Voices from the field

Voices of members of the early childhood workforce from around the world.

2020
In an effort to highlight how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted those working in early childhood services across sectors, the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative launched the Voices from the Field campaign.

By capturing different voices in the early childhood workforce (ECW) and sharing their perspectives, the campaign puts a spotlight on their challenges and gives insights into their everyday realities.

Interviews were conducted with ECD professionals from 11 countries and various sectors. Here we share six of these interviews. We hope you welcome this as an opportunity to appreciate and celebrate their resilience, care, commitment, and professionalism. There is so much to learn from them.

Are you a member of the early childhood workforce? Raise your voice, share your experience here!

To read more interviews click here, or use your QR Code scanner to scan the code to the right of this text.
What would you like people to know and understand about your work during the COVID-19 pandemic?
It was a totally new situation, and many people began to recognize the importance of kindergarten. Parents and children missed kindergarten.

They missed the relationship with the staff, the other children, and all the pedagogical activities we do every day. We talked to them on the phone, sent emails, and had video meetings. Some children missed us so much that they would beg their parents to send us pictures and messages every time they did something they wanted to share. Many parents asked questions about how to talk to their children about COVID–19 and other challenges they faced during the lockdown period.

The kindergartens were open during the lockdown for children with special needs, children living in volatile homes, and children whose parents held critical jobs like grocery store workers, nurses, and doctors.

When we returned after lockdown, on the red level (the strictest level), there was an understanding between authorities, unions, owners, parents, and staff that we needed shorter opening hours. For years, we have been advocating the need for a good ratio of staff to children throughout the day. COVID-19 made that an absolute necessity and underscored the benefit to the children — like we knew it would.

Another happy side effect of the "all hands on deck" attitude was that non-essential tasks were removed, which gave us even more time with the children. In Norway, most kindergartens serve 2-3 meals to the children instead of having children bring food from home.

What are you learning during these times as an individual and a professional?
We can learn a lot from how everybody worked together — from the government, the unions, the employers, the staff, the parents — to get the best possible solutions in a difficult time.

Being a union representative, nationally, my employer has been working closely with me to discuss different dilemmas and solutions. Since I work "on the floor" with all the other workers, I’m living with the consequences of their decisions and can quickly let them know of any unintended side effects or new challenges.

During the pandemic, we have really seen how much time preparing and cleaning up after meals takes. So when parents started bringing food, and we shortened the opening hours. That gave us more time for each individual child.

When we reopened, we were clear that we were not compromising, that COVID rules would be followed only
to the extent that the child’s welfare was not interfered with. We needed to be the constant for children because home wasn’t constant anymore; their parents weren’t working, or they were working from home. They couldn’t go out and play with whomever they wanted. But, kindergarten was the same. So, throughout this whole thing, we were clear that we could not open the kindergartens if we could not be authentic. If a child comes running towards me, I’m going to sit down, I’m going to open my arms, and I’m going to give that child a hug – that child doesn’t need me to be different. They need me to be me.

Many children came back from the lockdown very scared because everywhere they went, they had to act differently. We needed that normalcy.

We have followed all the protocols, but never to the point where children experienced being with us differently. There is no social distancing in a much-needed hug for young children. I think that’s been one of the most important things we’ve done as a profession – fighting for the child’s need for normalcy and physical contact – just being ourselves and saying, “You can’t open kindergartens if they can’t be what the children need.”

Our union, Utdanningsforbundet, fought tirelessly for both the children and the workers’ needs.

What concerns you the most now, and what concerns you most for the upcoming period?
I’m afraid that after we go back to some kind of normal, we’ll forget what we learned in this situation.

That we would go back to being open for 10 hours, which means that you’re stretching staff while still being expected to keep up with the additional cleaning that we’ve had during the red level COVID period. I’m afraid that some of the benefits we’ve seen will be forgotten.

If you could send one positive message to your colleagues around the globe at these challenging times, what would it be?
When we get to do our job right, we can accomplish so much. We have seen children blossoming during this time. So, the positive message is to remember how important your job is – not just to keep society running, but also keep it running on an individual child-centered level. We are the voice of the children; we have to be adamant not to compromise on that, no matter what the situation is.

If you could send one positive message to children and families/caregivers around the globe at these challenging times, what would it be?
Don’t worry. We will get through this together, and we will bring a sense of normalcy to the situation. In kindergarten, you will get to play with other children, get a hug when you need one, and most things will be as before. To the parents: We got this!
What would you like people to know and understand about your work during the COVID-19 pandemic?
I am a medical doctor and have been working with children and families for the past five years. I also hold a master’s degree in child development and I am a Holistic Sleep coach for children. I mostly work in the Paediatric Emergency Department, where we see a cocktail of diseases and emergencies on a normal day. We saw a surge in suspected and positive COVID-19 cases in July and August as well as the common cold and various other illnesses as Kenya prepared to head towards its peak in August/September. Medical and nursing school never prepared us for what we are facing right now, however we are learning something new about the virus every day.

What are you learning during these times as an individual and a professional?
The pandemic has taught me a lot about being resilient, taking care of myself both physically and mentally, as I am aware that I cannot fill someone else’s glass when mine is empty. It is also important not to overwork yourself and reduce your exposure to the hospital. As healthcare workers we often ignore self-care and dive into work thinking we are invincible, but the pandemic as changed that narrative for most of us. We now realize how much we need each other in these trying times.

When you think about the work you are doing and children and families you are serving what concerns you the most now and for the next period?
I am very concerned about the mental health of our parents and children. We have not lived in times like these for the past century. The uncertainty of what tomorrow will bring in terms of health, economic strain and losing loved ones among others is a trauma many of us will only realize once this is all over since our brains are still in survival mode. It is crucial for our governments, societies, and the collective parental village to support each other during this time. There has been a lot of conversation around mental health especially this year and we should work towards normalizing this. As child care professionals, we must also be focused more than ever on child health, infant mental health and early childhood development.

As child care professionals, we must also be focused more than ever on child health, infant mental health, early childhood development and learn about the science behind Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and its impact as Childhood Trauma on long term physical and Mental Health.
If you could send one positive message to your colleagues around the globe at these challenging times, what would it be?

We see you. We see your pain. You are doing your best to protect yourself and save lives in dire circumstances. You are dealing with shortages of Personal Protective Equipment, living away from loved ones, and being a victim of abuse from some governments and at the work place. To those who have lost their lives working in the front line, to those who are still soldiering on every day, when all this is over, history will remember you as healthcare heroes.

The new normal may bring more positive changes — the way we work and communicate with each other, our value systems, the concept of self-care, our mental health and the importance of conscious parenting. We can get through this by appreciating the silver linings, but most importantly by having hope.

If you could send one positive message to children and families/caregivers around the globe at these challenging times, what would it be?

The times we live in are very challenging, but we need to take this opportunity to bond with our children and families in ways we have not been able to due to our busy schedules.
What would you like people to know and understand about your work during the COVID-19 pandemic?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, my organizational values of Care, Holistic Education, Excellence, and Relationship continue to align with any changes that we need to make in times like this.

What are you learning during these times as an individual and a professional?

I am always looking for change and new projects to engage in, so I found this pandemic stimulating and exciting. It challenges my creativity and ability to problem-solve.

During these times, I also learnt when to say "stop." I've learnt when I should tell myself that what I have tried is not working and that I need to review my priorities and refocus on my purpose.

I have also developed rituals to sustain my energy under tight timelines and pressure. These rituals were especially crucial during busy times. Being open, flexible, and loving the unknown has really helped me stay positive and, in turn, allowed me to support those who needed it.

When you think about the work you are doing, and the children and families you are serving, what concerns you the most now and for the next period?

I am definitely concerned about how children will cope in these challenging times. We understand how children develop and what children need to grow holistically. With this pandemic, one most important elements is missing, human touch. The concept of sharing also has to be changed for the time being.

I worry that children may be affected by increased stress or anxiety in their home as parents struggle with their own concerns and worries.

If you could send one positive message to your colleagues around the globe at these challenging times, what would it be?

Be open and embrace the unknown!

If you could send one positive message to children and families/caregivers around the globe at these challenging times, what would it be?

Play, be silly, and find creative ways to have fun!
What would you like people to know and understand about your work during the COVID-19 pandemic?
Some of our services continue as usual — contact moments for young children (until 14 months) and vaccinations. We do other parts of our work digitally as much as possible. Finally, we try to meet the parents’ needs as much as possible, and together we look at the possibilities to address their questions.

What are you learning during these times as an individual and a professional?
I have learned that a lot is possible from a distance, but real contact with children, families, colleagues, and network partners is incredibly important. It gives a lot more dimension to my work. In the future, I hope to find a good balance for both ways of working.

In addition, I have experienced first-hand how quickly we have adapted ourselves in a short period. Beautiful, new ideas and initiatives have sprung up everywhere to support children and families.

What concerns you the most now, and what concerns you most for the upcoming period?
I work in a neighborhood with a low socioeconomic status. Most families are living in strained circumstances with fewer resources. I’m concerned about the consequences for the well-being of parents and their children.

If you could send one positive message to your colleagues around the globe at these challenging times, what would it be?
In a short period, we have been able to adapt our work to the current circumstances. Not everything is perfect and optimal, but we all do our best, and we can be proud of that.

If you could send one positive message to children and families/caregivers around the globe at these challenging times, what would it be?
We are currently living in a very strange time. There is a lot of uncertainty, and we don’t know how long this will take. However, we must also continue in the ‘new normal.’ Try to enjoy the extra time you have with your family!
What would you like people to know and understand about your work during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Since 2008 I work in the social sector. I started working on community projects to enhance the care of families with young children. At the same time, I worked with local governments to make the voices of young children heard in public policy development.

I have been working with an organization in Brazil for three years to increase men’s involvement with young children and create policy proposals focused on this topic. We work on elaborating such proposals, as well as the implementation and the monitoring of public policies.

At first, I was confused about how to transform our face-to-face method so that we could do it from a distance. Promundo has a methodology called Program P, which is a series of internationally recognized activities that promote care skills in men who are parents. My big challenge was to transform these activities to perform them remotely, contributing to parents’ ability to care for their children, especially during this pandemic, when they spend more time at home and take care of their children.

What are you learning during these times as an individual and a professional?

Personally, the pandemic is teaching me to be resilient. It shows me that I need to take better care of myself to take care of others. It reminds me of in-flight rules, “secure your oxygen mask first, and then assist the other person.”

Professionally, I am learning that the crisis is an opportunity to change strategies and broaden my vision. Workshops with online activities allow the methodologies with which I work to reach more people throughout Brazil. During this pandemic, we’ve been able to connect with more men.

Between April and May of this year, violence against women in Latin America grew to disappointing numbers. During this period, activities we’ve conducted with men helped prevent situations that could lead to violence against women and children.

During the lockdown, I wrote a children’s book about fatherhood. It shows the relationship between a father and his young child. It shares how fathers can take care of children and address sensitive issues such as racism against black children. This topic is high on the agenda, alongside child protection and care.

What concerns you the most now, and what concerns you most for the upcoming period?

Families are not empowered, through public policies, to care for children. Governments invest in physical and professional spaces with face-to-face work but do not invest in parents. The pandemic forced children to spend
more time at home. Parents became their principal educators. I have concerns about family mental health and worries about strengthening education while avoiding violence in homes.

I’d like to ask governments and organizations to invest in families and communities. This will ensure the care and protection of children.

If you could send one positive message to your colleagues around the globe at these challenging times, what would it be?

This time should be a time for learning. It is a moment to seize our future. It won’t be possible to be the same after this pandemic; our practices will no longer be the same.

We have learned new forms of communication. We have learned to value families even more as the primary caregivers for their children. We need to reinvent our practices.

The pandemic will pass! We will return to our face-to-face activities. In the meantime, I wish you all strength and empathy to continue this work. I hope you stay focused on what we learned during this period — support families as the main caregivers of children and recognize the role that their communities play in child development.

If you could send one positive message to children and families/caregivers around the globe at these challenging times, what would it be?

It is a new time! I know a lot of families are afraid. Many families lost their jobs! Black men and black women living in marginalized areas are the most affected in Brazil. Historically, this population is already the most vulnerable. They are often not protected by public policies in Brazil, and in other parts of the world. Black children need to be hopeful that a new world will come! A new world that respects and cares for black children — this is my wish for black communities across the globe.

I’d also tell families that now is the time to strengthen the family bond. Men and women have the opportunity to spend more time with their sons and daughters right now. They can spend more time caring for and protecting children.
What would you like people to know and understand about your work during the COVID-19 pandemic?

As people who were directly connected to the field, we could not go to the field. The most important work of running creches was no longer possible. Hence we adopted a new strategy of reaching out to the children and their families; we started working remotely with a mobile phone. Our work on child development is the core of what we do, and we needed to focus on that even remotely. We focused our work on children's needs — health, care and education, safety, and nutrition. Even though we were not physically present, we continued to provide parents with capacity building and encouraged the parents and family members to engage with their children. There were initial hiccups, but we continued to follow up with the families.

We had to begin by ensuring that the families were okay and had necessities, such as food. We put all of our efforts toward ensuring that the community had necessities. We simultaneously worked with parents to help them cope with this situation and their children’s needs, specifically during this time.

What are you learning during these times as an individual and a professional?

I was initially hesitant to take my children’s help, but I eventually embraced my children’s support. So my children taught me, and I learned new things from them. My relationship with my children has grown, and they have also discovered more about my work.

In my profession, I learned new things. I was able to help my team members and encourage them too.

What concerns you the most now, and what concerns you most for the upcoming period?

The main concern I have is that some families will not get enough work. I have read and seen that everywhere people are losing their sources of income. The economy is now facing a crisis. How will the migrant workers be able to cope up with the crisis?

I also worry that if there is no work, children will be forced to work, increasing child labor in our country. If parents are struggling to find work and have to leave their children to search for jobs, there is a chance that older children will be responsible for their younger siblings and be deprived of education.

If you could send one positive message to your colleagues around the globe at these challenging times, what would it be?

We need to stay connected and work together. We must learn from each other and work together on new
WE NEED TO STAY CONNECTED AND WORK TOGETHER. WE MUST LEARN FROM EACH OTHER AND WORK TOGETHER ON NEW STRATEGIES TO REACH MORE VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND COMMUNITIES.

LAXMI ROKA

strategies to reach more vulnerable children and communities.

If you could send one positive message to children and families/caregivers around the globe at these challenging times, what would it be?
Stay safe and understand that we need to adapt to the new situation, this situation will change, and we will overcome it together.
LIFTING UP VOICES THAT MATTER

The ECW has played a significant role during the COVID-19 crisis — supporting the families and the children they serve and ensuring access to a continuum of services and assistance. At the same time, they significantly contribute to preserving the economy and adequate societal responses to the crisis.

Speaking out for themselves and the families and children they work with, Members of the ECW raised several common challenges and opportunities apparent during this period.

CHALLENGES VOICED BY THE ECW

As revealed by the interviews, many existing difficulties for the ECW intensified during the COVID-19 crisis, while others have been brought to the forefront.

Frontline workforce’s mental health and well-being

Effective leadership

Access to training and guidance

Investment in skills and equipment

Job and wage security

Serving and protecting children and families living in vulnerable conditions

OPPORTUNITIES VOICED BY THE ECW

Despite the many challenges that arose, the pandemic also created opportunities that have the potential to solve some pre-existing problems.

The child-adult ratio

Cooperation and partnerships

Increased outreach

Solidarity, creativity, and pride
NOW, IT IS TIME TO ACT

The ECW’s lived experiences featured under the Voices from the Field Campaign align with and enrich the five priority actions outlined in the ECWI position statement on COVID-19 that governments, civil society organizations, and funding agencies must take protect, support, and strengthen the ECW.

- **Respect and recognize ECD workforce**: Open the floor to ECW, treat them with respect, listen to and address their needs, and co-construct the solutions needed to overcome the challenges created by the crisis. Their stories prove the essential role they have, and now more than ever, it is imperative to recognize it.

- **Prioritize health, safety, and psychosocial well-being of the workforce**: It is well known that the ECW’s working conditions highly correlate with burnout and attrition rates. During the pandemic, exposure to health-related risks and stressors, which place a tremendous burden on the workforce, has been amplified. The interviews show that finding ways to maintain their well-being and the well-being of the families and children represent the highest priority for ECW. Leaders, managers, and peers’ critical role in preserving the workforce’s physical and mental health is key. Workplace policies and practices need to safeguard the workforce’s health, safety, and psychosocial well-being.

- **Improve working conditions and protect wages and jobs**: The ECW was among the essential frontline workers combatting the pandemic’s immediate consequences. More than ever, their critical role in supporting children, families, and society is unquestionable. However, many of them face the risk of losing their jobs and having to change their career path due to, among other reasons, inadequate compensation. Policymakers and governments should prioritize policies that safeguard jobs and wages for the ECW.

- **Use the knowledge and experience generated during the pandemic to improve the preparation and professional development of the ECW**: The pandemic caught all of us unprepared. The ECW is being confronted with new demands that require new knowledge and skills. As highlighted by most interviewees, it is the first time they had to use technology to deliver their programs. Some did not know how to use the necessary technology, while others were not prepared to respond to specific issues emerging during the pandemic. Their pre-service preparation programs had not provided knowledge and skills for using technology in their professions. Re-examining the curricula of the pre-service and in-service training institutions is imperative. Technology literacy should be part of the pre-and in-service training curricula so that ECW can adequately and timely react to the needs of the families and children. Companies should also be encouraged to develop software that is tailored to the services delivered by the ECW.

- **Include ECD workforce in introducing changes and developing COVID-19 response governments, civil society organizations, and funding agencies should make sure to sustain the opportunities for change that have been created during the pandemic. Some interviewees stressed that they fear that positive changes made during the pandemic will be forgotten. We must preserve best practices and revisit the focus of our efforts if we want to provide children with a better present and future, directly and through supporting those who care for them.

- **Nurture solidarity and peer support among ECD workforce**: The ECW has been exemplary as they stand in solidarity and support each other and families and children. This can serve as the starting point for improved intersectoral cooperation, collaborative learning, and, equally important, organizing in unions.

The workforce is sending a clear message to families through the work they do each day—“you are not alone.” Now it is time for policymakers, civil society, and funders to send the same message, “We see you; you are not alone” to the workforce working on the frontlines of the COVID-19 crisis.

READ MORE INSIGHTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS:

- Blog: Lifting up voices that matter
- Interviews

Do you have question about Voices from the Field? Please write to Emily Henry at ehenry@issa.nl.
Are you a member of the early childhood workforce? Share your story with us!

Use your QR Code scanner to scan the code to the right of this text. Or, click here.