



Research Article

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The Role of Mothers in the Education of their Preschool Children: A Comparative Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to analyze the role of mothers in preschool education before and after the pandemic. The design used was descriptive-comparative with a qualitative approach. Nine mothers of preschool children from two public educational institutions in Lima-Peru participated. The verbal data was collected through in-depth interviews. Four subcategories were found: support in homework, support in learning activities, expectations and concerns, needs in terms of resources and forms of communication. In conclusion, before the pandemic, education was primarily teacher-centered. Currently, due to the lack of psychomotor, socioemotional, and communicative development caused by the pandemic, mothers are more involved and understand that the roles of parents and teachers are shared to ensure children's learning.

Keywords: early childhood; preschool education; mothers; qualitative study

1. Introduction

A difficult situation has been experienced worldwide, affecting more than one billion students due to school closures in 191 countries as a result of COVID-19 (CEPAL- UNESCO, 2020). The same institution announced the global education coalition and implemented a new educational system with applications, platforms, and resources during the school closure period. However, the United Nations Children's Fund highlighted that school closures affected 743 million girls and over 111 million children living in less developed countries. For this reason, the same institution sought partners to provide access to education for 48.6 million children, including 6.4 million children in

transit and 31.7 million children in poverty (UNICEF, 2022).

The participation of parents in the education of their children became crucial to the extent that they were guided by the teaching staff, prioritizing quality relationships between them (Yildiz et al., 2023). In this sense, teachers valued parents for their influence on their children's learning at home, based on knowledge and theories about family knowledge (Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022). These situations highlight the importance of continuing to build quality relationships between teachers and parents to support children's educational development.

In the international context, studies have been found that have addressed parental involvement with preschool children (Alper et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2020; Bartoli et al., 2022; Cueto et al., 2020; Dove et al., 2018; Kaščák et al., 2023; Kurupinar & Kanmaz, 2023; Navarro-Cruz, 2023; Razeto, 2018; Siu & Keung, 2023; Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022; Tye, 2023).

In Peru, studies were conducted that demonstrated, on the one hand, the value of mediation between parental support and commitments to their children that allowed the development of early mathematical skills during the preschool stage (Malaspina & Garcia Ampudia, 2022). On the other hand, the existence of greater commitment and support from families towards learning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Carcausto et al., 2022).

Given the above, the present study is relevant, as there are no known studies to date that have explored the experiences, expectations, concerns, strategies and resources of mothers who accompanied the education of their children before and after the epidemic. This information can help educators, education policy makers and parents work more effectively in early childhood education in the current environment. Therefore, the aim was to analyze the role of mothers in the education of their children before and after the pandemic.

1.1 *Revisión bibliográfica*

The literature emphasizes that parental involvement in preschool education implies active and continuous collaboration with schools to promote the education and comprehensive development of children (Epstein, 2011). This commitment manifests itself through regular communication with teachers, active participation in school activities, and support for the learning process at home. Close cooperation between parents and schools is essential to creating an enriching educational environment. The emphasis is placed on positive and proactive parental involvement in all stages of the education process to contribute to the best development of preschool children (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

School and home give rise to parental involvement and allow learning to extend beyond the classroom to different spaces, as mentioned in the overlapping spheres theory (Epstein, 2020), as it combines school learning with learning in different settings (Sarmiento & Zapata, 2014). In the same vein, (Volman & 't Gilde, 2021) argue that families and communities contribute to students' learning achievements as a historical source of culture and essential life skills. The author relies on the Funds of Knowledge theory, which highlights the diversity of learning obtained from the environment, taking into account the economy, culture, and family background. This model acknowledges the complexity and multidimensionality of family involvement (Epstein, 2020).

Based on the above, parents and school are important components in the educational life of children in early childhood. In this sense, Vygotsky's socio-historical-cultural theory states that learning takes place in relation to families and the community (Daniels, 2003), while Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory refers to the interactions between families and schools, maintaining communication, knowledge, and understanding (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

The role of mothers in preschool education is associated with the organization of time and space (Kong & Yasmin, 2022), parental strategies (Barnett et al., 2020; Razeto Pavez, 2016), concerns and expectations (Cueto et al., 2018; Razeto, 2018) and resources and communication that generate learning within the children's home.

Mothers' organization of space and time in accompanying their children's homework at home is closely related to the environment intended for learning and parent-child interaction at home (Kong

& Yasmin, 2022). Likewise, with spending more time with their children. In that sense, it has been shown that when parents spent more time with younger children, their learning and psychological well-being improved (Li & Guo, 2023).

Parents' educational support strategies are critical to their children's learning, which means that parental involvement in educational activities and support at home have a positive impact on the cognitive, social and emotional development of preschool children (Barnett et al., 2020; Razeto Pavez, 2016). For his part (Epstein, 1992) suggests strategies of an initial and differentiated nature. The former is emphasized at the preschool and basic level, where families and school learn to support each other in responsibilities, and the latter is adapted according to the needs and circumstances of families. However, this support can be affected, when they delegate all responsibility to school teachers (Varshney et al., 2020).

Parents' concerns and expectations are related to their children's learning in the school environment and to the quality of teaching provided by teachers. This shows in parents are interested that their children performing well in the classroom and acquiring knowledge effectively (Cueto et al., 2018); however, authors such as (Razeto, 2018) argue that concerns are related to barriers in the educational system and little family involvement due to work occupations and other family responsibilities that directly indicate in their children's learning.

Regarding resources and communication for education, the former refers to the elements and means (educational materials, didactic toys, books, among others) that are used to facilitate learning and the development of skills in children. Preston et al. (2018) complements the aforementioned by arguing that their knowledge, experiences, language, culture, emotions, and socioeconomic status of parents are important resources for the education of their children that should be recognized and taken advantage of to enrich the child's educational experience at home. The second alludes to the verbal and nonverbal interaction between parents and teachers, as well as between children, which plays a fundamental role in cognitive, linguistic, and social development at this crucial stage of child development.

2. Methods

The study was descriptive-comparative with a qualitative approach (Doyle et al., 2020). This design was relevant to the study, as it allowed us to go beyond the literal description of the accounts expressed by mothers about their children's early education before and after the pandemic. Additionally, this design helped to synthesize the information extracted from the interviews and then interpret and compare it with the current literature (Bradway, 2018; Carcausto et al., 2020, 2022).

The population consisted of 43 families of the 5-year-old classroom of the morning shift of two public educational institutions in Lima-Peru, the selection of the participants was carried out in the following way: a virtual invitation was made, of the total of 12 families accepted voluntarily (1 father and 11 mothers) who signed the informed consent. According to the principle of data saturation, which refers to the repetition of information collected and analyzed from the interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), 9 mothers were left, most of them housewives, aged 28 to 36 years, single, with complete secondary education. It should be noted that having opted for the saturation point may have generated some bias that made it possible to lose nuances and depth of analysis of verbal data, despite verification by two experts in the field.

In-depth interviews were conducted via zoom to three mothers and six face-to-face interviews between September and November 2022. Before the application of the interview, a pilot test was conducted with three mothers to make some adjustments to the instrument that contained four specific open-ended questions and a guiding question that was as follows: What was your experience or perception about the education of your child before the pandemic and how is it currently? It should be added that the six mothers who were interviewed in person decided to be interviewed in their homes and the duration of the interview was between 28 and 35 minutes.

After transcribing, reading, and rereading the interview, we identified the emerging categories and the most representative quotes from the interview for subsequent qualitative analysis. To ensure

the precision of the analysis and interpretation of the data, we used the thematic content analysis method (Campbell et al., 2021). It should be noted that to ensure the credibility of the transcribed information, it was given to the interviewees so that they could corroborate the information provided. The selection process of the quotes and the induction of the subcategories were verified and validated by two experts on the subject matter.

3. Results

These keywords highlight how the pandemic affected children's education and development, and how mothers, teachers, and the community cope and work together to provide a nurturing educational environment despite the circumstances, as seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Preliminary sense of the study based on keywords

The results of early childhood education from the mother's perspective are structured into a central category and four subcategories drawn inductively from interviews as shown in Figure 2, although conceptually and theoretically they were previously grounded (see the Introduction).

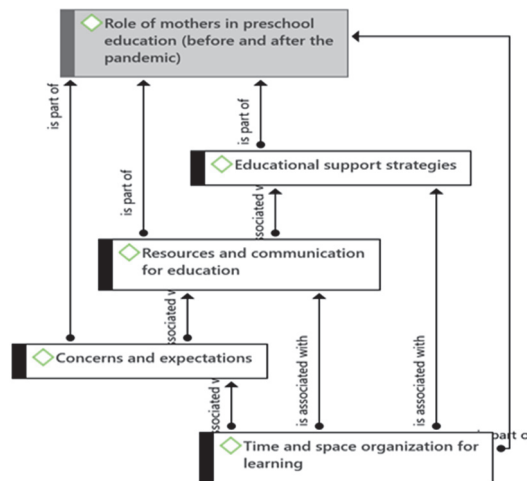


Figure 2: Deductive-inductive categorial system of the study.

3.1 Time and space organization for learning

This subcategory refers to the way in which mothers manage time and space when providing support to their children in household activities, and is closely linked to the organization and planning of chores, as well as to the learning environment at home. In that sense, we show how mothers changed their homework help activities before and after the pandemic. For example, mothers RH and MC, before the pandemic, sometimes helped children with homework, especially in the afternoons or evenings due to work commitments; at other times they were supported by a family member. For her part, mother LCH had a space at home for her children to do their homework, while others, like mother EP, adapted to their circumstances because they lived in a rented house without a special place to study.

"Sometimes I would support him on his homework in the afternoon or evening because I worked almost every day" (Mother RH).

"His sister would pick him up from school. When she had time, she would help him with his homework" (Mother MC).

"The space was my room, we had a table and there we always did our homework." (mother LCH).

"I lived in a small room. I had no space, but then I tried to help him as much as I could" (Mother EP).

In the wake of the pandemic, there has been a change in how they support their children in their homework. For example, mother AB, although she does not own the room where she lives, recognizes the importance of providing her children with a dedicated study space at home, suggesting a greater emphasis on creating an environment conducive to learning. On the other hand, other mothers such as RH, LCH and PC mention that they rely on relatives or private tutoring services to help their children with homework when they are at work. This may indicate increased awareness of homeschooling and the search for solutions to ensure continuous support for children.

"For my daughter to study I should have a special place [...]. But for now I live rent, she does her homework with her siblings" (Mother AB).

"[...] in the afternoon or evening I help her with her homework" (mother RH).

"When I am not there, sometimes I hire my niece or a miss to help her with her homework" (Mother LCH).

with her homework" (mother LCH).

"I help my daughter with her homework at 5:30 or so" (Mother PC).

3.2 Educational support strategies

Mothers' support strategies as educational activities play a key role in having a beneficial effect on the cognitive, social, and emotional development of preschool children. The following shows how mothers' educational support has evolved before and after the pandemic.

Before the pandemic, at the first and second appointments, both mothers (AB and YP) involve active participation in their children's activities. Either by taking the child to the park or helping her with homework after playing. For her part, mother LCH highlights the habit of reading children's stories to her child as a way of cultivating a taste for reading. She also uses the practice of tongue twisters to improve pronunciation. This strategy suggests a playful and participatory approach to strengthen language skills and interest in reading from an early age. Similarly, the mother MC describes how she supports her child in homework and learning using resources accessible at home, such as bottle caps and play dough. This strategy demonstrates a creative adaptation to the home environment to reinforce numeracy skills outside the school environment.

"We would almost always take her to the park to play for a while and then do homework" (Mother AB).

"After playing with her for a while, she helps her with the homework that was left for her at school"

(Mother YP).

"When I had time I would read her children's stories so that she would like reading, also I would make her practice tongue twisters so that she would pronounce better every day" (Mother LCH).

"I supported him with some homework and learning at home, for example, my son learned to count faster using bottle caps and plasticine, the rest he did at school" (Mother MC).

After the pandemic, the first quote indicates that the mother LCH becomes more aware of her child's education and takes on a more active role. Previously, she relied on her sister for support due to work responsibilities, but now she herself is more directly involved in the educational process. The statement of the mother PC suggests a proactive approach to reinforce and support what is taught at school. This approach reflects increased parental responsibility to ensure understanding and consolidation of concepts learned in the school environment. The third quote indicates that the mother IA has chosen to stop working to be closer to her child and assist with his tasks. This shift in work dynamics reflects a conscious prioritization of direct parental involvement in the child's education. The last quote from the mother MC suggests a strategy of balancing work responsibilities with educational support, occasionally hiring someone to assist in her child's learning.

"[...] Now I am more conscious of his education; before, my sister supported me because I was working" (Mother LCH).

"Reinforce what they will teach him in school" (Mother PC).

"[...] I have stopped working to be closer and support him in his tasks" (Mother AI).

"Sometimes I hire a lady to support him in his learning, but almost always I am with my son despite work" (Mother MC).

3.3 Concerns and Expectations

The concerns and expectations of mothers are related to their children's learning in the school environment, as well as the instruction provided by teachers. In this regard, according to the narratives of mothers NV, LCH, and AI before the pandemic, they expressed concerns and expectations about the development and disruptive behaviors that affected their children's learning. Regarding expectations, for example, the mothers were not very clear because, according to them, by seeking therapies and solutions to control problematic behaviors such as tantrums, bad mood, and rebellion, they could feel reassured about their children's learning.

"I had hope that with therapies, his tantrums and bad mood towards tasks would decrease" (Mother NV).

"I was worried about his rebellion, as he wouldn't obey" (Mother LCH).

"[...] I wanted him to speak more because we couldn't understand him" (Mother AI).

After the pandemic, the concerns of the AB, RH, and PC were focused on the impact of the pandemic on the complete development of their children, particularly in the development of linguistic, emotional, and social skills. Additionally, some mothers like AI believe that annual changes in teachers affect the behavior and learning of their children, considering that each has different methods of treatment and teaching. Mothers like EP also had expectations about the academic recovery of what was lost during the pandemic and the future development, not only in the cognitive aspect but also in the communication and motor skills of their children.

"It worries me because in the pandemic I could not help her well in her learning [...], I think the teacher should reinforce more in her language and the integration between them" (Mother AB).

"[...] I am also worried that my daughter will be 6 years old next year and she will be in a 5-year-old classroom" (Mother RH).

"I worry that she will be afraid to play and talk to her friends" (Mother PC).

"I wish they wouldn't change teachers every year because the children get used to one, it affects them" (Mother AI).

"My expectation is that what was lost during the pandemic will be recovered [...] and the anxiety of having to talk to peers will decrease" (Mother EP).

3.4 Resources and Communication for Education

This subcategory refers to the elements and means (educational materials, educational toys, books, among others) used to facilitate learning and the development of skills in children. In relation to this, before the pandemic, some mothers such as LCH and AI show their role as facilitators of materials necessary for their children's learning, following the teacher's indications and requirements. Although the mother MC emphasizes the importance of complying with the teacher's requests for materials so as not to affect her daughter's learning, she also shows some commitment in accompanying her child's learning at home.

*"I gave her all the materials that the teacher asked for so that she could do her work well, (Mother LCH).
"[...] when there was no pandemic disease, I complied with the list of materials requested by the teacher at the beginning and during the year, the rest was taken care of by her teacher [...]" (Mother AI).
"The teacher knows why she asks for these materials. If I don't hand them in, my daughter might not do anything, she will be sad, [...] when I had time, I taught her to count numbers using pebbles or matches, sometimes I made her watch videos so she could learn to count numbers" (Mother MC).*

However, after the pandemic, mothers place more emphasis on acquiring and utilizing tangible and digital educational resources. This includes activities such as watching and listening to online stories, playing online games, and providing concrete materials that children can manipulate at home. Additionally, constant communication with teachers often occurs through platforms such as WhatsApp, serving as a virtual substitute for in-person interactions. In summary, these statements reflect the diversity of materials mothers employ to facilitate their children's learning, underscoring the importance of collaboration between school and home.

*"[...] purchase fable books, crayons, puzzles requested by the teacher for learning at school" (Mother NV).
"Buy play dough and logic blocks requested by the young lady" (Mother LCH).
"For my daughter to learn more, I use the internet to watch videos and play online, in addition to materials that are around me or that the teacher does not provide" (Mother MC).
"We have constant communication with the teacher, both in person and via WhatsApp" (Mother YP).*

4. Discussion

According to the results of the analysis by subcategories, the role of mothers in the education of their children before and after the pandemic was different. Before the pandemic, mothers were little involved in their children's education because they had obligations inside and outside their homes and preferred that it be the responsibility of teachers. After the pandemic, mothers showed greater commitment to support and accompanying the learning provided by teachers. This means that mothers understood that they and their teachers share the role of ensuring that children learn.

Further details on the interpretation and discussion of the subcategory results are provided in the following.

4.1 Time and space organization for learning

Before the pandemic, homework support was related to specific schedules and availability of space, while after the pandemic, more emphasis is placed on the need for dedicated study space and consideration is given to hiring outside help to ensure that children receive consistent educational support. From this, it can be inferred how the pandemic has influenced the dynamics of home education specifically, organization of time and space for children's learning. In that line, the results

of (Kaščák et al., 2023) show that the pandemic not only affected the home environment and its spatio-temporal structure, but also had an impact on educational structures related to time and space. Rosales Morales (2020) mentions that the time factor of families means having communication with their children so that together they can reflect on the difficulties that may arise in the environment or in the classroom. This communication is manifested in collaborative work between educational agents to ensure learning.

4.2 Educational support strategies

In terms of educational or learning support, prior to the pandemic, play was prioritized before schoolwork, with the goal of improving language skills, but with limited participation of mothers due to work occupations. These mothers' decisions are similar to the study by (Navarro-Cruz, 2023), where it was found that Latina mothers preferred to combine activities such as companionship, school care, and work, prioritizing the latter activity. Regarding this, (Mayorga Peñaloza et al., 2019) mentions that the accompaniment of families in learning is being affected because parents work and delegate responsibilities to relatives or caregivers. Regarding the finding on the value of play and activities to improve language skills, it differs from the study by Siu & Keung (2023), where working mothers appreciate play more for the development of their children's social skills. The difference found is probably due to the context and the greater attention requirements of the children, according to the mothers' perception and knowledge.

Following the pandemic, there was a significant increase in father involvement, some of whom even stopped working to be more present in their children's education. This is evidence of greater participation of mothers in their children's learning, carrying out reinforcement activities, and seeking the help of private tutors when necessary. The changes presented evidence of a significant adaptation of families and a renewed perception of homeschooling. Although, according to teachers' perceptions, parental involvement falls back into pre-pandemic routines due to lack of time and training (Jones & Palikara, 2023), Tye (2023) highlights the relevance of continuing to promote in the post-pandemic the involvement of parents in their children's learning process.

4.3 Concerns and Expectations

In the expectations and concerns before the pandemic, mothers' expectations focused on improving the learning outcomes of their children; in that line, Cueto et al. (2018) points out that these educational expectations, on the part of families, ensure the development of students at a high level above the students' educational expectations, committing more to their learning. As for mothers' concerns about their children's learning, it focused on language development because it did not allow them to have good results in the learning process. In that sense, in the study of (Alper et al., 2021) it was found that the child's language development and the quality of linguistic interaction are associated with the modifiable characteristics of the parents. This explains that the greater the self-efficacy and knowledge of development of parents, the greater the linguistic capacity.

Following the pandemic, maternal concerns have expanded to a more holistic perspective, considering the overall impact on children's development, addressing linguistic, emotional, and social complexities resulting from the disruptions caused by the crisis. In addition, there has been an increased focus on annual teacher turnover, highlighting variability in teaching methods as a factor of concern and underscoring the importance of consistency for children's sustainable academic and emotional development. This implies that their children's learning is provided in the best way by their teachers at school so that they can improve their psychomotor processes, socialization, and communication with their peers affected by the pandemic (Kurupınar & Kanmaz, 2023). In this sense, (Cueto et al., 2018) mentioned that parents have expectations about the performance and educational level that teachers should provide to their children. These results align with what was found by (Volman & 't Gilde, 2021) as it emphasizes the development of basic skills; they are based on the FOK

theory due to the diversity of learning they get from their environment, taking into account their economy, culture, and family background. Regarding the emotions and social skills affected by the pandemic, it will be necessary to reinforce them through warm and caring parental relationships to promote children's emotional well-being (Yuan et al., 2023).

4.4 Resources and communication for education

Regarding resources and communication for home education. Before the pandemic, the availability and accessibility of educational materials varied according to social and economic status. However, after the pandemic, despite some economic deficit, mothers emphasized the acquisition of resources such as storybooks and manipulative materials and some printing devices to support learning at home, in addition to constant communication with teachers through WhatsApp or face-to-face. These changes after the pandemic indicate an adaptation to a more enriching and interactive education at home. In relation to educational resources, according to (Sarmiento & Zapata, 2014), the organization of resources and materials is important for a learning experience to occur. Although for (Preston et al., 2018) the differences in access to educational materials are due to the poverty rate in families in urban and rural areas.

The limitations of the study lie in the analysis of new categories that were not explored in depth in the research, such as the evaluation and teaching strategy that emerged in the interviews, as well as the fact that in the study only one educational agent of the school context was considered. In this sense, it is suggested that future research investigate the mentioned topics using other qualitative methods or mixed methodologies, with the purpose of deepening this line of research.

5. Conclusions

Before the pandemic, mothers provided little time for their children's education due to work obligations inside and outside of the home. They basically assumed the role of facilitators of learning materials for their children requested by school teachers. From this it can be inferred that before the pandemic, education was largely teacher-centered. After the pandemic, mothers become more involved and involved in school and actively support their children at home through the use of various tangible and digital resources. In this period, due to the lack of psychomotor, socioemotional, and communicative development caused by the pandemic, parents become more aware that their roles and those of educators are shared to ensure children's learning. These changes reflect mothers' resilience in the face of unexpected challenges and their continued commitment to their children's education. In this sense, it highlights the importance of communication and collaboration between parents, educators, and the school community to address these concerns and meet expectations for quality education.

Although mothers have undergone a change in their educational participation, this presents opportunities and challenges to adjust the roles of both mothers and teachers to effectively harness this increased maternal participation collaboratively. It also underscores the need to ensure equitable access to digital resources and tangible materials for all families, thus avoiding potential economic and technological disparities. These changes will require effective communication and coordination strategies between mothers and teachers, as well as the fostering of a culture of collaboration within the educational community.

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