

Covid-19 and the exacerbation of inequity in Aotearoa New Zealand

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**EDUCATION AND
SOCIAL WORK**



Kia ora koutou from Aotearoa New Zealand

Researching Covid-19

- This work expands on my earlier work in which I researched the role of schools in disaster response and recovery
- That work highlighted four themes:
 - Schools as community hubs
 - Principals as crisis leaders
 - Teachers as first responders and on-going trauma workers
 - Children and young people as active participants in their own recovery



These themes still resonated

- Schools continued to support their communities well beyond their educational function
- Principals had to manage their schools through an uncertain time and be there for their students, staff and communities
- Teachers had to work long hours to prepare for online teaching and support students' wellbeing
- Children and young people found ways to make sense of these circumstances despite their difficulties and anxieties



But the inequities dominated

Even before the first lockdown in March 2020 we knew that:

- One in five students lives in a food insecure household and relies on school breakfasts and lunches
- 50% of schools did not think their students and their families could access online learning, because of lack of Internet coverage or connection, lack of, or not enough suitable devices for the number of children in the home



Flaxmere Primary School students enjoy their lunch.

Collective research in 2020 revealed

Continuum of lockdown learning experiences

- a) Accessible internet and device..... Limited access
- b) Sufficient skills for on-line study Limited skills and training
- c) Quiet or suitable study space.....Crowded or noisy home situation
- d) Relevant materials.....Inappropriate or insufficient materials
- e) Quality curriculum.....Busy work rather than deep learning
- f) Flexibility, choice or tailored activities..... One-size-fits-all activities
- g) Clear communication between school and family.....Difficult access or unclear messages
- h) Clear instructions and expectationsConfusing or vague instructions or expectations
- i) Regular contact and feedback from teachers..... Irregular contact and limited feedback
- j) Learning support from family.....Families lacking knowledge, skill, time or energy
- k) Self-regulation and time management.....Students struggle with managing time and focus
- l) Autonomy and independence.....Students lack confidence and are dependent on others
- m) Less distraction..... More distraction, loss of focus
- n) Improved concentration..... Inability to concentrate
- o) Regular engagementIntermittent or no engagement
- p) Enjoyment in learningLoss of enjoyment in learning
- q) Visible progress..... Lack of progress, slipping back
- r) Enhanced wellbeing..... Loss of wellbeing, anxiety, stress, mental health concerns

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Key: Blue = provision; Green = process; Black = outcome

(Mutch, 2021)

What did our research reveal: schools?

- We were telling the Ministry about students that didn't have either **modems or devices**. We gave out a huge number of our devices to students in the community because there are a lot of families that don't have the ability to be able to provide for these. [Principal]
- Before we went into full lockdown, we actually got as much **food** together as we possibly could and got that out to families, however we could really, and we did that throughout the lockdown as much as we could. [Principal]
- Our team had **learning packages** for our children, at their level, for doing the work that they were able to do. That was a big challenge as well, to the extent that we were stopping off on the way home and posting them in letterboxes. [Teacher]

What did our research reveal: principals?

- *It was hugely stressful. We very quickly created an on-line presence. And I said to the staff at the time and to the parents that we weren't necessarily focused on keeping the kids learning in the way we would have at school. **It was just about keeping connected.** [Principal]*
- *...my role in the sense of the pedagogical leader... it stayed... but it was more. Usually it's around learning and successes of what we're doing, but now it was the successes of how distance learners work and in support of that. It just really moved into **health and wellbeing.** So moving from probably **pedagogical to pastoral...** [Principal]*
- *We're really lucky, we have a really great principal. And she's like, you know, "**Just go back to our values** and our school strategic goals, which are whanaungatanga, building relationships, and hauora, as foundations for learning."
[Teacher]*

What did our research reveal: teachers?

- *My role changed in that **I had to become a learner**. For a start, I'm not very conversant with Google programmes and the computer. It wasn't going to get any better because in my class alone we only had six I-pads for 25 children. [Junior primary teacher]*
- *So, in a normal world, on my weekends, that's the time that I spend with my family ... but during the pandemic, students were emailing me and sending me work on a Sunday evening, and so you just answer them, because **that's just the kind of world that you're in at the moment**. [Secondary teacher]*
- *I think that the bit that doesn't get spoken about is that the majority of educators out there **also have their own families** that they were having to deal with – supporting their own children, dealing with the partner who could have lost a job. [Primary teacher]*

What did our research reveal: students?

- *Yeah. I think really, during lockdown, it's just the whole thing, like, changed, in the way that my days used to run. I mean, I'd just come to school, see my friends, you know, do my schoolwork. It was really just a routine almost every day. **And then, all of a sudden, that just got cut off and, like, we had to stay at home.** [Secondary student]*
- *I think, for me, the biggest takeaway was **how amazing our students can be with student agency** and learning, really independently. We just had a task board up, and then we said, "You choose what you want to do, when you want to do it, as long as you want to do it" but we still had high expectations of them, as a teacher. [Primary teacher]*

Two sides of lockdown

- Some of my students have **very structured days with their parents who make sure they get out of their pyjamas**. So that's when it was quite successful. Others we didn't see for weeks. So, the students that were engaged learned how to use different digital tools – things that they would never get to do during class... [Secondary teacher]
- Even with the zooms and online learning, **it was very disconnected**. I didn't feel I was getting a very good idea of exactly how things were going for all the children. Some children we didn't hear from until we were back in Level Two. Some children I heard from every day... Parents texted and called but then for others, it wasn't the case. **And I was thinking, are they okay? Are their families okay? And that caused a lot of anxiety for me about their wellbeing**. [Primary teacher]

Inequity was exacerbated

- *Yeah, it was quite stressful. Because at my dad's house, we have, like, a big family. So, we've two younger siblings. And, like, I'm trying to help them with their schoolwork because my dad's an essential worker. And then there's my stepmother who lives there, my great grandmother, my cousin. So, it's, like, really hard just **trying to do everything as well as my schoolwork.** [Secondary student]*
- *For my family, even I am... we're working as essential workers. So, **we continued to work during lockdown.** And the added precautions of being at home and taking care of your family as well. And thinking of their safety along with yours is kind of nerve-wracking at times. So, like, when we get home, we're hand sanitising and taking our clothes off and going straight for a shower and all that. And the same goes for most of my friends in Year 13. [Senior secondary student]*

Coming back to school

- **You know, they didn't all come back at once.** They did trickle back. And, no, actually, we did we lose some of them altogether. Some of them started working, and they just didn't stop. They just didn't bother coming back to school. [Secondary teacher]
- When they first came back, **they were quiet and withdrawn,** I think they were frightened. The classroom wasn't the style they were used to. You had to have social distancing. I bought hand towels, bottles of handwashing soap, everything I could think of to make them feel safe. [Primary teacher]
- **The Year 9s were just ecstatic to be with their friends** again, I think they missed the sociability that's at school. But the Year 11 and 12s, not quite so evidently excited, because it's not too cool to show that you're excited. But with **some of the seniors there was a degree of anxiety:** "We've missed out on this, so how do we catch up? What do we do about the credits?" [Secondary teacher]

Lockdowns had long term impacts

- I know that **some of our families really struggled and not just low level income families**. It was also it was across the board... so, you know, the impact of [COVID-19] made some families probably reprioritise what's important. [Primary teacher]
- **Some of the students are getting counselling because they couldn't cope**. I had three girls who were really good before lockdown but are now getting anxiety treatment, because they were away from their friends, and their family environment was not that good. They were not the same people when they came back, which was really sad. [Secondary teacher]
- It's not until this year that I've gone, "**Oh, it has affected some kids.**" One of my boys who's new to my class this year, he has a real germ phobia. And it started with Covid. And then it impacted on his friendships because, he's not wanting to get too close to people. [Primary teacher]

But there were some silver linings

- *We're a small community, and we have good connections with our community anyway, and it was a really good opportunity to stay in touch. I spent a lot of my time phoning the parents and just saying, "Hey, how's it going? **So, keeping in touch with all the parents and families was a really good outcome.** [Secondary teacher]*
- ***Principal networks, I think became stronger in terms of checking in with each other around,** 'Oh, what are you doing about this?' 'And what are you doing about that?' And so it kind of helped move away from that competitive model. We're all in the same boat here, so let's think how we can help each other. [Principal]*
- ***Collegially, what I think what went well was to have regular contact with colleagues which took away the feeling of isolation.** It was great and I'd look forward to seeing them each day as they helped me through the processes to be confident and informed. 15 [Primary teacher]*

And some reflections

- I kind of knew it already but it just highlighted **the power of a few things**: the power of relationships with parents, how important that is. How different everyone's homelife is and how that can impact their learning. It highlighted how powerful collaboration within the team is. [Primary teacher]
- And then another big takeaway for me, was that the importance of **'Maslow before Bloom'**, the idea of prioritising student wellbeing before any learning can actually happen. [Primary teacher]
- And Covid has really made me reflect on that, **about how communal and how vital and human learning is, and that we are meant to be together**. And that the unnatural notion of pandemics, when we make a circle around each other, runs risks for all of us, you know. We felt that in our own families; it's no different for schools or institutions. [Secondary teacher]