



Transforming Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood Care and Education During COVID-19 in a Poor Community of the Cape Flats, South Africa

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Abstract

In this case study I explored the dilemmas of three early childhood care and education (ECCE) teachers in a poor community in the Cape Flats of Cape Town, South Africa during COVID-19, and how they used these dilemmas to transform their teaching. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants and data was collected through a semi-structured interview and thematically analyzed. Ethical clearance was secured from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Mezirow's transformative learning theory was used as an analytical framework for the study. In particular, Mezirow's concept of disorienting dilemmas was used to engage with the dilemmas the ECCE teachers were confronted with during the pandemic. Further, his concept of perspective transformations was used to analyze how the ECCE teachers engaged with these dilemmas to transform their teaching. Findings show that while ECCE teachers' faced disorienting dilemmas of digital inequity and of children's interactive play, they also adopted alternative roles and actions as they engaged in dialogue and shared negotiations, ensuring that the functioning of the ECCE centre would continue in solidarity with the children and parents. These findings have important implications for how local government provide financial and digital support for poor communities during times of crisis.

Keywords Transformative learning theory · Early childhood care and education · Teachers · COVID-19 · Poor communities

Introduction

The global coronavirus pandemic impacted severely on the early childhood education sector which resulted in temporary lockdowns. A UNESCO (2020) report stated that over 1.9 billion students in more than 190 countries were mandated to leave schools. Apart from the deleterious impact of the pandemic on children's learning, it has also had an impact on the social and economic circumstances of children, families, communities, and teachers, especially for children and teachers who come from poor communities. Like many other countries, the South African government implemented regulations for a national lockdown which mandated that all early childhood development (ECD)

services, including preschools, creches, and playgroups, close on the 18th March 2020. This resulted in many social, economic, and educational challenges faced by teachers, children, parents, and communities. To combat the economic challenges, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that an ECD Employment Stimulus Relief Fund of R1.3 billion was to be made available to the ECD workforce, and the Department of Social Development (DSD) later announced that R496 million would be spent on the ECD sector through once-off payments to be paid directly to ECD programs (Ashley-Cooper & Ehrenreich, 2021). However, to date, these funds have not been paid to the South African ECD sector and there has been no accountability for this disappearance (Ashley-Cooper & Ehrenreich, 2021). For a long time, the ECD sector in South Africa has been fraught with challenges such as access to quality ECD services for the poor and vulnerable and professionalization of the workforce, amongst other challenges. To combat these, the department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and European Union (EU) in 2017 collaborated successfully with universities and non-governmental organizations to provide

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funding for projects to improve the qualifications of the ECD sector and to bring together a unified voice for the professionalization of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in South Africa through the Teaching and Learning Development Capacity Improvement Programme (T&LDCIP).

Educationally, while early learning centers have tried to engage with children through online teaching and learning, the impact of COVID-19 has resulted in a forfeiture of children's learning. The nature of early childhood teaching and learning is through play and exploration, calling for physical presence and interaction between teachers and children, which was compromised due to the pandemic. While Baytiyeh (2018) postulated that schools must continue with the help of information and communication technology (ICT) through the use of online e-learning platforms such as Moodle and social apps such as WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook, the reality in the poorest communities in South Africa is that not all parents and caregivers have access to technology, and that the poorest families do not even have cellphones. Stats South Africa (2020) confirms that 37% of families have consistent access to technology and the internet, leaving 63% without this access. This is exacerbated by the average income of families in Manenberg, where this study took place, is between R1601–R2 800 per month, and high levels of crime are present (PNP, 2017/2018). Considering minimal access to technology, some early childhood centers opened their doors after the initial lockdown measures were released, but faced challenges. For example, there was no fantasy play allowed, no sharing of toys, minimal interactions between teachers and children, and many children could not afford to attend the centers. This impacted negatively on teachers' emotional wellbeing, resulting in them experiencing a lack of confidence and despondency. Most early childhood centers who looked forward to the funding promised by the South African government, as indicated above, were highly disappointed and relied on parent fees to cover salaries. The overwhelming impact of COVID-19 also placed huge financial burdens on ECD sites. Many had to close their doors, with the result that many teachers, of whom most are Black women, lost their jobs. The Plight of the ECD Workforce (2020) South Africa reported 99% of caregivers stopped paying fees due to the lockdown, 83% of ECD operators were not able to pay salaries of staff during lockdown, 96% of ECD operators indicated that their income was insufficient to pay operating costs, 68% of ECD centers were concerned about not being able to open after lockdown, 35% were registered with the unemployment fund, 13% were registered with the Companies and Intellectual Property Commission (CIPC), and 45% were registered with the South African Revenue Service (SARS). These realities, both political and economic, illustrate the gap between rhetoric

and reality and the overall lack of awareness amongst politicians of the realities of the poorest families. A study by Khlaif et al. (2021) explored how twenty middle school teachers responded to school closures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the violence-struck countries of Afghanistan, Libya, and Palestine. Teachers developed skills to use emerging technologies and designed suitable digital content whilst building strong relationships with the local community to undertake their responsibility in emergency remote learning (ERL) by establishing community centres for families who were poor. The issues around access of poor families and communities to educational technology are one aspect, but there is also a misunderstanding of the processes of early childhood learning and development and empowering communities. Simply asking families to use Zoom or Teams is a poor substitute for face-to-face interaction and hands-on activities for young children.

While the story of COVID-19 reveals a bleak picture of how ECD was negatively impacted in South Africa and internationally, research indicates the pandemic also resulted in positive change. A survey by the Save the Children Fund, (2020a) of parents in the United States reveals a large number of children were spending between two to three hours a day on online learning while 4% of children were spending six hours on their education, which is equivalent to the time of a normal pre-kindergarten day. 72% of these children were also happy to spend time at home with their families. Another study by Livari et al. (2020), shows how teachers and children in Finland and India flourished and transformed their teaching and learning despite facing challenges during COVID-19.

As there is limited research carried out on COVID-19 related to early childhood education in the South African context, I carried out a small-scale qualitative research project that focused on the dilemmas that ECCE teachers in a poor community faced related to COVID-19 and how they used these dilemmas to transform their teaching. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the dilemmas that ECCE teachers in a poor community face during COVID-19?
2. How have ECCE teachers used these dilemmas to transform their teaching, and if so in what ways?

This study is imperative as it showcases that despite the dilemmas ECCE teachers in a community with high levels of poverty and crime faced with COVID-19 and other socio-economic challenges, they transformed their teaching. The intention of this study is to highlight how a small group of teachers took the initiative to transform their teaching by supporting the children and engaging closely with the community. The theoretical framework is presented, followed by

the methods, findings, discussion, conclusion, and implication of findings.

Theoretical Framework

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1996) provides critical insights about how teaching and learning can be transformed and was an appropriate theory choice during this unprecedented time of COVID-19. Mezirow (1996) emphasized the importance of experience, understanding one's frame of reference, the role of a disorienting dilemma, importance of critical reflection and critical self-reflection, the role of rational discourse, and the important role of dialogue in communicating with others. This foundation enables learners to embark on new ways of thinking, deciding, and feeling based on their experience (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Transformative learning theory involves making new and revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience in the world (Mezirow, 1996). A report carried out by Calleja and Borg (2014) indicates how dialogic communication was enhanced when a group of educators engaged to reflect on the realities of their practice in relation to their new understandings. The processes of mentoring and training were implemented in a way that respected the pace and curiosities of the participants, and which allowed space for reflection and praxis.

Transformative learning comprises different components which include disorienting dilemma, perspective transformation, critical reflection, and critical self-reflection. Mezirow (1996) postulated that a disorienting dilemma is caused by a life crisis or a major change in an individual's life which causes a personal transformation. This was later revised as perspective transformation (Imel, 1998). In this study the main disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1997) that these teachers, children, and the community faced was COVID-19; other sub-categories of the disorienting dilemma were digital inequity and interactive play.

Perspective transformation occurs when, after an individual experiences a dilemma, the individual understands that old ways of realising matters are no longer relevant. When this happens the individual adopts new and revised patterns and integrates both old and new patterns (Imel, 1998). Mezirow (1996) warns that dilemmas are resolved when individual moves from an unexamined way of thinking to a more examined and critical way of thinking, which cannot be resolved only through acquiring more information, enhancing problem-solving skills, or adding to one's competencies. Perspective transformation is about becoming critically aware of how our beliefs influence or restrict ways in which we understand and feel about the world, and reflecting on these assumptions in order to create a more inclusive and integrating perspective, making new decisions to create new and transformed understandings (Mezirow & Associates,

1990). Perspective transformation is underpinned by the following steps: disorienting dilemma; self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame; critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural or psychic assumptions; recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and others have negotiated a similar change; exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions; planning of a *course* of action; acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; provisional trying of new roles; building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective. All these steps do not have to be completed, nor do they need to be completed in a linear manner. Perspective transformation was initially described by Mezirow as a linear process, but was later described as 'recursive, evolving and spiralling in nature'. Another amendment was the inclusion of feelings of intense surprise and not just limiting the process of perspective transformation to feelings of guilt or shame (Taylor in Mezirow & Associates, 2000). The most intense stage is that of anger, which needs to be resolved before the individual moves on (Taylor, 1997). Perspective transformation can take place on an individual or personal level, or on a group or collective level (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Mezirow (1991) added another phase that fell between the eighth and ninth, and that is of renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships (Baumgartner, 2012). Mezirow also placed emphasis on the importance of how personal meanings are developed and validated through human interaction and communication. Later, Mezirow expanded his work to include social transformation and social action as essential objectives of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991).

Transformative learning develops through reflection and conversation with others (Mezirow, 1996). When a researcher or learner begins a process of reflective discussion, this is a form of intervention and can become 'action research' (McNiff et al., 1992). A process of 'perspective transformation' is then developed. As learners reflect, they begin to question, evaluate, and compare encounters so that sense can be made of these diverse experiences. The learner then begins to apply new experiences to prior knowledge and is able to form new understandings or makes frames of reference about the world and others in the world. Thus, one can argue that transformative learning contributes to constructing new knowledge after reflection and analysis of a prior situation. Mezirow (1996) states that a person's actions in a new experience are guided by a frame of reference. According to Mezirow (1991, 2012; Mezirow & Associates, 2000) a person's self-critical reflection can give rise to transformation of a frame of reference comprised of two components, habits of mind and points of view. Mezirow (1991) indicated three habits of mind: epistemic (knowledge of how a person uses acquired or possessed knowledge), sociolinguistic

knowledge (how one uses language in a social setting), and psychological knowledge (how people perceive themselves). Habits of mind are made up of a person's point of view, their feelings, and judgements towards others, or they can also be institutional habits of mind or habits of practice. Habits of mind tend to remain static, while points of view transform as a person has an experience that does not fit into their previously perceived perspectives and is able to reflect critically on their previous assumptions.

Five of the ten steps of perspective transformation that were relevant to this study were used to analyse the data: being confronted with a disorienting dilemma; recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and others have negotiated a similar change; exploration of new roles, relationships and action; building of competence and self confidence in new roles and relationships; and the recognition of one's own preferences and feelings as a researcher and how these are minimised.

The ECCE teachers in this study were faced with disorienting dilemmas when COVID-19 struck. The main disorienting dilemma was COVID-19, and there were other sub-disorienting dilemmas such as online inequity and interactive play. These resulted in concern and a self-examination through discussion and offering possibilities for change. Transformative learning was evidenced as ECCE teachers engaged in a process of reflection and dialogue, not just amongst themselves but with parents as well. This dialogue enabled the teachers and parents to express their thoughts and concerns about the re-opening of the ECCE centre, teaching online, and communicating with parents.

Methodology

This study took place in Mannenberg, a township area of the Cape Flats in Western Cape, South Africa. The apartheid government created this township for low-income “coloured” families. The area is affected by socio-economic challenges whereby gang crimes and shooting incidents are

prevalent. The township has ECCE centres that are privately owned, as well as some that are attached to public schools. The privately owned centres usually cater to children aged from birth to five years while the public schools are aimed at children in the Pre-grade R and Grade R (reception year) to Grade 3, which forms part of the Foundation Phase of primary schooling. Grade R is the year before formal schooling. The global pandemic resulted in many private early childhood centres closing their doors and those that still operated turned away babies focusing only on teaching children from three to five years. I opted to use a qualitative approach with a case study (Cresswell, 2017). Qualitative researchers embark on contextual choices when choosing research contexts which include the opportunity of negotiating access and the possibility that research sites have to provide diverse, interrelated data (Holliday, 2016). A case study is used when a researcher attempts to understand a real life-bounded situation called a case. While a case study can assist researchers in understanding a small number of cases, it does not enable researchers to make generalisations about how other related or similar cases may perform. Considering this, the case study aligned well with the interpretivist research paradigm, as I sought to explore the dilemmas ECCE teachers faced during COVID-19 and how they used these dilemmas to transform their teaching.

Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was most appropriate during the time of the pandemic, as the study criteria required that teachers needed to be teaching in an ECCE centre and have an appropriate qualification in ECCE. I also knew one of the ECCE teachers whose family owned the ECCE centre and who was an former ex-student I had lectured on the Diploma in Grade R (Reception Year). I made telephonic contact with her and she forwarded my request to carry out the study to her family, to which they agreed. Ethical clearance was granted by the institution at which I lecture. The teachers also consented

Table 1 Participants demographics

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Ages of children worked with	Qualification level	Number of years teaching at the centre (year)	Number of children per class
Teacher A	F	34	5–6	Diploma Gr R (level 6 ECD certificate)	15	17
Teacher B	F	24	3–4	Level 4 ECD certificate	1	25
Teacher C	F	31	4–5	Level 5 ECD certificate	3	19
Teacher D	F	56	2–3 and 4–5 yrs	Centre Manager	19	Overall management and teaching

Pseudonyms were used for all participants

through signing a letter of consent informing them that their confidentiality and anonymity would be respected and they could withdraw at any time (Table 1).

Data Collection

Focus group interviews took place with three teachers and the centre manager. Social distancing was maintained as each participant, the researcher, and research assistant sat three metres apart. Focus group interviews are a democratic and inclusive process, in which the participants are valued as active partners, whose professional perspectives will be enhanced by the process of involvement. My choice for using a focus group interview was guided by the fact that I wanted to create a feeling of belonging during the interviews, considering that COVID-19 had impacted negatively on ECCE teachers. I, therefore, thought that this would give the teachers an opportunity to share their experiences about teaching during the pandemic. The focus group interview was conducted in English, audio recorded and transcribed, and lasted for approximately 90 min.

Data Analysis

A thematic approach was used to analyse the data (Yin, 2003). Common themes were categorized; similarities and differences were identified. Trustworthiness and credibility were established by the participants re-examining data and adding additional information if necessary. Data were read again to the participants to ensure that no loss of information occurred as the data were transcribed. This was undertaken as a deliberate step to assure accuracy of information (Table 2). The questions included in Table 2 were asked to all the participants during the focus group interviews.

Findings

The findings are presented in two main themes. The first theme presents disorienting dilemmas which are sub-categorised as disorienting dilemmas of digital inequity and of

interactive play. The second theme focuses on perspective transformations.

In this study the main disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1997) facing these teachers, children, and the community was the COVID-19 pandemic, while the other sub-categories of the disorienting dilemmas are noted above.

Disorienting Dilemmas of COVID-19

Digital Inequity as a Disorienting Dilemma

The teachers were first asked to respond to the challenges they faced with regards to COVID-19. The following excerpt by Teacher B indicates that a lack of access to technology as a digital inequity was one of the major issues faced by the parents.

“It’s not just Wi-Fi, a lot of our parents don’t even have cellphones. For example, you have a grandmother – she is the only one with a cellphone. Then I have my Grade R learner, my one parent, her husband lost his job – then young mother, she had a stroke – she was also out of work. And then they got six daughters from high school to primary school – only mom’s got a cellphone. And she is managing the high school’s work, it’s the primary school’s work and then I’m coming with Grade R work also. So she was like, with most of our parents it was no data – it’s one cellphone so the mother says look I’ll get to the Grade R learner later. My primary school and high school learner are now more important you know. Some of our parents have no Wi-Fi - no data, don’t even have cellphones. They would literally go to the neighbor because we live in courts here, so we often have maybe like three learners from the same court and then the two moms would maybe just ask that mom – I would say just liaise with that two parents because they don’t even have cellphones.” (Teacher B)

Digital inequity was expressed through Teacher B’s voice highlighting her concern about the lack of cellphones in this community, as many families did not have a cellphone.

Table 2 Focus group interview questions

1. What were your experiences of teaching and learning during Covid-19?
2. What were the challenges you faced during Covid-19?
 - 2.a. How did you overcome these challenges?
3. What were the children’s responses about play and learning during Covid-19?
 - 3.a. How did you respond to the children’s responses?
4. What were the parents’ responses in relation to Covid-19 and the ECCE centre?
 - 4.a. How did you communicate with the parents and was this communication challenging or not?
5. Explain how you thought about empowering the parents during Covid-19?
6. During Covid-19 how were you conscientised to transform your teaching?

If there was a cellphone perhaps only one member would possess it, such as the grandmother indicated above. Many children in poor communities in South Africa are cared for by their grandparents due to their parents having passed away or the inability of parents to take care of their children due to drug and other socioeconomic problems. Khlaif et al. (2021) noted that many teachers in the countries of Afghanistan, Libya, and Palestine expressed concern about parents and communities who experienced digital inequity during COVID-19. The challenge of digital inequity has been considered to be a global problem during COVID-19, resulting in many children, families, and communities either not having access to WIFI or the mobile devices necessary for online teaching and learning. While it is understood that digital inequality has been brought to prominence internationally by COVID-19, the reality is it has exacerbated the unequal situation of the majority of South Africans who face social and economic challenges (Valodia & Francis, 2020). They argue that the lockdown has intensified how the inequalities of the apartheid past continue in post-apartheid South Africa. Teacher B expressed her concern about families not having access to cell phones, and understands that this is a shared challenge amongst most of the families in this community. She, therefore, explores options to implement an action to help parents overcome this challenge (Mezirow, 1997). This is indicated in her statement, ‘I would say just liaise with that two parents because they don’t even have cellphones’.

Disorienting Dilemma of Interactive Play

Teachers C and A reported how children faced a disorienting dilemma of interactive play in the following excerpts

“It was like the kids not having the freedom of the fantasy area – that’s where they dress up, mommy and daddy comes out there. They didn’t have that, they couldn’t explore. I have to play with my blocks and that is mine – so it was single play – sort of playing – individual play not group play. So if one child was with the blocks then she couldn’t interact – she could speak to the other child – can’t touch the same equipment”. (Teacher C)

“They were sad because they couldn’t really play, couldn’t believe it. They were just sitting. And sit in a hula-hoop. When a teacher has a discussion on the mat and the morning rings it’s supposed to be in a hula-hoop a meter away from each other. One child in one hula-hoop, one child in another hula-hoop. Yes. And were they happy? Were they... not at all. No, not in the beginning. It was totally different for them. We had to explain what is taking place”. (Teacher A)

Teacher C and A expressed their disorienting dilemma about how children could not be interactive during play, and more so during fantasy play, once the early childhood centre had reopened under restricted conditions. Play is a powerful medium through which children understand their world and it is effective in enhancing children’s affective and cognitive learning (Alcock & Stobbs, 2019). Fantasy play provides opportunities for children’s minds to become flexible, adaptive, and imaginative, and if imaginative play is encouraged during early childhood, this contributes to enhanced creativity in adulthood (Bruce, 2004). Fantasy play is also understood as the most important form of play as children are not merely playing, they are free to take risks and do things that they would not be confident to do outside of fantasy play (Karpov, 2005). However, the nature of fantasy play is that there needs to be close engagement and interaction between children. This was a huge challenge during the study. However, Teachers C and A showed how they assisted children to explore new roles and actions (Mezirow, 1991) to overcome the challenge of not being able to participate in fantasy play. This was noted when individual play replaced fantasy play. While children played individually when sitting in their hula hoops, they were provided with building blocks. This finding indicates that children were unhappy when involved with individual play instead of fantasy play. However, it also shows how these teachers found alternative roles (Mezirow, 1991) for children’s involvement, as opposed to not being involved in play at all. Mezirow (1991) reminds us that the challenge of combining social solidarity with physical isolation creates disorder, which transformative theory terms as a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991).

Perspective Transformations

New Roles and Actions

Teacher C reported that teaching was a huge challenge because this was the first time she taught online:

“Oh, my challenges that I faced during Covid was I never did teaching online. That was a big challenge for me – I had to do teaching online – I needed to interact with the children everyday. I needed to get into the children and with the parents. And you have to do a story and because why we never did that before and that was really a big challenge for me for learning online teaching, that is a big challenge for me”. (Teacher C)

“For me it was a big challenge at first – I first helped Cathy – assisting in her class and then when my class opened, it was like you have to change your whole way of teaching and your way of communicating with

the children because we're not allowed to touch them and it was hard but at the end of the day we just had to accept what is happening – so we just have to follow protocols and go with what they expect from us". (Teacher D)

Teachers C and D indicated that it was the first time that they had taught online, which was challenging. This is a common finding as many teachers around the world found it difficult to teach online during COVID-19 due to it being their first time and most teachers had not been exposed to online teaching previously, especially in early childhood education (Luscombe, 2020). Teachers have been affected by online teaching challenges in relation to poor and unsuitable content and instructional materials, and the absence of support and training coupled with teaching quality (Rees & Seaton, 2011). While this is the reality worldwide, Teacher D's response, 'we had to just accept what is happening, so we just have to follow protocols and go with what they expect from us', shows us that Teacher D in her willingness to accept protocols and go with what they 'expect from us' demonstrates that she does not value the importance and centrality of this experience (Mezirow, 1991) in order to critically reflect. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) emphasizes the importance and centrality of experience, which allows one to understand one's frame of reference and the role of a disorienting dilemma, in this case the challenge of online teaching.

However, while Teacher D showed evidence that she was willing to accept what was expected of her, Teacher A showed evidence of exploring new roles and actions as the following excerpt reveals:

"Like you never actually realise how much mistakes you also make when you speak until you listen to yourself on a video recorder. So recording the stories – I would ask my husband because he was also at home – make the video, I'm gonna tell the story and then he said you spoke wrong now and I was like... retake again you know. The online took a lot of your time because I don't want to send something and it's like... You want it to be perfect for the child. So I panicked, I was scared you know. And then also when we could come back ... I was like where do I start first of all because now we're basically in the third term – we missed out on the second term and then I said okay look being at the centre I could start again from the beginning and we're not going to put them down for naps or whatever – I am just going to work and play as much – go through it so I can cover as much as I can". (Teacher A)

COVID-19 forced teachers to rethink and critically reflect on their practice. Teacher A reported that she never realised

how many mistakes she made previously when teaching until she was forced to record herself doing a story; doing so ensured that her husband watched out for any mistakes she might make. While this occurred, there was a transformation in her learning; a fundamental change in the way she saw herself (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Thus, through critical reflection and being engaged in discourse, she was able to critically take action through familiarising herself with taking videos, which she wanted to be perfect for the children. There was a transformed frame of reference as she embarked on new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting on this experience (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). This also generated critical reflection and building a 'community of practice' (Wenger et al., 2002).

Critical Reflection and Dialogue

Critical reflection and dialogue are pivotal elements in transformative learning. This is evident in the following excerpt:

"I honestly panicked. I told myself – I was worried and said look we need to do something – I think the first three weeks we thought maybe it's just gonna be less than a month and we gonna go back and then when the president announced the lockdown is continuing, I panicked. I said look we need to sit together and let's open up the groups and let's see what the response from the parents was – so I was nervous, like I'm always just in my classroom and I'm used to them walking in anytime – I'm used to evaluators walking in, I'm okay with that. But the parents – you know it was a bit daunting because I'm recording videos and I'm like doing different..." (Teacher A)

Teacher A showed evidence of reflecting critically on the disorienting dilemma of not being able to teach online, as she admitted that 'we need to do something', 'we need to sit together and let's open up the groups'. This shows how she critically reflected on the disorienting dilemma and realized the challenge of teaching online was a shared and negotiable experience (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Dube, (2020) states that any crisis requires new ways of thinking and teaching and it is through crises that teachers must support their students to strengthen their competencies, skills, and communication. In addition to providing emotional support, Teacher A was willing to provide models of functioning and her admittance to 'let's open up the groups' is evidence of this transformation. Her quest for finding alternative perspectives (Mezirow, 2000), in her attempt at preparing videos (albeit not totally to her satisfaction), shows the transformative stride that she advances towards. She also engaged in dialogue and interacted with the teachers to identify alternative perspectives (Mezirow, 2000).

Negotiating of Shared Challenges

COVID-19 impacted negatively on individuals' social and economic circumstances. As a result, many parents at this ECCE centre had lost their jobs, as Teacher A indicated below.

"We were actually very proud of our parents – a lot of our parents lost their jobs, you know they weren't working. So we told them look we'll come... the centre is going to try and financially meet you half way and let's see what you can bring". (Teacher A)

The above excerpt highlights how Teacher A critically assessed the situation of unemployed parents caused through COVID-19 and the impact that this meant for nonpayment of fees. Realizing that there should be no compromise on the education of these young children, she reflected critically that others, in this case the parents, were undergoing a challenge shared with the teachers. Therefore, she negotiated and thought of new ways of being and living (Mezirow, 1991).

Considering that parents' unemployment was a shared challenge, Teacher A also reported that after negotiating with parents, they were willing to assist with the purchase of Lego sets:

"Surprisingly the parents... I got Legos but was not enough for everybody. Because they normally play like 3 or 4 with the Legos now you can't split the Legos between the whole class – so the parents... I drove around to Osmans to get the cheapest and spoke to them – I explained to them our situation and they would give us discounts and stuff and parents bought the kids their own little set of Legos to play with so when they're in their hula-hoop they can all play with their own Legos. That is the plus side again – there was no fighting – you know normally you have you know I want... there is a thousand Legos but everybody wants that one specific block – the plus side was because they each had their own – you never had that nagging of – you know that scuffling between the kids – this is mine I bought that you know. The challenging part I would say was getting the equipment – not having enough and making do with what we could you know". (Teacher A)

The above excerpt shows how Teacher A further negotiated and engaged in dialogue with the parents and store from which the Lego blocks could be purchased; she identified alternative perspectives. In doing so she adopted a new role and responsibility. Not only was she an ECCE teacher, she took on the role of a negotiator and mediating agent between the parents and the store. This shows her creativity and perseverance ensuring that children are not deprived of playing with educational toys during the pandemic. This

shows how teachers have shown great resilience, creativity and perseverance during COVID-19.

Supporting Solidarity Through Opening the ECCE Center

ECCE centres were closed during the lockdown, yet when the lockdown level was eased in August 2020, many chose to remain closed due to the risk to children, teachers, and parents. However, this ECCE centre made an important decision to open:

"We decided to open up the groups. [The Department of] Social Development came out because they were actually very proud of what we were doing. We were one of the only centres running. The rest of the centres was all scared and then they used us as an example. They made videos with us. Yeah, even ... UCT centres sent a message to thank us because they were scared to open up. It was August So we had to send our video to Early Learning Resource Unit so we can have a certificate that our centre can open because government said we have to go according to their Covid 19 protocols. So we made a video – other schools made clips but we made a full video – if you want it you can have it – you can see it. How we work with the children and then the Minister got the video from our school. If we can do it then all the other schools can do it also. The parents, they were nagging us, please open. We said we're taking a risk – they said they can't anymore". (Teacher A).

The decision to open the ECCE centre was just not influenced by the ECCE teachers but by the parents as well. The words *'the parents they were nagging us, please open'* shows a sense of solidarity between the ECCE centre, parents, and community (Mezirow, 1997). The above excerpt shows how Teacher A attempts to analyze the situation of opening up the centre and considered the different points of view from parents (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Teacher A, in deciding to open up the centre, pursues a model of functioning (Mezirow & Associates, 1990).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study I explored the experiences of ECCE teachers during COVID-19 and how they used these experiences to transform their teaching in a poor community in Mannenberg in the Cape Flats, Cape Town, South Africa. The data is from one ECCE centre, collected in February 2021. In response to the first research question the study reveals that the experiences of ECCE teachers were related to the many challenges of COVID-19, which were analyzed in relation

to disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1996). The disorienting dilemmas identified included those of digital inequity and interactive play. Many teachers around the world have experienced these dilemmas (UNESCO, 2020; Jordan, 2020; Khlaif et al., 2021). The responses related to the second research question (Have ECCE teachers used these dilemmas to transform their teaching? And if so, in what ways?) show that while one teacher went along with what was expected of her and did not value the importance and centrality of the experience of COVID-19, another teacher critically reflected and engaged in discourse with all affected. She was thus able to transform her frame of reference as she acquired new ways of thinking and feeling, and thus adopted new roles. The transformative roles of the head teacher in this study is commendable. Considering that most of the parents lost their jobs due to COVID-19 and could not pay the fees, the head teacher realized that COVID-19 presented shared challenges, and she was prepared to meet the parents halfway with regard to payment of fees and negotiating the purchase of toys. This highlights how the ECCE centre supported the parents and negotiated new ways of being and living; and how they worked together with the parents in solidarity. An interesting finding is that while the area in which this ECCE centre is located is known for gang violence, the ECCE teachers used the experiences of COVID-19 to transform their teaching through critical reflection, dialogue, and negotiation. Thus, they adopted new ways of thinking and feeling, negotiated new roles and supported the community in solidarity.

The first recommendation drawn from my research is that local governments in South Africa need to provide strong support for ECCE teachers which will contribute to the professionalization of the sector in relation to online teaching during times of crises. Second, financial and educational support needs to be provided to families in poor communities for training in online learning and teaching, so that the dilemma of digital inequity and access to data can be addressed. My third recommendation is that more research needs to be carried out amongst children and parents from poor communities to understand their perceptions of COVID-19. Such perspectives will contribute to the limited scholarship on the dilemmas of COVID-19 in ECCE in South Africa. My final recommendation is that local governments need to prepare ECCE teachers for challenges that are exacerbated by both economic and political disparities. These findings and recommendations have important implications for politicians to consider: ECCE has not been well supported by government during lockdown and stronger support is required for the sector; not just in times of crises, but consistent, continual support during normal times as well. I acknowledge that this was a small scale study with a concomitant inability to generalize the findings. I, therefore,

recommend that future studies should focus on teachers who teach both in advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE contexts.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Informed Consent A statement of informed consent is included in the manuscript.

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