

Covid-19: Impact on schools and early childhood services

Interim Report, August 2020

Overview

ERO has a comprehensive and fast-tracked work programme underway to understand the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on students, services and schools, and on teaching and learning in Aotearoa New Zealand in the English and Māori medium education sectors. Given the speed with which Covid-19 is developing, ERO is providing interim findings to inform the response by the Government, schools and early childhood services. This report is the second of the series of preliminary findings from this work.

In June we published the first paper [Covid-19: Learning in Lockdown](#) – which focused on findings from our survey in lockdown of 10,000 students and 700 teachers. The survey indicated areas of potential concern related to teacher wellbeing and student engagement. We have followed this up through interviews with schools and services.

This update sets out the preliminary findings from interviews with 95 early childhood service providers and 110 schools¹. In the English medium sector, the interviews with early years services began in July 2020 with service leaders and will continue to the end of August 2020. For schools, interviews with principals and Board Chairs took place from the middle of June 2020 to late July 2020 and a further round of interviews are underway in term 3. In the Māori medium sector, ERO's specialist Māori medium evaluation and review team, Te Uepū ā-Motu, gathered Covid-19 insights alongside Māori medium partners, Kōhanga reo, Puna reo, Te Aho Matua Kura Kaupapa Māori, Ngā Kura ā Iwi and Ngā Kura Motuhake. The interviews focused on three things:

- what helped during the lockdown?
- how well are students transitioning back to services and schools?
- what are the ongoing challenges?

These preliminary findings indicate areas where services, schools, learners and whānau currently need support and

how we prepare and respond in the event of another lockdown.

In the next phase of work, we will be conducting further interviews, focus groups and a follow up survey of students, teachers and kaiako to:

- examine the impact on students' learning and attainment
- identify effective innovation and teaching strategies both during lockdown and on return to school
- assess the ongoing impact on student, teacher, kaiako and principal wellbeing and the drivers of it
- investigate further the impact on Boards of Trustees
- understand in more depth what has worked for Māori and Pacific learners.

Early Childhood Services

What helped during the lockdown?

Three themes have been identified as helping during lockdown.

Regular and clear communication. Regular and clear communication with kaiako, parents and whānau has been a key priority for all services. Nearly all services (around 80%) reported that they had contacted parents and whānau over the lockdown period. Most communication occurred online and included:

1. sharing relevant information about the different phases of the lockdown
2. what the lockdown meant for the service
3. supporting parents to engage with their children's learning
4. maintaining relationships.

¹ Further interviews are underway. At this point low decile schools are overrepresented in the sample and ECE provision in Auckland is not included.

Supporting parents and whānau. Nearly half of services reported that their kaiako had encouraged and supported parents to help their children learn at home. A fifth of services provided curriculum experiences online for children to participate in, which included literacy, music and dance. Other support provided by services included providing information related to children's behaviour and support for families who were struggling financially. Over a third of services provided Ministry of Education resource packs to children. In addition, a third of kindergartens and home-based education and care services said they provided their own resource packs to parents and whānau.

Support from the Ministry. Two-thirds of services reported that the Ministry of Education bulletin provided "very useful and succinct information". Nearly a third of services (around 30%) commented on the supportive telephone calls and guidance provided by the Ministry of Education regional offices.

How well are children and whānau transitioning back into services?

Service leaders identified two key factors in transitioning children back into their service.

Gradual reopening helped. Nearly half of services reported that the gradual reopening of their service helped them transition children back on site. The staggered re-opening allowed time to inform parents and whānau of new routines and enabled kaiako to establish new health and safety protocols.

Anxiety was an issue. Around one-in-three services reported anxiety among their parents and kaiako. Services reported that many of their parents expressed anxiety about their child returning to the service. Kaiako provided reassurance to parents about their preparedness to manage new health and safety protocols and shared how they would continue to educate and care for their child, stressing that "kaiako would still hug their child". Nearly half of services reported that their children's wellbeing and sense of belonging has been a major focus as they transition back into the service. Re-familiarising children with the routines and supporting them to reconnect with their peers has been a priority.

What are the ongoing challenges?

Across early childhood services four ongoing challenges are emerging.

Kaiako stress. Kaiako spent considerable time reassuring parents who were experiencing anxiety related to or exacerbated by Covid-19. This placed an extra strain on kaiako who were often experiencing anxiety themselves. Strategies that some services used to support their staff included discussing their concerns with them, funding

counselling and enabling kaiako to return to work when they felt ready. One-in-ten services indicated that if this situation was repeated, they would "focus on staff wellbeing" earlier.

Kaiako sick leave. Staff absences due to sickness were reported in a fifth of services. For some services, finding day-to-day relievers is becoming a challenge. This may result in services not being able to access enough qualified kaiako, which could impact on their funding. This was identified as an area of concern more often in education and care services than in other service types.

Reduced attendance. Early childhood services were asked about the longer term impact of Covid-19 on their service. Less than a fifth of these services indicated that their rolls had reduced or children were attending fewer hours. These services are more likely to be education and care services. There is a growing awareness that when the wage subsidy is removed this may affect children's attendance. The sector is also concerned that "frequent absences due to children being sick will affect funding". Early childhood services who rely on seasonal workers or tourism workers reported having to operate with a decreased roll. For example, all three Hawkes Bay services in our sample reported a drop in the number of children enrolled.

Vulnerable groups. Services expressed concern that children with additional needs had not progressed as expected in their development and learning. Contributing to this concern is the anxiety of kaiako and whānau that there is a longer wait time following the lockdown period as early intervention services are "catching up on their workload". Another challenge was being able to communicate with parents and whānau who had limited English. This was reported by one-in-ten services. Different strategies were employed by leaders including drawing on the language expertise within the teaching team and employing someone from the community who can liaise with these families.

Alongside these challenges, services reported two positive developments.

Greater engagement with parents and whānau. Kaiako and whānau had time to engage in conversations about their children during lockdown. Services would like to retain this stronger connection.

Confidence and use of digital technologies. Kaiako confidence in use of digital technologies has significantly developed during lockdown. They have used a range of approaches to communicate with children, parents and their early childhood service with Zoom, online early childhood web-based software, email and Facebook being the most popular. Some leaders have identified the possibility of continuing to use digital technologies for staff meetings or parent and kaiako meetings.

Schools

What helped during the lockdown?

Four themes have been identified as helping schools during lockdown.

Being prepared. Two-thirds of the schools reported that they had successfully prepared for lockdown. Factors associated with schools who reported being prepared included using digital technology as an established part of their teaching practice and having up-to-date contact details for learners and whānau. Some of these schools reported that they had been planning and preparing in advance of any official guidance, based on their own monitoring of the pandemic, nationally and internationally. Schools were not asked directly if they felt they were prepared for the lockdown. However, around a third of schools we talked to did not mention being prepared for the lockdown as one of their success factors in responding to Covid-19.

Ministry of Education and others' support. Nearly half of leaders expressed positive feedback about the Ministry of Education's communications and bulletins, while noting that it was often difficult to keep up with the quantity of guidance and the pace of change as the situation developed. The distribution of digital devices was challenging but leaders were positive about the Ministry's physical learning packs. Some leaders also reported that they had been well supported by their Kāhui Ako, other regional networks or professional networks. Board Chairs were very positive about the advice and guidance they had received from the New Zealand School Trustees Association.

Strong communications. Many leaders reported that regular communication helped to build teacher relationships with whānau and gave whānau greater insight into their children's learning. Teachers used a combination of phone calls, emails, video calling and other digital platforms to regularly check in with learners and whānau. This was key to maintaining learner engagement, and as a way of monitoring learner and whānau wellbeing. Around a third of leaders specifically cited greater whānau involvement and integration of home and school learning as a success over the lockdown period. In the Māori medium education sector, leaders strengthened their communication with their kura whānau, which they reported had a profound calming and reassuring impact on whānau, kaiako and the wider community.

Prioritising wellbeing. Nearly three-quarters (around 70%) of leaders reported that they had explicitly prioritised learner wellbeing over academic learning during lockdown. Leaders recognised that they could not expect the normal level of engagement and workload during lockdown and

made clear to learners and whānau that learning was second to wellbeing. Some schools reported modifying their curriculum to include more fun activities, and to encourage learners to engage in physical activity as appropriate.

Wellbeing was also the main priority for leaders across the Māori medium education sector, which included the health, safety and physical needs (emotional, cultural and spiritual) of whānau and kaiako.

Schools also played a critical role in the broader community.

In around a quarter of schools, leaders reported that they had distributed care packages, including food parcels and clothing, to whānau in their community, often in conjunction with KidsCan or local marae. These were largely low decile schools.

Just under a third (around 30%) of leaders reported having concerns for the safety of some of their learners in their home situations. In some cases, schools notified Oranga Tamariki or police.

In the Māori medium education sector, leaders used their knowledge of whānau to tailor their support and utilised existing systems and processes to provide a range of resources to whānau, which included food, clothing, hygiene packs and shelter. Leaders were guided by tikanga to meet the needs of their kaiako and ākongā. They also supported pakeke and kaumātua in their iwi and hapū.

How well are students transitioning back into schools?

Two-thirds of schools identified their transition of students back to on-site schooling as a success. The factors that supported this were:

- taking a phased approach to re-opening through the alert levels
- identifying learners who had not returned and making specific contact with their whānau to check in and reassure them
- managing whānau anxiety about returning by clearly setting and communicating hygiene and safety protocols
- developing individual transition plans for learners with additional learning needs
- focusing on re-connection and re-engagement and celebrating learning that had taken place over lockdown rather than putting pressure on learners over what had been missed.

A third of schools identified challenges relating to transitioning back to on-site schooling. These challenges included:

- high rates of non-attendance and difficulty contacting some parents and whānau
- some learners being anxious or showing signs of trauma
- learners unsettled and having trouble engaging in schoolwork and school routines
- some challenging behaviours resulting in suspensions
- difficulty re-engaging some students who were missing co-curricular activities like kapa haka or sports (where these were not happening for safety reasons).

Lower decile schools reported more challenges transitioning their students back to school than higher decile schools. On average, low decile schools reported roughly twice as many challenges as successes, mid decile schools slightly more challenges than successes, and high decile schools a relatively even split of successes and challenges.

For Māori learners in English medium schools there were some specific considerations:

- leaders were aware that in some cases Māori learners had less access to devices and connectivity
- leaders and teachers ensured that te reo Māori, kapa haka, and tikanga Māori elements were included in learning packs and online provision during lockdown
- some whānau Māori were slower to return their children to school at the lower alert levels, due to anxiety around health in the context of having extended family living together.

For Pacific learners and families:

- equity of access to devices and connectivity was an issue in some cases
- as with whānau Māori, extended family situations meant that some Pacific learners were slower to return to school. This was also true of some Asian families.
- in some cases, language barriers with Pacific families created some additional complications to schools' communication efforts.

What are the ongoing challenges?

Schools interviewed have identified the following five key ongoing challenges.

Staff wellbeing. This is the most commonly cited ongoing challenge. Three-quarters of schools reported one or more challenges relating to exhaustion and sickness, teacher stress about workload, teacher anxiety about health, or principal stress. This may have been influenced by the interviews being conducted towards the end of term 2. Leaders and teachers reported that they worked through the term 1 holidays getting prepared for distance learning, and so by the end of term 2 many reported being tired and in need of a break. Many leaders commented that they were ensuring that the July holidays would provide a real break for their teachers.

Principals' stress. Principals took on a lot of responsibility for student learning and wellbeing, as well as staff wellbeing, and in many cases, whānau and community wellbeing. While a few principals reported having valuable support from networks and their Board Chairs, it is clear that the level of responsibility and stress that they have been managing is significant. As one principal told ERO: "Everyone is sitting on my shoulders so I can't afford to fall over or everyone falls over." While boards tended to be extremely positive about the work that leaders and teachers did, some board members talked about not wanting to bother the principal too much: "The Principal would inform us (*referring to the board*) of what's going on, keeping us updated. I really didn't want to bother her."

Learner progress. One in five school leaders expressed strong concern about the effect of lockdown on learner progress and achievement, particularly for learners whose engagement had been more limited. The ongoing prioritisation of wellbeing over learning means that this was not yet a focus for many schools. Many reported that they had deferred planned assessments to manage pressure on learners as they re-engage with on-site schooling.

Student wellbeing. Around a third of schools with secondary-aged learners reported that senior students were anxious around NCEA achievement requirements. Half of schools reported that they had a specific focus on students with additional learning needs, many of whom principals believed had struggled during lockdown and transitioning back to on-site schooling. Specifically, their focus included:

- more frequent contact and support provided, by teachers and teacher aides, to whānau during lockdown
- individualised learning packs
- deliberate transition plans to manage anxiety, challenging behaviours and disruption to routines as learners came back to school at lower alert levels.

Financial concerns. A quarter of schools reported financial concerns due to:

- inability to enrol international students for the indefinite future
- anticipated loss of local fundraising due to the economic impact on the community
- increased costs, such as buying additional cleaning products and services, hand sanitiser, as well as the cost of preparing and distributing physical learning resources.

There are also concerns about the impact on students of increasing financial distress within families. Māori medium education leaders want to be able to sustain the valued practices that were undertaken during the different alert levels. This is becoming increasingly difficult as they are being faced with heightened levels of poverty and other associated social, economic and cultural challenges for whānau. In a third of English medium schools, leaders reported that they were aware of financial pressures on whānau and the local community as a result of job losses due to Covid-19. They saw this manifested in:

- food insecurity and hardship in many homes
- whānau distress and instability, which impacted on learner wellbeing and behaviour
- some whānau unable to stay in areas with high housing costs without employment.

Alongside the challenges there were three positive developments reported by schools:

Technology. Two-thirds of school leaders told ERO that they intended to retain some elements of distance learning and the use of digital technology in their curriculum. Many leaders had recognised elements of digitally-enabled learning that had been beneficial for learner engagement during lockdown and wanted to build on this. Some leaders also saw that continued online learning would help prepare them for any future lockdowns. To support this focus, many leaders reported that they intended to access professional learning and development for teachers.

Engagement with parents and whānau. A third of school leaders reported that they wanted to build on the improved communication and relationships with learners and whānau. Some whānau who had been more difficult to contact in the past were now in more frequent and fruitful communication with them. Some schools had developed closer relationships with local iwi and marae, which they were seeking to maintain.

Self-directed learning. Nearly a third of school leaders wanted to continue with greater flexibility in scheduling –

for example, staggered start, finish and break times for different groups of students. A quarter of school leaders reported that they were looking to work deliberately with students to enhance self-directed learning and their time management. They saw this as a way of encouraging resilience and independence, and that it was enabled by greater integration of digital technology within students' learning.

Implications

These are the initial findings, and further analysis of interviews is underway that will refine these findings. Early implications are:

To support services and schools we may need to:

- ensure enough support is in place for principals, in particular first time, new or isolated principals
- closely monitor the impacts on early childhood education attendance once the wage subsidy expires, particularly in areas economically impacted by Covid-19
- work with the early years sector on how to ensure access to qualified relieving teachers given the increase in sick leave due to Covid-19
- closely monitor schools' financial pressures. The Government's decision to bridge the funding gap for those schools who have lost revenue from international enrolments will have helped, but other pressures such as those relating to reduced fundraising capacity may continue to impact schools
- support the increased use of digital technology.

To support learners and whānau we may need to:

- actively track where learners are and who is not enrolled as the potential for increased transience means some students may fall through the gaps
- monitor the impact on learning and achievement and support schools to prioritise learning as well as wellbeing. The effect is likely to be more significant for those groups of students for whom engagement during lockdown was more of a challenge: Māori, Pacific, students with additional learning needs, and students in low decile schools
- ensure access to support for children with additional learning needs.

If we experience another lockdown we may need to:

- ensure access to devices and connectivity is in place in low decile schools before another lockdown
- take further action to reduce anxiety in NCEA students (including further changes to NCEA) and teachers
- take further action to alleviate financial issues for services and schools
- work with schools so they prioritise learning as well as wellbeing (and share good practice from the first lockdown on how to do that)
- keep the Ministry of Education support and bulletins
- support services and schools to communicate important information with whānau who have limited English.

To be prepared for a further lockdown schools and services may need to:

- have updated contact details for students, family and whānau and maintain relationships with iwi and community groups
- have identified the most effective teaching strategies that support both wellbeing and learning and have a plan to deploy them
- have identified support for principals including from the Boards of Trustees
- have strategies to ensure staff wellbeing and manage staff absences.

Next Steps

Schools and services are facing ongoing challenges and further impacts of Covid-19, with economic impacts particularly likely. In addition to completing the interviews underway ERO is undertaking:

- a follow-up survey of principals, teachers, kaiako and students to understand ongoing impacts
- investigating with selected schools to analyse the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on student engagement and achievement
- targeted focus groups with schools to learn more about:
 - innovative teaching practices that support learning
 - how to ensure preparedness of schools for future lockdowns
 - the significant challenges faced by schools
 - the impact on Māori and Pacific student outcomes
 - the impact on Boards of Trustees.

ERO will continue work underway to understand ongoing impacts in the Māori medium education sector and the sector's response.

ERO will continue to report preliminary findings and adjust the focus of the work as the impact of Covid-19 unfolds to inform the response by the Government, schools and early childhood services.

