Original Research

Preschool teachers' perceptions of preschool education during Covid-19 in Greece: a diary-interview study

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Abstract: Preschools all around the world had recently been forced to adopt Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) as a means to encounter the Covid-19 pandemic. While online teaching and learning has already been employed in higher education for many years, this was the first time it had been implemented in preschool classrooms. The current study aimed to investigate preschool teachers' experiences of formal education during the transition between ERT and face-to-face education in Greece. Teacher diaries were collected over a four-month period, followed by online interviews with the teachers. Both data sets were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Findings indicated that ERT had a short-term negative influence on children's behaviour and eagerness to engage in interpersonal social interactions upon their return to preschool. Teachers further reported that the measures adopted by the Greek Government as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic had a negative impact on children's learning, belonging, development and participation and failed to meet young children's needs. The appropriateness of remote teaching as a mode of learning for preschoolers is discussed.

Keywords: Covid-19, Pandemic, Preschool education, Emergency Remote Teaching

Introduction

In March 2020, more than 1.6 billion children were unable to receive face-to-face education due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Gromada et al., 2020). To safeguard students and the general public, education ministries around the world decided to close schools for all age groups and grades. Early childhood education centers were closed and at least 40 million preschoolers lost the opportunity to learn in preschool classrooms (Gromada et al., 2020). Following the extended school closures, decisions were made for the educational strategy to be adopted, which supported either blended or exclusively online learning. Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) became the standard of teaching instruction. In contrast to online learning, which is associated with a carefully developed learning program for distance learning purposes, ERT refers to a temporary shift from face-to-face learning to remote teaching due to restrictions imposed in crisis situations (Hodges et al., 2020). Throughout the school year, children, teachers and parents experienced the transition from face-to-face to remote teaching. While transitions in the context of education typically refer to a period of time when children enter a different stage of learning, such as the transition from preschool to primary school (Koglbauer, 2022), the Covid-19 pandemic introduced a new type of transition associated with changes in children's learning modes. The shift from traditional teaching and learning to ERT unsettled parents and teachers alike (Duran, 2021; Dadatsi & Koukouriki, 2022; Nikolopoulou, 2022). This was partly due to the fact that preschool education places more emphasis on the children than on the subjects compared to the rest of the school system (Turan, 2004). In addition,

there were no relevant studies and guidelines on how preschools should operate in such cases (Yildirim, 2021).

Considering this unprecedented type of learning for young children, the current study sought to investigate teachers' understandings of this phenomenon through teachers' diaries and online interviews. Although other studies have investigated the topic and its impact on this age group (e.g. Marmot et al., 2020; Dong et al., 2020; Alabdulkarim et al., 2022; Ford et al., 2021; Cantiani et al., 2021; Yildirim, 2021), the majority of them were conducted either when preschools were closed or when children returned to the physical setting of preschool. This is one of the few studies that investigated the same group of children and their teachers throughout the transition from ERT to face-to-face education that took place during the 2020-2021 school year (some exceptions include Apostolou & Lavidas, 2021; Lavidas et al., 2022). Taking into account the novel conditions under which early childhood education had to operate, the study sought to answer the following research question: What are preschool teachers' experiences of preschool education throughout the transition from ERT to face-to-face education that took place during Covid-19?

Typical preschool education in Greece

According to their age, children in Greece can enroll in one of two different preschool education programs. Children up to the age of four can enroll in childcare centres, while those between the ages of four and six enroll in kindergarten. As of 2018, children are legally required to attend kindergarten for at least one year before entering primary school (Eurydice, 2023). Kindergartens operate in accordance with the national curriculum and are administered by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. Kindergarten teachers are required to have a Bachelor's degree from schools or departments of early childhood education (Sofou & Tsafos, 2010). During the study, preschools operated under the Cross-thematic Curriculum Framework Syllabus Design, which is the country's national early childhood curriculum and it was established in 2003 (Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs [MoE], 2003) but was updated in 2021. Its aim is to foster and assist the physical, emotional, cognitive and social development of young children and to facilitate their transition to primary school (Doliopoulou, 2006; Penderi et al., 2021). Kindergarten teachers also have access to the Preschool Teacher's Guide (Dafermou et al., 2006), which provides them theoretical and practical assistance in order to effectively implement the curriculum. The curriculum adheres to the principles of cross-thematic and interdisciplinary learning and is structured around the cognitive domains of language, mathematics, human and physical environment, invention and expression, and computer science. Each of these cognitive categories includes specific skills that young children should acquire (MoE, 2003). According to the principles of interdisciplinary learning, these cognitive domains should not be considered as independent thematic units. Rather, they should be taken into account in order to develop activities that children find to be meaningful and purposeful (MoE, 2003). Another principle of the curriculum is child-centred teaching and learning, which highlights the importance of children's play, interests, needs and involvement in decision-making (Dafermou et al., 2006; MoE, 2003).

Greek preschools work daily with a curriculum that combines structured and unstructured learning. During the day, children have the opportunity to engage in free play in the different classroom centers, to interact with materials of their preference and to socialize with their teachers and peers. They also engage in activities organized by the teacher in accordance with the topic of the day and work alone or in groups (Penderi et al., 2021). Greek preschools usually have gardens where children can get involved in motor activities, run, play and use playground equipment and various materials that promote physical movement. Parents have the option to get their children enrolled in the mandatory program that requires children to start school at 8:30 and leave at 13:00 or participate in the all-day program that they can either leave at 16:00 or 17:30 (Eurydice, 2023). Hence, young children in Greece typically spend considerable time in preschool, which can range from 4 and a half to 9 hours on a daily basis.

Preschool education in Greece during the Covid-19 pandemic

The school closures were adopted as a measure to encounter the Covid-19 pandemic, which unavoidably brought many disruptions to school experiences of children, teachers and parents. The minimum of 4 hours that children would normally spend in school was reduced to 2 hours and 10 minutes including a total of 40-minute breaks. The school day also started at 14:10 instead of the morning, which brought additional changes to children's daily routine. This practice was reported to be problematic as children were sleepy and tired during those hours (Markaki & Kostas, 2022; Nikolopoulou, 2022), but the Ministry of Education did not provide any explanation for these changes. The school environment was replaced by computers and tablets, and the physical presence of teachers and classmates was replaced by a digital one. This had a considerable impact on children, as close interpersonal interactions between children and teachers, including physical contact, are typical in Greek preschool classrooms (Penderi et al., 2021). The absence of the nurturing dimension of the teacher-child relationship caused emotional distress to teachers and negatively affected their sense of professional identity (Dadatsi & Koukouriki, 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2022).

While attending ERT was mandatory by law (MoE, 2020), several financially underprivileged children did not have the means to participate, so the government recommended participation through telephone. The issue of Internet accessibility and the lack of technical

means that would allow children to participate in ERT has been consistently reported in the Greek context (e.g. Markaki & Kostas, 2022; Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023; Apostolou, 2023). Similar findings from other countries also indicate that a number of preschool children could not attend remote teaching due to a lack of resources (e.g. Yildirim, 2021; Timmons et al., 2021; Atiles et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2021). This could be particularly problematic for preschoolers whose learning cannot rely solely on listening combined with their developing skills, which would require the assistance of parents working from home. Financial assistance was provided towards the end of the school year in the form of 200 euro vouchers. Families who met certain financial criteria could use the vouchers to purchase technological equipment (Ministry of Finance et al., 2020). Like children all around the world, pupils in Greek preschools lost face-to-face contact with their teachers and peers, the opportunity to interact with the material space and objects of the school, their routines and familial ways of learning (Papandreou & Vellopoulou, 2023). Meanwhile, no guidelines were given on how teachers were expected to achieve curriculum objectives such as developing collaboration and socialization skills, understanding the value of teamwork or preparing children for a smooth transition to primary school through this type of learning (Foti, 2020; Chalari & Charonitis, 2022; Markaki & Kostas, 2022; Apostolou, 2023).

Issues with ERT identified in early years' classrooms

Teachers

Significant problems with the implementation of ERT in preschool classrooms have been reported in a number of Greek studies as well as the international literature for teachers, children and parents alike. Prominent issues reported by Greek preschool teachers include lack of training and insufficient technological skills (Foti, 2020; Apostolou & Lavidas, 2021; Markaki & Kostas, 2022; Dadatsi & Koukouriki, 2022; Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023; Apostolou, 2023; Tympa et al., 2023), difficulties in developing appropriate materials for online learning in a limited period of time (Foti, 2020; Chalari & Charonitis, 2022; Markaki & Kostas, 2022; Nikolopoulou, 2022), the inability of ERT to meet children's emotional and educational needs (Apostolou, 2022, 2023; Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023) and the lack of internet and technological equipment in preschools and children's homes (Markaki & Kostas, 2022; Nikolopoulou, 2022; Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023; Apostolou, 2023).

More specifically, Papandreou & Vellopoulou (2023) reported that while distance learning was helpful in maintaining some sense of connectedness between the children, their peers and the school context, preschool teachers in Greece faced difficulties in providing children with emotional support, accommodating children's needs and desires to be with their friends and supporting peer interactions, group work and children's play. Teachers also expressed worry about the extent to which children are prepared for the transition to elementary school, particularly in terms of language and math. Another identified problem was the lack of access to technological equipment for a number of children. Issues were further reported in relation to the practical implementation of child-centred teaching, experiential learning and the active involvement of children in decision making. In another study involving 280 preschool teachers from Greece, Gkoros & Papageorgiou (2023) found that educators held negative views on remote education as they considered that it limits the implementation of psychomotor activities and is not as effective as traditional teaching in developing children's social skills. Furthermore, teachers expressed considerable issues with internet access and technological equipment in relation to children, schools and themselves. Other reported problems related to children's levels of engagement during online learning, its limited ability to support individualised learning and the lack of support for children with special education needs.

In another Greek study, Apostolou (2023) investigated the views of 18 Greek preschool teachers on literacy and literacy practices during face-to-face and remote teaching. The teachers expressed their lack of preparedness to engage in this type of learning and their disappointment with the possibilities offered by remote teaching to effectively prepare children for the demands of primary school- particularly regarding written language. The primary school teachers who participated in Apostolou's (2022) study further confirmed these findings, as according to participants, the language activities implemented in preschools during ERT were not effective in preparing children for the literacy requirements of the first grade of primary school.

Furthermore, participants in the study by Markaki & Kostas (2022), reported issues with the lack of technological equipment in homes and schools, the exclusion of many children from ERT due to lack of equipment, the lack of support from the Ministry, the excessive amount of screen time to which children were exposed, children's lack of engagement during remote teaching and the negative impact of ERT on children's development. Additionally, Lavida et al.'s study (2022) found that preschool teachers faced difficulties during ERT as they were not familiar with the online platforms they had to utilise for teaching since they had not received training for distance education while schools and children lacked the infrastructure and equipment required to participate in ERT. Participants further explained that it was challenging for individualised learning to take place and that as time went by children's interest in the learning process was fading away. These findings are in line with Nikolopoulou's (2022) study, in which 14 Greek early primary teachers, reported issues with limited resources for children at home, which had an impact on their ability to attend ERT, and insufficient

teacher training in online learning. In addition, preschool teachers in Chalari & Charonitis (2022) research have also reported the difficulties they faced when working remotely while their own children and partners were also at home, and their lack of experience in remote teaching, which required of them considerable time to organise the lessons.

Similar findings are reported in the international literature. The lack of technological equipment and internet connection as well as the lack of technological knowledge of preschool teachers are the most commonly reported issues associated with ERT (e.g. Alan, 2021; Yildirim, 2021; Timmons et al., 2021; Atiles et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2021; Steed & Leech, 2021; Abdul-Majied et al., 2023). At the same time, teachers struggled with managing their workload as they had to develop the materials for online learning from scratch while helping their own children who attended ERT (Bigras et al., 2021). Another reported problem was the young age and developmental stage of the children, which restricted their ability to learn autonomously and negatively impacted their levels of concentration and interest in ERT (Kruszewska et al., 2022; Ford et al., 2021) and the absence of in-person interactions with the children (Steed & Leech, 2021; Ford et al., 2021). Furthermore, teachers worldwide faced difficulties in teaching topics that they considered to be important, and assisting students to gain the skills necessary for the transition to primary education. This issue has been reported in the contexts of Greece, Germany, Turkey, the US and the UK (Quenzer-Alfred et al., 2021; Yildirim, 2021; Gonzàlez et al., 2022; Apostolou, 2022; Wythe, 2022; Bakopoulou, 2022; Gelir, 2023). Finally, preschool teachers have internationally reported on their difficulties to replicate the aspects of traditional education such as inquiry-based teaching when teaching remotely (Timmons et al., 2021), which led them to have doubts on the effectiveness of remote teaching and learning for preschoolers (Atiles et al., 2021; Duran, 2021; Negrette et al., 2022).

Children

Research has reported the various difficulties that children faced during distance learning, such as children's limited concentration during online classroom meetings, which was mainly due to their lack of interest, lack of variety in learning activities, or the presence of other family members (Kruszewska et al., 2022; Ford et al., 2021; Atiles et al., 2021; Lau & Lee, 2021). Furthermore, Marmot et al. (2020) stated that the restricted opportunities for children to have access and interact with educational materials limited play-driven learning that is typically employed in formal preschool education. Another commonly reported issue related to distance education was that it limited children's opportunities to socialize and develop social skills (Bonal & González, 2020; Atabey, 2021; Gelir, 2023). Several studies question the impact of lacking socialization and interaction with the physical school setting could have on children's social-psychological development (Pascal

et al., 2020; Gelir, 2023) as well as whether it would be possible to make up for lost school experiences with home experiences (Andrew et al., 2020).

Considering the social dimensions of learning, the lack of face-to-face interactions with school could have a serious impact on children's opportunities to experience school belonging, and to develop their identities and skills, which would lead to negative behavioural, educational and social outcomes (Broekhuizen et al., 2016). Parental reports from 3275 parents from China indicated that children had regressed in terms of educational skills and behaviours (Dong et al., 2020), while caregivers from Brazil who participated in Costa et al.'s (2022) study reported that children manifested aggressiveness and misbehaviour. Similar findings have been reported by parents from Turkey (Arslan et al., 2021; Duran & Ömeroğlu, 2022) who observed increases in boredom, aggression and shyness as well as parents from Italy who reported significant increases in their children's emotional reactivity, anxiousness-depression, withdrawal and aggression during the lockdown (Frigerio et al., 2023). A study investigating the effects of Covid-19 in typically developing Italian preschoolers compared to children at risk of neurodevelopmental disorders, also found that both groups were equally affected. Children demonstrated heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and externalizing behaviours (Cantiani et al., 2021). At the same time, any sort of contact with school was reported to have a positive influence. Meanwhile, it was observed that the amount of pandemic-related information communicated to children affected their levels of anxiety and depression (Cantiani et al., 2021).

Additionally, reports from parents of Italian and Spanish children aged 3 to 18, indicated differences in the emotionality and behaviours of their children, including attention difficulties, boredom, irritability, restlessness, nervousness, feelings of loneliness, uneasiness, and worries (Orgilés et al., 2020). Moreover, according to 140 preschool teachers from Turkey who participated in Duran's (2021) study, during ERT children experienced anxiety, fear and were longing to return to preschool. These outcomes have been associated with a variety of factors including the lack of interactions between children (Jiao et al., 2020), which was caused by school closures and social distancing legislation that could result in loneliness and higher levels of anxiety and depression (Loades et al., 2020). Preschool teachers in Portugal further believed that policies such as restricting children from sharing materials and enforcing health regulations upon return to school would prevent them from playing and interacting with others (Cordovil et al., 2021).

In the Greek context, preschool children generally expressed negative feelings towards distance learning, which was often attributed to missing physical contact and their friends (Nikolopoulou, 2022). In studies involving children, it was found that they were missing their teachers, peers, and school materials during ERT (Demir Öztürk et al., 2020). A different study including 41 children between

the ages of 3 and 7 explored what preschoolers missed from their schools during the lockdown through their drawings (Alabdulkarim et al., 2022). Children were found to most frequently draw people. The second most common theme in their pictures was the school setting and especially the playground. In terms of items, children often depicted large and fine motor toys with an emphasis on large items. The researchers suggest that children's frequent drawings of large play structures and toys reflected their yearning for large motor activities as a result of school closures. Similar findings were reported in Pascal & Bertram's (2021) research, which included children from England, Scotland and New Zealand. Through storytelling, children expressed that they missed their friends, the opportunities to play games and be outdoors as well as their daily routines. Yildirim (2021) further reported that children's emotional, cognitive, and social development were further hindered as children were missing their friends, and did not have the time they needed to adjust to school and form a positive perception of it. They also mentioned the technical issues including poor Internet connection and parents who were wary of this style of education.

The issue of having access to technology and an internet connection also raised concerns about ERT, equity and exclusion. There are examples of schools that set up Internet hotspots for children lacking Internet access, supported by local charities that provided devices to underprivileged children (Mourlam et al., 2020). However, this is not what happened in Greece. Only in May 2020, when the school year was about to end, did the government offer 200-euro vouchers to families that met specific economic requirements (Ministry of Finance et al., 2020). Aside from the fact that many children had been excluded from the educational system up to that point due to a lack of supplies, the government's funding barely covered the price of any accessible equipment. No measures were taken to provide access to the Internet. This means that the experiences of schooling for certain groups of children were severely affected during ERT.

Parents

The Greek and international literature have consistently reported on the difficulties of remote education during the preschool years due to the age of children and the lack of the associated skills and knowledge required to be involved in this type of learning (Nikolopoulou, 2020; Samuelsson et al., 2020; Pyun, 2021; Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023). As a result, parents were unavoidably involved in their children's learning during ERT, which had a significant impact on their daily routines (Miller et al., 2022; Garbe et al., 2020; Glauberman et al., 2022). Parental engagement was crucial for the quality of ERT as well as children's opportunities for participation (Markaki & Kostas, 2022) as they were required to organise activities for their children, provide them with technological assistance and supervise their online activities (Schmidt et al., 2020; Timmons et

al., 2021). This situation was particularly demanding for parents who worked from home or had more than one child of school age (Dong et al., 2020; Lau & Lee, 2021). Meanwhile, home-schooling children with additional needs was also a challenge, as reported by parents from Saudi Arabia (Alhuzimi, 2021), the UK (Couper-Kenney & Riddell, 2021), France (Cacioppo et al., 2021) and Greece (Vlachou et al., 2023). These conditions along with parents' low levels of self-efficacy beliefs experienced during the pandemic (Morelli et al., 2020; Xue et al., 2021; Vatou, 2023) made ERT a challenging experience for families.

Greek preschool teachers have reported some problems with parental involvement in the remote education process, like unwillingness for parent-teacher collaboration, intrusion during online learning, parental judgment, not providing the necessary assistance to children and inability to participate because of family/work obligations or lack of equipment/ technological skills (Foti, 2020; Markaki & Kostas, 2022; Chalari & Charonitis, 2022; Sidiropoulou & Sementeriadis, 2023). However, evidence indicates that overall remote teaching and learning supported the relationship and cooperation between teachers and parents and helped teachers to get to know their students' families better, while parents valued preschool and teachers' work more (Bigras et al., 2021; Chalari & Charonitis, 2022).

The issues mentioned in this section indicate that ERT was a challenging experience for children, parents and teachers alike. Children's opportunities to develop interpersonal relationships with their teachers and peers, to develop a sense of school belonging and to benefit from learning were severely affected. Furthermore, the inability to be included due to lacking the technical means, inevitably led to exclusionary practices against financially disadvantaged families. Therefore, it is important to investigate how teachers experienced preschool education under such unprecedented circumstances.

Methods

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

IPA is a qualitative research method that investigates how individuals perceive their respective realities (Smith et al., 2009). Its aim is to understand how each study participant experiences and perceives the phenomenon under investigation (Smith et al., 2009). Its roots can be located in phenomenology as well as hermeneutics, which leads to an analytic approach that is descriptive as it is concerned with examining how things appear to be, as well as interpretative as it rejects the construct of uninterpreted phenomena (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The phenomenological feature of IPA is associated with an attempt to thoroughly investigate the subjective worldviews of participants, as opposed to an emphasis on theoretical

constructs, predefined categorical systems and objective accounts (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Meanwhile, according to hermeneutics, in order to understand and interpret the ideas that the other person is trying to communicate, one must be in a position to understand their thinking as it conveys their experiences and worldviews (Freeman, 2008; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). From that perspective, IPA researchers use interpretation to comprehend the participant's meaning-making in an effort to understand what it means to be in the other person's shoes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This results in a double hermeneutic process where researchers attempt to make sense of the participant trying to understand their subjective realities (Smith & Osborn, 2015). IPA is further characterised by its commitment to idiography, which is concerned with what is distinctive in each particular case (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This leads to the examination of divergence as well as convergence in smaller samples (Brocki & Wearden, 2006) and a thorough analysis of each participant's data set to investigate their experiences and perceptions in their particular circumstances. "The basic principle of the idiographic approach is to investigate each individual case, prior to developing any general statements" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8).

Participants

Purposive and snowball sampling were employed in this study. Participants were recruited on grounds of being preschool teachers and working at preschools during the project. A small sample size of five preschool teachers (Dimitra and Nataly, who worked in public preschools and Kate, Nefeli and Demi, who worked in private preschools) was recruited, according to the requirements of idiographic studies, as large data sets may prohibit nuanced meaning inflections from coming to the surface (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, only a small sample size can deliver the thorough interpretative analysis that IPA research demands (Smith et al., 2009; Creswell, 2013).

Ethical considerations

In the present project, the researcher contacted the participants and collected data after obtaining ethical approval from the University of Aberdeen. Teachers gave their informed, voluntary consent prior to data collection. Due to health concerns related to the pandemic, consent forms were delivered through email and signed electronically by participants to avoid physical interactions. Participants were fully informed of the research methodology, context, and objectives of the project. No physical interactions between researcher and participants occurred during the course of the project as to protect the health and safety of everyone involved. In any case, participants were informed that they could get in touch with the researcher or terminate their participation at any time, without giving a reason, if they felt uncomfortable or had any reservations.

Types of data collected

Two types of data were collected: teachers' diaries and online interviews. The diary technique can, to the extent feasible, provide the researcher with insight into people's motives, feelings, opinions and behaviours through participant recordings (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005; Poppleton et al., 2008). The biggest advantage of the diary technique is that it enables the researcher to directly observe phenomena that are difficult to access (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977; Elliott, 1997; Bolger et al., 2003) and can provide a "view from within" (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977, p. 484).

Generally, diaries developed for research purposes can be structured in different ways and can have a structured, semi-structured or unstructured format. In the structured diary approach, participants are expected to complete diary forms developed by the researcher. While structured diaries can direct the participant towards the type of information the researcher is interested in and can produce quantitative data (Corti, 1993), they do not allow participants to elaborate on their thinking and experiences, which restricts unexpected findings from arising (Bolger et al., 2003; Kenten, 2010). On the other hand, unstructured and semi-structured approaches can give insight to participants' real-life experiences while giving them space to express what they consider to be important in relation to the research topic (Milligan & Bartlett, 2019). In unstructured diaries, the diary entries are decided by the participants, who are expected to document their views and experiences on the research topic without being given directions from the researcher. Regarding the semi-structured approach, participants are provided with some guidelines on the kind of information the researcher is interested in, while being encouraged to record information they consider to be relevant to the study topic (Milligan & Bartlett, 2019).

In the present study, semi-structured diaries were selected as they can provide rich qualitative data (Elliott, 1997) while maintaining the focus of the research project. As people's experiences vary, this method enables the provision of unique and complex narratives while allowing different participants to concentrate on the same themes to ensure consistency across the data set. Additionally, adopting semi-structured diaries can assist researchers in avoiding issues such as participant attrition or a lack of consistency in their responses, which can occur when employing an unstructured approach (Latham, 2003; Monrouxe, 2009). Teachers were given a degree of direction in terms of data that would be of interest to the researcher, such as the kind of difficulties they faced in implementing this type of learning, its impact on interpersonal interactions and potential differences in children's engagement. This provided participants with a framework to work with when writing their diaries (Worth, 2009) while having the freedom to record events that they considered significant, regardless of the researcher's initial assumptions (Elliott,

1997).

Diary approaches are typically used with other research methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being examined (Sheble & Wildenmuth, 2009). The diary-interview method (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977) involves recording diaries and then conducting an interview with the author based on the content of the diary. This approach is considered an approximation of participant observation (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005) and "one of the most reliable methods of obtaining information" (Corti, 1993, p.1). It also minimizes the possibility of analytical misinterpretation (Kenten, 2010) by allowing the researcher to examine what was and was not recorded in the diary (Sheble & Wildenmuth, 2009).

As in the case of diaries, the semi-structured approach was selected for interviewing, as it gives the participants space to express themselves while allowing unexpected discoveries to emerge (Alsaawi, 2014). Additionally, the researcher can ask follow-up questions depending on participants' responses in order to elicit additional information and allow participants to change the course of the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2015). All interviews were conducted according to an interview schedule based on the research objective (Table 1) in order to ensure that all questions were covered (Alsaawi, 2014) and were further individualised based on each participant's diary entries. The interview questions were open-ended, descriptive, and non-directional (Creswell, 2013) and aimed to investigate preschool teachers' experiences of formal education during the transition between ERT and face-to-face education in Greece. Probe and follow-up questions were asked throughout the interview in order to encourage the teachers to express deeper and more insightful responses (Rabionet, 2011). The interviews were conducted individually and remotely through Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 40 minutes.

Table 1. Interview Schedule

First part
Teacher's gender, age, qualification level, years of teaching experience
Second part
Teachers' experiences during the transition from ERT & ERL to traditional teaching and learning
1) Recently, schools on a global level have experienced some unprecedented circumstances. How do you think this affected children's' experiences at preschool?
2) How do you feel about the measures adopted by the Greek government to encounter the Covid-19 pandemic?
3) How would you describe your experiences of remote teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic?
4) How would you describe your experiences of teaching upon return to preschool grounds?
5) Have you observed any differences on children's behaviour upon their return to preschool?

Data analysis

As IPA is both a method and a methodology, the present study followed the steps recommended by Smith et al. (2009). The analysis was data-driven and the data were not organised according to pre-existing categories for content analysis in order to be open to the possibility of identifying unexpected findings (Kelle, 2005). Data coding was based on meaningful units of text that could independently convey meaning. In the first stage of analysis, as is customary in IPA studies, the teacher diaries, which were gradually acquired prior to the interviews, were read and re-read several times until an understanding of their main points was developed. A "free coding" method was adopted (Larkin & Thompson, 2012) and notes were also taken on any instances that could be further clarified during the interviews. The diaries were helpful at that point to tailor each participant's interview based on specific diary incidents.

The method of free coding was applied to both the diaries and the interviews after all the diaries had been collected and the interviews had been recorded and transcribed. Instead of reading all the material in parallel, the analysis of each participant was carried out before moving on to the next (Peat et al., 2019). As a result, the idiographic nature of IPA began to take shape since the distinctive features of each case could be better understood when they were examined separately from the other cases in the data set. After completing this process, the researcher returned to the beginning of the transcripts and shaped the free coding notes into shorter phrases that indicated emerging themes. Some themes were not considered at the time as they were scarcely present in the participant's narratives or did not fit well in the emerging structure (Smith et al., 2009). However, they were reviewed by the researcher following the analysis of all participants to examine potential connections between cases. In the next stage, to confirm the validity of the analysis, themes were connected with the relevant extracts from the primary source material (Smith et al., 2009). The themes were then developed into a narrative account. The same process was carried out for each participant. The analysis resulted in the themes and sub-themes depicted in Table 2 below, which are further elaborated in the findings section.

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes resulting from the analysis

Theme 1	Theme 2
Issues during ERT	The impact of Covid-19 related measures on children upon return to school
● ERT as hindering children's learning	● Short-term behavioural regression
● ERT as an exclusionary practice	● Short-term differences on children's eagerness to socialize
● ERT as hindering children's sense of school belonging	

Findings

The findings of this study are divided into two sections. The first section depicts teachers' perceptions of ERT during school closures and is comprised of three themes: "ERT as hindering children's learning", "ERT as an exclusionary practice" and "ERT as hindering children's sense of school belonging". The second section presents teachers' perceptions of the impact ERT had on children upon return to preschool. This section includes two themes: "Short-term behavioural regression" and "Short-term differences on children's eagerness to socialize".

Issues during emergency remote teaching and learning

ERT as hindering children's learning

Participants agreed that ERT as a learning approach led to a variety of problems. One negative impact of ERT that all participants reported had to do with the limitations of this approach when it comes to preschoolers. More specifically, teachers described problems with conducting the lesson in the way they thought appropriate. It was almost impossible to conduct group work and in most cases educators indicated that they followed a teacher-centred approach to explain children each day's topic and then to ask questions about it, followed by the implementation of individualistic activities. This extract from Nefeli's diary depicts a typical day during ERT and resonates with most participants' narratives:

Because of Covid, we have remote teaching 2 times a week. Usually, this lasts 45', but there have been times it has lasted an hour. At first, I ask them to share their news and what they do with their time at home. Then, every time I choose a thematic unit and explain it verbally, but also by showing them videos, pictures and reference cards. At the beginning of "lecturing time", they have their microphones turned off, so that they can hear me and for there not to be a lot of noise. In the second stage of instruction, I ask them to turn on their microphones, for the lesson to become more interactive and I ask different questions regarding what they see on their screen or regarding what they hear. Then we open our notebooks and do, each day in turns, pre-writing and pre-math exercises. Every time they finish a page, I ask them to show it to me and we continue. Then,

we may say a song or two for them to relax or read them a fairy tale of which they see scanned pictures and I read to them (again during this time with their microphones turned off). Then, I ask them to turn them on and one by one, children only turning the pages now without me reading, narrate what happened in the story we just read.

In her interview, Kate repeatedly referred to the issue of not being able to organise group activities:

.... but there was no teamwork. The whole thing was very individualistic.

Only one teacher reported trying to work around this issue. Nataly reported implementing activities where all children needed to contribute in order to achieve a common goal, or by communicating with parents to organise online meetings for their children. This type of management highlights the important role of the educator in identifying possible alternatives in order to overcome different types of obstacles to the best possible extent:

.... It is very hard for group activities to be organized.... I chose to work with the project method, where even though some activities will be individualistic, they will lead to the creation of a group result. But beyond that, I also have some ideas for group activities. For example, we synthesize songs where each child in turn says a lyric, or we make stories using the same approach. I am also lucky to have some very cooperative parents and once a week I give children a group activity which they implement beyond teaching hours. For example, this week parents communicated with one another and the children met through Skype and created a poster for the topic of our project.

Beyond the limitations that ERT had as an instruction approach, participants also questioned its abilities in terms of meaningful contribution to the learning and skills development of children. Teachers stated that it was purposeless for some subjects to be conducted online. Hence, the issue of ERT and subject compatibility was an obstacle for children's learning:

I mean it didn't offer them some kind of knowledge or anything.... Now for me to read them a fairy tale through the screen is pointless, to do pre-writing exercises and stuff like that okay. Now some other things like the fact that they had gym, that they had music and that they had English for me could be omitted, from the point that you put them in

front of a screen for no reason, now to do gym inside the house, doesn't essentially offer them something.

Kate

At the same time, issues were raised in terms of the skills that children were able to develop or not develop during ERT. Some of the problems narrated by teachers, applied to all children and others applied to specific groups of children. Three of the teachers questioned the developmental appropriateness of this type of learning for children of this age group. Nefeli stated that online learning could be more beneficial for older students:

I don't know if they were appropriate (the measures), but they were characterized as necessary in order to protect everyone's health. However, children's age, the context and its abilities, need to be taken into consideration. Online learning cannot offer the same thing to a child who is 5 and a child who is 15.

Demi also reported on the importance of context, content and teacher support, which are necessary for young children to develop their skills:

One of the school's goals is to help children socialize, feel accepted, capable, confident in themselves through the development of feelings like communication, trust, safety, collaboration. All these skills are necessary as well as the context necessary, along with the necessary support by the educators and the curriculum in order to develop.

Furthermore, Dimitra observed that the language proficiency of children with foreign backgrounds was negatively affected:

I notice that Marios and Ahmed find it more difficult to understand and to speak in Greek. I guess that all this time they spoke their native language at home and they had reduced inputs in terms of Greek.

ERT as an exclusionary practice

Another problem reported by teachers working in public preschools was that ERT is an exclusionary practice. This was largely attributed to the fact that many children did not have the technological means necessary to join online learning, while not receiving any assistance from the government. Nataly reported:

From the 10 children 4 participate, and not on a daily basis... others because they don't have access to a PC or the Internet and others because they have a sibling of a higher grade and one computer at home, so they are prioritized to attend the lesson. The Ministry's suggestion for children to participate via the phone can only be characterized as a joke, while families in need have not received the equipment promised a year now.

The same problem was evident in Dimitra's classroom:

From the 32 children I have in my classroom only nine attended online learning. The others did not have access to

a computer. You know when there are other siblings at home and parents have to work from home as well, not everyone can afford to have their own personal computer... These students were excluded from school without receiving any help from the Government. So, the system basically rejected them... They only gave vouchers of 200 euros to families in need in May. Schools closed in June. What was the point?

ERT as hindering children's sense of belonging to preschool

Several teachers believed that online learning had taken a toll on the sense of belonging of children to preschool from a variety of perspectives. Dimitra considered interruptions at preschool attendance, along with the limited time of children's physical presence at preschool having a negative impact on children's relationship building and their sense of connectedness. She further noticed differences in terms of the quality of child-teacher relationships in comparison to the school years before the pandemic:

..... the truth is connectedness to school and interpersonal relationships were hardly ever developed. Children started school in September which is an adjustment and difficult period for many of them and then schools closed. Right when children started to bond, to trust their teachers. And then they attended school for two more months. So what? This year was a year lost. .... It is not a tangible thing you know. But I do not feel as close to them as I would have been the years before. We didn't have the time to get to know them yet, they didn't have the time to get to know us, to trust us.

Moreover, Demi considered that children's sense of belonging had been indirectly affected by ERT and pandemic-related measures due to not developing social-emotional skills:

Within so few months children received so much information about the pandemic, they had to get used to connecting through a computer for them to do part of the activities from home, while when they returned to school they faced a new routine full of restrictions. In this age, the development of social-emotional learning skills is very important for children's education. Developing a sense of belonging to me is based on these skills.

Additionally, a practice adopted by Nataly during ERT led to a divide between the children who were able to participate in online learning and those who lacked the technical means to do so upon returning to school. More specifically, during ERT, Nataly encouraged children to reveal information about themselves and find commonalities with one another by showing through their cameras, their rooms and favourite belongings or by demonstrating skills like playing the piano. According to the teacher, this opportunity for connectedness which was created for children participating in ERT could lead to feelings of disconnectedness for those not involved:

Of course, upon return, children who didn't participate could have felt as outsiders, as children were very eager to talk about it or started bringing toys at home based on our meetings online.

The impact of Covid-19 related measures on children upon return to school

Short-term behavioural regression

All teachers agreed that there was a short-term behavioural regression from the children's part upon return to preschool after the lockdown. This mainly referred to children not following the school rules or routine and regressing in terms of social-emotional skills. However, in every case, children could re-adjust after a few days. Kate reported on how she had to re-establish the rules which had been adopted in her classroom:

....it took some time to work on how we participate again, like in the circle we raise our hands, we don't talk when another person is speaking, because everyone wanted to talk…. of course, there was a big effort in reminding what the boundaries are, how much it is okay to be loud, to be angry, that we don't hit, all these things wanted a lot of work again…

Similarly Nefeli narrates:

Of course, it affected them; of course, there were children who upon returning to school again we were like in an adjustment period, everything from the start…

Nataly agreed that children had behaviourally regressed upon return to preschool but they rapidly returned to their usual status:

And then they returned to school, and we had to start from point 0 again. They had forgotten most of the things we had established before closing…. Overall, during that week it seemed like many of our routines had been forgotten but that kept improving as days went by quite quickly.

In her diary Demi explains:

The conditions we have been adjusted to during the pandemic seem to have affected all children in the way they play and express themselves. I see that some steps which had been made regarding expressing their feelings, collaboration, intimacy, sharing have gone back…..

Short-term differences on children's eagerness to socialize

Children's interpersonal relationships were reported to be affected by the lockdown upon return to preschool but were restored soon. The main and evident change observed by most teachers was that children were not initially eager to socialize with their teachers and peers. Participants reported that children were socially reserved towards them during the first days of being back. Nataly reported that children were reluctant to interact with their friends although they were happy to be reunited:

On the first day, children were happy to see their friends and play but it was a bit awkward for a little while. Like they were shy with me and some of their classmates, but they got over that pretty quickly….

Nefeli also reported that children were socially reserved towards her and their classmates but that lasted only for a few days:

For most children, thankfully, it could take about two to three days to re-adjust. They came very shy both towards me but also their peers. Of course, it didn't take long for us to find our rhythms back, to reconnect with their friends.

Demi agreed:

In terms of their teachers, children came more reserved, shyer…. they didn't want to, they didn't feel comfortable again to hug one another, to play. This took a while to be restored.

Besides the initial awkwardness that teachers considered children had experienced, they reported another factor that influenced children's willingness for social interaction. Children were reported to be concerned with the possibility of being infected by Covid-19. Sometimes that led to the fear of close interpersonal exchanges, avoidance of physical contact and complaints when being touched by other children. Kate considered that the way people in children's social environments reacted to the possibility of being infected, affected children's eagerness to interact with others:

And we have freaked children out like you sneeze use your sanitizer, like the child has done something bad, but this is how they have made us. When there was suspicion that we may have a case for example at school, because a child's father was found to be positive, the child and the mother were negative and they made us all do self -tests and a child was found to be positive. Until he did the PCR test, everyone at school was like we don't touch anything, we had this kind of fear, like it was the end of the world.

Demi further considered that the focus on preventive measures around Covid-19 transmission had influenced children's behaviours:

Many of them were scared due to the information they had received about protection measures and they didn't want the other children approaching them or touching them during play.

Nefeli attributed children's reluctance for social interactions to the protection measures and parents' concern around the possibility of getting infected:

There was a numbness, a fear towards simple human contact….. I believe this happened due to the situation and due to the news that hugs are not allowed, kisses are not

allowed, contact is not allowed, and from parents for sure because they were afraid of the situation, there would have been talks about not touching other people, not touching many objects…. All this created some estrangement within them….

Nataly reported having similar experiences in her classroom:

Many of the children didn't even enjoy the activities during the first days. On the contrary, you would often hear "Miss, George touched my hand I have to use the sanitizer. We mustn't touch one another!" The same thing would happen in case some child would take off their mask. There was tension….

At the same time, Dimitra, Nataly and Kate reported that after children got over the stage of feeling socially awkward with one another, they were observed to be even more eager than before to socialize with peers and even more engaged for a while. Teachers believed this happened because the children were missing their friends and were longing to reunite with them. This temporary change in their behaviour could reflect their need to re-establish a sense of connectedness upon spending a period of time away from their peers. Nataly associated children's eagerness to interact with children outside their usual social circle to stem from children's limited socialization opportunities during the lockdown:

On the first day they were a bit awkward. Then, they were more eager than before to play with everyone, probably because they had missed communicating and playing with other children during the quarantine and then they returned back to their usual groups after they had gotten all that energy out of their system.

A similar observation was reported by Dimitra in her interview and diary. She considered the children's need to interact with their friends while schools were closed, which led to increased levels of engagement and compliance to the rules:

Students who were happy to be at school before closing were more eager to return and they were very engaged, excited, and compliant upon coming back. But this got back to more common levels as the days went by……they all said they were tired from being in that situation and that they missed being at school and meeting their friends. So, I think this eagerness to return is what affected their engagement.

In her diary she writes:

Today children came to school with joy. But I noticed that children started to focus again on the friends they had before we closed. During free play, Angel played with Jim, Mary with Angelika and generally the groups of friends which existed before closing.

Discussion

The study was conducted under the unprecedented circumstances imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to school closures all around the world and a shift towards remote education. This restricted the face-to-face interactions that children would typically experience in preschool settings along with their typical classroom routines. To investigate preschool teachers' experiences of teaching during ERT and upon return to preschool, the study employed online interviews and teacher diaries. Teachers shared similar experiences about the impact of Covid 19 on preschool education during the transition from ERT to attending the physical school setting. Findings indicated that ERT did not work well for preschool children in terms of learning, socialization, inclusion, belonging and behaviour. Specifically, all teachers reported that during ERT they faced difficulties in carrying out the lesson in the way that they deemed appropriate, as online learning did not facilitate group work, it was not suitable for all subjects and restricted children's opportunities to develop academic and social-emotional skills. This can be particularly problematic both in terms of children not being able to achieve the goals that preschool education seeks to reach for them, as well as not being able to have a smooth transition to primary school.

Aligned with previous research, children expressed that they were missing their friends and the school physical setting (e.g. Demir Öztürk et al., 2020; Alabdulkarim et al., 2022; Pascal & Bertram, 2021; Yildirim, 2021; Nikolopoulou, 2022) and in some cases, they were observed to get disconnected and disengaged over time (e.g. Jiao et al., 2020; Kruszewska et al., 2022; Alabdulkarim et al., 2022; Markaki & Kostas, 2022; Lavidas et al., 2022; Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023). Moreover, ERT as a type of learning practice promoted an individualistic and teacher-centred type of instruction (Papandreou & Vellopoulou, 2023). Of the five teachers participating in the study, one managed to adopt a different approach in order to address the teacher-led instruction fostered by ERT, which ameliorated some of the issues teachers faced to some extent by designing activities where individual action would lead to a collective result. Such practices have also been reported by some teachers in the study by Papandreou & Vellopoulou (2023). Furthermore, by having direct access to physical environments and belongings of their home, this teacher provided children with an opportunity to discover commonalities between them and express parts of themselves, such as skills that they did not have the opportunity to reveal at school. Similar findings have been reported in previous research (Johnston et al., 2021; Chalari & Charonitis, 2022). This teacher's mindset and approach is indicative of the importance of teachers' practice in influencing children's experiences of schooling, as she managed to maintain or even enhance children's sense of connectedness with one another under unfavorable circumstances. At the same time, this practice

came at a cost, as the opportunity for connectedness created for children participating in ERT could lead to feelings of disconnectedness for those lacking the means to be involved, which created a divide between "them" (children not participating in tele-education) and "us" (children participating).

While not the case with all teachers, two participants reported that many children were unable to participate in remote education due to lacking the necessary technological equipment (e.g. Yıldırım, 2021; Timmons et al., 2021; Nikolopoulou, 2022; Markaki & Kostas, 2022; Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023; Apostolou, 2023), which indicated that they were practically excluded from the education system. This practice could be detrimental to children's sense of belonging to school, as it resonates with exclusion and rejection and denies children the opportunity to participate in education and develop social-emotional and academic skills. This issue was reported by teachers working in public preschools and it may not often be the case in private schools where children come from more privileged financial backgrounds. These conditions may place an additional burden on children from low SES backgrounds, who have been found to have a lower sense of belonging to school (OECD, 2017). In Greece, while 20% of students lack computer access and around 10% do not have Internet access (OECD, 2018), low-income families received financial support from the government a month prior to school closures for the summer holidays, meaning that they had lost most of the school year. Additionally, the government only provided partial financial support for the purchase of computers, laptops and tablets, while issues of Internet access were not addressed. Other countries have reportedly taken measures to address the issue of internet accessibility for students and ensure the inclusion of all children during ERT, which took place during the Covid-19 pandemic (Mourlam et al., 2020).

Apart from these issues, it is questionable whether any kind of teaching method can adequately replace in-person education when it comes to this age group. This view has been consistently expressed by preschool teachers in a number of studies both in the Greek context (Foti, 2020; Nikolopoulou, 2020; Chalari & Charonitis, 2022; Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023) as well as in the international literature (Duran, 2021; Atiles et al., 2021; Negrette et al., 2022). Even if the issues of accessibility and teacher training (e.g. Timmons et al., 2021; Gomes et al., 2021; Abdul-Majied et al., 2023; Apostolou & Lavidas, 2021; Lavidas et al., 2022; Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023) are addressed in the future, no solutions have been proposed to overcome the limitations of remote teaching and meet the needs of this age group. Issues such as the lack of autonomy of young children, (Samuelsson et al., 2020; Pyun, 2021; Chalari & Charonitis, 2022; Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023), the difficulties of replicating the preschool classroom environment in an online context and providing the same quality of educational experiences (Chalari & Charonitis, 2022; Apostolou, 2023) are challenging to reconcile.

Furthermore, unlike older children, for some preschoolers, the classrooms may be the first context in which they regularly interact with people outside their family circle and start to develop relationships with other adults and peers. These relationships cannot be sufficiently nurtured and supported online (Dadatsi & Koukouriki, 2022; Rodriquez et al., 2022; Chalari & Charonitis, 2022). Even when preschools reopened and children met their teachers and peers again, teachers and children expressed dissatisfaction that they could not hug, kiss and get close to one another due to social distancing measures (Foti, 2021). Even if teachers manage to help children develop academic skills under these circumstances, children's crucial interpersonal skills would not have the environment necessary to flourish (Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023). Participants further perceived that online learning contributed to a hindered sense of connectedness in different ways, such as the negative impact on children's relationship building due to attendance interruptions and the limited time children spent in school during the academic year (Chalari & Charonitis, 2022), limited opportunities to develop social-emotional skills (Atiles et al., 2021; Negrette et al., 2022; Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023; Gelir, 2023), limited time for engaging in interpersonal interactions with children (Atabey, 2021; Bonal & González, 2020; Erdamar & Akpinar, 2022; Wijaya et al., 2022; Gelir, 2023) and lack of opportunities to engage in group activities as ERT only allowed for teacher-led instruction (Papandreou & Vellopoulou, 2023).

Upon return to preschool, participants observed a short-term behavioural regression in terms of children's adherence to school rules and routines. Similarly, teachers reported a short-term disruption in children's socialization experiences due to a sense of awkwardness and reticence that children were reported to manifest regarding their social interactions with their teachers and peers. This was also reported by the participating teachers in Foti's (2021) study. However, both children's behaviour and interpersonal relationships were quickly restored to their pre-Covid status in a short period of time. Soon after children's re-adjustment, in some cases they were also observed to be even more eager to socialize with peers and engage in school activities for some days, which the teachers attributed to the fact that children missed their friends and longed to reunite with them. For some children, socialization was further affected due to fear of being infected (Vasileva et al., 2021). This often led to them avoiding close interpersonal exchanges, physical contact and complaining when they were touched by other children, which could indirectly influence children's experiences of connectedness due to diminished interpersonal relationships. Cantiani et al. (2021) supported that although it is significant that children are informed about the pandemic, the type and amount of information children receive are of equal importance. Hence, a variety of factors including prolonged physical distance and health concerns could influence children's interpersonal relationships during outbreaks.

Conclusion

The impact of this type of learning on children's experiences of education adopted for the first time in early years' classrooms worldwide as a response to Covid-19, is a territory that needs to be explored further. While online learning has been carried out with older students for many years, it does not seem to be a viable option for preschool children in its current form (e.g. Foti, 2020; Chalari & Charonitis, 2022; Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023; Atiles et al., 2021; Negrette et al., 2022). Apart from its negative impact on learning, behaviour, belonging and socialization of participating children, it is not even an option for many financially disadvantaged children (e.g. Yıldırım, 2021; Timmons et al., 2021; Nikolopoulou, 2022; Markaki & Kostas, 2022; Gkoros & Papageorgiou, 2023; Apostolou, 2023). This means that remote teaching is not sufficient to help children reach their potential. While this is problematic in itself, it can also make the transition to primary school more difficult (e.g. Papandreou & Vellopoulou, 2023; Apostolou, 2022, 2023).

The study further highlights the need for governments to take measures to provide equal education opportunities for all. As the study showed, taking insufficient action to allow underprivileged children to participate in ERT resulted in marginalizing them further and excluding them from the education system. Considering how access to education is not only the right of all children (UNICEF, 1989) but is also obligatory by law for children over the age of four in Greek schools, ensuring school attendance for all children should be a top priority for governments.

Limitations and implications

This study adds to the limited amount of research that has investigated preschool education during the transition from ERT to face-to-face education as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it is the only study that has employed the diary-interview approach to investigate the issue, which accounts for a more robust methodology in comparison to questionnaires or interviews that have been typically employed by the majority of studies investigating the topic (Corti, 1993). It should be noted that the small sample size included in the research does not allow for generalisation of the findings. However, the coherency of the research findings is supported by other studies from the Greek and international context which have reached similar results and conclusions. Further research should be conducted in order to investigate and develop guidelines regarding how preschools should optimally operate in crisis situations while taking into consideration the particular needs of children in this age group. Future research should include larger sample sizes and investigate the variety of factors that could have an impact on preschool education during remote teaching

like the school's philosophy, the impact of governmental decisions and the lack of government assistance as well as parents' needs in assisting children with this type of learning. Most importantly, children should be involved in the research process in order to allow their voices to be heard and communicate their needs. This study, which is the only one to date that has investigated the topic through the diary-interview approach, should be considered because of the insight it provides regarding the issues experienced in preschool education during the transition from ERT to face-to-face learning. The study findings add to the body of literature that demonstrates the problems experienced with distance education during the preschool years and can be utilised in order to identify solutions that would make distance education a viable option in early year's education.

Conflict of interest

The author does not have any potential conflict of interests that may influence the decision to publish this article.

Consent for publication

The author approves of the submission of this research which is conditional upon the decision made by the editorial board from the peer review process and consents to the publication of the current work. The work has not been, nor has it been submitted to other journals in consideration for publication.

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