

# Online early childhood education: Not remotely what's needed <sup>[1]</sup>

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After working on early childhood education and care for more than 40 years, I am sometimes stunned when I read about “innovations” in child care that I assume are put-ons but turn out to be perfectly serious. Such was my reaction the other day to a story in the New York Times about a kindergarten readiness program that four year olds can access remotely— “almost entirely online”.

Hahaha, I said to my husband, who was also gloomily reading the New York Times online. “Listen to this whacky idea”. Silly me—I thought the story was satire-- like The Onion's old story about cash-strapped USA parents outsourcing their children overseas to less-developed countries with very low labour costs because they can't afford the cost of US child care.

Reading beyond the headline, I saw that—although it perfunctorily raised some caveats, this was no satire. It was a perfectly serious discussion about a trend in ECEC, and in the sober New York Times too.

As the story goes, this particular online “readiness” kindergarten for four year olds was being promoted in a small California town by its mayor, who took up the idea because he “wanted to be on the front line” to bring success-bearing early childhood learning to the preschoolers in his mostly Latino, agricultural town.

The national director of the firm's implementation plan described it this way to a promotional meeting with a group of parents: “When your children sit down to use the program, they're going to learn with games, with songs and puzzles... they're going to have a good time, but they're really going to learn all the things that they need to be successful when they get to kindergarten, which is really a win-win.”

The idea is that “children spend 15 minutes a day, five days a week over the course of nine months, tapping through lessons on a computer”. By report, 16,000 kids have already “graduated” from the Utah-based program. And big plans for expansion are afoot.

This online kindergarten program originated with the Utah legislature, which—using private funds and donations and, in 2018, public funds from the federal Department of Education—to establish it state-wide.

The explicit rationale for the embrace of remote, online early childhood education as a substitute for a real program is solely about money. The argument goes that “an online program is better than the current preschool options available to most low-income families—which are often nothing”.

It's not for the rich, you see, who are presumed to already have all the ECEC opportunities they need. Rather it is intended to deliver “readiness” for kindergarten to low income families who have fewer ECEC options.

In North Carolina, one of the states considering adopting the online program, a Republican state legislator said that he “absolutely agreed that a face-to-face, high-quality pre-K is the best option” but that the money to provide this for all children was not available.

As noted, “online preschools are cheaper than traditional schooling”, costing “hundreds of dollars per child, compared with thousands per child in preschool”.

Of course it's cheaper - why wouldn't it be? Remote ECEC doesn't need cost-generating high ratios of trained early childhood educators who might demand decent wages and working conditions or even unionize. Doesn't need kids messily playing outside with other kids or need any at all learning about social relationships through play with other kids. Remote online ECEC doesn't need to be scheduled so families (mothers) can go to work or school knowing their children are safe and engaged in great activities with other children and adults. Doesn't need to support parents as parents in multiple ways or worry about including children with disabilities. Certainly doesn't need costly facilities.

The kids can just watch a video.

Although it's hard to believe that people think this is anything other than an off-the-wall idea, remote online early childhood education is growing in the USA, with half of Utah's four year olds enrolled in this particular program, and other states including Wyoming, Mississippi, Delaware, Indiana, North and south Dakota and Montana adopting or considering it. One wonders whether it will also be out-sourced to the Global South, whose countries surely lack adequate ECEC programs - or even to Canada, where affordable, quality ECEC is acknowledged to be in short supply and unevenly distributed and especially lacking for disadvantaged groups such as Indigenous children.

To be sure, the New York Times did raise some substantive questions: “The arrival of the digital preschool alternative raises questions about education quality and what exactly preschool is meant to teach. As the economic chasm in the United States grows, who gets access to human interaction is becoming a stark dividing line through every stage of life”, and briefly cited concerns from prominent ECEC experts Professor Steve Barnett and Nancy Carlsson-Paige, an advocate for universal preschool.

Other articles about the growing remote online ECEC presence raise similar concerns, including citing the World Health Organization's

recommendation that children under age five should have very limited, or no, screen time and identify the ways in which a remote program fails to deliver social interaction, physical activity and child care. And there are all sorts of scholarly and expert writings about how digital activities and young children fit together in an increasingly digital world but online early childhood education as a substitute doesn't emerge from these as a best practice or good idea.

But what is disconcerting is that this idea is being treated seriously as an alternative to the quality early childhood education and care that benefits both children and families, rather than as a sendup, which it should be seen as. The idea was presciently lampooned in a 2014 mock news article about a US government report by The Onion, but most of the scanty discussion of the growing trend treats remote online early childhood education as an inevitable and better-than-nothing development, with scattered rearguard points raised in opposition. That is, though devoid of content, it's a debate, not a lampoon.

The New York Times article ran in the Technology section. While, yes, this is about technology, it is really about care and education, public policy, equality and inequality, human rights, ethics and how we understand society. Substituting an online remote "readiness" gizmo for poor four year olds because it's "better than nothing" when a wealthy society does not choose to pay for and provide early childhood education and care is not a trivial trend. It completely begs fundamental questions about the common good, the consequences of inequality and what's the right thing to do.

Thus, it is surprising, and dismal, that a trend such as this can take off—even being publicly funded—without these kinds of issues being seriously raised.

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