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# The experiences and professional challenges of preschool educators during and after the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown: Reflections from Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Abstract:** Like many countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has faced the challenge of ensuring continuity in education in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic; therefore, different methods of dealing with the crisis have been devised accordingly by the Ministry of education and the kindergarten management. This paper analyses the experiences and challenges of preschool educators during and after the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in BiH. Qualitative research was conducted with 19 preschool educators, selected using »snowball sampling.« The data were collected through a semi-structured interview and processed using qualitative content analysis. The results of the research indicate a number of challenges encountered by preschool educators. During the lockdown, the biggest challenge was the use of technology and ensuring continuity in education, while in the period after the lockdown, the shortage of educators and the organization of work with respect to epidemiological measures came to the fore. Analysing the experiences of educators during and after the lockdown, it can be concluded that the quality of preschool education during the Covid-19 pandemic can be improved if educators are provided with adequate support in dealing with the challenges posed by the crisis situation.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, pandemic, preschool educator, professional challenges

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## Introduction

Covid-19 has spread around the world at an unexpected rate. In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO 2020a) announced that there was a public health crisis for the first time, and shortly thereafter, on 11 March, it declared a pandemic (WHO 2020b). There was a crisis in all sectors, especially in education. It was a big blow to all education systems, or, as Thomas and Rogers (2020) state, »many countries in the world are now participants in the biggest unplanned experiment that education has ever seen« (Ibid, p. 89).

A crisis is defined as a process of transformation in which the old system is no longer sustainable (Mikušová and Horváthová 2019, p. 1847). In such situations, change is needed and results in a new system that responds to current challenges. In the crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, social contact was no longer sustainable, and physical distance was sought. This led to the closure of educational institutions worldwide at all levels and the search for new sustainable patterns of action. It also meant that there was a need to transform the teaching process and an abrupt transition from traditional teaching to distance learning.

According to UNICEF (2020, p. 4), the Covid-19 pandemic led to the closure of schools in 20 countries and preschools in 19 countries in Europe and Central Asia, and the effects of the pandemic were felt by about 49.8 million children. Almost 90% of the world's population of students in educational institutions had impaired learning experiences caused by various precautionary measures (UNESCO 2020, p. 1). Children of all ages have remained behind the closed doors of educational institutions around the world. Many missed a year or more of high-quality learning, meaning that fewer children were enrolled, and they attended lower-quality programmes than before the pandemic hit (The Covid-19 Pandemic's Impact b. i., p. 38). The pandemic has especially aggravated social inequalities and deepened the pre-existing gap between children from different families and developmental backgrounds. Children who lived in difficult circumstances before the crisis, such as children from lower-income families, children from rural areas, children with disabilities, faced significant obstacles to educational access before and especially during the pandemic (UNICEF 2020, p. 4).

Since mid-March 2020, about 500,000 children and youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have been affected by the suspension of preschools, schools, and universities across the country (UNICEF and UNESCO 2020, p. 8). In BiH, the preschool education level was most affected by the pandemic. According to UNICEF and UNESCO (2020), preschoolers were the largest group that did not have access to online learning during the suspension of education. It is estimated that between mid-March and mid-May 2020, the preschool education of as many as 82%<sup>1</sup> of children was interrupted during the suspension of preschool institutions (UNICEF and UNESCO 2020, p. 4). Only 1% of children attended preschool institutions that remained open, 13% of children aged three to six attended preschool education online, and 5% of children aged five to six attended compulsory/preparatory preschool programmes online (UNICEF and UNESCO 2020, p. 10).

The preschool education sector is particularly vulnerable given the fact that before the pandemic, only 25% of BiH children attended preschool. The inclusion of disadvantaged children is particularly low. There is a gap between urban and rural areas and between employed and unemployed parents. Of the total number of children with preschool education, only 0.5% are children from rural regions, 2% are children of unemployed parents, and 2% are Roma children (UNICEF 2016).

### *The Covid-19 pandemic: Implications for preschool education*

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the lives of children around the world, and they are considered to be among its biggest victims, as children's lives are nonetheless being changed in profound ways (UNICEF 2020a). However, the pandemic does not affect all age groups equally. The most vulnerable are preschool children, whose development depends on close interaction with adults and peers. With significant restrictions on play, movement, peer relationships, and social contact outside the family, the pandemic changed the context of preschool children's daily lives and routines (OMEP 2020, p. 120). In addition, they are growing up in a stressful context of crises, illness, and death as a result of Covid-19 and face social exclusion due to physical distance and exposure to television screens. In such conditions, the cooperation between parents and educators as key persons responsible for creating a stimulating context for children's development comes into focus. During the crisis, all children's microsystems became remote islands, and cooperation between parents and educators was needed to bridge the existing gap to adequately support children's development. However, the pandemic has pushed preschool education into collapse and parents into a daily struggle between childcare and business commitments.

In the first wave of the pandemic, kindergartens closed around the world. This was the most challenging period, as it was necessary to enable the continuation

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<sup>1</sup> It refers to children who attended and then stopped attending preschool during the pandemic, especially during first lockdown (mid-Marc – mid-May). It should be noted that there are also units that have cancelled compulsory/preparatory preschool programs, which are slated to start in April or March (UNICEF and UNESCO 2020).

of educational activities in a very short period. To this end, online platforms have been created and used at all levels of education to establish contact with students and ensure the continuity of education (UNESCO 2020a, p. 1). Teachers around the world were generally not ready to support the continuity of learning and adapt to the new teaching methodologies (United Nations [UN] 2020, p. 15). However, the greatest challenges were faced by educators working in preschool institutions, because the learning specifics of preschool children are a major obstacle to the use of technology for educational purposes.

Preschool children learn through their own experiences interacting with others; therefore, converting this model of learning into distance learning is a special challenge. In line with the above, Spiteri (2021, p. 3) points out that preschool education is difficult to achieve virtually, because learning in the early years is based on providing sensory experiences, hands-on activities and face-to-face interaction. According to that, World organization for early childhood education (OMEP 2020, p. 120) emphasizes that educational policies must take into account the importance of continuity of preschool education through the use of creative proposals, strategies, and materials. This means that learning activities should be based as much as possible on play, exploring the environment, and the creative casual play. In this regard, it is stated that »it is necessary to develop methodologies focused on play, the involvement of the body as a way of experiencing, discovering, and investigating the environment, the manipulation of natural and cultural objects, and close human contact« (ibid., p. 120).

In addition, preschool children do not use technology on their own; therefore, if an adult does not support them, they remain unreachable for distance learning. »Even elementary-aged children may struggle with distance learning, especially if an adult is not available to support them, unlike older children and adolescents who become better able to regulate their own emotions and behavior« (Bond 2020, p. 30). Therefore, the challenge was not only how to create educational content but also how to motivate and empower parents vis-à-vis cooperation and joint activities with children. It is this connection between educators and parents that points to the importance of shared responsibility and parental involvement in children's development and learning.

Covid-19 was also a great challenge for parents, especially mothers who tried to balance child care and business responsibilities in this crisis situation (Gromada et al. 2020, p. 1). In fact, the pandemic has managed to make creating a family learning environment much more challenging (Barnett and Jung 2021, p. 3). While under normal circumstances, children had the opportunity to participate in a variety of developmentally stimulating contexts, during the lockdown, the only developmental context was the family environment. However, economic instability, social isolation, illness, and the uncertainty of the crisis are external environmental factors that have interfered with and further undermined the developmental context that parents create in crisis situations. It follows that the concept of crisis management may be relevant in the study of developmental and educational contexts under Covid-19 pandemic conditions.

Coombs and Hollady (2012, p. 8) present an approach that describe crisis management as three processes: pre-crisis (prevention and preparation), crisis (response), and post-crisis (learning and revision). These three phases have become prominent aspects of crisis analysis, and their understanding can improve both theory and action in practice. Accordingly, we are in the third post-crisis phase, which should open communication between different experts to enable them to share experiences and respond to challenges during a crisis situation. Lessons learned from crisis situations can mitigate negative effects or prepare participants for similar crisis situations that may follow (Coombs and Hollady 2012, p. 8). Although the two-year crisis period caused by the Covid-19 pandemic is behind us, a great deal of research on its effects in the field of preschool education already exists (Alan 2021; Kim et al. 2021; Yıldırım 2021); it would be worth comparing this with reflections from BiH. Given that the response to the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in the field of education was decentralized in BiH (UNICEF and UNESCO 2020) in accordance with the country's administrative system (in BiH, 15 authorities are responsible for education), there were various strategic modalities of response to the new situation.<sup>2</sup> To present the experiences and challenges of preschool educators in more detail, we chose the Sarajevo Canton, as it is one of the most developed in BiH, and its online learning for preschool children was organized.

The focus of this paper is on learning and revision in the post-crisis phase, which should result in recommendations for improving strategies for dealing with crisis situations in preschool education in BiH. In this regard, several research questions are asked: (1) What professional challenges did preschool educators face during and after the lockdown? (2) How was the continuity of educational work in preschool institutions ensured? (3) How do educators describe the behaviour of children in kindergarten after a lockdown? (4) What are the effects of the pandemic on the functioning of preschool education, and how can the obtained information be used to improve the preschool practice?

## Methodology

### *The research approach*

The research uses a phenomenological approach that relies on describing and interpreting the studied phenomenon. Phenomenologists study social and psychological phenomena from the perspective of the people involved (Groenewald 2004, p. 44) and help us learn from these experiences (Neubauer et al. 2019, p. 1).

<sup>2</sup> While most education authorities did not organize preschool online learning during the lockdown, in some administrative units (Republika Srpska, Sarajevo Canton, Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, and Central Bosnia Canton), children aged three to six were able to attend online activities. Although the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports did not organize preschool online learning in the Una-Sana Canton, there were examples of preschool institutions whose management started it on their own initiative. Compulsory/preparatory preschool education on the internet for children aged five to six has been organized in Sarajevo Canton and Posavina Canton. The Department of Education of the Brčko District organized preschool education for five-year-olds through the television series *Mini School*.

The aim of the research is to collect data from the perspective of preschool educators who participated in online kindergarten activities with children during the pandemic. Given the fact that the pandemic created a new and unusual context for which no one was ready and in which the continuity of educational activities was to be maintained, the value of revising and learning from such experiences is immeasurable. Because the lived experience of preschool educators is subject to an interpretive process, the research is based on a hermeneutical approach that is rooted in the interpretation of life experiences. By studying the given statements and understanding different experiences, an attempt was made to conceptualize how preschool educators experienced professional challenges during the pandemic and how they anticipated the possibility of improving their work in the subsequent period.

### *Sample*

The participants were selected using purposeful sampling. The snowball sampling approach was applied; this is considered ideal when looking for interlocutors with specific characteristics that are recognized by individuals in the population (Cohen and Arieli 2011, p. 427). Initially, the researcher identified four educators with characteristics that were appropriate for the purpose of the research. These educators then helped further by nominating others who were potentially interested in being interviewed. Each subsequent participant recommended the next, and as the research progressed, the sample became larger.

The sample consisted of 19 educators from 10 public kindergartens. The educators were selected according to two criteria: They had to a) have experience with the phenomenon to be investigated (participation in online kindergarten activities during the pandemic) and b) be willing to participate in the research voluntarily. The educators were aged 26 to 51 and had 5 to 27 years of work experience. All the educators were female, had completed four years of undergraduate studies<sup>3</sup> as a preschool educator, and worked in public kindergartens. All participants were informed in advance about the research purpose and procedure, and the researcher pointed out that anonymity was guaranteed. To ensure the confidentiality of the data in the presentation of the research results, the participants were assigned codes (educator 1, educator 2, etc.).

### *Data collection*

The data were collected through a semi-structured interviews with preschool educators. A semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researchers was used based on an analysis of recent literature and informal interviews with experts

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<sup>3</sup> The initial education of preschool educators is organized according to model 4 (240 ECTS) + 1 (60 ECTS) at the Department of Preschool Education in the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Sarajevo.

in the field of preschool education. It consisted of six main topics for discussion in the form of questions, which are presented in the research results below. The interview protocol was presented to an educator who worked during the pandemic in a public preschool with children aged three to six and a university professor who conducts research in the field of preschool education, and it was modified based on their feedback. The pilot study was conducted with two educators, and the instrument was thus finalized.

### *Procedure*

The study participants were included anonymously and voluntarily. The interviews were conducted individually with each educator live or via Zoom video call. The each interview lasted an average of 45 to 70 minutes.

### *Data analysis*

First, the data for the analysis were prepared by transcribing audio recordings of interviews conducted with preschool educators. A qualitative analysis of the content was performed using an inductive approach that involved the creation of codes and categories. Because qualitative content analysis retains the mixed method in text analysis (Mayring 2015, p. 366), two basic steps of analysis were combined as basis of this research: a qualitative-interpretive step that follows hermeneutical logic in assigning categories to specific parts of the text and a quantitative step involving a frequency analysis of these categories. Reliability was sought through the process of multiple data checks by reading each interview several times, developing categories and codes in the process, and taking into account the clear line between participants' statements and researchers' interpretations. The results of the analysis are presented in tabular form.

### **Research results**

The results presented below are organized into six thematic units in accordance with the basic questions asked by the research participants: ensuring the continuity of educational work, professional challenges for educators during the first lockdown, professional challenges of educators after the lockdown, behaviour of children in kindergarten after the lockdown, opportunities to improve further work in a pandemic, and summaries of the effects of the pandemic on the functioning of preschool education. The data are presented in tabular form through key topics, categories, and codes, for which the frequency has been quantified, and examples are given in the form of authentic quotations from interviews conducted with preschool educators.

*Ensuring the continuity of educational work*

The first lockdown in BiH took place from mid-March to the second half of May 2020. At that time, all educational institutions were closed, and educators and teachers faced the challenge of ensuring continuity in education through various forms of communication (Table 1). After a period of shock that is characteristic of all crises, a period of self-organization followed. As the Microsoft Teams platform had already been used in primary schools, its application method had also been devised within preschool institutions. However, due to the specifics of preschool age, the platform was used only for educational work with children in the year before they started school (older educational group: children in the sixth year of life), while children in the fifth year of life (middle educational group) were approached through informal forms of communication, and the younger and nursery groups maintained communication solely with parents. In addition to the platform, the educators used the Zoom application for video meetings and sometimes had phone calls with the children, or the children did the same with each other. Until the platform was created, Viber groups were most often used in the initial period or were mostly used for current information later. In addition, some kindergarten teachers created Facebook pages for kindergartens; therefore, they also used them to inform parents or share interesting ideas for stimulating activities in the family environment.

Category	Codes	Examples
<b>Forms of communication</b>	Microsoft Teams (n = 15)	»Only parents of children who were in the year before starting school that particular year could access the platform. The focus was on preparing children for school.« (Educator 1)
	Kindergarten Facebook pages (n = 5)	»We used Facebook pages most often to notify and inform parents, while we used the platform for educational work.« (Educator 7)
	Zoom (n = 10)	»We used Zoom for video calls, and we did it occasionally to let children see each other. We preferred spontaneous conversations.« (Educator 2)
	Viber messages (n = 11)	»For the first few days or weeks, I worked through the Viber group until the platform was created.« (Educator 8)
	Phone calls (n = 4)	»We reactivated Viber groups, but reluctantly, as we 'got burned' a few times because of parents who did not understand the purpose of the group.« (Educator 5)
	Email (n = 6)	»Parents take photos of what children have done and send them to us on Viber. They even filmed how, for example, they made footsteps in the hallway to exercise or how they turned the wall into a canvas.« (Educator 1)  »The children used to call me because they missed the kindergarten and their educator. They also called each other.« (Educator 18) »Before we got the platform, we sent the activities to parents via email. Afterwards, the email was used more by the colleagues working with the younger groups.« (Educator 2)

Table 1: Forms of communication used by educators with parents and children during the lockdown

According to the educators' statements presented in *Table 2*, the continuity of educational work was ensured most often through *video calls* (n = 12) and *video shows* (n = 11), but the educators also created special *video content* (n = 11), *PowerPoint presentations* (n = 7), *written instructions with useful work materials and web links* (n = 6), or instructions through *a series of photographs* (n = 4). In the year before the preschool children started school, video shows created especially for this age group in preparation for school, as well as video calls, were used most often, and for younger children, non-contact activities, such as sending assignments in various digital formats (written instructions, recorded content, or photographs), were used. The educators noted a large number of views of these videos that parents and children were able to watch officially through the platform. The parents also sent feedback by filming or photographing the children during their activities or work. This ensured at least a minimum of interaction in the relationship between educators on the one hand and parents and children on the other.

Category	Code	Example
Forms of activity	Video calls (n = 12)	<p>»The older group had an online activity once a week. We adapted the content that we normally use in kindergarten to the video call.« (Educator 17)</p> <p>»We worked every week through video calls so that the children would have personal contact, which is much more important than the activity that is being done.« (Educator 18)</p> <p>»We occasionally joined in the call so that the children could see each other.« (Educator 19)</p>
	Video shows (n = 11)	<p>»While the slightly older educators did not get along with the online environment, about 30 of us younger educators in a public institution recorded content from various fields—physical education, music, speech development, mathematics, and the world around us—which were placed on a platform that could be used by the educators and parents of children in the older kindergarten group.« (Educator 1)</p>
	Creation of video content (n = 11)	<p>»I did everything that the children needed to do at home, and someone always had to film me. I set up a polygon and crossed it, hit cones, drew fruit, modelled dough, and sent all these tasks for the children, thus encouraging them to work.« (Educator 9)</p> <p>»A colleague recorded me playing songs on the guitar, and we sent them to the children for them to learn them at home with their parents.« (Educator 18)</p>
	Creation of instructions through a series of photos (n = 4)	<p>»I took a picture at home of how to make a butterfly out of toilet paper. I sent it to them and told them to try it too.« (Educator 8)</p> <p>»My son took a picture of me explaining the procedure of an activity, and I sent it as an instruction.« (Educator 2)</p>
	Creation of Power Point presentations (n = 7)	<p>»I used to make PowerPoint presentations suitable for children, with many illustrations, stories, links to songs, and suggestions for playing and working at home; I interpreted the content by recording my own voice.« (Educator 9)</p>
	Written instructions with useful work materials or web links (n = 6)	<p>»I mostly did the written forms of assignments. I sent two assignments a week covering one weekly topic. I would always write instructions to the parents first to explain why we are doing a certain topic and then write instructions for the activity itself.« (Educator 8)</p> <p>»What they would do orally in kindergarten as a directed activity, I turned it into a written form. I always wrote instructions for parents and a description of activities. Along with that, I would send a link for a song or a story to listen to.« (Educator 2)</p>
	Little bags with materials (n = 1)	<p>»We made little bags with materials for the middle group because we weren't sure if everyone had materials at home. We put blocks, crayons, plasticine, collages, scraper papers, a collection of worksheets, etc. We put in each bag a toy from the kindergarten that they loved very much. Parents picked up the bags at the scheduled time. The bag was a link to all the activities we did during the week.« (Educator 1)</p>

Table 2: The way educators designed educational content during the lockdown

### *Professional challenges for educators during the first lockdown*

Following to the lockdown, educators found themselves in a whole new situation, causing them to have to act in a way they had never experienced before. On the one hand, it was necessary to maintain the continuity of educational activities through distance learning, and on the other hand, no one was ready for this way of working with preschool children. The transition to distance learning in preschool education was an experiment whose effects have yet to be explored. The challenges faced by educators in their professional activities can be divided into four categories (educator, educator–parent, educator–child, and context) and 15 codes, as presented in *Table 3*. The biggest challenge was the lack of computer literacy ( $n = 19$ ) because all educators stated that they did not have enough knowledge and skills to coordinate distance learning. In addition, *the design of educational content* ( $n = 18$ ) in a way that corresponds to the distance-learning format and *indirect communication through parents* ( $n = 15$ ) also posed a challenge for educators. *The inability to establish contact with a certain number of parents in the group is also often a challenge* ( $n = 9$ ), and the main reason is the preference given by parents to school children or the lack of technological devices or someone to support children's use of them while parents are at work.

Category	Code	Example
Educator	Lack of computer literacy ( $n = 19$ )	<p>»The biggest challenge was using the platform ... definitely. I was inexperienced and insufficiently educated to use the tools of the platform and a little worried about how I would cope with all this.« (Educator 11)</p> <p>»I was scared .... The word platform itself, alas, what is it? Will I know how to use it or involve the kids? I also had to educate the parents on how to use it, and I wasn't even used to it myself.« (Educator 8)</p> <p>»We didn't know what a platform was and how to hold educators' meetings through Zoom. I remember when the platform was just launched, I was a responsible educator, and my colleagues expected me to know all this and to instruct them. But, of course, I didn't know, as it had all just begun.« (Educator 13)</p>
	Design of educational content ( $n = 18$ )	<p>»My greatest challenge was how to envisage and transfer the planned activity to the children.« (Educator 12)</p> <p>»It was challenging to design the content in such a way that we first had to instruct the parents how to do with the children those activities that we would otherwise do with them in the kindergarten. It is completely different when you work directly with children and when you work with them with the help of parents.« (Educator 2)</p> <p>»When preparing the video to be sent to the children, one of the housemates always had to film us. I watched a colleague's activity explaining to the children how to use the furniture as a training ground. For example, crawl under the table, make eights around the legs of the table, crawl under the chair on your back, etc. A colleague did all this, and her daughter filmed it, so she couldn't do it alone.« (Educator 1)</p> <p>»It was challenging to switch from that close contact with the children to a different way of working.« (Educator 3)</p>

	Challenges related to the new roles (n = 5)	<p>»I was chosen to record video shows with the team from my kindergarten, which would be posted on the platform. We did a play with flat puppets. The big challenge for me was to stand in front of the camera and address the children, but there were no children there, actually. I imagined they were here, but they were not. Then I said that if I had wanted to be a leader, I would not have chosen to study preschool education.« (Educator 8)</p> <p>»I was nervous when I had to stand in front of the camera. I am much more relaxed when I'm with children.« (Educator 5)</p> <p>»We were supposed to record instructions for parents and children. I was embarrassed in front of the camera. I'm not the type who likes to be filmed.« (Educator 3)</p>
<b>Educator-parents</b>	<p>Impossibility of establishing contact (n = 9)</p> <p>Maintenance of contact (n = 9)</p> <p>Sending of feedback (n = 3)</p> <p>Completion of children's activities by parents (n = 2)</p> <p>Parent empowerment (n = 5)</p>	<p>»There were parents who never signed up for the platform even though they got the access code properly. There were those who applied sometimes before the end, and they didn't even send a single assignment.« (Educator 19)</p> <p>»There was a mother with four children, three of them school-aged. They did not have enough laptops or mobile phones, but schoolchildren had the advantage, whereas the preschool child was left aside.« (Educator 8)</p> <p>»There were parents who did not respond at all; for example, one boy was in the village with his grandmother and grandfather, and they did not have a network. He did not attend any activities.« (Educator 1)</p> <p>»There were parents who had children who went to school, so they said I couldn't cope with the kindergarten as well. Their priority was to finish the activities with the schoolchildren first and only then with the younger ones.« (Educator 10)</p> <p>»Approximately one-third of parents did not get involved, explaining that they did not have time and that their schoolchildren were a priority.« (Educator 11)</p> <p>»In my group, the parents were lazy. They were active at first, but as time went on, the curve began to decline. So I couldn't reach the kids.« (Educator 8)</p> <p>»There were periods when the parents were infected, they could not stand it, they could not get involved.« (Educator 18)</p> <p>»Those children and parents who were otherwise active before the pandemic remained the same in online activities.« (Educator 7)</p> <p>»Not all parents always managed to send feedback.« (Educator 15)</p> <p>»Parents made extra effort to improve on the work that their children had done. These were parental interferences in the aesthetic expression of the child, which is not very good.« (Educator 7)</p> <p>»Also, the challenge was to listen to the parents themselves, listen to them talk about their problems with their children, and properly advise them on how to spend quality time with their children in isolation. We were available for 24 hours for a while to reduce the time for the deadlines we set at the beginning.« (Educator 13).</p>

<b>Educator – child</b>	Indirect communication through parents (n = 15)	<p>»I had no access to the children. I tried to reach the children via their parents. I was trying to get them to cooperate.« (Educator 14)</p> <p>»For the children to get involved, it was necessary to animate the parents. It was not easy at all times because the parents were also in shock.« (Educator 4)</p> <p>»Children do not know how to use technology on their own. We established communication after the parents' working hours.« (Educator 17)</p>
	Communication interference (n = 3) Irregular involvement (n = 7)	<p>»We had some background noise in the video call; it was terrible for me. They started calling out to each other and speaking out loud at the same time.« (Educator 8)</p> <p>»The internet connection was not stable.« (Educator 5)</p> <p>»The children who stayed with their grandparents could not always get involved in the activities.« (Educator 14)</p>
<b>Context</b>	Stress (n = 3)	»It was not easy to function under stress and to redirect your thoughts.« (Educator 13)
	Lack of educators (n = 10)	<p>»A colleague retired, and no one came to replace her. While some worked in pairs, I had to be alone. I missed someone to consult with in order to organize activities.« (Educator 8)</p> <p>»My biggest challenge was being alone. A colleague had her contract terminated, and I had to carry all the burden myself.« (Educator 2)</p>
	Environment (n = 5)	»The home environment was not the most convenient one for work; everything we needed was in the kindergarten. But if I was in the kindergarten on a particular day, no more colleagues could come because we were not allowed to meet. We had to finish a lot of things in a limited period of time or take them home.« (Educator 17)
	Lack of materials (n = 5)	<p>»There were no bookstores or photocopiers, and we needed materials to prepare the activities.« (Educator 7)</p> <p>»I told the parents that if someone did not have the material to work at home, as the bookstores did not work, that they were free to come to the kindergarten, and I would give them the material from the kindergarten that the children would use in the kindergarten anyway. I told them the days I was in the kindergarten.« (Educator 8)</p>
	Expectations (n = 2)	»Keeping records of activities was too time-consuming. For example, the written form of preparation was required, and it was very difficult for spontaneous encounters with children such as we used to have during the lockdown.« (Educator 1)

Table 3: Professional challenges of educators during the lockdown (mid-March to the second half of May 2020)

*Professional challenges of educators after the lockdown*

The opening of kindergartens after the lockdown was lifted meant a return to the »new reality« caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and many new challenges. Kindergartens in the Federation of BiH organized their work, respecting the recommendations for the work of preschool institutions of the Public Health Institute of the Federation of BiH after the Federal Civil Protection Headquarters issued a recommendation to the cantonal headquarters to reopen kindergartens. In addition to the general measures aimed at preventing the spread of Covid-19 disease (e.g. practising hand and respiratory hygiene and avoiding touching the face), kindergartens insisted that all employees wear masks and organize work in small groups and in two shifts so that between them, thorough cleaning and disinfection of the premises could be performed (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2020, p. 3).

In the subsequent period, kindergartens were no longer closed, but there were occasional interruptions in the work of certain educational groups when new cases of infection appeared. From the end of the lockdown to the time of the research, the most difficult period for educators was the third wave, which occurred in March 2021. They remember this period as the most difficult because many educators were ill; thus, despite the existing shortage, they had to deal with an additional lack of staff. Challenges faced by educators after the lockdown can be divided into two categories (in compliance with the epidemiological measures and the context of educational activities) and eight codes, as presented in *Table 4*. According to the educators, in addition to the shortage of educators, the biggest challenges after the lockdown related to the organization of work in compliance with the epidemiological measures: *the »red line« for parents* (n = 19), *picking up and seeing off children* (n = 19), and *the balance of proximity–distance* (n = 18).

Category	Code	Example
<b>Compliance with the epidemiological measures</b>	Balance of proximity–distance (n = 18)	»How to maintain distance and satisfy children’s need for contacts. During games and other activities this was impossible.« (Educator 2) »How to respect children’s needs for interaction and, at the same time, all the orders of the crisis headquarters, especially the physical distance.« (Educator 4)
	The »red line« for parents (n = 19)	»The challenge for us was imposed by new parents who came to enrol their child in kindergarten and did not know what kindergarten looked like. Some parents protested, saying that they could not enrol their child in kindergarten if they did not know what it looked like or where they were supposed to leave their child.« (Educator 13) »It was okay with the children who went to the kindergarten before; they knew the space and the teachers. What about children who came to the kindergarten for the first time, and what about the parents who left their children to the unknown educators in an unknown space for the first time? We did not have the opportunity to show them space and thus facilitate the transition.« (Educator 5)
	Picking up and seeing off of children (n = 19)	»Since the parents could not enter, we had to leave the whole group to pick up the child or help him pack up and see him off. It could happen that the parent kept you at the door to ask you something.« (Educator 6)
<b>The context of educational activities</b>	Reduced learning environment (n = 5)	»The children could not use any of the materials that could not be washed or wiped daily. Plush toys were not allowed, nor sand, clay, plasticine, and the like. This greatly affected the usual availability of play materials and the activities that took place in the kindergarten.« (Educator 4)
	Work with masks on (n = 5)	»Children very often do not hear us under these masks, and we have a problem regarding communication.« (Educator 15) »It is difficult to work under masks because our work with children is based exclusively on conversation, touch, care, etc.« (Educator 13)
	Discontinuity of meetings (n = 10)	»The problem was with the sick parents and the isolation of the whole group. It happened to us once that the whole group was in isolation for two weeks. During this period, there was a lack of communication with the whole group. There were kindergartens where this happened many times.« (Educator 1)
	Lack of educators (n = 16)	»The reduced capacity of professional staff and other employees due to them falling ill with Covid-19 was the biggest problem for us in the functioning of the kindergarten.« (Educator 9) »I no longer knew how many facilities I went to for replacements. They just called and said they needed an educator here, they needed an educator there ... this educator got sick, and that one as well.« (Educator 15) »Educators often replaced each other in other groups.« (Educator 14) »We joined the groups because there was a lack of educators; a lot of them got sick or went on a break. I went on a replacement to another kindergarten, and my children joined that older group with another teacher. Children were lost: Who was going to be their teacher and which group would they belong to?« (Educator 13) »My colleague went on a break, so I was left alone. It was my biggest challenge—how to cope with that in these circumstances.« (Educator 16)
	Stress (n = 3)	»In the period when the corona was spreading rapidly, it was not easy to distance yourself from the whole situation and not think about the older parents you had at home, and each time you were among the children, you were at risk.« (Educator 9)

Table 4: Professional challenges of educators after the lockdown

*Children's behaviour in kindergarten after the lockdown*

The changes that educators noticed in children after they started coming to kindergarten again once the lockdown ended can be divided into three categories (peer relationship, reflections on the current situation, and adaptation after the lockdown) and four codes, as presented in *Table 5*.

Category	Code	Example
<b>Relationship with peers</b>	The joy of socializing (n = 5)	<p>»When the kindergarten opened, everyone came back and stayed until the end of the day, as they were very eager to socialize. As each child showed up, everyone was thrilled to meet again, and more and more excitement was created.« (Educator 17)</p> <p>»So they came with joy, and the admiration was seen on their faces. They missed their kindergarten and socializing. Joy was felt.« (Educator 7)</p>
<b>Reflections on the current situation</b>	Risk awareness (n = 5)	<p>»They showed concern about whether corona would enter their family. One boy said, Semir's dad got corona, so could my dad or my mom. They talked a lot about the disease, and it was seen in their drawings. Many of them were worried.« (Educator 1)</p> <p>»At one point, one boy said to another boy who sneezed, Get away from me. It's the corona.« (Educator 8)</p> <p>»They were aware of the risks. If someone accidentally put a toy in their mouth, other kids would immediately snatch to the teacher and ask her to punish the child. They knew they shouldn't put toys in their mouths.« (Educator 13)</p>
	The notion of death (n = 5)	<p>»Most children had not encountered death until then and learned that people were dying of corona. In their heads, they thought that everyone who got sick from corona died of it. During the third wave, some of their grandparents died; this was their first encounter with death. The children talked a lot and asked questions about death. One boy said, Thank God we don't live in Italy; they all died.« (Educator 1)</p> <p>»A boy said, We're all going to die of corona.« (Educator 17)</p>
<b>Adaptation after the lockdown</b>	Daily routine and kindergarten rules (n = 6)	<p>»When they returned, as they did not sleep during the day at home, they lost the habit of sleeping, and it took them a while to return to the kindergarten routine. It took time to get them back on track and to get them to obey the old rules.« (Educator 7)</p> <p>»The children did not cooperate with the educators, [and] they did not accept their obligations, which we all have in our small teams. It took them a while to get back to the old way.« (Educator 11)</p>

*Table 5: The observed reactions of children upon their return to kindergarten after the lockdown*

*Possibilities for improving the preschool education practice in pandemic conditions*

According to preschool teachers in this study, their further work in a pandemic could be improved by focusing on areas that can be divided into three categories (training, technical support, and staff support) and six codes, as presented in *Table 6*.

Category	Code	Example
<b>Training</b>	Education (n = 18)	<p>»Different types of training for the use of new technologies in the design of educational content for preschool children.« (Educator 9)</p> <p>»Education for online guided activities, as well as how to convey the planned content to children.« (Educator 12)</p> <p>»Organize workshops for educators to improve their competencies for working in an online environment.« (Educator 8)</p>
	Manual (n = 3)	<p>»It would be good if both parents and educators had a manual on the functioning of kindergartens in such extraordinary circumstances.« (Educator 2)</p>
	Promotion of good practice and exchange of experiences (n = 4)	<p>»It would help if examples of good practice were published more and promoted among educators.« (Educator 10)</p> <p>»We miss mutual support and exchange of experiences between kindergartens.« (Educator 7)</p>
<b>Technology support</b>	Technology support (n = 9)	<p>»We don't have a computer in the kindergarten that would make it easier for us to prepare. The internet connection is very weak for us. We have it in some of the rooms, but we don't have it in the others. It would help us to have a stable internet connection.« (Educator 13)</p> <p>»We regularly take pictures of children with private mobile phones, so the mobile phones are full of children's pictures and payment slips sent by parents. It would be much easier not to use our private devices.« (Educator 15)</p>
<b>Staff support</b>	Additional staff (n = 11)	<p>»It is necessary to hire more educators because there is a great need for it. There is always someone missing, so we merge our groups all the time.« (Educator 6)</p> <p>»What would be beneficial even without a pandemic and what would help us are the assistants in the groups, at least when we have children with developmental disabilities.« (Educator 4)</p>

*Table 6: What could be beneficial to educators to improve their work in pandemic conditions*

*Summarizing the effects of the pandemic on the functioning of preschool education*

The effects of the pandemic on the functioning of preschool education can be grouped into two categories (positive and negative effects) and six codes, as presented in *Table 7*. Among the positive effects, the most prominent is the *professional development of educators* (n = 18) because the crisis required daily learning to adapt to new circumstances, and among the negative ones, there is the *lack of continuous interaction with children* (n = 18), which could have resulted in certain gaps in the development of children's skills and abilities.

Category	Code	Example
Positive	Professional training of educators (n = 18)	»What I learned during the corona period, especially about technology, now turns out to be very useful. For example, now I know how to make some simple quiz questions that motivate children even more.« (Educator 1) »I studied day after day. The new circumstances forced me to find and perfect some new forms and ways of working.« (Educator 8)
	Building of relationships with parents (n = 10)	»My openness to the parents and the needs they had during that period was a reflection of the state of emergency. I wanted to help in every possible way and respond to some questions and concerns, advise, and listen to the current problems they were facing. That made us very close to each other.« (Educator 12) »Parents have realized how much they need us and how much children need the kindergarten. They started appreciating us more.« (Educator 13)
	Parental empowerment (n = 9)	»Working in this way, we also taught the parents, and we had to explain to them not only how they would do an activity but also why.« (Educator 8) »The parents learned as well. They have already started sharing ideas for playing with children.« (Educator 2)
Negative	Lack of continuous interaction with children (n = 18)	»We lost time with children we can't get back.« (Educator 13) »The children missed a period in which they could develop their social skills.« (Educator 10)
	Kindergartens closed to parents and the local community (n = 16)	»Parents could not participate in the kindergarten activities. Before, we often organized gatherings with parents on the premises of the kindergarten when we taught children about different occupations ... Now we are limited.« (Educator 7)
	Disadvantages of applying technology in educating preschool children (n = 2)	»Preschool education cannot function online; a child cannot develop life skills online or establish and build quality relationships with peers.« (Educator 11)

*Table 7: Positive and negative effects of the pandemic on the functioning of preschool education*

## Discussion

The Covid-19 pandemic had serious consequences for all levels of educational systems around the globe. Currently, much attention is being paid to the undesirable effects of the pandemic and the possibility of creating better responses to »the new reality« it has caused. In addition, it is uncertain how long it will last. Accordingly, the experiences of preschool educators are a rich source of knowledge and learning about the context of the functioning of preschool education during the pandemic, even though it faced multiple challenges in BiH long before the pandemic. Taking into account the above-mentioned and based on the statements of educators, we can identify two types of challenges: the existing ones that came to the fore during the pandemic and the new ones that were born as a result of the crisis. Regarding the former, the shortage of educators is particularly noteworthy; this has been recorded not only in BiH but also in other European countries (Miković 2019, p. 188) to the extent that the education profession is categorized as »alarmingly unstable« (Whitebook et al. 2001, p. V). The already insufficient number of educators has been further reduced in times of crisis when some went on sick leave due to infection with Covid-19. This was an aggravating circumstance not only for other educators who had to join groups or go to other kindergartens for help but also for children who suffered discontinuities in their regular communication with educators. Such a context could have resulted in a decline in the quality of the process in preschool education, because the research (Cassidy et al. 2011, p. 4) shows that frequent changes of educators in educational groups result in a lower quality of educational work and negative consequences for children's socio-emotional and language development, including the relationship between educators and parents.

According to preschool educators, when it comes to challenges that have emerged in the new circumstances, lack of computer literacy is among the biggest. That some of the effects of the pandemic were global is indicated by the fact that the results of other research (Alan 2021; Crawford et al. 2021) show how one of the most important challenges preschool educators face during distance learning in an epidemic is the effective use of technologies for educational purposes. For example, Alan (2021, p. 3) discusses the need to improve technological competencies in the first place in his research on five identified needs of preschool educators during a pandemic. Apart from this, there has been talk of exploiting the potential of digital technology to innovate educational practice but also about the fact that information and computer literacy are competencies needed by every citizen for employment, personal development, and social inclusion (Carretero et al. 2017, p. 6). During the pandemic, these only became real challenges for preschool educators. In addition, the establishment of distance learning through various online platforms and networks during the lockdown has given rise to extra challenges for educators. Among the most important are ensuring continuity in education through maintaining contacts with children and parents and designing the educational content to suit the online version of preschool children's education. In fact, these two challenges represented a major test of the resilience of preschool education and its adaptation to the emerging crisis situation during the lockdown. Although a certain type of educational activity

for children in the fifth and sixth years of life was established very quickly, young children remained unreachable through the online way of working. The lower the age, the greater the barriers to continuing education through online activities; this is because children are less and less willing to use technology and communicate independently and the need for direct interaction is greater. What is more, it is increasingly difficult to convert the format of direct interaction that would otherwise be organized in the classroom into a virtual format that would be accessible, developmentally adapted, and stimulating for young children. In addition, in the new circumstances, the andragogy aspect of educational work came into focus through the empowerment of parents to create a stimulating family environment and joint activities with their children. In the virtual activities, educators always started with two goals in mind: the one to be achieved with parents and the one to be achieved with children. Such indirect communication with children through parents repositioned educators and parents from a situation in which the preschool educators and children were at the centre of educational events and the parents outside to one in which the preschool teachers are outside the centre of educational events where the parents and children were present. This inversion of relations with regard to being »inside« and »outside« means a very different perspective in the educational process and requires a thorough reconceptualization of work. The »insider« educator interacts with children directly, while the »outsider« educator acts from the periphery—that is, via the parents. This suggests the inversion of the centre of educational events between the two basic microsystems—family and kindergarten—which implies a different learning environment that is an important factor in curriculum development. This type of repositioning and inversion is dictated by the current epidemiological situation; therefore, it is possible to count on episodic changes in key positions and environments, which will require a much more flexible approach by educators and much better cooperation with parents.

## Conclusion

Although the pandemic significantly disrupted the continuity of education and created various challenges for educators, it identified new perspectives of educational work and new ways of communication, and it encouraged educators to improve and move their own boundaries. It also identified the weakest points in preschool education that need to be improved. In this sense, according to the results of this research, it is especially important to further strengthen the existing capacity of educators with new staff; to improve educational competencies for the use of modern technology, especially for educational purposes; to improve educational competencies for creating educational content in the online format; to improve educational competencies for more efficient cooperation with parents under pandemic conditions; and to improve kindergartens' technological equipment.

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### **IZKUŠNJE IN STROKOVNI IZZIVI VZGOJITELJIC MED IN PO ZAPRTJU VRTCEV ZARADI PANDEMIJE COVIDA-19: REFLEKSIJE IZ BOSNE IN HERCEGOVINE**

**Povzetek:** Podobno kot številne druge države se je tudi Bosna in Hercegovina (BiH) soočila z izzivom, kako zagotoviti kontinuiteto na področju vzgoje in izobraževanja v času pandemije. Na področju predšolske vzgoje je pedagoško delo potekalo z uporabo različnih pristopov, ki so jih za spopadanje s krizo zasnovala tako vodstva posameznih vrtcev kot tudi pristojno Ministrstvo za izobraževanje. V tem prispevku analiziramo izkušnje in izzive vzgojiteljic predšolskih otrok v BiH v času zaprtja vrtcev zaradi pandemije. Opravili smo empirično raziskavo, v katero smo vključili 19 vzgojiteljic, ki smo jih izbrali po načelu vzorčenja snežne kepe. Podatke smo zbrali z uporabo polstrukturiranega intervjuja in jih ustrezno kvalitativno vsebinsko analizirali. Rezultati nakazujejo, da so vzgojiteljice pri svojem delu naleteli na številne izzive: v času, ko so bili vrtci zaprti, je bil največji uporaba tehnologije in zagotavljanje kontinuitete vzgojnega procesa, medtem ko je bil po ponovnem odprtju vrtcev v ospredju problem pomanjkanja vzgojiteljic in s tem povezana organizacija pedagoškega dela ob sočasnih zahtevah po spoštovanju epidemioloških ukrepov. Na podlagi analize izkušenj vzgojiteljic med in po zaprtju vrtcev je mogoče skleniti, da bi bilo mogoče kakovost predšolske vzgoje med pandemijo izboljšati, če bi imeli strokovni delavci ustrezno strokovno podporo pri njihovem soočanju z izzivi v tem kriznem obdobju.

**Ključne besede:** covid-19, pandemija, vzgojiteljice predšolskih otrok, strokovni izziv

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