

Above and beyond: How schools step up when crisis strikes

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*Ko Aoraki te maunga
Ko Māwheranui te awa
Ko Tuhinga o mua te kainga
Ko Te Tai Poutini te rohe
Ko Te Wai Pounamu te motu
Ko Moana-nui-a-Kiwa te moana
Ko Carol Mutch te tangata e tū atu nei
Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa*



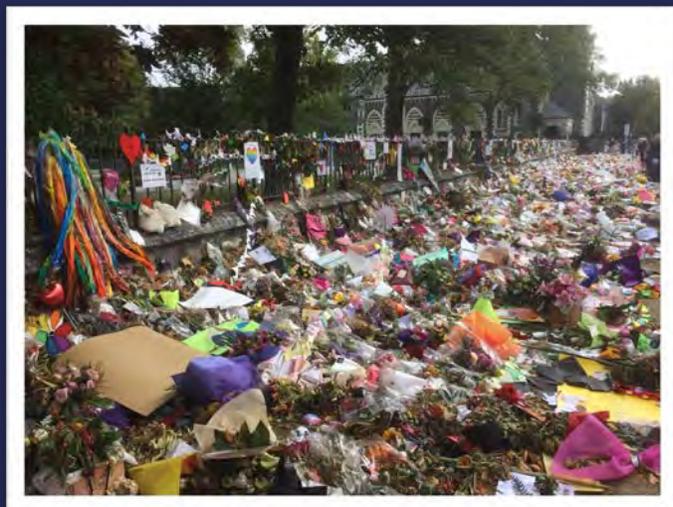
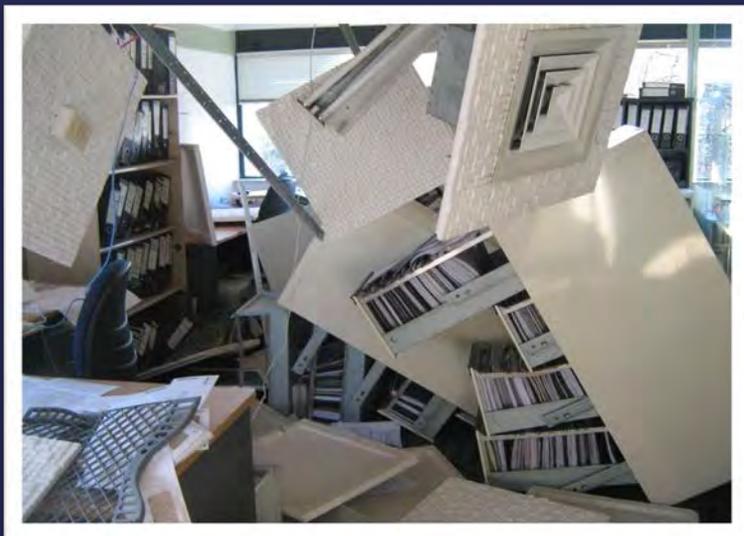
Above and beyond: How schools step up when crisis strikes

A note of caution: This talk includes themes of disasters, death and destruction. If you feel distressed, please do not hesitate to leave and seek support.

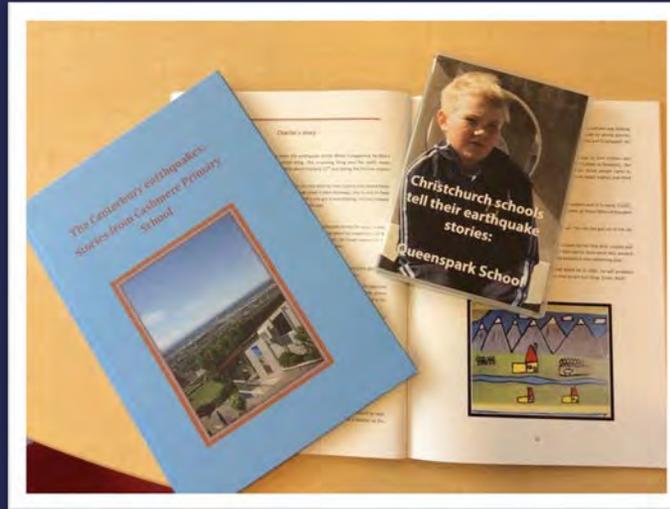
But it is also a tribute to remarkable people whom I would like to honour for their courage, care and commitment.



My recent story



My research



Everywhere: schools



Principals and teachers



Six research settings

Australia	New Zealand	Japan	Samoa	Vanuatu	Nepal
<p>2009 Black Saturday bushfires</p>	<p>2010/2011 Canterbury earthquakes</p>	<p>2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami</p>	<p>2009 Upolu earthquake and tsunami</p>	<p>2015 Cyclone Pam</p>	<p>2015 Gorkha earthquake</p>
<p>2020 Summer bushfires</p> <p>2020-22 Covid-19 lockdowns</p>	<p>2019-2022 Floods, Canterbury, Marlborough, Buller</p> <p>2020-22 Covid-19 lockdowns</p>				

Their stories: Christchurch

My thoughts then were never, "We aren't going to get out" or that it would collapse, but my thoughts now when I look back is that the whole place could have fallen in. We were so jolted that we stood up, then we were jolted back down the force was so great. There was a group of children in the boat, and all we could see was the whole thing swamped with the big waves, and we couldn't even get to them. We tried to stand and go forward, but we were just knocked back...the lights went out, and the children were screaming. All I remember is the siren noise, and I went and grabbed a few of the Year 4 children out of the pool, and I just huddled with them. (Teacher)



Samoa:

The earthquake hit just after 7 in the morning. I was walking to school. I was about halfway there when I felt it. I started to run so I could get to school before anything happened. At the gate I saw the wave. Many children were already in the classrooms with their teachers. They saw me and started running towards me. I tried to signal for them to go the other way. I turned away from the school and started running up the hill and they started to follow me. Some were screaming. Some were crying. The tsunami caught the latecomers. It was very sad. We sat under a shaded tree and said a prayer. (Principal).



Japan

I was not in the school but in another building that was five stories high. The water came right into the building. We were trapped for five days. We had no information. There were people who were getting sick and we had to take care of them.

Five days later we were rescued by helicopter. After that I went to visit the school. The windows were blown out, doors ripped off, ceilings down, walls collapsed, the gym was damaged. The students got the information that the tsunami was coming so they ran up to the shrine on the mountainside and were saved.

Houses were ripped away and the countryside looked like a huge lake, completely under water. The flooding overtook the river banks. The bridges were ripped away. The ways to move around were so limited. The roads were damaged. I had to use a bicycle. It was tough work. I lost 20 kilos after the earthquake and tsunami – it was such a hard time. (Principal)



Vanuatu

Our roof lifted off and there was water everywhere. The shutters blew off and the glass in the windows broke. In the daylight, I could see how bad the damage was. Every neighbour had their roof blown off and water had come in. The bridge was down so no-one could get across. The telephone lines were all down. It was three days before there was any communication with the outside. At the school, the main building – the roof was blown off. The school hall snapped, the kindy and the school stage were blown over – big damage. I had to make a report but we don't have the money to fix it – but we don't give up, we go slowly, slowly. (Principal)



Nepal

Regarding my family – for almost two months my whole family, we stay outside because most people were frightened to go inside their houses even if they were only partially damaged. We stay in a tent and the whole neighbourhood stayed out with us. Fifteen families together. We shared everything and cooked together.

*Through my Rotary friends in Australia, we supported a thousand people. For 15 days we fed them – breakfast, lunch and dinner because they didn't have anything and they have to live outside. We built some temporary shelters out of bamboo and gave them some blankets.
(Principal).*



Australia

And I think [our house], even though we didn't get caught in the fires, everything was black. Houses were black. Took months to clean the houses. So you had a constant reminder all the time. It wasn't just, oh, they're done now. We still have ash in certain places in our house. And even the trees got affected. So, you're constantly seeing it all the time. (Teacher)

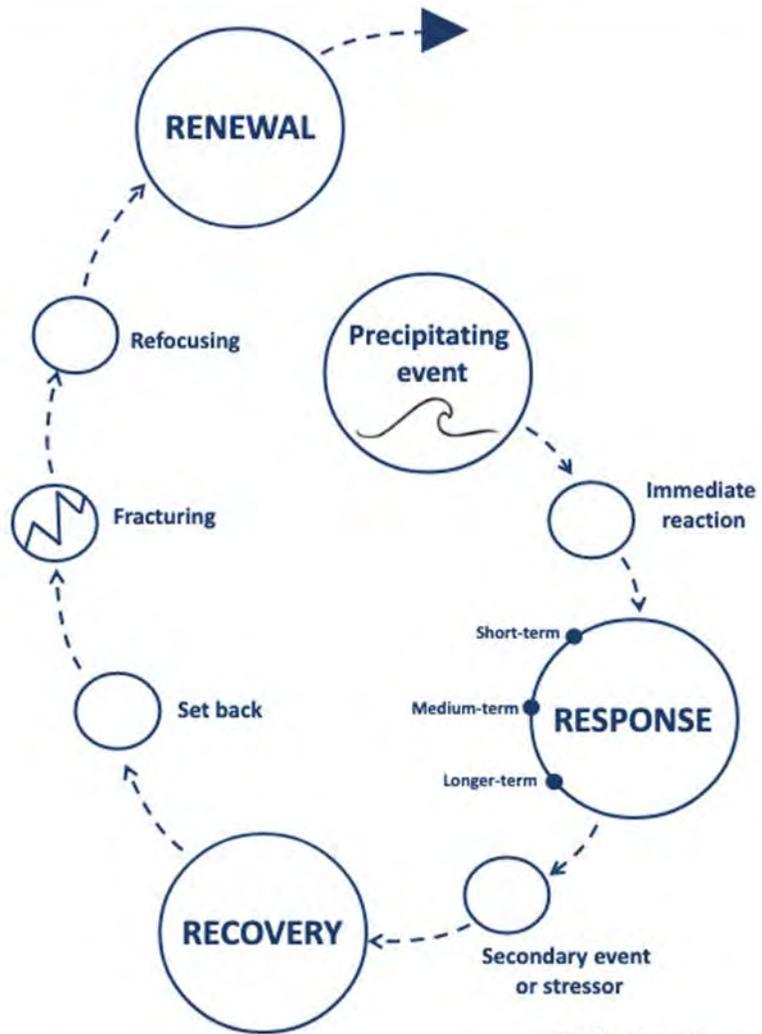


The disaster cycle



- **Prevention/mitigation**
- **Pre-disaster preparedness**
- **Warning**
- **Immediate response**
- **On-going response**
- **Early recovery**
- **On-going recovery**
- **Secondary stressors**
- **Long term recovery**
- **New normal**
- **Lessons for next time**

THE CRISIS CYCLE



Carol Mutch (2020)



Response



I put on my principal's smile. Parents arrived and were standing outside. I realized then that I had an audience and my response needed to be calm and instantaneous. I had to look like I was in control. (Principal, School NZ1)

When I got to my school, I found the roof of my classroom had gone. UNICEF provided tents but the school needed to decide who would use them. They decided on a younger class who wouldn't need desks ... and an experienced teacher – like me. (Teacher, V2)

After the earthquake, I came to realise that most of the students in the affected area lost everything. Their houses were collapsed. They lost their books and their uniforms, some even lost their parents. I asked my Rotary friends in Australia to raise some funds to help the victimised families. (Principal, School N1)

After the cyclone, I have to be a carpenter. I look at the classrooms and make a report. The Ministry came around to assess the damage. I ask parents to assist as I have no handyman. We still have things to be done. We have to spend school money on the roof. (Principal, School V1)

Short term recovery



The government decided that school would start on April 21. Some teachers were going to other schools but they stayed as long as possible to help with the recovery. Some children were still living in shelters. Teachers visited the shelters to encourage the children to come back to school. Even in May some children wouldn't come back to school so some of the other students went to visit them. (Principal J1)

The MoE gave us two weeks to recover then we come back to school. They tell us to go slowly with the children so that they can forget about this. After a week when some start coming back, the teachers ask them about what happened to them – to tell their stories and we have lessons about safety precautions, what to do if there is another cyclone. (Principal, V1)

We started a mobile school system. Because I saw that my students were frightened and sad. They had no food and nothing to do and their parents were busy with rescue work. I mobilise my teachers and we go to different places for one or two or three days. We let the children do drawing and painting and singing and dancing to make them happy. We feed them a small snack. We did more than 50 places. (Principal, N1)

Ongoing issues



Obviously, we kept on feeding kids, we've always done that to a certain extent but that became more evident. There were kids without lunches; there were kids without breakfasts. We just fed them as the need arose. Kids were really tired, so we would put cushions in the back of the room for them to sleep. (Principal, NZ2)

We didn't know what to do. We didn't have any training. We didn't expect this to happen in Samoa. For a long time, children were nervous and afraid. They wouldn't go back to the beach. Their homes and their clothes were all gone and they still had trauma. When they came back to school, we let them do what they liked. They could come to school or they could stay home. (Principal S1)

When the children come back to school they are still traumatised. At first, they are in shock. It takes time for them to do anything. The teachers can't teach. Children just sit there. First day only about three or four per class come. It took a month before they all came back. I told the teachers to go by the Ministry of Education advice – just go little by little. Ask them to tell the stories of their experiences, then go slowly, slowly, little by little. (Principal V1)

Longer term issues



To begin with the children liked the tent. It was like playing house. But when it was hot, the tent was dry and dusty and when it rained the floor was full of puddles. After a few months the children wanted to go back to a regular classroom. (Teacher, V2)

We were affected for the whole year. More than 100 students could not come back. They were frightened and their parents did not want them to come to school. Last year the results of the examination were not so good. Students couldn't study. They are squeezed into a small tent with no lights – very difficult. (Principal, N1)

That starts to wear down the staff, so we knew that we had to look after each other. We really had to look out for each other – be prepared, watch for the signs: 'This teacher is not going to be at school tomorrow. I can just tell, she's looking shaky.' (Principal, NZ2)

The other thing is the sort of impact on the community and individuals in terms of like having the bushfires and then flooding in town and then straight into a pandemic. It felt like everybody was sort of locked down already in the school holidays, in the summer holidays, because of all the smoke and stuff. (Teacher, A1)



Secondary stressors: school closures

I was just sick in my stomach thinking, okay, what is it saying about jobs? What is it saying my child's school; other children's schools? . . . There wasn't enough information given out at the time, for you not to think about what does this mean for you, for your future. I mean, we're already living in house waiting to be repaired, and we're going to lose my job now and my child's going to lose their school. (Teacher, NZ5)

How does that affect the staff? The emotional ties and the relationships are torn apart; families that have been associated with the school for decades have gone. That kind of link and historical connection and knowledge of the community and the school and its involvement goes as well. History goes; it travels with the people. [Our school] has been around for 141 years...it's not a place of recent history, we're looking at quite a significant place in the community. (Acting Principal, NZ5)

New normal



If you look at our village now everyone has everything in their homes... houses are built, electricity restored and installed to our new location. In the evenings there are volley ball games and the young and old hang out in the evenings. The only sad part is that no one lives where we used to live... where our village used to be. (Student, Samoa)

It was healing for them and healing for us. For the children to see other people from the community, and parents, people from the bank, and the people Sarah got to scrape bricks – it broke down barriers. After the earthquakes, people wanted to help and good things can come out of adversity. That was one of the positive things about our community, that people looked beyond themselves and the children got to see this. (Principal, NZ4)

We know from all the international literature that this will stay with people. I've got colleagues who've been diagnosed with cancer, with stress-related illnesses. They go to the doctor, get medical attention, but still there has been a gradual decline in teachers' well-being. (Principal, NZ5)

Research themes

- **School as a community anchors**
Before, during and after the traumatic event
- **Principals as crisis leaders**
Despite the toll it takes on their own wellbeing
- **Teachers as first responders and on-going trauma workers**
Despite often being victims themselves
- **Children and young people as active participants**
While caring is important, active engagement in processing the event and recovery decision making helps them in the long term

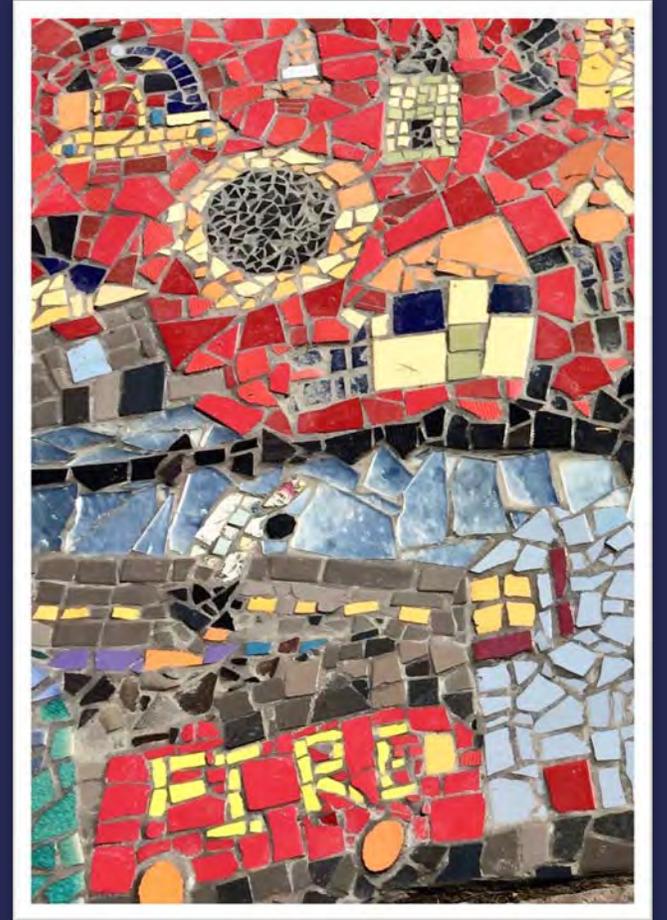


Research findings

- Principals and teachers put their students first when they faced a disaster situation
- Principals and teachers returned to work despite often being victims themselves
- Teachers focused on children's needs more than their own
- Teachers tried to balance helping children to process their experiences safely with returning to normal school routines
- Schools also needed to look after their school families and communities



- Schools continued to provide the best education they could despite limited facilities, lack of resources and insufficient funds
- The stress of coping and trying to keep positive through a prolonged recovery period led to the teachers' and principals' decreased physical and mental wellbeing
- Bureaucratic decisions made by government agencies without consideration or consultation added to the stresses that schools were facing
- Little acknowledgement was given to principals and teachers of the heavy burden that they carry in post-disaster contexts



But wait there's more...



The research themes still resonate

- 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 to support students' wellbeing
- Children and young people found ways to make sense of these circumstances despite their difficulties and anxieties
- But, the research also highlighted the dual role of teachers who were also parents and revealed that existing inequalities were exacerbated



Teachers who were also parents (in NSW)

T3, AU: And the other thing I find really difficult to deal with, was the confusion over essential workers' children. We had children here, whose parents were stay-at-home mums. Well, our staff who are vulnerable need to be working from home; our staff who have their own children need to be working from home. I was lucky. Mine are old enough. I could have left them at home unsupervised, if I had to...

T2, AU: I had my own kids at home as I was here at school. I was lucky that my husband is a stay-at-home parent and so he had our three kids at home and they all had their little work stations set up...

T1, AU: I remember a bit of criticism in certain media, criticising the how much work the kids were actually doing and [saying] the teachers are just having a holiday...

T3, AU: Scott Morrison basically saying teachers are a waste of time, we need to get their butts back to school – and he says that publicly. Like, that's the head of the country who thinks...teachers are letting us down and they just need to get back to the classroom...

T3, AU: And I mean, the resentment that I felt as a member of staff and a mum...but I was expected to do it for other people's family because that's my job. And, it was actually said to me, "That's your job and you're paid to do it."

“School is like the safe place”

Rumours going around:

“Children who coughed or sneezed

Would be tested at school

Without parental permission”

Kids were scared:

“What’s going on?”

“Is everyone going to get Covid?”

We had kids who were

worried their parents were going to die

Kids were really confused

What could we say?

They’re so young.



Lots of children were self-conscious
About their background
Some of them didn't have a desk
Or a room to study
They would have big families of nine or ten people
In a three-bedroom home.

Lots of kids were sending in their work
At six or seven o'clock
Because mum and dad
had been working during the day
And if their parents were essential workers
They were babysitting
and looking after other small children.

It was a different experience
for the students who had difficulties at home
or whose parents lost jobs
and they were really suffering
and struggling for food and things.
They didn't bother about learning
because learning was the last thing.

I heard on the grapevine
that lots of students
were out there working
to bring in money for their families.

A lot of families were doing their best
They just couldn't cope
Things were falling over
Emergency housing
You couldn't do your learning.
If you don't have an address
you don't get parcels or packages.

I knew our children would struggle
They're homeless and living in motels
When things get tough;
Adults get stressed.

It was very difficult
because for many students,
school is like the safe place for them.



**And when will someone,
somewhere, say thank you?**

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