

Learning through lockdown: Supporting resilience and innovation

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Challenging circumstances can often result in the development of new understandings, innovation and resilience. When the global pandemic began in early 2020 and Covid-19 lockdowns occurred, like many in the education sector, New Zealand Tertiary College (NZTC) needed to be responsive to the changing environment and consider new ways to support students; particularly those on placements. This article recounts a story of resilience relayed through the narrative of a third year Bachelor of Teaching student (Rebecca) whose final teaching placement was impacted by the April 2020 Covid-19 lockdown, and the field practice program leader (Fiona)

This is a jointly written article by Rebecca, a final year Bachelor of Teaching student, and myself, Fiona, the field practice program leader. Rebecca was on her final Field Practice placement in her Home Centre when New Zealand moved to Alert Level 4, the highest level of lockdown. Rebecca reached out to the college to see whether it would be possible to continue her placement. She shared how the teachers in her centre were showing resilience through the introduction of effective and innovative practices to overcome the restrictions. In the first part of this article, Rebecca recounts the experience from her perspective. In the second, I will discuss how outcomes typically situated in a physical setting were still achievable through lockdown and how resilience was shown.

Rebecca's story

When New Zealand was placed into lockdown, our early childhood centre was closed, and the teaching team had to adopt new teaching styles and explore new ways to connect with the community and support our whānau and tamariki. My home centre is a public kindergarten that serves a culturally diverse neighbourhood in the heart of Otara, South Auckland. As a third-year student I was halfway through my Home Centre Field Practice placement when the first lockdown hit. Following discussions with my lecturer, I was very fortunate to be able to complete my placement virtually. This was a whole new experience for everyone involved, and one that taught me so much about the resilience of our children and whānau, and the importance of relationships.

When our centre closed, this led to a drastic change in routine for our children. Many of the whānau at our centre face financial hardship, which was exacerbated by the lockdown; it was a stressful and uncertain time for many. It was also challenging for myself and the other kaiako (teachers), as we balanced the demands of our own family circumstances with finding new ways to support the children. Our teaching team had regular Zoom meetings to discuss how we planned to stay connected and offer support to our whānau and tamariki (children). We were in regular telephone contact with all families to ensure that everyone felt safe and supported. A real positive for me was witnessing how the strong and trusting relationships between kaiako and whānau grew and were strengthened over this time.

Staying connected

As a teaching team, we decided that it was vitally important to us to develop meaningful and creative ways to connect with the centre community. We posted activities, games and videos of us singing our favourite songs online for whānau to share with their children. This helped us to stay connected when we could not physically be together. The games and activities were planned with the interests of the children in mind. At the same time, we were conscious of the needs and aspirations of our whānau and I was encouraged by my Associate Teacher to plan responsively so that everybody had equal opportunities to participate. Through our conversations with whānau, it became clear that many families did not have a lot of resources at home, therefore special care was taken to ensure that all the resources we used were readily available or easily substituted to remove any barriers to participation. Examples of games and activities that I planned over this time include a colour themed treasure hunt, a memory game using everyday household objects, and a bowling game using empty bottles. I also incorporated some simple sign language into videos to support and include children with additional needs.

Once the country moved to Level 3 we created a toy library which whānau could access in a contactless way. Photos of packs we created were posted online, and families chose a pack for the week and were given a collection time. Packs were themed around children's interests and included outdoor toys, art materials, blocks and construction toys. This was hugely successful and well used by the whānau who then posted photos of the children's learning and engagement on Storypark (an online learning platform). This was such a big success that it has continued over the school holidays. We also researched resources that were available to our families who were struggling, such as foodbanks and pātaka kai (open pantry). This was an area that I feel particularly passionate about, and during my virtual placement I was able to take an active leadership role and connect with the local community and secure food donations to make kai (food) parcels for our whānau.

I feel incredibly privileged to have had the support of the teaching team, my Associate Teacher and New Zealand Tertiary College to experience a virtual placement. The lockdown experience challenged me professionally to adapt to a new way of life, to communicate and connect differently, and to learn new and creative ways to cater to the needs of our children and whānau. Ultimately though, I think that it has been positive as we have strengthened relationships and grown closer with our families and community. I am in awe of the resilience of our families!

Fiona's Story

When the country moved to Level 4 lockdown, the majority of the early childhood centres immediately closed, and for the majority of students on Field Practice, their placements were discontinued. However, the centre Rebecca was working in continued to serve the community. Rebecca and her Associate Teacher shared with us how the teachers and the centre were adapting practices in response to the lockdown, and were continuing to meet the needs of the children and whānau. Rebecca spoke to us of how these challenges were creating opportunities for innovative practices. When we learned of Rebecca and her centre's response to lockdown, we were excited to support Rebecca in continuing her placement. One of the major outcomes

for Rebecca's placement related to the facilitation of effective professional communication. In a physical setting, this might be demonstrated in many different ways, through everyday team teaching, attending professional meetings, maintaining children's documentation. However, the disruption to normal routines and services brought by lockdown meant that as a team we needed to reconsider how the placement's Learning Outcomes might still be met. The first aspect of the communication outcome referred to the student's professional communication with colleagues, her Associate Teacher and her allocated lecturer. Following discussions with Stephanie, we found that during lockdown, this level of communication was actually heightened, with Rebecca and her Associate Teacher demonstrating high levels of interaction and engagement with children, their families and others in the teaching team. This was also true of Rebecca's interactions with the college; emails and the use of Zoom fostered effective communications allowing for regular discussions focusing on new ways of meeting the established outcomes.

During the lockdown, Rebecca and her Associate Teacher had been able to maintain frequent contact with the other members of the teaching team through daily scheduled conference calls, emails and text messages. Communication with families also continued through regular telephone calls, emails, text messages and the use of Storypark. Although these tools were used regularly before, they now became essential. Through regular interaction provided by remote technologies, relationships between Rebecca, the teaching team and families, relationships were strengthened and areas of need were identified which were then addressed.

A secondary focus for the placement related to the area of relationships and how these were being established and maintained with the children and their families. Through speaking with Rebecca and her Associate Teacher, it was evident that the relationships with the parents and children were actually being strengthened, both through supporting parents with sharing teaching resources and strategies, and also in the ways that Rebecca and her team were able to provide more immediate support. Organising the pick-up and drop-off of teaching resources and the essential food packages showed how the relationships had developed, and showcased the leadership skills and professional values that Rebecca and those in her centre demonstrated. We also noted the consideration shown to those families who did not have access to the Internet, but were still included in the planning and preparation.

By supporting the placement to continue in the extenuating circumstances, all stakeholders in the partnership between the student, Associate Teacher and the lecturer discovered and learnt new ways of understanding the role of the early childhood teacher. Rebecca's perseverance in the face of challenge not only allowed her to continue in her role as a teacher, but also enabled her to complete authentic and relevant tasks that supported her growth and professionalism. It is clear from the discussion of Rebecca's experience that the resilience of the centre and teaching team motivated them to continue providing education, which contributed to the resilience of children and families.

Conclusion

This was just one of the many stories of growth through resilience we heard from our students during these uncertain and troublesome times. Throughout the country, where possible, early childhood services remained open and serving their communities. While the implications of the lockdown are still reverberating, it is a testimony to the strong sense of professionalism and ethical positioning of the role of the early childhood teacher, that new and innovative practices were developed to match the needs of the community.