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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Play and learn: Children's agency through the COVID-19 pandemic in Mozambique

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Abstract

Social distancing, one of the measures adopted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, profoundly impacted on the lives of children. The consequences were, however, not homogenous. By focusing on the daily practices of 41 Mozambican children aged 3–10, we consider how differences in socioeconomic backgrounds led children to respond to the social restrictions in ways that made sense to them. Inspired by Abebe (2019), we identify how the interruptions of daily routines enabled specific instances of agency on children's part. These, we argue, produce new forms of continuity.

KEYWORDS
agency, children, COVID-19, Mozambique, play, school

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic affected many around the world, both directly, through the symptoms produced by the virus, and indirectly, through the necessary constraints to daily lives. In particular, various forms of lockdown limited both the nature of—and the actors involved in—social interactions. These limitations led to specific consequences on children's lives—for example in relation to their experiences of learning (school) and of play. Of course, not all children were equally impacted: we know that social and economic background, geographical contexts—among others—were key in shaping specific experiences of the lockdown. These differences strongly suggest that the experiences of children during Covid-induced isolations cannot be homogenised across borders (Barron et al., 2021).

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Following the confirmation of the first case of Coronavirus in South Africa on 6 March 2020, the Mozambican president Filipe Nyusi urged citizens to follow initial World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendations, while also reinforcing police monitoring on the streets.

On 20 March, with the increasing number of cases in South Africa, Nyusi announced new measures to contain the virus: all international travel was suspended, meetings with more than 50 people were banned and public and private schools closed indefinitely. The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Mozambique on 22 March 2020.

Days later, on 1 April, the State of Emergency was declared initially for 30 days, but then extended to almost 5 months. This was the length of the more extreme social restrictions, including lockdown. However, schools in Mozambique only reopened to in-person pupils in March 2022, almost 2 years after initial closures.

Stemming from a larger study involving 73 children between the ages of 3–15, this paper focuses on the experiences of lockdown of 41 Mozambican children aged 3–10: although all living in and around the capital Maputo, these children come from different social and economic backgrounds, a feature that—we contend—mediated significantly their experiences of lockdown. Between July and September 2020, the first author interviewed participants and their carers through either phone calls or social media. Albeit challenging, this semi-structured method allowed children to take part according to their skills and abilities, as we discuss in more depth in the method section.

This paper is structured as follows: First, we engage with the current knowledge regarding how children's lives—school, play and daily practices—have been affected by Covid-induced social limitations. Then, we explain the methodological structure of this study—including a consideration of ethics. The dataset is then described, before the analysis focuses on how Mozambican children's school and play routines have been affected by lockdowns. We consider our findings in relation to school and learning first, before engaging with play and daily activities. This analytic distinction enables us to construct a strong argument for children's agency: the curtailing of educational avenues for children's development is a clear impact of lockdown practices and has defined children's lives in deficit during the global pandemic. Children themselves appeared to be very aware of what activities constituted 'learning' or 'play' in their pre-lockdown lives. Maintaining this distinction as a starting point enables us to give participants credit as we engage with their worlds. Yet, we push the conversation beyond this distinction as the analysis progresses: the spill-overs we identify between learning and play suggest that children use formal learning activities to seek entertainment and fun, while also pursuing educational implications from play-based activities. Mediated by socioeconomic backgrounds, daily practices evidence that children have not been passive in responding to the social restrictions imposed on them. They have been able to identify changes in routines, while also harnessing them to create novel situation to explore and exploit during play—the case of the Corona game we discuss later on is symbolic in this sense. Inspired by Abebe (2019), we identify how the *interruptions* of daily routines imposed by Covid management strategies enabled specific instances of agency on children's part. These, we argue, respond to interruptions by producing new forms of *continuity*, which have enabled young people's lives to continue.

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN: WHERE ARE THE AFRICAN CHILDREN?

After realising Covid-19 was not 'just a flu' (Van Prooijen et al., 2022), scholarly attention started to engage with its consequences on various areas of life, such as healthcare and employment, as

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well as focusing on children's experiences around the world. This literature developed across two major themes: the effects of Covid-19 on children's education (Castro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021; Crane et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2021; Spadafora et al., 2022; and others); and its impacts on family dynamics (Chen et al., 2021; Harrop, 2021; Limbers & Pavlov, 2021; and others). A third line of enquiry has developed to consider the emotional and mental health issues brought about by isolation and social distancing in children and adolescents (Chen et al., 2020; Crane et al., 2021; Egan et al., 2021; He & Li, 2021; Linnavalli & Kalland, 2021; O'Keefe et al., 2021; Sabaoui et al., 2021; Tebet et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021; and others). This is, however, not directly relevant to the findings we discuss, so, although a key component of current scholarly discussion, we have decided to exclude it from the thematic conversation that follows.

Cortés-Morales et al. (2021: 4) note that, in the worst phase of pandemic (until April 2021), ‘188 countries closed schools and other educational institutions country-wide, while others closed schools in restricted areas, for variable periods of time’. Citing UNESCO data (2020), the authors point out that ‘up to April 8th, 2020, 1 576 021 818 learners had been affected by these closures, 91% of the world student population’. These numbers are indeed astonishing as they identify the magnitude of Covid-19's impacts on education. School closures in most countries led to delays in teaching and learning, although this was not homogenous as settings that could fairly easily transfer their sessions online, did so. Albeit successful in ensuring some educational continuity for pupils, these strategies often came at the expense of teachers, who had to go through significant upskilling in relatively little time (Egan et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021).

Overall, homeschooling merged distinct needs, activities and relational dynamics connected to childcare, education, paid and domestic work. Regardless of whether sessions moved online or not, school closures transferred the cost of childcare on to parents and carers, who had to support delivery and often take on part of the education of their children. This had significant consequences on their own workload, often forcing a reduction in working hours for those who were able to transfer their duties online. Others lost access to their livelihood entirely (Cordini & De Angelis, 2021; Pitzalis & Spano, 2021), with significant consequences for entire families, once financial support started to wane. For this reasons the impacts of school closures were more extreme on lower classes, thereby exacerbating social class disparities (Goudeau et al., 2021). The evidence developed so far mostly pertains to WEIRD populations: the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and other European countries. In these contexts, class differences played a key role in understanding educational continuities: we know for example that children from affluent backgrounds transitioned more easily into remote delivery. A context of disadvantage meant scant access to hardware, software and the internet. An appreciation of these differences was conducive to a clearer understanding of how inequality shapes childhood (Gonzalez & Bonai, 2021; Holt & Murray, 2021). One of the main points raised here is that children from higher social classes not only had ready access to technology, but were also more familiar with tools and applications. Conversely, studies in these countries also engaged with the experiences of minority groups, such as refugees, migrants, children living with disabilities or affected by health conditions, among others. The discussions highlighted the difficulties in catering for these different groups via online delivery—considering also that often kids in these groups were disproportionately affected by Covid-19, both directly and indirectly (Kaffenberger, 2021; O'Keefe et al., 2021; Primdahl et al., 2021; Schuck & Lambert, 2020). Further studies engaged primarily with mental health, and how this triggered vicious cycles of isolation and social exclusion (Chen et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021).

The limited number of studies considering the African context still identifies a gap pertaining to the experience of African children. Here, much of existing research pertains to South

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Africa (Datzberger et al., 2022), with significantly fewer studies looking at the rest of the continent. Among these, Kim et al. (2021) discuss the impacts of Covid-19 on preschool education in Ethiopia, identifying how lockdowns are likely to reinforce inequalities between children from advantaged and disadvantaged households. In West Africa, Yao et al. (2021) consider the impacts of Covid-19 alongside those of Ebola on long-term health conditions and their implications for school systems. Biomedical studies in this area outnumber studies from a more sociological perspective—especially those that engage directly with children's experiences of lockdown.

Only a smaller number of studies engaged with the perspectives of young people themselves, to better understand how they responded to changes in their daily routines. For example, Shah et al. (2021) worked with young people aged 14–18 as co-researchers to analyse the transformative effects of the pandemic on family life in various socio-cultural contexts. Findings emphasise young people's agency, illustrated by their decisions to take on a more active caring role and by challenging their own beliefs and sense of identity in relation to those of other family members. Yet, the paucity of studies directly involving young people suggests children's agency remains a gap in the literature, as we mostly infer children's experience through the views of those close to them. The experiences of children in non-hegemonic contexts, and practices not directly linked to education—such as play—feature as a significant gap.

These absences are not novel: over the years, the role of African children as rights bearers has remained mostly invisible. Aderinto (2015), Alanamu et al. (2018) and Twum-Danso Imoh (2016) discuss the roles of African children and the importance of rethinking their absences as part of a discipline that aims to position African children and childhoods in their geographical, political and historical contexts. Similarly, Honwana and Boeck (2005) argue for the inclusion of young people in knowledge production as both makers and breakers. Although innovative in approaching a generally voiceless (silenced) portion of the population, Honwana and De Boeck's discussions are reminiscent of Bhambra's use of the concepts of rupture and difference (2007), which risks missing out on the power of continuity. In response to this, Abebe (2019) offers an operationalisation of agency as both continuum and interdependence. Continuity refers then to how young people tend to incorporate existing social expectations and rules to their ways of being and socialising. For instance Manuel (2012), in her study of young adults in Maputo, evidences how the new and creative interact with a continuity of practices, meanings and logics in complex ways, fomenting the dilemma that the young adults face in the search for stable relationships in the city (8). Interdependence partly resolves the everlasting dilemma between dependence and independence, so often used to distinguish children from adults. However, Abebe (2019) warns against the allure of such simplifications, especially as they gloss over processes of mutual dependence: although children may depend on adults in some way (food, healthcare, shelter,…), adults may also depend on children (care, but also emotional support). Ultimately, these notions are mutually dependent: childhood exists only if adulthood does.

This view of interdependence is particularly fitting—both contextually and culturally—for its synergies with the notion of *Ubuntu*. For example, Honwana and Honwana (2020) remind us that community is key to African identities. More specifically, they emphasise how the Zulu notion of *Ubuntu* as '*Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu* (I am, because we are) speaks to human interconnectedness and represents the various threads that bind together the human spirit'. Agency then, is both the outcome and the means for the production of *Ubuntu* and of an identity that is, ultimately, dynamic, situated and contextual: the consideration of the context is a necessary starting point to identify what kind of agency young people have, how they obtain and exercise it, how context shapes it, and how their own agency relates to that of others (Durham, 2011). This reference to relational agency is not new. Spyrou (2018) for example, offers a dynamic understanding

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of children's identity as embedded in social relations and networks, while Raithelhuber (2016) defines it as a collective achievement. In Lovell's words (Lovell, 2003, 2):

> [...] agency lies in the interstices of interaction, in collective social movements in formation in specific circumstances, rather than in the fissures of a never-fully-constituted self.

Agency is thus characterised in a more complex way, extending beyond the individual, within the social interactions they maintain, and within their broader context—which also clearly suggests a consideration of agency cannot be carried out independently from its socioeconomic and cultural contexts. It is this specific articulation of agency that we will use to illuminate how a group of children in Maputo (Mozambique) responds to the social consequences of the pandemic. We believe that this illuminates Honwana and Honwana (2020) plea for young people to rewrite the narrative that constructs them as disengaged and apathetic. The next section will clarify the methodological structure of this study.

METHODOLOGY

As introduced above, this paper engages with the voices of children from different socioeconomic areas in and around Maputo to consider the following questions: (i) How did lower-class and upper-middle-class children cope with the pandemic and the changes it induced in their daily lives? (ii) Could they—and how did they—maintain any continuities in their daily practices? We use school attendance as a proxy for socioeconomic background: children attending public schools are considered of lower class, while those attending private schools are considered of higher social class. This position is not unproblematic: many low fees private schools in non-WEIRD contexts serve lower classes. Yet, our position is informed by Languille (2019), who argues that even low fees private schools emerged in South Africa alongside the middle class, and can therefore be used as a rudimental proxy in the absence of more precise measures.

For this study, 41 children aged between 3 and 10 years were interviewed from in and around the capital, Maputo.

The age distribution of the sample was as follows (Table 1):

This research gained ethical clearance through the Department of Anthropology of the Federal University of Paraíba (Brazil), where the first author attended her postdoctoral program, and was based on the Code of Ethics of the Brazilian Association of Anthropology. In Mozambique, this study was discussed with colleagues in the Department of Sociology in order to ensure the study was culturally contextualised. Ethics considerations mainly revolved around online

TABLE 1 Age, gender and socioeconomic distribution of the study sample

Age	Number	Percentage
3 to 5 years	12	29.26%
6 to 10 years	29	70.74%
Male	21	51.21%
Female	20	48.79%
Low social class	12	29.26%
Social class medium-high	29	70.74%

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data collection, the importance and strategies for acquiring children's assent, the early identification of signs suggesting the need to interrupt/withdraw the data collection, and the type of support that could be made available to participants, should it be needed.

With this in mind, our recruitment strategy was twofold: the first author initially reached out to families who had participated in previous research (Author, 2015; 2020). Second, the study was advertised through Facebook® and by word of mouth, leading to further recruitment. In all cases, initial contact was made with the guardian of the children; it was only after parental consent was granted that children were approached for assent. This was gained through an audio message sent to guardians to be shared with prospective participants: this message explained the study as the researchers' TPC[1] and asked the children whether they would be able to help by sharing some aspects of their lives during lockdown.

The interviews, with a semi-structured script, revolved around children's perceptions of the pandemic and the virus; conceptualisations of health and disease; isolation; changes in routine; school life and play. They were conducted online, through the digital media WhatsApp®, which is widely used in the country. Data were generated via an assumption of ongoing consent: the first author was particularly alert to non-verbal signs of disconnection, and would interrupt or change the direction of interaction in consultation with participants (Ferreira, 2010; Pastore, 2021). Differences in socioeconomic background started to become apparent at this stage, as children from less affluent background struggled to access reliable networks and were often unable to engage in video—or audio—calls, limiting their contribution to written answers.

The interviews tended to be quite short—around 10 minutes—although some lasted longer in response to children's participation and ability to engage with the researchers. Sessions would develop loosely around the prompts identified by the researcher, but also include rapport-generating activities such as informal chats and games. The nature of virtual interactions was challenging, especially because the interviewer did not have an existing rapport with the children, but also internet connections could be unreliable, leading sessions to be interrupted and restarted. Interviews were audio- or video-recorded, in line with data allowance, before being transcribed, translated and thematically analysed. This process entailed approaching the data set by Constant Comparative Analysis (Glaser, 1965), which enabled commonalities to emerge. This led to the emergence of a number of themes—for instant emotions, or sibling relationship, and daily routines. The two categories of school and play were selected among others for the development of this specific paper and due to their recurrence, and to the ability to weave a specific argument around children agency.

The study's reliability was pursued through authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994): participants' narratives figure significantly in this study, striving to represent the richness, depth and multifaceted character of participants' lives, and the location of these within a wider social context. Inevitably, authenticity is also impacted by the researchers' positionality (Dodgson, 2019): although both researchers have lived, worked and researched in Mozambique, the first author is currently based in Maputo—and has been for the past 10 years, thus able to navigate structures and contexts with a strong understanding of the participants' experiences of lockdown. Both authors advocate for a stronger inclusion of children's agency in matters that concern them, an important factor in situating this paper.

SCHOOL AND LEARNING ACROSS SOCIAL CLASSES

This section argues that children participating in this study did not passively adjust to constraints imposed by lockdown. Rather, their experiences evidence how they exerted their agency in

managing the changes in their daily routines, while also ensuring continuity in the face of interruptions. In constructing this claim, we interpret our data alongside the theorisations of agency elaborated above. Children's instances of agency present at the intersections of interdependence and continuum of practices: they respond actively to changes around them, and use these changes to position themselves within their contexts, using existing relations to bridge gaps and absences.

This section is structured around the following questions: (i) How does socioeconomic background mediates children's access to education? (ii) What are the losses, the interruptions—both in the educational system and in the school-based relationships and interactions? (iii) What are the gains enabled by lockdowns, and how do children pursue continuities in their lives? We will engage with these questions by considering content delivery, social interactions and access to electronic devices. These points will also enable us to identify spill-overs: practices that lead to the development of skills, which are then employed for different purposes. These specific instances, we claim, are those that offer clear opportunities for children to exert their agency.

Of the children interviewed, only 29 attended state schools, while 12 were registered at private schools. During lockdowns, private schools broadly transferred their delivery online, whereas state schools suspended theirs altogether. This identifies a first, clear difference between the two cohorts. Mozambique is a country where current demands for schooling greatly exceeds offer: for example, in 2018 the pupil/teacher ratio (PTR) was 55:1 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020). However, this piece of information is of little importance as it often masks striking differences between schools with a relatively healthy PTR and others with PTR > 100. High demand for schooling is a historical constant in the country, where the private sector developed in the mid-1860s, in colonial times, to further differentiate between different groups of the settlers' children (MINED, 1999). It is worth mentioning that in the colonial period, schooling was only for the children of the Portuguese settlers and for those who had formally accepted to give up their cultural identity to be recognised as individuals and bearers of a limited amount of rights, the so-called '*assimilados*'.[2] It was only in 1975, when Mozambique gained Independence, that the education system was nationalised, leading to the abolition of private schools. These were resumed in 1991, in conjunction with the end of the Civil War, and the Constitution of the Republic, catering to—and contributing to the development of—a middle to upper class in the country (MINED, 1999).

The national educational system has therefore been conducive to the diversification of Mozambican socioeconomic background well before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, with the interruptions of face-to-face classes, this gap became larger (UNESCO, 2020), as some children simply ceased to have any access to education, while others progressed. In this sense, the education system amplified existing differences, while also rendering them more visible (Goudeau et al., 2021).

Anselmo, aged 7, for example:

> I'm getting dumb! I don't know anything else, nothing, nothing! When school comes back, I'm going to study hard! You see, idiot! Dumber

Anselmo's emotive words speak of the difficulties of not having classes, while also not being able to study at home. His perception of learning losses also led him to specific resolutions for when schools would reopen again. Cris, aged 9, offered similar insight:

> this virus took a lot from us, but the worst was the school. You see, now we do not even go to class, we do not study. They just give us texts to read and that's it. You do not learn anything else.

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Public schools responded to lockdowns by selling resources in aid of home learning,[3] and offering support to families through WhatsApp® groups. Yet, many of the children interviewed in this study eventually became unable to engage with these resources. This was due to several reasons: (i) not having money to buy the material; (ii) not having access to relevant WhatsApp® groups due to lack of technological and monetary resources to purchase data; (iii) lack of parental support and guidance, since most parents/guardians may not have received formal education as children, and therefore lacked symbolic capital to aid with home learning. This explains why Cris points to the change in routines and the suspension of classes as main factors defining the new educational experience. Although she continued to receive educational resources, this was not enough to ensure her learning. This is a key point: it suggests that learning is not solely about the contents delivered in class—it is about the relationships built there, the interactions with peers and the support available from teachers and other staff, without which learning is severely impacted. We suggest that this can be illuminated within the concept of relational agency introduced above (Lovell, 2003; Raithelhuber, 2016): Cris' ability to learn and thrive academically and beyond does not solely depend on the availability of learning resources, but also on the relations that embody that learning. For example, Alberto, age 11, claimed:

> Everything remains the same, except the classes. I want the virus to stop so that I can go to school! I liked to play there, I liked playing better before. Now I play alone.

This interruption of school-based social interactions—so visible for state educated children—features strongly among the impacts of lockdowns and further contributes to exacerbating the differences between socioeconomic backgrounds. Younger children aged 4–7 from more affluent families, for example, identified learning how to read and write as one of their activities of this period, developed mainly with the help of their parents. Marley, aged 4, rushed off an interview session saying:

> I cannot talk anymore, I have a newspaper to read. Bye, that's enough, we'll talk later.

Similarly, Inês, aged 4, wrote 'a, e, i, o, u', as if teaching the alphabet and clarifying that that was what she liked to do best at that moment. These developments were enabled by the presence of an adult, who had the required symbolic capital and time needed to scaffold skills development with their children. Such activities were not reported by the lower-class children, who maintained their routine activities, especially those related to household tasks. Inevitably, the complex interaction between relations and learning is mediated by socioeconomic background, establishing these three elements as necessary factors in children's experiences of lockdown.

For older, privately educated children, classes were mostly (and promptly) transferred online, for the sake of continuity. Helena, aged 6, described her new routine:

> I wake up, I brush my teeth, I do TPC, I watch Little Monsters [TV show], I spend time with my brother. A lot has changed, but it's also the same, like TPC. I've got plenty! Because before I was in school and had TPC, and now I'm not and I have TCP. Now we do not even have the weekend anymore. Every time it's TPC work. I'm tired. So nothing has changed. I improved on TPCs, I no longer make so many mistakes, because Mom helps me. Dad too. Now I listen up to them and I also learned that I cannot beat my brother.

Helena's words point to not only a continuity of studies, but also an intensification of efforts. This, however, was also enabled by adult support in the family. Helena and other children continued to

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take distance classes, using various digital devices such as WhatsApp®, Zoom®, Microsoft Teams® and Google Meet®. Yet, despite the visibility of delivery continuity, the quantity of work children were required to complete is not necessarily synonym with quality or attainment. Moreover, Helena expresses some discomfort as she identifies the loss of spare time—her weekends—and of the activities that came with it. This suggests that the continuity of content delivery also led to interruptions in children's routines, an area of overlap between state and independent sector children. The profound changes led by lockdowns speak of spaces: those lost—the classrooms, the playgrounds—and those children ended up spending more time in—their homes. Watson, aged 9, operates this shift between activities and contexts:

> Pandemic is staying at home. Playing and studying every day. But now we are here, you do not study at home, you do not have money, just feel hungry. Things are bad in the quarantine.

Watson, who belongs to a lower social class, points out the difficulties brought about by spatial constraints. The changes in setting are intrinsic to the actions those spaces enable, or prevent. And an attempt to just carry on—to keep playing and studying as he did before—is crushed against the inevitability of financial shortages, and hunger. For Watson, sustained isolation meant fewer opportunities to raise the economic capital the family normally relied upon. Activities that would have been normally at reach are now precluded to him, as hunger has set in. These voices point very clearly to the role played by lockdowns in exacerbating pre-existing inequalities: schools became means for the reproduction of social and structural inequalities, instead than being a vehicle for social mobility. It is in this way that schools contribute to shaping different childhoods, emphasising the existing abysses (Lins et al., 2020) between haves and have-nots. Similarly, Cortés-Morales et al. (2021: 7) talk of 'lockdown imagined' to symbolise the multiple effects of the pandemic in accentuating socioeconomic differences through the experience of the pandemic. This is particularly hard to identify in non-WEIRD context, where there is a tendency to homogenise children's lives within the impacts of poverty. However, data discussed here strongly points to different childhoods—both in relation to school experience and, more broadly, of social identity. Socioeconomic backgrounds are a strong factor for access to educational resources, mediating childhood practices altogether.

A further element that mediated access to education was access to electronic devices with Internet access, which created further opportunities to differentiate between socioeconomic backgrounds. For Fernando, aged 8, electronic devices offer enhanced possibilities for learning:

> Now I know a lot of geography. I saw that Brazil is very large, and that Germany already has fewer cases of coronavirus than here.

Most of the children from the private sector interviewed here continued with their remote classes online. As a consequence, they were also able to extend their learning, for example by relying on explanatory videos on YouTube or other platform. Suddenly, children like Fernando gained access to knowledge about very different parts of the world. Yet, this expansion of learning opportunities was only available to those children with adequate economic capital, further emphasising difference in experiences of childhood.

The role played by technology in shaping childhoods also stretched beyond education. For example, Ak'liyya, age 8, uses devices.

> to take pictures, make magic videos, play. I make a lot of videos. Just for fun.

Similarly, Nalik, age 11, uses tech:

> to do my projects. I am developing a new language, and using the computer helps me with that.

These voices identify a spill-over in children's practices: school-related activities have contributed to the normalisation of electronic devices in children's practices, offering opportunities for them to exert their agency thereby. In this case, for example, both Ak'liyya and Nalik use devices for ‘fun’, suggesting they are able to transfer the skills they have learnt through schooling to other areas of their lives.

As practices developed through online learning spilled over to fulfil other needs, new opportunities arose for learning. For example, children from the lower social classes kept engaging with households' tasks: sweeping the floor, cleaning and washing dishes. Children from the higher classes started doing these activities during the pandemic, understanding these moments as something fun and complementary to the routine established by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Luana, 7 and Ayanna, 8, explained how they started spending more time helping out with their mum's business:

> now we make cakes. I learned it from my mother. I can already cook. I'm now my mother's helper at the cake shop. I can cook for you when you come here!

Similarly, Helena identifies movies as further sources of knowledge:

> I learn in the movies too. Movies helped me understand some things…

Day-to-day tasks offered children a novel access to learning, leading the development of new skills, which children were proud of and happy to potentially showcase to others. These experiences identify three types of learning distinct from school: care (of others, mainly siblings), obedience/discipline (to others, mainly carers) and domestic chores. The role played by these types of learning can be illuminated with the concept of agency as interdependence (Abebe, 2019): the shift of educational activities to the home conflated tasks previously pertaining to very different realms. So educational activities lead to the development of skills which can be transferred elsewhere. Similarly, practices other than education started to yield clear educational outcomes. The children interviewed as part of this project have evidenced they can make executive decisions about what is eventually transferred, how and why. Yet, in so doing, they also highlight the specific relationships enabling such instances of agency. Moreover, as they care for their siblings and listen to their carers, they also enact a type of agency that is grounded within local cultural norms, pertaining, for example to seniority and respect (Salvi, 2020). Conceptualised as such, agency that is relational is also conducing to the production of what is other to children—the adults in the picture—in a way that is aligned with pre-existing intergenerational expectations.

As learning moved out of the classroom, the next section follows suit, in order to consider how play and daily practices were constrained by Covid-19, while also offering opportunities for continuity and children's agency.

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PLAY AND DAILY PRACTICES

As children negotiate their learning within developing technological skills and new and old social connections, their choices around how to spend their time offer yet another opportunity to engage with their agency. Although informed by the different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds of the children interviewed as part of this study, children's daily practices present as instances of agency: it is through these practices that children enact continuity in their lives. Theoretically, this argument also enables us to stretch Abebe (2019) take on agency as continuity and interdependence: these two approaches are not distinct, but mutually constituted within children's daily practices. We set off by considering how children spent their time:

Table 2 shows the main everyday activities that participating children engaged in during the pandemic. Although a significant number of children relied on electronic devices, it is perhaps surprising that only 19.17% of participants identified this as a daily activity. We understand this along the dimensions of age and socioeconomic background, in that some children were too young to use tech, while others did not have access to them at all. In this respect, economic capital remains the strongest factor in predicting behaviour. Importantly, activities here are not listed by objective: as introduced earlier, educational and social objectives may be equally met through any of these, as lockdowns merged spaces that once added stronger separation between aims. This is in line with Katz and Walsh (1991: 503), who argued that 'the dividing line between work, play and education becomes blurred, as children's play itself was often a creative means for the acquisition, use, and consolidation of environmental knowledge.'

The activities listed above can be further analysed as interruptions and continuities, in an attempt to consider children's agency vis-à-vis structural constraints. Take Lina, 10, for example, who stated:

> I cannot wait to go play. Now I just stay home, just stare! I do not even have a telephone to be able to talk to my friends.

Or Edson, 9 years old, remarking:

> At school, me and my friends would go play ball at each break time. Not now though, not on the computer! That was the coolest time in school.

Especially children from lower social classes stated that they enjoyed playing more before the pandemic. Abiba, aged 11, exclaimed:

TABLE 2 Activities other than school

Activity	Number	Percentage
Computer/videogame	14	19.17%
Household tasks	14	19.17%
Watching TV	13	17.80%
Cooking	9	12.32%
Spending time with family	7	9.58%
Reading	7	9.58%
Playing	4	5.47%
Drawing	3	4.10%

> Oh, playing used to be fun before, in times of fun! Now nothing is exciting. Staying at home without seeing my friends? Oh, that's not playing.

And Helio, aged 8:

> Playing is not good right now. You cannot play like you used to, you cannot run, play zotho (tag), hide-and-seek. I want the epidemic to end so that I can play again.

Watisso, age 9, said:

> Now I have a lot of time. I can build my txinzdiris (spinning tops), but I have no one to play with. I'm saving it to play with my friends later.

Similarly, Nestor, age 6, liked play better before the pandemic because.

> Then I could go to the park, go down the slide, play with my friends. Now I play mounting Lego, all by myself. I miss going to the park and meeting my friends.

The experiences recounted here talk of two specific interruptions. One has to do with peers—not being able to play with friends as children used to before the pandemic. Second, these voices invoke spatial constraints, which intervened to change significantly the possibilities for play. The materiality of life (Heikkilä & Mankki, 2021, p. 2), in other words, shaped agency in unforeseen ways. This is particularly evident in relation to outdoor play, part of the everyday especially for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This is the type of play that was severely affected by the pandemic, leading to changes in imagination, creation and creativity. Although in a smaller proportion, 12 of the 41 participants reported that they no longer played. These children came from families with very little economic capital, and for these the pandemic meant an interruption in adults' livelihoods, as well as children's schooling. The lives of these families were confined within the physicality of their homes, where children were before used to playing outside in the streets and with their neighbours (Pastore, 2015, 2020).

Children from upper classes were affected differently. For those who had access to devices, the internet acted as an enabler, making schooling possible, as we as the maintenance of peer relationships. Children, for example, integrated the virtual space within their daily practices of play, opening up social opportunities in times of isolation. Keano, 9 years old, proclaimed:

> Now it so much better! We can play everytime!

Kaio, 7, went as far as to say:

> I prefer to play now. I've got more time. It's the good part of the virus.

Sharing a similar idea, 9-year-old Roberto commented:

> Now it's better. I can have class and do my TCP whenever I want, and play too. I can play whenever I want, I can attend classes whenever I want. I have more time now.

These quotes speak of a newly found freedom, whereby children have a number of tasks and objectives to meet during the days, while being free to decide how to achieve those objectives.

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They do not have to be at school at a specific time, or match their parents' work commitments. As a consequence, these children are quick to identify the gains the new circumstances have offered them.

There are some constants, even across socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, all children unanimously reported missing playing with their friends. Children who could retain some social contact during the pandemic—through siblings for example—used this to develop new play routines. For example, Kelm, aged 7, told us everything about the 'Corona Game'—his favourite game:

> one of the us (children) being the virus and having to touch the others; whoever manages to hide, put on a mask in time, or rub alcohol on their hands is free.

Ak'llya, age 8, also developed a similar scenario:

> [...] a game my younger sister invented. One of us is the coronavirus, and we (siblings) have to escape it. You cannot touch the wall or the face, otherwise you'll die. If she touches our hand, we lose. We only win if we wash our hands first.

These examples illuminate Woodhead's (1998) argument around children's abilities to negotiate and make choices that reconcile work, domestic activities and play, even in limited and restricted contexts. Here for example, participants are not only being defined by the virus, but they also use it to create something out of the new circumstances. We argue that this is a clear example of how they exerted agency—an agency that is contextualised and relational, as it exists within and towards relationships. In this sense, this practice also evidences the making of *Ubuntu* (Honwana & Honwana, 2020), as this game exists within a specific cultural setting, one where children learn most of the elements of their culture through songs, games, riddles and rhymes both at school and from other children (Punch, 2003). The 'Corona Game' is therefore possible in this cultural context, while also contributing to the reproduction of *Ubuntu* at large. Pastore (2020) identified play as the main activity for children: it is through play that they develop and maintain relationships with their peers, learn and teach, reuse materials and create new ones, seize social and cultural values, familiarise themselves with their contexts and environments. With the pandemic, accesses were restricted, especially of children from lower classes. Yet, data discussed here have evidenced how children exerted agency despite Covid-19-related constraints.

The agency displayed by these recounts is therefore both continuity and interdependence (Abebe, 2019)—whereby these two elements are mutually enabling, and mutually constituted. It is, in other words, through the wider cultural setting of *Ubuntu* that this specific type of agency is enabled. As this wider symbolic context empowers children to put forward their own ideas—through Corona Games for example, it also ensures the reproduction of the system. Children's play, in other words, uses relational agency to ensure some continuity of practices, thereby ensuring the reproduction and maintenance of *Ubuntu*.

CONCLUSIONS

As the world emerges from the years of pandemic management, we take the time to reflect on what the findings discussed here mean for childhood studies. First, we recognise that this study carries specific methodological limitations, due to the age of the participants, alongside the limitations to data collection imposed by lockdown. We are aware that only being able to engage

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with children through digital media already excludes a significant section of the population. Yet, we believe the insight offered by our analysis remains key, albeit particularistic. We focus on three specific contributions to knowledge. First, a focus on socioeconomic backgrounds in a non-WEIRD context contributes to the heterogenisation of non-hegemonic childhoods. Second, the emphasis on children's experiences of lockdowns enables us to tease out their agency at a time of constraint. Third, we use our findings to stretch current theorisations of agency in ways that are culturally and locally informed. We consider each of these points in turn.

This study has generated evidence to support the role played by socioeconomic backgrounds in mediating access to both learning (school) and social relationships (play) during the 2019–2021 Covid-19 pandemic in Mozambique. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to be excluded from educational activities, as state schools struggled to transfer their practices online, and as families had limited technological resources to enable online tuition, if this was in existence. Interruptions of parental livelihoods also meant exacerbated poverty. At the other end of the spectrum, children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, possibly attending private institutions, were more likely to see their classes transferred online, and have access to devices that would enable them to join sessions. For these children, lockdown could mean enhanced freedom, and clearer opportunities to make decisions about how to invest one's time. This insight is key as it mirrors similar conclusions reached in WEIRD context, identifying potential synergies in the impact of lockdown in different geopolitical contexts. By so doing, it also gives visibility to the plurality and diversity of the experiences of childhood in Mozambique: to contextualise the conditions enabling the possibility for agency is a key step in recognising children's rights.

Subsequently, this paper engages with Mozambican children's experiences of lockdown with the aim of mapping their agency against different levels of constraints—applied by the pandemic, but also mediated by socioeconomic backgrounds. Our findings evidence how the pandemic has severely affected the lives of children in Mozambique. At the same time, we argue that the children who participated in this study actively embrace structural constraints in order to produce something meaningful to them. An example of this is the 'Corona Game', which some children developed as a means to respond to the pandemic, ensure compliant behaviour and, overall, creatively manipulate limitations into opportunities. Understanding children's agency alongside Abebe's (2019) theorisations of interdependency and continuity has strong implications in relation to how children develop their own citizenship and pursue their rights. The examples discussed here strongly point to children's social needs, which they themselves position as key not only to their daily practices, but also for their learning.

Last, we argue that Abebe's (2019) theorisations of agency could be further stretched. Not only can agency be understood as interdependency and continuity, but our findings suggest that these two dimensions of agency may be understood as complementary, rather than distinct. It is the norm and practices of *Ubuntu* that establish a sense of self that is relational: this type of interdependency enables agency, which we have argued here, is deployed to ensuring continuity in a world ruled by uncertainty.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

[1] TPC stands for *Trabalho Para Casa*, the equivalent of homework.

[2] Portuguese colonisers opposed the recognition of Mozambican identity through the establishment of an *indigenato*, a racial system distinguishing natives from non-natives in law, politics and public life, and treating the former as slaves while recognising the rights of the latter (Sabaratnam, 2012). This system also allowed for a third category, that of the *assimilados*. To gain this status and its corresponding rights (including access to education and a salary), a Mozambican was expected to adhere to a number of norms, including being able to read, write and speak Portuguese fluently, being of good conduct and abiding by the public and private rule of Portugal (Mondlane, 1969).

[3] This practice was common during schools closures, but also before the pandemic. As public schools do not have the structure or funds for this, it is down to students to pay for copies.

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