

## Benefits and challenges of online learning for ECE tamariki and whānau: Strategies for kaiako.

Zahra Herrmann | New Zealand Tertiary College

*Early childhood education (ECE) is a complex sector that is highly responsive to contextual demands. However, with the rapid transition from classroom teaching to online communications and remote delivery due to Covid-19 restrictions, the early childhood sector finds itself in hitherto unknown territory. Since the start of the physical restrictions prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic, online teaching and learning has played an indispensable role in ECE programmes both internationally and throughout New Zealand. As one might expect, there are debates and discussions on the benefits and risks associated with engaging young tamariki (children) extensively in learning through Information and Communication Technology (ICT). This article will explore the benefits and challenges of online learning for tamariki, kaiako (teachers) and whānau (family) and offer strategies to support kaiako in developing and delivering teaching online.*

### Introduction

While kaiako guided by *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* curriculum advocate for tamariki to learn through play, hands-on experiences and investigation (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017), Covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions have necessitated the provision of remote learning technologies to further learning and maintain relationships with children and whānau. Although listed as an essential service, a close reading of the discourse suggests that ECE services were positioned by the Government as essential only in order for other essential services to continue (Gibbons & Tesar, 2020). However, my own experiences as a lecturer suggested that many ECE services were able to go above and beyond expectations by providing tamariki and whānau with support that was responsive not only to their learning needs but also to their social and emotional needs. It was largely felt that the kaiako response to the changes and introduction of innovative practices were a testimony to their professional commitment.

### Benefits of designing and delivering online programmes

Studies suggest numerous benefits of online teaching for kaiako, including increase in technical skills, improvements in partnership and communication with tamariki and families, and the opportunity to promote practice-based learning (Jones, 2020; Kim, 2020). It was also noted that kaiako were developing creative skills and increasing capabilities in the use of ICT as the situation demanded (McPake et al., 2013). During the pandemic, kaiako were encouraged by the affordances of technology to tailor their communications to the needs of tamariki, thus strengthening partnerships with whānau (Education Review Office [ERO], 2021). The benefits of using online learning through the pandemic also extended to supporting tamariki wellbeing beyond the lockdown period and their transition back to early childhood centres (ERO, 2021).

It is recognised that online learning has the potential to help tamariki develop their skills in thinking and can be an effective tool for learning (Edwards et al., 2018). Through online learning, tamariki can become familiar with digital technology and experience a wider range of learning activities in all subject content areas. The inclusion of interactive digital programmes provides tamariki with agency in making creative choices in painting, drawing, music and dance. Well-designed digital programmes can be utilised to promote children’s social skills such as turn taking and collaborating with peers (Dong et al., 2020). Opportunities for partnership with parents through remote technology can also support kaiako to identify tamariki interest and other information, making planning responsive and intentional. Supporting greater alignment between the home and centre settings, kaiako can help whānau design regular activities such as outside time, reading and other activities (Richards & Sotolongo, 2020). It is noted that all tamariki need the flexibility to adapt to new ways of learning, and therefore kaiako and whānau must work together to identify tamariki learning needs (Jones, 2020).

### **Challenges of designing and delivering online programmes for kaiako**

ICT can present challenges for kaiako. A major consideration for all kaiako is to ensure that the online environment kaiako provide is healthy and safe (Edwards et al., 2018). Mitchell et al. (2020) highlight that kaiako need to be aware of the content of online programmes for the early childhood age group and consider the appropriateness of content to ensure that the material is socially and culturally appropriate. A further challenge in designing, developing, and delivering effective online programmes is dependent upon kaiako efficacy (Hunia et al., 2020). Although kaiako have been using ICT as an integral part of their role, their ability to use ICT as a teaching tool to teach remotely signifies a shift in usage, meaning that many kaiako needed to learn new sets of skills (Kalogiannakis, 2010). A number of teachers have reported on the inherent difficulty in planning for infant and toddler online engagement (Jones, 2020), reflecting the view that children under the age of two “do not absorb content” (Canadian Pediatric Society, 2017, p. 462) from screens and have difficulty transferring learning from screens (2D) to real-life (3D).

### **Challenges of online learning for tamariki**

Tamariki may experience challenges when engaging in online learning programmes. Limitations of online learning for tamariki can vary, depending on their ability to access resources to participate in online programmes. For example, tamariki may not have access to computers or have limited experience and skills with computers. Therefore, a significant challenge for kaiako to consider is that young tamariki access to online learning depends on adult supervision, which may not always be practical. In addition, Kim (2020) suggests that online programmes may not provide sufficient learning opportunities for tamariki, who tend to learn through hands-on and active (kinesthetic) involvement. To help mitigate this challenge, kaiako may consider how to best enact their responsibility of being knowledgeable about alternative ways to support tamariki development that is stated in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) in an online learning context.

### **Whānau experiences**

Partnership with whānau is an essential contributing factor for better outcomes for tamariki in the early years (Hargraves, 2019; MoE, 2017). Thus, it is important to know whānau experiences of online learning. In the wake of lockdowns, parents’ feelings about online learning were mixed. Research into the impact of Covid-19 on tamariki and

parents in the United States, identified among the unexpected benefits of the shift to remote learning, parents perceived greater flexibility, experienced less stress, found more time to spend outside, more family time, and had improved relationships with siblings (Jones, 2020). While some parents found that lockdown restrictions resulted in more time spent with their tamariki, a stronger feeling of bonding and connecting, others considered online learning an additional burden to their busy lives (Garbe et al., 2020).

Challenges for online learners identified by parents included increased screen time, a lack of social engagement, a lack of focus or interest in online learning, technology-related issues such as access to devices or skill in using online platforms, a lack of ability to self-directed learning and boredom (Jones, 2020). Parents also reported issues of balancing their work commitment. These issues were multiplied for parents with more than one child learning online (Garbe et al., 2020).

### **Strategies for developing and delivering teaching online**

A review of the literature suggests that several steps are involved in developing and delivering effective resources online, which, like all other curriculum development, includes planning, implementing, evaluation and reflection. Essential points to consider when planning online programmes are:

- Develop interactive programmes to help tamariki participation and engagement.
- Develop and maintain effective communication with children and families.
- Reflect after each session to identify what went well and what might be improved next time.
- Consider the differences between the online learning environment and face-to-face teaching, and adjust your expectations.
- Use tamariki screen time wisely to maximise the benefits and limit tamariki exposure.
- Be creative in designing your project to encourage self-directed learning. For younger tamariki, less complicated programmes work best.
- Consider all subject content areas, including physical-education sessions that guide tamariki in movement as well as inviting tamariki to explore emotions.

### **Conclusion**

The ongoing pandemic on ECE impacts tamariki, whānau and kaiako in many ways. Given the uncertainty and changing government requirements due to Covid-19, kaiako and EC centres had responded in innovative and explorative ways. The way that kaiako provided online learning to ECE tamariki during lockdown shows their resilience, creativity and their strengths as they stepped up to face unprecedented challenges. They prepared and provided new experiences for tamariki and whānau at home. This article discussed the benefits and challenges faced by tamariki, whānau and kaiako during this time and has offered some strategies for kaiako in preparing online learning experiences for tamariki. As indicated in previous discussions, there were many positives to moving learning and teaching online which might be further accentuated in preparation for a greater use of online platforms in ECE.

## References

- Canadian Paediatric Society. (2017). Screen time and young tamariki: Promoting health and development in a digital world. *Paediatric Child Health*, 22(8), 461- 468 <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/pxx123>
- Dong, C., Cao, S., & Li, H. (2020). Young children's online learning during COVID-19 pandemic: Chinese parents' beliefs and attitudes. *Children and Youth Services review*, 118, 105-440. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105440>
- Edwards, S., Mantilla, A., Henderson, M., Nolan, A., Skouteris, H., & Plowman, L. (2018). Teacher practices for building young children concepts of the internet through play-based learning. *Educational Practice and Theory*, 40(1), 29–50. <https://doi.org/10.7459/ept/40.1.03>
- Education Review Office (2021). *Learning in a COVID-19 world: The impact of COVID-19 on Early Childhood Education*. Education Review Office. <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/learning-in-a-COVID-19-world-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-early-childhood-education>
- Garbe, A., Ogurlu, U., Logan, N., & Cook, P. (2020). COVID-19 and remote learning: Experiences of parents with children during the pandemic. *American Journal of Qualitative Research*. 4(3), 45-65. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/8471>
- Gibbons, A., & Tesar, M. (2020). The 'new normal' and 'new normalisations in early childhood education policy in Aotearoa New Zealand: Learnings from Covid-19. *New Zealand annual review of education*. 25,5-19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26686/nzaroe.v25.6911>
- Hargraves, V. (2019). *What is parent partnership*. The Education Hub. <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/what-is-parent-partnership/#:~:text=Parent%20partnership%20involves%20early%20childhood,curriculum%20decisions%20about%20children's%20learning>.
- Hunia, R., Salim, S., McNaughton, S., Menzies, R., Gluckman, P., & Bardsley, A. (2020). *Addressing Rangatahi Education: challenges after COVID-19. A partnership report by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei and Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures*. The University of Auckland. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/Addressing-rangatahi-education.pdf>
- Jones, D. (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on young children, families and teachers*. Defending the early years. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED609168.pdf>
- Kalogiannakis, M. (2010). Training with ICT for ICT from the trainer's perspective. A local ICT teacher training experience. *Education and Information Technologies*, 15(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-008-9079-3>
- Kim, J. (2020). Learning and teaching online during COVID-19: Experiences of student teachers in an early childhood education practicum. *International Journal of Early Childhood*. 52, 145-158. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-020-00272-6>
- McPake, J., Plowman, L., & Stephen, C. (2013). Preschool children creating and communicating with digital technologies in the home. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 44(3), 421–431. [https://pure.strath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/33716756/Pre\\_school\\_Children\\_creating\\_and\\_communicating\\_REVMar2012.pdf](https://pure.strath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/33716756/Pre_school_Children_creating_and_communicating_REVMar2012.pdf)
- Ministry of Education, (2017). *Te whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa Early childhood curriculum*. Author.

Mitchell, L., Meagher-Lundberg, P., & Wells, C. (2020). *Impact of Covid-19 on the early childhood education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. Report 2: Interviews with managers*. Te Pūtahi Rangahau Mātaranga o Wilf Malcolm. Wilf Malcolm Institute of Education. The University of Waikato.

Richards, D.E., Sotolongo, J. (2020, May). *5 ways early care and education providers can support children's remote learning during the COVID-19*. Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/5-ways-early-care-and-education-providers-can-support-children-remote-learning-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic>