



Impact of Covid-19 on the early childhood education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand

Report 2: Interviews with managers

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SNAPSHOT OF KEY FINDINGS

This report follows a management survey on the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ECE services (Mitchell et al., 2020). It discusses findings from interviews with managers from five kindergarten associations, four community-based education and care services, three private education and care services, two Pasifika-language immersion services,¹ and one playcentre regional manager. The interviews sought to drill down into key issues identified in the survey around operation during COVID-19, connections/brokering with families and community, and sustainability. Challenges, opportunities and policy recommendations were canvassed. The interviews were carried out in August and September 2020, some of which, in Auckland, were after a second lockdown.

Strategic planning

- Some managers adopted and modified already existing pandemic plans and others developed new plans. Services with an umbrella or national organisation were able to use plans generated collectively at a national or regional level as a basis to develop their own plans in response to local conditions.
- The plans canvassed critical issues around communication procedures and processes, decisions about staffing, financial plans, procedures for the wellbeing and learning of staff, engagement with and support for families/whānau, and support mechanisms. It is a tribute to many, that such plans were made quickly and thoroughly over such wide areas.
- Key features underpinning effective planning were ‘good’ communication processes among staff and a shared workload. The use of a variety of platforms for communication in order to reach everyone was important in creating opportunities that were tailored to the community and individuals. Managers expressed confidence that they had created plans and processes that put them on a sound footing for any future lockdowns.
- A collective ideal for the future was not specifically discussed but it seems to be a basic foundation for plans going forward.

Health and wellbeing

Health and wellbeing of *staff* was a critical concern. Managers reported raised levels of stress and anxiety amongst staff and increased use of sick leave and time off. Anxiety for some staff extended beyond the workplace to home environments. Issues encompassed relationship issues, staff struggling with mental health issues and other problems, such as housing.

Raised levels of stress and anxiety for *families/whānau and children* were also noticeable. Managers spoke of teachers/educators using various ways to encourage children to express their feelings or offer a calming environment. Application was made by two managers to the Emergency Response Fund for supporting children to settle. Families were under stress when they faced job losses, or the wage subsidy ended.

Inventive ways were found to support health and wellbeing: communications adapted to individual preferences, counselling and time off for staff under stress; use of wage subsidy to ensure staff were paid; support for families through delivery of food vouchers.

¹ We have not specified the language so the services are not identifiable

Professional learning and development

Professional learning and development continued during Levels 4 and 3, with good use made of Zoom and Teams for staff meetings, webinars, and online discussions. Staff from some education and care centres were said to have more time to ‘catch up’ on documentation, appraisals and evaluations. Staff pay and conditions is a key policy issue, discussed in the conclusion.

Connections/brokering with families and communities

Useful examples were given of expectations for teachers/educators to tailor their communications to every family individually. How parents might support the child’s learning, e.g., through questioning techniques, was a feature. Pasifika immersion services used home languages to communicate but noted a paucity of resources in home Pasifika languages. Two-way connections with home were facilitated through use of Zoom to communicate, and an unexpected spinoff was that teachers/educators made ‘virtual’ visits to homes. Managers reported that connections were strengthened through these ways of communicating.

Enrolments and attendance

Changes to patterns of attendance occurred after Alert Levels 4 and 3. Managers in low socioeconomic communities reported it was often some considerable time before all children returned to the service. Reasons were worry about COVID-19, children staying away with minor illnesses such as a cold, and fear. Some full-day services had diminished enrolments and a few sessional services had increased enrolments. It was thought some families wanted shorter hours and less costly ECE because of changes in their employment. Participation was encouraged through fee relief and changes in operation.

Funding

There were very big differences in managers’ reports of the percentage of funding that was spent on salaries — from 54 percent, to over 60 percent, to 70–80 percent, to 85 percent. The figures reflect the variability in staff pay rates and in operational models. Policy suggestions made by managers were particularly focused on addressing funding issues related to teacher pay and addressing inequities in pay rates.

Frequent Absence Rule and cleaning costs were issues for some managers.

Use was made of the wage subsidy for paying staff, two managers described an insurance policy for staff and operational costs, and one manager described a small business loan to help with cashflow.

Challenges and opportunities

Challenges were the speed with which the pandemic happened, the unpredictable nature of COVID-19 and what might happen long term. But some managers expressed being better prepared.

Resourcing families for home learning materials was an issue, and Pasifika immersion service managers said materials in Pasifika home languages were needed.

Wellbeing strategies for adults and children were a new need that could be strengthened. Settling children required support.

Retention and payment of staff was a challenge facing some education and care service managers, as was ongoing viability with no or minimal fees coming in.

Opportunities were the new ways found to communicate with families and community and the greater use of online learning.

A Kindergarten Association manager saw opportunities to support smaller stand-alone services (after consultation), and another thought the association had a role in adapting to new families coming to them.

Policy

When asked, “What, if any, changes would you like to see in ECE policy to put your service/s and the sector on a sound footing in the future?”, managers commented on the need for increased funding rates and improved funding mechanisms so that for-profit services are fully accountable for the funding received and funding for intended purposes and pay parity across the sector.

Secondly, in response to concerns about long-term sustainability and centre closures, some managers criticised the competitive environment. A kindergarten association manager argued for “a fully-funded public network as a baseline to ensure quality education is available for all children whose parents want it”.

Several managers advocated for ECE services to be funded and supported as integrated centres offering ECE as a hub for wider access to services that support families.

Most managers expressed the value of employing 100 percent qualified teachers. There was one dissenting voice.

Conclusion

The interviews highlighted crucial issues that need attention or support at policy and organisational levels. Suggestions for change are made in the conclusion to the report.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) services have played a crucial role in supporting workers, families and children through the COVID-19 pandemic. Homebased educators supported essential workers through providing education and care for their children during Lockdown 4, and many teacher-led services were open for some children during Lockdown 3. The needs for social distancing, public health and safety measures and restrictions on ECE attendance changed teaching and learning in ECE services and their operation. ECE services needed to find innovative ways to communicate with children and families and offer learning opportunities and support. ECE management interviews, discussed in this report, followed a June 2020 survey (Mitchell, Hodgen et al., 2020) that gathered information about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE sector, based on the experiences and perspectives of ECE service managers in kindergarten associations, homebased services, education and care services and playcentre regions. The survey report details background information about the study.

COVID-19 was first identified in Aotearoa New Zealand in January 2020. By March, when several ‘clusters’ of cases had been identified, the government introduced an Alert System designed “to manage and minimise the risk of COVID-19 in New Zealand” (New Zealand Government, 2020). The aim was to act quickly to eliminate COVID-19. During 2020, Alert Level 4, in place from 25 March to 27 April 2020, was a ‘lockdown’, where people were instructed to stay at home in their ‘bubble’ of designated members (usually family) other than for essential personal movement. Only essential services and businesses were able to open. All ECE services were closed, although the government paid an allowance for homebased carers to provide care for children of essential workers. Alert Level 3 (27 April to 13 May 2020) was a restricted lockdown. The ‘bubble’ could be expanded slightly; ECE services were able to open for children of parents who had to go to work and had no other arrangements, and for essential workers. All children were to have access to distance learning. At Alert Level 2 (from 13 May to 8 June 2020), all early childhood services were able to open, with strict hygiene requirements and plans to transition children back. Alert Level 1 (from 8 June to 12 August 2020) was portrayed as ‘business as usual’ for ECE services but with continued hygiene and cleaning requirements. Further Alert Levels were implemented in August (Level 3 for the city of Auckland from 12 to 30 August 2020 and Level 2 for the rest of the country). Since then, the country has moved down Alert Levels, with Auckland moving at a slower rate, until from 8 October, the whole country is at Level 1.

The interviews were designed to capture more detailed information from managers about their practices and policies in response to the pandemic, any new practices that would be continued, and management views of the ongoing sustainability of their service. The interviews were carried out in August/September 2020. The interview for six managers from the Auckland region took place in late September after Auckland had gone into the second lockdown in August. For these managers, we were able to compare their preparation and family responses over time. The findings complement survey report findings (Mitchell, Hodgen et al., 2020) and are intended to support the ECE sector in decision-making, inform government officials and government and provide information for families and the public. Another article (Kahuroa et al., in press) offers perspectives of children. It discusses the working theories of 4-year-old children whose teachers encouraged them to draw, construct images, and explain and tell stories about their experiences, ideas and feelings about the virus.

Methodology

The research question guiding this project is: ‘What are the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE sector?’ The interviews enabled us to gather exemplars and detailed accounts of management practices, views and experiences.

The interviews were applicable to Kindergarten Association management, education and care service management, playcentre management and homebased service management. Interview questions were constructed after analysis of the survey responses and related to the following areas that had been identified as particularly crucial in these responses:

- Operational aspects of strategic/action planning, measures to support staff professional development, and staff health and wellbeing;
- Brokering/connections with the community and how connections were maintained during lockdowns;
- Sustainability. This set of questions asked about impacts on enrolments and attendance, hours of operation and funding. We asked about challenges and opportunities and managers' views of government policy required to support the ECE sector.

The interview schedule is set out in Appendix 1.

The sample was drawn from participants who answered the survey and who had responded positively to a question asking if they would be willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview, and if so to provide their contact details. We aimed to recruit participants from each service type, but this was a busy time for many managers following the COVID-19 lockdowns. We were not able to recruit home-based participants. Research ethics approval was gained from the University of Waikato Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee. Managers signed an informed consent form for their interview.

Fifteen managers from kindergarten associations, education and care centres, [Pasifika] immersion centres and a playcentre region were interviewed. Table 1 gives information about interviewees by service type and number of services managed. The number of kindergartens managed by the kindergarten associations ranged from very large, to medium sized to small. Four of the education and care managers were responsible for just one centre, while three managed two or more centres. They included community-based and private centres. One of the [Pasifika] immersion services was a single community-based centre; the other was privately owned, with two centres. The playcentre region was of moderate size.

Table 1. Number of interviewees by service type and number of services managed

Management by service type	Number of interviewees	Number of services managed
Kindergarten Association managers	5	173
Education and Care centre managers (community-based)	4	8
Education and Care centre managers (private)	3	10
[Pasifika] immersion centre ² (community-based)	1	1
[Pasifika] immersion centre (private)	1	2
Playcentre regional manager ³	1	Medium size
Total	15	194

² We have not given the language for the immersion services because that could have made them identifiable.

³ We have not given the number of playcentres in this region so that it is not identifiable.

FINDINGS

The findings are discussed in seven broad areas: strategy/action plan, health and wellbeing, professional learning and development, connections/brokering with families and community, sustainability (enrolments and attendance, and funding), challenges and opportunities, and policy recommendations.

Strategy/Action Plan

Managers were asked about development of a strategy or action plan during COVID-19 lockdowns and how this supported their service/s systems and processes. The following section outlines what services either had in place or developed, the focus of planning, how useful this was, and what was learned along the way.

Overview of planning

The type of pandemic planning differed amongst services. Planning was not linked to size or type of organisation with some of the small and some of the large organisations already having well developed plans in place, while others developed plans in conjunction with alert levels.

Pandemic procedures and policies, such as Crisis Management policies, had already been developed in some services prior to the Level 4 lockdown in March 2020, with a few managers noting they had pre-tested their pandemic procedures during previous outbreaks in their communities. These were re-established, with the addition of technology used during lockdown to support good communication amongst staff and between community and services.

Other services drew up COVID response plans in March; some of which were developed by umbrella organisations, either at a local and national level, and others by a stand-alone service on their own. Where there was a national strategy, services responded locally as alert levels changed, developing local response plans and procedures.

Some managers were more ad hoc about the development of plans but also used government information. A few said they initially focused on business continuity or financial planning. These service managers said it was important they knew they could cover costs. For them, the wage subsidy supported payment of staff salaries and provided 'peace of mind'.

Focus of planning

Strategies and action plans focused on a wide range of topics: communication procedures and processes, decisions about staffing, financial plans, procedures for the wellbeing and learning of children, engagement with and support for families/whānau and staff as well as anticipated health and safety support mechanisms. These latter included cleaning processes, creation of staff 'bubbles' and how to support staff with underlying conditions. All service managers said they incorporated government guidelines from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education into their planning.

Plans for the pandemic outlined policies targeted at each alert level. These used the regular information issued by the Ministry of Education in their ECE bulletins as well as their own operational necessities, such as information around keeping staff safe. As one manager of a kindergarten association said:

So we used our pandemic plan to base our Level Four on, and then out came ... all of their stuff, so we adapted our plans to make sure that we were aligned to theirs. And sometimes we had a little bit of a higher threshold. Not so much in Level Four, but in Level Three. You

know, we put things in place that the Ministry didn't say we had to put in place ... particularly when we went down the levels from Level Four to Three to Two, we kept some things in place really around ... around teacher anxiety, and to make them feel safer.

Playcentre regions provided information for their national website, which covers all members across New Zealand. Playcentre members contributed ideas and suggestions.

We've done a whole section on our website for COVID 19 information; and we've done a whole section on the website called the virtual village; it had play ideas and suggestions for things for people to do at home; PD they could do, te reo activities, looking after yourself, how to have meetings on line; we basically put everything on there. We all fed into it, just about what people could do. (Playcentre regional manager)

Another manager, for a community-based education and care service, said it was important to provide clarity for staff and community by focusing on planning for the different alert levels as well as supporting a sense of belonging. This service also sent information to families/whānau as a newsletter.

We also developed different plans for different levels. Like should we open at a Level 3? What would that look like? And if we opened at Level 2 — which we ended up opening at — what that would look like for the teachers. So the teachers had clarity. But the parents also had clarity about what, what it would look like when you came in to drop off your children. What it would feel like. What our process was, how we were going to keep everybody safe. How were we going to nurture wellbeing and belonging and all of those things that are part of *Te Whāriki*. (Education and Care service manager)

What was learned

Overall, service managers said they were more confident when faced with further lockdowns, as they had developed policies and procedures and knew how to proceed. Key features underpinning effective plans were:

- good communication processes;
- shared workload.

Good communication processes were found to be of importance in supporting relationships and therefore a sense of collective belonging, amongst staff, and between services and their communities, families/whānau and children. Communication processes were viewed as both a mechanism for conveying information from a range of sources as well as for supporting wellbeing.

Service managers said that faced with another lockdown, plans and procedures set up for use during lockdown were, or would be re-established. As one manager said:

I think we'd probably do everything exactly the same; so the expectation around staff still working from home; communication with whānau, making sure we were connecting with each other. I think we would probably use what we've already done but do it again; and hopefully we would do it a little bit smarter than we did last time, because it was all new so there were things like Zoom which we hadn't used before. (Kindergarten association manager)

Where services had many centres and many staff, the use of a variety of platforms for communication in order to reach everyone was important. These services also supported staff working from home by providing them with the technology and the training to use the platforms. This, in turn, supported communication amongst teams and with families/whānau. For many staff the lockdown periods were an opportunity to become skilled in using different social media to communicate with families/whānau, such as live streaming mat-time and stories on a closed Facebook page as well as the use of apps such as WhatsApp and Messaging.

Some people check their emails, some people check their Teams. And I think the message is you have to put out as much ... information as you possibly could, because that I think was what kept everybody informed, and calmed everybody's response. (Kindergarten Association manager)

Communication with families/whānau using the ECE service was an integral part of planning. Service managers emphasised the importance of ongoing communication with their community to support clarity around what was happening at services by sharing information. This was done using the means most appropriate to different communities; for example, where use of technology was low, staff made phone calls.

I think for us the most important thing was to tell parents, to assure them this will pass, but we have to follow these rules now to ensure the children's and the adults' safety and wellbeing is prioritised. ([Pasifika] immersion centre manager)

Managers of multiple services noted that it was essential to share the workload by establishing clear operational procedures which involved all staff members at a level they were comfortable with.

I was doing the strategic **and** the operational, rather than spreading that workload. So I think that I would look at how we involve more people in our office team in the execution. (Kindergarten association manager)

For education and care services, both community-based and privately owned, planning and discussions with committees/team members/parents was important to ensure all members of the ECE community were informed and involved in decisions as required.

One of the main things we learnt as a committee was having those plans and conversations around what we would do and what if it happened again. (Education and care service manager)

Operational processes were set up so services could work within teams to make contact with all families and children.

Everybody had their own group and they contacted them by phone call and email each week, and then reported back to us in our staff meeting how everybody was getting on. As well as that, they were commenting all the time, replying to children, following them up. But this was to make sure we got every single person. There were no gaps. (Education and care service manager)

Health and Wellbeing

The following section outlines the thoughts and perceptions of managers on the impact of COVID-19 regarding health and wellbeing of the early childhood communities they are associated with and what was put in place to support health and wellbeing.

All service managers spoke about the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns on *staff* in terms of health and wellbeing, in particular:

- Raised levels of stress and anxiety amongst staff;
- Increased sick leave and time off for staff.

Management of health and wellbeing issues was generally shouldered by managers and senior staff and encompassed areas outside their usual remit. Managers talked about the challenges in dealing with the sense of panic felt by some staff while trying to ensure everything was in place for the lockdown both in home settings and at work. Issues at times encompassed such things as relationship issues coming up due to staff

in lockdown situations, staff struggling with mental health issues and other issues such as housing when in lockdown.

None of us had ever experienced anything like ... like that. Also trying to kind of pre-empt was ... was challenging for us as well. So I just stayed at work so that they could ring, or talk, or you know, do whatever they wanted, you know, whatever contact they needed. (Kindergarten association manager)

That was a huge thing for the staff; and for me making sure that everyone was OK ... that was a huge burden actually. I think definitely the managing of people was — “Well ok, I’ve got this responsibility and I need to make sure everyone’s ok.” That was pretty big. (Education and care service manager)

For some, staff health issues impacted on the time taken to return to the workplace. Higher rates of sick leave amongst staff were an issue for some services. Once staff returned to work following lockdowns, and if they became sick, due to the precautions around COVID-19, they were sometimes using sick leave at a higher rate than previously.

The need for ongoing support for staff as they returned to work was identified by one service manager who talked about the importance of identifying and discussing feelings.

What we did start doing when we got back is ... You know, how we do that kete with the children, of ‘What do you want to put in your kete today?’ I started doing that with the teachers. Because I found that the teachers’ wellbeing resources were quite low. And if you could hear what they wanted to put in their kete, if they wanted to put in calmness, then you know, they actually needed to be able to find a space to do that. Because we were able to be more aware of each other. [Name] found that really helpful. Then she could understand how other people were feeling from what they said. And, and she felt like we were all more mindful about the fact that she was struggling, as she was. (Education and care service manager)

Another manager spoke about the need for support mechanisms to be in place long term.

... counselling, time off if you need it; if you’re having a day when you just don’t feel that you’re up to coming to work then just let us know, be honest about it, don’t come in you know. Lots of things in place ... I am aware though 18 months, they’re talking 18 months for people’s wellbeing to settle down. So we could yet see fluctuations over that 18 months. So we’ll be putting that support in for ever and ever and ever. (Kindergarten association manager).

Raised levels of stress and anxiety for *families/whānau and children* were also noticeable.

Some managers commented that some children were unable to deal with all the information they were getting through the media and from family.

There are children who have it at the back of their mind all the time. Some children say ‘They’ve got the flu, they’ve got COVID’. Their behaviour is getting quite disruptive and you can hear in the language there’s a hidden fear ... [What] we’ll be going for in terms of emergency funding is maybe have some more soft spaces. In the centre, if a child wants to be beside themselves, they can just go in there, little tents where there’s a small opening but a child can take a toy and just play on their own. ([Pasifika] immersion centre manager)

One manager, in talking about children’s anxiety in the service, explained how they were responding to this.

They’ve got all these worries, then they ... they don’t necessarily know how to ask their parents about. They might do. But maybe they don’t get the kind of way we respond. I’m not sure ... We’re doing quite a lot stuff on emotional ... How you are feeling and being

able to read other people's emotions. We've been doing a lot with loose parts, where they can come in and decide how they're feeling, and make some kind of face, and tell someone how they're feeling ... [Name] made all these little buzzy bees that have got their names on, and you've got to find your bee and you put it in the part of the hive that is how you're feeling today ... pictograms up there, so the children can recognise, 'My bee is happy,' or anxious, or worried, or ... And so they choose where they want to put those, and ... and we talk about it a lot more at mat time. (Education and care centre manager)

In a related study, children were invited by a teacher in small groups to draw and tell stories about their working theories and understanding of COVID-19. Another teacher created story stones, illustrating emotions, events and images likely to be experienced by many children during the Level 3 and 4 lockdown periods and including unfinished statements/questions. She then used these story stones as catalysts for discussion with children. Later, children added more story stones. The processes helped children to express their feelings and make sense of the world (see Kahuroa et al., in press).

Another manager said they had thought about using funding from the Emergency Response Fund to employ teacher aides to help settle children in their centres. This particular service had families/whānau whom the government had housed in their community during lockdown periods.

Managers also mentioned the potential impact on families' health and wellbeing once wage subsidies ceased and noted the importance of being aware of this and extending mental health/emotional support at the service. As one manager said:

I'm more worried about when the wage subsidy stops and jobs tighten; what will that do? The people that are potentially affected are the ones that don't normally ask for help because they've never had to. That's going to be quite a change in mindset. Watch this space and see what we can do to support this. (Kindergarten association manager)

How health and wellbeing was maintained

During lockdowns, managers and other senior staff provided support for staff through regular contact, including informal conversations, emails, phone calls, text, Zoom meetings, and health and wellbeing webinars on topics such as resilience and healthy eating.

Our staff, that was something that was really important, our staff were called, making sure they were well and if they're not how could we help. ([Pasifika] immersion centre manager)

What I did was every two or three days I just sent a group text out to them to say, 'How are you doing?' You know? 'This is what I've been doing, what have you been up to?' So that they just had somebody who was reaching into their homes, just to say hello. Another thing that we did to support people was I had what I called 'coffee and chat' sessions on Zoom or Teams. (Kindergarten association manager)

Connection with the community was important to staff health and wellbeing. Managers commented that feedback from parents with photos was a positive part of 'keeping well'.

All of the feedback and the photos that parents were sending in, I was putting that into a document and making the document available for all of the staff to see ... feedback and those photos of children who have been part of your life 40 hours a week, we have a huge investment in their lives and what they are doing; and the staff fed back to me that it was those photos that kept them going. (Education and care centre manager)

External counselling for staff was provided by some services with others also offering 'time off' for staff to regroup. Counselling costs were paid in some instances and partially paid in others. Staff were also able to

contact EAP (Employment Assistance Programmes). In a few services, staff were offered the opportunity to take annual leave although this was not generally taken up.

Financial support was important with managers ensuring staff were paid 100 percent of their wages or salary. For some services, this included staff who had COVID-19 tests and were on leave waiting on results as well as staff who were at a higher risk due to health issues so required leave for a longer period.

We maintained 100% staff — 100% wages and salaries throughout. Because we sort of see that as part of our helping keeping our staff feel safe. (Education and care service manager)

In some instances, services paid support staff extra during a holiday period, while others paid relievers with fixed term contracts for a limited period of time. HR support was also made available. One service put together information and resources from different websites as well as tips and tricks about mental health and wellbeing and regularly posted these on the services website.

A few service managers said they supported staff by not placing too many expectations on them regarding their work contributions.

I had no expectations ... I told them, they didn't have to write learning stories or do anything, and it was up to them, how often, or what they contributed to the WhatsApp group, but they all wanted to. (Education and care centre manager)

A kindergarten association organised to deliver food vouchers for families from low-income communities and employed a 'community navigator' to broker support for families from refugee and immigrant backgrounds who wanted such support.

Professional Learning and Development

Having more time for professional learning and development (PLD) as well as reflection on practice during lockdown was commonly mentioned by many managers. The following section outlines how this was achieved and the types of learning that happened. Typically, staff were said to have more time for PLD, which enabled many to catch up on documentation and gave time for personal reflection. The use of online apps enabled staff to engage in PLD. While this was a new medium, it would appear that benefits regarding ease of use are something that will remain incorporated in operational practice.

Managers said that staff in education and care services, in particular, had the time to think about things such as appraisals, internal evaluations, self-review and to spend time in online discussions with other staff discussing pedagogy. Some service managers said their staff were able to use the time to 'catch up' on practice related work, such as learning stories and planning, as opposed to formally taking part in PLD. This was important, as when in centres, time was limited for documentation and reflection on practice. Just one manager said staff had scheduled time off-site for PLD.

We certainly had time. We got to catch up on all our documentation which was fabulous. (Education and care service manager)

More time for appraisals and we've got three PRTs (provisionally registered teachers) so there was a lot of work done on that. A lot of opportunity for PLD via zoom and webinars and bits and pieces; so there was a lot of opportunity to do that. (Kindergarten association manager)

Service managers said staff met regularly online, both as staff groups formally and informally. Staff also took part in PLD individually. Expectations varied across services, with some managers clearly outlining what they required, while others said they expected staff to achieve what they could in the circumstances.

I think it was really important to catch up weekly. I think it was a good thing to keep an eye on how things were going for them personally. We had a really clear expectation that family

came first, so if they needed to manage their work around their family ... if they had young children, and there was no expectation from us, but we expected them to be working when they could. (Kindergarten association manager)

Some of them were writing up their folders with reflections and things that they wanted to do. Some of them were communicating with each other. They had **Zoom** meetings about how it was going and what they were up to. And kind of like a centre meeting really, 'cause they ... On their agenda they have to discuss a little part of their internal evaluation at every meeting. So it was that sort of thing. (Education and care manager)

We didn't do team professional development like that. I just sent links for things. We did have a staff meeting which was more about just connecting for ourselves and saying, 'How are you doing? What have been your highs this week? What have been your lows this week? What do you need? Can we pray for you? What can we do that can support you?' For each other. (Education and care manager)

Many managers commented that stress levels made it hard to always focus on PLD. Staff in some services were able to physically meet, in their bubbles, during Level 3. Some services were open for children of essential workers. Managers at these services said that staff took the opportunity to create a roster so they could also take time to work on PLD, both individually and as a team.

Managers of kindergarten associations commented that, in many instances, services had developed their use of online platforms, in particular, Teams and Zoom. Zoom was found to be useful for larger staff groups, whereas Teams was limited in the number of staff able to participate. Links to webinars were also made available to staff. In some services this changed the way PLD was carried out.

We'd given them some ... some webinars link[s] to *Te Whāriki* ... and then that got them to start seeking more webinars. They were so successful that in the last term break, we used webinars as our PLD. So we identified a whole lot of webinars that linked to our priorities for learning for the year, and our teaching and learning goals ... And we sent them out ... a list of them, and they had to choose four to watch over the term break, and then they wrote reflections and they linked them to the professional standards ... That was what we used for PLD for that break. Because we didn't have time to set up a whole lot of PLD ... and you know, things like Zoom meetings [were a new way of meeting] ... But we're so used to them now that they just are a part of life, and we use them all the time now. (Kindergarten Association manager)

Online meeting apps continue to be used for both meetings and learning, with managers commenting that meeting online was easier and just as effective as gathering multiple staff members together in a single location, and reduced travel time for many.

Geographically if we've got people who are travelling ... Like [name], even to get ... we try and have a mid-point. But if people travelled to [name], you're still talking about three quarters of an hour for people for travelling ... So being able to just sit at your computer and log on is really useful. I think we would continue that for some specific things ... (Kindergarten Association manager)

Community connections/brokering

The interviews enabled us to find out more detail about the ways in which managers tailored communication to the needs of families, family responses to the communications, how managers brokered support to services beyond early childhood education and productive means of communication that managers would carry forward.

Tailoring communication to needs of families

Managers thought carefully about the families serviced by their ECE setting/s and ensured communication was appropriate for them. This was articulated very clearly in the strategy of a large kindergarten association which also set out expectations for teachers:

As a team, it is critical that we stay connected with **all** our tamariki and whānau and work to provide equitable opportunities for all to engage in our ECE curriculum, whether it is in the physical kindergarten or via distance learning.

Begin by checking in (individually) with **each** of your whānau to identify how they want to be contacted and what access they have to technology.

Decide as a team who will contact each whānau of your tamariki. It may be each kaiako has a group of tamariki, or you may decide it is the Head Teacher or another team member that contacts some families because of the relationships. What we are saying here is, you know your whānau best. (Kindergarten Association strategy)

The strategy went on to describe some valuable forms of communication and to note that some families may like only one method of communication, while others may be happy to have more than one method. An expectation was set out for teaching teams to ‘connect’ daily with whānau and tamariki and that once whānau post, the teaching team would respond on the same day.

Several managers gave advice on the kinds of questions that would encourage learning.

Conversations (via the whānau chosen method of communication) may include:

- What can we do for you?
- What is your child doing? What kind of play have they been up to?
- Where did this interest come from, I wonder?
- What has happened at home lately that might have inspired/sparked this learning?
- We are keen for tamariki to stay connected with their friends. How can we help this to happen? (Kindergarten Association manager)

Families not having reliable internet access was an identified issue for some. In this instance, phone calls and text messaging were common, and some inventive ways to communicate were also found, such as provision of ‘learning packs’ where services arranged delivery to the home. Some managers reported teachers/kaiako making videos for Facebook:

... little videos of the staff just being themselves and doing like little learnings ... A number of centres would have done that. We found that that engagement really helped as well. We were like quite surprised that actually by how well-received it was. Because initially for the staff ... They felt quite awkward about recording themselves, putting themselves online. But then there was nothing but positive feedback coming back. (Education and care manager)

Some commented on Ministry of Education resources and resources from other organisations as being valuable.

So we were getting information from the Ministry, from the Early Childhood Council and from Child Forum, so together the three lots of information; it was very clear and it was succinct. I can’t fault the Ministry. I had several phone calls. They touched base with me several times to make sure we were OK. I think they did a good job. (Community education and care manager)

However, this was not everyone’s experience. One education and care centre manager was so critical of government agencies that this participant wrote the following statement for inclusion in the interview transcript:

Trust is not built amidst a crisis. It is the foundation of conscious and consistent leadership, transparency, and partnership. Over the last several years, we have experienced a systemic shift from government agencies, be that MoE, ERO, and Teachers Council, away from a culture of engagement and partnership to a clipboard mentality based on compliance and fault. Meanwhile, we receive messages that we, as a sector, fail to provide quality care and education to our tamariki. As a result of this adversarial relationship, when a crisis occurs, neither party trusts the other to deliver a calm, deliberate, and professional response. As an organisation, we continue to engage, particularly with the MoE, to discuss issues and reengage a relationship built on partnership. Our experience continues to be brushed off, preferring to operate in their internal microcosm. However, we will continue to engage these agencies at every level because what we stand to lose if we don’t is unconscionable. We must trust that everyone in early childcare is doing their best by the children under our care.

Pasifika centres and centres with large Pasifika populations used families’ home languages and encouraged culturally and linguistically compatible teachers/kaiako to communicate directly with families.

Family responses to communications

An unexpected spinoff from using Facebook and online learning and engagement platforms was that two-way connections between teachers and families became stronger. These communication methods brought the teachers and children into family homes.

It just strengthened [community connections]. It was amazing. When we came back, there was no sense of having been apart because we’d continued these relationships right throughout. We’d been in their homes through the videos they’d put up and the photos. We all felt like this — a surprise. We still try to home visit [outside lockdown]. Some children really need it and respond to that, but it’s not for everybody. (Education and care centre manager)

The value of pedagogically framed discussions held during family visits was discovered in the Wadestown Kindergarten Centre of Innovation research project (Simonsen et al., 2010), where teachers and researchers held discussions with families about their child’s literacies and experiences at home. Gains included

greater insights into family contexts and how children’s literacy strengths have developed and are supported at home, a “bigger picture” understanding of children’s learning and development, and closer connections with families. These gains potentially flow though into teachers and parents being more ready to share experiences and discuss educational aims, and families being more willing to volunteer their expertise within the education programme. (p. 94)

In future, ECE services could consider making intentional use of Facebook (and home visits) to generate two-way understanding.

Sustainability

Enrolments and attendance

All services were closed during Alert Level 4. Some services opened for children of essential workers in Level 3. The following section describes the impact of COVID-19 on attendance and enrolments.

Overall, attendance was low at Level 3, with some families/whānau choosing to wait to return until either Level 2, or even Level 1. In one instance, a service, which had a few parents needing care at Level 3, asked student teachers if they would be comfortable working as nannies, rather than opening the centre. Students were paid by the parents for this. The service then opened at Level 2.

All services opened when Level 2 was announced. While managers said most families/whānau returned during Level 2, many families/whānau took some time to return. Some services had 100 percent attendance after a week; other services had high enrolment figures, but attendance rates were low, ranging from between 25 to 60 percent of usual rolls. Lower rates of children returning to the ECE service were reported in lower socioeconomic communities. A South Auckland private education and care company manager reported an initial 32 percent drop in roll numbers. A kindergarten association manager said the association had only a 56 percent attendance rate of children returning, and that varied from 25 percent in a kindergarten in a low socioeconomic community to 89 percent in another. By May, the rate was 97 percent across all kindergartens.

Families/whānau stayed away because of worries about COVID-19. In addition, higher numbers of children were kept at home because they were sick; where previously children would have attended with colds, this was not acceptable.

Nobody wanted to come at Level 3. Same thing we did at Level 2 and a few more parents came. But there were still parents who said ‘No, we are not bringing our children till Level 1’. Just this week we had one of the parents who has kept the child away, waiting for Level 1 to happen, she said ‘I’m going to bring my baby’. I said ‘It’s been a long while’. We totally understood the parents; they had a lot of fear. (Language immersion centre manager)

Coming out of the lockdown there was a lot of suspicion and fear from the parent community, and it was our responsibility to ... to sort of dispel some of those ... That misinformation that was going on as well. (Education and care service manager)

A few managers reported diminished rolls. One service was 20 percent down and the manager did not anticipate picking up many enrolments until early 2021. Another service lost 30 families across two centres. Losses were due to risks from COVID-19, some children leaving for school, redundancies, families/whānau moving away, and a drop in child enrolments with children being kept at home. Some families/whānau continued to work from home because they had flexible working hours; they moved their child to a sessional service rather than a full day service; others reduced the hours they used. One manager said the numbers for babies and younger children had dropped. Further impacting on enrolments was said to be the extent of competition for enrolments in communities amongst services. One manager talked about the impact of other services offering deals for families, noting that these were generally short-term only.

Because numbers have dropped in all centres, so a lot of centres have been giving deals for new people coming. So they’ve [the parents] kind of, ‘Oh well if I’m going to do it sometime, I may as well do it now. So I get the advantage of the deal.’ There’s a **huge** amount of competition in the community. (Education and care manager of multiple centres)

However, several of those interviewed reported no change in enrolments, and a few managers, generally sessional, reported increased enrolments with families/whānau moving children from full day care to services with shorter hours or less costly options due to changed circumstances. As one manager said:

There was one where the dad had decided to continue working from home. Mum was still working. That meant that dad had more flexible hours. He could come and pick the child up at 3 o’clock, so the child had no longer needed to go to full daycare. Another family just realised that they no longer wanted to rush with everybody out the door by 7.30 and enjoy the more relaxed feeling, and suppose this is not a lifestyle we wanted after all, so we’ll change. Our hours are 9 to 3.45. Another family realised they didn’t want to pay for their

child going to a centre for longer hours and still have to pay over school holidays. We don't charge for, if they don't come on school holidays. (Education and care service manager)

Some managers reported supporting participation through specific measures aimed at reducing or removing the cost of attendance, catering individually for particular families or changing operating models to suit changed circumstances. These included:

- An immersion centre exempted parents from paying fees when a parent lost their job;
- An education and care centre, where rolls reduced because some children did not return, offered extra hours to other children at no cost, on the basis that management knew a family was struggling.

Because our rolls are a bit lower, I can say, 'Look, I've got extra days, you don't need to worry about fees at all. Come extra days.' Because we can do it. It actually has a benefit for us too, because we get more funding, so it's not a completely neutral thing.

- A kindergarten association used Equity Funding to pay fees for some parents.
- A kindergarten association changed its operating model for one kindergarten from seven hours a day to six hours a day. "They were working at 70 percent, and now they've gone back to six hours; their occupancy rate's 98 percent." However, these changes were decided prior to lockdowns in consultation with families but took effect after lockdowns.

Managers, both teacher and parent-led, mentioned having an increase in enquiries. This did not always result in an increase in enrolments.

Funding

All services continued to receive the same level of government funding for child- funded hours as they did prior to lock-down. Services that had experienced a minimum 30 percent decline in actual or predicted income were eligible for the government wage subsidy. Obligations were for employers to use the subsidy to retain and pay their staff. Later, a wage subsidy extension was available for a business that had experienced a minimum 40 percent decline in revenue over any consecutive 30-day period in the 40-days immediately before the date of application (but no earlier than 10 May 2020) when compared to the same period in 2019.

We asked managers what impact COVID-19 had on their service in terms of funding. Specific questions were asked about fees, the wage subsidy, rent relief and small business loans.

As a context, staff salaries/wages are a large cost item in teacher-led services. There was a big variation in the reported percentage of funding paid in staff salaries, although only some managers provided this figure. According to one manager, "within the sector they talk about 54 percent being a benchmark for wages". The reported percentage in our interviews ranged from "over 60 percent" for a manager of seven private education and care centres, to 70 percent for a kindergarten association manager, to 80 to 85 percent for a manager of five community-based education and care centres. This community-based education and care manager employed 100 percent qualified teachers. The figures reflect the variability in staff pay rates and in operational models. Policy suggestions made by managers are particularly focused on addressing funding issues related to teacher pay and addressing inequities in pay rates.

The Frequent Absence Rule was said to affect funding, particularly in low socioeconomic communities where children attended irregularly. This was an ongoing issue, not caused by COVID-19. A small kindergarten association managed the problem by employing a number of casual staff who were moved from one kindergarten to another according to child attendance on the day. But frequent changes of staff are not the best for the child and teacher developing close, reciprocal relationships.

For some services, the cost of cleaning compounded funding issues, particularly in services where no fees were being paid.

Three times a day a staff member will go right through, wiping, washing toilets, handbasins – at least three, maybe four or five times. That is the extra cost of cleaning stuff and also hand sanitiser as it's being used so much more now. Those are extra costs we didn't have before. We had hand sanitiser but we didn't use it, just soap and water. ([Pasifika] immersion service manager)

Similar to findings from the survey, education and care centre managers reported uptake of the wage subsidy and rent reductions while kindergarten associations did not, except for one association for its full-day centre. One education and care centre manager was awarded a small business cashflow loan (only available for businesses or organisations of a certain size) and two had useful insurance policies that paid out during centre closures. Below are vignettes about how these were used and the difference they made.

Wage subsidy

A community-based education and care centre with a school operating model (6-hour day and school terms) received the wage subsidy in addition to the ECE Funding Subsidy. During Alert Levels 3 and 4, the centre did not charge any fees. “No [fees]. If they're not there, why should they have to pay?” The manager said that the centre would have struggled without the wage subsidy. The wage subsidy enabled all staff, including relievers, to be paid through the holidays and for ECE to be free for a lot of families on their return. Free ECE was particularly important for families who had lost their jobs and were now retraining.

They're now doing retraining that they're getting free. Actually, for some of our families that's been a kind of ... It sounds weird to say, a bonus, but for some of them [they] have been trapped in jobs that they didn't particularly enjoy [and] are now getting to retrain for things that they think they really would like to do ... At the moment I don't even think it's worth asking for optional charges because I don't think people have got it.

A private education and care centre business manager in a low socio-economic community received the wage subsidy in the first round. Staff were fully paid over the time. This manager was critical that the wage subsidy extension available from 10 June to 1 September 2020 was only for organisations predicting a 40 percent loss of revenue.

The second round ... definitely favours the higher socio-economic centres to keep them open. Because when they rely so much on parent payments ... Yeah, they can easily show that loss ... You know, if we operated at a 40 percent loss of revenue, we'd have to close our doors a long time ago.

This was said to be “a very low margin business” where parents “don't have disposable income. And so we haven't qualified for the second round of the wage subsidy”.

A kindergarten association received the wage subsidy for its relievers who were fully paid over the lockdowns, as were permanent teachers. It was also given a rent reduction by a council for its all day centre although it did not ask for this.

Insurance policy

A community-based education and care centre subscribed to an insurance policy recommended by the Early Childhood Council in 2012, called Childproof Insurance. “They had a pandemic policy within that insurance. And look where we are now [laughs]. They are removing that clause next time it's renewed they told us [laughs].” The policy was described as the centre's “saving grace”. It only charged fees for the parents from Level 2 and any children who were either sick or decided not to come back were charged half

fees in Level 2. The insurance covered all of the parent fees that were not paid, and staff were paid 100 percent. This centre applied for the wage subsidy, but then paid it back when it became clear that because of the insurance, the centre was not eligible. The centre is attached to an education institution which also charged no rent over April and half the rent in the month of May. Asked if there was any impact at all in terms of funding, the manager said:

Actually no, not for us and I think we've been really, really lucky; we're one of the lucky centres. We haven't had a reduction in child numbers so I haven't had to reduce my staff. We've just picked up and carried on as normal.

Small business loan

A *community-based education and care centre* received the wage subsidy, insurance and a small business loan. The centre operates all day with hours from early morning to evening and mixed ages. It opened for children in Level 2, when the majority of parents came back in the first week, with all returning in the second week. Some parents returned only for the 20 hours free ECE, and management was flexible about allowing them to do that. A small number of families in financial difficulties were told just to pay what they could afford to pay. Staff continued to be paid. The small business loan helped the centre to boost its cash flow. The loan is interest free if repaid within one year. The management did not predict difficulties in paying the loan back in small amounts at low interest rates of 3 percent (presumably after one year).

Challenges and Opportunities

Managers were asked about the key challenges their services faced due to COVID-19 and lockdowns. They were also asked whether this had presented any opportunities. These are outlined in the following section.

Challenges

The overarching challenge services faced was, or is, the ongoing long-term nature of the pandemic and the speed at which it happened as well as the sense of not knowing when clusters may happen resulting in further lockdowns.

So it was all new and fresh the first time, the first time round. Doing it again if that were to happen too quickly, you know, I think we've seen a little bit of that in Auckland going back to Level 3 and Level 2.5. (Kindergarten association manager)

Other challenges mentioned were:

- Issues around resourcing families/whānau in terms of learning materials. For the Pasifika services in particular, lack of materials available in the home languages to support language during lockdown was an issue.

The lack of Pacific resources for our children. Like, it was great that the Ministry had some packages at Level 4 for the children that stayed home, and Level 3; but here we are, we're a [name of nation] preschool but all the resources at the centre are in English.

- The ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has also created a challenge for services around strengthening wellbeing strategies for everyone connected with services, staff, families/whānau and children as well as maintaining wellbeing over time, particularly emotional wellbeing.
- Managers also talked about the issue of settling children once they returned, noting that for some children it is taking "some time". The transition back to the service for children was not always

easy, with many children needing to settle back into centres after a long break. Others were anxious about COVID 19.

After that seven weeks of being in lockdown, it was resettling the children, coming back. They never have that amount of time away from the centre. Over the Christmas period we close for a month and the seven-week lockdown was even longer than that period; and we know how they are when they come back after that month, you know. [laughs] You've got to resettle them all over again. (Education and care manager)

- Retention and payment of staff was another challenge facing some education and care service managers.
- Managers commented on the challenges going forward where services charge minimal or no fees. A few managers said that while the wage subsidy was helpful, they needed to take on small business loans as they had no fees coming in.

Level 3 we did, Level 2 we said we've got to pay our staff. But we haven't chased anybody even if they haven't paid up to now. (Education and care service manager)

Opportunities

Managers also identified opportunities that had come up around dealing with the pandemic. All managers talked about the opportunity they had to strengthen community connections and relationships developed during lockdown periods. This communication would be continued.

In larger organisations, such as kindergarten associations, managers commented on the possibility of working more closely with smaller stand-alone services in their communities, looking at how they could support and work with them and meet different needs, for example, in terms of PLD or in supporting families/whānau across age groups and economic levels. However, this was said to require more time and consultation.

We've had quite a few opportunities in the fact that our other services in town that charge fees have lost a lot of their families because they've had jobs reduced. So we've got an opportunity to really step into that space because we are free. That's been kind of exciting in some ways because we can support those families in a different way, so we need to adapt to that. (Kindergarten association manager)

The COVID-19 pandemic had provided services with the opportunity to develop an online presence when communicating both amongst staff and with communities. Zoom and Teams introduced during lockdown to support communication with staff were very effective and would be continued.

A manager talked about the use of apps to communicate amongst teachers.

We didn't have a messaging group for the teachers before this happened. But one of the teachers set it up. And it's just continued ever since which has been a plus ... much better than email, as people don't necessarily read it. They message on the spot and they send pictures. It's good. (Education and care service manager)

Managers said this expedited and personalised communication with families/whānau and they would continue to make use of new online tools.

Policy

Managers were asked ‘What, if any, changes would you like to see in ECE policy to put your service/s and the sector on a sound footing in the future?’ The main issues were about funding, concern about enrolments, attendance and sustainability, and teacher qualifications.

Funding rates, mechanisms and pay parity

Managers commented on the need for increased funding rates, improved funding mechanisms and pay parity.

Where education and care centres employed 100 percent qualified teachers, managers said that paying the teachers appropriately was becoming harder and harder, especially when staff were highly experienced. There was a view that the funding through the higher funding band did not compensate for higher costs. A small kindergarten association manager also expressed some difficulty in meeting the costs of conditions under the Kindergarten Collective Employment Agreement. This kindergarten manager argued that they were funded for only about 70 percent of increased salary costs in 2020. The manager wanted a mechanism for funding that covered costs and a system that was more sustainable in the future. The frequent absence rule was conveyed by a manager in a low socioeconomic community as problematic.

Aligned with thinking about the need for increased funding was a call for greater accountability for spending to ensure funding went to intended purposes. This was expressed especially in relation to spending by for-profit providers.

I wouldn't just want money handed over to some services and then it doesn't ever filter down to teachers and children. So some kind of checks and balances around ... around that. (Kindergarten association manager).

I would like to see that [funding is] targeted at children's needs and teachers' needs, rather than profits. But you know I've felt like that my whole life, so ... there's got to be more accountability about how money is used, that the ... profits that shareholders get need to be reduced so that the wellbeing of children and teachers is what governs things. (Community-based education and care centre manager)

Most managers in education and care centres advocated for pay parity for teachers in education and care centres with pay of teachers in kindergartens.

I think probably the issue, and one that we're all facing at the moment, is the one around funding really. And you know, it's not really related to what we've been through. It's the whole pay parity. You know it's recognising the ECE sector for what we are and who we are and comparable to kindergarten teachers and all that. That's going to continue to be needing reform. (Community-based education and care centre manager)

Enrolments, attendance and sustainability

Some managers were worried about long term sustainability. This concern was expressed by full-day education and care centre managers and linked to changed patterns of parental employment, job loss and fear of further lockdowns.

As we've moved through the alert levels, retaining children has been a real challenge. And a lot of that's to do with the ongoing fear around Covid as well. And ... those families that now have, like, family members no longer employed, and are at home choosing to keep the kids home ... nervous that if we were to go into a further, larger-scale lockdown, especially once we start seeing job losses, that will really affect our ability to continue to operate.

Especially with the model that we do (family liaison, van). (Manager of seven private education and care centres)

A view was expressed that there will be centre closures and competition “to capture those children that will have been lost to those centres” (Education and care manager). The competitive environment also featured in a kindergarten association manager’s view that there is “an opportunity to market ourselves as being more appropriate for the post-Covid world” in terms of being a community. This manager argued for a fully-funded public network as a baseline to ensure quality education is available for all children whose parents want it.

Several managers advocated for ECE services to be funded and supported as integrated centres offering ECE as a hub for wider access to services that support families. In relation to kindergartens in low socioeconomic communities, a kindergarten association manager thought that child participation could be enhanced by catering more broadly to the needs of families.

So you know, kind of ways of supporting families to attend. We’ve got two kindergartens who have got KidsCan, that is fantastic. So ... so good that you know parents don’t have to worry about food and clothing and stuff like that. It’s an amazing service. I’m trying to think of other policies that I think would be helpful. I mean the other policies that I think would be helpful, don’t actually relate to pandemics and Covid though. (Kindergarten association manager)

An education and care manager spoke of a teacher who supported Pasifika parents but had limited time to do this because of her teaching.

So she’s getting a group of all her Pasifika parents together once a month, and she talks with them. And they talk, talk, talk and then she withdraws — ‘cause it’s in the middle of the session. Well, I’d love funding for that so she could be involved. (Education and care manager)

A kindergarten association manager had employed a “community navigator” to work with refugee and migrant families and support them to access services and opportunities.

Qualified teachers

Most managers expressed the value of employing 100 percent qualified teachers. A [Pasifika immersion] manager gave an account of why she thought this was an important policy.

100% with the teachers; I am all for richer teachers. My thoughts behind that, before we start this preschool; I want the children to get the best. [6 of 10 teachers qualified in the team]. ...I believe at preschool they need to get the best, need a good calibre of teachers ... We need to have training for all teachers at preschool; this is a crucial age of children [sic] development and learning. Teachers need training to expand their knowledge. [Pasifika immersion manager]

But one education and care centre manager had an opposing view. “Get rid of the 100%. That was a political soundbite in our opinion, and serves no ... In fact, it can heavily disadvantage low socio-economic areas.” At the same time, this manager wanted education and care centres to be paid at the same funding rate as kindergartens.

Conclusion

This report on interviews with 15 managers from kindergarten associations, education and care services, Pasifika immersion services, and a playcentre region delves more deeply into findings from an earlier survey

of managers on the impact of COVID-19 on the ECE sector (Mitchell, Hodgen, et al., 2020). It shows the extraordinary lengths that management and teachers/educators in ECE services went to during lockdowns and alert levels throughout 2020 to communicate with and support children, families, teachers/educators and communities. New modes of distance communication that were especially effective for working with teacher/educators and families were and will continue to be used. Some valuable understanding of strategic planning in the event of a pandemic was developed.

But the interviews highlighted crucial issues that need attention at policy and organisational levels.

Anxiety about COVID-19, precarious employment and stressful living situations have undermined wellbeing for some children and adults. This is likely to be an enduring problem. Early childhood education services need support to work through wellbeing issues that are affecting their communities.

There are very big discrepancies in the pay and employment conditions of teachers in the ECE sector. Pay rates vary widely depending on contractual arrangements made with employers, with kindergarten teachers, who are also the most unionised group, having the single largest collective employment agreement and pay parity with teachers in schools. NZEI Te Riu Roa states that the discrepancies in pay vary from 23 percent to 49 percent (NZEI Te Riu Roa, 2020). The government's 2020 pre-budget announcement delivered a funding increase to pay teachers in education and care centres to pay a salary commensurate with the first step of the kindergarten teachers' pay scale. But the Minister of Education noted that 'this funding boost goes some way towards levelling the playing field for ECE centres looking to employ qualified teachers, but I do acknowledge that fully closing the gap between education and care services and kindergartens will be a challenge to be addressed over a number of Budgets' (Radio New Zealand, 2020). In this study, not surprisingly, some education and care service managers reported on teachers having more time for documentation, appraisals, evaluations and professional learning and development during the COVID-19 lockdowns, a finding that serves to highlight the inadequacy and variability of employment conditions. It is time to act with urgency on discrepancies in pay and conditions. New funding delivery mechanisms are needed that separate salary funding from operational funding and ensure salaries are paid according to a collective pay scale so there is no leeway for providers to decide to spend money which is intended for salaries on business profits. A related issue is to ensure accountability for spending, whether from funding from government or parent fees/donations or community contributions.

The final major issue is the vulnerability and threats of closure that some ECE services face. If many ECE services collapse, this will require careful planning to ensure any new services address family and community needs and to avoid potentially ill-considered takeovers. The pandemic has highlighted the pitfalls in allowing a market approach to determine where and how ECE services are provided. Calls for a planned approach to public and community provision have been a constant refrain since the 1980s (Early Childhood Education Project, 1996; May & Mitchell, 2009, 2018; Mitchell, 2015, 2019) and in the government's Early Learning Action Plan (Ministry of Education, 2019). Now is also an opportunity to support new forms of integrated service that management responses show to be worthwhile. It would be more efficient and a better use of public money to plan early childhood centres in every community so that the provision meets the needs of families in that community. We need to move away from the market approach and now is the time to act.

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APPENDIX 1: COVID-19 ECE MANAGEMENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Operational

1. Strategy/action plan

- a. Did your service/s develop a strategic/action plan during COVID-19 Lockdowns and Levels?
If yes, please can you give me a brief overview and some exemplars (that go into more detail).
- b. What did you learn from it that you would carry forward in the event of another pandemic/ anything you would do differently/what advice you would give others about strategic planning?

2. Professional development/staff practice

- a. Having more time for professional development and reflection on practice during Lockdown was commonly mentioned by many service/s. Can you tell me about your service/s experience of this?
- b. Is there anything you are doing differently now as a result of your experiences? (e.g. providing staff time and opportunities)?

3. Impact on health and wellbeing

- a. Can you tell me about any impact COVID-19 had on the health and wellbeing of staff?
- b. What is/was put in place to maintain the health and wellbeing of staff?

Connections/brokering

4. Connections with community

- a. Can you tell me about the family and community connections, or brokering that developed due to COVID-19? (Prompt: What did you and your service/s do?)
- b. What sorts of things will be continued (e.g. distance communication and learning, other processes)?

Sustainability

5 Enrolments/attendance

- a. What impact has COVID-19 had on enrolments/attendance at service/s you manage? (Prompts: Current enrolments and attendance (what is the impact)? Projected enrolments and attendance (what is the likely, or, possible impact)?)
- b. Have there been changes in operational processes (e.g., all day to sessional, particular age groups affected, opening hours), and why?

6 Funding

Can you tell me what impact COVID-19 has had on your service in terms of funding? In particular:

- a. Fees (charged/did not charge during lockdowns, leniency/free for some families on return, viability of service). If there has been a change in fees structure, what does this mean and are you happy to give an example (e.g. if fees lowered)?
- b. If applicable, would your service have been viable without the wage subsidy? Tell me about this? How was it used?
- c. Did your service apply for rent relief? Please tell me about this (Impact).
- d. Did your service apply for a Small Business Loan? How do you plan to pay this back in the future? What will the impact be on your service/s?

7 Challenges and opportunities

- a. Can you tell me what you see as the main challenges your service/s face due to COVID-19, and why? (e.g. staff losses)
- b. Are there any opportunities arising from Covid-19? (Discuss)
- c. What are the key lessons you have learned should your service go back into level 2, 3 or 4 lockdowns?
- d. What are your predictions for future viability for the service/s you manage?

8 Government policy

- a. What, if any, changes would you like to see in ECE policy to put your service/s and the sector on a sound footing in the future?
- b. Anything else you would like to say?

Thank you

Would you like a transcript?