



Young Children's Social Interaction Recovery After the COVID-19: Perspectives of Teachers, a Headteacher, and Parents

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ABSTRAK. Pandemi COVID-19 membatasi kesempatan anak usia dini untuk berinteraksi secara langsung dengan teman sebaya dan guru, sehingga memengaruhi perkembangan sosial mereka. Meskipun pembelajaran tatap muka telah kembali dilaksanakan, proses pemulihan interaksi sosial anak pada masa pascapandemi belum dipahami secara memadai. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis pemulihan interaksi sosial anak usia dini dalam pembelajaran tatap muka berdasarkan perspektif guru, kepala sekolah, dan orang tua. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan melibatkan delapan partisipan yang dipilih melalui purposive sampling, terdiri atas tiga guru, satu kepala sekolah, dan empat orang tua. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan enam tahap analisis tematik Braun dan Clarke. Keabsahan data diperkuat melalui member checking, peer debriefing, dan audit trail. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa interaksi sosial anak pulih secara bertahap setelah kembali ke pembelajaran tatap muka. Pemulihan tersebut dipengaruhi oleh rutinitas keluarga dan pengalaman sosial, komunikasi responsif serta dukungan bertahap dari guru, kegiatan bermain kolaboratif, dan konsistensi kerja sama sekolah dengan keluarga. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pemulihan interaksi sosial anak merupakan proses perkembangan berkelanjutan yang memerlukan dukungan terpadu dari sekolah dan keluarga.

Kata Kunci : Anak Usia Dini; Interaksi Sosial; Pembelajaran Tatap Muka

ABSTRACT. The COVID-19 pandemic restricted young children's opportunities to interact directly with peers and teachers, affecting their social development. Although face-to-face learning has resumed, the process through which children's social interaction recovers in the post-pandemic period remains insufficiently understood. This study aimed to analyze the recovery of young children's social interaction in face-to-face learning from the perspectives of teachers, a headteacher, and parents. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed with eight purposively selected participants comprising three teachers, one headteacher, and four parents. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail. The findings showed that children's social interaction recovered gradually after their return to face-to-face learning. This recovery was shaped by family routines and social experiences, responsive teacher communication and individualized scaffolding, collaborative play activities, and consistent school-family collaboration. The study concludes that the recovery of young children's social interaction is a continuing developmental process rather than an immediate consequence of school reopening. Sustained and coordinated support from schools and families is therefore essential to provide meaningful opportunities for communication, cooperation, and peer engagement across children's daily environments.

Keyword : Early Childhood; Social Interaction; Face-to-Face Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Social interaction is a central component of early childhood development because it enables children to communicate, cooperate, understand others' perspectives, and build positive relationships with peers and adults. These experiences support children's social-emotional and language development and help them participate meaningfully in early learning environments. Blas [1] reported a strong association between social interaction and language development in the post-COVID-19 period, while Sloss et al. [2] emphasized that meaningful interactions in early childhood education settings contribute to children's socioemotional strengths. Accordingly, examining how young children rebuild social interaction after returning to face-to-face learning is essential for understanding their post-pandemic adjustment.

The COVID-19 pandemic substantially disrupted young children's everyday social experiences worldwide. School closures and restrictions on social activities reduced opportunities for direct interaction with peers and teachers, limiting children's experiences in practicing communication, cooperation, emotional regulation, and participation in group activities. Widyastuti [3] reported that these conditions negatively affected preschool children's social and emotional development, while Jing et al. [4] identified increased emotional and behavioral problems among preschool children during the pandemic. Similarly, Vincent et al. [5] found that school closures were associated with psychological distress and broader developmental challenges. These findings indicate that pandemic-related disruptions affected not only children's learning opportunities but also the social environments through which interpersonal competencies are developed.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic persisted even after social restrictions were lifted. Kästner et al. [6] identified an increased risk of social and behavioral developmental difficulties among preschool children following the first wave of the pandemic. Likewise, Scott et al. [7] reported that limited social interaction affected children's social cognition, including their ability to understand others' perspectives and process social information. These findings indicate that disruptions in children's social experiences may continue to influence their social development during the post-pandemic period.

Recent studies suggest that post-pandemic recovery in early childhood development depends not only on the removal of social restrictions but also on the availability of supportive environments that facilitate children's re-engagement with others. Le et al. [8] reported that pandemic-related disruptions affected preschool children's cognitive, executive, and social-emotional development, while Muñoz et al. [9] highlighted the consequences of reduced developmental stimulation during this period. Lee and Hwang [10] further showed that pandemic experiences were associated with children's language development, and Kannel et al. [11] emphasized the influence of societal crises on children's social competence. These findings suggest that children's recovery requires supportive interactions and developmental opportunities across the environments where children live and learn.

Early childhood education environments and family contexts have been identified as important settings that support children's developmental recovery after the pandemic. Davies et al. [12] reported that early childhood education and care services provided sustained developmental support for young children, while Oppermann et al. [13] demonstrated that supportive home and preschool environments contributed positively to children's social-emotional development. Neuberger et al. [14] further emphasized the importance of interactions among children, teachers, and parents in promoting children's well-being. However, existing studies have primarily examined developmental outcomes or the quality of educational environments, while less attention has been given to how children's social interaction recovery is experienced and understood by multiple stakeholders across school and family contexts.

Preliminary observations and discussions were conducted at a private early childhood education institution in Makassar, South Sulawesi, during school-readiness assessment and student admission preparation. Discussions with teachers, the headteacher, and school representatives indicated variations in children's social adjustment after the pandemic, particularly in initiating communication, participating in group activities, and interacting confidently with peers. These initial conditions provided the contextual basis for exploring how young children rebuild social interaction after returning to face-to-face learning.

The return to face-to-face learning provided opportunities for young children to rebuild social relationships through interactions with peers, teachers, and learning activities. Araújo et al. [15] reported that reopening early childhood education services contributed positively to children's well-being and educational practices, while Bub et al. [16] highlighted the role of positive teacher-child interactions in supporting children's social-emotional development. Furthermore, Xie et al. [17] and Conceição et al. [18] demonstrated that play-based and social-emotional learning activities can strengthen children's social abilities. However, existing studies have mainly examined specific interventions or developmental outcomes rather than explaining the broader process of social interaction recovery involving children's experiences across school and family environments.

Although numerous studies have examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early childhood development, previous research has largely focused on developmental difficulties during the pandemic or general social-emotional outcomes. Limited attention has been given to how young children gradually rebuild their social interactions after returning to face-to-face learning, particularly through the interconnected roles of teachers, school leaders, and parents across school and family contexts. This gap highlights the need to understand social interaction recovery not only as an individual developmental process but also as a process shaped by children's surrounding environments. Therefore, this study aims to explore how young children's social interaction is re-established after the COVID-19 pandemic based on the perspectives of teachers, a headteacher, and parents. This study contributes a contextual understanding of young children's social interaction recovery by explaining how family

routines, teacher support, play-based activities, and school–family collaboration collectively shape children’s adaptation after the pandemic.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore how young children’s social interaction recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic was perceived by teachers, a headteacher, and parents. The study was conducted at a private early childhood education institution located in an urban area of Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, serving children aged four to six years. The research site was selected based on an existing institutional collaboration related to school-readiness assessment and developmental discussions. This context provided access to teachers, school administrators, and parents who were directly involved in supporting children’s social adjustment after returning to face-to-face learning.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in children’s social adjustment after returning to face-to-face learning. The study involved eight participants, consisting of three early childhood teachers, one headteacher, and four parents. Teachers were selected because they observed children’s social interactions and classroom adaptation, while the headteacher and parents provided perspectives from school management and family contexts. The inclusion of participants from both school and home environments enabled a broader understanding of children’s social interaction recovery. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants: GTK-1 to GTK-3 for teachers, KS-1 for the headteacher, and OT-1 to OT-4 for parents.

Data collection consisted of preliminary contextual observations and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Preliminary observations were conducted during classroom activities, break periods, and school-readiness screening to understand children’s social interaction contexts after returning to face-to-face learning. Discussions with teachers, the headteacher, and school representatives were also conducted during the initial stage of the study to identify relevant issues related to children’s social adjustment. The main data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between May and July 2026 with teachers, the headteacher, and parents. The interviews explored children’s peer and teacher interactions, classroom adaptation, social behaviors after the pandemic, and strategies implemented by adults to support children’s social interaction recovery. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants’ consent. Field notes were used to document contextual information supporting the interpretation of interview data.

The Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s framework [19]. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. The transcripts were then coded inductively to identify recurring patterns related to children’s social interaction recovery, post-pandemic adaptation, and the experiences of teachers, the headteacher,

and parents. Related codes were compared, refined, and organized into themes representing shared perspectives across school and family contexts.

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through member checking, peer discussion, and an audit trail. The researchers reviewed the interview data and analytical process systematically to maintain consistency in theme development. The audit trail included interview recordings, transcripts, coding notes, and analytical records. Regarding ethical considerations, institutional permission was obtained through the collaboration agreement between the research institution and the participating school. Participants were informed about the study objectives and procedures, and verbal consent was obtained before interviews were conducted. Participant identities were protected through pseudonyms, and all data were used solely for research purposes.

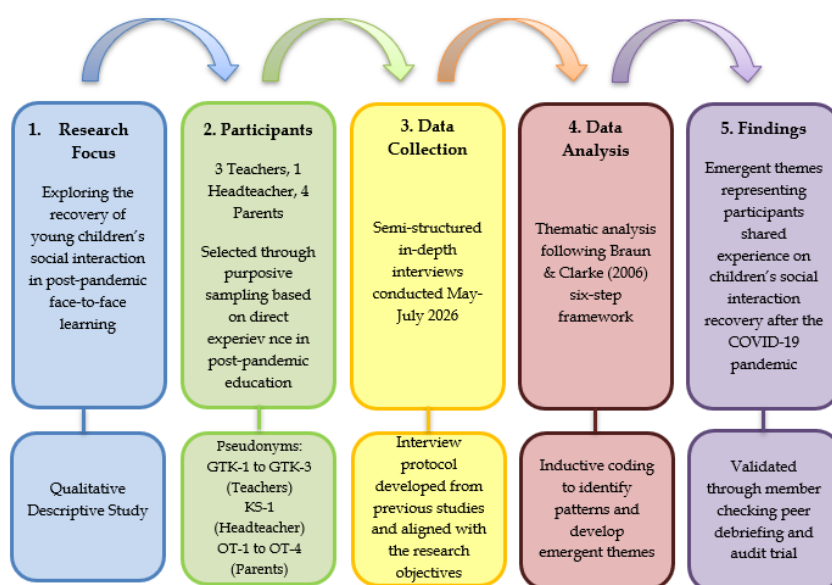


Figure 1. Research Procedure of The Study

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis resulted in five overarching themes that represent participants' perceptions of children's social interaction in the post-pandemic context. These themes are presented in Table 1 and discussed in the following sections.

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Supporting Participants

Theme	Description	Supporting Participants
Theme 1. Children's social interaction gradually recovers following face-to-face learning	Children demonstrated increasing participation in peer interactions after returning to face-to-face learning	GTK-1, KS-1, OT-1, OT-3
Theme 2. Family Routines and Social Experiences Shape Children's Social Interaction Recovery	Children's post-pandemic social adjustment was influenced by family routines and opportunities for social interaction	GTK-3, KS-1, OT-4
Theme 3. Teacher support facilitates children's social interaction	Teachers promoted children's social interaction through responsive communication and scaffolding strategies	GTK-1, GTK-2, KS-1

Theme 4. Play-based activities promote children's social interaction recovery	Cooperative play provided opportunities for children to develop communication and collaboration skills	GTK-2. KS-1, OT-3
Theme 5. School-family collaboration supports children's social development	Consistent collaboration between schools and families reinforced children's social development	GTK-3, KS-1, OT-3, OT-4

Theme 1. Children's Social Interaction Gradually Recovered Following Face-to-Face Learning. The thematic analysis revealed that children's social interaction gradually recovered after returning to face-to-face learning following the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers, the headteacher, and parents observed improvements in children's willingness to communicate, participate in group activities, and establish relationships with peers. However, the recovery process varied among children, as some children interacted spontaneously while others required encouragement and repeated opportunities to engage socially.

A kindergarten teacher described how children gradually developed social participation through daily classroom activities: *"Children's interactions in the classroom are quite active, although many are still centered on their own interests. They most frequently talk and play together during learning centers, outdoor play, and mealtime. For example, during pretend-play activities, several children immediately divided roles as shopkeepers and customers. However, some children preferred to observe first and only joined after being invited by their peers."* (GTK-1).

This statement indicates that children's social recovery occurred through repeated exposure to shared activities. While some children were able to initiate interaction independently, others needed supportive invitations from peers and teachers before participating. The headteacher similarly emphasized that children interacted more effectively when activities provided meaningful purposes and a relaxed atmosphere: *"Overall, children's social interaction at school has developed well, although the level varies across classes. Social interaction occurs most frequently during free play, learning centers, sports activities, shared meals, and cross-class activities. Children tend to interact more easily when activities have clear goals and the atmosphere is relaxed rather than overly formal."* (KS-1). From the parents' perspective, improvements in children's social confidence were also evident outside school.

One parent explained: *"My child is quite sociable and usually makes friends quickly when playing outdoors. When meeting new children, he often offers them toys or invites them to run and play together."* (OT-1). Taken together, these accounts indicate that children's social recovery extended across school, family, and broader social environments. Participants described increasing confidence in initiating interactions, engaging in cooperative play, and establishing friendships, although the pace of adjustment differed among children. These findings are consistent with Hong et al. [20] and Kütükçü et al. [21], who reported that young children experienced a gradual process of social readjustment after returning to preschool following prolonged school closures. However, this study extends previous findings by highlighting that recovery was not only related to children's return to school but also shaped by the quality of everyday interactions and support systems surrounding them.

The present findings further emphasize that meaningful teacher–child interactions and peer experiences functioned as important mechanisms in children’s post-pandemic social recovery. Yang et al. [22] demonstrated that positive teacher–child interactions support children’s confidence and classroom participation, while Karuppiah [23] highlighted the role of responsive teacher–child relationships in encouraging engagement and cooperation. Similarly, Eidsvåg and Rosell [24] showed that group play strengthens children’s sense of belonging through cooperation and shared experiences. Building on these studies, this research demonstrates that children’s social recovery after the pandemic occurred through continuous opportunities to communicate, play, and participate in supportive social environments involving teachers, peers, and families.

Theme 2. Family Routines and Social Experiences Shape Children’s Social Interaction Recovery. The analysis revealed that children’s social interaction recovery was shaped by family routines and everyday social experiences rather than by the direct effects of the COVID-19 pandemic alone. Participants emphasized that parenting practices, opportunities for social interaction, digital media exposure, and children’s individual characteristics influenced how children gradually re-established social relationships after returning to face-to-face learning.

A kindergarten teacher explained that children’s current social abilities reflected the interaction between family experiences and opportunities for social engagement: *"Some families became closer and spent more time playing together, allowing children to develop strong communication skills. Others became accustomed to excessive screen time and had limited opportunities to interact with peers. Therefore, children’s current social condition is better understood as the result of family routines, individual temperament, and social experiences after the pandemic."* (GTK-3).

This account indicates that children’s social adjustment was highly contextual. Rather than experiencing the same developmental outcomes after the pandemic, children demonstrated different patterns of social interaction depending on their home environment and opportunities to engage in meaningful communication. The headteacher further highlighted several family-related factors influencing children’s social development: *"The most common challenges include excessive gadget use, limited conversations at home, inconsistent parenting practices, and overly demanding academic expectations. Some children also attend numerous extracurricular lessons, leaving them with little time for free play."* (KS-1).

This perspective shows that children’s opportunities to practice communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution are closely related to everyday family routines. When free play and social interaction are reduced by excessive screen exposure or highly structured activities, children may have fewer opportunities to develop interpersonal skills. Parents also recognized their role in shaping children’s social competence. One parent reflected: *"One challenge is that we sometimes become overprotective because our child cries easily. If we always defend the child, they have fewer opportunities to solve problems independently. Gadget use is not our main concern, but*

when the child is tired, watching videos is often preferred over playing. We are trying to maintain a balance." (OT-4).

This perspective reinforces the notion that parents actively shape children's opportunities to develop social competence. Participants recognized that excessive protection, limited peer interaction, and unbalanced media use may reduce children's chances to practice independence and interpersonal problem-solving, whereas supportive parenting and balanced routines create more favorable conditions for social development. These findings extend previous research on children's post-pandemic adjustment. Hong et al. [20] reported that children's readjustment after prolonged school closures was influenced by family support and opportunities for social participation. Similarly, Kütükçü et al. [21] found that children's communication skills after the pandemic varied according to family environments, previous social experiences, and continuity of interaction opportunities.

Unlike studies that primarily emphasize the negative consequences of pandemic disruption, the present study highlights that children's social recovery should be understood within their everyday ecological contexts. Family communication, parenting consistency, balanced technology use, and opportunities for free social play collectively shaped children's ability to rebuild social interaction after returning to school. Therefore, post-pandemic recovery requires collaboration between families and schools to provide stable routines, responsive relationships, and meaningful opportunities for children's social engagement.

Theme 3. Teacher Support Facilitates Children's Social Interaction. The thematic analysis indicated that teachers played a central role in facilitating children's social interaction during the post-pandemic period. Participants consistently described teachers not merely as classroom instructors but as facilitators who created emotionally supportive learning environments, encouraged communication, and guided children through social challenges. Rather than expecting children to interact independently, teachers intentionally provided verbal guidance, modeled appropriate communication, and gradually supported children in participating in peer activities according to their individual needs.

A kindergarten teacher explained that children responded more positively when teachers used responsive communication instead of relying solely on classroom rules: *"Children communicate quite openly with their teachers. They frequently ask 'why', tell stories about events at home, and ask whether their friends' actions are appropriate. Children become more cooperative when teachers explain the reasons behind classroom rules and allow them to repeat what they are expected to do." (GTK-2).* This finding suggests that teacher-child communication extended beyond academic instruction. By explaining the rationale behind classroom expectations and encouraging children to express their thoughts, teachers created opportunities for meaningful dialogue that supported children's understanding of social norms and cooperative behavior. Such interactions also appeared to strengthen children's confidence in communicating with both teachers and peers.

The headteacher similarly emphasized the importance of emotionally responsive teacher–child relationships: *"We encourage teachers to communicate warmly, respectfully, and in ways that are appropriate for children's developmental level. Teachers do not simply give instructions but also listen to children's stories and help them express their feelings."* (KS-1). This perspective highlights that effective teacher support involves recognizing children's emotional experiences as an integral part of social development. By acknowledging children's feelings and encouraging open communication, teachers fostered classroom environments where children felt safe to participate, collaborate, and resolve interpersonal difficulties.

Teachers also described using individualized scaffolding strategies when supporting children who experienced difficulties interacting with peers. One teacher explained: *"I first observe whether the child's difficulty is caused by shyness, limited language ability, or previous unpleasant experiences with peers. The child is then invited to play with one friendly classmate before gradually joining a larger group. I also model simple expressions and never force the child to speak in front of the whole class immediately."* (GTK-1). This quotation demonstrates that teachers adjusted their support according to each child's developmental needs rather than applying identical strategies to all children. Gradual peer introduction, language modeling, and emotional reassurance enabled children to participate in social interactions at their own pace while reducing feelings of anxiety or social pressure.

The present findings support previous research emphasizing the importance of high-quality teacher–child interactions in early childhood education. Nilfyr et al. [25] highlighted that purposeful teacher–child interactions provide opportunities for children to develop social understanding through shared experiences, while Yang et al. [22] demonstrated that responsive communication enhances children's participation and engagement. Similarly, Karuppiah [23] showed that warm and respectful teacher–child relationships contribute to children's confidence and social participation. However, this study extends previous research by showing that post-pandemic social interaction recovery required more than positive communication alone. Teachers combined emotional responsiveness with individualized scaffolding strategies, including observing children's readiness, identifying barriers to participation, and gradually introducing peer interaction opportunities. These practices demonstrate that teacher support functioned as an adaptive process that responded to children's different levels of social adjustment after the pandemic.

Overall, the findings suggest that teacher support functions as a critical protective factor in children's post-pandemic social interaction recovery. By combining responsive communication, emotional sensitivity, and individualized scaffolding, teachers helped children rebuild social confidence and develop interpersonal competencies that extended beyond classroom instruction. Such findings reinforce the importance of strengthening teachers' capacity to facilitate children's social interaction through responsive communication and individualized scaffolding as essential components of post-pandemic early childhood education.

Theme 4. Play-Based Activities Promote Children's Social Interaction Recovery. The thematic analysis identified play-based activities as an important context that supported children's social interaction recovery after returning to face-to-face learning. Participants described collaborative play as providing opportunities for children to communicate, cooperate, negotiate roles, and rebuild peer relationships through meaningful shared experiences. Rather than functioning only as recreational activities, play became a social learning environment where children practiced interpersonal skills through authentic interactions with peers.

One kindergarten teacher described how collaborative activities encouraged children to coordinate and share responsibilities during classroom projects: *"For example, when creating a miniature garden, one child puts in the soil, another places the seeds, and another waters the plants."* (GTK-1). This example demonstrates that collaborative play allowed children to experience cooperation through concrete shared goals. During such activities, children learned to communicate their ideas, recognize others contributions, and coordinate actions with peers.

Another teacher described similar interactions during constructive play activities: *"For example, when building a city with blocks, the children discuss where to place the houses and roads."* (GTK-2). This activity further illustrates that play supported not only cooperation but also children's ability to communicate ideas, negotiate decisions, and reach shared agreements with peers. Through constructive play, children were encouraged to listen to others' perspectives and adjust their actions within group activities, strengthening their communication skills and collaborative behaviors.

The headteacher similarly emphasized that activities involving shared participation generated stronger social engagement among children: *"The most effective activities are collaborative projects, traditional games, classroom performances, and outdoor learning activities. Children are highly enthusiastic because they can move freely and see the results of their work together."* (KS-1). This perspective highlights that play-based activities created social environments where children could interact naturally and participate without excessive pressure. Shared activities provided repeated opportunities for children to communicate, cooperate, and develop confidence in engaging with others.

From the parents' perspective, play also contributed to children's social confidence beyond the school setting. One parent explained: *"My child is active and quickly becomes familiar with others, especially during physical games."* (OT-3). This account indicates that the benefits of play extended beyond classroom contexts. Children's involvement in enjoyable social activities supported their willingness to interact with others and adapt to different social environments.

Taken together, these findings indicate that play-based experiences created natural opportunities for children to rebuild peer relationships, communicate effectively, and develop cooperative behaviors across different social contexts. Rather than functioning merely as instructional activities, play served as a meaningful social environment where children practiced negotiation, shared decision-making, and interpersonal understanding.

These findings are consistent with Eidsvåg and Rosell [24], who argued that group play promotes children's sense of belonging through shared participation, cooperation, and mutual recognition among peers. Similarly, Nilsen [25] emphasized that intentionally organized play environments influence children's opportunities to engage in meaningful social interaction. Extending previous research, this study demonstrates that play-based activities functioned not only as a context for social development but also as a mechanism for rebuilding children's social interaction after pandemic-related disruptions. Through collaborative projects, constructive play, outdoor activities, and traditional games, children gradually regained confidence and strengthened peer connections through repeated social experiences.

The present findings extend previous research by demonstrating that play-based activities functioned not only as a learning strategy but also as a mechanism through which children gradually rebuilt their social interaction after returning to face-to-face learning. Recognized by teachers, school leaders, and parents, collaborative play provided repeated opportunities for children to practice communication, cooperation, and shared decision-making through role-playing, constructive play, outdoor activities, and traditional games. These findings highlight that maintaining play-based pedagogy is particularly important in post-pandemic early childhood education because opportunities for meaningful peer interaction support children's social confidence and recovery.

Theme 5. School-Family Collaboration Supports Children's Social Interaction Recovery. The thematic analysis demonstrated that effective collaboration between schools and families was an important factor in supporting children's social interaction recovery during the post-pandemic period. Participants emphasized that children benefited when teachers and parents shared common expectations, maintained regular communication, and applied consistent approaches to social learning across home and school environments. Rather than positioning children's social development as the sole responsibility of schools, participants viewed it as a shared process that required continuous cooperation between educators and families.

The headteacher highlighted that children's social development was strengthened when schools and families worked together to provide consistent guidance and opportunities for social interaction: *"The main supporting factors are a consistent relationship between the school and the family. High-quality play experiences, responsive teachers, clear rules, and regular opportunities to interact with peers greatly support children's social development. We also involve parents through regular meetings and developmental progress reports."* (KS-1). This statement indicates that school-family collaboration extended beyond information sharing. Regular communication between teachers and parents enabled both parties to monitor children's development, reinforce positive social behaviors, and provide consistent support across different environments.

A kindergarten teacher expressed a similar perspective: *"Collaboration with parents is important so that strategies that are effective at school can also be implemented consistently at home."* (GTK-3). This finding highlights the importance of continuity between children's learning environments. When parents understood and applied

similar social guidance used at school, children received consistent messages regarding communication, cooperation, empathy, and appropriate social behavior. Such consistency supported children in transferring social skills from classroom interactions into everyday experiences.

Parents also recognized the importance of maintaining alignment between home and school. One parent explained: *"We are trying to establish the same basic rules at home so that our child does not become confused or seek out the person who is more permissive."* (OT-3). Another parent emphasized: *"Cooperation with teachers is essential so that children receive consistent messages about courage, empathy, and conflict resolution."* (OT-4). These perspectives demonstrate that parents viewed themselves as active partners in children's social development rather than passive recipients of school information. Consistent expectations, behavioral guidance, and communication between home and school contributed to children's ability to regulate their behavior and apply social skills across different contexts.

These consistent with Kambouri et al. [26], who identified reciprocal communication, mutual trust, and shared responsibility as important foundations of effective parent-practitioner partnerships. Similarly, Hannon and O'Donnell [27] emphasized that meaningful family-school collaboration requires ongoing dialogue, emotional support, and shared responsibility rather than merely parental involvement in school activities. Hendriawan et al. [28] further demonstrated that collaborative guidance between teachers and parents supports children's social-emotional development by maintaining continuity in behavioral expectations and addressing children's individual needs.

The present findings extend previous research by demonstrating that school-family collaboration functioned as a supportive system that strengthened children's social interaction recovery after the pandemic. While previous studies have highlighted the importance of parent-school partnerships for children's development, this study shows how shared expectations and consistent social guidance across home and school environments specifically supported children's process of rebuilding social interaction after returning to face-to-face learning. Therefore, post-pandemic social recovery should be understood as a collaborative process involving teachers, families, and children's everyday social environments.

CONCLUSION

Based on the perspectives of teachers, the headteacher, and parents, this study concludes that young children's social interaction gradually recovered after returning to face-to-face learning following the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings demonstrate that this recovery was not solely determined by school reopening but emerged through the interaction of family routines, children's social experiences, responsive teacher support, play-based activities, and school-family collaboration. Therefore, post-pandemic social recovery should be understood as a contextual and collaborative process shaped by children's everyday environments at home and school. This study highlights the

importance of early childhood education environments that provide meaningful opportunities for peer interaction, responsive teacher–child communication, individualized support, play-based learning experiences, and consistent collaboration with families. These elements are essential for helping children rebuild social confidence and develop interpersonal competencies after periods of disrupted social experiences. This study was limited by its small sample size, focus on a single educational setting, and reliance primarily on adult perspectives rather than direct observation of children. Future research should examine more diverse educational contexts and incorporate children’s perspectives and systematic classroom observations to provide a deeper understanding of young children’s social interaction recovery after major social disruptions.

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