Challenges Faced by Childcare Directors During COVID-19: Leading During A Global Pandemic

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Abstract
Childcare centers have faced many stressors both during and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on stress and coping theories, this study explores how the pandemic affected childcare center practices and how center directors responded. Childcare directors were surveyed to explore their perspectives about the pandemic’s effects on teachers and staff, children and families, and the daily routines at their centers. The ramifications of masking, quarantines, and social distancing were also discussed. In addition, directors were asked how they envisioned the future for their centers, and their plans to move forward after the pandemic. Twenty-seven responses were analyzed using a content analysis approach, and the results indicated that staffing issues, increased stress levels, reduced parent involvement, and low enrollment were all prevalent themes. Some directors felt optimistic about the future, while others doubted their ability to keep their doors open to families. Many of the childcare centers felt they simply couldn’t compete with retail and restaurant businesses to increase pay and retain teachers. More optimistic directors focused on identifying resources to aid their centers to cope with the adversities experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords COVID-19 pandemic · Childcare · Directors · Early childhood

The pandemic has impacted every facet of early care and education, and will likely continue to do so well into the future. COVID-19 has placed significant financial strain on the childcare industry, with some programs at risk for closing permanently. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) conducted a national survey in March 2020, and discovered that many childcare directors were unsure about the future viability of the entire early care field. Ali et al., (2021) has described childcare workers as vulnerable since they are putting their hearts and souls into a program that may or may not end up closing. Research has shown that early education teachers’ wellbeing has a direct link to the amount of stress they are experiencing, and the level of support that they are receiving (Roberts et al., 2019). In addition, childcare staff are often underpaid, without health insurance, and working extended hours. In 2021, another NAEYC survey indicated that federal relief funds had prevented the closure of many facilities (NAEYC, 2021). Those funds did not, however, address the systemic problem of teacher shortages reported by more than 80% of respondents.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the important role of childcare for essential workers and those on the front line of the pandemic (Bigras et al., 2021). Support from the local, state, and federal governments has been crucial to ensure that quality childcare continues to be available for those who depend on a consistent and stable environment for their children. Reports of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on childcare centers suggest that the pandemic changed center routines and affected center finances (Freedman et al., 2020). The rapid changes and new burdens of following health protocols resulted in an increase in work-related stress for early childhood educators (Crawford et al., 2021) at the same time that many parents also experienced increased stress induced by pandemic changes (Zhang et al., 2021). Recently, reports indicate that pandemic-related...
changes in young children’s routines may have affected their social-emotional development and readiness for school entry (Egan et al., 2021; Natason, 2022), however, other reports have indicated that communications with childcare centers and educators have been instrumental in helping parents and children successfully cope with the changes brought on by the pandemic. It is clear that the pandemic introduced new stressors into childcare settings with significant effects on the children and families they serve. What is less clear are the specific ways in which centers have been impacted by the pandemic, and how those impacts might have stressed individual educators, center directors, and the centers as organizations.

**Stress Theory and Coping at Individual and Organizational Levels**

The pandemic has added to the demands on individuals and organizations. When new demands are viewed as taxing or exceeding the resources of the individual, the result can be stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). During the pandemic, 40% of directors surveyed in two Louisiana parishes reported trouble sleeping, while 30% had trouble with focusing (Bassok et al., 2021). Cognitive and behavioral efforts to address stress have been defined as coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). Coping can be both cognitive-focused, problem-solving actions, as well as emotion-focused, attempts to regulate one’s level of stress by appraising the feedback from the environment. Individuals’ coping behaviors and thoughts may be either effective or ineffectve (Compas et al., 2001). Understanding what one has at stake in a situation, planful problem solving, and positive re-appraisals of the situation can lead to an improved emotional state for those experiencing stress. This transactional model of stress has been applied to better understand childcare center directors’ stress and recovery from stress (Elomaa et al., 2020).

Job security and teacher retention during the pandemic also had an impact on directors’ stress levels. In a study surveying 75 Louisiana childcare directors, 56% were not receiving a salary when their centers were closed, but 62% were still working at the center. Many feared that if they stopped working, they would lose their jobs (Bassok et al., 2021). Independent of the pandemic, many directors typically experience stress because of too much work, the demands of leading others, and the need to secure resources. An important factor in how directors recover from stress is work engagement. Better work engagement is often correlated with recovery from stress, and avoiding exhaustion.

Organizations, such as childcare centers, also experience stress due to changes in the community such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Eksi et al., 2020). Eksi and colleagues evaluated the relationship between organizational identity, organizational support, and organizational stress in academic organizations. Identity was defined as a set of individual evaluations that define the general behavior of an organization. When individuals adopt the values and goals of their organization and see themselves as part of a team, they exert extra effort toward organizational success, leading to organizational support. The study found that organizational identity positively affected organizational support. The level of organizational support, in turn, negatively affected organizational stress. When an organization adopts a strong identity that engenders high levels of commitment from individuals to that organization, it is less affected by stress.

**Stress, Effects on Children’s Learning, and Center-Parent Communication**

High and persistent levels of stress can have negative effects on children (Felner et al., 1981). Children with histories of significant early life stress events such as parental separation, parent-child separation, or housing challenges can lead children to be more reactive to daily life events and demonstrate less cognitive control (Demir-Lira et al., 2016). Studies have found evidence that when teachers are more stressed, children with disabilities are less engaged and make less progress on Individualized Education Program goals (IEP; Wong et al., 2017). Reports of the effects of pandemic-induced changes on children’s learning and behavior have been mixed. Young children have had a higher incidence of depression, social problems, and anxiety as the result of the pandemic (Meherali et al., 2021). Parents working from home during the pandemic reported that their children kept home during the pandemic became less social, more demanding, and were likely to regress to the behaviors of younger children (Egan et al., 2021). Other parents reported that children spending more time with parents supported language learning.

Several studies have found that children and families benefited from the pandemic-induced changes in center-parent communication (Soltero-Gonzalez & Gillanders, 2021; Bigras et al., 2021; Linnavalli & Kalland, 2021). Enrolling children in childcare during the pandemic appeared to benefit parent-child relationships, and parents reported that resources offered by centers helped them to cope with stress (Zhang et al., 2021). Children and families have benefited from effective center-parent communication, and some have reported that the pandemic enabled teachers to forge more authentic relationships with parents. Positive parent-teacher communication became a resource for teachers, supporting their sense of engagement and purpose as they felt that
parents appreciated their contributions. These positive communications offset, to an extent, the effects of pandemic-induced stress.

This study provides exploratory findings from a phase of the pandemic that involved extensive lockdowns and other mandated public health measures. These findings provide a reference point for future studies with a larger sample to determine the extent to which the issues directors identified were transient or persistent. Furthermore, the purpose of this study is to describe the changes that childcare directors faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how those changes affected teachers, children, and centers as organizations. We were interested in whether changes were viewed as stressors or opportunities. In addition, the directors discussed their vision for the future and how they plan to move forward. The study was driven by the following research questions:

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted childcare centers, and what precautions or modifications have been made to the daily routines?
2. What impact has the pandemic had on the childcare teachers, children, and families who attend childcare centers?
3. Based on the perceptions of directors, what does the future look like for childcare centers?

**Method**

**Participants and Setting**

Participants in this study were childcare directors throughout the state of Ohio, in the midwestern United States. Contact information was gathered from a list of childcare programs associated with a Prekindergarten associate degree program at a southwest Ohio university. Online surveys were sent to a total of 57 individuals, and 27 of those individuals completed the survey through Qualtrics. The participants varied in age, level of education, and length of time in their position (see Table 1). Participants had a wide range of experience in their positions ranging from four months to 28 years. Regarding the highest level of education, the directors ranged from an associate degree to a doctorate, and one had a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. The ages for the directors ranged from 29 to 64 years old. The childcare centers where the directors worked were also diverse in terms of the location, number of children served, and the number of teachers on staff (see Table 2). The number of children served ranged from 40 to 700 children. The ages of the children attending each center ranged from birth to twelve years, and the number of teachers employed ranged from seven to 150 teachers.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The survey used in this pilot investigation was developed following established steps for instrument design, adapted to surveys using open-ended responses (McCoach et al., 2013). The purpose of the survey was to ascertain the specific stressors that childcare programs were experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were asked twelve survey questions, which were all approved by the researchers’ Institutional Review Board - IRB (see Table 3). The survey instrument was developed based on a thorough literature review, the authors’ professional experiences working with preservice teachers in childcare programs, and feedback from an Advisory Board who was composed of childcare directors and other early childhood professionals in the community. McCoach et al. describe...
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Table 3  Survey questions
1. In what specific ways has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your childcare center?
2. What changes and precautions have you had to make due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How have your teachers and staff been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. Has COVID-19 had an impact on the daily routines at your center?
5. How have the children and families that come to your childcare center been impacted by COVID-19?
6. How do you envision the future for your center, and how do you plan to move forward after COVID-19?

step six of survey development as, “generating operational definitions—generate/select items for each of the dimensions” (p. 278), and it was determined in the beginning stages of development that open-ended responses would be used for the survey created for this study. Steps that are applicable to quantitative items, such as steps 13 and 15 on factor analyses, were not conducted. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants were allowed to withdraw at any time. The survey was open and available for participants to complete for a three-week period in October 2021. Only survey questions one through six were analyzed since questions seven through twelve were demographic in nature. The online survey took approximately 15–30 minutes to complete.

When analyzing the survey data, the investigators searched for patterns (common themes) in the survey responses using a content analysis approach (Krippendorff, 2004). Specifically, the data was analyzed using the following process (a) prepare the data for analysis; (b) become familiar with the data; (c) identify units of analysis; (d) define tentative categories for coding the responses; (e) refine categories; (f) establish category integrity (Johnson & LaMontagne, 1993). The qualitative responses were organized by each survey question and then grouped into narrative units so that tentative themes could be identified. The themes were further analyzed to search for commonalities or similarities between survey responses. This process continued until both of the investigators were confident that the identified themes best represented the data. The data was reviewed by the investigators multiple times to look for the consistent themes. The following section provides the results of this analysis.

Results

Survey Question One

Three themes emerged for survey question one, “In what specific ways has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your childcare center?” The themes were, (1) staffing and finances, (2) increased stress, and (3) negative impacts on children and families. Each theme is described along with the responses that fall under this theme.

Theme One: Staffing & Finances

Sixty-seven percent (18) of the participants mentioned teacher and staffing issues in their survey responses, while revenue and financial issues were discussed by 41% (11). The reduced number of teachers and staff led to difficulties with class coverage and meeting ratio requirements for many of the childcare centers. The result, in some cases, was to shut down classrooms which produced even more complications with coverage and age-appropriate interactions between children. The mental health of the teachers and staff was also a significant concern mentioned since the pandemic produced a unique set of stressors for teachers, directors and staff. Twenty-six percent (7) of directors brought up low enrollment as being a significant issue at their centers, especially since some parents were now working from home and did not require childcare. For example, participant five stated, “We went from 34 sites down to 10 sites.” Reduced class size was a concern for four of the directors. Fewer children were attending childcare consistently due to various reasons, such as illness or a change in the parents’ working conditions. Having to refund families who had to quarantine also resulted in financial strains for the centers who were providing refunds. The increased cost of personal protective equipment (PPE) and extra supplies (e.g., hand sanitizer, disinfectants) for cleaning was also an unforeseen cost as a result of the pandemic. Participant four discussed that the “increased expenses for supplies” has been one of the impacts for their center.

Theme Two: Increased Stress

Increased stress was a common theme mentioned by 15% (4) of the participants. Participant six made a powerful statement about the effects of stress by stating, “The stress is so high and there is no end in sight.” Some specific examples include the challenge of maintaining the daily curriculum while keeping the classrooms (and entire center) clean. Class coverage was even more challenging since teachers needed to take breaks and have lunch, but in many cases, there were not enough individuals to maintain ratio and licensing requirements. Overall mental health concerns were also discussed by directors since teachers were working long hours with few breaks throughout the day. Participant 21 was concerned about the effects of stress on her teachers and stated that, “the mental health and wellness was a struggle” for her staff. There seemed to be a sense of hopelessness for many
centers that simply did not have enough teachers on staff to provide them with a moment to take a break or recharge.

**Theme Three: Negative Impacts on Children and Families**

According to the directors surveyed, the COVID-19 pandemic had negative impacts on both children and families. Twenty-six percent (7) of the participants discussed the specific impacts that affected children and families the most. Social emotional impacts were observed by many of the childcare teachers and staff since children were deeply impacted by all of the changes and disruptions to their routines. Limited socialization also took a toll on many children who were used to attending childcare on a regular basis. With the new COVID-19 restrictions, centers were no longer able to allow parents and families into the classrooms with other children. For example, participant 18 said, “We are not allowing parents and visitors into our classrooms while the children are present.” The result was less interaction and communication between parents and teachers. There were also fewer opportunities to discuss concerns that teachers or parents might have about their children’s behavior or development. Several childcare teachers were also seeing more behavior problems in children than before the pandemic. Participant six made a powerful statement about how the pandemic has affected families, “Many families are in crisis, and are simply trying to get through the day.”

**Survey Question Two**

Four themes emerged for survey question two, “What precautions or changes have you had to make at your childcare center due to the COVID-19 pandemic?” The themes were, (1) health measures, (2) parent involvement, and (3) reduced interactions between children. Each theme is described along with the responses that fall under this theme.

**Theme One: Health Measures**

Childcare centers took many precautions to ensure that their doors could stay open and children and staff stayed healthy. Wearing masks was a common theme that was mentioned by 59% (16) of the participants. Directors had different thoughts and opinions on the possible impacts mask wearing for the children. One director, who described her center as a Spanish immersion center, stated that wearing a mask was especially challenging while trying to teach children a new language. The cleaning and sanitizing routine was also another common theme discussed by 44% (12). More time was also required for more frequent hand washing and cleaning toys and equipment immediately after use. Participant seven stated, “We are taking temperatures of children before they enter the center, and have enhanced cleaning and sanitation procedures.”

**Theme Two: Parent Involvement**

During the pandemic, many centers were forced to limit parent interaction within their centers and classrooms. Thirty percent (8) of the participants mentioned that they had to make this change. Drop off and pick up procedures were also significantly impacted by COVID-19, and 22% (6) mentioned this. Some of the centers chose to initiate a curbside drop off or pick up procedure, which was convenient for parents but did not allow for communication between the teachers and parents on a regular basis. Participant 12 went into more detail by stating that they were allowing “No parents or volunteers in the building which makes drop off and pick up much more labor intensive.” Participant eight mentioned that their center had adopted new procedures for parents to sign their children in and out to reduce the amount of people coming into the building.

**Theme Three: Reduced Interactions Between Children**

Interactions between children throughout the day were also affected by the pandemic. Thirty percent (8) of the directors mentioned this topic and gave examples of how children had fewer opportunities to interact during their daily routines. Before the pandemic, many centers combined classrooms at the start and end of the day when children were just arriving or being picked up to go home. However, due to extra precautions during the pandemic, teachers did not combine classrooms for fear of infecting more children. Large group activities also ceased during the pandemic. Participant 25 said, “Some things will probably remain in place after COVID but I would like to see the groups be able to combine for large group activities.” Most teachers tried to limit exposure to other children outside of their own classrooms.

**Survey Question Three**

Two key themes emerged for survey question three, “How have your teachers and staff been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?” The themes were, (1) increased stress and (2) staff and finances. Each theme is described along with the responses that fall under this theme.
Theme One: Increased Stress

Fifty-two percent (14) of the participants responded that they were concerned about the higher levels of stress that their teachers and staff were experiencing as a result of the pandemic. Specifically, mental health was mentioned by four of the directors. Participant four stated, “Increased stress, financial impact of quarantines, working longer hours, increased frustration from families,” were all factors that were affecting the center. In some cases, the pandemic had caused divisiveness between the teachers, staff, and directors. Individuals had different beliefs about the seriousness of the virus, and some felt that the risk of getting sick and exposing their own families was adding to their own stress. Some of the examples given were related to the significant toll that the pandemic was taking on everyone at the centers. Many teachers and staff were constantly worried about becoming sick or being exposed to the virus and having to be quarantined. Another related issue that was discussed was that the constant masking was causing social emotional issues with teachers and their ability to effectively communicate with the children. Participant ten shared that the center had lost a member of their staff due to COVID-19, which caused a great deal of stress to the entire staff.

Theme Two: Staff & Finances

Financial concerns were a common thread in many survey responses. Thirty-three percent (9) of the directors discussed how the pandemic had impacted the center finances specifically. The main concern mentioned by many was the issue of being short staffed and not having enough teachers to stay open for families. Teachers and staff were forced to work longer hours to make sure there was classroom coverage, which resulted in more responsibilities (e.g., daily deep cleaning). Not surprisingly, teacher and staff burnout were also a risk of the longer hours and increased responsibilities. For teachers and staff who had to quarantine (or had family members who were quarantined), loss of pay was a significant concern. Participant 11 stated, “I think socially, emotionally, and financially the staff have been impacted. Where some were furloughed, lost loved ones, and just changes in general have been hard to adjust to our new normal.”

Survey Question Four

Two themes emerged for survey question four, which was, “Has COVID-19 had an impact on the daily routines at your center?” The themes were, (1) changes to lunch/snack/health routines, and (2) negative impacts of quarantined teachers/staff.

Theme One: Changes to Snack/Lunch/Health Routines

Meal and snack times are very important routines in a childcare setting. This is often a time for children and teachers to relax and socialize with one another. Eleven percent (3) of the directors mentioned this theme, and cited examples of how they had to make changes to this important daily routine. Some centers shifted all lunch and snack times to eat in the classrooms (rather than a common area). Children stayed together as a group and ate in their own classrooms. Participant eight shared that there were, “no family style meals and teachers served children their portions, but (the children) are still eating family style.” Another change related to meals and snacks was the additional sanitizing and cleaning that was required. More time was spent sanitizing classroom surfaces to prepare for meals and clean after they were complete. Since water fountains were no longer being used, other methods to drink water had to be used (e.g. using cups and the sink). However, this involved making sure that cups were properly sanitized, and not shared between children.

Theme Two: Negative Impact of Quarantined Teachers/Staff

The quarantines caused by the pandemic had significant impacts on the ability of childcare centers to stay open while keeping children, teachers and staff healthy. Participant 21 voiced her frustration by stating, “Staff have had to quarantine due to exposure, even though they are showing no symptoms. This puts a huge strain in our day to day routines when we are understaffed.” Eleven percent (3) of the participants discussed the serious impacts that quarantines had on their childcare centers. For example, quarantines caused staff shortages which also negatively impacted the centers’ hours and availability to stay open. Therefore, centers may have had to open later or close earlier to accommodate fewer children and teachers. Since classrooms were also staying separated and not combining at the beginning or end of the day, more staff were needed to supervise children. Twenty-two percent (6) of the directors discussed their concern about not being able to combine classrooms, especially since there was often a shortage of teachers due to quarantines. The unpredictability of quarantines also meant that directors did not know classroom schedules ahead of time since teachers could become ill at any time (or have a family member quarantine). This produced a critical lack of teacher coverage in the classrooms at times. Participant six was aware that quarantines were used as a precaution, but stated, “We now have to quarantine children that are exposed and not necessarily positive. This is the worst thing.
for children and parents. They need to have a regular schedule and be at the center if they do not have symptoms.”

Survey Question Five

Three themes emerged for survey question five, “How have the children and families that come to your childcare center been impacted by COVID-19?” The themes were, (1) parents/families fearful of getting sick (due to COVID-19), (2) disruptions to parent work schedules, and (3) children exhibiting some behavior problems/developmental issues.

Theme One: Parents/Families Fearful of Getting Sick (COVID-19)

The fear of contracting COVID-19 was a frequent topic discussed by 41% (11) of the childcare directors. The daily increased stress levels and anxiety appeared to have a negative impact on the families and the children attending many of the centers in this study. Participant 20 stated, “The fear factor regarding illness creeps in on occasion as well.” Some of the children started to become fearful and developed anxiety while in their care. In some extreme cases, some parents went as far as making the decision not to send their children to childcare at all to reduce the risk of their child becoming infected. In addition, some of the families were more fearful of COVID-19 due to the fact that they had lost a close family member, co-worker, or friend.

Theme Two: Disruptions to Parent Work Schedules

On top of the fear of contracting COVID-19, parents were faced with significant disruptions to their work schedules. Thirty-seven percent (10) of the directors mentioned that the impact of changing work schedules greatly affected families. Oftentimes, parents and family members had to miss work due to quarantines (for themselves or their children). Some classrooms were shut down and in extreme cases the entire center was closed due to an increase in COVID-19 cases. Some parents also chose to work from home to avoid exposure and to minimize stress. However, working from home presented a new set of challenges. Working from home can be especially difficult with children to care for and supervise. Participant 16 made the following statement, “Families have gotten sick and have had to take off time from work in order to care for themselves or their children. They have also had to find childcare for their children when they went remote.” In another example participant six said that, “some families are refusing to pick up their ill child due to fear of losing their job.”

Theme Three: Children Exhibiting Some Behavior Problems/Developmental Issues

The COVID-19 pandemic seemed to affect children differently than adults, according to childcare directors. Twenty-two percent (6) of the directors surveyed mentioned a variety of issues exhibited by children in their care. The changes in routines was a definite stressor for many children, especially for children who thrived on a consistent daily schedule. Participant six mentioned, “Many families are in crises, we see children with more behaviors and the parents trying to just survive the day.” Another issue was the confusion around social distancing. The concept of keeping distant from their teachers and peers was very foreign to most children, and many struggled to grasp the concept. Children who normally enjoyed holding their teacher’s hand or hugging their classmates were no longer able to do so. Another area of concern for directors was children falling behind in their development or academic progress. With inconsistent attendance and frequent quarantines, children did not receive the same amount of instruction as before the pandemic. Some teachers believed that mask use also had a negative impact on language acquisition for some children. In addition, potty training was also more challenging due to inconsistent attendance and schedules.

Survey Question Six

Two themes emerged for survey question six which was, “How do you envision the future for your center, and how do you plan to move forward after COVID-19?” The themes were, (1) divergent responses to pandemic stressors, (2) restoring parent involvement at centers (similar to pre-pandemic), and more diverse experiences with the children.

Theme One: Divergent Responses to Pandemic Stressors

Survey question six elicited a variety of responses from childcare directors. A consistent theme throughout the survey was the need for teacher recruitment and retention. Forty-four percent (12) of the participants brought up teacher recruitment and retention in regard to their concerns for the future. Some directors stated that their center would be forced to close if they could not hire more teachers. In an ironic twist, some centers had to start a waitlist because of being short staffed. If they did not have the staff coverage, they could not accept more children and regain their financial stability. For 33% (9) of the directors, the future for their center was simply unclear. Some directors stated that they could not compete with other industries for pay
(e.g., restaurants, retail). In addition, they were not able to increase pay or benefits due to the financial strains that the pandemic had caused. Participant nine stated that, “It is impossible to pay teachers higher wages without making prices outrageous for families - which is a disservice to many low-income families or people in need of childcare.” Some directors described their situations as a “staffing crisis.” On top of recruitment and retention, directors were concerned about motivating their current employees and ensuring that they were mentally healthy so that they would stay. However, some directors were more optimistic about the future of their center. Several mentioned that they had rebounded well and despite the challenges of the pandemic they continued to grow. Participant 15 indicated that “our future is bright…our staff believes in what we do.” Another director (18) suggested that they were moving forward with “a strong team” and they were looking forward to letting parents back into the classroom.

**Theme Two: Restore Parent Involvement and Diverse Experiences with Children**

Nineteen percent (5) of the directors felt that the need to restore more parent involvement was crucial to a successful future for their centers. The necessity for parent communication during parent drop off and pick up was also a critical component so that parents and teachers could discuss topics related to the children. Nineteen percent (5) of the directors also felt that the future must also include more diverse activities that used to take place such as Christmas programs and extracurricular activities. Participant 16 stated that they planned on, “continuing to sanitize but wanted to bring back family events and activities inside the building.” These types of activities were highly valued by the families, teachers, and the children.

**Discussion**

The goal of this study was to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected childcare centers and those they serve. Center directors detailed how health-related challenges changed practices in their centers, and how center operations could be affected in the longer term.

**Pandemic Changes as Stressors for Childcare Centers**

Center directors reported that the pandemic introduced a host of stressors. At the individual level, educators were concerned for their own health risks, which was in alignment with Daro and Gallagher’s (2020) report on the experiences, economic impact, and ongoing needs related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors found that over 80% of the childcare providers surveyed were highly worried about working parents sending their kids to childcare sick. Educators and directors needed to change their routines and take on new duties to meet new health requirements. The risk or reality of losing pay due to quarantines took a further toll on the emotional wellbeing of educators. Hanno et al. (2020) found similar findings with caregivers using at least one type of public assistance during the pandemic. Specifically, 26% of community-based center staff accessed unemployment benefits and 13% took out some type of a small business loan during the pandemic. Directors reported new challenges meeting staffing needs and complying with health measures while continuing to meet state-mandated requirements. At the core, many directors became concerned about center finances, and teacher shortages.

Staffing challenges in childcare centers were present prior to the pandemic (Bassok et al., 2021), with teachers leaving early childhood education at nearly twice the rate of K-12 education. Pandemic relief funds provided temporary help for many centers early in the pandemic (NAEYC, 2021), but did not solve the staffing shortage issues. COVID-19 added to staffing shortages (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022), particularly for state-funded preschools. The center director responses in our study reflect the push and pull of the pandemic on staffing and center finances. The pandemic required smaller classes and social distancing, which may have discouraged families from sending their children to centers. Another study on the effects of the pandemic cited that many centers were at approximately 50% of enrollment compared to pre-pandemic numbers (Daro & Gallagher, 2020). Staff had new concerns about the health risks of being in childcare, and new duties meant that many centers were challenged to increase enrollments when demand recovered. Overall, many directors and educators felt more taxed by the pandemic-induced changes at centers, making it more difficult for many to recover from stress.

**Pandemic Impacts on Children**

Directors observed that children at their centers had less opportunity to engage with others socially, which impacted their social and emotional skills. Changes in routines and some health measures, such as physical distancing, may have interfered with learning and social development, leaving children with less mature behaviors and lower readiness to advance to elementary school. At some points in the pandemic the focus at some centers shifted to maintaining the basic safety of children, with stressed teachers facing too many barriers to engage in the best practices to support early learning. Other researchers have reported mixed
results on the effects of the pandemic on children’s learning and social development. Children were more likely to experience poorer mental health during the pandemic (Meheralı et al., 2021), and for young children there have been anecdotal reports of children experiencing delays in their social-emotional development and school readiness (Natason, 2022). There is little question that sustained stress can make children more reactive to everyday challenges and hurt their ability to focus their attention (Demir-Lira et al., 2016), but it is not clear if most young children faced sufficient stress from the pandemic to have these effects. Other studies have reported that children’s learning and wellbeing were not significantly affected by pandemic-related changes.

Center and Family Communication Disruptions

The communication that typically occurs between center educators and caregivers was disrupted during the pandemic. Parents were not permitted to enter classrooms, and the beginning and end of day routines were changed to curbside pick-up procedures. These pandemic-induced changes meant fewer opportunities for teachers to talk with parents. Research shows that communication between childcare teachers and caregivers is critical to both parties (Bigras et al., 2021). Parents who were home-bound during the pandemic found that teacher communication—in terms of suggestions for age-appropriate activities—helped parents cope with stress (Zhang et al., 2021). For teachers, the pandemic gave some teachers an opportunity to engage families in more authentic relationships (Soltero-Gonzalez & Gillanders, 2021). According to a Canadian study, educators at childcare centers open during the lock-down felt that relationships with parents were a critical resource for the educators (Bigras et al., 2021). Similar to directors’ reports in the current study, the Canadian educators felt stressed by being at work during the pandemic. The appreciation of the parents, however, contributed to the educators’ sense of engagement and purpose. Looking to the future, several center directors in the current study recognized the need to restore communication between teachers and caregivers. In the context of other studies on teacher-caregiver communication, an additional implication is that this communication is, or has the potential to be, a critical part of organizational identity and support (Eksi et al., 2020). Strong teacher-caregiver communication has been part of what provides a sense of value and purpose to teachers in childcare centers (Bigras et al., 2021).

Divergent Responses on Pandemic Recovery

Center directors’ views on the post-pandemic future for their centers ranged from optimism and further growth, to fears for the viability of their centers. At the core of directors’ responses from across this spectrum was how to address teacher shortages. Directors who feared for their centers’ future discussed competition for staff as insurmountable. They did not see how their centers could fund higher pay or improved benefits while maintaining accessibility for families of young children. The additional stress posed by pandemic-related health concerns made coping with recruiting and retention issues seem even more out of reach. Directors who were optimistic about their center’s future cited the strength of their team and the commitment of their teachers in the missions of their centers. Through the lens of stress and coping theory, one interpretation for why these directors had very different responses is that they perceive different levels of personal and organizational resources to manage stress.

Resources that enable positive coping with stress come in varied forms. It is possible that directors with more optimistic outlooks had more human or financial resources as compared to less optimistic directors. We did not measure financial resources, but the language of the optimistic directors suggests higher levels of organizational support in the form of teacher and staff commitment to the purpose or mission of their organization. Another optimistic director focused on the strength of the team that they had in place, and looked forward to re-engaging with parents. For center directors individually, prior reports have indicated that directors with a high level of work engagement managed stress more successfully (Elomaa et al., 2020). At the center organization level, a strong sense of teacher attachment or responsibility to the organization has been identified as a form of organizational support that can help to offset stress (Eksi et al., 2020). In sum, higher levels of teacher commitment and a sense of belonging to a strong team appear to contribute to a more positive outlook for the future. Less optimistic directors did not focus on team strength, and may be facing a different set of stressors than optimistic center directors. Recent reports suggest that childcare centers face recruitment and retention challenges, and are constrained in their ability to meet demands for enrollment (NAEYC, 2021; Bassok et al., 2021).

The authors acknowledge that there were limitations to the present study. Possible limitations were the small sample size, which may have limited the generalizability of the results of the study. Also, this study was conducted within one state, which may have also impacted the representativeness of the sample population. Since the surveys were completed by directors limited to one region, some differences may not have been noticed based on levels of public funding, staffing requirements, etc. This study provided a broad representation of centers and directors, but not explicitly a representative sample of centers. Therefore, it is unclear to
what extent the findings are generalizable. Future research might consider a more diverse population of childcare programs and geographical regions to gather data that represents a broader sample.

**Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has put stress on childcare centers on multiple fronts. This study identified in more detail how specific pandemic changes affected centers, and how those changes created unique challenges for directors, educators, and families. Many directors reported pandemic-related effects on children in their centers, and communication between centers and caregivers was clearly disrupted by pandemic changes. Quarantines were also identified as one of the major disruptors, and the pandemic aggravated an already difficult staffing situation for many childcare centers. While some directors were hopeful that this trend would change, many were concerned that this teacher shortage would continue and possibly result in the closure of some centers.

Those directors who looked forward to the future with optimism reported organizational support – the sense that their team was strong or felt a clear commitment to the center’s goals. They were focused on re-engaging with caregivers, which prior studies have shown to be a contributor to teachers’ feelings of purpose and commitment. Directors who were less optimistic discussed the teacher shortages as nearly insurmountable given their current resources. These directors may have faced a larger gap in the resources needed to address pandemic and ongoing stresses due to the circumstances of their centers. Our suggestion for future research is to explore the differences in how centers’ can effectively identify coping strategies and resources to help teachers dealing with stress during the post pandemic years. For those centers struggling with teacher shortages, it will be crucial to pinpoint factors that help to increase hiring and attract potential teacher candidates to the childcare field. In addition, studies could focus more deeply on the next steps and how the future looks for childcare centers throughout the state of Ohio, the United States, and beyond. Since this study provided findings from the early phase of the pandemic, it may be helpful to survey a larger and more diverse sample to determine the extent to which the issues directors identified were transient or persistent toward the end of the pandemic and moving forward.

**Supplementary Information** The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01398-z.

**Data Availability** Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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