South African Journal of Childhood Education
ISSN: (Online) 2223-7682, (Print) 2223-7674

Early childhood development renaissance: Parents' visions and values in the post-pandemic era

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Dates:
Received: 28 Feb. 2025
Accepted: 29 July 2025
Published: 14 Oct. 2025

How to cite this article:
Chigonda, G.K., Phatudi, N.C. & Phala, T.A., 2025, 'Early childhood development renaissance: Parents' visions and values in the post-pandemic era', *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 15(1), a1701. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v15i1.1701

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Background: Parental involvement is integral to the success of early childhood development (ECD) programmes. The onset of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and the adoption of remote learning reshaped parental roles, values, and expectations in ECD. Parents assumed greater responsibility for their children's learning and development, encountering new challenges in the post-pandemic era. While parents remain central to children's early experiences, their visions, values, and expectations in supporting holistic development remain underexplored.

Aim: This qualitative study explored how parents perceive and envision ECD in the post-pandemic era.

Setting: The research was conducted with parents of young children enrolled in ECD programmes in Chitungwiza District, Zimbabwe.

Methods: Guided by an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with six purposively sampled parents. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and actionable solutions.

Results: Findings highlighted parents' emphasis on meaningful participation in decision-making, prioritisation of children's developmental needs, equitable access, improved infrastructure, and flexible policies for ECD programmes during pandemics.

Conclusion: The study concluded that the post-pandemic era in Zimbabwe marked a paradigm shift in parents' visions and values of ECD.

Contribution: This study contributes to the discourse on ECD recovery by informing policy on fostering inclusivity and sustainability in early childhood education. It underscores the importance of transformative learning and enhanced collaboration among parents, schools, and government to strengthen Zimbabwe's ECD programmes.

Keywords: early childhood development; renaissance; parents; post-pandemic era; vision; values.

Introduction

A profound reawakening in early childhood development (ECD) has been experienced in this post-pandemic era. Parents in diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts have reevaluated their visions, priorities and values regarding the growth, development and education of their children (Winter, Smith & Szproch 2022:1–24; Yokoshiwa et al. 2020:188–193). The disruptions caused by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic intensified the existing vulnerabilities in ECD. As a result, parents assumed more active roles in supporting children's development and learning. This renaissance has seen many parents place a greater value on emotional well-being, flexible educational spaces, cultural rootedness and the incorporation of both cultural and digital resources. In the post-pandemic era, it is important to understand parents' evolving views as they seek to rebuild and reimagine the future of their children and, at the same time, help in shaping responsive, inclusive and sustainable early childhood policies and practices (Prime, Wade & Browne 2020:631–643).

The devastating and negative effects of COVID-19 were felt immediately as schools and ECD centres shut down (Tomlison, Richter & Slemming 2021:1–2). Millions of children were distressed by the pandemic as a result of ECD centre closures. In their study, Benner and Mistry (2020:236–243) estimated a total of 180 million children being affected worldwide. The scholars further reported the negative long-term effects of the crisis, such as loss of quality in ECD. Literature has extensively

documented the importance of early childhood in a child's developmental trajectory (Campos & Viera 2021; Thorpe et al. 2020; Warwick, Warwick & Nash 2017). The shutting down of early childhood centres disturbed and compromised children's development in all areas, such as social, cognitive, emotional, physical, spiritual and mental well-being. Subsequently, the resultant effects of the pandemic, such as remote learning, social distancing protocols and safety measures, disturbed the normal development of children's socio-emotional skills, cognitive and physical development and mental well-being (Conto et al. 2021).

In Zimbabwe, ECD as a sector spent most of its time out of school as it wase the last to reopen compared to other levels of education (Dzobo, Chitungo & Dzinamarira 2020:2–12; Mugabe 2020). The lockdown period took a long time to end. Parents were unwillingly coerced into the educational matrix of early childhood education as co-educators. They were forced to adjust to the uncertainties of COVID-19. It is therefore important for this study to explore how Zimbabwean parents envision and expect their children's development within ECD in the post-pandemic era. The exposure of being their children's facilitators in learning might have altered their values and understanding of child development, learning and their long-held expectations for formal ECD programmes.

Many countries adopted remote teaching as a strategy to curb virus transmission during the pandemic, but this resulted in triggering many adjustments in the education landscape that persisted into the post-pandemic era (Apriyanti 2021:18–25). However, in the context of Zimbabwe's ECD sector, remote support and nurturing were largely inaccessible because of digital infrastructural deficits, thus affecting the learning by doing of early learners and the developmental needs of young children. Consequently, the support for children registered in ECD centres in Zimbabwe during the lockdowns was mostly informal and parent facilitated rather than structured or technologically driven (Muchandiona & Manyumwa 2024:915–927). The support for children during the pandemic was provided remotely. The strategy was adopted to curb virus transmission, which triggered a lot of adjustments that have persisted in the post-pandemic era (Muchandiona & Manyumwa 2024:915–927). Furthermore, adoption of maintaining and sustaining the support through the remote strategy during the pandemic placed a lot of burden on parents (Apriyanti 2021:18–25; Lee et al. 2021). For example, disparities in the socio-economic status of families, equity and access have been perennial disturbances in parents' journey supporting children's development.

Many families struggled to provide the stimulation and support necessary for holistic child development because of economic hardships and the lack of digital resources for remote learning and development (Nhongo & Tshotsho 2021). This raised concerns about the long-term effects on children's holistic development. This phase of adjustment saw a evolving and transformation in parental attitudes towards government support, education and the role played by schools and communities in child development. Thus, it is vital to assess how parents' values, visions and expectations have evolved because of the influence of the pandemic.

Literature review

This literature review synthesises existing knowledge on parental involvement in early childhood centres pre-pandemic, during the pandemic and post-pandemic. The review discusses the impact of the pandemic on children's learning and development and how it has influenced parental perspectives, including changes in parental values, visions and expectations.

Parents as prime stakeholders in early childhood development

Parents are integral to the success of ECD programmes (Bartolome, Mamat and Masnan 2020:44–58). According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, children's development is profoundly influenced by their immediate environment, particularly parental involvement (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Existing research has drawn attention to parents' involvement in children's education and development (Dettemers, Yotyodying & Jonkmann 2019:1–13; Gugiu et al. 2020:627–641). Authors have tended to use the terms parental involvement, participation and engagement synonymously (Wilder 2014:377–397). However, for the purposes of this study, it is crucial to explain these terms for clarity.

Parental involvement is explained by Venter, Joubert and Chetty (2014:1225–1234) as an initiative of the school or centre and is guided by policy documents. Parents are considered to be invited guests into the centre, and they have to comply with the rules and regulations of the centre. Another definition by Bartolome et al. (2020:44–58) positions parents as partaking in the learning of their children both at home and in school. On the contrary, parental engagement encompasses the definitions of parental involvement. Parental engagement entails parents sharing information regarding children's learning progress, behaviour, emotional well-being and ongoing learning needs with the centre (Baxter & Kilderry 2022). Parental participation is described by Cox-Petersen (2011) as a partnership. The ECD centre and the parents collaborate to come up with common goals for the best interests of the children. Bayat and Madyibi (2022:1–10) and Kambouri et al. (2021:639–661) add that a collaboration between parents and schools fosters cohesion between the school and home. Parents are entitled to know what happens in the centre and to offer support where necessary. It not only goes beyond just giving a helping hand to the centre but also includes being part of the decision-making process at the centre (Bayat & Madyibi 2022:1–10). In this scenario, parents are commended for sharing their experience, values, visions and family culture with the

centre (Soltero-Gonzalez & Gillanders 2021:965–976). In the post-pandemic period, the intention of examining parents' visions and values is for them to shift from parent involvement, which is defined by centre parameters, to parent participation, which is focused on dialogue and community building through collaboration.

Parental home-based involvement during the pandemic

Notwithstanding the given definitions, historically, parental involvement has been known to have two categories: home-based involvement and school-based involvement (Boonk et al. 2018:10–30). Bronfenbrenner (1979) terms the home and school as the micro layer surrounding the child. At home, the parent monitors and guides the child through age-appropriate activities. Activities such as drawing, storytelling, counting objects, singing and number games reinforce classroom experiences in informal, playful ways. In school, parents participate in school activities such as volunteering, parent–teacher conferences and school events (Boonk et al. 2018:10–30). However, unlike school-based involvement, home-based involvement has hidden consequences as it impacts the child's development and academic success both positively and negatively. For example, during the pandemic, home-based learning may have led to closer relationships and improved communication between children and their parents (Chitanana 2022:75–90). Parents who assumed responsibility for their children's learning lacked the pedagogical training, technological resources and the time needed to provide consistent and developmentally appropriate instruction (Chitanana 2022:75–90). According to Chitanana (2022:75–90), Zimbabwean parents faced challenges in accessing devices, internet connectivity and appropriate learning materials. These challenges may hinder children's learning and also lead to an increase in frustration, anxiety and emotional tension within families. Thus, during the pandemic, parental involvement was home-based as parents became teachers of their children with the country's adoption of remote support and learning.

Different scholars and researchers have highlighted the role that parents play in ECD before, during and after the pandemic. Kambouri et al. (2021:639–661) and Munje and Mncube (2018:80–93) attest to the assertion that ECD programmes are seen as a stage that creates a relationship between schools and families and acknowledges the role played by parents in children's development and education. However, not all parents had equal access to resources in order to support children's education. Remote learning using digital tools benefited others while widening the educational gap for some children as parents failed to provide the necessary digital tools (Chitanana 2022:75–90). Parents' visions and values for the post-pandemic period were shaped by their experiences during the pandemic, socio-economic status and cultural views. Research has documented parents' concerns about the extent of learning loss that children experienced during the pandemic and the difficulties of home learning parents faced during COVID-19 (Chitanana 2022:75–90; Maphosa 2021). According to Nhongo and Tshotsho (2021), parents were still reeling under economic pressures caused by the pandemic. Research by Chitanana (2022) emphasises that while parental engagement is critical, it must be supported by accessible resources and guidance.

A study conducted by Watson and Singh (2022) in Australia reported that parents were informed by school heads of a deterioration in their children's behaviour and mood. Children displayed high levels of emotional difficulties and problems and inattention (Watson & Singh 2022). The same results were affirmed in other studies carried out in other countries such as China, Scotland and America (Dong, Cao & Li 2020; Russel et al. 2020:671–682). The studies revealed that children showed anxiety, behavioural difficulties and inattention because of the pandemic. A lack of developmental support because of lack of knowledge regarding ECD can make it difficult to instil the correct modes of behaviour, and children may imitate unacceptable language and mannerisms (Watson et al. 2020). While the importance of parental involvement and participation in ECD programmes is well-documented, there is a notable gap in research examining how parents perceive and experience rebalancing efforts. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive understanding of parents' perspectives, which is critical for designing responsive and effective ECD systems.

Access to remote learning and learning loss

The COVID-19 has been attributed as the most contributing factor of learning loss out of past pandemics because of remote learning (Baz 2021:25–35; Kuhfield et al. 2020:549–565). Pier et al. (2021) describe learning loss as a decrease in children's academic ability and a decrease in knowledge and skills. They expand their description of learning loss by stating that it can occur if the education sector cannot provide the same conditions of learning, which prevailed the previous year. The COVID-19 resulted in school closures with the consequence that remote support and learning had to be implemented. This move resulted in learning loss, especially for children in ECD centres (Donnelly & Patrinos 2022:601–609). Donnelly and Patrinos (2022:601–609) further explained that learning loss manifests itself in ECD through language delays, reduced school readiness, weakened social skills and emotional or behavioural setbacks. Wang et al. (2020:945–947) define remote learning as learning that occurs when the child and teacher are physically separated. Remote teaching is a strategy that involves teachers or parents using digital resources and online platforms to deliver lessons outside the classroom. Many countries creatively introduced different strategies such as the internet, television, radio and many other options (Alan 2021:987–994). However, scholars and researchers have debated the suitability of remote teaching and learning in the ECD phase (Garbe et al. 2020:45–65).

Garbe et al. (2020:45–65) advised that it was possible to conduct remote teaching with children in the presence of certain factors: access to the internet, stimulative educational materials and availability of power, appropriate software and support from caregivers. Children in ECD require interactive, age-appropriate, play-based learning applications that are visually engaging and aligned with developmental needs (Garbe et al. 2020:45–65). Thus, in Zimbabwe, during the pandemic many ECD children missed out on learning because they had no access to power to charge devices or play radio lessons, and there was a lack of locally relevant offline-capable software designed for ECD. Learning solutions focused more on older children sidelining the unique developmental and technological needs of younger children (Nhongo & Tshotsho 2021). Cullinane and Montacute (2020) asserted that remote learning needed adequate planning because the gap between the rich and poor could widen. A study by Timmons et al. (2021) revealed that remote learning was full of challenges in the ECD phase. One of the challenges cited was the feasibility of maintaining an interactive learning environment. Children learn through hands-on activities while interacting with tangible materials (Heckman 2012:1–2). Thus, the absence of these interactions in remote learning may affect children's cognitive abilities and their ability to play and empathise with others (Timmons et al. 2021). In addition, this absence of interaction may seal opportunities for them to develop their imaginative and creative skills.

Zimbabwe, as a country, regards ECD as a critical phase in children's development (Government of Zimbabwe 2013). The constitution further states that parental support of the school is valuable for children's development and academic performance (Government of Zimbabwe 2013). A decree pronounced by the Zimbabwean President on 24 March 2020 was a turning point in the development of young children. Schools and ECD centres were closed as a disease preventive measure in the hope of protecting the health and life of both children and adults (Government of Zimbabwe 2020). Children were confined at home and parents took over as educators overnight. The government issued directives for institutions to begin lessons online, also using radio and television broadcasts (Nhongo & Tshotsho 2021).

Learning and development in ECD include physical contact, hugging, verbal interaction with friends and teachers, gestures, facial expressions and non-verbal gestures for children with special needs (Timmons et al. 2021). This was replaced by something completely different from what they were used to: information and communication technologies (Nhongo & Tshotsho 2021). For many of the family members, it was a wake-up call as their homes were not designed as ECD classrooms (UNICEF 2020). Furthermore, the confinement deprived children of interactions with other children and playing their traditional games (Egan et al. 2020:3–4). There were concerns about children's development as the government introduced a phased approach to learning and further reduced the time for school attendance (Government of Zimbabwe 2020). Thus, there was no structured learning in many ECD centres. Literature has alluded to the prerogative of understanding parental values, visions and expectations in early childhood as the insights will result in shaping the future of ECD policies and interventions (Naidu, Muthukrishnu & Holden 2011:2–100).

Statement of the problem

Early childhood development in Zimbabwe is struggling to maintain its pre-pandemic achievements because of COVID-19's lasting effects such as socio-economic and infrastructural disparities. While considerable efforts have been made by the government to address some of the challenges, gaps are still evident in addressing learning loss, the digital divide and disaster preparedness. Parents are players in children's education and development. However, despite the veneration of the centrality of parents in children's early experiences, their visions, values and expectations in supporting children's holistic development remain unexplored. If parents' views and expectations are not considered in the ECD matrix, the education system in Zimbabwe might find it difficult to minimise inequalities in the developmental trajectory of children. There is limited research and understanding of how parents' visions, values and expectations have changed in the post-pandemic era, as this period is a turning point in how parents perceive, prioritise and engage with their children's development.

Research aims

The main aim and objectives of the study stated in this section were based on the study's problem statement.

Research aim and objectives

The aim of this study is to explore how parents perceive and envision ECD in Zimbabwe in the post-pandemic era.

Research objectives

- To explore the changes in parents' perceptions and expectations of ECD in Zimbabwe following the pandemic.
- To investigate how parents' values and visions of early childhood education have shifted in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19.
- To understand how these evolving parental expectations can inform the rebalancing and rebuilding of ECD programmes in the post-pandemic era.
- To examine the role of parents in supporting their children's early education during and after the pandemic.

Main research question

How have parents' visions, values and expectations for ECD in Zimbabwe evolved in the post-pandemic era and what implications do these changes have for the future of ECD programmes and practices?

Theoretical framework

When considering parental visions and values in the post-pandemic period, the works of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Mezirow (2000) provide a lens into parents' expectations of their children's educational future. Ecological systems theory and transformative learning theory were relevant to the study. Bronfenbrenner conceptualised the environments that surround the child as nested systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979). These nested systems influence a child's development. The pandemic rearranged these systems, impacting parental roles and expectations. The theory helps to explain how the pandemic altered the systems, resulting in parents shifting their values and visions for their children. Proposed by Mezirow (2000), the transformative learning theory focuses on how individuals change their perspectives after experiencing a disorienting dilemma that challenges their existing beliefs and values. In this study, parents encountered a disorienting dilemma in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mezirow 2000).

Research methods and design

Study design

The approach adopted for this study was a qualitative research approach guided by the interpretive paradigm. A qualitative approach is described by Creswell and Creswell (2018) in Denzin and Lincoln (2018) as an approach that focuses on understanding the feelings, thoughts and interactions of research participants. The study focused on six purposively selected parents of children enrolled in government ECD centres in the post-pandemic period in Chitungwiza District, Harare province. Mini-focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. Face-to-face interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews have a flexible characteristic, which makes it possible for researchers to probe participants for greater clarity and depth on the research problem (Jonhson & Christensen 2014).

Setting

Bryman (2016) and Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) highlighted that the location was a critical component of the research because by understanding participants' settings, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied based on the time and space in which the participants exist. In this study, I selected parents who had children enrolled in government primary schools that had ECD (A) (3–4 years) and ECD B (4–5 years) classes attached. The primary schools were in low-income areas called high-density suburbs or townships in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe.

Study population and sampling strategy

The purposive sampling technique was used in this study. According to Creswell (2014) and Kumar (2014), purposive sampling is a criterion-based selection method for qualitative research. Cohen et al. (2018) propose that there are many ways of selecting a sample as it is difficult to conduct a study with a large population. I selected the study sites and participants for this study using purposive sampling. Six parents of young children enrolled in ECD participated in the study. All participants had experienced and witnessed COVID-19 disruptions to their children's participation in ECD centres, ensuring that their views were relevant to the post-pandemic focus of the study. Hence, the participants gave rich information, which helped me gain a deeper understanding of parents' visions, values and expectations in this post-pandemic era. Participants represented six different districts in Chitungwiza Urban. Table 1 shows the selected participants and their codes.

Data collection

This study wanted to find out and understand more about parents' values and visions. These traits are fundamentally personal, subjective and traditionally entrenched. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews and mini-focus group discussions were used to gather data. Six participants were interviewed, and one focus group discussion was carried out. According to Creswell (2014), a typical focus group is made up of 6 to 10 participants. For this study, one session allowed participants' voices to be heard while maintaining rich interaction. Focus group discussion allowed me to observe group dynamics, shared norms and beliefs and collective meaning-making that might not have emerged in a private conversation. Semi-structured interviews have a flexible characteristic, which makes it possible for researchers to probe participants for greater clarity and depth on the research problem and is well suited to thematic analysis (Jonhson & Christensen 2014). Questions were formulated as open-ended in order to encourage participants to speak freely in their own words (Jonhson & Christensen 2014). In this study, to explore the values and visions of parents and their insights within their socio-cultural realities meaningfully, the guide focused on five main areas: family values and parenting ideals, educational aspirations, cultural beliefs and practices, emotional well-being and post-pandemic adaptations. Each participant was

TABLE 1: Participants and their codes.

Gender for participants	Age in years	Occupation	Code
Male	32	Primary school teacher	P1
Male	29	Informally employed	P2
Female	35	Health worker	P3
Male	22	Gardener	P4
Female	42	Vendor	P5
Female	34	House maid	P6

free to select the venue and time to be interviewed. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min, and with the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. As the researcher, I also took observational notes on tone, body language and context (Jonhson & Christensen 2014). Lastly, the transcripts that represented the complete verbal data from each session made up the dataset for analysis.

Interview schedules: Individual and Focus group

The semi-structured individual interview schedule focussed on what parents viewed as important in their children's development during the early years. Beliefs and practices and traditional and cultural values were key to how these affected their parental roles after COVID-19. Supporting their children during COVID-19 was key to how they engaged their children.

The focus group interview schedule dealt with key values and support given by parents during the pandemic. It also focussed on the role that technological devices, traditional and community resources played to support their children. Parents were challenged to share their aspirations on how they would like to see ECD programmes based on their experiences of the support of their children during COVID-19.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report patterns within the data. Nowell, Norris and White (2017) describe the thematic analysis as being a very flexible way of sourcing detailed data within qualitative data. In analysing data, the study followed the six stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013). The analysis stages proceeded through data familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and write-up.

The process of thematic analysis for the study followed a systematic and reflective journey, beginning with data familiarisation. The researcher thoroughly read and re-read transcripts from six semi-structured interviews with parents (coded as P1 to P6) and one focus group discussion (coded as PFG). This immersive engagement allowed for the initial recognition of patterns and the emotional tone underpinning parents' narratives regarding their children's care, development and education after COVID-19 disruptions.

Following familiarisation, the researcher undertook systematic coding of the transcripts. Meaningful extracts from participants' statements were identified and assigned descriptive codes that captured specific ideas. For instance, the following quote was coded as 'emotional awareness':

> 'I didn't know my four year old had anxiety until I stayed with him full time. I have learnt to listen more and to comfort him and not just discipline.' (P6, Female ,34 years old)

Similarly, a statement from PFG, 'The pandemic made us realise that we are not just parents, we are part and parcel of the education team', was coded as 'parental involvement in learning'. These initial codes represented recurring ideas and were kept consistent across the dataset.

As the coding developed, related codes were clustered into categories. For example, codes such as 'emotional awareness', 'prioritising mental well-being' and 'understanding child's needs' were grouped under the category 'Parental Emotional Reconnection'. Likewise, codes such as 'home-school collaboration', 'supervising learning at home' and 'valuing teacher-parent dialogue' were organised under 'Redefined Parental Roles in Education'.

From these categories, broader themes began to emerge. The category 'Parental Emotional Reconnection' contributed to the overarching theme 'Revaluating Health, Nutrition Hygiene and Well-being', which captured how the pandemic prompted parents to rediscover and prioritise the emotional and developmental needs of their children. The category 'Redefined Parental Roles in Education' was expanded into the theme 'Rediscovery of the Home as a Learning Environment', signifying how parents began to see themselves not just as caregivers but as active partners in their children's early learning.

Once themes were finalised, they were clearly defined and named to reflect their core ideas. The final write-up stage integrated these themes into a coherent narrative supported by rich, contextual participant quotes. The codes, grouped first into conceptually linked categories and then into themes, provided a grounded yet interpretive understanding of how the pandemic catalysed a renaissance in how parents view ECD.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa's College of Education Ethics Review Committee (No. 2022/11/09/14036924/42/AM). Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection and all participants provided informed consent. All participants were provided with information pertaining to their rights as research participants, such as the right to withdraw or decline to answer any question at any time. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity by removing identifying details from transcripts. Pseudonyms were used in reporting findings. Furthermore, audio files and transcripts were stored securely.

Results

The COVID-19 pandemic was a turning point in the history of ECD in Zimbabwe as its effects altered and reshaped parental visions, values and expectations of their children's education and future. In this post-pandemic period, there was a paradigm shift in their visions and values as their sentiments revealed a desire for resilience, adaptability,

inclusivity and an education system that cushions children for an unpredictable future. Key issues centred on learning loss and recovery, parents' emerging roles in education, the digital divide and technology integration, socio-economic disparities, health and safety precautions, and government and community support. The notation P is used to represent quotes from parents and PFG is used to represent focus group interviews. The most outstanding quotes selected from the data are presented under each theme.

Rediscovery of the home as a learning environment

Pre-pandemic views of parents indicated that they saw their children's learning as the responsibility of schools only. Their views shifted with the advent of the pandemic. One of the first of these shifts cited by parents was the recognition that learning not only centres in the classroom but also extends beyond the classroom. Parents saw children's education as a shared responsibility between the early childhood centre and the family. As pointed out by a parent of a 5-year-old child:

> 'Before the pandemic I saw paying school fees for my child as the only duty, I left everything in the hands of the school. COVID-19 was a good lesson for me. Now I realise that I must be involved in my child's education all the way.' (P2, Male, 29 years old)

This sentiment was also echoed by participants P3 and P5:

> 'Before the pandemic, I used to depend entirely on the school, but this changed during the lockdown, I saw that children need parents' support in their learning at home.' (P3, Male, 35 years old)

> 'The pandemic opened my eyes that learning doesn't only happen at school. Our homes are learning spaces too and as a parent I am part of that environment.' (P5, Female, 42 years old)

In the focus group discussion, this same vein of shifting attitudes can be traced in the following comments:

> 'The pandemic made us realise that we are not just parents, we are part and parcel of the education team. We now go for meetings and ask questions we never asked before.' (P2, Male, 32 years old)

> 'Some of us didn't know how to support children with school activities before, but now we've learnt through asking questions and trial and error.' (P2, Male, 32 years old)

This shift in attitude was reported by many parents. Across both interviews and group discussions, there is a consistent reflection of transformation in how parents view their roles. They indicated their willingness to be actively engaged in centre activities and view education as a shared responsibility between school and families. The pandemic is seen as a catalyst for both increased participation and a cultural shift in parenting. Nurturing, teaching and supporting learning at home became a shared and valued responsibility.

The COVID-19-induced learning gaps

Under this theme, a number of issues were raised. Parents expressed concerns over the learning losses that children experienced during the pandemic. Participants were agitated over the developmental losses that accrued because of the prolonged closure of ECD centres. This was shown by some of the sentiments expressed. A participant expressed:

> 'As a parent I felt disillusioned. I didn't want my child to feel left behind because of the time schools were closed. I expected the centre to come up with structured programmes that help children to learn what they missed. Learning is not just about moving forward but making sure that children have understood.' (P1, Male, 32 years old)

This parent was referring to how children were promoted to the next grade level without repeating the grade level they missed. Another parent raised the same sentiments:

> 'You know the government acted as if everything was back to normal and yet everyone knew children did not go to school for a long time.' (P3, Female, 35 years old)

Some parents showed their distress:

> 'My little girl missed nearly two years of school! Who is going to teach all that? I didn't have the money to pay for extra lessons. The government should give us resources so no child is left behind.' (P6, Female, 34 years old)

Early childhood development in the Zimbabwean context assumes that children have had full access to structured play-based early experiences for them to be promoted from one grade to the next, for example, from ECD A to ECD B or from ECD B to Grade 1; ECD A and ECD B are all situated in primary schools and are therefore under the leadership of the primary school head. However, COVID-19-induced school closures meant children missed a yearlong of in-person instruction and development support. Despite children not accomplishing the expected milestones, they were promoted to the next level.

The pandemic exposed structural weaknesses in infrastructural development in Zimbabwe's ECD centres. The use and importance of digital tools in remote learning became centre stage. While in some families there was a lack of access to digital devices and Wi-Fi connectivity, parents acknowledged the need for children to be technologically competent from a tender age. A father of a 4-year-old commented:

> 'When schools were ordered to close, we didn't have any of the digital tools at home. My child was completely cut off from learning. I told myself that I was going to work very hard and provide these resources. I want all my children to grow up knowing how to use a computer and a smart phone to navigate online learning because the future is digital.' (P3, Female, 35 years old)

This shift in visions and values saw parents in the study calling for the government to expand access to digital educational tools. From focus group discussions, this statement was repeated by participants:

> 'In our area, not all families have internet connectivity or digital tools at home. If another disaster comes in future and online learning comes back, there should be support to make sure every child has the necessary tools.' (P1, Male, 32 years old)

Another parent shared the same sentiment:

> 'It was unfair that most of the children in our area did not access both the radio and television lessons just because we don't have internet and reliable electricity. There should be offline learning choices or better provision of digital resources.' (P4, Male, 22 years old)

One of the weaknesses revealed by the pandemic was inequalities in the ECD sector. Parents lamented their inability to expose their children to quality education because of their poor socio-economic status. Parents expected the government to come to their rescue. One parent lamented:

> 'Our children did not go to school for almost two years. The government need to provide equal education for every child.' (P2, Male, 29 years old)

Another parent lamented:

> 'We expect the government to step in and provide quality education for all and not just leave it to parents. There should be policies and adequate funding for Early Childhood Development so that every child benefits.' (P3, Female, 35 years old)

The general consensus in focus group discussions was that parents want the government to provide free or subsidised ECD programmes, better resources and infrastructure.

Besides the call for equity, results indicated that parents emphasised the importance of instilling values and cultural identity in their children's growth and development. Parents want schools to teach moral values and life skills that are anchored in Zimbabwean heritage. One parent reported that when schools reopened at the end of the pandemic, her child's teacher was not happy about the foul language and unruly behaviour her child was displaying. This parent blamed this undesirable trait on the amount of time children remained confined at home. Nevertheless, this parent encouraged other parents as follows:

> 'Always teach our children who they are and to know our tradition, appropriate language and our way of life, hunhu or ubuntu despite the circumstances.' (P6, Female, 34 years old)

Parents in the study felt that a strong foundation in cultural identity was helpful to children in their development.

Revaluating health, nutrition hygiene and well-being

This theme reflects how the COVID-19 pandemic steered parents to reassess the physical health, nutrition, hygiene and emotional stability of their children. The pandemic shifted parents' priorities, thus bringing holistic child well-being into centrality as an integral aspect of ECD. Parents admired the smaller class sizes, which prevailed during the pandemic for health protection. Parents had this to say:

> 'In government schools there are always large classes. I didn't see anything wrong until I witnessed smaller classes during the pandemic. Now I want a smaller class size for my child.' (P3, Female, 35 years old)

> 'Small class sizes and single desk sitting are good for disease prevention.' (P5, Female, 42 years old)

Parents acknowledged the importance of adhering to strict hygiene standards in ECD centres and want this to continue during post-pandemic period. This was shown in statements such as:

> 'When I visited my child's centre, I advised the teacher to always have clean water, sanitisers and a safe environment. It is a sad day if we go back to the way things were before the pandemic.' (P2, Male, 29 years old)

> 'I didn't know my four-year-old had anxiety until I stayed with him full time. I have learnt to listen more and to comfort him and not just discipline.' (P6, Female, 34 years old)

Results revealed that health and hygiene in ECD centres were of major concern to parents. Parents indicated that the journey for reshaping ECD still had roadblocks for successful implementation. Participants cited the persistence of economic hurdles and infrastructural deficits in schools as challenges that faced many families in the provision of quality education for their children. Participant 1 summarised this point by saying:

> 'As parents we are still incapacitated to provide all the resources needed at early childhood centres. Many early childhood centres still lack proper facilities to support digital learning. We need the government to invest in early childhood programs.' (P1, Male, 32 years old)

In the focus group discussion, these comments were aired:

> '[*E*]ven little things like washing hands and covering food became important to us. Health became part of parenting. We now make sure they eat breakfast and carry healthy snacks to school. It's now part of our daily routine. After the pandemic, I saw that children need to feel safe. We reduced shouting and started encouraging them more.' (P5, Female, 42 years old)

Participants' comments reveal a paradigm shift in how the parents in the study perceived ECD. They now viewed it not just as an academic process but as one interrelated with health, nutrition and emotional security. The comments also reflect post-pandemic learning and adaptation as parents reevaluated the conditions necessary for children's growth and safety.

Shifting gender roles in child development

Results from this theme showed that the pandemic disrupted traditional caregiving patterns and prompted a notable shift in the roles of mothers and fathers in ECD. Participants shared that fathers who previously were less involved in hands-on caregiving support took a more active role in childrearing. Mothers reported a shift from isolated responsibility to shared parenting, especially during the lockdowns.

One participant commented:

> 'I used to go out to work and never knew how hard it was at home. Now I respect my wife more and help more.' (P6, Female, 34 years old)

Other participants echoed the same sentiments:

> 'I noticed my wife was overwhelmed, so I started helping with supporting children's activities. It made me feel more connected.' (P4, Male, 22 years old)

> 'There is more teamwork in our house now. We learnt that raising a child is not a one-person job.' (P1, Male, 32 years old)

Participants during the focus group discussion reiterated this paradigm shift in child rearing:

> 'Fathers were forced to become part of the learning process. Some enjoyed it. It changed how they view themselves. Men used to just provide money. But during lockdown they were at home and they started bonding with the children. Lockdown made us realise that parenting should not depend on gender. We're trying to keep that balance even now.' (P6, Female, 34 years old)

The theme reflects an important post-pandemic transition in family dynamics and gendered parenting roles.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic was a crunch moment that disrupted routines, reconfigured social structures and revealed both vulnerabilities and strengths within early childhood systems globally (Benner & Mistry 2020:236–243). Within this shifting landscape, parents emerged as central figures in the reimagination of ECD settings. The findings of this study revealed that the pandemic catalysed a renaissance in parental visions and values. This was marked by a radical reevaluation of roles, priorities and relationships in the upbringing and education of young children. The findings of this study, grounded in the voices of Zimbabwean parents through both interviews and focus group discussions, reveal a transformative shift in parental perceptions and practices. The discussion presented here interprets these findings using Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, offering theoretical grounding to explore how the post-pandemic era has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of ECD at the family and community levels.

Rediscovery of the home as a learning environment

One of the most notable findings was parents' realisation that the home could be a rich environment for learning. Previously, many parents externalised learning to formal institutions, viewing education as the responsibility of ECD teachers and schools. The lockdowns necessitated by the pandemic made it clear that learning could not be confined to the classroom, prompting a paradigm shift. As some participants remarked:

> '[*B*]efore the pandemic I saw paying school fees for my child as the only duty, I left everything in the hands of the school. COVID-19 was a good lesson for me. Now I realise that I must be involved in my child's education all the way.' (P2, Male, 29 years old)

This sentiment was also echoed by a participant:

> 'Before the pandemic, I used to depend entirely on the school, but this changed during the lockdown, I saw that children need parents' support in their learning at home.' (P3, Female, 35 years old)

Comments such as these reinforced this shift. This transformation aligns closely with Mezirow's notion of a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow 2000), which is a core component of transformative learning theory. The closure of schools disrupted assumptions about learning, pushing parents to engage in critical reflection and reconsider the learning potential embedded in everyday home life. The redefinition of the home as a legitimate and powerful site of learning reflects a perspective transformation, as parents moved from passive observers to active facilitators of development.

Likewise, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory supports this finding by illustrating the intensified role of the microsystem, the home. It became more central and was reshaped. With the school temporarily removed, the home microsystem had to absorb both caregiving and educational functions, thus strengthening its developmental significance.

The COVID-19-induced learning gaps

This theme captures parents' reflections on how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted their children's learning, leading to significant gaps in early literacy, numeracy, social skills and developmental routines. These gaps were more pronounced for families with limited access to digital devices, structured learning materials or guidance from educators during school closures.

During the pandemic, parents found themselves as facilitators of their children's learning. Results showed that while some parents welcomed that move, some felt that the ECD sector needed to provide parents with training on how to support home learning. This resonates with results from a study by Garcia and Weiss (2020). The study recommended parental involvement during the pandemic as emergencies can lead to negative impact on the educational process and outcomes. This fosters a stronger home-school collaboration that allows parents to contribute meaningfully to children's education and development. COVID-19 pandemic also nudged parents to appreciate indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual beliefs and community cohesion. Thus, parents wanted a situation where ECD policies and curricula reflected local languages, values and beliefs. Participants showed reluctance in always adopting westernised pedagogical

models that they perceived as culturally distant and inaccessible in rural and high-density areas. This clearly demonstrated that the macrosystemic setting significantly shaped parental visions and values for ECD.

During the pandemic, the remote support for learning model served no purpose for ECD children because of the lack of resources and parental capability in digital knowledge. That being the case, the effects of the pandemic on children were centred on the inequalities it created along the socio-economic lines. Parents wanted this to be addressed as it was in variance with the *Zimbabwe Children's Act 5.06 of 2001*, the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) and the Education Amendment Bill of 2019. These statutes spell out and guarantee the right to quality education for every child (Mukushi & Chinamora 2021). Additionally, Zimbabwe is a member of international bodies such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals with reference to Goal 4 among other treaties that recognise the value of inclusive and quality education for every child (Mbulayi, Makuyana & Kang'ethe 2021:565–583). Parents also highlighted the need for stronger collaboration between families, teachers and policymakers in shaping the future of ECD. The results indicated that parents wanted to be more involved in their children's education than before. In his study, Packman (2020) revealed that parents in his study expected to invest more in the learning process and wanted more involvement in the future.

These findings reinforce that learning loss was not limited to academic skills but included holistic developmental domains such as socio-emotional growth, behavioural regulation and readiness for structured schooling.

Revaluating health, nutrition and emotional well-being

Another clear post-pandemic shift was parents' heightened focus on emotional and nutritional well-being as integral to child development. The pandemic illuminated vulnerabilities in children's physical and psychological health, and many parents responded by prioritising food security, mental health and emotional connection. This shift reflects the expansion of the parental lens beyond academic learning to include affective and physiological dimensions of development.

Mezirow's theory explains how parents underwent reflective learning, realising that holistic development includes emotional and physical well-being and not just cognitive milestones (Mezirow 2000).

Bronfenbrenner's outer circle, called chronosystem, played a role as parents' responses evolved as the pandemic stretched on, shaping how they now prioritised well-being in the long term. The pandemic heightened awareness of the importance of maintaining clean and safe learning environments:

> 'In government schools there are always large classes. I didn't see anything wrong until I witnessed smaller classes during the pandemic. Now I want a smaller class size for my child.' (P3, Female, 35 years old)

Two parents lamented:

> 'Small class sizes and single desk sitting are good for disease prevention.' (P5, Female, 42 years old)

Parents recognise the importance of maintaining high hygiene standards in ECD centres and most expected schools to implement strict hygiene measures, provide adequate sanitation facilities and ensure that classrooms are well ventilated. As a result of the culmination of problems induced by the pandemic, a spike of bad behaviour and language was reported by parents. Mugwara (2020) argues that the unaffordability of the means for remote learning brewed unacceptable behaviour in children in some ECD centres. This finding also resonated with findings in China where parents and teachers reported children displaying unruly behaviours (Dong et al. 2020). The importance of ingraining traditional values and cultural identity in children's learning is important in their upbringing:

> 'After the pandemic, I saw that children need to feel safe. We reduced shouting and started encouraging them more.' (P6, Female, 34 years old)

Hence, the pandemic reinforced the call for an ECD curricula that include indigenous knowledge systems and moral education, so that children develop a sense of identity and responsibility (Government of Zimbabwe 2024–2030).

Under Mezirow's theory, this reflects a transformational learning process in which the role of parenting evolved to encompass dimensions previously left to professionals such as nutritionists and psychologists. Parents began to engage in reflective action, changing their family routines, budgeting practices and conversations with children to support a more holistic form of development. This also reflects a widening of the child's microsystem in Bronfenbrenner's model, where care practices within the home, including food preparation and emotional dialogue, become more developmentally stimulating. The pandemic acted as a chronosystemic event, a major sociohistorical shift compelling parents to see their children's well-being as central to resilience and lifelong learning.

Shifting gender roles in child development

The study found that traditional gender roles within families began to shift during the pandemic. Fathers, who were previously less involved in early childhood routines, began to take on more active roles in caregiving and learning facilitation. PFG commented:

> 'I used to go out to work and never knew how hard it was at home. Now I respect my wife more and help more. Lockdown made us realise that parenting should not depend on gender. We're trying to keep that balance even now.' (P1, Male, 32 years old)

Here, we observe transformative learning as a collective social experience, in which the crisis of the pandemic acted as a catalyst for challenging entrenched gender norms. Perspective transformation occurred not only at the individual level but also within the family unit, revealing how crises can expand awareness and trigger behavioural shifts that align with evolving values (Mezirow 2000).

From the lens of Bronfenbrenner, this reflects shifts at the macrosystem level – societal values and cultural norms around parenting were disrupted, allowing for new configurations of roles within the microsystem of the family. Moreover, the chronosystem, which captures life transitions and sociohistorical circumstances, provides the temporal context through which these transformations were made possible.

The post-pandemic era initiated what can be seen as a transformative renaissance in parenting within the ECD sector. Parents' reflections and actions demonstrated that the pandemic was more than a crisis but a pedagogical pivot. Using Mezirow's transformative learning theory, the findings show that parents experienced disorienting dilemmas that led to deep critical reflection and meaningful behavioural change. They did not simply adapt; they reconstructed their roles and assumptions, moving from passive supporters to active co-educators and well-being advocates.

In parallel, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory helps contextualise these transformations within the broader social, economic and cultural systems. The redefinition of the microsystem (family), renewed interactions in the mesosystem (school-home) and shifts in the macrosystem (societal norms about parenting and education) underscore that this renaissance is both personal and systemic.

Implications

Creating opportunities for parents to voice and realise their visions, values and expectations includes an awareness of the influence parents exert on centres to create a supportive community within ECD centres. Parents' experiences of the pandemic influence their expectations to participate more in their children's education and development in the post-pandemic era. The influence of transformative learning theory helped parents change their perspectives after experiencing a disorienting dilemma that challenged their existing beliefs and values (Mezirow 2000). If there is shared decision-making between the centre and parents, holistic development is assured and no child is left behind. Parents know that their concerns are addressed and appreciated and that they have a voice which is heard by the centre.

Conclusion

This study explored parents' visions, values and expectations in the post-pandemic era. The post-pandemic presented itself as a transformative point in the history of ECD in Zimbabwe. Results showed that parental visions and values played a central role in shaping the future of ECD in Zimbabwe. Participants shared a diversity of views, and they highlighted the need for inclusive and transformative processes in ECD to ensure a robust programme. Parents not only acknowledge the importance of technology use but also want a balance between technology and traditional practices in education. They also highlighted the need for continual collaboration and dialogue between parents, government and other ECD stakeholders to envision ECD programmes that meet the needs and expectations of all stakeholders. Thus, the results show that the future of ECD lies in a holistic approach that takes on board academic learning, digital literacy and cultural heritage.

Acknowledgements

This article is partially based on the author's thesis titled 'Experiences of School Heads of Early Childhood Development Programmes on children's holistic development in a pandemic context' towards the degree of PhD in the Department of Early Childhood Education, University of South Africa, South Africa on 2025, with supervisors Prof. N.C. Phatudi and Dr T.A.L. Phala. It is available here: https://uir.unisa.ac.za/.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

This study was conducted by G.K.C., under the supervision of N.C.P. and T.A.P., who contributed equally to the research.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the first author, G.K.C., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or publisher. The authors are responsible for this study's results, findings and content.

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