

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS DURING THE LOCKDOWN: A STUDY FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS

C. Mesquita, C. Ribeiro, M.L. Azevedo

Research Center in Basic Education, Instituto Politécnico de Bragança (PORTUGAL)

Abstract

The pandemic situation caused by SARS-CoV-2 led to the closure of all educational institutions and the implementation of remote learning. In Portugal, due to constant lockdowns and contact restrictions, children were confined for a long period, putting their rights at risk. This is an empirical study that adopts a qualitative approach. It was conducted with 502 early childhood educators working in different regions of mainland Portugal and the islands (Azores and Madeira). Its purpose is to address the research question: "In what ways were children's rights compromised during the lockdown period due to SARS-CoV-2?" An online questionnaire was used for data collection, and descriptive statistics and content analysis were employed, supported by MAXQDA software. The data reveal a duality of opinions. Some educators believe that children's rights were ensured, while others argue the opposite, emphasizing that the rights of provision were most compromised. Educators demonstrated a lack of awareness regarding the rights of participation and prevention.

Keywords: Children's rights, early childhood education, SARS-CoV-2, COVID-19, pandemic consequences.

1 INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, triggered by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, had a profound impact on the lives of millions of people worldwide. One of the most affected areas was education, with widespread closures of educational institutions and a shift to remote learning. In Portugal, the constant lockdown measures and contact restrictions resulted in a long period of confinement for children, raising legitimate concerns about ensuring their rights. The respect and guarantee of all rights, the best interests of the child, the right to express opinions, the right to play, and the right to education based on equality of opportunities, as defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, may have been compromised [1].

Children's rights are a set of principles and guarantees aimed at ensuring the well-being, protection, and healthy development of all individuals under the age of 18. They are grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989. The CRC is the most widely ratified international treaty in history and outlines a range of specific rights and responsibilities for children, their families, governments, and society as a whole. [1]. The Project COVID 4P Log Project [2] organizes children's rights into four types: (1) Protection Rights: Aim to prevent discrimination, abuse, exploitation, substance use, and conflict, among others. These ensure effective and child-friendly intervention when any of the included rights are compromised; (2) Provision Rights: Encompass rights that enable the development and growth of all children. They include the right to residence, nutrition, and quality education. These rights are directed towards health, education, social security, family life, culture, games, and leisure. They aim for family-oriented assistance, especially economically; (3) Participation Rights: Ensure that children have a name, an identity, and physical integrity is assured. They guarantee freedom of expression and opinion. These rights ensure that children are consulted, heard, and have access to information. They certify that their opinions are considered and influence decisions regarding matters involving or affecting them; and (4) Prevention Rights: Aim to foresee and prevent possible violations of children's rights. They include the right to legal representation, social support, and emotional well-being. This organization is taken into account in the presentation and analysis of results.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on the four types of children's rights, resulting in changes in the global Human Development Index, particularly affecting the poorest countries and the most vulnerable populations. [3]. Studies indicate that children, as a vulnerable group, have suffered losses in areas such as education, socialization, development, safety, and health, including increased sedentary behaviour, obesity, hunger, violence, and high levels of stress. [4]–[6]. Parental reports indicate that many children experienced excessive dependence, inattention, irritability, and worry during the pandemic. [7], [8]. Furthermore, direct research with children reveals that their rights, especially

related to education, leisure, and protection against violence, were compromised, with more severe impacts for those in economically disadvantaged families [9], [10].

To address the challenges arising from the pandemic, the European Union has established a strategic plan for children's rights from 2022 to 2027, emphasizing the protection of children in crisis and emergencies [11] and highlighting priority areas, including freedom from violence, equal opportunities, safe access to technology, and the rights of children in crises [12], [13]. Governments and institutions play a crucial role in creating laws and policies to protect children's rights, while educators, whether professionals or family members have the responsibility to support children during times of anxiety, changes in routines, and uncertainties. Listening to educators' perceptions regarding children's rights during the pandemic is essential to guide future actions and ensure the protection and well-being of children. [13], [14].

This empirical study adopts a qualitative approach and seeks to investigate in-depth how children's rights were compromised during the lockdown resulting from the pandemic situation had on children's rights. For this purpose, a survey was conducted with 502 kindergarten educators working in various regions of mainland Portugal and the islands of Azores and Madeira. An online questionnaire was used to collect data, and both descriptive analysis and content analysis were employed, supported by MAXQDA software.

This article is structured as follows: it describes the methodology used to collect and analyze the data. Subsequently, the research results are presented. Next, data is compared with other studies, and their implications are discussed. Finally, the article concludes by highlighting the main findings and their implications for the protection of children's rights in crises like the one experienced.

This article is structured as follows: first, we describe the methodology used to collect and analyze the data. Next, we present the research results. Subsequently, we compare the data with other studies and discuss their implications. Finally, we conclude the article by highlighting the main findings and their implications for the protection of children's rights in crises similar to the one experienced.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study stems from data collected in Portugal during the pandemic phase caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus, shortly after the reopening of kindergartens and nurseries following a lockdown that lasted for over three months. Due to this unprecedented situation, schools and kindergartens were forced to close their doors, and early childhood educators and teachers had to rethink and reformulate their educational practices.

The study is based on the research question: "In what ways were children's rights compromised during the lockdown due to SARS-COV-2?" Its objective is to gather the perceptions and views of early childhood educators regarding this question. It follows an interpretative methodological approach that employs an online questionnaire as the data collection technique, completed by 502 active early childhood educators from various regions of Portugal. For the analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the data, content analysis is used for open-ended questions, and descriptive statistical analysis is employed for closed-ended questions [15], [16].

The questionnaire developed encompasses a set of fifteen questions: six open-ended and nine closed-ended questions. It is organized into three distinct blocks: (I) Participant identification; (II) Educational action during quarantine; and (III) Difficulties experienced during the pandemic at a professional level. This study focuses its analysis on Block I and the dimension of "educators' perception of the difficulties experienced by children during the confinement period" and "children's rights during the pandemic," belonging to Block III.

The questionnaire was validated by five early childhood educators with the same characteristics as the intended participants. This evaluation resulted in some changes and adjustments to make it more understandable and intuitive. It was disseminated using the Google Forms application on different social networks and distributed by email to early childhood educators by the Association of Early Childhood Education Professionals in Portugal (APEI). A total of 502 responses were obtained from early childhood educators from north to south of Portugal and their respective islands who volunteered to respond and collaborated as requested. Participant responses were interpreted through a combination of statistical analysis and content analysis [17], facilitated by the MAXQDA software. This analytical approach led to the identification of categories and subcategories, providing insights into their perceptions [18]. Thus, the analysis of Block I was conducted through descriptive statistical analysis. The two dimensions within Block III were analyzed using content analysis.

After obtaining the data, a pre-analysis was performed by grouping similar responses, categorizing them based on the information they contained, and assigning codes. This alphanumeric coding system used letters to indicate categories and numbers for subcategories (e.g., A, A1, A1.1, A1.2, ...). This strategy resulted in two categories and six subcategories (Figure 1).

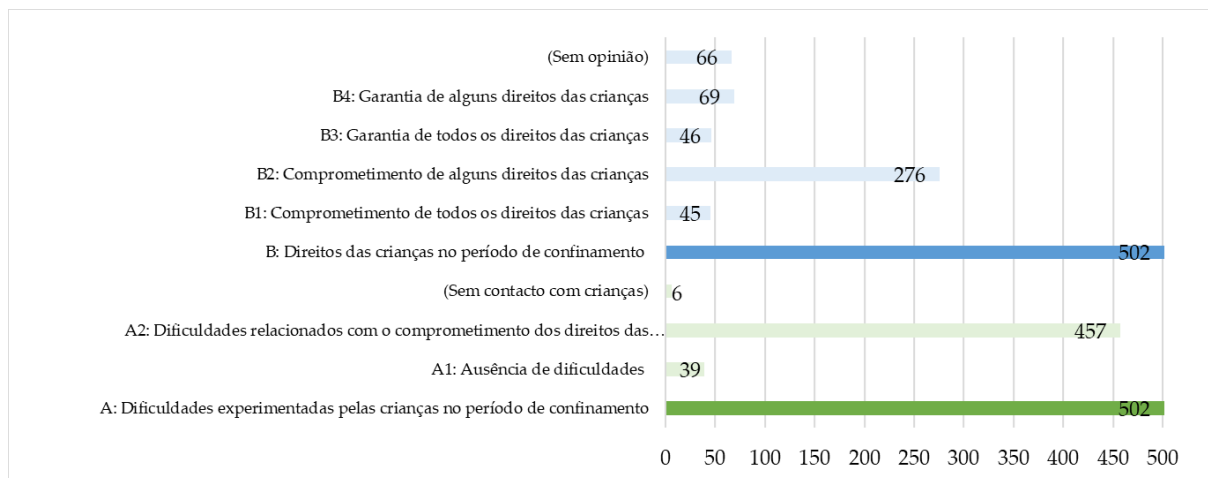


Figure 1. Categorical system of content analysis.

The educators' responses followed the same coding strategy, where the letters refer to the early childhood educator (EI) and the numbers to the order in which the questionnaire was submitted (e.g., EI1, EI2, ...).

Considering the limitations and biases of the study in advance, efforts were made to minimize them. However, the following aspects need to be considered:

It is not guaranteed that the educators who chose to participate in the study disclosed their sincere perspectives, but rather what they interpret as socially acceptable or what they believe the researchers expect. This could affect the accuracy of the reported perceptions.

- Content analysis of open-ended responses is subjective and depends on the researchers' interpretation. Different researchers may reach different conclusions.
- Alphanumeric coding may oversimplify the complexity of the responses.
- Participants reported their perceptions and conceptions, which may not necessarily reflect the objective reality of children's rights during the pandemic. Since, if at all, the contact between educators and children was solely online, there may be differences between educators' perceptions and the actual experiences of the children.
- The results are specific to early childhood educators in Portugal and may not be generalizable to other populations or cultural contexts.
- The study was conducted shortly after the pandemic. Educators' perceptions may have evolved as the pandemic situation changed.
- The use of an online questionnaire may exclude educators who did not have easy access to technology or were not comfortable participating in online surveys.
- The results may be specific to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and may not apply to other situations of lockdown or other issues related to children's rights.

3 RESULTS

We proceed with the presentation of the data that emerged from the questionnaire. This is divided into three subchapters. The first pertains to the participants' sociodemographic characteristics, the second focuses on the category Difficulties experienced by children during the confinement period (A), and the third is related to the category Children's rights during the confinement period (B).

3.1 Participant profile

The data characterizing the participants were collected through the analysis of the first block of the questionnaire concerning the participants' identification.

The preschool teachers who responded to this study are predominantly female (99%), with an age concentration between 51 and 60 years (33.5%) and between 41 and 50 years (29.3%). Participants aged between 31 and 40 years accounted for 23.9%, and only 8% were between 20 and 30 years old. Finally, the number of individuals over 60 years old amounted to 5.4%. The majority of respondents have a bachelor's degree (70.4%), while others hold a master's degree (25.1%), a bachelor's degree (3.6%), and a doctoral degree (1%). Years of service varied between 11 and 20 years (27.1%), 21 and 30 years (25.9%), 31 and 40 years (25.5%), 0 and 10 years (19.1%), and over 40 years (2.4%). They are employees of public institutions (44.4%), private charitable institutions (36.1%), private institutions (18.9%), and others (0.6%). Most preschool teachers work with children aged 3, 4, and 5 years (51.4%), followed by the group of 2-year-old children (12.9%), 5-year-old children (10.2%), 1-year-old children (10%), 3-year-old children (7.4%), 4-year-old children (4.6%), and lastly, the nursery group, with children under 1-year-old (3.6%).

3.2 Educators' Perceptions of the Difficulties Experienced by Children During the Lockdown

Among the 502 participants, 6 people indicated that they had not had contact with children and therefore revealed not having a clear perception of the difficulties. In the responses provided by the remaining respondents (497), a duality of situations was observed, giving rise to two categories: Absence of difficulties (A1); and Difficulties related to compromising children's rights (A2).

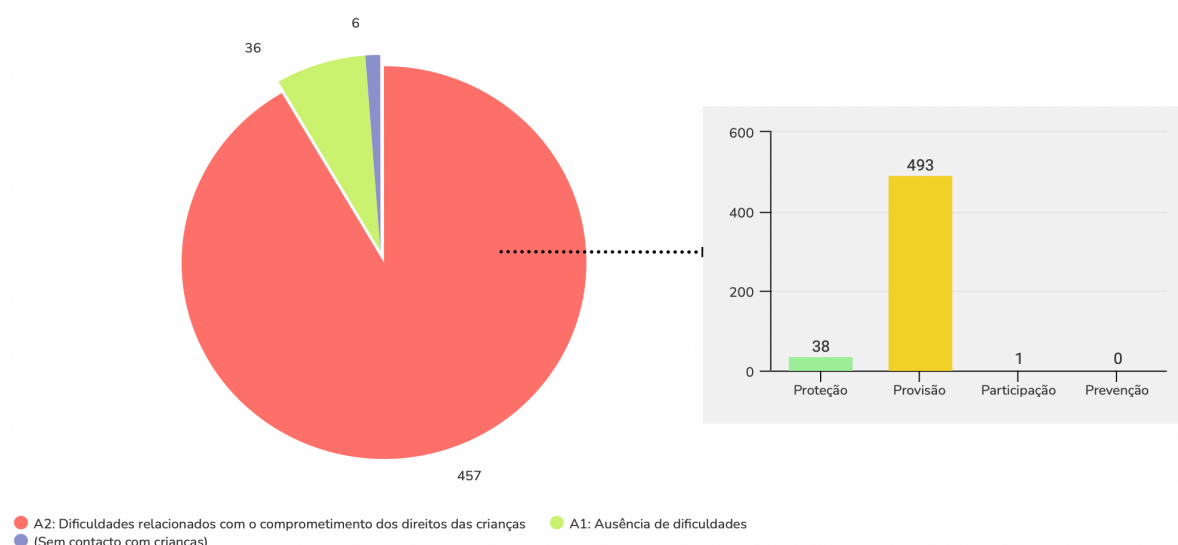


Figure 2. Participants and responses in subcategories (A category)

As depicted in Figure 2, the majority of participants (457) emphasized that the pandemic situation caused various difficulties in children, compromising their rights. Some participants highlighted specific rights that were compromised, and some of them listed more than one. They mainly mentioned (493 responses) difficulties in ensuring rights to provision, followed by rights to protection (38 responses) and rights to participation (1 response). No responses were observed regarding prevention rights. In contrast, 39 participants believe that children did not experience any difficulties. Six participants mentioned not having contact with children, as the institutions closed and did not maintain the educational component.

Participants who stated that the lockdown did not cause any difficulties for the children (A1) emphasized reasons (A1.1) such as how "they adapted well" (E190), or "engaged in projects and challenges" (E160), or because they were "happy with their families" (E170). One participant revealed that there was an evolution in the growth/development of the children, and another pointed out that the existence of large families contributed to the absence of difficulties. A greater difficulty was noted in parents rather than in the children.

Participants listing difficulties that children experienced during confinement (A2) related them to the compromise of some of the children's rights. Thus, the major difficulties were related to ensuring children's rights to provision (A2.1). Within this category, difficulty in learning was highlighted, indicating a lack of

motivation and concentration of the children during synchronous sessions. A regression in the child's autonomy, in some cases caused by parental interference, was emphasized, considering "there was a lot of parental involvement in the tasks" (EI485), and the dependence on "the use of digital tools" (EI434) due to the complexity of handling technological means. Mentioned was also a lack of adherence to educational proposals from the educator. Difficulties related to socialization were also highlighted within the rights to provision, revealing that the children missed their group peers and adults: "missed daycare, friends, and adults" (EI87), "lack of interaction with other children" (EI58), and "not having friends to play with" (EI365). Consequences were emphasized, revealing that children became "more closed" (EI15), and "introverted" (EI223), that there was an increased distance between the educator and the children and a decrease in empathy, becoming "more self-centred" (EI261). Another aspect highlighted was the "lack of routines" (EI3) or the need to adapt to "other routines" (EI66). Participants believed there was a "lack of a structured routine" (EI199) and the "fulfilment of rules" (EI237). The lack of freedom due to the obligation to stay at home for a long time, often without outdoor space, was also emphasized: "All their freedom was taken away" (EI125). The compromise of the right to free play was also highlighted, mentioning once again the absence of outdoor space for some children. Six educators felt that the children were uninformed about the pandemic situation: "The children did not understand very well what happened" (EI125). Four educators also perceived a "regression in the children's development" (EI354).

Difficulties in ensuring children's rights to protection (A2.2) were emphasized. Participants revealed that they perceived emotional consequences experienced by the children, highlighting feelings of "anxiety" (EI228, EI278; EI402; EI428; EI482), "fear" (EI228), "apprehension" (EI443), "fatigue" (EI69; EI91), "impatience" (EI116; EI201; EI262), "emotional instability" (EI21), and "stress" (EI496), and the absence of present happiness due to "sad looks" (EI48). Some consequent behaviours were highlighted, such as "crying" (EI417) and "tantrums" (EI16; EI21; EI201; EI241; EI284). Six participants mentioned that they perceived a "greater emphasis on social inequalities" (EI306). They recalled the "essential" role (EI306) of school "for a significant number of children from families in dire circumstances" (EI306), as well as the "difficulty in supporting children with additional support needs" (EI179). Data also revealed inequality in the support provided to children, as well as in the feedback given to educators. Two participants emphasized "deprivation of affection" (EI287).

Although less evident, difficulties related to children's rights to participation (A2.3) emerged, revealing the absence of the child's participation in "family management" (EI167). No responses were observed regarding prevention rights".

3.3 Children's Rights During the Lockdown

The responses of early childhood educators were divided into three different groups regarding children's rights during the lockdown. Some considered the situation negative, mentioning a total or partial compromise of children's rights; others considered the situation positive, emphasizing the total or partial guarantee of children's rights, and some revealed having no opinion. From this analysis, the following categories emerged: Compromise of all children's rights (B1); Compromise of some children's rights (B2); Guarantee of all children's rights (B3); Guarantee of some children's rights (B4).

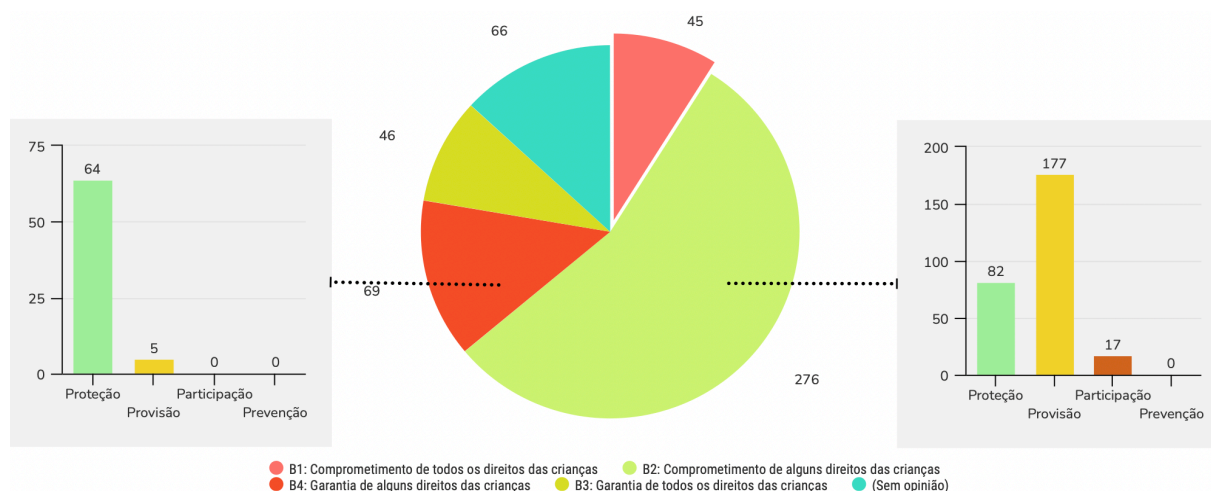


Figure 3. Participants and responses in subcategories (B category)

As observed in Figure 3, when participants were asked to assess the pandemic situation considering children's rights, 291 of them believed that children's rights were compromised, with 276 indicating a compromise of all rights (177 participants mentioned provision rights, 82 protection rights, and 17 participation rights), and 45 mentioned compromises of only some rights. In contrast, 115 participants believed that children's rights were safeguarded, with 69 mentioning some rights (64 referring to protection rights and 5 to participation rights), and 46 believed that all rights were safeguarded.

Participants who believed that there was a compromise of all children's rights (B1) made statements such as 'a castration of all their rights' (EI151) and 'a trampling of all rights' (EI155).

Other participants pointed out specific rights that were not safeguarded (B2). Among these rights, and considering the classification defined and described in the methodology, provision rights (B2.1) were the most mentioned. The right to socialization is mentioned by early childhood educators when they state that children 'lost the right to socialize' (EI40) and that the lockdown and the pandemic 'can have consequences for the children's socialization perception, even among different groups and ages' (EI65). Educators state that 'being confined at home led to children developing their socialization skills less' (EI223). The right to play is also mentioned as not ensured, evident in statements such as 'their right to play and socialize was compromised' (EI10), and 'they are constrained in their freedom to play' (EI279). In the same context, reports are indicating the compromise of the right to learning, as evidenced in statements like 'the right to education was at stake' (EI12), 'there was a concern for respecting children's rights, but the right to education was not fully achieved, for various reasons' (EI62). Some educators point out that the pandemic 'undoubtedly took away their right to be free' (EI318), and that there was a lack of freedom to move around freely and live a normal life (I have examples of several children who didn't leave their homes for two and a half months)' (EI190), since 'children were confined without finding less harsh confinement solutions' (EI201). Educators state that it was a 'very unnatural and unhealthy moment for the overall development of children' (EI125) and that it 'deprived them of some essentials for their healthy development' (EI396). Some mentioned that the right to have a routine was difficult to achieve, even pointing out that 'in some cases (parent reports, media) there were exaggerations in terms of activities, forgetting the fundamentals, which is playing and maintaining routines' (EI 398). The right to food and happiness was also mentioned by educators who stated that 'some children may have experienced difficulties in terms of nutrition' (EI22), or that 'many must have gone hungry' (EI302), and that 'this situation violated the child's right to play and be happy' (EI482).

Protection rights (B2.2) are also mentioned by educators as being violated. Participants mentioned that the right to equality (social and opportunity-wise) was compromised because 'there was no equity in the process; some children did not have equal access to all resources, even though we tried to reach the subsidized children with materials and tried in every way to contact the families to know each child's situation' (EI55), and because 'there was evident inequality and opportunities, among the different social strata' (EI173). They emphasized that it was the children in more precarious situations who suffered the most from the lockdown, mentioning 'situations of hunger, violence, abuse, and mistreatment that worsened during this period' (EI315), and that 'children must be protected from neglectful families' (EI26), since 'many children [...] may not be safe in their homes, in families with nonexistent social relationships' (EI306). They mentioned that it was a cold situation, without recourse to affection and touch. Very impersonal' (EI102), and that it compromised the right to affection and physical and emotional health. Respondents mentioned that 'not having physical contact, hugs, cuddles, was complicated' (EI116), that it 'compromised the emotional state of the little ones' (EI254), and that the 'exposure to screens was also not ideal for these children, and we know that, given the situation the parents were in, they also felt the need to expose them to screens beyond what we promoted' (EI165). They emphasized negligence in the right to security, stating that the lockdown created insecurity and that 'in some contexts, protection and provision rights prevailed, but in others, not even that, because often it is the school that protects the children' (EI201). An educator also highlighted the violation of the right to privacy, stating that: 'the right to privacy as well as the right to play were greatly compromised' (EI63).

Participation rights (B2.3) were the least emphasized by the respondents. Nonetheless, educators mentioned neglect regarding the child's agency, listening, choice, opinion, and will. It was evident that 'their voice as individuals was not present in the choice of what they wanted to do' (EI263), that there was a 'lack of respect for their true interests and desires' (EI195), that 'the children were not heard, [and that] they were denied the right to participate in the decisions made' (EI163), and that the children 'are the first to be 'silenced' and the last to be heard!' (EI155).

Educators who believed that benefits could be derived from the lockdown period stated that there was a guarantee or effort to guarantee all children's rights (B3), as evidenced by statements like 'from the point of view of children's rights, I consider that these were safeguarded and preserved in other

circumstances' (EI69), 'it is a new, complex situation, but where the rights and needs of children were respected' (EI435).

The category 'guarantee of some children's rights' (B4) was also noted. Following the same categorization mentioned above, provision rights were the most highlighted (B4.1). Some participants highlighted the advantage of this period in promoting quality time with family. They revealed that 'families relearned to spend so much time with their children and adjusted strategies to 'make the most of' full-time parenthood' (EI51), that 'some children experienced family life as never before' (EI320); and that became 'a unique opportunity to create bonds and affections and to spend time with parents and siblings that would never otherwise happen' (EI243). The right to play is also mentioned, in the following words: 'They valued playing more, leaving the technologies aside' (EI189); 'I think families didn't deprive them of their essential activity: playing' (EI224). It was also mentioned that 'given the situation we are experiencing, I think the right to education was safeguarded' (EI232), and that 'the child was free as much as possible' (EI366).

The rights of protection (B4.2) were less emphasized, with the guarantee of the right to safety and health being highlighted, as they stated: 'Furthermore, the children were protected' (EI134) and 'We ensured a fundamental right: health. And that was essential for their development and safety.' (EI405).

4 DISCUSSION

From the conducted research, other studies also point to pandemic-related impacts on children's provision rights, namely the right to play, socialize, and receive education. In Casey and McKendrick's research and the data that emerged from this study during the pandemic, some participants believed that adults interfered with and directed children's play, primarily conducted in a home context. [19]. This leadership by adults may have led to a decrease in the child's autonomy, freedom, and creativity. On the other hand, the authors reflect that the time children spent at home playing may have reinforced the idea that home is a space and time for play [19]. Regarding the right to socialization, studies reinforce the statements of the kindergarten teachers, emphasizing the children's distancing from their peers. Lundy et al. highlight that 56% of the participants had difficulty in speaking with their friends since the beginning of the pandemic, worsening as their ages decreased." [9]. Barna et al. mention that online communication greatly limited interactions among children, and they were not satisfied with this model [20]. In terms of family relationships, studies highlight positive effects, which were also confirmed in this research and even pointed out as a potential benefit of confinement. Barna et al. emphasize that children mentioned that this was a time to learn a new way of living as a family, describing that it brought about positive changes in relationships and routines with family members. [20]. In terms of the right to education, highlighted as a challenge in this study, other research reveals that education was considered better before SARS-COV-2 (62%). [9]. Children were dissatisfied and unhappy with online schooling due to increased homework. However, they demonstrated empathy and acknowledged the efforts made by teachers, schools, and parents. [20]. In a study where the participants were children, the data aligns with some of the findings from the current investigation with adults. The data from the children show a perspective that aligns with the perceptions of the early childhood educators in this study. It becomes clear that the children were displeased with the pandemic, expressing their biggest desires to return to their daily routines and be with friends, have more time to play, and be outdoors [13].

Concerning protection rights, other studies also point to compromises during the pandemic, particularly regarding the right to health, safety, and equality. Contrary to the findings in this study where equality is the most mentioned compromised protection right, research indicates more significant consequences for safety and health. [4]–[6], [14], [21]. They emphasize an increase in sedentary behaviour, a rise in obesity, an escalation of hunger, a surge in violence against children, and elevated levels of stress, posing severe risks to the health and safety of children. [5]. In addition, studies enumerate a deficit in sports and other activities [9], [20]. These factors can cause changes in children's behaviour, potentially leading to serious problems, such as mental disorders. [21]. Studies investigating these effects reveal an increase in excessive parental dependence (36%), followed by inattention (32%), irritability (31%), worry (29%), constant requests for updates (28%), fear of family members falling ill (21%), sleep problems (21%), loss of appetite (18%), nightmares (14%), and discomfort and restlessness (13%) [16]. Additionally, there is an increase in difficulty concentrating (76.6%), boredom (52%), irritability (39%), nervousness (38%), feelings of loneliness (31%), and worry (30.1%) [8].

Another study conducted by Xie et al. demonstrated a possible increase in depressive symptoms and anxiety symptoms, which are also frequently mentioned in this study. [22]. Similarly, as listed in the previous point, Barna et al. also emphasize the sadness and longing felt by children during the pandemic

[20]. They point out a positive view that goes beyond the data obtained in this study, stating that these moments allowed reflections on themselves, on others, and the world around them [20]. Regarding the right of children to be protected from violence, the data collected in this study aligns with other research. Although the majority of children (52%) heard or witnessed less violence during this period, some children from minority groups (e.g., migrants, with disabilities, seeking asylum, etc.) reported experiencing higher levels of violence during the pandemic [9]. This leads to a reflection on the right to equality outlined in this study. Also, in the study by Mesquita et al., it was concluded that the pandemic situation may have put the most vulnerable children at risk, as children in families facing economic and social difficulties were the ones whose rights were least secured in [10]. In the year 2020, the Human Development Index (HDI) recorded its first setback since its creation in 1990, with a special impact on the poorest countries and the most vulnerable people [3]. It is worth noting that children are part of this more vulnerable population group, as evidenced by experiences from other outbreaks [4], [6].

As in this study, there is a lesser focus in research on children's participation rights during the pandemic. In contrast to the research conducted here, other studies focus on the children's perspective. In Lundy et al.'s study, over a third (35%) of children mentioned not knowing if they were being heard, while 38% said they had not been listened to by the governments, feeling that this right was overlooked. Also, when specifically asked if they felt that their opinion had been taken into account regarding the crisis caused by Covid-19, only one-fifth (20%) of the respondents responded positively [9].

Although this study reveals little data on children's prevention rights, other studies have collected significant data, reflecting on behaviours to adopt in similar future situations. According to Jiménez et al., it will be necessary to prioritize mental health, digital inclusion, education, and children's participation [12]. According to Pascal and Bertram, there is a challenge that, although an everyday one, needs to be approached with extra care during a pandemic [13]. His challenge is to respond to what children tell authentically and actively about the issues they are experiencing. In this specific case of a pandemic situation, adults need to equip themselves with tools to help children communicate more effectively what they are feeling (either verbally or through silences) [13]. Emphasizing the relevance and importance of the two major institutions, school, and family, that children come into contact with throughout their lives, it is also emphasized that it is through a sense of belonging that a child builds their identity, personality, knowledge, and develops their behaviour and view of the world around them. Therefore, they should focus their attention and support children in three important aspects: the new way of living in this new reality, explaining the precautions they need to take and what will change in them, others, and their routines; being open and supporting the discovery of feelings and emotions to prevent fear and anxiety; and being aware that the transition processes from home to school occur as smoothly as possible, always thinking and focusing on the physical and emotional well-being of the children [14]. Governments and institutions worldwide have a role to play in creating laws, actions, and mechanisms to protect children. It is their responsibility to define measures to ensure public and quality education, social protection, and subsistence [6]. Step has already been taken in this direction through the creation of the strategic plan for children's rights defined by Europe for the years 2022 to 2027 [11]. In this plan, safeguarding children's rights is at the center of efforts. This document states that the human rights set out in the European Convention on Human Rights, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other European documents, including civil, economic, social, political, and cultural rights, are rights to be enjoyed by children of the member states of the Council of Europe. This strategy was created so that these rights become a reality for all children, taking into account six priority areas of action: "1) Freedom from violence for all children; 2) Equal opportunities and social inclusion for all children; 3) Access to and safe use of technology for all children; 4) Child-friendly justice for all children; 5) Giving voice to every child; 6) Children's rights in crisis and emergencies" [11, p. 9]. The authors also emphasize that to counteract the worsening of social disparities and the economic and public health crisis experienced by children, it is necessary to: i) support member states in creating a strong child protection system in times of crisis; and ii) create guidelines that lead to the protection of children facing a public health crisis (ensuring the right to education and participation) and develop children's digital citizenship; and iii) identify possible new vulnerable situations and develop measures aimed at their protection. These strategies mention suggestions made by children, including the possibility for all children, even in crises, to attend school, to have access to healthcare systems, to ensure appropriate treatment and communication, and to adapt language whenever necessary. It is also highlighted that one of the central focuses when working with children in crisis and emergencies is to emphasize the right to participation, promoting children's involvement in decision-making processes, particularly related to measures to deal with pandemics [11].

5 CONCLUSIONS

This research reflects the perspective of preschool educators regarding the impact on children's rights during the lockdown due to the closure of kindergartens, the cancellation of in-person activities due to SARS-COV-2, and the differences felt upon returning after the confinement.

The study was based on an interpretative analysis of an online questionnaire with 502 participants, predominantly women from various regions of Portugal. The analysis allowed for the identification of two distinct profiles of preschool educators. Some see this situation as a compromise (total or partial) of children's rights, mentioning that the lockdown compromised rights related to food, participation, privacy, freedom, affection, socialization, creativity, equality, learning, routines, play, happiness, development, health, protection, and safety. When aligning the responses with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, educators believe that, among other articles, Articles 2, 3, 12, 28, and 31 were not ensured. In contrast, albeit in a smaller number, a group of educators viewed this situation as a guarantee of rights. A minority, which is believed to be somewhat distant from reality, saw this period as an enriching moment. Some professionals pointed out advantages resulting from this situation in terms of the right to play, education, protection, health, freedom, and socialization, with greater closeness to the family.

Regarding children's rights, there is greater agreement among participants regarding the adverse impact this situation had on socialization, either due to the distance from peers or family members, particularly grandparents. In future similar crises, attention must be given to the right to protection/prevention, as some educators mentioned that lockdown may have endangered children in more vulnerable situations. The exacerbation of inequalities during the pandemic was also felt, especially among families facing greater social and economic difficulties. It is emphasized that the right to the child's participation was compromised, as the child was never heard by social agents to express their opinion. It became evident that the right to play was compromised during this period. Educators believe that although children had more free time, their play was conditioned or had significant adult intervention. Another highlighted evidence relates to a deficit in learning. Several participants mentioned that remote learning is not effective for preschool-age children.

The conclusions of this study underscore the urgent need to reassess and strengthen policies aimed at protecting children's rights in crises such as the SARS-COV-2 pandemic. The significant impact on the right to socialization, education, and children's participation, as well as the accentuation of social and economic inequalities, highlights the importance of developing more comprehensive prevention and crisis response strategies. For future policies, it is essential to consider measures that ensure digital inclusion, promote children's involvement in decisions affecting them, and provide effective support for distance learning, especially for preschool-age children. Furthermore, addressing social inequalities is crucial, ensuring that children in more vulnerable situations have equal access to education, health, and protection services. These conclusions serve as a warning of the need for a more comprehensive, child-centred approach in future crises, aiming to protect and promote children's rights in all aspects of their lives. There is a greater need to investigate prevention and participation rights, as these were mentioned less by educators, and there is a lack of research in these areas.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work has been supported by FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia within the Project Scope: UIDB/05777/2020.

REFERENCES

- [1] UNICEF, *Convenção sobre os Direitos da Criança*. 2019. Acedido: 8 de fevereiro de 2021. [Em linha]. Disponível em: https://www.unicef.pt/media/2766/unicef_convenc-a-o_dos_direitos_da_crianca.pdf
- [2] J. Davidson, D. Karadzhev, E. Lux, S. Shields, L. H. V. Wright, e G. Wilson, «Inspiring Children's Futures is pleased to announce the fifth in the series of COVID Learning Reports, COVID Learning Report: Upholding the 4P's of Children's Rights during COVID-19.», University of Strathclyde, 5, 2021. Acedido: 15 de dezembro de 2022. [Em linha]. Disponível em: <https://inspiringchildrensfutures.org/blog/learning-report-overview>

- [3] Plataforma Portuguesa das ONGD, «Portugal e a Agenda 2030 para o Desenvolvimento Sustentável.», 2020. Acedido: 15 de janeiro de 2020. [Em linha]. Disponível em: https://www.plataformaongd.pt/uploads/subcanais2/portugaleaagenda2030paraodesenvolvimento_sustentaavel.pdf
- [4] UNICEF, The Alliance, e Better Care Network, «Proteção das crianças e adolescentes durante a pandemia da covid-19: Crianças e Adolescentes e Cuidados Alternativos ao Acolhimento Institucional: Medidas de Resposta Imediata.», 2020. Acedido: 12 de janeiro de 2021. [Em linha]. Disponível em: https://www.unicef.org/brazil/media/8611/file/covid-19_criancas-adolescentes-e-cuidados-alternativos-ao-acolhimento-institucional.pdf
- [5] M. F. A. Nehab, *COVID-19 e saúde da criança e do adolescente*. IFF/Fiocruz, 2020.
- [6] Organização Internacional do Trabalho, «COVID-19: Proteger as crianças do trabalho infantil, agora mais que nunca.», 2020. Acedido: 15 de janeiro de 2020. [Em linha]. Disponível em: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---ilo-lisbon/documents/publication/wcms_754635.pdf
- [7] W. Y. Jiao *et al.*, «Behavioral and Emotional Disorders in Children during the COVID-19 Epidemic.», *The Journal of Pediatrics*, n.º 221, pp. 264–266, 2020, doi: doi:10.1016/j.jpeds.2020.03.
- [8] M. Orgilés, A. Morales, E. Delvecchio, C. Mazzeschi, e J. P. Espada, «Immediate psychological effects of the COVID-19 quarantine in youth from Italy and Spain.», *Frontiers in Psychology*, n.º 11, pp. 1–10, 2020, doi: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.579038>.
- [9] L. Lundy *et al.*, «Life Under Coronavirus: Children’s Views on their Experiences of their Human Rights», *Int. J. Child. Rights*, vol. 29, n.º 2, pp. 261–285, 2021, doi: 10.1163/15718182-29020015.
- [10] C. Mesquita, R. P. Lopes, A. C. Loureiro, e C. Ribeiro, «Pedagogical challenges in times of SARS-COV-2 in early childhood education.», em *13th International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation*, L. G. Chova, A. L. Martínez, e I. C. Torres, Eds., IATED Academy, 2020, pp. 7358–7368.
- [11] Council of Europe, *Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027): “Children’s Rights in Action: From Continuous Implementation to Joint Innovation”*. 2022.
- [12] E. Jiménez *et al.*, «The unequal impact of Covid-19 on the lives and rights of the children of modern slavery survivors, children in exploitation and children at risk of entering exploitation», *Children and Society*, 2022, doi: 10.1111/chso.12572.
- [13] C. Pascal e T. Bertram, «What do young children have to say? Recognising their voices, wisdom, agency and need for companionship during the COVID pandemic», *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, vol. 29, n.º 1, pp. 21–34, 2021, doi: 10.1080/1350293X.2021.1872676.
- [14] Comissão Nacional de Promoção dos Direitos e Proteção das Crianças e Jovens, «Corona vírus #Covid-19: Como podem os adultos apoiar as crianças a lidar com o desconfinamento.», Comissão Nacional de Promoção dos Direitos e Proteção das Crianças e Jovens, 2020. Acedido: 12 de janeiro de 2020. [Em linha]. Disponível em: www.cnpdpj.gov.pt/documents/10182/14796/Corona+v%C3%ADrus+Covid-19-Como+podem+os+adultos+apoiar+as+crian%C3%A7as+a+lidar+com+o+desconfinamento/ffe201da-1aac-47fd-84f9-954c4e624729
- [15] L. Aires, *Paradigma qualitativo e práticas de Investigação educacional*, 1.ª. Lisboa: Universidade Aberta, 2015.
- [16] A. Morais e I. Neves, «Fazer investigação usando uma abordagem metodológica mista.», *Revista Portuguesa de Educação*, vol. 20, n.º 2, pp. 75–104, 2007.
- [17] J. (Ed.) Amado, *Manual de investigação qualitativa em educação*. Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2017.
- [18] L. Bardin, *Análise de conteúdo*, 70.ª. Edições, 2011.
- [19] T. Casey e J. H. McKendrick, «Playing through crisis: lessons from COVID-19 on play as a fundamental right of the child», *International Journal of Human Rights*, 2022, doi: 10.1080/13642987.2022.2057962.

- [20] M. Barna, N. Fernandes, e A. I. Sani, «The subjective well-being of children in times of confinement [O bem-estar subjetivo das crianças em tempos de confinamento] [El bienestar subjetivo de los niños en tiempos de encierro]», *Revista Portuguesa de Educacao*, vol. 35, n.º 1, pp. 380–404, 2022, doi: 10.21814/RPE.23741.
- [21] I. R. S. da-Mata, L. S. C. Dias, C. T. Saldanha, e M. R. A. Picanço, «As implicações da pandemia do COVID-19 na saúde mental e no comportamento das crianças», *Residência Pediátrica*, n.º 377, pp. 1–5, 2020, doi: 10.25060/residpediatr-2020.v10n3-377.
- [22] X. Xie, Q. Xue, Y. Zhou, Q. Liu, J. Zhang, e R. Song, «Mental Health Status Among Children in Home Confinement During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Outbreak in Hubei Province.», *China. JAMA pediatrics*, vol. 174, n.º 9, pp. 898–900, 2020, doi:doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2020.1619.