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Transitions:
Young children's lived experiences of early learning and childcare from Covid-19 lockdowns to the present

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List of Acronyms

ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services
NCR	National Capital Region
NCAER	National Council of Applied Economic Research
ECE	Early childhood education
CBGA	Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability
CRY	Child Rights and You
NEP	National Education Policy
ECCE	Early childhood care and education
MHRD	Ministry of Human Resource Development
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NSS	National Sample Survey
DCPCR	Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights

Abstract

This research paper focuses on situating young children's experiences in childcare and early learning from Covid-19 lockdowns to the present in Delhi, India. The main findings are drawn from primary fieldwork with children in classes 1 and 2 (in August 2022) using child-centred participatory methods and unstructured interviews with seven caregivers. The main questions the paper explores are: how did young children experience learning and childcare during Covid-19 lockdown and the aftermath? And how can these experiences during lockdowns help us understand the current structuring of children's daily lives? The conceptual tools used to explore these questions are drawn from theories situated within critical childhood studies including the sociology of childhood, and at the intersection of culture and child development.

The findings reveal the changing nature of priorities in childcare and learning from lockdowns to the present. In terms of childcare, I highlight children's role in the distributed care system on one hand, and parental constructions of their needs and vulnerabilities on the other. I show how growing concerns around children's use of time in lockdowns led to a search for alternate avenues for learning, which were available through private tutoring. Further, my findings demonstrate the enduring impacts of this shift on children's present routines. Finally, the paper questions assumptions around children's linear trajectories and prescriptions of 'developmental milestones' and argues for a more contextually grounded approach that situates children's socio-cultural background to understand experiences of childhood.

Relevance to Development Studies

Reviewing literature on impacts of Covid-19 lockdowns on children's learning and care in India revealed a dominance of rapid-survey and questionnaire-based research. These studies largely focused on macro-level impacts and related policy suggestions. This paper responds to the gap of young children's experiences of their rapidly changing environments. Moreover, situating children's perspectives counters the strong influence of the adult-gaze in social sciences and contributes to an epistemological shift, building on existing work by critical childhood scholars. Finally, while research has looked at experiences of care and learning in the lockdown period and present as separate points of inquiry, this paper aims to bridge the gap between these two phases and highlight the interconnectedness of children's experiences.

Keywords
Young children; childcare; early learning; Covid-19 lockdowns; child-centred participatory methodology

Chapter 1 – A rupture in time:
Impacts of Covid-19 lockdowns on young children and their families in Delhi, India

When the first national lockdown was announced in India in March 2020 in the wake of Covid-19, practically all sectors, including educational institutions shut down physically. More than two years later, while national public discourse seems to relegate Covid-19 to a phenomenon of the past, the lingering effects of successive lockdowns persist in lived accounts of families across India. This research paper will explore the impacts of Covid-19 on a relatively neglected sub-population, young children living in urban poverty in Delhi, and specifically understand how Covid-19 disrupted the childcare and early learning environments, with these changes spilling over to the present moment. The main findings are drawn from fieldwork conducted in the month of August 2022 in Delhi. Children currently enrolled in Classes 1 and 2 in a government-run primary school in the age range of 6 and 7 were involved in the research, as well as their caregivers. When the lockdown was first announced in March 2020, these children were between the ages of 4 and 5. Data was collected both in the classroom environment within the school (through activities with children) as well as households of selected children (interviews with caregivers).

The introduction maps out impacts of Covid-19 lockdowns on urban poor households in Delhi and sets out a context to situate young children's experiences within their socio-economic environments. This is followed by a discussion on the relevance of the research problem and enumerating the research question and sub-questions the paper aims to answer.

1.1   The macro picture: impact of Covid-19 lockdowns on families living in urban poverty in Delhi, India

As incidence of Coronavirus infections began picking up nationally from January to March 2020, state and central governments went into a frenzy to try and control the public health ramifications of a predicted mass outbreak. "Schools and anganwadis[1] were closed in Delhi on March 5, 2020, and on March 22, 2020, India went into a complete lockdown" (Puri et al., 2021, p93). At the time of announcement of the national lockdown, 557 patients were diagnosed with Covid-19 and 11 deaths were reported at a national level, with two of these deaths being reported from Delhi (India Today, 2020). The haste with which the national lockdown was announced at four hours' notice closed the doors of the economy, public services, and (literally) people's homes. Commentators noted how the announcement brought with it "one of the most extreme national lockdown measures…by the government of India" (Sen, 2020, p3). The lack of forewarning and stringency of measures plunged millions of Indians into disarray, contributing to the loss of livelihoods particularly among families reliant on daily wage earnings.

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[1] "The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) aims at providing supplementary nutrition, growth monitoring, immunisation, preschool education, health check-ups and referral to children between the ages of 0 and 6 years, as well as health- and nutrition-related education and facilities for pregnant women and lactating mothers. These services are provided through childcare centres, *anganwadis*" (Maity, 2016, p59).

In Delhi National Capital Region (NCR), a survey by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) in April 2020, a month after the lockdown, found, "84% of people in Delhi and its suburbs, most of them part of the region's vast informal economy, have suffered wage losses in the past two weeks" (Nanda, 2020). This aligns with my own conversations with caregivers as they all mentioned losing their primary source of livelihood when the lockdown was announced. The NCAER report further examined economic impacts by income category, geographical location i.e. urban or rural residence and probed whether respondents benefited from government welfare measures in this period. Importantly, the findings suggested that respondents living in urban poverty faced the highest income shock, as compared to their counterparts in rural areas due to receiving fewer government benefits such as cash transfers. They note "a rural–urban divide, with a higher proportion of respondents in rural areas reporting the receipt of welfare benefits…we also observe that the relative risk ratio for those who did not get rations but needed them is also higher for casual wage workers and those who received partial salaries or had lost their jobs" (NCAER, 2020, p6).

The findings from their report point to an important contextual factor - that of low state support following the lockdown measures among urban poor residents of Delhi. Moreover, stringency of lockdown measures coupled with their longevity (three national lockdowns were announced between March 2020 and October 2021) delivered a blow to household savings, resources, and resultant economic capacity. For instance, a grandmother of a 6-year-old girl I spoke with said, "*in the second lockdown, people were very badly hit because the savings and survival tactics we used earlier were exhausted and there was no work coming in either.*"

The remaining sections of this chapter tease out the implications of this massive income shock on the lives of young children and move from the macroeconomic context to the household-level impacts on childcare and learning under these circumstances.

1.2   Understanding the context: urban poverty in Delhi

Delhi, the capital of India, is home to 16.78 million persons[2] as per the 2011 Census, with the highest percentage of population being recorded in the 0-14 age group at 27.19% (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2022). The large differences in experiences, opportunities, and socio-economic composition characteristic of India are reflected, and to an extent, amplified in this large metropolis. Much of Delhi's population growth has resulted from internal migration within India, particularly from neighbouring states (Dupont, 2017) in search for employment. Among families I spoke to, three had migrated from rural parts of India (in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) to Delhi after the first lockdown. They all reiterate - Delhi has a particular lure; it is rife with opportunity, and yet, it can be a hostile environment to raise children. To understand why this is the case, it is important to understand the features of the settlements these families stay in.

Baud et al. (2008), in their study mapping urban poverty hotspots in Delhi provide some common characteristics of households living in these settlements. This includes, "inadequate and unstable incomes, inadequate, unstable or risky asset bases (such as lack of education and housing), inadequate provision of public infrastructure (piped water,

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[2] In the absence of the regular decennial Census that was put on hold in 2021 owing to Covid-19, current projections of Delhi's population estimate the total population at 20,571,000 (20.57 million) people (Government of Delhi, 2022, p408)

sanitation, drainage, roads and footpaths), inadequate provision of basic services, limited safety-nets for those unable to pay for services, inadequate protection of poorer groups through laws and rights, and powerlessness of poorer groups within political and bureaucratic systems" (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004, cited in Baud et al., 2008, p1386). When I visited households to interview caregivers of selected children, the feature of inadequate public infrastructure was striking. The settlement[3] where families lived was in East Delhi district of Delhi NCR. The boundary between the main road, with speeding cars and wandering cows, and the settlement was not clearly demarcated. Narrow lanes, referred to colloquially as *gali*, separated houses from another. An average of 90 houses resided in one *gali*. They were lined with cycles, scooters, footwear of families living on the ground floor, abundant loose electrical wiring, and spill over waste from households. Within homes, there were usually one or two rooms shared by all members of the family.

Evidently, cramped living conditions and inadequate sanitation facilities were key features of the area where these families resided.[4] This forms an important lens to understand the environment in which families navigated lockdown measures and the kinds of physical challenges that will be later discussed in terms of play opportunities, perceptions of risk and safety, among other issues that directly affected children.

1.3 Young children's environments before and during the pandemic

The age group in consideration through the course of the paper is young children, between 4 and 5 during the lockdown period and presently between 6 and 7 years. Therefore, discussions on impacts on children focus on the 'early childhood' phase. Globally, 'early childhood' refers to a period that encompasses "a range of activities that promote holistic care and education for children from birth to 8 years" (Okwany & Ebrahim, 2019, p1). In India, 'early childhood' corresponds to the ages 0-6 years, the rationale being that "over 85% of a child's cumulative brain development occurs prior to the age of 6" (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2020, p7). This classification is echoed in programmes that target young children in the form of a diverse range of early childhood education (hereafter, ECE) service providers in India (see figure 1 below). In addition to government run programmes, the private entities the figure alludes to includes private pre-primary institutions and tutoring. Sriprakash et al. (2020) note that these are largely "low-fee" avenues. They argue that huge demand combined with variations in quality have resulted in a "competitive, highly stratified, and increasingly marketized" (Sriprakash et al., 2020, p332) private ECE landscape in India. Moreover, in India "around 37 million children do not avail of any ECE service, whether in the public sector or those provided by the private aided and unaided centres" (Save the Children and Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA), 2022, p5).

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[3] The name of the settlement and all personal identifiers have been excluded to preserve anonymity of respondents

[4] This can be explained by looking at Delhi's population density which was recorded as the highest in the country with "11320 persons per square kilometre, as against the national level of 382 persons per square kilometre" (Government of Delhi, 2022, p400).

Figure 1: Types of ECE service providers in India

ECE SERVICE PROVIDERS IN INDIA

1. Government run ECE programmes provided through Anganwadi Services and School education programmes (e.g, Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan)

2. NGO run ECE programmes, and

3. Private entities
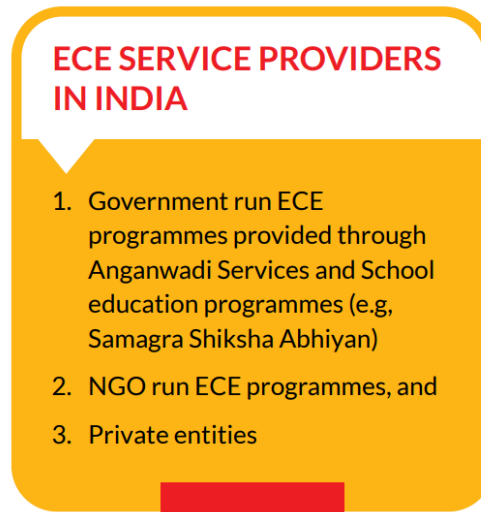
Source: Save the Children and CBGA, 2022, p5

The diverse trajectories of children preceding the lockdown are important to keep in mind because they cater broadly to the care and education of young children but the emphasis within each type of institution varies. In conversations with caregivers during fieldwork, it appeared that the pre-lockdown enrollment trajectories significantly varied among children, with a few not enrolled anywhere, a few attending Anganwadis and others in government pre-primary classes.

When the Covid-19 lockdown was announced, the immediate consequence was that these "early childhood program[mes] for children, families, teachers, and teacher educators…ceased to operate" (Pattnaik & Jalongo, 2021, p759). Closure of public educational institutions immediately spurred a crisis of hunger with food, earlier provided in schools and Anganwadis, no longer being an assured source of nutrition for children. While government departments issued directives to ensure that take-home-grains, dry rations, and food supplements reached beneficiaries, interviews with caregivers painted a starkly different picture of that period. For instance, in Delhi, a report stated, "instead of nutrition kits, the beneficiaries were given a 650-gram packet of panjiri[5] and a 250-gram packet of groundnuts… Moreover, in many locations, supply of these packets has been erratic and grossly inadequate" (Shagun, 2020). Ineffective state support and stringent lockdown regulations in Delhi meant that the overall care of young children and responsibility towards their educational and health needs was largely left in the hands of the family and caregivers. While this was largely the case before the pandemic as well, lockdowns amplified this concentration of responsibility and drastically shifted the balance from the State to the household.

Globally, "India is second only to Uganda when it comes to [the longest period of] Covid school closures…at 82 weeks – or 574 days – between March 2020 and October 2021" (Mogul & Sud, 2022). In Delhi, while schools began reopening in a graded manner from October 2021, "schools opened only briefly for primary grades; greater emphasis was placed on opening schools for Class IX-Class XII because board examinations are held for Class X and Class XII" (Banerji & Ashraf, 2022, p33). While some children involved in the research

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[5] "Panjiri is a nutritional supplement made from whole-wheat flour fried in sugar and ghee" (Shagun, 2020)

were enrolled in formal school (class 1) during this period of brief reopening, caregivers mentioned that children in classes 1 and 2 only began physically attending school in March 2022. Thus, for most of these children, their introduction to formal schooling was put on hold due to massive uncertainties surrounding reopening of schools and eventually came after a period of two years of being predominantly at home. The question of children's experiences in care and learning during this time and how it has impacted their current trajectories form the core concerns of this paper.

1.4 Literature review on impacts of Covid-19 on young children's childcare and learning environments

Covid-19 lockdowns forced researchers to pause fieldwork and rethink modes of collecting data. This led to a spurt of phone-based surveys, rapid assessments, and policy briefs to produce knowledge on impacts of a heavily under-studied and new phenomena. This fed into a range of prescriptive studies, meant to serve as 'action-oriented' or 'solution-based' research. This trend was particularly dominant in the early stages of Covid-19 lockdowns with the observation, "From a scholar's perspective, we are now "participants in the biggest unplanned experiment that education has ever seen in our lifetimes" (Thomas & Rogers, 2020 cited in Pattnaik & Jalongo, 2021, p760).

Globally, studies focused on short and long-term risks on young children (Yoshikawa et al., 2020) and comparative assessments of government measures to introduce alternate childcare and learning arrangements (Gromada et al., 2020). A few studies in India mapped the impacts of Covid-19 on the childcare environment and have largely focused on the gendered nature of time-use patterns and large increases in unpaid care work with the closure of various avenues for childcare (for example, Deshpande, 2020; Hazarika & Das, 2021; Chauhan, 2020). Fang Lee (2020)'s study from Australia discussed the ethics of care in light of Covid-19. The focus is on what a "socially just ECE landscape might look like through the lens of a feminism approach" (Lee, 2020, p385) rather than a specific account of Covid-induced disruptions.[6] Rana et al. (2021), through interviews with six mothers in Delhi, Bangalore, and Lucknow, looked at the contributing factors that affect the childcare environment such as worsening mental health during lockdowns.

Literature on impacts of Covid-19 on children's learning primarily in the form of surveys highlighted multiple layers of inequities (rural-urban, gender, class, and so on) in access to remote education, and concerns about learning losses compounded by long periods of school closure. For instance, the volunteer-led SCHOOL survey, conducted in August 2021 in 16 states, including Delhi, found "children who were studying online "regularly" was just 24% and 8% in urban and rural areas respectively…[further] The youngest children, e.g., in Grades 1 and 2, have been especially deprived of support" (Bakhla et al., 2022, pp2-4). Banerji & Ashraf (2022)'s study from Delhi NCR points out that Delhi had a pre-existing advantage in terms of internet access, compared to the national average[7]. This translated into higher receptivity of online classes in the capital, though their findings showed that, "the age group emerges as a significant variable with children between the ages of 11-14 years more likely to access remote learning than children in other age groups" (Banerji & Ashraf, 2022, p34).

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[6] Lee's argument that care in the early years should not be narrowly understood only as childcare is considered in the section on limitations

[7] They draw this conclusion from National Family Health Survey-5 data

A survey by the Delhi-based non-profit, Child Rights and You (CRY) in the early stages of the first lockdown asked parents (through an online self-administered survey) about their perceptions of impacts on children's lives. They found that a majority of parents lamented increased screen time for children even when children were not attending online classes and "three out of four parents believed their child was left with no outdoor play (74%) and no social interactions (73%)" (Sharma & Ghosh, 2021, p16). They probed further into impacts on different aspects of children's lives and showed how parents felt the maximum impact was on children's education and learning, followed by children's extracurricular activities, their friendships, and social lives.

The literature reviewed clearly illustrated that Covid-19 lockdowns and resulting digitisation of learning exacerbated pre-existing divides in terms of access and quality to education and halted non-educational related benefits of schooling such as socialisation and friendship. Yet, despite countless studies that recorded these important impacts, there are areas that have so far not received adequate attention in research and forms the basis of the research problem.

1.5   The research problem

From studies described in the previous subsection, it is evident that the nature of research during Covid-19 lockdowns responded to the need to produce rapid research to make sense of a completely new phenomena. Without taking away from its important function, what stands out is that this type of research failed to include children's perceptions of these rapidly changing environments and how it has impacted them in their own words. While there is literature on 'shocks to the childcare environment,' it is striking that children are portrayed simply as recipients of care and their perspectives on relationships with parents and caregivers do not feature in accounts. Moreover, research on younger children, many of whom in the present paper were not enrolled anywhere before and during the lockdown period has received even less attention. The exclusion of young children's perceptions, however, predates research generated during Covid-19. McNamee & Seymour (2012) analysed sampling techniques of 282 articles in leading journals focused on children's research and showed how empirical and theoretical work has focused on 10, 11 and 12 year-olds. They demonstrate how this bias manifests in research with "younger age groups (5–7) [showing] considerably less likelihood of being included in research samples than those at the other end of the childhood continuum, i.e. 15–18 year olds" (McNamee & Seymour, 2012, p163).

Second, in terms of learning environments, the latest National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in its very first chapter states that "ECCE [Early childhood care and education] ideally consists of flexible, multi-faceted, multi-level, play-based, activity-based, and inquiry-based learning" (MHRD, 2020, p8). The idea that play and learning are inextricably linked has been articulated in previous policies and literature on the subject. Yet, the question of what this really meant for young children living in cramped urban spaces amidst a stringent lockdown and during the transition to easing of restrictions has not been explored adequately and will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters.

Finally, while studies examine impacts of Covid-19 lockdowns on children, or the current moment when schools have reopened in isolation, there is no inquiry into the connections between the two periods. Specifically, there is a gap in understanding of the transitions between these two periods i.e. how being confined to the home environment for a

period of almost two years for very young children in the study location affected their current trajectory. Following from this, the next subsection looks at the primary research question and sub-questions the paper aims to answer.

1.6   Research Question and Sub-questions

Given the research problem, the paper aims to address the following research question: **How did Covid-19 lockdowns and the aftermath influence young children's learning and childcare experiences?**

The sub-questions decode this further, and are as follows:

1. How did young children experience learning and childcare during Covid-19 lockdown and the aftermath?
2. How can these experiences during lockdowns help us understand the current structuring of children's daily lives?

The structure of the paper is as follows - the second chapter is devoted to methodology and methods, where the rationale and specificities of the use of child-centred participatory qualitative research are discussed. Further, the chapter includes important considerations of ethics in research with children, and my own positionality with respect to the research. The third chapter elucidates conceptual tools that will be further used to answer the questions through an engagement with secondary literature. The fourth and fifth chapters dive into findings from fieldwork and map out changes in the childcare and learning environments from the first Covid-19 lockdown in Delhi to the present. The concluding chapter draws from the previous chapters to link findings and includes an afterthought where I reflect on areas uncovered during this process that can be explored further in future research.

Chapter 2 – Looking through children's eyes: Countering the dominance of the adult gaze

The starting point of the methodological inclination of this paper is to counteract the prior dominance of the "adult" gaze in social sciences that looked at childhood as a "transitory phase on the way to adulthood…[where] children's current thinking and acting receded into the background" (Esser, 2016, p2). The methodological decision in this study to foreground perspectives of young children serves as an epistemological contribution to shift this balance of power and contributes to critical childhood studies that have further developed this position. While the roots of this shift are discussed in the theoretical section of this paper, this chapter focuses on understanding the guiding methodological principles of my study, how I chose to operationalise it through specific techniques, and ethical considerations during and after fieldwork.

2.1   An Appraisal of Child-centred Participatory Methodology

Child-centred participatory methodology emerged through the recognition that earlier studies had largely "failed to incorporate children as subjects in the research; [further,] neither have they been attentive to children's subjective views including their voice and action" (Okwany & Ebrahim, 2016, pp.8-9). There was a call then for children's role in research to shift from objects (of research) to subjects, and more recently, as participants whose perspectives are central to the process of co-constructing knowledge. Given that fulfilling criteria of children and youth's "active participation" in research has increasingly coloured the imagination of donors and researchers alike, there is a valid concern that this methodological inclination then, becomes much like the tick-box phenomena pervasive in rapid surveys or questionnaire-based studies. I recognise the growing critique of the "chimera" of participatory design with children and questions on "how participatory" it truly is (see Franks, 2011), as well as Hart (2008)'s contention that focusing on individual participation has led to conceptualising the 'local' as distinct from wider social relations. Nevertheless, I proceed to explain why it offers a site of possibility to resist impositions of narratives around young children and how I respond to these critiques.

Child-centred methodology espouses a non-teleological view of children's development that is not end-focused and reiterates the opposition to viewing children predominantly as future adults. Additionally, participatory design with young children counters the "belief that young children cannot be reliable sources of data, or an assumption that caregivers 'know best' so can speak on behalf of young people" (Crivello et al., 2008, p57). Empirical work in this paper offers a possibility to address this gap and gain a better "understanding of [children's] priorities, interests and concerns and how children feel about themselves and their lives" (Pascal & Bertram, 2009, p254).

An important qualification of how child-centred methodology has been understood is that moving away from the adult gaze does not imply re-constructing the adult-child binary. On the contrary, there is recognition of the "relational" dynamics underpinning experiences of childhood and "recognition of their embeddedness of children within key relationships" (White, 2002, p1096). Alongside his critique of participatory design, Hart (2008) offers a way to counteract 'localisation of participation'. He mentions, "we must pay attention to the

political-economic as well as the socio-cultural dimensions of young people's lives" (Hart, 2008, p414). Just as adults cannot be separated from the material and socio-cultural contexts that shape their activities, children's voice and actions must be contextualised against their backgrounds and experiences of those around them. To this end, given young children's prolonged stay within the home environment during lockdowns, caregivers perceptions through unstructured interviews were also included in methods.

2.2 Sampling and data collection

Findings in this research paper are drawn from primary fieldwork conducted over a period of three weeks from 1-19 August 2022 in Delhi, India. Using snowball sampling as a first step, a local non-governmental organisation (hereafter, NGO) helped me identify a government-run primary school for children in Classes 1 to 5 (ages 6 to 10). This technique was chosen due to two reasons - first, I had a clear idea of specifications related to the age group for my research and second, accessing government institutions usually entails a long bureaucratic process involving multiple permissions. With constraints on time allocated to fieldwork and given the NGO's access to government primary schools in Delhi, they helped me identify the school relatively easily. The school was run by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi and located in East Delhi, India. After explaining the purpose of my research and emphasising that names of the school, geographical area, and children would be anonymised in this paper, the Principal of the school granted permission to carry on with my research with children in classes 1 and 2.

I employed purposive sampling to identify selected children whose caregivers I wanted to speak to. This was based on my observations from activities with children and the responses I received. I conducted seven interviews with caregivers after school hours in their homes. These homes were all located within one-two kilometres radius from the school. While I wanted to maintain a balance between the age and sex of children whose caregivers I spoke to, five were girls and two were boys; two were 6-year-olds (Class 1) and five were 7-year-olds (Class 2). One major reason for why I was unable to balance the sex composition which serves as a key limitation of my empirical data, was that most boys were either accompanied by slightly older siblings or walked home with other boys who lived close to them after school was over. This restricted the number of boys' caregivers I could speak to because I first sought consent from them when they came to pick up the children in school before accompanying them to their home for the interview. Nevertheless, through activities with children, the sex composition remained roughly equal, and I was able to directly speak to boys.

Since the new class had begun in July 2022, the teacher mentioned that total enrollment numbers were yet to stabilise, and that attendance was significantly lower than the number of children officially enrolled in classes. The average class size was 15-20 children for class 1 and 12-25 children for Class 2. This range was based on my own observations attending classes for three weeks as well. Given variations in attendance and that not all children were keen on participating in all activities, the number of children for each activity varied. For both classes 1 and 2, there were 2 sections and children were divided equally at the beginning of the school year. I interacted with the same section of children from Class 1 and 2 through fieldwork and allocated a nearly equal amount of time with both classes. Typically, I would first go to class 1 children after their morning assembly and spend two hours with them; followed by a half-hour break when the mid-day-meal was distributed from 10:00 - 10:30 AM; and spend the remaining part of the school day (10:30 AM - 1 PM) with class 2.

2.3   Beyond 'spoken voice': A discussion on methods

Drawing from Punch (2002), I acknowledged the need to use methods that avoid infantilising young children but are simultaneously cognisant of hierarchies underpinning the power relations between adults and children that are reinforced in daily interactions. This pursuit involved moving away from imposing constraints on how young children should put forward their 'voice' and acknowledging multiple expressions they embody. As Alderson explains, young children express themselves often through "conversing, communicating, story-telling, entertaining, imagining, playing with plausible and implausible ideas, making connections, meanings and sense" (Alderson, 2009, p90). The range of these expressions necessitated flexibility in selection of methods and allowing a degree of uncertainty before fieldwork. Before delving into any of my own research activities with children, I spent a significant amount of time in the classroom involving myself in their daily schedule to build rapport and to understand the comfort level of children with different modes of expression. I spent three weeks attending regular classes with children in classes 1 and 2. Only after careful consideration and identifying children who were comfortable with the said techniques, I engaged them in activities towards the end of their regular class schedules.

In my selection of methods, I drew from the Mosaic approach theorised specifically for research with young children by Clark & Moss (2001) but adapted it to suit my context. Specifically, while the "mosaic approach combines traditional (observations and interviews) and participatory (child-led photography and tours) tools, thus providing multiple ways for young children to share their perspectives," (Baird, 2013, p36) I felt certain methods such as child-led photography, while extremely interesting, were difficult to carry out given restrictions of time and physical space. Moreover, the power of storytelling to facilitate a process of co-constructing knowledge was considered. Pascal & Bertram (2021) used storytelling in ongoing research with young children and found that it was a powerful way for "children [to] provide us with unique insights into the child's world as they experience it and reflect children's fundamental being and their lives" (Pascal & Bertram, 2021, p24). Finally, after considering the use of various methods, those included in this paper included storytelling, art-based reflections, and unstructured interviews with selected children. Additionally, I noted down classroom observations during the three weeks I spent in classes with the children. The usage of multiple methods aimed at capturing a range of expression responds to the call from Mazzei and Jackson (2012) where they emphasise the necessity of going beyond "spoken voice."

Through storytelling, I explained to the children that I was going to tell them a story about two children Ayan and Alia, 4- and 5-year-old siblings respectively. While telling them the story, I asked the children what they think happens next and what they were doing in similar circumstances. Ayan and Alia's story was meant to understand experiences of children from the announcement of lockdown all the way to schools reopening – what they were doing and how they perceive the changes in their environment (see Appendix 1 for storybook).

I used art-based reflections both for warm-up activities and to conduct research with children. In one activity, I asked the children to draw their home and members of their family on a sheet of paper (see Appendix 2 for a selection of drawings). After the children had finished drawing, I asked the children to come and explain what they have drawn, who all live in their family, what the roles of each member are and the relationships they share with them. The purpose of this activity was to understand how many children have siblings,

perceptions regarding the roles of each member of their family and their relationship with siblings.

Interviews with caregivers were unstructured and guided by the responses they gave to each set of sub-questions. I recorded these conversations after seeking permission to facilitate transcription after the interview process. The interviews were conducted in Hindi and transcribed to English afterwards. Most respondents were mothers, but there were a few households where fathers, a sister and grandmother also participated (see Appendix 3 for guiding questions).

2.4 Ethics and positionality

While acknowledging the plurality of experiences underpinning childhood based on socio-cultural and material positioning in India, Bisht (2008)'s study of teacher's perceptions on the adult-child relationship in Lucknow reveals insight into power dynamics that inform the ethical considerations taken in this study. She notes a tendency to assign characteristics based on 'stages' of childhood identified as "*chhote bache*", "*kishor awastha*" and "*bade bache.*"[8] Interestingly, the demarcation was not based on a rigid chronological age-based rationale but rather, the perceived traits stemming from social meanings attached to each stage. For *chhote bache*, the commonly assigned traits were "innocence", "immaturity" and "dependency". I found a similar perception was echoed by a few parents. For instance, the father of a six-year-old girl, when asked about his daughter's activities during the lockdown said, "*the child does not fully realise what happened during the lockdown. Generally, she does not understand many things right now (voh abhi nasamajh hai).*"

Against the backdrop of everyday adult-child relations characterised by a hierarchy where children's voices are often silenced, establishing equal terms of engagement in a short time span was the biggest ethical question I had to confront. I could not escape being seen as a highly educated adult in the children's eyes in a cultural context that accorded immense value to education. Navigating ethics and positionality for me, then, was to find a way to minimise this distance as much as possible.

When I was first introduced to children of classes 1 and 2, I could sense a feeling of nervousness and timidity. The children were prompted by their teacher to stand and say, "*good morning, ma'am*". I immediately knew that I had to gain their trust and confidence before commencing any of my own activities. I spent a week immersing myself in their regular class schedule and engaging in learning and play activities. My prior experience of working with young children in similar age groups and familiarity with many of the teaching methods used in the classroom helped me engage more meaningfully. Moreover, during 'break' time, children would often resort to free play among themselves and ask me to join. This was one of the few moments in their day that was unstructured, and children determined how to use this time. "Being open to children's agendas…[and giving] children control over the process to value what they had to say" (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998, p341) and do during this time was a critical part of not only gaining trust, but reducing the adult-child gap and become more relatable. Moreover, immersing oneself in activities deemed important for children counters more transactional forms of research where agendas are pre-stated and adult driven. Giving myself this week was critical in understanding children's preference for activities centred around drawing, role-play, and storytelling that helped me finalise which methods to

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[8] Small children, adolescence, and big/ mature children

eventually use. Additionally, I was able to pinpoint individual variations in receptivity of these methods, which led to an adoption of multiple methods.

In the remaining two weeks of fieldwork, I balanced engagement with their regular schedule and my own activities. I sought verbal consent before each activity and indicated that children could leave or disengage at any point. This led to variations in numbers of children who participated in each activity. Simultaneously, after school hours, I accompanied children and caregivers to their home for unstructured interviews with the latter. My approach to the ethical dimensions of this component was different. Specifically, before accompanying them, I first explained the purpose of my research and emphasised that I do not represent either the government school or an NGO. This led to a few parents rejecting the request for interviews. Eventually, seven caregivers were interviewed, and written consent was sought from them (see Appendix 4 for a sample of the consent form in Hindi).

Ethics, however, goes beyond consent. After fieldwork, I sat down to transcribe recordings of my interviews from Hindi to English and ensure that ideas did not get lost in translation. Given that my analysis centred around decoding beliefs, experiences, and perceptions, I had to pay close attention to stay true to what was said and avoid the "framing and taming" (Edwards et al., 2016) of language.

2.5   Limitations of my study

I acknowledge that children, like adults, are not a homogenous group and that there may have been important social variables such as gender, caste, and religion that led to different experiences of childcare and learning. While I weave this into my discussion where applicable, there were no evident differentials in my findings. I see this as a key limitation against the backdrop of literature that clearly demonstrates caste, religion, and gender-based variations in experiences of childhood. When I reflected on why this was potentially the case, I recognised that though I intended to capture an equal sex composition in purposive sampling to select caregivers, I was restricted by the fact that a smaller number of adult caregivers came to pick up young boys at the end of the school day. Since I wanted to obtain consent before going to their household, this led to a lower number of boys' caregivers I was able to speak to.

Second, in responses to group activities with children, I noticed sometimes that there was a tendency for repetition of responses following one child. This became clear in my activity inquiring about the nature of digital play. It was difficult at the time to separate whether all children engaged in similar types of online games or if there was a tendency to repeat earlier responses. To counteract this issue, in addition to group activities, I included unstructured interviews with a few children where I spoke to them individually. Further, classroom observations for three weeks and speaking with caregivers were key tools to triangulate my findings.

Third, while my literature review particularly around care and learning, revealed multiple ways of conceptualising the two, I restricted analysis to the specific ways in which these were understood by children and families. Taking the example of care, careful attention was paid to how I phrased the questions in activities and in interviews to ensure uniformity

in understanding. For instance, drawing from literature reviewed, I made sure to ask about the nature and distribution of care. Yet, ideas carried forward in this paper reflect responses I received.

Finally, another limitation of my fieldwork was that I spoke predominantly to mothers since they came to pick up children from school. This led to a scenario where questions on childcare were mostly answered by mothers, thereby reinforcing the normative idea of responsibilities assigned to motherhood. Notwithstanding these key limitations of my study, I tried to exercise flexibility during the process of data collection and be open to children's agendas. This uncovered many elements that I had not anticipated. The nature of fieldwork, therefore, though always rife with limitations, has an ingrained dynamism that is critical to reflexive research and challenging one's assumptions.

Chapter 3 – Childhood as a socio-cultural construction

From the literature reviewed in the introductory chapter, I argued that the gap this study aims to bridge stems from the dominance of research during the Covid-19 period that was largely prescriptive, centred around policy recommendations and took on a rapid-survey, online questionnaire mode. This led to a consideration of research conducted in the pre-Covid period to understand how best to analyse children's experiences in the context of the study. This chapter discusses the choice of concepts used to explain findings and draws from theories situated within critical childhood studies including the sociology of childhood, and at the intersection of culture and child development.

3.1 Epistemologies of studying children and the pursuit of resisting universalised accounts

In the previous chapter, I discussed how child-centred participatory design was selected as a methodological tool to understand experiences of children; and that child-centred did not imply "child-only", leading to the use of complementary techniques involving caregivers. This inclusion of a relational perspective, however, is preceded by various shifts in childhood studies over the decades and must be briefly contextualised to situate the theoretical inclination in this paper.

Prout & James (1997) trace how dominant approaches in studies of childhood were clouded by the field of child development psychology and biological models of growth, with the looming presence of Piagetian logics heavily influencing the scientization of phases of childhood development. They further explain how this linear trajectory, "consisting of a series of predetermined stages, [led] towards the eventual achievement of logical competence…Within such a conceptual scheme children are marginalised beings awaiting temporal passage, through the acquisition of cognitive skill, into the social world of adults" (Prout & James, 1997b, p11). This model of linear growth underpinning stages of child development has had lasting influences on researchers and practitioners alike. In Penn (2012)'s scathing critique of the World Bank's approach to early childhood, she notes how the moral panic generated through urgency of intervening in the ECCE period as the most 'cost-effective' investment into 'future economic productivity' has had important repercussions. First, it derives legitimacy from the powerful influence of neuroscientific discourse and biological models of child growth, primarily theorised in the West, that lay exclusive claim to rational ways of depicting progression in childhood. She argues that this has further marginalised alternate ways of imagining what a 'good childhood' looks like for young children in many parts of the world. The implication of such an understanding, combined with models of child development including Piaget's account, has been to "create the child as a univocal object domain with particular characteristics or properties" (Jardine, 1988 cited in Block, 1997, p149). Evidently, as Penn demonstrates, this perspective is heavily influenced by Western rationality.

While acknowledging the epistemological origins of dominant approaches, turning to global-local binaries has been resisted by scholars. Okwany & Ebrahim (2016) emphasise situating "in-between perspectives in the early childhood care and education spaces between the polarity of dominant and Africentric narratives…[It] is critical to pay attention to the people in these spaces, their practices, beliefs and interpretations as sites where global and local forces converge or diverge" (Okwany & Ebrahim, 2016, p3). Similarly, Amita Gupta has analysed how phenomena such as neoliberalism and globalisation interact with and shape

early childhood in India. Gupta's work nuances multiple influences that shape ECE in India and she shows how "urban ECE classrooms in India revealed a space of pedagogical hybridity where curriculum and pedagogy were simultaneously influenced by local, colonial, and progressive ideologies and practices" (Gupta, 2022, p367). These "layered" influences point towards the futility of universalised conceptualisations and necessitate contextually grounded research to understand complexities underlying the messy social reality of young children.

A more recent shift in social studies on childhood emphasises the need to situate children's own perspectives and recognise their agency. Additionally, the hallmark of these studies was a common understanding that viewed "the child as subject, relational and sited in generational ordering" (Lange & Mierendorff, 2009, cited in McNamee & Seymour, 2012, p159). Yet, children's agency has become a contested idea with scholars like Esser (2016) raising questions on whether the notion of children's "independent" agency can be understood outside of individualised Western societies. She argues that this negates a relational understanding where agency exercised by children is shaped by and influences their social environments. The challenge, then, is to "find a relationship to both children's own activity and to the social processes which shape and constrain children's lives but in which they themselves are not necessarily involved" (Prout & James, 1997b, p28). To this end, the theoretical inclination of this paper emphasises the social and culturally constructed nature of early childhood and leads to considerations of age, children's needs, and time as the key concepts used in analysis.

3.2   An elusive variable: the meaning of social age

"Age is one of the most elusive social variables of sociological analysis; the most collected but the least used" (Finch, 1986 cited in Prout & James, 1997b, p232).

Chronological age has dominated most normative ideas of what constitutes age with the "legal system [using] chronological age to regulate education, sexual intercourse, marriage, and labour force participation, to name just a few examples" (Laz, 1998, p104). Educational systems espouse these values through the creation of the age-class system in schools where transitions through the schooling system are determined by progression in chronological age. Seen parallelly with the Piagetian model of child development, advancing in chronological age has also implied gaining maturity and rationality of thought. Critics of this idea from within sociology challenge the fixity of age, and argue that its use changes through time, and depends on the norms and expectations derived from social contexts in which meaning is ascribed to it. The rendering of chronological age as objective fact has been countered by putting forward ideas of social age, further used in this paper.

Theorised specifically in the context of children and youth, I draw from Clark-Kazak (2009)'s understanding of social age in my analysis. She defines "social age analysis [as] an investigation into the social meanings ascribed to biological human development and/or chronological age" (Clark-Kazak, 2009, p1313). There are four reasons for why I see her conceptualisation as a value to research children's experiences. First, she situates social age as complementary to ideas of chronological age, while noting the limitations of the latter. In turn, the idea that social meanings may either reaffirm or contradict the values ascribed to chronological age become important. The addition, then, is to complement this understanding with a more grounded, socially, and culturally responsive meaning. Second, given that chronological age feeds into linear trajectories of growth, she argues that social meanings resist the tendency to ghettoise "children's issues" and include wider socio-economic and

political processes that shape experiences of childhood. Third, Clark-Kazak argues that "social age analysis requires an analysis of dynamic intra- and intergenerational relationships" (Clark-Kazak, 2009, p1319), which makes it a relevant theoretical perspective to situate children's experiences with family members in the home, where they spent a significant amount of time during the lockdown. Finally, her conceptualisation does not preclude the possibilities of analysing how normative developmental thinking percolates to meanings ascribed to age with her observation that, "perceptions of young people and their social roles are also affected by exposure to western norms and values in development contexts. With colonisation, westernisation and urbanisation, formal education has also become an important indicator of social age" (ibid.). This is relevant for the present paper since studies of ECCE in India have previously demonstrated impacts of globalisation, for example, on children's everyday lives. Social age analysis is therefore used to not only look at the descriptive meaning of age, but the socio-cultural meanings attached to its varied connotations.

3.3   Constructing children's 'needs'

Among the thirty odd references to 'needs' in India's 66-page National Education Policy (2020) document, a majority are guised as proclamations about children's specific needs. Much like chronological age, "this seemingly innocuous and benign four-letter word conceals in practice a complex of latent assumptions and judgments about children" (Woodhead, 1997, p61). Drawing from Woodhead, this benign word is understood as a "cultural construction, superimposed on children 'in their best interests' as future adult members of society" (Woodhead, 1997, p66). Compared to the rampant use of 'children's needs' notably in debates spanning the 'the best interest principle' in child custody proceedings to child vulnerability within childhood studies, there has been considerably less theorisation on how the word carries meaning in relation to children's experiences and varies across contexts.

In Devine (2000)'s study of constructions of childhood in Irish schools, she breaks down discourses of teachers and students to examine how children's "needs discourse" operates. She draws heavily from Foucauldian power analysis and Giddens' structuration theory to examine perceptions of teachers, and how binary power relations are challenged by children through a negotiation of "teacher/pupil interaction which would accord them a greater voice in school" (Devine, 2000, p38). Her study shows that construction of 'needs' forms the entry point of inquiry, and theories are further used to substantiate analysis. While examining discourses was a possibility in the present study, I have resisted doing so since the exploratory nature of this study meant that deconstructing meanings attached to 'needs' was, in itself, a gap this paper aimed to address.

The decision then to retain 'needs' in conceptual analysis stems from the idea that "statements about children's needs convey an element of judgement about what is good…and how this can be achieved. It is this aspect of such statements that imbues them with emotive force, implying an imperative for action" (Woodhead, 1997, p65). The link here to action becomes important since action further translates to activities that make up children's daily lives, a core concern of this paper.

3.4   Time

From scientific work such as Stephen Hawking's 'A Brief History of Time' to philosophical and existential traditions notably through Heidegger's 'Being and Time' to the world of music with Pink Floyd's famous song lyric, "the sun is the same in a relative way, but you're older,"

(AZLyrics, n.d.) the notion of 'time' and specifically that of time passing has received considerable attention across disciplines.

Given that the research question traces children's experiences from lockdowns to the current moment, there is a clear temporal theme running through the paper and yet, its usage necessitates a concrete conceptualisation in this specific context. The lens of time is understood in two specific ways. First, drawing from Prout & James (1997), time is understood in relation to its effects on structuring activities with the acknowledgment that "time is used effectively to produce, control and order the everyday lives of children" (Prout & James, 1997a, pp.227-228). This will be further used to analyse the changing relation between time and ordering of lives across two distinct phases – the lockdowns and its aftermath. Moreover, acknowledging that children in my research experienced a spatio-temporal shift from home to school, and learning environments regulated primarily by the household to formal entities, Prout & James' argument that time forms a useful lens to study "transition" is taken here.

The second understanding of time, primarily to situate the idea of time passing, is borrowed from Craig Jeffrey (2010)'s theorisation of 'temporal anxiety' in relation to understanding temporal experiences. Jeffrey focuses on feelings of inertia and temporal disruption fuelled by socioeconomic transformation in liberalising India in the context of youth in Uttar Pradesh. In his discussion, he traces how "models of how social lives should be mapped onto chronological time…[influenced] dominant visions of how people should comport themselves with respect to linear time" (Jeffrey, 2010, pp.467-477). Notably, these feelings were a response to macro-level forces of economic restructuring in his work and yet, there is a parallel that can be drawn to the Covid-19 lockdowns. The lockdowns, too, disrupted routine life and prior daily activities of adults and children alike by forcing them to stay home. This was then followed by a period of reopening and the slow resumption of earlier activities. In such a context, an inquiry into strategies of time-use across the two distinct periods of lockdown and present, and how these influenced the ordering of everyday lives that Prout & James reference become important for the study.

3.5   Making linkages

Figure 2 below summarises how the three concepts of social age, construction of needs, and time have been understood in the previous sub-sections. The arrows in between indicate that linkages between concepts are critical in exploring the research questions. The next two chapters put these concepts to use to make sense of young children's experiences in the childcare and learning environments from Covid-19 lockdowns to the present.

Figure 2
Linkages: Conceptual tools and research questions

SOCIAL AGE
- Socio-cultural meanings of age
- Sheds light on intra and inter-generational relationships
- Considers impacts of normative developmental thinking and global-local influences on meanings of age

RESEARCH QUESTION AND SUB-QUESTIONS

How did Covid-19 lockdowns and the aftermath influence young children's learning and childcare experiences?
- How did young children experience learning and childcare during Covid-19 lockdown and the aftermath?
- How can these experiences during lockdowns help us understand the current structuring of children's daily lives?

CONSTRUCTION OF NEEDS
- Needs in relation to constructing perceptions of vulnerability
- Needs in relation to what children should be 'doing' -> implies an imperative for 'action'

TIME
- Role in structuring activities
- Temporal anxiety stemming from Covid-19 as a rupture in time
- Time-use patterns and looking at 'transition' moments

Source: Author's work, 2022.

Chapter 4 – At home: Grounded narratives on childcare and learning during Covid-19 lockdowns

During the national lockdown from March to August 2020, caregivers recalled that all family members stayed together under one roof for the first time in recent memory. With the closure of formal avenues for learning, childcare and the narrowing scope of informal care arrangements stemming from restrictions on mobility, responsibilities towards the care and learning of young children fell exclusively on the household. While children unequivocally stated that they preferred coming to school than staying at home, they appreciated the increased time spent with family members. A seven-year-old boy, when asked how he felt staying at home, said, *"everyone was home, so I enjoyed their company – I didn't feel like going out then."* Another six-year-old girl remarked, *"I had more time to spend with my parents. They used to play with me when they were home."* At the time, no one anticipated how long the measures would continue. This chapter looks at how constructions of children's age, needs and vulnerabilities fed into the childcare and learning environments during three successive lockdowns from March 2020 to October 2021 and provides the basis for understanding implications for children's subsequent trajectories, discussed in the next chapter.

4.1 Childcare in the pandemic: perceptions and distribution of 'care'

Care was defined by caregivers in terms of physical care and the associated duties parents have towards their children. For instance, a mother, while explaining what caregiving entailed, said, *"currently I see to it that they [her children] get food on time, eat, bathe, sleep."* Moreover, the nature and intensity of childcare was informed by birth order and the number of children in the household. In households with very young children (ages one, two, three), mothers emphasised that care and direct supervision was accorded in a preferential manner – with physical care of younger children taking precedence over other children in the household. The second child was seen as having passed the stage of requiring direct care. In households where children had older siblings, there was a marked difference of parental attitudes, with a sense of easiness among mothers. They mentioned that their childcare duties were not so intensive since the child had aged a bit and recalled being more involved when the child was younger. This shows how childcare was determined in terms of perceived vulnerabilities and needs in relation to the age composition and distribution among siblings within the household.

While mothers spoke of childcare as a duty of parents towards children, examples of children's care work came to the fore in cases of health emergencies in the household. For instance, a mother of a seven-year-old girl revealed that her youngest son who was eight months old during the first lockdown was in and out of multiple hospitals after being diagnosed with typhoid. While she and her husband exclusively monitored the child's health, she recalled that her daughter, who was then four-and-a-half, insisted on accompanying her parents to the hospital. While they never took her along, she was acutely aware that her brother was unwell. During this period, the mother mentioned that her sister, who lived close by, looked after her daughter. When asked about the relationship with younger siblings earlier that day, the girl remarked that she felt a sense of responsibility towards her brother. *"When my mother is cooking, I spend time with my younger brother and make sure he does not run out of the house."*

The mother acknowledged that her son was still weak and required constant monitoring after his operation to ensure that he did not step out of the house or eat any food from outside. She further mentioned, *"she (her daughter) plays with her younger brother when I have to go out."* The different articulations of the child's role vis-a-vis her brother shows how children's care work was dubbed as 'play' in this scenario. It can be further juxtaposed with the mother's acknowledgment of the importance of her sister's support in taking care of her daughter, and a parallel devaluation of the child's role, highlighting differing values accorded to children and adult's care work.

The example above has important repercussions for an understanding of the micro-context of care in this setting. First, from Okwany (2016)'s discussion of responses to shocks in the care system in Kenya and Uganda, she argues that in these contexts of low state support, a "distributed care system" exists, with older siblings' playing a critical role. Evans (2011) similarly shows how taking on care responsibilities in sibling-headed households in contexts of HIV/AIDS induced parental death, blurred boundaries between categories of child, youth, and adult and subverted normative age-stipulated ideas of childhood. The distribution of care in the example also demonstrates how care work is performed both inter-generationally (adult and child) and intra-generationally (siblings); though as shown above, there is an invisibilising of the latter's role.

Second, Christensen (2000) shows how the perception of vulnerability, particularly in contexts of illness, is articulated and understood by children in a different way than adults. While parents in her study understood the process of illness as a physical vulnerability or compromised state of the body, the children, who themselves experienced illness, "expressed these as disruptions to their everyday practices and routines, for example because of parental restrictions imposed on them" (Christensen, 2000, p46). Recovery was then viewed as reclaiming their social position and activities. While the girl in my example did not experience illness herself, Christensen's argument has been referenced to show the differing perceptions and connections adults and children make between the body, vulnerability, and illness.

Finally, the example highlights a tension between perception of vulnerability of young children on one hand, and them embodying language of care by exhibiting these roles. It further points to the lack of recognition of children's activities in the micro-context of care. This devaluation is paralleled in Punch (2001)'s observation from her study in Bolivia where she used a generational and intra-generational lens to understand the division of household responsibilities. She noted that even though children from age four engaged in agricultural tasks that contributed to the overall maintenance of land, "children's work [was] often not counted as 'work' by adults" (Punch, 2001, p810). Moreover, connecting Evans (2011)'s argument to the broader Covid-19 context, given estimations of the large number of children orphaned during lockdowns in India (Ray, 2022), the discussion on reconfigurations of children's care responsibilities, sometimes in defiance of the meaning associated with their chronological age, becomes relevant.

4.2 Averting risk: parental regulation of the 'outdoors' amidst Covid-19

Furthering Woodhead (1997)'s association between needs translating to action, parental perception of children as physically vulnerable and a resultant need for protection (particularly during Covid-19 with a heightened sense of health risks) becomes important to understand regulation of children's activities. The language of care in this context was articulated as a strategy of risk aversion to ensure physical protection. To explain further, while parental energy was directed towards very young children, the degree of freedom accorded to older children was still restricted to ensure their physical safety. The immediate threat of the Coronavirus was used to justify children's confinement to the home during lockdown; and yet they were not allowed to go out after restrictions had been lifted as well. The perception of children's vulnerability directly stems from the construction of children's needs where "children are constituted as essentially vulnerable beings who can only survive and develop successfully if intensely nurtured and protected by adults…[and further implies] the positioning of adults as responsible providers and carers of the child" (Christensen, 2000, p40).

To decode this specific understanding of vulnerability, I explore parental reasons underlying the fear of letting children go out to play during this period. The first was a fear of police retaliation and parents recalled the high level of police presence outside their neighbourhood during lockdowns. Coercive policing was strengthened by rampant imagery of "the police with its new role, widening their law enforcement powers, through surveillance, [and] patrolling streets to ensure lockdown and business closures" (Bhardwaj, 2021, p148). This fear was then ingrained in children as well with a mother of a seven-year-old girl recollecting how *"once from our home's window, she saw a policeman wielding a stick on the lane when a few other people had stepped out. Since then, she never insisted on going out to play."*

The second set of reasons related to concerns for safety and preventing physical injury for children whom they perceived as more susceptible to injury than others. For instance, a mother of two boys, ages six and thirteen, said, *"many parents are afraid to send smaller children out alone so they stay predominantly at home. I feel afraid - what if he [the younger son] goes to the main road and gets hurt…I would be concerned for his physical safety if he went out to play. It is better if the children are in front of you – at least you know they are safe."* The spatial organisation of the neighbourhood, like many other unregulated urban settlements in Delhi, comprised narrow lanes outside the houses with loose electrical wiring and limited opportunities for outdoor play. Yet, the mother drew a distinction between the two sons when she mentioned, though she dissuaded both sons from going out to play beyond the immediate vicinity of the house, her *"older son does not listen – he goes off to the park to play with other children his age."* While this is perceived as a natural act of defiance by the older son, the younger child's activities are monitored more closely, thereby restricting his opportunities to go outdoors. This relates to Punch (2008)'s observation from her study of children's perceptions of sibling dynamics that "graded levels of autonomy often become translated into different degrees of privileges for older and younger siblings [thereby] reinforcing the status and age hierarchy of the birth order…[Moreover,] many children indicated that parents tend not to allow younger siblings to be as geographically mobile as their older siblings" (Punch, 2008, pp.5-8).

Finally, parents emphasised that the high transmissibility of the Coronavirus meant that if one member of their family fell ill, others would follow. A father of a six-year-old girl

stressed that in their home, this would be disastrous as there was not sufficient space to quarantine. Yet, long after the first lockdown restrictions were eased, older members began leaving home. The father mentioned that this was because there was a slow resumption of economic activities and as the sole breadwinner, he had to leave home for work. There was a hierarchical construction of need to justify going out, with the youngest children coming last. This was reinforced by the Delhi government's decision in 2021 that called for the graded reopening of schools with higher classes, particularly children in Classes 10 and 12 who had board examinations, receiving priority. This led to a scenario where most children I spoke to stayed at home for a period of one and a half years, with negligible opportunity to go outdoors. Acknowledging these physical space constraints along with a strong inhibition to let children go outdoors, many parents rationalised the increased time children spent on phones.

4.3 Understanding constructions of 'play' and 'learning' during the lockdown

In the first chapter, I introduced how surveys capturing parental perceptions on impacts of the lockdown on children showed that there was a stronger prioritisation of disruptions to 'learning' over 'play'. In this section, I go a step further to look at what the two encompassed in this setting and decode how this dichotomy is understood in relation to children's needs, age, and time.

"When the lockdown was imposed, children were not going out. Schools were also closed. What will children do sitting idle at home? How much will they play? In any case, where is the space here to play?"

This quote by the mother of a six-year-old boy encapsulates ideas around what children were 'doing' during the lockdown. Yet, there was a clear distinction made between degrees of 'sitting idle' for children of various age groups in the household. The feeling was intensified for older siblings, all enrolled in formal education before the lockdown. Parents felt that 'sitting idle' came at the cost of engaging in studies. For most parents, the idea that children aged three to five were predominantly playing at home fit their understanding of age-specific constructions of childhood. A mother of a six-year-old girl, (who was four during the first lockdown) while explaining her daughter's daily routine, said *"she used to play. We used to explain to her, 'schools will open soon, you will also have to go.' She didn't know at that time what a school was."* Yet, as time passed and children grew older, parents recalled feeling a sense of uneasiness with the time devoted to 'play'.

4.3.1 Children's 'play'

When children were asked about their activities during the lockdown, the most common responses included 'playing'. Examining parental perception alongside children reveals diverging constructions of play with some parents associating 'sitting idle' with playing, and others seeing it as a realistic strategy to keep children occupied. A few expressed frustrations and recounted how they would scold their children to dissuade them. *"He still plays Free Fire. I used to get very angry, scold him and hit him also to stop him from playing these games. But when an older child in the house is playing it constantly, the younger children naturally follow"*, said a mother of a seven-year-old boy.

In contrast, children articulated their learnings from play very differently. Within play, an overwhelming majority of children mentioned playing online games, followed by playing with their siblings at home and watching television. With limited smartphones in the household, digital engagement became a shared activity between young children and their siblings. Most girls mentioned they played games where you had to put make-up on dolls and dress characters. Boys frequently cited 'shooting' games, the most common response being 'PubG' and 'Free Fire', both being simulations of war-like scenarios with two opposing teams using guns, tanks, and strategic thinking to defeat the other. A six-year-old boy, when asked what the game entailed, explained in great detail how fighters climbed to "vantage points"[9] to strategically manoeuvre their next move against the "enemy". It was interesting to note the contrast with the relatively withdrawn nature of the child in regular classroom activities. Evidently, the child's description of the game revealed how engagement with digital technology during the lockdown, mostly as a shared activity with siblings, led to acquisition of specific skills that were not necessarily valued in the classroom environment. Through Kervin et al. (2015) study of online games among pre-schoolers, they too found that "children were 'playful social learners'...who engaged with technologies in social and pleasurable ways, which in turn demonstrated their confidence and mastery" (Kervin et al., 2015, p236). Moreover, the example complicates the notion of 'developmentally-appropriate' activities prescribed based on assumed cognitive capacity at given ages.

Beyond digital engagement, children cited playing with siblings in the household during the lockdown. Here, responses were similar across sex with both boys and girls mentioning games such as '*pakran-pakrai*' (chasing each other), '*aankh mein choli*' (a scarf is tied around the eyes of one child who looks for other children) and '*chupan chupai*' (hide and seek). With all family members occupying the same physical environment, these games suggest that children maximised the use of restricted space. Yet, children who lived through the first lockdown in rural settings had far greater avenues to play with other children within and outside the household. A mother of a seven-year-old girl recalled that her child regularly went out for at least an hour a day during the first lockdown in rural Bihar to play with other children. Noting differences in the stringency of lockdown enforcements, she lamented that their migration to Delhi following the first lockdown resulted in a significant reduction of these opportunities.

4.3.2 'Learning' during the pandemic

In between the second and third lockdown in 2021, calls for admission to the new school year for Classes 1 and 2 were floated in the neighbourhood. A few parents admitted their children to the new class but recalled that schools remained shut and online learning was being pursued till March 2022. Determined to deliver some form of education to their children, a few parents noted purchasing an additional phone for online learning[10]. Yet, in hindsight, all parents stressed that they thought it was an ineffective mode of learning specifically for young children.

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[9] The child specifically used this word

[10] The cost of lower-end smartphones, which enable usage of Zoom, YouTube, Whatsapp, and other apps ranges between Rs. 7,000 - 10,000 ($ 85-120). Moreover, the proliferation of cheap data packages in India, notably by companies like Reliance Jio and Airtel, has led to an uptake of internet usage and a parallel expansion of the smartphone market (Singh, 2022).

Parents mentioned that online classes lasted roughly two hours every day in the morning. There was no break in between and the strength of the class on average ranged from eight to ten students. Current class sizes for both Classes 1 and 2 are far greater than this number. Hence, issues of accessibility are useful to understand receptivity of online classes in the previous year. Beyond physical access i.e. limited smartphones in the house and clashes in classes among siblings, parents stressed the in-accessible nature of pedagogy in an online medium for young children. An older sibling of a seven-year-old girl, currently age twenty, explained how classes were conducted, "*she [the teacher] would switch on her web camera, share her screen, show the book, and point towards where she was reading from the book. She would read each line herself. She would not ask children to repeat after her. She asked the children to only observe her. But we had to play a role in ensuring that the child was following the teacher's finger movements as she read the page.*" The need for supervision was echoed by another mother who mentioned that her son was five years old at the time and if she did not sit next to him during the class, he would keep the phone on while class was underway and start playing on the side. The inability of very young children, who had never experienced online learning before, to understand how to use the medium was reiterated by several parents. Overall, it appeared that children's participation in online learning was passive. Looking back at the period, some children recalled attending classes, but emphasised that they enjoyed school far more.

4.3.3 Decoding the dichotomy between 'play' and 'learning'

Admittedly, this section so far has presented 'play' and 'learning' activities separately, thereby reinforcing the dichotomy of the two. This choice stems from separate articulations of activities by children and caregivers alike. Gupta (2022) mentions how "the concept of play was officially written into educational policy for the first time [through the National Policy on Education, 1986] while formal instruction of the 3Rs[11] in ECE was discouraged" (Gupta, 2022, p367). Yet, nearly four decades later, with subsequent ECE policies re-emphasising the same ideal repeatedly, the prioritisation of 'learning' over 'play' persists.

In this context, the bifurcation was cemented by phenomena predating lockdowns. Yet, as the next chapter will show, parental perception of temporal rupture during Covid-19 lockdowns influenced children's transitions into formal avenues of learning. I proceed to first draw from literature on the increasing formalising tendency within ECE in different contexts which resulted in creating this dichotomy and then situate it in the present discussion.

In the USA, Nicolopoulou (2010) showed how "play is being displaced by a single-minded focus on teaching academic skills through direct instruction. This emphasis on more didactic, academic, and content-based approaches to preschool education comes at the expense of more child-centred, play-oriented, and constructivist approaches, which are dismissed as obsolete or simply crowded out" (Nicolopoulou, 2010, p1). This tendency is reflected in Bipath et al. (2022)'s study from South Africa where they demonstrate how the "erosion of play favoured more didactic approaches in areas such as literacy acquisition for preparation of test-based school assessment" (Bipath et al., 2022, p517). Experiences in drastically different contexts such as South Africa and USA find resonance in Singh and Gupta (2012)'s study from Delhi where they too find that "parental construction of childhood in

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[11] 3Rs refers to Reading, Writing, Arithmetic

contemporary social networks is defined by academic achievement. The beliefs about the significance of play are dismissed and performance in school is seen as the only path for children to carve out success" (Singh & Gupta, 2012, p246). These distinctions were found to be echoed by children in the present study as well, with them mentioning that their primary role in the household was 'studying'. In contrast, during the lockdown, many of these children responded that their primary activity was 'playing.' This ties into the construction of children's needs discussed earlier where 'play' time is compromised "to adapt into adult roles and prepare for their future at earlier ages" (Ginsburg, 2007, p184). The separation of these two activities by children can be explained through a parallel from Yamamoto (2020)'s study where she shows how six and seven-year-old Japanese and American children's beliefs about school learning are shaped by the cultural contexts they grow up in with its emphasis on different 'learning' aspects of formal schooling.

The discussion in this chapter has shown how changes in the childcare and learning environments during lockdowns were shaped by perceptions of children's vulnerability and needs determined by different understandings of age. It highlighted the tensions between children's perceived vulnerability and their role in the distributed care system and showed how this vulnerability feeds into regulation of children's activities, with children engaging in online games as a shared routine with siblings. Further, parental perception of the ineffectiveness of online learning along with children's passive involvement fuelled certain shifts in children's activities once lockdown regulations began to ease. The next chapter examines this further and shows how the connections between the lockdown and the subsequent period are critical in understanding children's routines in the current moment.

Chapter 5 – "I like school more than tuition": Situating the shifting learning environment

"When you go home today from school, what will you do?", I asked a six-year-old girl. *"I will go and do homework for tuition first. I will then go for tuition at 5 PM, come back at 8 PM, then I will eat and go to sleep"*, she said. Her routine found resonance with most children in Class 1 who, when asked about tuitions, proudly echoed that they too go for these classes after school hours. While schools physically reopened for Classes 1 and 2 in March 2022, it appeared that many children already had some experience of learning through private tutoring before entering the classroom. Why were these avenues chosen and how did this transition impact young children's routines? This chapter aims at offering insight to these questions and picks up from where the previous chapter left off to situate the dynamics that have culminated in the present structuring of children's daily lives.

5.1 The changing nature of time-use among young children

With significant variations in receptivity of online learning and continuing physical closure of schools, parental concerns of too much 'play' time, which some equated with 'sitting idle', eating into time for 'learning' began growing. As shown in the previous chapter, there was a strong feeling among parents that the maximum disruption to children's lives during lockdowns was in terms of 'learning', and 'play' featured lower down the priority list. By mid-2021, lockdown regulations had become far less strict, and this period provided an opportunity to explore avenues for learning. Since the home was seen as a place where learning did not occur and schools remained closed at the time, the most readily available avenue was the private tutoring market. It is well documented in India that "[though] private tutoring is prevalent at all levels of education, it is preponderant in secondary education" (Sujatha, 2014, p1) when children are faced with high-stakes examinations, notably in classes 10 and 12. While there is an acknowledgment of the phenomenon at pre-primary and primary levels through government data and previous studies discussed briefly in subsequent sections, there has been much less inquiry into how very young children perceive their time in these additional classes alongside parental motivations. This section will further look at motivations linked to the perceptions of what children should be doing at a particular age and stage, as well as experiences of children's entry into tuition and its lasting impacts on their present lives.

A twenty-year-old, who herself conducted additional classes for children in primary school explained the resurgence of private tutoring: *"when things began opening up [mid-2021], we began hearing about resumption of tuition. This was a good time to send my sister [then six] since the teacher did not live too far away and my parents felt she should learn something that will help her in school later on."* There was a feeling, particularly voiced by adults, that Covid-19 lockdowns served as a distinct rupture in time - it caused massive economic distress, halted social lives, and led to a feeling of being stuck. Young children, whose lives were largely unregimented prior to the pandemic, viewed lockdown more in terms of disruptions to play. As the previous chapter showed, children maximised the use of limited space and engaged in different forms of play as a shared activity. Yet, with increasing anxieties around missed 'learning', time started gaining more significance for children's activities when restrictions were eased. The idea of missed learning time can be linked to Craig Jeffrey (2010)'s argument of "surplus time" that was not being put to use and an accompanying perception of temporal anxiety. The feeling

of being left behind among youth in his study, was rooted in an inadequacy of following normative trajectories linked to arranging linear time according to particular 'milestones' and expectations. This feeling of inertia he references, stemmed, among other reasons from "educational environments that championed the productive use of time" (Jeffrey, 2010, p477). The feature of trying to game time to be 'productive' is one significant driver of shifts to formal tuition environments. It shows how adult anxieties around time, even when not shared by young children themselves, are powerful mechanisms in regulating children's lives, particularly when linked to making investments.

5.1.1 Tuition as necessity?

"I stayed at home in the beginning [during lockdown]. Then my parents started sending me for tuition so I would get an opportunity to go out of the house" said a seven-year-old boy, recounting the first time he stepped out of his house towards the end of 2021. When asked if he enjoys tuition more or school, he responded, *"school because the tuition class has less children and we can't play. The tuition teacher also takes our test."* While this boy's first impression of entering tuition was that of excitement primarily stemming from going outdoors once again, as time passed, he mentioned the trade-offs with play and compared school as a more fun place to be in. Why then, despite this sentiment, were children aged six and seven being enrolled in these classes? To understand this further, caregiver's perceptions become important.

Tuition was framed by adults as a necessity for these children for several reasons. Explaining the pre-existing value ascribed to private tutoring, the grandmother of a six-year-old girl said, *"Irrespective of government and private [school], we need to put the children in tuition."* In her house, all children from ages six to seventeen attended tuition. This quote highlights a perceived additional value being provided through tutoring and a need for children to benefit from it. Second, as another father of a seven-year-old girl emphasised, tuition was framed as a necessity due to the importance of seeking alternate avenues for studying. He mentioned, *"If she studied by herself, we would not find a reason to send her for tuition anywhere. The issue is this child does not study herself at home. This is why we have to send her outside for tuition."* Here, the idea of home environments being unfavourable for learning is reiterated once again. Moreover, tuition is seen as an alternate space not just for learning but also as a disciplinary environment where children 'have to' and are made to study.

Beyond finding strategies to overcome the feeling of lost time in the preceding lockdown period and catch up with learning, the specific moment these children found themselves in at the time was a transition to formal schooling (class 1) and preparations to meet the 'needs' of that environment. School closures necessitated an alternate avenue for learning, which was readily available through private tutoring. Drawing from Prout & James (1997a), the role of time to order activities and its increasing significance in moments of transition are analysed further. This transition from ECE environments to formal school, though thought of in present educational policy as part of a continuum comprising a larger foundational stage of learning[12], continues to represent certain major 'shifts' in the child's

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[12] The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage, released in late October 2022, states, "All the Learning Outcomes have a developmental trajectory across every age group through the Stage. They must be seen as a continuum and a trajectory" (National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Framework, 2022, p225)

life. To put it simply in the words of a six-year-old boy, who when asked to describe his drawing on the roles of each family member including himself, said, "*I am now in big school and so is my older brother*". Preparations for entering 'big' school come with a set of responsibilities that include becoming more attentive to 'studying' but are not simply limited to curricular expectations.

Pianta & Kraft-Sayre (2003) describe the wide range of changes that are experienced in this transition during pre-pandemic times. These include, "a substantial shift in culture and expectations, including more formal academic demands, a more complex social environment…and more transitions during the school day (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003, p2). Juxtaposing the applicability of these changes to the current discussion, how was this transition realised for children who had either never previously attended educational institutions, or attended them for brief periods online? While this transition assumes progression in chronological age-determined 'development milestones', the embodiment of the child 'now in big school' and its accompanying responsibilities are determined not so much by prescribed milestones, but other skills deemed more important as we will see in the next section. As demonstrated, tuition environments were a major avenue to prepare children for schooling. It becomes important then to look at the use of time in these spaces and how their pedagogical inclination shapes children's learning. The additional value ascribed to tuition can be further examined to understand what form this value takes, especially for very young children. In the following discussion, we will see how different expectations were outsourced to private tutoring in the run-up to resumption of school and presently, alongside it.

5.2 Outsourcing 'school readiness'

The notion of 'school readiness' or preparations for transitioning from ECE environments to formal schooling has been discussed in Sriprakash et al. (2020)'s study from Katihar district, Bihar to show how "children as young as three and four years were required to sit for long periods engaged in rote-instruction with little to no opportunity for play-based learning" (Sriprakash et al., 2020, p332). They further show how school readiness discourses centred around the need for more "school-like" ECE services to prepare children for the competitive formal school environment, and that families believed these institutional settings were "not only desirable but also as the only legitimate site of learning" (ibid.). Here, they reference not only private tutoring, but also pre-primary classes in private schools, along with other ECE providers in their research. Yet, their discussion touches upon key features that find resonance with private tutoring for young children in the present paper.

To probe this idea of legitimacy further, informal conversations with teachers and interviews with parents revealed that there are several contributing factors to cement the position of private tutoring as a space for young children's learning. A parent mentioned that one of the teachers in the primary school conducts tuition after-school hours, with parents vying for a spot for their children in this class. Second, in an interview, a parent told me how her child was enrolled in the same tuition as a teacher's child, signifying that the tuition was perceived as high-quality owing to the superior value accorded to the teacher's decision to enrol her child in this class. Third, to explain the resurgence of the tuition phenomenon that coincided with easing lockdown restrictions, parents seemed to suggest that the enrollment of other children in the vicinity to these classes pushed them to do the same. Indeed, as Gupta (2022) observes, "private tutoring gains social legitimacy by not just the academic support it claims to offer but also the embodied resources, in the form of teacher-tutors as

well as effective teaching and learning practices" (Gupta, 2022, p6). Moreover, beyond social legitimacy, growing older against the backdrop of anxieties around children's usage of time transformed private tutoring to something that children 'need' to engage in.

Following from the perception of legitimacy of these spaces, there are distinct forms of value attributed to private tutoring. These include, "*aspects not necessarily related to formal learning – such as, how to behave appropriately when you go out, how to communicate with others. I have seen changes to her way of talking with others. You must know what kind of area **** is [where they stay]. The dominant language on streets is rough and aggressive. It depends heavily on the teacher – if the teacher teaches good habits, the child will naturally emulate them. They also focus on reading stories which have some moral values – such as helping elders, respecting everyone, greeting people. Everything is taught in English to the children*" explained the older sister of a seven-year-old girl. What is clear from this quote is that these spaces ingrain normative behavioural patterns among children such as engaging in polite conversation, learning codes of morality and appropriate behaviour to counteract the surroundings they live in. This aligns with observations from Maithreyi et al. (2022)'s study on ECE in Tamil Nadu where they note, "often it is not just academic knowledge that parents from marginalised communities seek to secure…but also the cultural capital of dress, mannerisms, refined language and disciplined comportment" (Maithreyi et al., 2022, p5) that is associated with the elite. The emphasis on English as a medium signals a particular aspirational value that is circumscribed in imaginations of adults, and is passed on to children. Further, the quote implies the need for children, from a young age, to distinguish themselves from their environment by internalising particular mannerisms. This ties back into Sriprakash et al. (2020)'s accounts of parents in Bihar emphasising the need to remove their children from the village environment and instead focus on learning useful skills, of which English featured high on the priority list.

5.3 The costs of private tutoring

The discussion in this chapter so far has focused on presenting why private tutoring is envisaged as a necessity in preparations for schooling, but an obvious question remains. How are these families, who during the Covid lockdowns lost their sources of livelihood affording these classes? To understand the magnitude of the phenomenon, the latest round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) on social consumption of education notes that the average out-of-pocket expenditure per student per year at the pre-primary level in urban areas is Rs. 14,509 or $175 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2019, p36)[13]. Caregivers noted that the amount incurred on tuition ranges from Rs. 300 to 600 or $3.6 to $7.2 per month based on classes conducted six days a week after school hours. A study by the NGO *Saajha* in Delhi also showed how, "during the crisis [lockdowns], a lot of households did buy smartphones solely to continue their children's studies. There have been numerous reports, narrating stories of the extent parents have gone to make technology available to their children" (Bhatnagar & Roy, 2021, p120). The prioritisation of investments in 'learning' in resource-constrained environments becomes clearer once the 'need' for private tutoring is taken into consideration.

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[13] By virtue of reflecting a national average in urban areas and combining private and public educational institutions, this figure hides substantial variations in expenses. Yet, it provides a starting point to situate massive additional expenses incurred on education by families in urban India.

'Costs' of private tutoring in this subsection are also taken to reference the impacts of this phenomenon on young children. A seven-year-old girl, while explaining why she likes coming to school more, said, *"I like school more than tuition because I feel I learn more in school. In school, we also get the chance to play. In tuition, they teach us multiplication and teach us from the book."* From other accounts of children, they described how a didactic form of teaching comprising textbook-based learning, memorisation, repetition, and heavy emphasis on testing is ingrained through private tutoring. It appeared that parents were acutely aware of this pedagogical inclination the girl described and sent children to these classes precisely because of it. Taking the example of multiplication further, a sister of a seven-year-old girl explained, *"in addition to school revision, they teach future curriculum as well as other things that may come in handy. For example, in school they are only being taught subtraction right now. In tuition, they are taken a step forward and made to learn multiplication as well."* The comment about taking a step forward, though made in reference to curriculum, relates to the idea of acquiring certain forms of education to maintain differentials. It further signals strategies to put children ahead of the pack by circumventing the scope of formal school curriculum. To regain lost time, attending tuition is then perceived as a way of pressing the accelerate button and racing against time. Relatedly, this maximisation of 'time-use' is seen as an important mechanism to achieve productivity.

While children clearly indicated preferences for school, the pride associated with attending tuition referenced earlier in this chapter shows that their perceptions of delivering on normative understandings of what they should be doing as 'big' children is an important component of their self-identity. As Gerber & Huijsmans (2016) emphasise, studying "perspective[s] of children requires appreciating children as social actors living their current lives as children, who are also aware of the role attributed to education in their future lives as grown-ups" (Gerber & Huijsmans, 2016, p212).

Yet, despite the push towards these forms of education which were expected to give children a head-start, my experiences observing classroom settings revealed noticeable differences in children's receptivity to classroom teaching, which for the most part was structured around curricular expectations. This highlights a clash of values with parents investing in modes of learning children least prefer and further shows that for many children, the formalised pedagogical inclination of private tutoring has not resulted in outcomes desired by parents. Most importantly, as children express repeatedly, it has come at the cost of activities they enjoy the most.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion and Afterthought

When I first began reviewing literature to identify my research topic earlier this year, I remember looking for insights into young children's experiences during the Covid-19 lockdowns in India. Following multiple iterations in the specific focus of my research, the puzzle that emerged consistently was that children's voices were crowded out or subsumed in discussions on how lockdowns and accompanying school closures jeopardised the future of an entire generation. Studies tended to be prescriptive, centring around broader impacts on children's education, health, and wellbeing, and aimed to provide pointers for future action. Within this, there was a further marginalisation of children's perspectives. Lockdowns arguably restricted the capacity for researchers to conduct empirically grounded research, but a deeper problem was apparent. As McNamee & Seymour (2012)'s study showed, even within earlier scholarship on childhood, there was a clear de-prioritisation of younger children's perspectives. Against this backdrop, I view my research as contributing to shift this epistemological balance and build on work by critical childhood scholars such as Prout, James, Woodhead, Punch, Penn, and Okwany (to name a few), whose works I draw inspiration from and have referenced through this paper. This concluding chapter draws on previous chapters to re-emphasise the key arguments and reflects on areas uncovered during the research process that can form the subject(s) of inquiry in future scholarship.

6.1 Enduring linkages between the lockdown and present

My research question set out to examine how young children in contexts of urban poverty and low state support navigated early learning and childcare during three successive lockdowns to the present in Delhi. Considering the relationality underpinning experiences of childhood and Esser (2016)'s paper raising questions on children's "independent" agency outside more individualised contexts, my methodological approach focused on children's perceptions, but incorporated caregivers as well. Combining participatory methods such as art-based reflections, storytelling, and traditional methods of classroom observation and unstructured interviews, I sought to explore children's experiences through an engagement with concepts of social age, constructions of needs, and time.

While my empirical work and findings are organised based on experiences during the lockdown and its aftermath, rather than viewing these in isolation during two distinct periods, the linkages between them are key to understand children's present routines. I start by highlighting how birth order and distribution of age among siblings informed the nature and intensity of care, perceived in terms of childcare by caregivers. Through the example of a seven-year-old girl, I demonstrated how far from being passive recipients of care, children took on some of these responsibilities, particularly towards younger siblings. However, their role in the distributed care system was devalued and dubbed as 'play', pointing to the necessity of recognising both the intergenerational as well as intragenerational nature of care work. Parental perceptions of vulnerability of children, however, became key to understand restrictions of the outdoors on one hand, and the graded construction of 'need' to justify going out of the home, with youngest children coming last. Children's activities, then, revolved predominantly around play. While children described digital play enthusiastically as a shared activity with siblings, parallelly, their passive (or even absent) engagement with online learning fed into adult anxieties around 'lost learning time.'

Since schools remained closed and the home was perceived as a space where learning could not happen, alternate avenues had to be found. Children's 'needs' during this time were perceived as being prepared for formal school. The push towards private tutoring came with easing lockdown restrictions. Through a discussion on values ascribed to tuition, I showed how parents felt it was an effective learning and disciplinary environment to ensure children remained 'a step forward'. The resulting changes in time-use increasingly came at the cost of 'play.' Presently, children's routines centred around 'learning' – in school and in tuition environments, albeit with drastic differences in pedagogy. While children articulated clear preferences for school, perception of tuition was mixed. Though children did lament reduction of play time, they saw it as a necessary part of their role as going to 'big' school.

6.2 Tensions

Experiences in childcare and learning described above complicate assumptions of children's linear trajectories and prescriptions of 'developmental milestones' that tie into the logic of progression in formal schooling. Children's activities do not always align with chronological age-based cognitive capacities, but rather the socio-cultural meanings associated with evolving needs at different stages of their lives. This has been highlighted through multiple tensions in this paper between care and vulnerability, play and learning, and 'being' and 'becoming'. Viewing these tensions as complex realities of childhood allows for a more contextually informed approach in research and practice.

6.3 Reflections and areas for further research

In interactions with children, I remember the enthusiasm when asked to describe the types of digital games they played. Their engagement with this medium had resulted in many learnings that were not valued in the curriculum-driven nature of pedagogy. Given increasing digital time among children, research can help uncover values children ascribe to this form of play; and further, how they use these skills in other aspects of their life. While I discuss the nature of digital play, what struck me was that many of these games reinforced normative gendered assumptions. An inquiry into young boys' and girls' meaning making of these activities can contribute further to research at the intersection of gender and childhood studies.

As I write this section, primary classes were shut once again in Delhi owing to high levels of air pollution. Notwithstanding epidemiological studies that have demonstrated heightened health risks of air pollution on very young children and the elderly, what is becoming evident in Delhi is young children's schooling is the first casualty when any uncertainty strikes. While uncertainty can take various shades (air pollution, future pandemics, global warming-induced changes), my research shows that learning is presently outsourced beyond the school environment. In events of likely school closures against the backdrop of uncertainty, the question of an increasing reliance away from schools on private tutoring has important implications for equity in learning. This dimension must be explored further in future research.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Story-telling activity with children of classes 1 and 2

Story-telling activity with children of classes 1 and 2. This was the rough script. Follow-up questions were asked depending on answers children were giving.

Who all like listening to stories? Ok today I will tell you all a story. This is a story about 2 children – Ayan and his sister, Alia. Ayan is 4 years old and Alia is 5. One day, Ayan and Alia were playing with their friend, Raju. What can you see in this image? What are they playing?

One day, their father was reading. What can you see in this image?

Their father used to read the newspaper every day. One day, their father was reading the news and he read that a virus has spread across the world. Then he read that because of this virus, everyone must stay at home. He told Ayan and Alia that everyone must stay at home. Alia and Ayan started thinking, now how will we play? Did something like this happen with any of you? Did anyone's parents tell them there is a big virus that has spread?

What can you see here? (houses) Yes, these are houses. But can you see anyone here? (no) Why do you think there are no people here? Where have they gone?

When Alia and Ayan were told that a big virus has spread and they must stay at home, how do you think they would have felt?

Now Alia and Ayan were sitting at home and thinking what should we do? What do you think they were thinking?

Ayan and Alia were told that they must stay at home for a while, and they could not go out. What do you think they will do in their time at home?

Did all of you face this situation as well? What all did you play at home?

Now we will see what Ayan and Alia did. Like all of you, they also were thinking what they should do while they are at home. Like this, one month passed, two months passed…and they began thinking when will this get over? What do you all think happened next?

One day, Ayan and Alia were told that they can now go out of the house. How do you think they felt? What did you all do when you went out of the house?

After that, one day their father told them they can go back to school. Now they went to school. What are they wearing?
How do you think they felt when they came to school? And what did they do when they came to school?
You all also came to school after so long. How did you all feel? What did you do?

Appendix 2: Selection of drawings from art-based reflections

Based on these drawings, children explained who all live in their house, what they do, and their relationship with each family member

Appendix 3: Guiding questions for unstructured interviews with care-givers

This is the rough set of questions. It was adapted based on responses and follow-up questions were asked accordingly. Interviews were originally conducted in Hindi and transcribed to English afterwards.

Section	List of guiding questions
Background	*Introduces research, its purpose, explaining consent* • What is your relation to the child (who studies in class 1/2) • Who all live in your house currently? What is their age • During the lockdown, who all were at home? • Where were you physically located during the lockdowns? *Follow ups on stringencies of regulations and nature of Covid-19 related regulations if the respondent lived elsewhere during lockdowns* • What are the occupations of members in your house? How did Covid-19 lockdowns impact the household's financial situation? • Did you benefit from any state support or government schemes during this period? • Before the lockdown, were your children enrolled anywhere? • How did you explain to the child what was happening at the time?
Experiences during lock-downs	• When the lockdown was first imposed, what did your child's daily routine look like? • Were there other children in the house during the lockdown? What were they doing? • During the lockdown, did you observe any other children playing on the lanes outside your homes or in the terrace of their homes? • What modes of learning did the child engage in during this period? How did they engage in these, and did they receive any support from others? • How was care for children realised during this period? What does it entail? How are roles distributed and who undertakes these? How is this different now? *Follow-ups were primarily based on responses related to play activities, online learning, how phone time was distributed, and nature and distribution of care*
Transition (when lock-down regulations started easing)	• When did the child start going out? • When did you get the child enrolled in school? • Does your child attend any additional classes or coaching? *Follow-ups on tuition based on responses*
School reopen-ing	• When did schools start and when did the child start going? • After going to school, have you noticed any changes in the child?

	• What do you think about the overall standards of the school the child is going to right now?
	• Since school fees are waived in the school, are there any other educational expenses?
	• How do you view the methods used to teach children in the school as compared to the tuition classes?
	• What does the child's routine look like now that he/she goes to school as opposed to earlier?
	• If there are future school closures, what effect do you think it will have on the child?

Appendix 4: Original consent form in Hindi

विश्वविद्यालय: इंटरनेशनल इंस्टिट्यूट ऑफ़ सोशल स्टडीज, इरेस्मस यूनिवर्सिटी

मास्टर्स: डेवलपमेंट स्टडीज

शोध पत्र: छोटे बच्चों और उनके घर के सदस्य के दृष्टिकोण: बच्चों के पर्यावरण में बदलाव समझने के लिए (कोविड लॉकडाउन से स्कूल रीऑपनिंग)

छात्र: अनुष्का गुप्ता

सहमति पत्र

जगह: _____   दिनांक: ___/___/_____   समय: ___:___ AM/PM

इस शोध का उद्देश्य छोटे बच्चों और उनके घर के सदस्य के दृष्टिकोण को समझने के लिए किया जा रहा है | कोविड लॉकडाउन से स्कूल वापस खोलने तक बच्चों के शिक्षा, स्वास्थ और देखभाल के बारें में मै कुछ सवाल उनके घर के सदस्यों से पूछूंगी | यह शोध मास्टर्स डिग्री के रिसर्च के लिए किया जा रहा है | जो भी जवाब आप देंगे, उनका उपयोग केवल शिक्षात्मक उद्देश्यों के लिए किया जाएगा | कोई भी जानकारी आपके नाम से नहीं संबंधित किया जायेगा |

निजता:

आपकी पहचान की रक्षा की जाएगी और सभी नामों को अनामीकृत कर दिया जाएगा। इस शोध में बच्चों के तस्वीर का उपयोग नहीं किया जाएगा।

स्वैच्छिक सहभागिता:

इस शोध में आपकी भागीदारी पूरी तरह से स्वैच्छिक है। यदि आप किसी भी समय भाग नहीं लेना चाहते हैं, तो आप छात्र को सूचित कर सकते हैं। इससे कोई पूर्वाग्रह नहीं होगा।

यदि आपके पास इंटरव्यू में भाग लेने के बाद कोई सवाल हैं, आप मुझसे +91-9811078766 नंबर पर संपर्क कर सकते हैं।

क्या आप इंटरव्यू में भाग लेना चाहते हैं? हाँ _____ नहीं _____

_____   _____

प्रतिभागी का हस्ताक्षर   दिनांक

मैं, _____, डेवलपमेंट स्टडीज, इंटरनेशनल इंस्टिट्यूट ऑफ़ सोशल स्टडीज की छात्र, प्रमाणित करती हूँ कि इस जानकारी का उपयोग केवल शिक्षात्मक उद्देश्यों के लिए किया जाएगा |

_____ छात्र का हस्ताक्षर

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