Together but Alone: Belonging at Return back to School in the Post-Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the research is to understand the experiences of children at school in the post-pandemic process and examine the belongings of children attending preschool education through the new normal period in the post-crisis. Phenomenological approach was used as a qualitative method. Aligned to this emphasis of the phenomenological approach, it is conducted to give meaning to the perceptions of young children through the concept of belonging regarding school in the new normal. The participants consisted of 12 girls and 12 boys aged between 65 and 78 months, mainly from middle-class backgrounds. Data was gathered via semi-structured interview form, including the questions about being at school in pre-pandemic, receiving distance learning during quarantine, and being at school during post-pandemic to reveal the experiences of children. As the last question of the interview, each child was asked to draw a picture about his/her school, friends, and the teacher. Findings of the study have identified with the phenomenon of "Play: Together but Alone". Play is also a tool for children to feel a sense of belonging to school and creates opportunities for children to have social, emotional, and physical experiences with their peers. In the study, children's belonging to school has been explained based on "play" and discussed with the themes of social, emotional, and physical belonging.

KEYWORDS

Belonging; post-crisis; preschool children; phenomenological approach.

INTRODUCTION

Such crisis situations like COVID-19 pandemic, the entire life of beings and especially the education of individuals have been affected. Significant crisis situations disrupt typical processes and ways of thinking (Hay, 2002), so it may be able to trigger in the educational sector as generated by COVID-19 (Zancajo et al., 2022). The pandemic period distance education process has been accompanied by some uncertainties, such as whether education methods are sufficient to reach the aims; whether educators could use this new system effectively or not; whether intended learning for children come true or not (Alan, 2021); and, with all these educational goals, whether the social interaction and attachment between young children and others at their social life at preschool period is still strong. This process was new for preschool children, and they tried to adapt to learning and playing areas post-pandemic level. We use the 'post-pandemic' term according to the government policies and regulations which allow us to line pre-pandemic. The crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the areas of health, social, economic and education in addressing. Under changing conditions, this crisis has also evidenced quality of teaching and existing educational issues are more visible (Zancajo et al., 2022). Distance education widened the performance gap between students and especially this gap increased in socially disadvantaged students more than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds (Blainey et al., 2020; Engzell et al., 2020); also, school closures and distance education process have caused for children unregular and insecure meals and disconnected them from peers and critically social interactions that is a vital need for individuals (Garlen, 2021). As expected, these changes have crucial consequences on young children's learning and developmental areas such as physical, social and emotional as well as the cognitive areas (Barnett & Jung, 2021).

To understand this new situation and regulations about distance and interactions between individuals, it is necessary to look at the belonging theory. It indicates the 'mode of representations of myself as an object', so it is a representation of the unity of myself about understanding all my repetitions (Forgione, 2017). In the life of human beings, knowing to belong where and with whom is related to human existence (DEEWR, 2009); and Brooker and Woodhead (2008) describe belonging as a kind of 'psycho-social glue' which connects individuals. It is also a fundamental human right and provides relational and collective socio-emotional contributions in the early years (Sumsion & Wong, 2011), especially critical for young children and their well-being. These researches have addressed Heidegger's (1962) theory of being and 'the mode of representation of myself'. In early learning centers, this means the simultaneity of different beings, their existence beside each other, communication and intimacy in discrete relation to others (Peers & Fleer, 2013). The children's everyday experiences at preschool have outlined a holistic approach to the development of children and indicated crucial values such as respect for human dignity, equity, freedom of thought, security and belongingness (Boldermo, 2020). When a young child has attended the early childhood education institution, s/he can find their place in a new social environment and feel to

experience belonging (Winther-Lindqvist, 2011). In a research, young children's everyday institutional lives and experiences were influenced by the peer culture, and they negotiate togetherness, therefore; there are key elements to display is membership in the group, drawing boundaries, togetherness, patterns of caring and sharing with physical closeness (Koivula & Hännikäinen, 2017; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). All these underline individuals' personal experiences as the sense of being at home.

These crucial changes with the distance education model during the pandemic period affected the children's lives deeply. These also changed their social life and interaction with their peers at micro and macro levels in educational settings. Educators who work with young children into practical teaching processes, things that show up at the micro level also have to happen at the macro level of individuals (Emilson & Eek-Karlsson, 2021). In an ordinary preschool day, 'insularisation' means isolation is a discussed issue in some intuitions, specifically homes, daycare centers, preschools, after-school centers, and places that provide children to play and leisure times (Karsten, 2002; Zeiher, 2003). A long time ago, Atkinson and Flint (2004) in their study stated that resulting in different kinds of social distance or separated communities in many cities based on age, class, income and ethnic groups from each other because of the developing countries and industrialized world. Tillett and Wong (2018) indicate in their research that educators' own sense of belonging belief affects the social, emotional, spatial, and temporal dimensions and the interactions in educational settings. There are findings that the individuals' belonging is vital if there is the right person in the environment and they want to become and share activities and other things. Thus, becoming with peers in shared activities makes them feel engaged with school activities, responsible to others, connected and a sense of belonging (Hayes & Skattebol, 2014). Another research has also highlighted the importance of one's roots and diversity specifically. They found that the concept of participation and equality in early education settings, belonging and diversity are tightly and closely related in Finnish-based study (Juutinen & Kess, 2019).

Belonging for children is not only to comprise relations among children but also to belong to a community; therefore, it provides a central feature of a long-term commitment, and motivation to engage and interact with other beings (Over, 2016). There is a strong relationship between belonging to a community and individuals' well-being (Miller, 2003; Ree et al., 2019). Meaning making of belonging for children is the process which happens between a child and their environment that makes things positive for the child (Boldermo, 2020). When children are active and explorative in a social origin and content (El'konin, 1999), through this way, they learn social roles and find social support (Hedegaard, 2020) that provides them better at many contents. Positive friendships significantly contributed to the development of a sense of community, as did success in social interactions, which contributed to the development of togetherness and healthy charities (Koivula & Hännikäinen, 2017). All these friendships, togetherness and participation in groups provide preschool children to establish emotional bonding and a sense of community in this security group. However, while individual children participate in different

activities in the group, they need the motivation to interact with each other and engage (Over, 2006). Such a new normal situation after the crisis, such distance education period, and limitations in many areas, children have come from different environments and families, so they require to adapt to this.

When looking at the role of early childhood education centers, they need to arrange not just physical connections but also social interactions and connections provided for the young children with the range of physical, social, and cultural spaces that are crucial. This also makes boundaries around early childhood education center settings more transparent and reflects critically within the children' everyday spatiality, encompassing personal histories and priorities, materials, playable areas, and other spaces (Kernan, 2010). To provide for the needs of young children in early childhood education institutions, the formation of friendship relations is emotionally significant for the child's whole development, meaningful experiences and social interactions (Hännikäinen, 2007). Sharing the same space and showing expressions of young children seem to be related to how s/he identifies the situation and is connected firmly to the sense of belonging of the child (Emilson & Eek-Karlsson, 2021). These things teach children to coordinate shared activities, solve conflicts and collaborate with their peers, parents, neighborhood communities, and other schools and services that permit children's engagement with physical and social surroundings around them (Kernan, 2010; Singer et al., 2012). During the pandemic, online education and after that, social distance were established when the children returned to school causing children to move away from school activities and decrease interaction between them (Hebebci et al., 2020) and peer relations (Buzzi et al., 2021) and these do not reduce the feeling of loneliness (Cauberghe et al., 2021). All these protect the child's place in the community and well-being because of the social-emotional support at this society unit.

These collective experiences of individuals also belonging to the social groups can include consistent and opposite representations when asked about the same target (Moscovici, 2001); in such a distance education period, it is common to observe similar pictures of individuals. Because social interactions are an essential part of people's lives, especially of children, and they affect each other and are affected by others. Many people, especially children hear and develop an understanding of this period from the media, news and the social environment around them (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021). Koivula and Hännikäinen (2017) indicate different elements of development, crucially one of which is integration and shared emotions via connection. This refers to a feeling of togetherness based on mutual bonds, engaging in positive and often interactions, and participating in shared activities and similar experiences. During this period, children mostly feel anxiety and fear, and because of social relation needs, they miss their friends and want to be and play together in school settings (Duran, 2021).

Throughout this study, even among the children who are at the early childhood education period and in these settings, we can observe being a member of a group, especially in a peer culture, that can highly affect individuals, also being a part of this culture and systems.

Such early childhood education environments provide children to develop belongings through the use and being there with peers, the environment's physical and social-emotional conditions. Based on this framework, we believe it is valuable to present evidence for young children's sense of school belonging to provide qualified educational activities. By this way, we aimed to examine the belongings of children attending preschool education through the new normal period in the post-crisis. Thus, research question is mentioned below:

- What are the experiences of children at school in the post-pandemic process?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Research design

Since the study aimed to reveal the school belonging of preschool children during the post-crisis period, it was exploratory in nature. Therefore, we used the phenomenological approach. Studies that try to explore the common meaning of the experiences of a few people about a phenomenon or a concept are defined as phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2013). Aligned to this emphasis of the phenomenological approach, we tried to give meaning to the perceptions of young children regarding school in the new normal.

Participants

For the sampling of the participants, we focused on the starting point in phenomenological research which is personal experiences. Therefore, we used purposive cum convenience sampling to select the participants. The Covid-19 pandemic process, which we take as an example of the crisis, constitutes our main center of research. In this direction, we selected the children who had experienced face-to-face education in pre-pandemic, distance education during the quarantine period, and face-to-face education in the post-pandemic. Twenty-four children participated in the study from five preschool education institutions. All institutions were in the Küçükçekmece distinct of Istanbul. The participants consisted of 12 girls and 12 boys aged between 65 and 78 months, mainly from middle-class backgrounds. The total mean age was 69.57 months.

Data collection and procedure

The individual-participant semi-structured interview is a substantive data collection tool in phenomenological research, as it helps to explore the individual's perceptions of their experiences on a particular subject in-depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). We collected the data by asking each child questions that enable them to remember, think, and describe their experience (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The interview questions are in the semi-structured interview form developed in line with the relevant literature and expert opinions. In the interview form, we included questions about being at school in pre-pandemic, receiving distance learning that is scheduled for no more than half an hour per day through online platforms during quarantine, and being at school during post-pandemic to reveal the experiences of children. As the last question of the interview, each child was asked to draw a picture about his/her school, friends and the teacher. After completing the picture, the child

was asked to describe the picture and the child's expressions were written by the researcher. Our purpose here was not to analyze the pictures drawn by the children, we only used them to support and illuminate their verbal expressions. Therefore, the verbal expressions of the children constituted the primary data of this study.

Before data collection, we conducted a pilot interview with a child and determined whether the questions were relevant and understandable. After the pilot process, interviews were conducted between May and June 2022. All interviews were conducted by one of the researchers. Before the interviews, she introduced herself to the children and explained that she would ask them a few questions and draw a picture. She held one-on-one interviews with each child in a quiet and comfortable room of each school. The interviews lasted an average of five to seven minutes for each child. Children completed the pictures in approximately three to five minutes. In terms of the reliability of the data, the interviews were audio recorded.

Data analysis

This study follows the phenomenological analysis process (Colaizzi, 1978; Güler et al., 2013). The data were analyzed in a systematic and controlled manner with the deductive method considering the components in the relevant literature. Starting from the data collection process, the researchers reflected all the experiences related to the phenomenon as it is and with all its reality. This is called bracketing (or phenomenological reduction) and means that researchers suspend their prejudices and knowledge as much as possible. This constitutes the first step of phenomenological analysis. Then, children's verbal accounts were transcribed verbatim by the researchers. From each transcript, significant phrases or sentences that pertain directly to the lived experience of being in school during the pre-pandemic process or the new normal, as well as the experience of the distance education process, were identified. After, the significant phrases and sentences were listed and irrelevant statements were eliminated. Meanings were then formulated from the significant statements and phrases. The formulated meanings were clustered into themes. The researchers created themes that frequently appeared in the interviews or that are common across all of the participated children, in addition to the themes belonging to only a child. Considering the general themes, "what" children experienced about the related phenomenon was written and examples of children's expressions were given *(textural description)*. In addition, the researchers emphasized "how" children experience the phenomenon, where it usually occurs, and what causes it *(structural description)*. Finally, the textural and structural definitions were combined and the experiences related to the phenomenon and how they emerged were defined *(unified description)*. The results were integrated into an inclusive description of the phenomenon, incorporating all the themes produced.

Validity and ethical principles

To support the validity of the research, diversification was used. Diversification can be achieved in different ways as data source, method and researcher diversity (Creswell, 2013). Data analyzes were carried out by one of the authors who have experience in phenomenological

research, and a consensus was reached by discussing the identified clusters and themes with other authors (Gibbs, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In addition to the researcher variety, children's drawings were used to support their verbal expressions as variety of data sources. Throughout the study, the researchers set aside their own prejudices and experiences and focused only on the participant children's experiences of the phenomenon. Moreover, the researchers reviewed all written transcripts multiple times and presented the data without any changes.
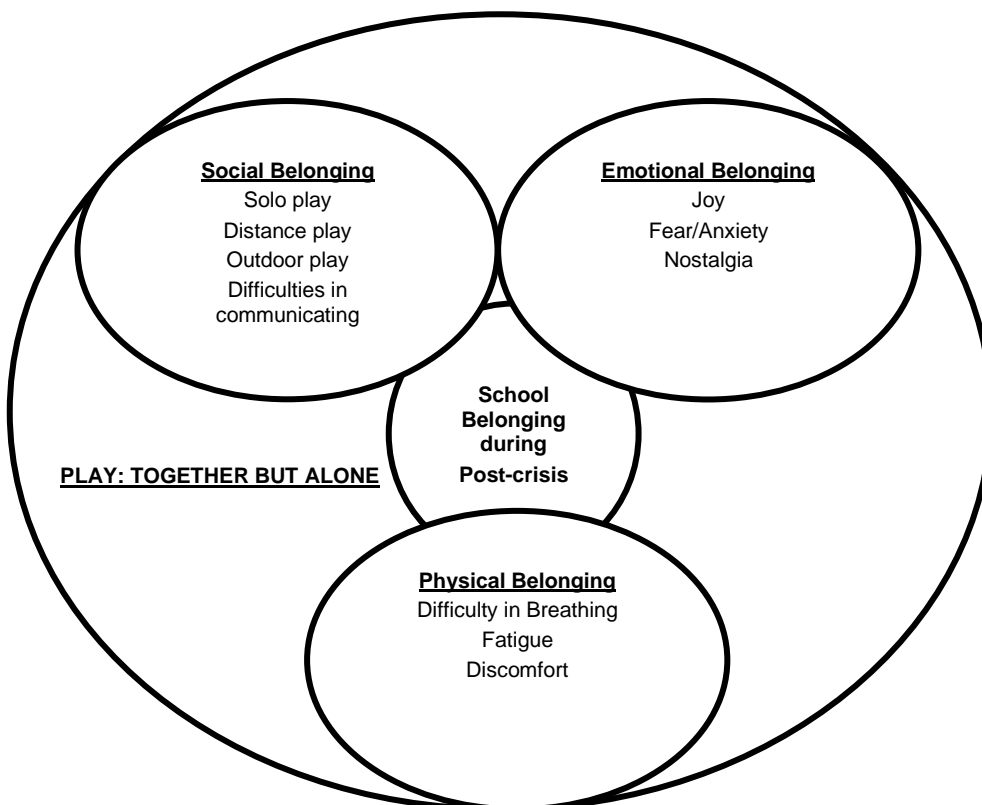
To ensure ethical principles, written approval was obtained from the university where the researchers are affiliated, stating that the relevant research is ethically appropriate. Before the data collection, informed consent was given by all the participating children's parents. Children's confidentiality was ensured by using code names.

FINDINGS

This study, which aims to reveal the school belonging of preschool children during the post-crisis period, has been identified with the phenomenon of "Play: Together but Alone". Play is a critical tool for children to feel a sense of belonging to school and creates opportunities for them to have social, emotional and physical experiences with their peers. In the study, children's belonging to school has been explained based on "play" and discussed with the themes of social, emotional, and physical belonging.

Figure 1.

School belonging of children during post-crisis period

In line with the approach based on the above, social belonging has been explained by the codes of solo play, distance play, outdoor play, and difficulties in communicating. Emotional belonging has been explained with the codes of joy, fear/anxiety and nostalgia. Finally, physical belonging has been explained by the codes of difficulty in breathing, fatigue and discomfort. The themes, sub-themes and codes are presented in Figure 1.

Social Belonging

Children' social belonging has been determined as "solo play", "distance play", "outdoor play", and "difficulties in communication". The children described and illustrated the solo play as follows:

C15: "The teacher was placing us at the tables separately. S/he put us alone at separate tables."

C10: "I'm playing with blocks. Most of the time I play alone at the table with the Legos."

Image 1.

Solo play (C10)

Drawing: I'm playing with blocks. Most of the time alone, with lego on the table.

Some children conveyed and illustrated that they were playing distance games within the scope of social belonging as follows:

C11: "For example, when we were playing, one of us was here and two of us were there. There were several steps between us."
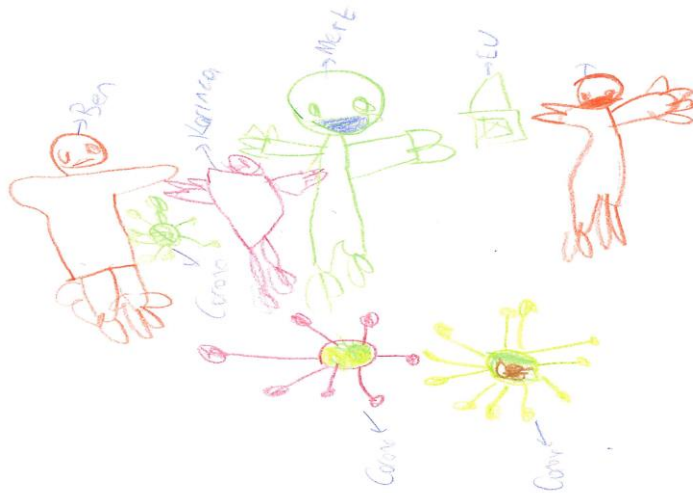
C17: "My friend was giving from the side like that from a distance. You know, we were playing teapot with her. I was pouring tea for her from afar. We were standing and giving each other because it was corona."

C9: "Viruses are circulating. Children play games. We play house, but there is a distance between us."

Image 2.

Distance play (C9)

Drawing: Viruses are circulating. Children are playing games. I'm playing house. There is distance between us.
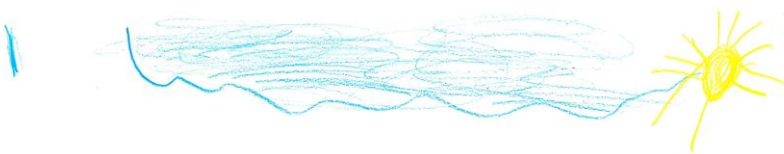
The children expressed their belonging in the outdoor as follows and reflected it in their picture:

C12: "We were playing a lot in the garden when we were without masks."

C17: "We went outside because we wore masks at school. We often go out to the garden. We play games. When we go out to the garden, we wear a mask, but sometimes we take it off. But we stand closer to each other. We are more happy."

Image 3.

Outdoor play (C17)

Drawing: We went outside because we wear masks at school. We often go to the garden. We play games. We also wear masks when we go to the garden, but sometimes we take them off but we play closer to each other.

Some children stated that they had difficulties in communication during play. Some of the children stated that they had difficulty in speaking and others in hearing. The children's statements are as follows:

C13: "I was having trouble moving my head. Hearing too."

C14: "...Because it was not easy for me to hear with the mask. It was difficult for me to speak."

Within the scope of the theme of Social Belonging, half of the children stated that they played distance games, one-fourth of them had solo play and outdoor play, and one-fourth of them had difficulties in communicating. When we examine the expressions, we can say that the social distance restriction brought by the pandemic is reflected in the games of the children. Children aged 5-6 years enjoy group games involving peer interaction. Young children may also benefit from physical cues such as lip-reading when communicating. However, the use of masks may cause children not to hear each other clearly. For such reasons, the use of masks negatively affected the communication processes of children. Based on these findings, we determined that children who like to play shared games with their peers in a social environment have difficulty in communicating during solo and distance games after the pandemic. This may negatively affect children's belonging to their class and friends. In C17's statement, we can see that children can play games closer to each other in the open area. It seems that children are willing to participate in garden games and this is an important factor in increasing their social belonging. Children want to play games and spend time with their peers in their own classrooms or schoolyards, even if they are physically distant or masked. All these findings stem from the need for children to establish a social and physical bond with their environment.

Emotional Belonging

In line with the interviews, the sub-themes of emotional belonging were determined as "joy", "fear/anxiety" and "nostalgia". Some of the children, who stated that they felt a sense of joy for returning to school, expressed their thoughts as follows and reflected on their pictures:

C4: "Coming to school with a mask... Because then I can have fun and play with my friends."

C23: "Even though it's Corona, I'm very happy to come to school and I'm sending a heart to school."

Image 4.

Joy (C23)

Drawing: Even though there's corona, I'm very happy to come to school, and I'm sending a heart to school.

Some children stated that they were afraid/anxious due to the coronavirus and expressed their feelings as follows:

C3: "I was so scared, I had more coronavirus. The coronavirus is about to leave us and we don't wear masks at school anymore, right?"

C14: "I didn't feel safe."

Another sub-theme within the scope of children's emotional belonging is the theme of nostalgia. The children expressed their longing for the past as follows:

C16: "Two friends are playing. They want to hug each other, but they can't because of corona."

C17: "I couldn't kiss or hug my friends at social distance. So it was a very bad day."

Image 5.

Nostalgia (C16)

Drawing: Two friends are playing. They want to hug each other, but they can't because of corona.

Emotional belonging is related to the close relationships that children establish with individuals and the feelings they share with them. It is also important for children to be in contact with their peers in the pre-school. Within the scope of the theme of emotional belonging, most of the children stated that their experiences of returning to school were positive. On the other hand, it was determined that one-fifth of the children had emotional experiences such as fear/anxiety and one-third of them had emotional experiences in the form of nostalgia. Due to the restrictions such as hugging and skin contact within the scope of social distance, children longed for the past. We can say that the failure of this situation drags the children to fear and anxiety. On the other hand, despite many negativities, it is a situation that we expect the children of this period to be happy about returning to school within the scope of their peer relations and socialization. Although children feel fear and anxiety, their longing for the past is related to the importance they attach to belonging. The joy of children coming to school despite the negativities, who feel a sense of belonging to the classroom environment and their friends, can be considered as an indicator of this.

Physical Belonging

We determined that the children experienced physical belonging in the form of "difficulty in breathing", "fatigue" and "discomfort". Children who stated that they had difficulty in breathing expressed as follows:

C1: "I was suffocating. It was a bad feeling."

C6: "We wear masks at school, we feel suffocated… Because I can't breathe while playing."

C15: "It's good to go to school. Wearing a mask leaves me a little out of breath. We play in the garden, but there is a distance between us. My teacher warns us if we get too close or remove the mask."

Drawing: Going to school is nice. Wearing a mask makes me a little breathless. We play in the garden, but there is distance between us. If we get too close or take off the mask, our teacher warns us.

Some children explained it as fatigue and expressed it as follows:

C7: "Because I get tired when I wear a mask."

C11: "It was going very badly (day). Because it was very tiring to change the mask after breakfast or something, but when the mask was removed, it was very easy for me."

Image 6.

Difficulty in breathing (C15)

All of the children, who described it as discomfort, stated that the mask hurt their ears, and they shared their own experiences as follows:

C18: "I don't like the mask, but I'm trying to wear it these days, but now for some reason I don't want to wear it... Because the parts of the mask (showing the tires) were bothering me. I also have earrings in my ears, that's why they bother me. I don't want to wear it."

C19: "The mask was very tight on my ears. And I was afraid that I would get prominent ears."

Half of the children who stated their physical belonging in a personal context stated that they had difficulty in breathing, a small part of them felt fatigue and one-third of them said they felt uncomfortable. It is noteworthy that all the experiences in the theme originate from the mask and include negative situations. We can say that the use of masks has a negative effect on children's games and social interactions and negatively affects belonging. Although situations such as difficulty in breathing, fatigue, discomfort and fear/anxiety caused by the use of masks negatively affect children's belonging after the pandemic, it has been observed that solo play, distance play and outdoor play in the school environment have a positive effect on their belonging.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study has aimed to examine the belongings of children attending preschool through the new normal period in the post-crisis and children's belonging to school has been explained on the basis of "play" and discussed with the themes of social, emotional, and physical belonging. Children's answers about social belonging are determined as solo play, distance education, outdoor play and difficulties in communication. At this new period, some of them have indicated playing separately and alone after distance education will return to school at a new normal. Children gain insight through the social context of the environment around them

and sharing the same environment with their peers provides them to develop a sense of community, togetherness, and healthy socialization (Koivula & Hännikäinen, 2017). In one of the researches, migrant children at early childhood education services cooperative play and participation in the plays, they feel togetherness and belonging to society around them in the school environment and this type of plays make these children adapted to new communities more easily (Sadownik, 2018). Social interactions and being close socially to the others are an essential part of children's lives, and they affect each other and are affected by others in terms of different aspects. Positive friendships significantly contributed to the development of a sense of community, as did success in social interactions, which contributed to the development of togetherness and healthy charities. Children stated their communication and social interactions at the class but, when they have shared about being outside, they are more communicated. They especially were happy when stranded closer to each other and shared a common goal at plays. So, this allows them to gain connectedness.

When young children engage in shared plays and activities, they communicate to others, collaborate with their peers and when they experience a problem, they try to solve and this increases the feeling of togetherness and being a part of the social surroundings around them (Singer et al., 2012). Koivula and Hännikäinen (2017) focused on interaction, shared experience and participating at plays and these all benefit from their collaboration. They also indicated having a shared social-emotional connection contributes to find playing together meaningful, crucial, pleasurable and rewarding. Therefore, after such a period and social distance play and activities between children, it is important to support the friendship in the school environment and their cooperative play skills and the establishment of a sense of community and belonging to the others and social atmosphere of school as a part of it. McMillan and Chavis (1986) indicates that the individuals need to be in relationships as a crucial gain for long-term commitment to the others. They focus on some elements of being a member of a community and belonging to it are membership, integration, and fulfillment of needs through participating activities. Social belonging is a critical aspect of development for young children, particularly during the preschool years. It refers to the sense of being connected and valued by others, and it plays a crucial role in shaping children's social, emotional, and cognitive development (Koivula & Hännikäinen, 2017; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Pekrun et al., 2009). All these protect the child's place in the community and well-being through the social support at this society unit. This stems from the need for social support and belonging to establish a protective environment for the children. As a result of all these a sense of belonging is not static, rather belonging between individuals is an ongoing process (Emilson & Eek-Karlsson, 2021) and affected from what is happening around them and sometimes it is needed to be achieved by individuals. Also, they stated another important one is emotional connection between the individuals in a community.

Besides social belonging, children stated emotional belonging as joy, fear/anxiety and nostalgia in the school setting at a new normal period after distance education. They talked about playing together and providing them to feel happy and a sense of joy when they are

together with their friends. Diaz-Diaz (2022) indicated that children while acquiring social and emotional skills that involve self-regulation and sharing their emotions and feelings learn well in early childhood education settings. Indeed, emotionally connecting with peers and classmates allows them to be joyful and happy. In a new and unknown situation, children need to feel positive together and while they play and connect, it is easy to belong with emotions. When children share the same social atmosphere, in the shared activities and plays they accept, respect and support each other. Although children feel fear and anxiety, they indicated that they feel happy after a distance education period at a new normal within the scope of their peer relations, sharing the same environment with peers and socialization. Rimm-Kaufman and his friends (2005) examined in their research the role of classroom setting and children's togetherness in preschool environments. It was found that emotional support and a warm, positive classroom environment are associated with fewer behavior problems and more positive social interactions among children.

Emotional belonging is a crucial aspect of children's development in preschools as it contributes significantly to their overall well-being, social and emotional development, and personal domains. Emotional belonging refers to the sense of feeling accepted, valued, and supported within a community or group of people. In preschools, emotional belonging encompasses the child's sense of belonging to the class, the teacher, and the overall school community. While children play together, they feel joy and less anxiety, so it provides emotional support. Research suggests that emotional belonging plays a vital role in children's psychological adjustment, and social skills (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Children who feel emotionally connected to their preschool community are more likely to have positive social interactions with peers, exhibit fewer behavior problems (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). A dimension of emotional support, which measures the extent to which teachers create a warm, supportive, and emotionally responsive classroom environment that fosters children's emotional well-being and sense of belonging (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Preschool teachers play a critical role in creating a positive and inclusive learning environment that fosters emotional belonging for children. Teachers can promote emotional belonging by creating a welcoming and supportive classroom climate, acknowledging children's feelings and needs, and providing opportunities for interaction, sharing, and collaboration (Emilson & Eek-Karlsson, 2021; Koivula & Hännikäinen, 2017).

Emotional belonging in preschool refers to the sense of connectedness and attachment that young children feel towards their teachers, peers, and physical environment. Research has shown that a strong sense of emotional belonging is essential for children's development and well-being, and it can have a significant impact on their social competence. This study investigated the impact of young children's affiliations with prosocial peers on their emotional experiences in subsequent peer interactions through play and activities at return to school in the post-crisis. It was found that preschool children who had positive relationships with prosocial peers were more likely to experience positive emotions during peer interactions and

were less likely to display negative emotions. This suggests that social belonging with prosocial peers can have a positive impact on children's emotional development. Emotional belonging is an essential aspect of children's development in preschools. Teachers can play a vital role in promoting emotional belonging by creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment that values each child's unique experiences and perspectives. In conclusion, these highlight the importance of belonging for preschool children's academic and social-emotional development when returning to school after a distance education period.

As for physical belonging, children made various statements that included dimensions of difficulty in breathing, fatigue, and discomfort. The children were aware that it was necessary to wear masks to protect themselves and others from the virus. However, most children said they felt uncomfortable wearing masks all day in the school. The children experienced pain in their ears or difficulty in breathing both in the classroom and in the garden activities. Especially outdoors where physical activity is high, the use of masks by children causes difficulty in breathing and feeling uncomfortable. Play provides children with quality learning experiences while preventing poor social, emotional and physical consequences (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988; Little & Wyver, 2008; Stone & Faulkner, 2014). Outdoor activities can play an important role in increasing children's sense of belonging to school. Because physical activities not only provide physical competence and improve movement skills, but also contribute to personal enjoyment, social adaptation, personal development, and social change (Makarova & Herzog, 2014; Sağın et al., 2022). Therefore, outdoor play can be an effective strategy in promoting children's belonging to school, especially after crisis situations.

Physical fatigue negatively affects not only the physical skills of children, but also their cognitive skills such as attention, focus, and thinking skills (Liu et al., 2012). The findings show that children experience some sense of fatigue, both socio-emotionally, and physically, after the crisis. We can say that these dimensions are in mutual interaction. It has long been known that physical discomfort or physical well-being has a huge impact on children's learning. For example, while there is little research on how face masks can affect social-emotional development in children, there are some research suggesting that wearing masks may prevent the identification of emotional expression in others (Carbon, 2020; Carbon & Serrano, 2021). The use of masks can also cause children to have problems in reading social cues, understanding what is being said and expressing themselves. The fact that children do not participate in activities and games in a physically comfortable way may also causes them to miss their past games and school order (e.g. constantly changing masks between meals and activities). For this reason, making children feel physically comfortable and vigorous is also important for belonging to the school socially, emotionally and cognitively. Children tend to value the idea of community in many ways, particularly emotionally and socially in relation to belonging to and membership in peer groups. The peer group and play activities appear to benefit from a strong sense of community as well as from inclusiveness, and unity. From a sociocultural standpoint, we would emphasize that the

foundation of young children's sense of community is friendships, shared play, and emotional bonding.

Limitations and Suggestions

In the present study, we referred to recent pandemic experiences to reveal children's belonging to school after a crisis. It is certain that every crisis has different dynamics within itself and can affect children's belonging to school in different ways. However, with future research, it is important to determine the common points in children's experiences in terms of supporting their sense of belonging to school in terms of social, emotional, cognitive, and physical aspects.

In the aftermath of the pandemic as a crisis, we have revealed that children need social interaction, emotional intimacy and bonding, and physical comfort. We think that these results can also be observed after different crisis situations such as natural disasters and migrations. As educators and decision makers, we should seek ways to enable children to continue their quality education and training activities after crisis situations. Therefore, future research results on children's sense of belonging to school will also be guiding.

There are yet no evidence-based classroom treatments (such as those based on randomized control trials) that blatantly improve children's feelings of school belonging. Understanding of how to advance preschool children's learning processes and their academic accomplishment will continue to be developed by future studies that focus on how a sense of school belonging might be improved. This is strongly supported by the phenomenology method, which shows how crucial it is for children to feel like they belong at school and part of the school. Therefore, various methods can be used to examine the implementations.

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