Live Virtual Sessions with Toddlers and Preschoolers amid COVID-19: Implications for Early Childhood Teacher Education

JUDIT SZENTE
University of Central Florida, USA
judit.szente@ucf.edu

This paper shares reflections on over 50 live Zoom instructional lessons with toddlers and preschoolers amid the first three weeks of school closures due to COVID-19 in the State of Florida. Reflections resulted in three themes: 1) implementing digital sessions with young children; 2) establishing and maintaining home-based child engagement through technology; and 3) ensuring family involvement/engagement through technology. Implications and research recommendations are provided for early childhood teacher education programs and in-service professional development opportunities to ensure that teachers are better prepared for teaching and learning in an online environment.

Rationale

About two months ago, children’s lives got turned upside down as they could no longer engage in their typical daily routines amid the COVID-19 disaster. Personal contacts were soon replaced by on-screen contacts with teachers and friends. At the same time, parents/caregivers/older siblings became the ones who were placed in an emergency home-schooling role—many of them also trying to balance their full-time job or trying to cope with the loss of loved ones or loss of jobs.
Meanwhile, teachers from preschools to universities placed content online in record speed and many started to offer live virtual sessions for students. Since the need and speed of such work was unprecedented, many early childhood teachers used their knowledge of best practices related to technology and young children (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media at Saint Vincent College, 2012; NAEYC, 2018; Rosen & Jaruszewicz, 2009; U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016) to complete such tasks. At the same time, many early childhood teacher educators reflected on whether teacher preparation programs fully prepared our teacher candidates for such practices and what we could do to better prepare them.

Process

During the first three weeks of school closures in the State of Florida due to COVID-19, the researcher observed over 50 live instructional Zoom sessions from her home. The lessons originated from three teachers of a private early childhood center that stayed open during the pandemic. These teachers connected with children from their classrooms daily from either school or their home. Half of these sessions were held for toddlers and the other half for preschool-age children. The researcher had one of her own children in both age-groups. Daily sessions were conducted in the mornings and in the afternoons—each lasting for 20-30 minutes at a time. For toddlers, the lessons focused on colors, shapes, sign language, stories, and short activities during both morning and afternoon sessions. Older children’s lessons in the morning included a morning meeting, weather report, pledge, stories, and activities usually around letters of the alphabet. They also received one or two assignments for the afternoon sessions based on what was learned in the morning. The researcher took notes in each session with the intent to see what worked well and what did not work, and what implications these sessions had for early childhood teacher education programs in order to better prepare our candidates for providing online experiences for young children. Qualitative methodology was implemented to analyze the notes and recurring themes were identified. The study was determined by an IRB as not to be human subjects research under DHHS and FDA regulations.
RESULTS

Three themes resulted from the observations. These were: 1) implementing digital sessions with young children; 2) establishing and maintaining home-based child engagement through technology; and 3) ensuring family involvement/engagement through technology.

Implementing Digital Sessions with Young Children

Teachers seemed comfortable with operating the Zoom program in their classroom or home. They were able to screen share, utilize digital books, and online links for the activities. They were also able to appropriately mute/unmute children, so their instruction was heard by all participants. Teachers shared additional learning resources for the online meetings each day in their Google Classrooms. They were able to record their Zoom sessions and post them for families who were not able to participate in the sessions and/or wanted to review the lesson later. Teachers quickly adjusted the security measures on the Zoom meetings once some inappropriate uses of Zoom were reported nation-wide. These were requiring passwords for meetings and locking meetings after they started. Unfortunately, the locking mode disabled some families to participate in an entire session if they were a little late to join. The need to implement digital sessions with young children is supported by prior work in the field (e.g., Edelman, 2020; ISTE, 2008; ISTE, 2020; Kurt, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2017; U.S.O.E.T., 2018).

Establishing and Maintaining Home-Based Child Engagement Through Technology

Children had more turns and were able to share more when the number of participants was small. When there were more than 10-15 students in the preschool meeting, children had fewer turns, were less actively engaged, and seemed to be losing their interest in the activities sooner. They got in and out of their seats/chairs more often or played with other materials. The length of the online sessions influenced children’s attention. For example, when sessions lasted for 15-20 minutes for toddlers, they were more focused at the end than when the sessions were 20-30 minutes in length. Preschool-age children seemed to be able to stay engaged until the end of the 25-30 minute-sessions. Children responded well in both age groups to songs, engaging stories, and music/movement and teachers utilized them
well when needed to regain children’s focus. Prior work in the field supports the need for establishing and maintaining home-based child-engagement through technology (e.g., Robson, 2020).

**Ensuring Family Involvement/Engagement Through Technology**

Teachers maintained communication with families regarding the daily sessions in the Google Classrooms and welcomed families in the actual Zoom sessions. There were more parents present on the Zoom screens with the toddlers than with the preschoolers. Teachers were understanding if children did not complete their assignment for the afternoon session due to a page not being able to be printed, or printer not working in the homes, etc. They also tried to troubleshoot audio/video issues and assisted parents/caregivers with making sure children were visible on the screen. Sometimes adjusting the tablet/computer screen was needed, so children’s whole face was visible not just their foreheads. At all times, teachers were patient and understanding with parents/caregivers if they skipped a session or more. Ensuring family involvement and engagement through technology is supported by prior research (e.g., Blagojevic, 2016; Grant & Ray, 2016).

**IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION AND IN-SERVICE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

There are several implications of this study for both early childhood teacher education programs and in-service professional development. These implications are organized in a taxonomy as presented in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Taxonomy for Developing Online Learning Opportunities for Young Children.](image-url)
As the figure indicates, there are three main components or access levels that build upon each other. Without formal access, actual access and/or functional access cannot happen. This study suggests that teacher education candidates and in-service teachers should be able to engage in activities at all three access levels. Therefore, teacher preparation programs should assess their courses and practices to ensure they are preparing candidates for such knowledge and skills.

The first component, formal access, includes access to an actual working computer/laptop/tablet and printer as well as internet in the homes of children, families, and teachers. It also includes access to hardware and internet in schools if remote learning happens from there. Further, it should also include assisting candidates/in-service teachers with ways to provide equitable access to technology for their students (e.g., How School Leaders Support Equitable Student Access to Digital Tools, 2017; ISTE, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). These may involve partnering with other schools or community organizations to share or obtain resources; collaborating with companies to obtain lower price points for devices to be used in schools and/or getting access to broadband for classrooms and communities; and being able to utilize government resources for digital access such as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Title IV, Part A, Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) Program (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2020).

The middle component, actual access, includes the ability of candidates/in-service teachers to be able to decide on the frequency of online sessions and the number of children in each session. It is important that candidates/teachers adhere to the guidelines for recommended adult-child ratios while teaching online as well. For toddlers, the ideal number is about 3-6 while for preschoolers it is 6-10 children in a group setting (NAEYC, 2013). Further, candidates/teachers should be able to utilize additional resources and strategies for children with special developmental, cultural, and/or linguistic needs (e.g., Edelman, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). They should also be able to relate to the diverse characteristics, needs, and responsibilities of families in terms of when/how/where they are able to connect digitally.

Lastly, the third component, functional access, includes developing candidates/in-service teachers’ digital knowledge, skills, and competence (Koehler et al, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2017; U.S.O.E.T., 2018); embedding such skills in all methodology classes (Instefjord & Munthe, 2017; International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), 2008; Koehler et al, 2014; Kurt, 2018; Rokenes & Krumsvik, 2014; U.S.
Department of Education, 2017); familiarizing candidates/teachers with not only various digital platforms such as Zoom, GoToMeeting, Google Classroom, and/or Skype (e.g., Edelman, 2020) but also with ways to utilize these platforms to teach young children appropriately. Further, this component also includes the development and utilization of appropriate assessment tools to evaluate such skills of teachers/candidates (ISTE, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Since teachers now have been able to provide online learning experiences for young children for over two months, the replication of such study pauses some challenges because teachers may have been able to reflect on their practices and modified their instruction based on these reflections. The study, however, can be replicated by observing similar home-based online sessions with toddlers and preschoolers and reflecting on what works/what does not work in those sessions and what may need to be addressed in early childhood teacher preparation programs/in-service professional development based on such observations. This study also suggests some recommendations for future studies. These include: 1) studying teachers’ recorded Zoom sessions and utilizing this information for both self-reflection and professional development opportunities; and 2) administering a reflective survey to teachers and parents who have participated in such online learning experiences and asking them to reflect on their level of preparedness with carrying out online sessions and to provide recommendations for both teacher preparation programs and in-service professional development opportunities in order to better prepare teachers to work with children and families in future digital environments.

References


