





Parent-pre-school teacher relations during the COVID-19 pandemic – Promoters and undermining factors

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled teachers to grapple with the challenge of distance learning and remote communication with pre-school children and their parents. This study examines how student-teachers perceived their and the teacher's relations with the pre-school children and parents during the first lockdown. The study is based on a mixed-method, quantitative and qualitative, research design among ten third-year student-teachers in Israel. 56% reported that relations with parents during the first lockdown were strengthened, which they attributed to several factors (e.g., parental desire to establish a routine and maintain the child's connection with their friends and teacher, and a desire to advance their children). Other factors were perceived to undermine parent-teacher relations (e.g., number of siblings, busy parents, economic and emotional stress, technological illiteracy). The study underscores the importance of a holistic and ecologic approach to relations among early childhood education teachers, student-teachers, parents, and children, and the critical need for partnership and transparency between the pre-school teacher and student-teacher.

Keywords: student-teacher perceptions, parents-teacher relationships, COVID-19, early childhood, promoters and undermining factors

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began to spread in Israel in March 2020, led to a lockdown of pre-schools and schools and a transition to distance learning, later re-opening under new rules of social distancing. For the first time, teachers had to grapple with the challenge of distance learning and communicating remotely with pre-school children and their parents. ECE student teachers in their third year of study who engaged in practice teaching twice a week in pre-schools, are mentored and guided by in-service mentoring teachers. The mentoring teachers assist the student teachers in planning and implementing learning-teaching processes in small groups and whole class management. In routine days, the student-teachers have minor interactions with the parents but during the COVID-19 pandemic, the connections between the teacher and parents became more visible to the student-teacher. This study examines how student-teachers perceived relations between the parents of the pre-school children, the in-service mentoring teachers, and themselves during the pandemic.

Parent-Teacher Relations in the Pre-School

Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological systems theory of human development underscores the critical influence of parent-teacher relations on the emotional wellbeing and learning of the child. Research has found that positive, cooperative communication between the pre-school parents and teaching staff create optimal conditions for children to achieve competency and develop a sense of security, trust, and continuity between the home and pre-school (Frish, 2012; Sheridan et. al, 2010). These relations were found to positively influence not only the child's scholastic achievement, but also enable the building of social and emotional competencies such as self-image, interpersonal communication, and decision-making (Christenson & Reschly, 2010). Epstein (2018) contends that greater parental involvement—all the activities undertaken by parents and teachers to advance the children—is generally characterized by enhanced partnership and mutuality with the education framework and affects its goals and structure.

Research about parent-teacher relations conducted by Israel's National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education prior to the outbreak of the pandemic (RAMA, 2017b) found that parents held a positive view of the teachers. In another study by RAMA (2017a), most pre-school teachers similarly reported good relations with the parents, marked by trust, ongoing communication, and cooperation. Research by Gilat et al. (2017) also found that more than 75% of the parents were satisfied with the pedagogical performance of the pre-school teachers as well as the social-emotional connection. Nevertheless, relations

between parents and the pre-school teaching staff are sometimes beset by difficulties derived from disparities in perception and expectations about their roles (Sverdllov & Aram, 2016), parental intervention in areas outside their authority, criticism of the pre-school teacher, or failure to abide by the rules set by the teacher (Tal, 2004). A similar study in New Zealand found that when relations between the pre-school teachers and parents were strained, the teachers' sense of efficacy was undermined (Mahmood, 2013). These difficulties have led many pre-school teachers to regard relations with parents as one of the most threatening aspects of their job (Metropolitan Life, 2005; Shimoni & Baxter, 1996). This concern appears early in the training of pre-school teachers as mentoring teachers convey "warnings" about interactions with parents (Dayan, 2004). Thus, it is not surprising to find that pre-school and other teachers (Addi-Racah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008; Greenbaum & Fried, 2011), as well as student-teachers, particularly during their in-training year (Levy et al., 2019; Peleg et al., 2019), report fear and tension in their interactions with parents, and find it hard to resolve conflicts. This emerges in a survey carried out among first-year teachers in which 70% of the respondents believed that the parents perceive them and the schools as adversaries (Metropolitan Life, 2005).

This research examines how the COVID-19 pandemic may affect the student-teachers' perceptions of parents-teachers' relationships. It would be interesting to find out if the student-teachers perceive the relationships as more positive and closer and what were their interpretation for these changes if any.

Parent-Teacher Relations in the Shadow of COVID-19

During the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, pre-school teachers, parents, and early childhood education students voiced concern about their ability to maintain consistency and continuity in their communication while engaged in distance learning (Shi & Ettekal, 2021). This new education format transformed the division of labor between parents and the teaching staff, forcing parents to become more involved in the learning process. In the professional literature, this early phase of a crisis is called "the honeymoon," as participants mobilize in the hope that with effort and dedication, the crisis will be overcome (Lahad et al., 2020).

Research by Forkosh Baruch (2018) conducted prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 found that parents were more likely to use varied digital means to communicate with the teachers, while teachers preferred targeted digital communication with the parents and face-to-face meetings. This study helped identify the potential of digital communication for bridging time and space, highlighting the importance of training teachers to use digital media for communicating with parents. In this sense, the pandemic transformed the system, forcing teachers and pre-school teachers to turn to digital media for communicating with parents, despite the digital obstacles noted in the Forkosh Baruch (2018) study.

A comparison by age reveals that the school population most vulnerable to the adverse educational effects of COVID-19 are those in early childhood programs because these are entirely dependent upon parental support (Ministry of Education, 2020b). The need for increased parental involvement in the distance learning process posed new challenges, both logistically (the need for quiet space, a computer, and an internet connection), and also educationally: The parents are called upon to demonstrate knowledge, digital literacy, motivation, and greater availability. Thus, it was not surprising to discover that parents at lower socioeconomic levels found it particularly difficult to provide support for distance learning (Andrew et al., 2020; Ministry of Education, 2020a).

A study in Finland during the pandemic found that parents expressed concerns about the emotional and scholastic wellbeing of their children, but that the support of the educational staff eased their fears and helped them cope with the challenges (Koskela et al., 2020). Research in Israel found, however, that the teachers considered parental involvement in the learning process to be challenging, and some feared the exposure and criticism could undermine their authority (Ministry of Education, 2020c, 2020d).

Gilat et al. (2020) examined the effects of distance learning on the pre-school experience from the perspective of mothers of three-six-year-olds in central Israel. A quarter of the mothers reported that distance learning improved the teacher's connection with them or their children. The research concluded that Zoom classes alone are not suitable for pre-school children, although asynchronous tasks such as films and presentations together with synchronous Zoom encounters helped maintain continuity between home and the school.

In conclusion, distance learning is not a substitute for direct frontal face-to-face teaching and learning processes particularly in early age. Moreover, young children from minority groups families are more vulnerable and require specific personal attention.

Training Students to Manage Working Relations with Parents

The training of students to be teachers is based on instilling theoretical-pedagogical fundamentals (Borg, 1998), actual work in the field (Denzin, 1999), and core practices and competencies in teacher education (Tal, 2019). Educational principles are constructed through the ongoing interaction of three dimensions: the personal-reflective, the professional (knowledge and skills), and the ecological setting (Vonk, 1995). During the training stage, student interaction with parents is infrequent. In fact, students hear negative messages from their teacher-mentors on the subject of parental involvement in their child's education (Dayan, 2004). Only when they enter the field do the students first experience the complex connection with parents. This difficulty led the National Association for the Education of Young Children in 2003 to set forth five principles for the training of pre-school teachers (Hyson, 2003). The second principal addresses teachers' relations with families and includes understand and value children's families and communities, create respectful reciprocal relationships, and involve all families in their children development and learning. Greenbaum and Fried (2011) conducted a review of education courses that address relations with parents taught in colleges and universities in Israel and the United States. They found that these courses deal primarily with managing problems, not preventing them. Most are taught in the pre-school training programs for the regular and special education systems, and most are given in teachers' colleges, not universities. The authors recommend that courses in Israel that train for communication with the parents take an ecologic approach, and that they foster multicultural competence for interacting with the children and their families, as do models in the United States (Banks, 2010; Cross et al., 1989).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Questions

How do students of education perceive their and the teacher's relations with the pre-school children and parents during the period of the pandemic? And what is their understanding of the role of the pre-school teacher in times of crisis?

The Research Context

This research focuses on a semester course entitled "Honing work skills with parents in the 21st century." This course is taught in the third academic year of a pre-school education program in a college in Israel. The goal of the course is to enhance theoretical knowledge, practical tools, and skills to optimize the students' work with the parents of pre-school children through lectures, case studies, discussion, and simulations.

The goal of the course is to provide guidance to the students during routine periods when they do not have frequent or ongoing communication with the parents of the pre-school children. The pandemic wrought changes in the usual routines, however, and the students found themselves having frequent and exposed interactions with the children and their parents, requiring them to adapt their teaching and communication methods to an unfamiliar reality. To understand the complexity of coping with distance learning during the pandemic, the students were asked as part of the discourse and reflective class discussion to share their perceptions of parent-teacher relations in the pre-school in the changing reality.

Research Design and Tools and Data Collection

This study is based on a mixed-method research design (Creswell & Clark, 2011) in order to expend and deepen our understanding of quantitative analysis of the findings. Education students were asked to respond to an attitude survey with twelve questions (based on RAMA, 2017a) about the effects of distance learning on relations with parents during the pandemic. Data were collected anonymously in May 2020 during the period of the first lockdown. The questions, formulated by the researchers, had two parts: Part one gathered personal information (such as role and gender) and about the kindergarten's characteristics (location, socioeconomic status and children's age) and part two focused on the perceptions of parent-teacher relations during the lockdown. Two questions were multiple-choice, e.g., "In your opinion, were relations with the parents strengthened during the pandemic?" to which the response could be yes/no/remained the same. Five open questions invited brief responses, e.g., "In your opinion, which factors affected communication between the parent and teacher during the pandemic?"

In the qualitative section, documentation was collected from ten student-teachers about the children's learning process during the pandemic as recorded in their field journals (Hazan & Notov, 2013). All student teachers were asked to share their field journals as part of their participation in the research. The student-teachers' journals that were selected were from pre-schools with diverse socioeconomic and cultural characteristics.

Research Population

The research population included all students in their third year of studies in the early childhood education program (n=48) at one Israeli college (including the ten students who shared their field journal). These students engaged in practice teaching twice a week in pre-schools attended by three-six-year-olds in the central region of Israel. 76.3% of the students did their practice teaching in pre-schools in an upper-middle class socioeconomic bracket, 18.2% were in socioeconomically middle-class pre-schools, and 5.5% were in socioeconomically lower pre-schools. All research participants were female, and the average age was 25.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed inductively based on an interpretive content analysis using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2012), which enabled the identification of central themes found in the questionnaire. According to grounded theory, it is required to use each phase of data inquiry to raise the analytic level of the research and develop theoretical categories. The analysis process begins with the research data and then fill out, check, and saturate the properties (i.e., characteristics) and create new theoretical categories. Then look for variation in these categories and relationships between them (Charmaz, 2012). A descriptive statistical analysis was based on the segmentation of frequencies and averages of the responses to the closed and open questions in the attitude survey. Triangulation was performed upon the student-teachers' responses to the closed and open questions to clarify the key themes that were revealed.

RESULTS

In this research we aimed to understand how do students of education perceive their and the teacher's relations with the pre-school children and parents during the period of the pandemic? And what is their understanding of the role of the pre-school teacher in times of crisis?

In the quantitative analysis of responses to the closed question, "In your opinion, were relations with the parents strengthened during the pandemic?", 56% reported that relations were strengthened, 44% responded that they remained the same, and none reported that relations worsened. Segmentation of the data according to socioeconomic status of the pre-schools found that in all the higher- or middle-class pre-schools, relations with the parents were reported to have strengthened or remained the same. In the more heterogeneous pre-schools (upper-middle, high, lower middle, and lower socioeconomic status), students

predominantly reported that the parent-teacher relations remained the same and did not strengthen. Schools in which parent-teacher relations reportedly remained the same had a higher number of immigrant children.

A qualitative analysis revealed that in the perception of the student-teachers, a number of factors promote or undermine parent-teacher relations for distance learning in pre-schools. In the findings below, we look more closely at these factors.

Factors That Promote Distance Learning

In a qualitative analysis of responses to the question, “what in your opinion were the factors that affected the parents’ participation in distance learning?”, a variety of reasons were cited by the student-teachers (n=48): parental desire to create a routine for their children; parental desire to maintain the children’s connection with their friends; parental desire to maintain connection with the pre-school teacher; parental desire to advance their children; finding a way to occupy their children during lockdown; parental appreciation of the pre-school teacher’s efforts; parental time and emotional availability for learning; parental desire for quality time with their children; the children’s desire to join the activities; and the pre-school teachers’ efforts to promote distance learning.

1. Creating a routine for their children

Parental desire to create a routine for their children was perceived by the student-teachers as one of the key factors promoting distance learning, cited by 50% of the students (n=24). One example: “The parents were looking for a framework, a routine, for the children; to provide a routine for the children as much as possible” [survey questionnaire]. One student-teacher viewed the parents as actively trying to forge connection, a framework, or routine for the children. She observed that communication depends upon the parent’s desire for it. Another interpreted routine as ensuring an ongoing, regular program—“maintaining a daily routine” [survey questionnaire]. Another saw routine as a way to preserve connection with the pre-school “due to the importance of ongoing communication with the pre-school for the good of their children” [survey questionnaire].

Analysis of the journals reveals a different perspective, one that highlights the need of the children for routine: “I felt that the children were hungry for routine, they were attentive to each other, and the parents joined them. They wanted to create a feeling of routine for their children” [Dana, field journal]. Another student-teacher saw routine as a beneficial element during the pandemic, noting the pre-school teacher’s provision of tools and direction to the children in order to maintain a daily routine at home and in distance meetings. “She explained the importance of every activity taking place at the pre-school at a specific time and suggested how this could be replicated at home. Afterwards, she [the teacher] mediated with the children, explaining to them how it would be possible to maintain the pre-school routine at home” [Shira, field journal].

2. Maintaining the children’s connection with their friends

Data from the survey questionnaire revealed that 29% of the student-teachers (n=14) interpreted the parents’ desire for their children to maintain contact with their friends as a factor that promoted distance learning, e.g., “for the children to see their friends on Zoom” [survey questionnaire]. This suggests that the parents understood the importance of their children’s communication with their peers. Another student broadened this interpretation, noting the importance ascribed by parents to the mutual relations of the children in distance encounters: “the desire that the children share and talk with their friends” [survey questionnaire].

The journals, too, reflect the perceived importance of the children meeting with their friends. One student-teacher noted how the children’s need for social interaction with their peers was reflected in the Zoom groups she conducted: “The Zoom groups I led dealt primarily with the desire to share of the children who had been cooped up at home for so long. Evident in these meetings was that the children were not emotionally available to learn or explore a story, and therefore these encounters became a time to share feelings, stories, events, or objects that the children wanted to share with other members of the group” [Elinor, field journal]. The student-teacher adapted her teaching methods to the new circumstances. She was responsive to the children and allowed them to engage in dialogic emotional-social discourse. She allowed them to share with their friends about their physical space (the home) and emotional world, modifying the curriculum in accordance with their needs.

3. Maintaining connection with the pre-school teacher

The survey questionnaire indicates that 27% of the student-teachers (n=13) interpreted the parents’ desire to maintain relations with the pre-school teacher as a factor promoting distance learning. For example, “I think they understood how important it was to their children that they maintain connection with the teacher” [survey questionnaire]. Another student emphasized the children’s need for connection with the teacher: “The children wanted to see the teacher, their friends; the children missed them” [survey questionnaire]. The student-teachers perceived the children’s desire to be in contact with the pre-school staff as strengthening the parents’ motivation to cooperate with distance learning. This means that according to the students’ perceptions the children’s motivation to participate in the distance learning has positive influence on the parents’ cooperation.

An analysis of the journals reveals ways in which the children remained connected and the meaningful learning that took place. For example, “One of the girls with whom I was in contact was in my small group and we did a personal project together. During these conversations, she wanted to share many personal things with me, something she did not do in face-to-face learning. Her voice was loud, in contrast with her quiet voice at the pre-school, and she participated very well. It greatly surprised me” [Rona, field journal]. The words of this student-teacher illustrate the importance of maintaining a personal connection with the children and its contribution to learning. Furthermore, it seems that, for some children, distance learning has advantages especially in one-to-one learning

4. Parental desire to advance their children

Data from the survey questionnaire indicate that only 27% of the student-teachers (n=13) attributed parental cooperation in distance learning to their desire to ensure their child's progress. For example: "They understood the importance [of distance learning] and how much it contributes to the child" [survey questionnaire]. Some of the student-teachers emphasized the value parents ascribed to promoting emotional-social and cognitive aspects: "This is important for children primarily due to the emotional and social aspects, but also the learning" [survey questionnaire]. Others seemed judgmental toward parents who did not cooperate with distance learning, and attributed this to their level of education, e.g., "Educated parents see distance learning as meaningful learning that could have an impact on their children's return to pre-school in quieter times" [survey questionnaire], suggesting that only "educated" parents understand the importance of distance learning. Some believe that parental concern about their child's readiness for first grade motivated their support for distance learning. Others saw it as a way for their child to keep up with Ministry of Education benchmarks—"studying subject matter and the desire to keep pace with the pre-school benchmarks" [survey questionnaire].

The journals suggest that some parents help their children emotionally navigate the sessions of distance learning in the belief that they are important for their child's progress: "The children were terribly embarrassed, and one could hear the mothers trying to get them to talk" [Sapir, field journal], and "Most parents cooperated with me, they were pleasant, attentive, and invested in the success of the project for their child" [Dalit, field journal].

5. Parental desire to keep their children occupied

According to the survey questionnaire, 20% of the student-teachers (n=10) believed that the parents' desire to keep their children occupied during lockdown was a factor that fostered cooperation in distance learning. For example: "[It provided] other activity to keep them busy during the day" or "they were searching for activities for the children" [survey questionnaire]. Other students emphasized the unique educational value of the pre-school sessions and the parents' desire to cooperate so that their children would be meaningfully occupied: "to give the children activities and tasks" or "to pass the time in educational activity" [survey questionnaire].

6. Parental appreciation of the pre-school teacher's efforts

In the survey, only 8% of the student-teachers (n=4) cited parental trust in and appreciation for the pre-school teacher as a factor that motivated their cooperation in distance learning. For example, "the effort of the pre-school teacher and respect for her" or "trust that the pre-school teacher will create worthwhile activities" [survey questionnaire]. Other students cited parental appreciation for the teacher's efforts as a factor that promoted their cooperation: "understanding that the teacher invests great efforts in creating alternative activities on behalf of the children" [survey questionnaire]. It seems that this finding may highlight student's perceptions on parents- teachers' relationships. The small number of students that related to this aspect may reveal that students are not acknowledge the complex relationships between parents and teachers and its effect on learning processes.

In the qualitative data, students more broadly interpreted the parent's perception of the teacher's actions; one student noted that the pandemic lifted the curtain on the teacher's efforts and the workings of the pre-school, making them more visible: "To my joy, the COVID-19 crisis caused me and many parents to better appreciate this profession since this is what helps parents themselves realize their personal aspirations, not just the children" [Rona, field journal].

7. Parental availability

According to the questionnaire, only 8% of the student-teachers (n=4) interpreted parental cooperation in distance learning as related to their finding time or being emotionally available. For example: "Some surely had more time in their schedule." Some students compared the parents who cooperated with parents who had a job, noting that work was the reason they could not participate in their children's distance learning. In other words, whether the parents cooperated or not in distance learning was related, in these students' minds, to other parental obligations: "Parents who had the time and ability could take part [more readily] than parents who had a job" [survey questionnaire].

8. Parental desire for quality time with their children

Data from the survey questionnaire indicated that only 4% of the students (n=2) observed that some parents viewed distance learning as an opportunity to connect with their child's pre-school experience and enjoy quality time with them. These students perceived this as promoting distance learning. For example: "sharing and spending quality time with the children" or "I also believe that parents wanted to participate and understand what goes on in pre-school and to connect with their children through distance learning" [survey questionnaire]. These students viewed parental participation in distance learning as an opportunity to connect with the world of their children, and observe the skills and subjects learned in pre-school.

9. The children's desire to join the activities

Analysis of the questionnaire found that only 4% of the student-teachers [n=2] noted that the desire of the children themselves to participate in distance learning constituted a motivating factor. For example: "the children's desire for some sort of framework" or "because of the children's desire to be on Zoom" [survey questionnaire].

The field journals also reflect the hunger of the children to meet and share their experiences with each other. For example: "The Zoom groups I led dealt primarily with the desire to share of the children who had been cooped up at home for so long. Evident in these meetings was that the children were not emotionally available to learn or explore a story, and therefore the encounters became a time to share feelings, stories, events, or objects that the children wanted to share with other members of

the group” [Elinor, field journal]. One student-teacher described her responsiveness to the child’s desire to share with friends in the home space, which suddenly became exposed and available for discourse with the child’s peer group. Another student described the children’s desire to be with the pre-school teachers and the joy this brought to her and the children: “The children were as delighted to see me as I was to see them” [Stav, field journal].

10. The pre-school teachers’ efforts to promote distance learning

As part of their training, student-teachers learn from the pre-school teachers on two levels: first, through observation of the teacher’s work with the children and their families; and second, through pedagogical-reflective discourse of the student and teacher about their educational activity in the pre-school. With respect to the first – observation of the pre-school teacher’s work – in the qualitative data from the field journals (the quantitative data did not relate to this aspect- this theme emerged only from the field journal), the students regarded the efforts made by the pre-school teachers to train them to connect with the children and parents as factors that promote distance learning: “During this period, the pre-school teacher conducted Zoom meetings with the children, but she did not forego the activities and material that she wanted to cover with them. Although this period was difficult and exhausting, the pre-school teacher continued to meet with the children daily via Zoom. I was witness to the difficulty of distance learning, but also to its importance” [Koral, field journal]. Here the student emphasizes the determination and consistency of the pre-school teacher in her attempts to connect with the children despite the obstacles.

Other students related in their field journal to the pre-school teacher’s use of technological tools to promote distance learning: “Racheli made sure to send the children apps and virtual learning materials, as the pre-school where I am practice teaching is very high-tech. The children work with the computer or an iPad, they learn, play, take pictures, etc. So, the idea of distance learning through technology is a comfortable and secure way for the children in our pre-school” [Sapir, field journal].

The teacher’s efforts to encourage learning also come through on the second level – the pedagogical-reflective discourse between the teacher and the student about the teaching that takes place (This discourse is mandatory part of the student’s preparation program. This teacher – student meeting occurs once a week for two hours) Rona related to the pedagogical-reflective discourse in her field journal: “In our conversation with the pre-school teacher, she shared with us that it was very hard for her to accept that they were closing the pre-school, she wanted to continue to meet with the children and maintain the routine. Now she makes sure to do a round of phone calls every few days with the children; it is important to her to speak with them personally, to hear from them, to find out how they are, to ask what they think about the situation, what they are doing at home, if they feel good at home, if anyone is in quarantine, and she also told them that they can call her whenever they need to. Later, she was thinking about visiting them at their homes to give them a Passover gift, but that depends on the situation” [Rona, field journal]. The pre-school teacher’s words to the students reflect the enormous effort she made to create a personal connection with each child in her pre-school, and to provide the student-teacher with tools for individual and group work in distance learning. This sharing of feelings revealed to the student the complexity of the role performed by the teacher training her. Rona’s journal reflects her understandings of the role of pre-school teacher in times of crisis.

Factors That Undermine Distance Learning

Responses to the survey questionnaire suggest a variety of reasons given by the student-teachers (N=48) as factors that impede distance learning: the number of siblings in the family; busy parents; economic and emotional stress; technological illiteracy; negative attitudes of the parents; and the children’s own difficulties with distance learning.

1. Number of siblings

Analysis of the survey data reveal that 48% of the student-teachers (n=23) mentioned as an impeding factor the inability of parents to juggle distance learning when there are several children in the household: “There are several children at home – connecting each one to Zoom and showing them videos all day long was hard for them” [survey questionnaire]. Some students noted that the parent’s difficulties were not just related to distance learning, but to the need to address multiple tasks at once: “There are other children at home, and they also need care” [survey questionnaire].

A similar picture emerges from the student-teacher’s field journals: “Understanding and including the parents and complicated families who may have children of different ages that need the computer for their own distance learning” [Shoval, field journal]. In other words, the parents face challenges in having to respond to more than one child – dividing up their time, giving help, and being emotionally available.

2. Busy parents

Another factor cited by student-teachers as impeding distance learning is related to the parents’ work life: 42% of the student-teachers (n=20) noted that the parents “are busy working from home or earning a living outside the home” or are worried about insufficient income during this period. Also, 31% of the students (n=15) cited time as a factor preventing full parental cooperation with distance learning. This response comes up repeatedly, usually with the phrase “there’s no time.”

In the field journals, some student-teachers described the difficulty faced by the parents: “At the beginning, it seemed obvious to me that the parents would cooperate, but I learned that there were two sides to the coin and the parents were also having a hard time with the situation and that it’s okay not to respond.” Another student-teacher noted that “During the coronavirus period there was a feeling that everything stopped, that the parents were not cooperating and didn’t have the energy for it.” The period when the children were asked to engage in distance learning also appeared to be difficult for many parents who were themselves working remotely, in the best case, or worried about unemployment and difficult straits during this period – earning a living and employment. These issues unquestionably hindered the productive participation of their children in distance learning.

3. Economic and emotional stress

The survey questionnaire revealed that 37% (more than a third) of the student-teachers (n=18) cited emotional difficulties of the parents as factors that undermined their cooperation with the distance learning. This was phrased as “The parents are having a hard time,” or the parents are experiencing “personal, financial difficulties and general stress because of the situation,” marked by “apathy, depression, or general despondency,” and thus lack the desire to encourage distance learning or be involved in it.

The field journals revealed another student-teacher insight—the role of the pre-school teacher as a supportive figure for the children and the parents who were experiencing emotional difficulties. For example: “I felt that the children were hungry for routine, they were attentive to each other, even the parents joined the encounter ... an emotional conversation about the challenging times” or “During the coronavirus outbreak, I learned how important it is to radiate quiet, calmness, and confidence to the children and parents. No matter where life leads, the teacher must be the pillar of the pre-school, radiating confidence and calming others” [Dana, field journal].

Another student-teacher saw the role of the pre-school teacher as the one who motivates, mediates, and empowers the parents in promoting distance learning: “I think that the main obstacle was encouraging the parents to lend a hand to help me and their children maintain some semblance of learning continuity, explaining its importance to the parents, and also hearing them out and trying to adapt as much as possible, not the opposite” [Dalit, field journal].

These findings reveal the emotional challenges that the children and their parents had to face during the pandemic. The student-teachers described a process of change—from thrusting tasks upon the parents to listening to their concerns and adjusting to their needs.

4. Technological illiteracy

The survey questionnaire exposed another theme—the technological-pedagogical factor that impedes distance learning. 25% of the student-teachers (n=12) noted that “Some lacked the technology that would allow the child to engage in distance learning” and the “lack of technological devices.” The student-teachers also mentioned the struggles of parents to cope with the barrage of information and tasks sent by the pre-school teacher: “lacking patience to deal with the material sent daily by the pre-school teacher.”

5. Negative attitudes toward distance learning

21% of the student-teachers (n=10), according to the questionnaire data, noted that the attitude of some parents toward distance learning was a factor that undermined communication. One example was parental concern about excessive time on the computer: “[There were] parents who prevented their children from taking part in distance learning because it meant being in front of a computer, and they were reluctant to allow their children so much screen time.” Interestingly, at a time when distance learning was the only way to connect the parents with the pre-school and teacher, the parents were unhappy about the connection. Thus, even at a time of emergency, parents persisted in their view of “just no more screens.” Furthermore, according to the student-teachers, some parents did not even see the value of distance learning: “Distance learning is not effective for the children.”

6. Children’s difficulties with distance learning

The survey revealed that 19% of the student-teachers (N=9) cited the difficulties children have with distance learning as a factor impeding success: “children who were not eager to share or be active,” “lack of interest by the child,” or “a child who cannot sit in front of Zoom for very long.”

The field journals testify to the complexity of the problems faced by the children in distance learning, and the strategies undertaken by the teaching staff to adapt their methods to the new reality: “The pandemic led to changed routines for the children—not attending pre-school, working at screens rather than face-to-face. It became evident in these sessions that the children were not able to learn or hear a story and therefore the encounters became a time to share feelings, stories, events, or objects that the children wanted to share with other members of the group.” As a result, sessions during the pandemic reflected an emotional-social discourse and not just educational material in order to adapt distance learning to the needs of the children.

Some of the student-teachers recorded in their field journals how distance learning was a factor that affected social-emotional aspects and led to regression in the children’s participation in the ongoing educational process: “Children who had achieved some self-confidence before the distance learning were suddenly embarrassed to speak, preferring to tell their parents what to say.” The words of this student-teacher cast light on the challenges faced by the teaching staff who had to maintain connection with the children and bridge the divide in order to address their needs and help them advance.

The Role of the Pre-School Teacher in Times of Crisis—Students’ Understandings

With regards to students understanding of the role of teachers in times of crises, analyzing Rona’s field journal as described above and the quantitative data (open questions from the survey questionnaire) revealed six major students’ understandings of the roles of the kindergarten teacher in times of crises:

- (1) Empathy, inclusion and understanding of the unique situation of children and parents.
- (2) Constant effort to communicate with all children and parents.
- (3) Ability to modify the pedagogical program to the distance learning platform .
- (4) Adapting differential ways of working with children and families with diverse needs.

(5) Being a professional /pedagogical adviser for the parents.

(6) Creating close relationships with the parents.

For example, in Rona's field journal she emphasizes the pre-school teacher's empathy, understanding of the unique situation of the children and their families and her constant effort to communicate with them. Other student wrote: "Conversations with parents were consistently, almost every day and in all forms of media: phone conversations, video, zoom, and WhatsApp groups. Most parents cooperated greatly. There were isolated cases of parents who did not want to cooperate, in these cases the kindergarten teacher cared for the situation and made sure to contact the parents". In this case, the student describes the pre-school teacher's effort to communicate with all parents. The use of the word 'care' reveals the empathy that was involved in this action. It also reveals the differential ways the teacher used to communicate all children and families. Another student reflected on the kindergarten teacher efforts to communicate with all parents: "There were some parents who did not want to cooperate, but this is ok, the teacher made sure to speak with every parent at least once a week". By using the words: "this is ok" it seems that the student expresses an empathetic and inclusive stance towards parents who did not respond to the teachers' efforts to communicate with them. Other student related to parents who do not speak Hebrew: "There are these parents who do not speak Hebrew, and those who do not always answer nevertheless teacher managed to communicate with them in one way or another."

Another student described the ways the teacher created close relationships with the parents: "The relationships with the parents was closer than ever ... the teacher shared with the parents every change and dilemmas and the parents also shared in every subject they were worried about or that they wanted to share with the teacher". Another student related to the teacher's role as consultant and pedagogical advisor: "I think that the parents saw in the teacher a force that can assist them handle with the situation, with the long stay at home, they shared their difficulties and daily struggles". Other student also reported that: "many parents consulted with the teacher". Other student described the teacher's flexibility to modify the pedagogical program to the distance learning platform: "The kindergarten teachers invested and made great effort to make different activities for the benefit (the best interest) of the children, to maintain a certain routine for the children."

DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores again the significance of the connection between the education system and the parents as critical to the learning success of pre-school-age children. The findings reveal that the student-teachers perceived that all three partners—teachers, parents, and children—played a role in promoting or impeding that success. Most of the factors, both promoting and impeding, were ascribed by the student-teachers to the parents—their role in coping with their child's distance learning during the pandemic. According to the student teachers, the children and the pre-school teachers had less of an influence on the distance learning process. These findings reflect, above all, the perspective of the student-teachers that the parents played a critical role in the distance learning of their young children during the pandemic. This perspective might derive from the fact that the children were in the physical space of their parents, and therefore the student-teachers regarded the parents as having sole responsibility for the child's learning.

According to the student-teachers, one of the key factors promoting the child's learning during the pandemic was the parents' desire to support their learning process. The students noted that distance learning was enabled by diverse factors that are related to the parents—maintaining relations with the pre-school teacher, establishing a routine, promoting the learning of the children, finding a way to keep the children occupied, and enjoying quality time with them.

These findings are consistent with previous research that emphasizes the importance of parental involvement in promoting their child's learning (Sheridan et al., 2010). During the pandemic, the student-teachers were also exposed to the complexity of the parents' role as the curtain was lifted on the pre-school (Blass, 2020), accelerating the student-teachers' understanding of the importance of the parental role in a child's education even at this early stage (Epstein, 2018).

With respect to parent-teacher relations during the pandemic, the findings reveal that the student-teachers interpreted parental participation in their child's distance learning as an affirmation of the pre-school teacher and a desire to remain in good relations with her out of concern for advancing their child. The student-teachers' writings reveal the importance they attribute to the parent's emotional connection with the pre-school teacher and their perception of the parents as actively involved in maintaining these relations. Also evident is that the pandemic engendered positive feelings and perceptions among the student-teachers vis-à-vis the parents, easing their concerns, as the teachers and student-teachers met affirmative reactions from the parents. The findings reveal a trend of more positive attitudes among the student-teachers about their relations with the parents, unlike previous research that emphasized the apprehensions of student-teachers during their training and internship (Levy et al., 2019; Mahmood, 2013).

Other data bring to light an empathic perspective of the student-teachers toward the parents' role in distance learning. For the first time, the parents were more visible to the student-teachers, more exposed (in their weaknesses and strengths), unlike the normal course of events. The parents were forced to adapt skills not unlike those of classroom management. Parents who managed to organize a nurturing physical and emotional learning space were perceived by the student-teachers as cooperative and promoting their children's learning.

The parents had multiple tasks—to encourage their children to participate in distance activities, to operate the technological media required for learning, to be at their child's side during the learning session, to mediate emotionally, cognitively, and socially (Feuerstein, 1998; Klein, 2020), and to make subject matter accessible during the distance sessions. This is a complex undertaking that demands new skills and expertise in mediating distance learning, which conforms to findings in previous research (Thorn & Vincent-Lancrin, 2021). The parents were forced to change their role and daily routine, becoming active partners in their child's

learning with their pre-school teacher and friends. They were called upon to organize space for optimal learning, and to make time for nurturing their child's learning, which, the student-teachers noted, was not simple for most of the parents. It should be pointed out that the roles of the pre-school teachers and student-teachers also changed—they were not required to grapple with some complex aspects of classroom management, such as organizing the educational environment, coping with disciplinary problems, managing staff relations, etc. (Mahmood, 2013).

Another finding of this study relates to the empathy expressed by the student-teachers toward parents whose difficulties prevented them from fostering the distance learning. The students related sensitively to the parents' emotional, financial, and organizational challenges. Thus, the pandemic seems to have broadened the perspective of the student-teachers and contributed to an empathic, sensitive, and more ecological, nuanced approach toward the parents and their needs. This may derive from the student-teachers' identification with the parents in the complexity of coping with and managing distance learning (Lahad et al., 2020).

Another interesting finding is that the student-teachers noted only undermining factors that are related to the behavior of the parents and children, not those related to the teachers' functioning. It may be that the student-teacher identified with the teacher as part of the mentoring dyad as Ragins (2002) claims that informal mentoring relationships develop because of mutual identification and interpersonal comfort. Moreover, relationships between student-teachers and the teacher in the Israeli education system, are characterize as informal and in most cases very close. For example, the student-teachers did not address the technological, personal, or other problems with which teachers grappled during the pandemic. These factors seem to constitute a 'blind spot' for them in the equation describing the role of the pre-school teachers and student-teachers in working with parents during the pandemic.

With respect to the student-teachers' perceptions of the role of the pre-school teacher in distance learning, the findings highlight the significance of the pre-school teacher as a role model. Moreover, in this time of the COVID-19 crises, the teachers coped with a new situation where they shared their difficulties with the student-teachers. This created a new situation in the power relations between the teacher and the student-teacher, where the teacher does not have all the answers. It seems that the student-teachers identified with the teacher's position, collaborated and assist them. During their one-on-one virtual meetings as well as the online learning with the children and their parents, the student-teachers were exposed to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the pre-school teacher. The discourse between them was profound and multi-layered. The students identified with the attitudes of the pre-school teacher and together they experienced the successes and failures of distance learning, compared to the routine learning. The pandemic presented new situations and challenges to both the pre-school teacher and student-teacher, and they coped with these as a team. It is important to note that in all the qualitative and quantitative data collected for this research, not one of the student-teachers submitted a critical view of how the pre-school teacher managed the distance learning.

With regard to the position of the children in distance learning, the student-teachers noted the challenges faced by the children, such as lack of emotional availability, difficulty of remaining focused on the computer screen, and regressive behavior. On the other hand, the student-teachers reported flexibility and development in their own teaching methods and attentiveness to the children. The student-teachers were responsive to the children and to subjects raised by them in the sessions and spontaneous in their reactions, allowing the children to share objects and engage in emotional discourse about experiences from their world, which encouraged them to participate more actively in the distance learning. It seems that the student-teacher's ability to be flexible and creative in their teaching methods developed and enhanced during the period of the pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

This study underscores the importance of a holistic and ecologic approach to relations among the pre-school teacher, student-teacher, parents, and children, and highlights the critical need for partnership and transparency between the pre-school teacher and student-teacher as factors that affect the student's learning and construction of her role as manager-in-training of a pre-school. Further, the student-teacher's partnership and involvement in the pre-school teacher's work with the parents help assuage her concerns about working with parents and increase her understanding and empathy toward their complex task. Therefore, it is important that those who train teachers and the policymakers of that training encourage more meaningful, frequent, and ongoing interaction of student-teachers with parents mediated by the pre-school teacher. The pre-school teacher must construct a deep partnership with the student-teacher, including more exposure to the entire system of communication with parents in all their complexity, with the aim of optimizing methods and tools for working with parents in their future role as pre-school teachers.

The findings of this study also reveal that the student-teachers did not relate to the difficulties they or the pre-school teachers encountered during the pandemic. This suggests that greater awareness must be raised to these difficulties, and a safe and inclusive space must be created to enable personal-emotional sharing. Distance learning enriched the teaching methods of the students, allowing them to be better attentive to and engage in personal-emotional discourse with the children, which enhanced their learning. It is important to continue to develop these teaching-learning methods during routine times as well.

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