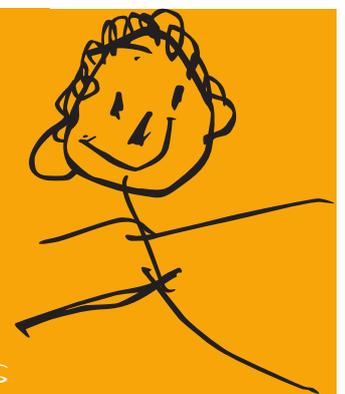


Early Education



Volume 67 Spring / Summer 2021

- TLIF Round 5: The use of tools for reviewing shifts in practice and learning outcomes
- Reflections on the role of teachers in contemporary ECE: Pedagogy, leadership and engagement with fathers
- The past, present and future of rural playcentres
- ECE and COVID-emotional factors for teachers and leaders
- Supporting Associate Teachers across the years





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Editors

Prof Claire McLachlan,
The University of Waikato

Dr Karyn Aspden,
Massey University

Associate Professor Sally Peters,
The University of Waikato

Design and layout

Margaret Drummond

Our thanks to our reviewers

Karyn Aspden, Monica Cameron, Glynne Mackey, Claire McLachlan, Jessica Smith and Sue Stover

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Contributions

Contributions of articles and photos are welcome from the early childhood community.

Early Education welcomes:

- Innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words and up to five keywords.
- Research informed papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords.
- Think pieces with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

Contributions can be sent to the 2022 editors

Claire McLachlan:
cmclachlan@waikato.ac.nz

Karyn Aspden:
k.m.aspden@massey.ac.nz

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Survey of emotional factors for early years educators during the Delta lockdown of 2021

Kirstine Rapson

Background

Having enjoyed the insular life in Auckland after being in lockdown for a few weeks, I decided it was time to catch up with friends again. I spoke with three friends - also early years teachers, giving me some food for thought. The conversations had all started with the usual pleasantries. "How are you doing? How are the kids? How are you coping with having your husband around all the time?". Invariably, however, the talk went to the obvious subject affecting us all—lockdown and working during lockdown. The friends I had spoken with are a centre manager and two other teachers, each of whom had vastly different experiences during this time. Some of the things they shared with me were positive, but other aspects were just awful. Prior to this, the only insights I had gained about how early years educators were finding lockdown were the feelings and thoughts of my colleagues and through forum posts that had been shared. Many of the forum posts I saw were negative—sometimes bordering on scathing. Had I taken these forum posts as gospel I would have assumed that the dissenting undercurrent apparent in them was true across the board for most teachers and managers, yet after talking to only three friends I realised that what the people in our profession went through was varied and complex.

There was, however, one brief part of a conversation that caused me to step back, think and ponder how we as a collective group of teachers had experienced this latest lockdown. My near and dear friend (who I have always looked upon as having the strength of an All Black's scrum) nearly caused my heart to break when she said, "I checked on my staff individually at least three times a week. I made sure they were okay and felt no pressure. I shared everything I knew and made sure they were taking care of themselves and their families first. But," she asked, "who checked in on me to make sure I was okay?".

This soundbite got me thinking about how other teachers and managers felt during this time. What were the needs and expectations of managers and teaching staff? Were they different? Did managers and centre owners know what their staff needed in order to make it through with a sense of wellbeing? Did teachers check in on their managers and enquire after their wellbeing? Did we support each other enough, and what did we need to feel supported? Did the response to lockdown change across regions of the country? What were the things that we could take away from this time to improve how we might respond to national emergency situations or used as best practice examples for us as teaching professionals in the future?

Feeling compelled to find out more, I again enlisted my three close friends and asked them two questions. What was important to them

related to work during lockdown, and what did they feel they needed? I formulated a plan for how to conduct the research and how to make it confidential, then I checked in with a very trusted person (who was also my past lecturer) about the validity of what I was thinking of doing, if there was a chance to submit an article, and if the idea and process looked sound. Once I was told to go ahead (with a publication suggested), I had six weeks to get it done. The answers provided by my friends, and additional conversations I had with colleagues, formed the basis of a questionnaire sent out for national response through two Facebook teachers pages, as well as being shared with contacts in the industry. The questionnaire was created using Jotform and included some generic questions about years in the industry, location in the country and centre size that would not identify a person, however, should anyone want to withdraw their response I would be able to find their form and delete it.

A collective narrative

The responses I received from the 20 teachers and seven managers from up and down the country, from large and small centres—with experience in early years education ranging from a few months to many years—are what have informed this collective narrative about the initial weeks of the Delta lockdown of 2021.

August 17th started out as a day like any other we had enjoyed over the preceding weeks and months. Discussions were had about the goings on in the centre. Learning was documented. Laughs were had, and the end of the day was getting ever closer. We were at 170 days with no community transmission of COVID-19, and while we knew it was still out there, we had seemingly beaten this virus. Then, with a call that rang out across our land, “There’s been a community case confirmed in Auckland!”, we got the news we hoped wouldn’t come: COVID was back in our midst. The words seemed to be untrue. Surely it couldn’t be. Yet, it was true, and our world was about to change again.

Up and down Aotearoa New Zealand we prepared ourselves for what we knew was inevitably to come. A national Level 4 lockdown was announced, and we collectively held our breaths in anticipation of how bad it would be this time. We had heard that the Delta variant was more transmissible, and was more dangerous, but we had conquered the virus before, we could do it again. We could, right?

Concerns

There were initial concerns from all of the teachers who responded. These teachers expressed concern around how long lockdown would last this time and if they would be paid or not. Three teachers speculated about whether they would have a job to go back to after lockdown finished. Some centres had barely survived the last Level 4 lockdown, would they survive another one—especially in low socio-economic areas? One centre was expecting a visit from ERO and the teacher in this situation had concerns about how it would be affected by lockdown. One teacher was troubled about not having gathered enough resources for group times and work to do during lockdown, and another wondered how to go on with children’s learning. Weighing heavily on the minds of many of the teachers was how the children and families would cope with having to go through this again, and of course there was the very real threat of the virus itself. Would our own families, our communities, and ourselves be safe now that we had the virus in our country, considering the vaccination rates we had at the time?

Managers and centre owners had trepidations as well. They too wondered how long it would last this time and worried about the impact of another lockdown on staff, children, and whānau. As friends and families were found to be at the epicentre of one of the largest outbreaks, one manager had very real concerns about how to juggle “their own personal feelings and concentration levels, their own family needs, keeping up to date with information to share, and on top of that the

needs and wellbeing of the staff and families they felt a responsibility towards". Another manager felt consternation around whether their team would have to take less pay and have more paperwork to do at home. One manager shared that the priority for the team was that they had someone to talk to and off-load to if needed during this time when they were going through personal stress and anxiety. This manager did not want to overload the team with unnecessary information that could further exacerbate the stress and anxiety they were already feeling and so was careful to share only information pertinent to them. Of the seven managers, only one had no initial concerns and felt confident that their team was well prepared to support families, having been through this before.

The centre managers and owners disclosed a variety of concerns held by their teams. Some of the challenges their teams faced included doing tasks such as internal reviews away from each other. Online videos for tamariki (children) were another challenge some of the team members battled with as well.

Communication and information sharing

Facing the reality of the situation we now found ourselves in, it was time to find out more information so we could hunker down, empty the supermarket shelves of toilet paper, and get on with lockdown (again). Whether from Auckland, Tauranga, the Waikato, Napier, Taranaki, Manawatu, the Wellington region, or as far south as Ashburton, all teachers shared that initial contact from their manager or team leader was made within the first 24 hours, and for some, immediately after the lockdown announcement was made. All respondents in a governance position also reported that they were in communication with their teams immediately. As the days went by, the main sources of information for managers and centre owners were TV and online news updates, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health updates, Government announcements, and through contact with the Ministry of Education.

The teachers used the same methods to keep updated, however they also used social media platforms, including the Teachers Advocacy Facebook Page.

According to responses from the questionnaire, after the initial contact was made, the types, methods and frequency of communication and information shared varied greatly from teacher to teacher. Sadly, one teacher reported that when the teachers at their centre questioned being paid 80% of their normal pay, the manager ceased all contact from that point on. The only other contact this teacher had from their management team was from the owner a couple of times to check on how the teacher had supported families, and then again to inform them that they would be going back to work at Level 3 with bubbles of 10 children. Unfortunately, this teacher left their job, and equally unfortunately, this teacher was not alone. Another educator described having minimal contact with their manager, that the concerns expressed were dismissed, and ultimately this teacher also left their job as well. Yet another teacher told of getting information from the management team that was contradictory to what was in the Ministry of Education Bulletins, and that queries were not responded to in what the teacher thought was a satisfactory manner. This teacher divulged there was a lot of pressure around work tasks while working full time hours and receiving 80% of pay, and that they felt there was no care for the wellbeing of the staff.

Thankfully, while these experiences are harrowing to read, they are the exception rather than the norm amongst the responses regarding communication lines with their leadership team. The remaining teachers wrote of contact being made as often as daily, and at least weekly. Of the teachers who replied to the questionnaire, 15 said that they had no questions that their management team couldn't answer at the time, and if there were questions that couldn't be clarified at the time, the responses were made quickly. In regard to contact with the lead team, one teacher wrote, "Our Manager's concern has always been our

safety and wellbeing, she has been checking in to ensure we are ok, what is happening, and how can we make it better if there are concerns.”.

One of the more disconcerting issues raised by team managers were the delays with communication from the Ministry of Education, particularly as centres were looking to re-open. This sentiment was expressed by all but one of the centre managers or owners.

Work during lockdown

Working during lockdown was no longer unusual, and each setting had different tasks for teachers to complete during this time. Most respondents reported there was an expectation to work whether by joining in on online professional development courses and webinars, or completing learning stories, internal evaluations, and teacher appraisals. Maintaining contact with children and whānau through online methods, including recorded and live mat times, and at home activity ideas were also expected to be done. How many of these tasks were set and the time frames for them to be achieved varied from centre to centre. Some centres had deadlines and others assigned tasks as a suggestion only for those who wanted to do them. Some teachers thoroughly enjoyed this style of working from home, and others found that the workload was yet another stress put upon them in an already stressful situation, particularly if they had school aged children with their own online learning to fit in as well—a sentiment also expressed by one of the responding managers. One manager collaboratively set goals with the teaching team based on what they as a whole team, felt was the best way to go ahead with working at home. Another manager felt that the team was the foremost priority and that their wellbeing and family came first, although there was still the expectation of daily online learning and that connections with the families were maintained. The continued process of completing internal reviews was the priority for another manager.

Concerns prior to re-opening

As time wore on and the virus affected the regions of country to differing degrees, relaxing of the lockdown constraints began to happen, albeit in stages and at different rates for different areas. Just as there were concerns when lockdown was first announced, there were also concerns prior to centres re-opening post lockdown, although six respondents reported that they had no issues with returning to work while still under some form of lockdown. The health and safety of staff and children along with mask wearing guidelines were the biggest cause for concern for those who were apprehensive about a return to centre life. Along with these worries were uncertainties around how the bubbles would work, how to juggle school aged children at home with the needs of working, having children in the centre who were perceived as not needing to be there, and difficulties deciphering the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health guidelines.

Planning for re-opening

How centres came up with plans to re-open differed vastly. Managers reported some of the plans were set by the leadership teams based upon Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health guidelines, and using WorkSafe plans, then passed on to the teaching team. Other centres took the opportunity to collaborate as a full team with management and teachers (either individually or as a group) to decode the information they had and set the plan together. Having been through lockdowns before, using guidelines and expectations from previous times was another way centres made their plans to re-open. For some of the managers, acknowledging the situations of each team member and their children drove their decision making when it came to how staff were rostered, and in another case, teachers were rostered on alternatively per week to keep the bubble small. Due to staffing constraints, one centre did not re-open again until Level 2.

Teachers reported differing ways plans were set to re-open. Re-opening plans set by management and the passed on to the teams were reported by six of the teachers. One teacher stated the plan was well thought out, and two others said the plan was set collaboratively, while one team set a plan in place at the beginning of the year as a precaution in case there were further lockdowns. Three teachers reported that they were unsure of how the plan was set, while two wrote the plan was based on bubbles, two that it was based on the needs of parents, and the remaining three stated that the plan was the same as previous lockdowns.

Wellbeing and stress management

Half of the teachers who replied said that their health and wellbeing was checked on by their managers, and half said it was not. Of the seven managers who replied to the questionnaire, five stated that their staff checked in on their wellbeing, while of the remaining two managers, one was not checked in on at all, and the other had the centre owner checking in regularly after they expressed their stress and that they didn't have a person to talk with. Most managers who responded were more concerned with the stress levels of their staff rather than looking after themselves first, however of all the 27 people who responded, two either needed the use of medication, or had to modify their prescription in order to cope with the pressures and stress levels they felt during this lockdown. One manager felt unsupported by her team and was very grateful for her husband, saying that without him she didn't know she would have coped, which was a very heart-warming statement to see. While saddened that this professional didn't feel supported from her team, it was a reminder that work is not the only place we can (or should in some instances) get the comfort we need during times of stress, pressure, and uncertainty. While some did not disclose the ways they managed stress levels, other ways people alleviated their stress levels were through exercise and self-help methods, taking up a hobby, and largely by sharing with their

colleagues. Only one teacher and one manager stated that they didn't feel stressed during this time.

Overall ratings

So, what was the overall take of being a part of an early years learning centre during this Delta lockdown? Of the managers and centre owners, four of the seven reported feeling generally positive about how it went, one felt extremely positive, one neither positive nor negative, and one felt somewhat negative. It is a possibility that the managers and centre owners who responded to the survey were those who felt that they did a good job during the lockdown, and those who questioned their own performance did not. However, these respondents were also generally positive about their team, the work they did, their interactions and information sharing with their teams.

Of the teachers who responded, an alarming quarter felt extremely negative about how they perceived the handling of this lockdown at their centre. It is worthwhile noting that of these five, two subsequently left their jobs, and one had some very negative experiences.

What next

So, what is the takeaway message from all of this? Where to next? How can this information guide us as professionals? Going forward we can all learn from this experience. Individually it be that this Delta lockdown heightened feelings of togetherness or solitude, security within a team, or isolation. The teams who felt the most positive about their experience identified the following features: they felt they were still part of a team; they felt secure; had frequent and open lines of communication; considered their wellbeing was being looked after; and felt as though their concerns were valid and responded to. The teams who were the strongest were the ones who upheld the values associated with being in a caring profession. Care, communication, responsiveness. Surely our care for each other and the needs we each have must be higher on our priority lists, or how can we care for the

children we teach? This simple lesson is one to take forward if we are to be on a constant trajectory of growth and development as teachers.

A learning story of Delta 2021 for teachers follows:

The teachers of Aotearoa New Zealand faced another challenging time during the Delta lockdown of 2021, and yet again proved that they are learners capable of dealing with adversity while upholding the standards that help to define this as an industry of professionals.

The teaching standard of Professional Learning was upheld through reflection early on during the year and formulating a plan should this situation ever happen again (as it did). Teachers participated in professional learning, and many discussions were had with colleagues and whānau to share information and ideas. Ways were found to actively contribute to the learning of the children and to reflect on their own growth as well. Teachers found

ways to still encourage fun and play with children—whether through recorded or live mat times, fortifying the link between home and centre life, and showing the importance of being a part of a learning-focused culture even though teachers, whānau, and tamariki had their individual challenges to face.

Through information sharing and finding ways to simulate physical presence, the importance of children and teachers still feeling a sense of belonging in the centre was recognised, and while communication between teachers and whānau was sometimes difficult, ways were found to show the commitment to each other. Through it all though, teachers found ways to do one of the most important aspects of being an early years teacher—they found ways to still engage with and have fun with the children. Teachers should be very proud of themselves.