Innovative ways of promoting whānau/family wellbeing during times of unpredictability and change in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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In this article for practitioners, the authors collaborate with student teachers, teachers, and families from early childhood settings throughout Aotearoa New Zealand to present an overview of how teaching practices were reimagined in innovative ways to promote the wellbeing of whānau during these unprecedented times. The authors discuss the holistic view of wellbeing and highlight how this is supported through a te ao Māori perspective. During the pandemic, teachers were able to strengthen partnerships with whānau and create a support system that resulted in meaningful learning and engagement for all stakeholders.

Introduction

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers forged a distinctive role in online teaching to connect with and support ongoing education, relationships and wellbeing for children and their families as teachers worked remotely. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Williams et al. (2012) highlight the principle of kanohi ki te kanohi (face to face) communication as important in building reciprocal, responsive relationships with whānau (parents and family). Kaiako have engaged with whānau in this way daily in the years prior to the pandemic but now new ways to communicate, that allowed for flexibility in location, resources and time, were needed in an environment that required social distancing and working from home. Early childhood settings responded quickly using a variety of ways to maintain partnership with whānau including online video meetings through Zoom and Microsoft Teams, telephone calls, chat, and Facebook groups.

In writing this article, the authors were able to connect with a number of families from Auckland directly impacted by the consequences of lockdown, and invited the participation of students and centre managers to inform this article. Their insights highlighted the strength and flexibility such avenues provided in maintaining constructive communication between teachers and children, teachers and whānau, children and whānau, and even whānau to whānau. While online platforms were primarily developed to support children with their ongoing learning, teachers and managers identified that they could also be used to support the wellbeing of whānau (Education Review Office [ERO], 2021). In this article the authors echo the concept that whānau wellbeing is directly related to children's wellbeing, and is paramount to how children learn in the early childhood setting and at home, particularly during times of unpredictability and change. The authors further explain how digital platforms that are used to support children can also be used to sustain relationships with whānau through such times.

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Promoting whānau holistic wellbeing

Aotearoa/New Zealand's early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa:* Ministry of Education [MoE], (2017) upholds that consistent, quality care should promote and protect the wellbeing of the child. The child is embedded within their whanau. Therefore, the child's health, wellbeing and learning is directly impacted by the wellbeing of their whānau. Stable, responsive environments that support children's identity, confidence and holistic wellbeing and development are essential (MoE, 2017). This concept of holistic wellbeing interdependency is noted in the Māori health model of Te Whare Tapa Whā (Ministry of Health, 2015). There, Taha whānau (family health) is recognised as one of the four dimensions in the holistic wellbeing of the child, including Taha hinengaro (mental including emotional health), Taha tinana (physical health) and Taha wairua (spiritual health). When one dimension is out of balance the child's holistic wellbeing is affected. This also resonates with the view of the child as nested within whānau and the immediate community as highlighted in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Bronfenbrenner identifies the influence of whānau on the child and the reciprocity of this relationship. Those located in the microsystem also have direct influence on the child, including home, early learning setting, whānau and kaiako (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The power of connections between these contexts increases when strong relationships are formed. While unpredictability and instability such as the emotional and economic effects of Covid-19 lockdowns, could detrimentally affect the development of the child, this can be mitigated by the ongoing support and connections between contexts such as centre and home (Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Roberts, 2017).

Riwai-Couch, (as cited in Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2020) explains the importance of developing and maintaining strong partnerships with whānau, valuing children's learning across contexts in strengthening quality education, supporting equitable outcomes, and honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi. This Treaty-based practice connects to Kaupapa Māori where whānau are intrinsically and intimately involved in their child's assessment process bringing their strong sense of identity, belonging, rights and commitment to the child's learning and development (MoE, 2009). Therefore, building strong relationships and working in partnership with whānau, considering their wellbeing before planning for their children's learning is crucial. These meaningful, respectful, reciprocal relationships connect to Māori concepts of whanaungatanga (partnership), manaakitanga (caring and sharing), aroha (love and respect) and whakaiti (humility) (Pere, 1997, as cited in Chaffey et. al., 2017). While these relationships and corresponding concepts are traditionally evident within the early learning settings and included in their philosophies, the authors promote the view that teachers can nurture whānau relationships and wellbeing across distances through digital platforms tailored to their individual needs. Covid-19 caused teachers to redefine ways to engage with children and whānau since the first lockdown occurred in March 2020. During this first and subsequent Covid-19 lockdowns, kaiako shifted their practice to digital platforms in order to teach and maintain relationships with tamariki and whānau from remote working locations. As teaching moved online, so too did the support for the wellbeing of tamariki, and therefore whānau wellbeing.

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Supporting whānau needs

During the Covid-19 pandemic, both in Aotearoa/New Zealand and globally, teachers recognised the connection between child and parent wellbeing, thus included whānau support in their regular contact (ERO, 2021; Gerdes at el.,2021). In Aotearoa/New Zealand the Education Review Office (ERO) found that 55% of leaders they interviewed identified that supporting the wellbeing of whānau was paramount to their response to the present-day pandemic scenario (ERO, 2021). Furthermore, 18% of service leaders identified support for the emotional needs of vulnerable whānau, assisting with food items and lowering fees to reduce financial burdens. In some locations, whānau were advised to just pay what they could afford (Mitchell et al., 2020). Some, predominantly smaller centres and kindergartens, also collaborated with local iwi and support organisations to provide access to, and distribute, food and clothing to whānau in need (ERO, 2021). The authors talked to student teachers who shared the emotional support they and their early childhood settings provided, as they delivered food and resources in farming communities (during the calving season) and in vulnerable urban communities. It was evident that support was actioned across the nation.

One student teacher explained:

> "During lockdown, a concern that I had was with the wellbeing of our tamariki and their whānau. So, I found that the Marae was an awesome support. I have a strong relationship with the local Marae, and had asked for further resources to support whānau and the wider community, including Waikato Tainui, and other neighbouring hapū. We were able to provide support with food, clothing, household items and sanitising packs and masks that helped families and the wider community."

While kaiako recognised the need to continue to develop relationships and support whānau and children's wellbeing during lockdown, there were barriers and challenges that could constrain this from happening. It is important to note that when parents were earlier invited and encouraged to visit their children's early childhood settings, during lockdown kaiako became manuhuri/visitors in the children's homes (Johnson, as cited in Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2020). This required new ways of inviting engagement with children and whānau. One service leader explained how the initial lockdown occurred so quickly that the centre was unprepared for it and they did not know the best way to communicate with families (ERO, 2021). Managing whānau and community anxiety was identified as a challenge (ERO, 2021, Mitchell et al., 2020). Also, some whānau expressed financial concerns and fear of unemployment due to the number and length of lockdowns. Whānau admitted to being overwhelmed by the impact of the pandemic as they juggled home, work, and school. Constant pivoting occurred as incoming information caused frequent changes in the pandemic response and home life, especially during the prolonged Auckland lockdown. According to Garrity and Canavon (2017), financial and employment stresses, along with complex and conflicting work schedules, time constraints, ill health, and restricted communication can affect relationship building between kaiako and whānau. While this could occur at any time, it was a heightened challenge during lockdowns. These stresses may explain some of the reduced engagement from whānau that student teachers and early childhood settings confided with the authors towards the end of the prolonged Auckland lockdown.

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Connecting with whānau

With face-to-face contact unavailable or restricted, the teachers the authors spoke to connected with whānau through diverse online platforms such as Zoom, Messenger, WhatsApp, Storypark, Educa, Teams, and Facebook; frequently using a variety of these to establish and maintain ongoing relationships and support children's learning. For these to be successful, whānau required smartphones, internet access and computers or tablets. Not having access to these could restrict the involvement of children and whānau due to limited connectivity, lack of devices or the number of people vying for household devices as whānau and children worked and learnt online simultaneously. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, ERO (2021) explained that 17% of early childhood leaders found supporting whānau without access to the internet or digital technology a challenge. Moreover, depending on the context of the families, online learning was reported as a stressful experience for those whānau who were not equipped to support children with the use of technology. Some whānau had different age groups of children at home or children who required additional learning needs (Charteris & Page, 2021). To navigate challenges of online learning, many teachers instigated regular phone calls. Research by ERO (2021) shows that over 50% of leaders identified phone calls as their main source of communication, followed by Zoom, Educa and Storypark, then Facebook and email. Teachers collaboratively planned and organised these through online meetings to ensure whānau were contacted and supported.

One student teacher shared:

> "The extra-long lockdown made us curious about the wellbeing of our children and families who were not so frequent on Storypark or Zoom sessions. So, we decided to make a wellbeing call to all of our key children, thereby covering each child as a team as part of our planning. Through text messaging, we first took a suitable time for the parents to talk and rang them in the window agreed by them. We personally talked to the parents about the emotional state of their families, about the children, and offered our support if needed and possible. Our parents appreciated our efforts to call each parent and render a feel-good feeling."

Many early childhood settings held mat-times via Zoom which primarily supported children's education, relationships, and sense of belonging. One parent explained how it provided her with an opportunity to see and talk to other parents, kaiako and children. Zoom mat-times were something to look forward to and provided her with peace of mind as her child was able to maintain relationships during lockdown. There was a sense of participation in a community of learners too. One whānau member commented, "*During the Zoom calls we were asked how we are coping and every parent attending could freely talk with the teachers and other parents about the struggles and challenges while being in lockdown*". There were important, ongoing effects from the relational based, supportive experiences teachers provided whānau with. This was explained by a whānau member, "*We built better relationships with his teacher and the centre in general during each L3 lockdown because we all had the time to chat properly. We have no family in NZ and so our daycare is a huge support system for us and they welcome that.*"

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The authors also found that whānau preferences of how they stayed connected with centres varied across the Auckland region, highlighting the need for teachers to know the individual whānau in their early childhood settings. While in one area of the city, students explained how whānau engagement increased through personally calling each home, in another, whānau preferred Facebook, StoryPark and Educa as their familiarity with these platforms, and the privacy they ensured, reduced barriers to engagement. One whānau expressed frustration as her child's centre emailed her up to three times a day, adding to the sense of information overload she was feeling during the prolonged Auckland lockdown. While the centre was active in supporting the child's learning, this response highlights the importance of teachers knowing their whānau, recognising their preferences, and engaging in flexible practices in order to reach them.

Conclusion

Even when there has been a substantial effect on the whole system of teaching and learning in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, teachers, through learning from their experiences, have bridged the gap between centres and whānau. Kaiako have formed an effective connection as much as possible. Amidst online teaching, the importance of whānau holistic wellbeing was identified, thus linked to positive learning outcomes for children. The foundations of the strong relationships that were built beforehand with whānau, were evident in the continued connections and support offered throughout the pandemic, but by introducing frequent and sustained connection using varied means of online platforms that were initially used for children's learning. This also opened a virtual doorway for teachers to not only strengthen partnership but intentionally create a support system, which also resulted in meaningful learning and engagement by all the stakeholders.

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