

PLAY IN A COVID FRAME

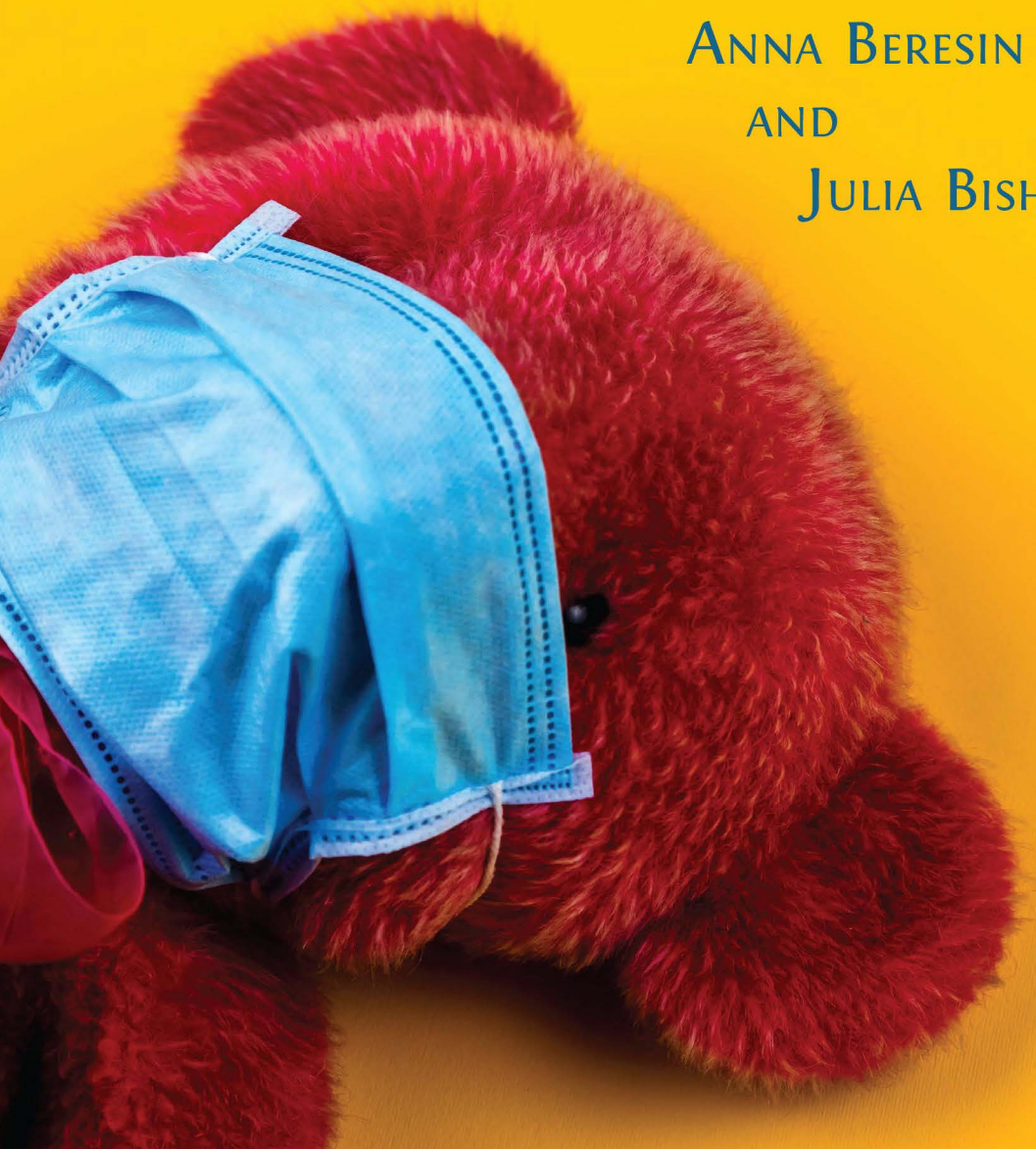
EVERYDAY PANDEMIC CREATIVITY
IN A TIME OF ISOLATION

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13. Children's Emerging Play and Experience in the Covid-19 Era: Educational Endeavours and Changes in South Korea

Pool Ip Dong

Covid-19 and Early Childhood Education and Care in South Korea

The coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has produced dramatic changes in the lives of adults and children globally. As one of the countries affected by Covid-19, South Korea decided to lock down schools and keep people at home in February 2020. Interestingly, South Korea was one of the countries that rapidly controlled Covid-19 transmission and had less severe national social distancing policies than other countries (Dighe et al. 2020). Indeed, most daycare centres and kindergartens operated full-time classes in the early days of the Covid-19 outbreak.¹ As

1 Early childhood education and care in South Korea can be divided into two categories: daycare centres and kindergartens. Under the Ministry of Health and Welfare, daycare centres serve children up to five years old. Meanwhile, kindergartens serve three- to five-year-olds and are similar to preschools in the United States (Byun and Slavin 2020). Sometimes, the word 'preschool' can be used to help readers understand, but I will use the word 'kindergarten' in this chapter.

the pandemic worsened in South Korea, however, the Korean Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) announced substantial safety measures. Only a few daycare centres and kindergartens provided childcare services for working parents in urgent need of family care, called '(at school) emergency childcare services', while most centres and kindergartens stopped physical attendance in response to the Korean government's health policies. Considering Korea's high level of education fever (Lee 2005), the decision to implement a school lockdown in South Korea was not an easy one.

Unlike in other countries, schools in South Korea start a new semester on 2 March. The MoE delayed the beginning of the new school year five times and kindergartens and daycare centres opened for classes on 27 May 2020, which was three months later than the usual beginning of the school year. In the meantime, young children stayed at home with their parents, who were working remotely, while the MoE, daycare centres and kindergartens tried to provide young Korean children with diverse opportunities for learning and play through distance education.

This chapter will explain how young Korean children engaged in emerging play experiences, as well as efforts made by Korean parents, teachers and policymakers to offer several playful and educational opportunities for young children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in 2020 and 2021. Recently, studies have increasingly shown the effects on and changes to people's daily lives due to Covid-19 globally (e.g. Rogers 2022). This chapter will give an insight into diverse forms of educational resilience and the (un)expected educational changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Educational Attempts for Young Children's Play during Covid-19

'A Package for Play': A Home-based Play Kit

A national-level, child-centred, play-based curriculum, called the Nuri Curriculum, is available for all children aged three to five years old in South Korea. The Nuri Curriculum is planned and provided free of charge to guarantee equivalent high-quality opportunities for

all children (Dong 2022a). Early childhood teachers, recognizing the importance of play for childhood development and learning in children's lives, employed a range of opportunities and strategies for play at home when schools closed during the Covid-19 pandemic. One example is a home-based play kit called 'A Package for Play'. This package, prepared by metropolitan and provincial education offices across South Korea, consisted of toys and other materials and was sent to homes when children could not attend kindergartens (Figure 13.1). Some daycare centres and kindergartens independently prepared and sent their own 'Package for Play' to children. As a form of home support, early childhood teachers encouraged children to play with the kit and guided parents in using it with children at home (Dong 2022a).



Figure 13.1 'A Package for Play' (including face masks, coloured paper, Play-Doh, balloons, wooden puzzles, paper puzzles, and some snacks), 23 October 2020

<https://www.kjilbo.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=91070>

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When first using 'A Package for Play', most parents and children found it difficult to play with the contents at home. Many parents were embarrassed and confused about how to effectively explain and use the materials in a playful mode with their children. As a result, teachers then sent parents notices and shared diverse and creative methods,

guidelines, and tips for enjoyable and productive play with young children.

'A Package for Play' was normally sent to children once a week but this schedule occasionally varied, depending on each school's situation. Many ECEC teachers considered the kit an effective and economical distance education strategy during the pandemic because it promoted parents' participation and improved their understanding of their children and ECEC (Park, Kim, and Shin 2021). Moreover, some daycare centres and kindergartens lent educational materials and toys to parents to promote children's play at home.

Many ECEC teachers felt that 'A Package for Play' effectively offered children hands-on, play-based activities. They also viewed it as a beneficial way for children and parents to interact through play (Park, Kim, and Shin 2021). Furthermore, some teachers creatively stimulated play participation within families by sharing home-play photos or holding competitions for pictures and videos of play on their class website. This helped children, parents and teachers to interact with each other during the pandemic. Some kindergartens and daycare centres in Korea still actively employ 'A Package for Play' to improve home-school partnerships. Furthermore, many parents welcomed the package because it gives them interesting ideas and information for promoting children's play at home.

Education Portals: Online Spaces for Sharing Play Information

Along with the above initiatives, the MoE, MHW and the Korea Institute of Child Care and Education provided families with information about various modes of play through websites related to Korean ECEC, such as i-Nuri (<http://i-nuri.go.kr>) and Play On (<https://more.goe.go.kr/kids-love>). These websites offer home-based play videos and pictures with guidelines for playing with toys, bodies and materials (such as stones, water, paint, clay and paper). For instance, the i-Nuri web portal was made by the MoE to provide informative educational content for South Korean parents and teachers. This content consists of language play, physical play, dramatic play, art play, science play, safety guidelines and so on. Due to the lack of physical activities and social interaction for children during Covid-19 (Hwang and Jeong 2022), many videos and

photos of play were uploaded and shared to develop children's gross motor, fine motor, and social-emotional skills by promoting prosocial behaviour and physical activity at home.



Figure 13.2 A screen capture from the i-Nuri portal (<http://i-nuri.go.kr>), 2022
Image © Korea Institute of Child Care and Education, 2023, all rights reserved

Another example of online support can be found in an education platform called Play On. This platform was designed by the Office of Education in Gyeonggi Province to promote a child- and play-centred ECEC curriculum and to prevent losses in children's learning during the pandemic. The play content on the platform was developed by early childhood teachers and educators, making it different from other education platforms. The contents on the website were made for children, teachers and parents living in Gyeonggi Province, and provided them with various play videos and guidebooks, as well as useful educational information.

The video content on the website consisted of 148 videos (about two to three minutes long each) covering twenty-nine themes. These videos explained how to play with coloured paper, how to engage in sensory play with flour, how to play with a plastic bottle, and how to explore newspapers. Nam and Choi (2022) analyzed the video content on the Play On platform, arguing that most videos promoted open-ended play

and encouraged young children to actively participate in it through cheerful music, narration and subtitles for young children.

Distance Education with Media: Real-time Interactive Learning and Content-based Learning

Due to the prolonged nature of Covid-19, various methods of distance education were explored and conducted in Korean ECEC settings. Two types of distance education in ECEC were considered: real-time interactive learning (via live-streaming platforms) and content-based learning (via broadcasts or videos) (Korean Educational Development Institute 2020). Interactive online classes for young children had never been trialled in South Korea before the pandemic. At the peak of Covid-19 transmission, daycare centres and kindergartens increasingly started to employ interactive online classes using digital technology. At first, many teachers encountered chaos because they had little experience in or infrastructure for delivering online classes. Nevertheless, the MoE actively supported ECEC teachers who were interested in online classes by providing training, and some schools independently prepared online classes for young children.

According to Cho (2021), many children and teachers met and played together via webinar software platforms (such as Zoom) to sustain and strengthen their relationships. After greetings, they shared play experiences for approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. For instance, a scavenger hunt game was played at home with video cameras displaying children as they searched for and found items (Dong 2022a). Such activities enabled adults and children to interact in a worthwhile manner. However, these play meetings were hard to conduct frequently because parents needed to set up digital devices for them. Thus, the distance education approach was mostly employed in 2020 and 2021.

Recently, despite all daycare centres and kindergartens resuming in-person classes, a few kindergartens still held annual events (e.g. family day) via Zoom because of Covid-19 measures. When many children and parents could not come together, the schools with experience of online distance education provided online spaces for students and their families to participate by providing them with playful activities (Dong 2022a). The Covid-19 pandemic led ECEC teachers to start to use

webinar software platforms, and now the method is broadly applied to meet teachers' various educational aims and needs in South Korea.

Interestingly, the pandemic sometimes forced early childhood teachers to produce their own play videos to demonstrate how children and adults could play with certain materials. Teachers familiar with computers, digital cameras and smartphones made play videos in their classrooms or at home using video editing software programmes or applications, such as Windows Movie Maker and KineMaster. ECEC teachers themselves played in the videos and introduced certain games and music. Some teachers uploaded their play videos on to YouTube and shared them with children and parents in their class. The children then enjoyed these play videos, participated in the suggested activities, and thus played in different ways (Dong 2022a). For instance, when ECEC teachers introduced a play routine with paper cups, young children and parents followed along. In the process, teachers also encouraged young children to play differently with paper cups and to share their play methods with other children in the class. Parents then shared their children's paper cup play activities through photos posted on their class websites (Figure 13.3). Teachers supported children and their parents by replying to their play activity photos and providing educational suggestions (Dong 2022a).



Figure 13.3 Photos on a class website showing children's play with paper cups at home, 12 November 2020

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Moreover, as an alternative way to support children's play and learning in the context of Covid-19, some early childhood teachers used broadcasting programmes and online play videos (Cho 2021; Nam and Choi 2022). For example, a special programme called 'My Home Kindergarten' on the Korea Educational Broadcasting System (EBS), a Korean public educational broadcasting company, was made specifically for young children who could not attend kindergartens and daycare centres, thus supporting their play and care at home in 2020. This programme supported many children who did not have digital devices or did not participate in online classes. Initially, the programme was intended to be broadcast for seven weeks (from 13 April to 28 May 2020). However, it was so popular among children and parents that its broadcasting run was extended. The thirty-minute programme was broadcast every morning from Monday to Thursday until December 2022. Based on the child- and play-centred curriculum, this programme emphasized various physical activities, music, and health and safety information for young children.

Educational Changes from Covid-19 in South Korea

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought many challenges and changes into the lives of young children, their parents and teachers. Above all, the unexpected situation gave rise to different perspectives among Korean teachers and parents on teaching methods and digital media-based learning in ECEC settings. Before the pandemic, the use of digital devices to interact was rare and limited (Kim et al. 2020). However, Covid-19 prevented people from connecting physically and led Korean teachers and parents to find methods to encourage children's play and social interactions through digital media.

This situation resulted in a dramatic change in people's perspectives regarding young children's use of digital media. Before Covid-19, many Korean parents and teachers expressed strong negative attitudes toward children's play with digital media (Erdogan et al. 2019; Dong 2018). However, as they experienced the reality of digital media play, they became more accepting of it and found effective ways for children to harness digital media. In this sense, more and more research was focused on young Korean children's (in)formal learning via YouTube

videos and other forms of digital media at home during Covid-19 (Dong and Henward 2021). Furthermore, many Korean ECEC scholars and teachers started to critically analyse the conservative discourses on digital media in South Korean cultural contexts (Dong 2022b), and actively explored digital media's opening up of new possibilities and capabilities for teachers, or what has been termed 'digital technology knowledge and skills' (Cho 2021).

In addition, owing to Covid-19, Korean teachers began to reconsider their teaching methods, teaching materials and their beliefs about children's play, all of which had previously been taken for granted in ECEC settings. By trying new strategies to deal with pandemic-related difficulties (such as the 'Package for Play' initiatives and distance learning via Zoom and play videos), many teachers were forced to rethink their educational strategies and resilience. For ECEC teachers, the Covid-19 pandemic created chaos and confusion, but it also provided a meaningful opportunity to rethink educational flexibility, develop new teaching competencies, and overcome challenges related to children's play in ECEC.

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic enabled young Korean children and parents to understand the importance of their relationships with each other. Recent studies focusing on young Korean children's views on Covid-19 and play showed that many young Korean children realized the value of their friends (Jo and Park 2021; Yang 2022; Hwang and Jeong 2022). As daycare centres and kindergartens were locked down and most children stayed at home throughout Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021, they could not play and interact with their friends freely. Some measures from the MoE and MHW to prevent coronavirus transmission in classrooms, such as the mandatory wearing of face masks and the imposition of physical distancing measures, forced many children to play alone or to engage in parallel play at a distance under their teacher's surveillance to prevent the spread of the virus (Jo and Park 2021). This situation made young children recognize the value of their playful connections with others, especially regarding their physical, emotional and social interactions with friends through play. For young children, play involves more than playful activities and learning tools. Play is a central part of children's lives and a way of understanding and engaging with one's world. In this sense, the ongoing presence of friends has

been crucial for young children to make sense of their everyday play throughout the pandemic.

Moreover, Covid-19 gave some Korean parents an unexpected chance to channel their anxiety and pressure into an improved understanding of their children through play at home. As mentioned earlier, parents had a hard time caring for their children while working from home. Korean parents were required to support their child's online learning by playing with the 'Package for Play' or preparing for online classes. In the process, many parents had more time than before the pandemic to interact with their children. They were also able to experience (directly or indirectly) ECEC teachers' online classes and consult the information regarding play available via online platforms (Kim, Cho, and Oh 2021). These opportunities helped parents to better understand their children and ECEC (Jo and Park 2021).

However, the Covid-19 pandemic in South Korea has not created exclusively positive experiences or (unexpected) benefits in ECEC. Some challenges and worries also arose among parents and teachers regarding children's development, mental health, and families' socio-economic status (Byun and Slavin 2020; Yang 2022). Some teachers revealed that many children had anxiety or fear of being infected with Covid-19 (Yang 2022). Moreover, as distance education became more common, most schools had access to digital devices and did not face problems; however, some children from low-income families or with working parents could not access distance education via digital media. Thus, the MoE, schools and local governments sought to lend digital devices to those children who needed them for distance learning and employed educational television programmes such as 'My Home Kindergarten' by EBS to ensure educational equity.

In addition, the Korean government has enforced a mandatory mask-wearing rule. Although the outdoor mask mandate has been lifted and individual choice on wearing face masks outdoors is now stressed, the indoor mask-wearing mandate is still strictly imposed (Ministry of Health and Welfare 2022). Under the strict face mask mandate, Korean children and teachers must wear face masks all day at school, except when eating snacks and lunch. Accordingly, an increasing number of researchers have conducted studies on Korean children's language, physical or cognitive development and their perceptions of mask-wearing (Kwon, Jang, and Wang 2022).

At the time of writing, the Covid-19 pandemic has not ended in South Korea. However, all Korean kindergartens and daycare centres have resumed in-person care and education. As part of the new normal created by the Covid-19 pandemic, many ECEC teachers have emphasized the impact of education on children's health and safety. Also, compared to before Covid-19, more children engage in hospital roleplay in ECEC settings (Jo and Park 2021), which might reveal some changed practices among children as a result Covid-19.

Endless Resilience, Attempts and Collaborations for Children's Play in the Covid-19 era

The pandemic changed children's play and everyday practices in Korean ECEC settings. Teachers are still trying to provide young children with sufficient time and opportunities for play despite various constraints. Furthermore, many schools urge children's families to play together to stay connected. The pandemic made it necessary for Korean ECEC teachers and organizations to create ways for children to interact and play with their families to promote children's learning and development. As a result, Korean teachers and families have co-constructed methods for fostering children's education and play.

Given the challenges of the pandemic, Korean scholars have cited a need for an ecological transformation of education in South Korea (Back, Lee, and Park 2020; Dong 2022a). Reacting to new questions and needs, Korean ECEC actors, including teachers, parents, researchers and policymakers, are eagerly exploring and studying a new perspective for accepting and understanding children's emerging play culture and educational ecology. Throughout the pandemic, the value of children's play will not change and may even be enhanced, even if the forms of play are different (Dong 2022a). Thus, new patterns of home-school-community relationships, children's play around analogue and digital media, and peer cultures should be considered through a novel ecological lens to better understand children's emerging play in these fast-changing times. By exploring Korean educational responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, I anticipate that this chapter has given an insightful perspective into diverse education resilience, educational possibilities and implications, and an opportunity to rethink teaching and learning in ECEC settings in the Covid-19 era.

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