

Policies and practices of early childhood education and care during the COVID-19 pandemic: Perspectives from five countries ^[1]

Author: Visnjic-Jevtic, A., Varga Nagy, A., Ozturk, G., Şahin-Sak, İkbāl T., Paz-Albo, J., Toran, M., & Sánchez-Pérez, N.

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EXCERPTS

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, which affects all areas of life, has also affected children in need of education and care. It is of great importance to develop policies that take into account the best interests of children in this process. In this review article, the policies developed for early childhood education and care during the pandemic period in five countries (Australia, Croatia, Hungary, Spain, and Turkey), how they are implemented, the problems that arose, and the solutions produced are discussed. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that we need to focus on eliminating the educational inequalities, set policies for the welfare of children on foundations that are more realistic, rebuild teacher training, and improve the welfare of families. Prioritizing the best interests of the child in the policies to be developed and building the social ecology on justice will ease overcoming the crises that will be faced.

Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) forms the basis for the acquisition of lifelong competencies. The disadvantages of children who cannot access a qualified environment and education in the early years continue throughout their lives, and to overcome this, practices that consider the best interests of all children should be a priority in the country's policies. According to United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) reports, it is stated that 175 million children between the ages of 3-6 do not benefit from early childhood education at all, and one out of every four children who is one year younger than the compulsory education age does not benefit from early childhood education at all (UNICEF, 2021a). Moreover, these are data prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and it is not yet known how children are affected by early childhood education as the pandemic continues. However, according to UNICEF's estimates, the global economic crisis caused by the pandemic negatively affected families in developing countries, and it is estimated that the number of poor children could exceed 725 million, with 142 million more children already facing poverty (UNICEF, 2021b). Undoubtedly, the increase in poverty leads to the restriction of children's access to education and health, and to a decrease in healthy nutrition resources. Furthermore, poverty causes parents to face difficulties in creating economic resources and experience psychological problems, and it disrupts family dynamics. This poverty not only directly affects the family and the child, but also negatively affects the budget allocated by the countries for education, which is an indicator of social welfare. This negative effect on the education budget causes interruptions or a decrease in the quality of the education services provided. Economically, psychologically, and sociologically fragile societies are facing major crises in this sense, along with the pandemic.

As a result of the rapid spread of the pandemic and became life-threatening, schools at all levels were closed in 191 countries, and 1.7 billion students continued their education based on the policies and practices that were promptly developed by their countries (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021) in line with the policies to combat the pandemic (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020) announced by the WHO on March 11, 2020. According to the report prepared by UNICEF in September 2020, while the rate of countries that switched to distance education at primary and post-secondary levels was 90%, this rate was 60% in early childhood education (UNICEF, 2021c). In the report, it is stated that despite these rates, not all children have equal access to education, educational inequality has become more evident with the pandemic, teachers' technology literacy and competent use are low in underdeveloped and developing countries, and there are difficulties in providing and accessing digital tools (UNESCO, 2020).

The fact that inequality in access to ECEC has become apparent during the pandemic is due to the policy uncertainties and investing in ECEC not being a priority. In addition, the suspension of education of 40% of children benefiting from early childhood education because of the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021c) contains important clues that larger crises will occur. These clues make it important to evaluate the educational policies and practices of the authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this review article, the policies developed for ECEC during the pandemic in five countries (Australia, Croatia, Hungary, Spain, and Turkey), how they were implemented, the problems that arose, and the solutions produced were discussed.

Region: International ^[3]

Tags: COVID-19 ^[4]

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