occurs when education systems, societies, and economies achieve some level of stability (Anderson, 2021). At this early juncture, perhaps the best we can aim for is “the development of strategies that will position systems and institutions to anticipate and prepare for future similar events and leverage this crisis to make fresh starts where systems, processes, and practices have clearly not worked, not supported everyone equally, and not offered individuals and communities the opportunities to which they have a legitimate claim” (Soudien et al., 2022, p. 303).

On the brighter side, the rest of the educational field finally is catching up to what early childhood has advocated for decades; namely, a focus on the whole child that takes all developmental domains into account; knowledge of child development; and effective collaboration with families, communities, and professionals in the allied fields. Shortly before COVID-19 hit, the Aspen Institute (2019) assembled a National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development comprised of an impressive group of scholars, researchers, and policymakers. The six key recommendations that emerged were remarkably consistent with the early childhood philosophy that has existed for at least as long as most of us with a long history in the field can remember. They included:

1. Set a clear vision that broadens the definition of student success to prioritize the whole child
2. Transform learning settings so they are safe and supportive for all young people
3. Change instruction to teach social, emotional, and cognitive skills; embed these skills in academics and in schoolwide practices
4. Build adult expertise in child development
5. Align resources and leverage partners in the community to address the whole child
6. Forge closer connections between research and practice

Up until quite recently, many educators working with older students would have dismissed these ideas as too “soft” and raised objections such as “What about accountability, academic standards, test results, and international comparisons of student achievement?” Evidently, at least some educational leaders are now willing to respect these time-honored tenets of our field and regard them as enlightened.

It remains to be seen whether humankind has learned from COVID-19 or if they will, in the rush to return to misguided notions about normalcy, revert to practices that ignore global interdependence, protect the privileged, and preserve the status quo. Attempts to cope with the pandemic have laid bare the inequities and the failures of entire nations, including those that are well resourced. What our youngest generation needs—perhaps now more than ever before—is compassion, advocacy, wisdom, research, and effective practice from the field of early childhood education and care. All these things are amply represented in the chapters that follow, contributed by an impressive group of teachers/scholars with a shared commitment to the very young child.

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