Article

When are we going to have the real school? A case study of early childhood education and care teachers' experiences surrounding education during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

In this study, we set out to explore how two private, early childhood education and care centres in a small island developing state in the Pacific are coping with schooling during the COVID-19 lockdown period. In particular, we used a case-study research approach to explore teachers' feelings about the situation and what actions or strategies the centres have devised to continue to support education of young children. We also report on the challenges and opportunities that teachers have experienced in teaching remotely. The case studies suggest that teachers feel worried not only about their personal lives, but also about their professional lives as teachers. The findings also reveal how the two early childhood education and care centres innovate in delivering education in a time of severe crisis. Glimpses of success are visible in terms of making teaching and learning possible and meaningful even with very young children. These findings provide useful insights into teaching and learning during a pandemic.

Keywords
COVID-19, teachers, education, pandemic

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Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the new coronavirus (COVID-19) a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020. Not even two months later, WHO called COVID-19 a pandemic, on 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2020). According to Cucinotta and Vanelli (2020, p. 157), COVID-19 is a 'novel disease with an incompletely described clinical cause' and is considered potentially dangerous for younger children and older adults. A pandemic is defined as a 'world wide spread of a new disease' (WHO, 2010). The virus spread rapidly across the globe, sparing only a few countries, most of which are small island states in the Pacific region.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been widely reported over various media platforms around the world and has been described as unprecedented. Apart from the health impact, COVID-19 has caused major socio-economic concerns. Given the fact that person-to-person contact is thought to be the main way the virus spreads, most countries have been under various levels of lockdown and schools remain closed in many parts of the world. As reported by Saavedra (2020), at the end of March 2020, approximately 1.6 billion children were out of school in 161 countries.

With an estimated 80% of school-aged children worldwide suddenly out of school, the impact on children's education and general well-being has been a major concern for all stakeholders, whether international organisations such as Save the Children and the United Nations (UN), or national governments, schools, parents and society in general. A Save the Children (2020b) report released on 23 March 2020 noted children's rights to 'survive, learn and be protected' during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Save the Children reports, while children's learning remains a major concern, the long-term impact of children staying out of school can lead to other social problems such as dropping out of school, early marriages and teenage pregnancies, or simply not being able to thrive when schools eventually reopen. Against this background, a report from Save the Children noted the following concern, particularly in reference to West and Central Africa: 'With COVID-19 pushing governments to confine populations and close schools, Save the Children is concerned about the limited mechanisms in place to ensure children can follow an education from their homes' (2020b).

With widespread concern and limited information available on children's well-being during the pandemic, a recent survey (Save the Children, 2020a) of parents in the United States revealed parents and children alike echo similar concerns to those highlighted by international agencies. This survey found varying degrees of emotional well-being of pre-kindergarten (under five) children in the US, who are experiencing feelings of boredom or confusion. In addition, a worrying 52% of children were concerned that they were not learning enough in order to prepare for when schools open, with a similar percentage of parents sharing the same worry. On the positive side, the survey noted that nearly half of the children were spending at least two to three hours per day on their education through distance learning. It is also encouraging to note that 4% of children reported spending six hours per day on their education, the equivalent of a normal pre-kindergarten school day. Another encouraging finding was that 72% of children reported being excited to spend quality time at home with their families. This aspect of the findings certainly points towards the important role parents are playing in their children's lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings noted in the survey are indeed encouraging. Many international organisations and educational experts suggest that some form of learning should continue to take place during times of crisis where students cannot physically report to school. For example, according to Saavedra (2020), many countries continue to offer online schooling. Online schooling, or, as Baytiyeh (2018) suggests, emergency education,

must continue with the help of information and communication technology (ICT). This includes online e-learning platforms (such as Moodle), the use of mobile communication or social apps (such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter) and the almost-forgotten radio and commonly watched television. It is encouraging to note that 98% of the world's population now live within reach of a mobile cellular network and almost half of the population is online (Save the Children, 2019). Furthermore, there are research studies that suggest the potential benefits of ICT learning modes (Altmann et al., 2018; Clarke, 2018; Duignan, 2020; Hass & Joseph, 2018). This gives a much-needed impetus to educational planners and teachers to deliver emergency education. Staying in contact with students is the most critical step in terms of: (a) ensuring that students do not feel left out as a result of lack of contact from teachers or schools; and (b) delivering education, in whatever form possible, during crises such COVID-19 (Baytiyeh, 2018; Saavedra, 2020). For students who cannot be reached using ICT tools due to extreme remoteness (for example, in many Pacific Islands), traditional modes of learning, using radio or hard-copy resources, could prove equally useful. A good example of such remote learning experience is the 'kindergarten of the air' programme launched by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in 1943 at the time of World War II. This programme gained much popularity and was transferred to the television medium in the 1960s (Griffen-Foley, 2019).

In the context of the above, with limited research literature on education in times of COVID-19, we set out to explore how a small sample of early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers from a small island developing state (SIDS) in the Pacific are coping with the pandemic. Our goals were threefold: (a) to explore their perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on their lives; (b) to share teachers' stories about teaching and learning methods they are using during COVID-19, including

highlighting any innovative strategies; and (c) to identify the challenges and opportunities of delivering education in times of extreme crisis. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are teachers' feelings about the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are some teaching strategies that ECEC teachers have used during COVID-19?
3. What are some challenges and opportunities that teachers have experienced delivering education during COVID-19?

This study is important and timely because it will provide much-needed information on how educators are ensuring that learning continues for very young learners. The study hopes to shed light on how a small sample of ECEC teachers from a developing island state have taken steps to support students' learning. The study's theoretical orientation is presented next, followed by the context and methods, findings, discussion and conclusion.

Theoretical framework

In this study we were guided by the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivists argue that there is no single, objective reality. On the contrary, interpretivists believe there are multiple realities. These realities are constructed by individuals depending on their personal experiences, values and beliefs. Interpretivists argue that individuals make cognitive as well as affective meanings by interacting with a phenomenon in diverse ways. This meaning-making is heavily influenced by an individual's present as well as previous encounters with the phenomenon as well as the context in which these encounters take place (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). We also adopted Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory to guide our study. Bandura (2001) argues that people have personal agency that guides how they act in different situations.

In other words, people can conceive unique events and work out new paths of action to take when faced with novel situations. For Bandura (2001), personal agency has features such as intentionality (people can choose to act), forethought (people can construct outcome expectations), self-reactiveness (people are able to self-direct their actions) and self-reflectiveness (people self-evaluate their own functioning). In summary, these four features effectively mean that people have the ability to produce good outcomes by their personal actions. He suggested that, especially with respect to self-reflectiveness, people can choose to be either pessimistic or optimistic and act accordingly to either self-advance or self-hinder their future.

With respect to research in education during normal times, this means that each ECEC teacher has their own personal reality about what makes a good education in general. However, in the time of a pandemic, which this generation is experiencing for the first time in their lives, this theoretical stance means that teachers would have formed new perceptions about the pandemic and education during the past two months. It also means that each teacher will have their own opinions and experiences about educational phenomena depending on the context they are faced with. With this in mind, we used the interpretivist paradigm as well as social cognitive theory to help understand what was going on in the teachers' minds during this time which has been accepted as the 'new normal'.

Context and research methodology

This study is based in one of the SIDS in the Pacific. In order to maintain the anonymity of our case-study centres and participants, we provide only general contextual information that appropriately represents the context in which the study took place. ECEC is an emerging area in education in the Pacific region, with most of the

SIDS beginning to establish formal ECEC centres in their countries. Some of these ECEC centres are part of the normal primary schools

ECEC in SIDS in the Pacific generally covers the ages from birth to eight years. Many ministries of education cater only for six- to eight-year-olds in the formal primary education system, while the under-fives need government attention during changing times when more mothers will need to work, and parents will be looking for good-quality learning spaces where they can leave infants and toddlers (from birth to four-year-olds) under the watch of qualified carers. This means that there are a number of new ECEC centres being set up within the primary schools, or separately as private ECEC centres. The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 caught nearly all countries by surprise, including smaller island developing states in the Pacific. Schools were brought to an early closure during March, which persists at the time of writing. This situation will likely continue until it is declared safe for children to return.

In this study, we utilised a case-study research method. According to Creswell (2017), a case study is a qualitative research methodology where a researcher attempts to understand in detail a real, life-bounded system called a case. Yin (2009) agrees that case-study research deals with real-life contexts and settings and provides a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In other words, while a case-study research approach helps researchers understand a small number of cases with a much deeper degree of understanding, it does not allow researchers to make generalisations about how other related or similar cases may behave. As such, the case-study research approach matches well with our interpretivist research paradigm under which we sought to explore individual ECEC teachers' perceptions and experiences of education during the COVID-19 situation. To fulfil our research aims, we studied two urban ECEC centres. The selection of our two case-study

units were based on purposive sampling. This was the most reasonable sampling approach in a pandemic situation. We approached two privately run ECEC centres via phone and email and they both agreed to be part of the study.

Upon sharing our research intention and receiving the participants' informed consent (we interviewed both head teachers, plus one other teacher from each ECEC centre; see Table 1), we decided on the mode of *talanoa* with our research participants. *Talanoa* is a method of conversation, similar to interviews, that has a long cultural as well as research tradition in parts of the Pacific region. Vaioleti (2016) sees *talanoa* as an open and informal conversation where people share their stories and feelings. The concept of *talanoa* creates, albeit implicitly, a high degree of trust between two parties who wish to talk, share and understand each other's perspectives or stories. Our choice of *talanoa* as a data collection technique was guided by our understanding that these were distressing times, and talking and sharing each other's stories using a culturally appropriate approach would be helpful in understanding the insights of our participants. The *talanoa* would also help to increase our participants' confidence to speak freely. In any usual cultural or social setting, *talanoa* is done on a face-to-face basis. In this study, given the travel and social-gathering restrictions, we agreed with our participants to have a telephone *talanoa*.

The telephone *talanoa* was conducted with each participant individually at a time suitable to them. Each *talanoa* lasted approximately 45 minutes and consisted of 3 main parts. The first part allowed teachers to share their feelings and emotions about the pandemic and nation-wide school closures. The main question that was posed here was: 'Can you describe your feelings and emotions when you heard the news of COVID-19 and subsequently the announcements about the closure of all schools?' The second part was about teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main

question that was posed was: 'What are your plans (if any) for delivering education to your school children; what actions or strategies have you decided to employ or have already employed?' The final session of the *talanoa* aimed to look at how the proposed strategies are/were working and to highlight the challenges and opportunities that our participants experienced. The main question that was asked was: 'How are the proposed strategies working so far, and what opportunities or challenges have you experienced?'

Each *talanoa* session was audio recorded and transcribed. Data was analysed using a thematic approach relevant to each major *talanoa* topic, and also with respect to each case-study school. In other words, we looked not only at how common themes arose across the two case-study schools, but we also gave prominence to the unique themes that arose at each school, with the aim of providing a 'big picture' of our findings. In order to maintain anonymity of our case-study centres and participants, we provide only a succinct description of the case-study schools and participants using pseudonyms.

Findings

The findings are presented as two separate cases. The outline of each case study's findings follows the three main *talanoa* topics: feelings and emotions, actions or strategies, and opportunities and challenges.

The case of Vuli Lailai

Anna and Madhu shared similar sentiments about their personal and professional lives when asked to share their feelings and emotions. Their main feelings related to personal life included the health and safety of themselves and their families. In addition, both of them were worried about the impact of the lockdown on their personal long-term financial and employability issues. In other words, these

Table 1. Case-study schools and participants.

Case-study school	Participants
Vuli Lailai is a private ECEC centre and has approximately 100 students in its various programmes. Student age ranges from three to five years and there are four full-time teachers. The centre has been in operation for more than 20 years.	*Anna* is the head teacher who has approximately 15 years of experience in ECEC teaching and holds a tertiary qualification in ECEC.
	Madhu is an assistant teacher who has more than 12 years of teaching experience at ECEC level. She has an undergraduate degree in ECEC.
Siga Lailai is a private ECEC centre that has approximately 70 students in its various programmes. Student age ranges from two to five years and there are eight full-time teachers. The centre has been in operation for more than 10 years.	*Lako* is the centre manager and head teacher. She has more than 10 years of experience in ECEC. She has relevant undergraduate qualifications in ECEC.
	Nei is a relatively young ECEC teacher having spent only a few years in ECEC settings. Nei is currently engaged in some form of further education in ECEC.

ECEC: early childhood education and care.

teachers were unsure about the future in terms of their own and their loved ones' survival, combined with some thoughts on the financial implications of COVID-19. Some of their feelings and uncertainties are captured in the following statements:

> At a personal level, I think my first concern is the health and safety of my family and myself. For example, will I catch this virus, or will a family member catch it? How long will schools remain closed? Will parents have their jobs and will they be able to pay the fees? Because we are a privately run centre and we depend on parents' money. Will parents agree to pay term 2 fees if schools remain closed and we teach remotely? (Madhu's *talanoa*)

> Also, I was worried about my career as an ECEC teacher, wondering whether I will continue to have a paid job, and my family in terms of my financial security. Also how am I looking after my health and my family's health, as well as health of my four staff who are working at my ECEC centre? (Anna's *talanoa*)

In addition to worrying at a personal level, the two teachers also showed concerns related to their professional life. Both the teachers shared how they were worried about their

students' health and safety and general well-being whilst they are experiencing a complete lockdown. Questions such as 'How are our children doing at home?', 'How can I be in contact with them?', 'When are we going to resume?' and 'Are we going to meet our teaching and learning plans and requirements?' were voiced by both teachers. Anna's account captures some of these emotions:

> My initial feeling was that while we were on our school break for term 1, after the break, when COVID-19 cases increased and the prime minister announced that all schools will (be) closed till further notice, I was worried about my children, they are at home (because they (are) on holidays), and how they are managing this pandemic? Do they know about why they are staying at home and not going to school for so long? This will also disturb their holistic development, especially their intellectual and social development. What is going in their mind? How are they experiencing the lockdown? Maybe some of them are going through abuse, or trauma, we don't know. We have some children at our centre who have a single-parent family and they are looked after by their guardians, so I was wondering how these kids may be coping with the lockdown. (Anna's *talanoa*)

In terms of strategies adopted by the Vuli Lailai centre, both Anna and Madhu shared similar outlines during their separate conversations. Some actions taken at Vuli Lailai included Anna organising a meeting with all her staff and getting in touch with the centre manager with their plans. Once these planned activities were approved by the manager, the teachers contacted parents using email as most of the parents have access to email. Anna and Madhu shared some of these actions with us at the time of the *talanoa*:

> Our first and immediate strategy was an online learning on literacy and numeracy using play-based learning at home. We send a link of a song through email to the parents. This song is about term 2 teaching and learning and is part of our term 2 curriculum. So the song is just one concept. We have a theme (and) that theme has a number of topics. For example, my term 2 theme is exploring and saving the nature in the garden – topics include plants and trees, vegetables, flowers, earthworms etc. For plants and trees, for example, we will ask the children to create a garden. If they are planting with their families, they can send a video or a picture of their practical work on planting, say, (for) example, planting your own vegetables. We have emailed the activity/worksheets/songs/practical hands-on activities to the parents. We have mentioned (to) parents to supervise, like spending one hour daily. This is for one week. We have sent them a template on how to assess, and the parents will be the assessor and they will be grading the assessments using broad criteria such as achieved, satisfactory, in progress, to assess their children on this activity. Parents will file these evidences and when school commences in June, the children will bring their assessment file and our teachers will compile (them) and this evidence will be taken to the manager. (Anna's *talanoa*)

Apart from the emails, each teacher at Vuli Lailai had created their own Viber group with parents. Viber is a free app that has text, calling and video-calling features. The aim of the Viber group was mainly to communicate with parents and children about the general well-being of the children as well as to send learning materials through the Viber platform. Those parents who cannot access Viber are called by the teachers on their phones. This was noted in both the *talanoa* sessions – an excerpt from Madhu's *talanoa* describes the context-specific communication actions that Vuli Lailai teachers had agreed upon:

> We go according to parents' needs and contexts. If they don't have emails or Viber, then we make phone calls. Say, for example, three-quarters of them can be contacted on phone and Viber. (A) very small number of parents are yet to be contacted. Like we have already 70 out of 100 students covered. We are still trying to contact others, as some have not responded to emails and phone calls. (Madhu's *talanoa*)

In terms of opportunities that have come out of the situation, both teachers shared their personal views about how well the parents and children were responding to teachers during the initial days of remote teaching and learning. According to Anna and Madhu, a lot of parents were responding to their emails and Viber messages, and were very appreciative of the teachers' efforts at Vuli Lailai centre. The teachers were able to share some of the messages received from parents through Viber groups:

> My child gets up in the morning and takes your name . . . (Madam Anna) . . . he says 'Teacher! Teacher . . . I want to go to school.' He wears his uniform and wants to come to school. (A parent in Anna's Viber group)

> Thank you . . . (Madam Madhu). My child is missing you and missing her friends. Thank you for the initiative. (A parent in Madhu's Viber group)

In terms of some of the challenges that have been faced, teachers mentioned the need for more training in technical issues using online technology such as email or Viber. For example, Madhu mentioned she had no idea how to

send emails to a large group of parents simultaneously or how to create email groups. This is because she normally send emails to a few people only. In addition, Vuli Lailai teachers mentioned that having more resources and facilities such as laptops and Internet access would be helpful in terms of delivering remote education during COVID-19.

The case of Siga Lailai

Both Lako and Nei shared similar sentiments about themselves and their family's safety during the COVID-19 lockdown. Both also talked at length about feeling worried for their students. In addition, the Siga Lailai study participants worried about the long-term sustainability of their centre. Privately run ECEC centres rely on tuition fees and do not receive any financial grants from the government. This was the main concern raised by Lako as the owner and manager of the Siga Lailai centre. According to her, she employs nine teachers and all of them depend on the centre for their daily livelihood:

> As an owner of a private school (with) the pandemic being declared in the last week of our school term, I still need to serve; a lot of parents and teachers depend on my school. Well, I was thinking ahead – if there was any closure how do I continue as my parents are private fee payers? (Lako's *talanoa*)

In terms of strategies to continue education, the Siga Lailai staff used a similar approach in their first step. Lako had to call a meeting with all her teachers to discuss next steps. The first strategy that was used was to prepare a week's learning package for the students as the lockdown was announced in the penultimate week of term 1. The Siga Lailai team were conscious that they had a duty of care towards parents and children. This meant that they had to complete the final week of term 1 through learning packages prepared and emailed to the parents.

> The first thing that we came up with was to prepare a learning package – for (the) whole of (the) last week. I called my teachers and we came with one week's worksheet. Packages for one week were print ones and were collected by parents. (Lako's *talanoa*)

While this move was seen as useful for the completion of the first term of education, the team kept thinking about how to continue the education for term 2 when a long period of lockdown was announced by the government. The team came up with the idea of exploring the Zoom app for continuing education as a trial during the final week of term 1. Zoom app is a web conferencing tool that provides for video and audio meetings of a large number of people:

> When the directive came from the government, we were on two weeks' holiday. This gave us two weeks' time to prepare. I (was) sending emails to parents and introducing a new app called Zoom that will be used in a trial run, in the same last week. We worked on a 40-minute trial – free trial, parents were asked to participate to give their feedback. (Nei's *talanoa*)

At the time of the *talanoa*, the teachers at the Siga Lailai centre were in their third week of using Zoom to continue educating their students. Given their relatively greater exposure to this mode of teaching and learning because they started with trialling Zoom in term 1, both Lako and Nei shared how helpful this initiative was in terms of a number of opportunities. Firstly, they noted that parental support was very encouraging as around 60% of the students were able to join their classes via Zoom during the trial week. At the time of the interview, approximately 80% of students were able to continue their education using Zoom. Even parents who had returned with their children to Australia and New Zealand were able to join. This, however, required the Siga Lailai centre to cater for the different time zones, especially for the two Australian students who were two hours behind local time.

One of the interesting actions noted at Siga Lailai was that, despite having a single laptop and a single Internet modem, all teachers took turns to deliver their virtual lessons at different times. Another noticeable arrangement was that, in order to keep the virtual space familiar to the children, each lesson was run by the respective teacher from their own classroom. This was done to ensure that children 'feel as if they were in their classrooms, they could see the table and chairs and the charts, etc.' (Lako's *talanoa*). Furthermore, the teachers were aware of the need to avoid exposing students to screens for long periods of time – this meant that teachers asked children to move around their house. For example, Nei shared how one of her students took her on a virtual tour of his house, 'showing me the kitchen, the fridge and his bedroom'. In another attempt to ensure that children were not only sitting and watching their screens, Lako reported how some of her students responded to a lesson on the colour brown:

> I was teaching (the) colour brown, the children were asked to show something from their home that was (the) colour brown. The children are doing exactly what the teacher is asking them to do; (to) find something that is colour(ed) brown and show it online. One went and got a jar (of) peanut butter, one girl showed an onion, one boy showed his teddy bear, one went outside and got his brown dog in front of the screen. (Lako's *talanoa*)

In addition to the relatively higher percentage of students taking an active part through virtual learning, the two teachers also reported how their students were fascinated by Zoom and in general by virtual learning. For example, in the following excerpt, Nei reports how excited her students are during the Zoom sessions. This episode also reveals students' attachments to their school and their classmates. In addition, it shows how children and teachers can demonstrate creativity in virtual sessions:

> A few of them are saying we miss you madam, before the class ends students will say 'I miss

you' to their friends and some even say 'I love, I love you' to their friends. On last week Friday we celebrated Mother's Day, we let their mothers sit with them, and after practising throughout the week. It was a new thing for us to do Mother's Day on a virtual platform. They made cards after we sent a card-making activity, we practised a dance item too, we also planned for gifts for mums; third one was an item – a dance, that was taught online, for the week and on Friday they performed. (Nei's *talanoa*)

In addition to all these positive outcomes, there were some challenges noted as well. At Siga Lailai, as noted earlier, the major challenge was that the school had only one laptop and a single Internet access point. This means that teachers had only a 'five minute space to take their laptop and modem to set up for a new session' (Lako's *talanoa*). Apart from that, some parents either did not have Zoom enabling resources at home or were unaware of how to use them. The latter challenge was mainly for those children who were looked after by their elderly grandparents, who may have lacked the necessary knowledge to use modern online technologies. Parents who faced such difficulties had 'print copy' teaching materials sent to them through email, or in a few cases, delivered to their homes by Siga Lailai staff. Adding to the list of challenges was the Siga Lailai staff's own lack of knowledge on using the different features of Zoom such as sharing the screen or videos. Apart from the challenges mentioned above, there were instances of children showing emotions such as 'missing their friends, missing their playgrounds, missing the swings' (Nei's *talanoa*), and asking questions such 'When are we going to have the real school?' (Lako's *talanoa*). Such instances created an emotive atmosphere for students and teachers, as shared by both Lako and Nei.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we set out to explore how a small sample of ECEC teachers are endeavouring to

provide education to young children during the COVID-19 pandemic in a SIDS in the Pacific. The story narrated in this paper is evidenced from two case-study ECEC centres in Suva in April 2020. With respect to the first specific research question, our findings confirm that teachers are experiencing strong emotions such as the fear of getting sick or losing their job as well as worries related to their professional duties as teachers. In short, the teachers in this study showed as much emotion about their students' health and safety as they would normally do for their own loved ones. For example, teachers raised concerns about the students being abused at home, especially those coming from single-parent families or living with their guardians. Similar concerns have been raised about child safety during times of natural disasters or pandemics by world bodies such as the UN, WHO or Save the Children.

With respect to our second research question, we have noted varying strategies used at the two case-study centres. At the outset, it is important to note that whatever approaches were used made a lot of sense to us. For example, simple techniques such as organising a collective discussion between teachers about what actions to take sound like very reasonable step to take in times of a pandemic. Furthermore, the agility of the two centres to respond quickly to the new situation is commendable. In both case-study centres, we noted teachers taking immediate action in line with the numerous COVID-19 advisories that were put forward and revised by the government on a continuous basis. These teachers made efforts to communicate with parents and children using innovative methods such as Viber groups. Initiating effective and immediate communication is a crucial step in times of natural disaster and pandemics (Baytiyeh, 2017). Most importantly, the findings suggest that both case-study centres were able to make use of appropriate and readily available strategies to deliver education to very young children. This was enabled in large part through ICT tools such as

email, Viber and Zoom. Those parents who could not be reached through these methods received print learning packages delivered by hand. At the time of the study, only a relatively small percentage of parents had not been reached by the two centres. In summary, it is worthwhile to note that the case-study centres were flexible and made good attempts to provide the best tailor-made options for parents. An example of this includes adjusting the times of Zoom sessions to accommodate international learners. From a social cognitive theoretical perspective (Bandura, 2001), such actions suggest that individuals acted in an optimistic manner, looking for novel ways to deliver education.

While there is sufficient research surrounding the benefits and challenges of online learning at higher-education levels (Baytiyeh, 2018; Duignan, 2020; Saavedra, 2020), there are no known cases of learning at ECEC level being delivered completely online, at least in the South Pacific region. The cases discussed in this research give us some useful insight into the role of online learning in difficult times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In summary, evidence from our case studies suggest that ICT-enabled learning can provide opportunities for young learners to connect to their curriculum, teachers and peers whilst confined to their homes. We speculate that these affective connections provide a useful means of maintaining emotional well-being in young children in times of crisis. With respect to the final research question, we argue that the strategies chosen by the case-study centres did provide teachers with opportunities to deliver educational content and maintain a healthy level of contact with their students, given that they had very limited resources, a lack of training and almost no prior experience in dealing with remote or distance education.

While our study has limitations in terms of sample size and an inability to generalise findings, we suggest that future studies could focus on generating more detailed findings about the role of educators at all levels in

tackling issues (such as those brought by a pandemic) that seem beyond our current conceptions and experiences. Such rich studies could provide a useful lens through which to evaluate our future educational direction.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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