



Open and Distance Learning in Early Childhood and Child Education: A Preliminary Systematic Mapping Review of Trends, Themes, and Research Gaps

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ABSTRACT

Background. Open and distance learning has become increasingly significant in early childhood and child education, particularly following the rapid expansion of online and remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, research in this domain remains fragmented across diverse contexts, including early childhood education, primary education, teacher education, parental support, caregiver involvement, and child-focused digital learning services.

Purpose. This study sought to provide a preliminary systematic mapping of publication trends, dominant themes, and research gaps in open and distance learning within early childhood and child education contexts.

Method. A preliminary systematic mapping review was conducted, guided by the PRISMA 2020 reporting framework. Following screening and eligibility assessment, 18 studies were included in the final synthesis and analyzed descriptively and thematically.

Results. Publications increased markedly during 2020 and 2021, reflecting the influence of pandemic-related school closures. Seven dominant themes emerged: online learning readiness, learner satisfaction and perception, tutorial and pedagogical quality, teacher or tutor competence, institutional support, parental and caregiver involvement, and child-focused digital learning support. The findings indicate that young children's digital learning requires adult mediation, age-appropriate instructional design, institutional readiness, and sustained school-home collaboration.

Conclusion. Open and distance learning constitutes an educational ecosystem shaped by pedagogy, access, interaction, and institutional capacity, rather than mere technology-based content delivery. Persistent gaps include limited longitudinal evidence, underdeveloped research on family mediation, scarce child-centered design studies, and the absence of an integrated conceptual framework.

KEYWORDS

Digital Learning, Distance Learning, Early Childhood Education, Open Learning, Preliminary Systematic Mapping Review

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INTRODUCTION

Open and distance learning have become increasingly important in early childhood and child education because they support access, flexibility, and continuity of learning. Digital platforms, online tutorials, learning management systems, video conferencing tools, and blended learning environments have expanded how children, teachers, parents, and caregivers participate in educational processes.



This shift became more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it also reflects a broader change in how educational access and learning support are organized.

Conceptually, open learning and distance learning are connected through access, learner autonomy, mediated interaction, and structured learning support. Open learning reduces barriers related to time, place, resources, and participation. Distance learning enables educational interaction when teachers and learners are separated by space, time, or both. Moore's transactional distance theory explains that distance education depends on dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy (Moore, 1993). Anderson (2008) emphasizes interaction, instructional design, learner support, and technology use in online learning. The Community of Inquiry framework also shows that effective online learning depends on teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000).

In early childhood and child education, open and distance learning require a clear conceptual boundary. Children's learning is shaped not only by digital platforms but also by teachers, parents, caregivers, institutions, and home learning environments. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory explains that children's learning and development are influenced by interaction among family, school, community, and broader social systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, open and distance learning in child education should be viewed as an educational ecosystem involving digital access, pedagogical interaction, adult mediation, institutional support, and home-school collaboration.

Previous reviews show that distance education and online learning are established research fields. Zawacki-Richter and Naidu (2016) mapped long-term trends in distance education, Means et al. (2013) showed that online and blended learning can support learning outcomes when well designed, and Martin et al. (2020) reviewed online teaching and learning across instructional strategies, engagement, and learning environments. However, these reviews do not specifically map open and distance learning in early childhood and child education contexts.

Empirical studies indicate that open and distance learning in child education involves learner readiness, tutorial quality, institutional support, teacher competence, and parental involvement. Chandrawati (2020) found that online tutorials supported active and autonomous learning among early childhood student teachers. Aisyah and Syarah (2024) showed that online learning readiness and satisfaction were shaped by self-efficacy, self-directed learning, learner control, motivation, and online communication ability. Zaidin et al. (2021) emphasized tutor competence and tutorial strategy, while Fairos (2025) highlighted leadership and self-efficacy in ODL. Halimah and Sit (2024) showed that parental involvement remains important when children's learning extends into the home environment.

Despite these contributions, the literature remains fragmented. Some studies focus on readiness, while others examine tutorial quality, teacher preparation, parental support, caregiver involvement, or child-focused digital learning services. Many studies are also limited to specific institutions, countries, programs, or learner groups. This fragmentation makes it difficult to identify research trends, dominant themes, and gaps in the field.

This study defines child education context as studies that examine open learning, distance learning, online learning, e-learning, ODL, or digitally mediated educational support for children, early childhood education, primary education, teachers, parents, or caregivers. Studies that discuss children only from biomedical, epidemiological, environmental, or animal-model perspectives are excluded unless they explicitly address educational processes or digitally mediated learning.

This study uses a preliminary systematic mapping review to identify publication trends, dominant themes, and research gaps in open and distance learning within early childhood and child

education contexts. The term preliminary is used because this review provides an initial structured map rather than a comprehensive meta-synthesis or meta-analysis. The review follows PRISMA 2020 to support transparent identification, screening, selection, and synthesis of studies (Page et al., 2021).

Based on this background, this study addresses three questions: how publication trends have developed, what dominant themes appear, and what research gaps require further investigation. The study aims to provide an initial map of open and distance learning research in early childhood and child education and to offer practical insights for educators, institutions, platform developers, and policymakers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a preliminary systematic mapping review to identify publication trends, dominant themes, and research gaps in open and distance learning within early childhood and child education contexts. This approach was selected because the study aims to provide an initial structured map of the field rather than a meta-analysis or comprehensive effect-size synthesis. The review process followed PRISMA 2020 to support transparency in identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies (Page et al., 2021).

The literature search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. PubMed was consulted only when studies explicitly connected child-focused digital learning with educational support, caregiver training, or learning-related services. These databases were selected because they cover education, open learning, distance education, online learning, teacher education, and early childhood education. Searches were conducted through title, abstract, and keyword fields when available, with adjustments based on each database system.

The main search string was:

("open learning" OR "open education" OR "open distance learning" OR ODL OR "distance education" OR "distance learning" OR "online learning" OR "remote learning" OR e-learning OR "digital learning") AND ("early childhood" OR child* OR preschool OR kindergarten OR "primary education" OR "primary school" OR "child education" OR "early childhood education") AND (education OR learning OR teaching OR pedagogy OR "teacher education" OR caregiver OR parent*)

Studies were included if they examined open learning, distance learning, online learning, remote learning, e-learning, ODL, or digitally mediated educational support in early childhood education, child education, primary education, teacher education, parental support, caregiver training, or child-focused educational services. Studies were excluded if they discussed children only from biomedical, epidemiological, environmental, animal-model, or general health perspectives without a direct connection to educational processes or digital learning. Opinion papers, editorials, comments, book reviews, and articles without sufficient empirical or evaluative evidence were also excluded.

The study selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 flow. Records were identified from the selected databases, duplicates were removed, titles and abstracts were screened, and potentially relevant articles were assessed in full text. After screening and eligibility assessment, 18 studies were included in the final synthesis. These studies explicitly addressed open, distance, online, remote, e-learning, ODL, or digitally mediated educational support in early childhood and child education contexts.

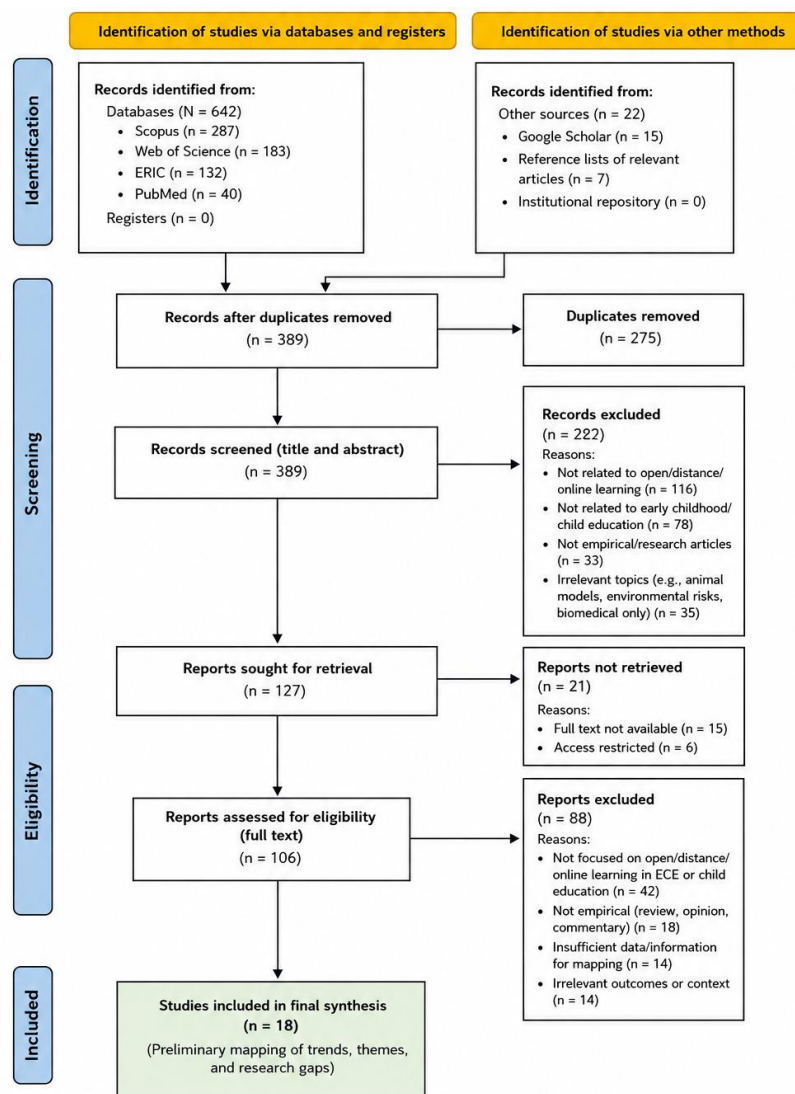


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Selection

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool 2018 because the reviewed studies used qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method designs (Hong et al., 2018). The appraisal focused on clarity of research questions, methodological appropriateness, coherence between objectives and methods, data quality, interpretation of findings, and relevance to the review focus.

Data were extracted using a structured form covering author, year, title, database source, objective, method, context, participants, key findings, limitations, and relevance to the review focus. The extracted data were analyzed descriptively and thematically. Descriptive synthesis was used to map publication trends, while thematic synthesis was used to identify dominant themes and research gaps. A thematic matrix was developed to show how included studies contributed to the main themes.

This review was conducted by a single author. Therefore, screening, eligibility assessment, data extraction, and quality appraisal were performed independently by the author. To reduce selection bias, predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied consistently, and excluded articles were rechecked against the review objectives. The absence of a second reviewer and inter-rater reliability assessment is acknowledged as a limitation. Since this study is a preliminary systematic mapping review with 18 studies, the findings should be interpreted as an initial structured overview rather than a comprehensive synthesis of the entire field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Study Selection and Corpus Characteristics

The study selection process resulted in 18 studies that met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The included studies explicitly examined open learning, distance learning, online learning, remote learning, e-learning, open distance learning, or digitally mediated educational support in early childhood and child education contexts. Studies that discussed children only from biomedical, epidemiological, environmental, animal-model, or general health perspectives without a direct connection to educational processes or digital learning were excluded from the final synthesis.

The final corpus consisted of studies published between 2020 and 2025. The studies covered several educational contexts, including early childhood education, preschool education, primary education, early childhood teacher education, parental support, caregiver training, online tutorials, remote teaching, and child-focused digital learning services. The corpus was considered appropriate for a preliminary systematic mapping review because it provided an initial structured overview of how open and distance learning have been studied in early childhood and child education contexts.

RQ1: Publication Trends in Open and Distance Learning in Early Childhood and Child Education

The first research question examined publication trends in open and distance learning within early childhood and child education contexts. The included studies were published between 2020 and 2025, with the highest concentration appearing in 2020 and 2021. This pattern reflects the strong influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on research related to online learning, distance learning, remote teaching, and home-based learning support.

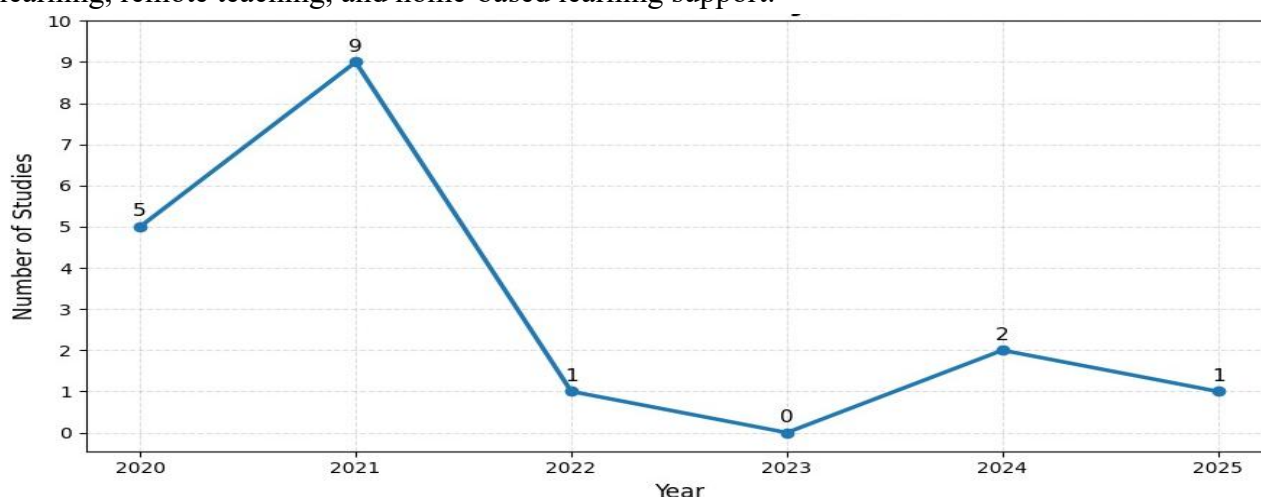


Figure 2. Publication Trend by Year

The publication pattern shows that research on open and distance learning in child education contexts increased sharply during the pandemic period. Most studies published in 2020 and 2021 focused on emergency responses to school closures, online learning practices, parental support, and remote teaching challenges. Later studies expanded the discussion toward online learning readiness, institutional support, teacher efficacy, and the sustainability of digital learning practices beyond the emergency context.

This trend indicates that open and distance learning in early childhood and child education has developed from a crisis-response issue into a broader research area concerned with access, pedagogy, adult mediation, institutional readiness, and child-focused digital learning support.

RQ2: Dominant Themes in the Reviewed Studies

The second research question examined dominant themes in the reviewed studies. The thematic synthesis identified seven dominant themes: online learning readiness, learner satisfaction and perception, tutorial and pedagogical quality, teacher or tutor competence, institutional support, parental and caregiver involvement, and child-focused digital learning support.

Table 1. Thematic Matrix of Included Studies

Theme	Number of Studies	Main Pattern Identified
Online learning readiness	6	Readiness was shaped by motivation, digital self-efficacy, self-directed learning, learner control, children's self-regulation, and parental readiness.
Learner satisfaction and perception	9	Satisfaction and perception were influenced by platform usability, interaction, support, screen time, and perceived suitability of online learning for young children.
Tutorial and pedagogical quality	7	Learning quality depended on instructional design, interaction, feedback, activity design, synchronous-asynchronous balance, and age-appropriate pedagogy.
Teacher or tutor competence	7	Teachers and tutors needed digital skills, online classroom management, questioning skills, material organization, and competence in maintaining children's engagement.
Institutional support	8	Institutions influenced learning through platform access, technical support, tutor training, school-home communication, digital resources, and policy readiness.
Parental and caregiver involvement	9	Parents and caregivers acted as learning facilitators, technical supporters, schedule managers, and mediators of children's digital learning at home.
Child-focused digital learning support	11	Digital learning support included online tutorials, virtual sessions, MOOCs, electronic educational resources, educational robotics, and child-centered remote activities.

The thematic matrix shows that open and distance learning in early childhood and child education is shaped by seven connected themes. Online learning readiness involved motivation, self-regulation, learner control, digital confidence, and parental readiness. This theme appeared in studies on early childhood teacher education and young children's online learning, where readiness was linked to self-efficacy, self-directed learning, and the capacity of parents or teachers to support learning.

Learner satisfaction and perception were influenced by usability, interaction, school support, screen time, and the perceived suitability of online learning for young children. Studies involving parents showed that children often needed adult assistance to complete distance learning tasks and that families expected more interactive learning and stronger support from schools.

Tutorial and pedagogical quality appeared as a central issue because digital learning cannot rely only on platform availability. The reviewed studies showed the need for clear instructional design, feedback, age-sensitive activities, and a balanced use of synchronous and asynchronous learning. Teacher and tutor competence was also important because online and distance learning required digital skills, online classroom management, material organization, questioning skills, and the ability to maintain children's engagement.

Institutional support shaped the implementation of distance learning through platform access, technical support, tutor training, digital resources, school-home communication, and policy readiness. Parental and caregiver involvement also appeared strongly because young children often needed adult mediation to access digital tools, manage schedules, and sustain engagement. Child-focused digital learning support included online tutorials, virtual sessions, MOOCs, electronic

educational resources, educational robotics, and remote activities designed around children's developmental needs.

RQ3: Research Gaps Identified from the Mapping Review

The mapping identified five main research gaps. First, many studies were context-specific because they focused on one country, institution, program, school level, or emergency learning context. This limits the transferability of findings across educational systems and cultural contexts. Second, many studies emphasized perception, readiness, satisfaction, or feasibility rather than long-term outcomes. Evidence remains limited on how open and distance learning affects children's cognitive, social, emotional, and literacy development over time.

Third, parental and caregiver mediation remains underexplored. Although many studies acknowledged that parents supported children's digital learning, fewer studies examined the quality, forms, and sustainability of this support. Fourth, child-centered digital learning design remains limited. Several studies reported concerns about screen time, attention, interaction, age suitability, and reduced play-based learning, but few tested age-appropriate design principles. Fifth, the field lacks an integrated framework that connects digital access, pedagogy, teacher competence, parental support, institutional readiness, and child learning outcomes.

Table 2. Research Gaps and Future Research Directions

Research Gap	Evidence from Mapping	Future Research Direction
Context-specific findings	Many studies focused on one country, institution, school level, or pandemic context.	Conduct comparative studies across countries, institutions, and child education levels.
Limited long-term evidence	Most studies examined perception, readiness, satisfaction, or feasibility.	Conduct longitudinal studies on children's learning outcomes and developmental effects.
Underexplored parental and caregiver mediation	Parents were frequently involved, but their mediation role was not always analyzed systematically.	Examine how parents and caregivers support digital learning at home and what support they need.
Limited child-centered design evidence	Several studies reported problems with screen time, attention, interaction, and age suitability.	Develop and test age-appropriate online and distance learning designs for young children.
Lack of integrated framework	Themes such as access, pedagogy, institutional support, and parental involvement were often studied separately.	Develop a conceptual model linking digital access, pedagogy, adult support, institutional readiness, and child learning outcomes.

Overall, the results show that open and distance learning in early childhood and child education has developed as an emerging and practice-driven research area. The field is dominated by studies on online learning readiness, parental support, remote teaching, teacher competence, institutional support, and child-focused digital learning practices. However, because this study is a preliminary systematic mapping review, the findings should be interpreted as an initial structured map rather than a comprehensive synthesis of the entire field.

CONCLUSION

This preliminary systematic mapping review provides an initial structured overview of research trends, dominant themes, and research gaps in open and distance learning within early childhood and child education contexts. The reviewed studies show that this field gained strong attention during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly when schools shifted from face-to-face learning to online, remote, and distance learning. The findings indicate that open and distance learning in child education should not be understood merely as digital content delivery. It is an

educational ecosystem shaped by access, pedagogy, interaction, adult support, and institutional capacity.

The mapping identified seven dominant themes: online learning readiness, learner satisfaction and perception, tutorial and pedagogical quality, teacher or tutor competence, institutional support, parental and caregiver involvement, and child-focused digital learning support. These themes show that effective open and distance learning for children requires age-appropriate instructional design, meaningful interaction, teacher guidance, structured parental support, and sensitivity to children's developmental needs.

Several gaps remain. Many studies are context-specific and focus on perception, readiness, satisfaction, or feasibility rather than long-term learning outcomes. Evidence remains limited on children's cognitive, social, emotional, and literacy development in open and distance learning settings. The role of parents and caregivers also needs deeper investigation because young children depend on adult mediation to access digital resources and sustain engagement. The field also lacks an integrated framework that connects digital access, pedagogy, institutional readiness, adult support, and child learning outcomes.

The findings have practical implications for educators, teacher education institutions, school leaders, platform developers, and policymakers. Open and distance learning for children should be supported by clear pedagogical goals, manageable screen time, interactive activities, teacher training, school-home communication, and accessible learning resources. Since this study is a preliminary mapping review with 18 studies, its findings should be interpreted as an initial map rather than a comprehensive synthesis. Future research should conduct broader systematic reviews, comparative cross-country studies, and longitudinal research on child learning and development outcomes.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT to support grammar correction, language enhancement, and readability. The author reviewed and revised the content and accepts full responsibility for the final manuscript.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The author declares no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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