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Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education

Special Issue – ‘Preparing Early Childhood Teachers to Assist Children Who Are Caught in Disasters’

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The Christchurch Earthquake: Lessons from the real-life experiences of early childhood teachers

Abstract:

Even though natural disasters are becoming increasingly prevalent, research investigating and offering practical advice to teachers around caring for children during and after an earthquake event is limited. This article aims to provide unique insight from early childhood teachers into a real-life experience of caring for children at their early childhood centre during and after the earthquake in Christchurch New Zealand in February 2011. Details of the setting on the day of the earthquake prior to the event are discussed, followed by what happened during the earthquake, the situation immediately following the earthquake when parents arrived to collect their children, and the subsequent days and weeks following the earthquake. The article concludes with advice and guidance from the teachers around tips and strategies for supporting children’s social and emotional wellbeing in such a situation for fellow teachers who may find themselves in similar circumstances in the future. Through providing this discussion, future early childhood teachers can be guided, not by hypothetical best practice, but by real-life events from early childhood teachers who have first-hand experience of supporting children prior to, during and after an earthquake event. This therefore provides essential opportunities for learning from practice and preparing for the future.

Keywords: 3-5

Christchurch earthquake; Early childhood teacher reflection; social and emotional support

Introduction

This article is structured in a way that provides real life accounts from New Zealand early childhood teachers reflecting on their experiences of the Christchurch earthquake (indicated in italics at the beginning of each Part). Each italicised teacher reflection is then linked to current research to analyse how the teacher's spontaneous actions offered holistic support for the children present, highlighting lessons to be learned for early childhood teachers in training. The teacher's reflections and subsequent analysis begins now as they set the scene of the earthquake event as they remember it.

Part one

Setting the scene: Early childhood teachers' reflection on events prior to the earthquake

Tuesday 22nd February began as most summer days do at our centre's beautiful seaside community east of Christchurch. It was a lovely warm day so outside play was available from the beginning of the day, with sun hats and sunblock on. Several of our families had walked with their children to preschool as they often stopped at the beach and whale pool on their way home. Our centre is only four blocks from the beach so this is a favourite community pastime. In the other direction is the river, only a block away so we are surrounded by nature's wonders, with the centre of Christchurch only being 9 kilometres away. Our centre programme is based on child-directed learning experiences which meant we had a rich curriculum set up both indoors and outdoors and teachers followed children's play leads. We operate as a non-profit early childhood education centre so have strong teacher to child ratios; 9 infants and toddlers in the nursery with 3 teachers and 30 pre-schoolers with 4 teachers and a teacher support whose key role was to facilitate children's kai (food) and caregiving routines. The morning passed with a calm busyness, with most children outside playing.

Following lunch, the children went back to their play with several preschool children heading to the nursery for a sleep in our shared sleep room. This room was designed so that the infants and toddlers slept in wall mounted cots and the pre-schoolers slept on mattresses on the floor area. The nursery teachers normally supported the children throughout this routine and had just left the room, to write down the sleep details for the sleeping children. Around this time, I was working in the office with my Assistant Centre Manager and she had

suggested we go grab some lunch down at our local shops, a 5-minute walk from the centre. While tempted, I declined as I had noticed my son was a little unsettled and I really didn't want to leave the centre with this happening. I had also noticed another teacher's child unsettled and a teacher had come and taken her down to the fort at the back of the playground with several other children. They were all having a shouting game which was resulting in lots of smiles and laughter. One of the teachers came to my office door where my son was and scooped him up to take him to join the fun and chaos at the fort. Being such a warm day, most children were outside and children were building in the sandpit along with water play. It was a typical summer day where children spend much of their day building and creating with outside resources such as sand, water and other building materials.

Many creations are made, children working together to create rivers, dams, forts, and many other constructions. Scenarios like this would go on for days with each child adding their own theory or style of building, collaborating together to achieve their designs. This day was no different and teachers made sure they were there with planks, tubes, spades and all sorts of resources to enable children to put their ideas into action. Teachers were sounding boards to children's ideas, there to support, offer ideas or provoke further thinking.

Planning for supporting children socially, emotionally and academically in everyday practice

As with all early childhood centres in New Zealand, The New Brighton Preschool is guided by the national early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996; 2017). The development of Te Whāriki has situated New Zealand early childhood education to be world-leading in its thinking around providing an holistic approach to education for infants, toddlers and young children. Rather than provide a check-list of rigid practice for each day, Te Whāriki maps out a framework of four principles and five strands which are woven together to create a metaphorical mat on which pedagogical practice is built. This framework affords pedagogical interactions to be implemented in everyday practice through the culture of each centre in response to the needs of each individual child present. Students training to be early childhood teachers in New Zealand are introduced to these concepts underpinning Te Whāriki, and practice implementation through practicum experiences embedded in their degree programmes.

Te Whāriki was created in response to social and economic situations of a rapidly changing society, where more women returned to work whilst still caring for their children, emphasising ‘the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning and of reciprocal and responsive relationships for children with people, places, and things’ (MoE, 1996, p.9). Its framework affords adaptation of practice to suit the temporal needs of society, making it relevant today with the increase in natural disasters and the associated changing needs of society and family to care for children prior to, during and after traumatic events.

At the heart of early childhood practice in New Zealand is the social and emotional wellbeing of children. As we see in the teachers’ narrative, outdoor play is promoted for curriculum implementation, and children are supported with affection by their teachers when they are feeling unsettled, with humour being recognised as important for supporting children’s emotional stability and resilience. Children are socialised to play together, observable in the teacher’s actions of including children in the fort play, but their need to have peace and rest away from social situations is also recognised, and observable in the time and space allocated for those children who wanted to rest. These traits are observable in the first reflection by the teachers above prior to the earthquake event as they went about their everyday practice not knowing what was about to occur.

What followed was a critical event that took the lives of 185 people (police.gov, NZ Police 2012) and continues to affect the lives of many more, even today. The teachers now describe the earthquake event as they remember it.

Part two

As the earthquake happened – teacher reflections on their immediate reactions

I walked out of the office, and was just at the door into the preschool learning environment, turning to briefly look at the Assistant Centre Manager and the earthquake began; this was 12.51 pm. Christchurch had experienced a large earthquake (7.1 magnitude) in the previous September which had many aftershocks, but immediately this felt very different and a lot more serious than anything we had experienced before. The noise was huge, the roar of the ground and other noises that you didn’t know how to identify. Standing was a real challenge and as I turned to look back the Assistant Centre Manager, I saw that she had briefly fallen to the ground. I clearly remember saying ‘This one is serious’. I looked out into the centre

from the doorframe and teachers were huddled on the ground with children, protecting themselves from the unknown. The shaking, rolling, creaking and groaning seemed to go on and on with small groups staying huddled together. The looks on their faces reflected fear and bewilderment. Fortunately, the outside teachers were amongst the children playing together so were quick to bring everyone onto the raised grass area, forming a linked arm chain circle around the children. Most children were silent, not being able to make sense of what was actually going on, this was very new to them. The September earthquake the previous year had occurred at night while children were in their beds and many slept through the event.

Back inside the moving was slowly quietening down and teachers started to stand and look around. I made a quick judgement that being outside together would be our safest place to be. This was because I had never heard or seen the building move like it had and I didn't know whether it was structurally safe or not and wasn't prepared to take this risk. The pre-schoolers with their teachers headed outside and I moved to the nursery. We were confronted with a challenge, the door to the sleep room was jammed and the teachers could not access the children inside the room. This was very distressing to the teachers and myself alongside another teacher encouraged those teachers with toddlers to join the group outside while we tried to gain access to the room. This involved using wooden play blocks to bang hard on the doorframe while standing balancing on top of furniture, finally popping the door open. As the door opened the crying in the room stopped and the children willingly came into our arms. We rapidly moved the children out to join the group, bedding and all, while one child remaining asleep throughout this whole time.

Once outside, we needed to form a plan about dealing with the immediate dangers of ongoing large aftershocks, getting in contact with our families to make sure they were safe and could come collect their children and surviving the next few hours. Our survival kits failed us, one was in the garage and we could not get the door open and the other was at the bottom of the pantry which was mostly spilled out onto the kitchen floor. I made the decision that I did not want people inside our building as I was worried about the building so set about getting the resources needed outside. Each teacher took on a role, some sung songs and read stories for hours on end with children, others tried to make phone contact with families, others helped to support parents as they came through the gates. We were concerned about tsunami risk but at this time didn't have any real knowledge around these, so tried for over 20 minutes to ring

the emergency services. Once through the person told us that if anything was going to happen, the army or some-one would be there to rescue us with army trucks and not to worry. I remember thinking how incorrect this would be as it seemed everyone had just gone. There was no-one on the streets nor at the police station across the road. It was eerily quiet apart from the sounds of the earth and people's car and house and building alarms constantly going off. In the playground though our little community were together, supporting each other and singing together. Every teacher gave all they could and when moments became too overwhelming people would take themselves to the side to get a little support from each other and then back to being supportive to the children and their families. Several times I stopped and observed how calm the group looked, singing and telling stories and just being there together. It seemed unimaginable that it could be like this with the broken environment around us and the strength of the continuous shaking.

Impromptu support of children's social and emotional wellbeing during an earthquake

Research informed policy around providing care and support of children's social and emotional wellbeing during a natural disaster is very limited. This made managing a situation such as the one described by the teachers here very difficult. Instinct was relied upon, where each action of the early childhood teachers was imperative for the immediate and subsequent health and welfare of each child and staff member. Practicing early childhood teachers, and early childhood teacher education can learn from the intelligent actions of the teachers here, which systematically included:

- Giving physical protection
The teachers protecting the children by linking arms around them on the soft grassed area and covering them with their bodies. Since the earthquake, the NZ government advise that children are supported to 'turtle up' (<http://getthru.govt.nz/downloads/preschool-resources>) which encourages curling up to protect yourself in a similar way.
- Securing a safe location
Moving the children to the open grassed area and ensuring that teachers escorted all free children to safety outside of a potentially unstable building resulted in no children needing medical attention after the earthquake. Currently there is advice around how

to best react to an earthquake if outside (<https://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/top-lists/what-to-do-during-an-earthquake-if-you-are-outside>).

- Supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing
Initiating a rescue of the children who were trapped inside the sleep room. These actions demonstrated a strong solidarity between the members of the centre and ensured that the children's social and emotional wellbeing was supported through responses that provided psychological first aid for the children (Brown, 2012).
- Reaching survival kit
Discovering that survival kits were unreachable and damaged. The NZ government issue advice on preparing a survival kit for emergencies such as earthquakes <http://getthru.govt.nz/how-to-get-ready/emergency-survival-items> but sadly many people affected by the Christchurch earthquake found that their survival kits were trapped inside garages or damaged by falling debris.
- Support through stories and songs
Each teacher having a role in supporting emotional wellbeing through singing songs and telling stories for the children in order to keep them calm and help them feel secure through playful activity (Bateman, Danby & Howard, 2013a; 2016). Stories about the earthquake experience were later documented in children's learning story books and provided essential artefacts for reflection for later talk with children to help them come to terms with events (Bateman & Danby, 2013).
- Reaching families as a priority
Once all children were securely together, next steps were planned around getting in contact with families. Recommendations around reducing the time of separation between children and their families during earthquake events is documented as critical for supporting the wellbeing of children (Yonekura, Ueno & Iwanaka, 2013), where family and community relationships are essential for children's wellbeing (Freeman, Nairn & Gollop, 2015; MoE, 1996; 2017).

The final aspect of the sequence of actions, connecting children with their families, is now discussed by the teachers in the next section.

Part three

Teacher reflections on when the parents started arriving

Over the next few hours parents arrived to collect their children. Some had travelled across town and as they entered the playground shared some of their experiences with the teachers. One parent had said the streets were like rivers, impossible to drive, potholes formed with cars submerged within them, others said people had died in the central city. While we wanted to comfort and listen to them, these tales were not what our children needed to hear. We decided it was best for us to position a couple of teachers at the entrance into the centre. They were there to greet and share that everyone was safe while also hearing the initial stories of what they had been through. Peoples' emotions were very raw and we needed to protect the children from this, so meeting them at the entrance enabled this to happen. A reassuring touch and to be told your children was safe and well often was the undoing for many, pausing to get their emotions together was really important.

Some parents wanted to get their children and just go, while others wanted to stay with us as it felt safer with others around. We were open to supporting people either way. We had a couple of families arrive with big vehicles and I asked if they could stay in case we needed to evacuate. I knew very little about tsunami's but being so close to the beach and the earthquake being so strong, I was worried.

On the day we were very fortunate to have a couple of younger teachers here who were very familiar with information and communication technology (ICT) and using devices. The landline phone service was not working and so these teachers were assigned the role to try and get in contact with parents and children's caregivers. The cell-phone network was only working intermittently and these teachers were focused on getting in contact with families. We had the paper roll of children present and as we gained contact with parents we would document attendance. As time went by I remember the concern of what would happen if we couldn't get hold of a family, what would we do. The Assistant Manager and I decided it would be our role to stay until the last child was collected and that we needed to be flexible and realistic about this plan. I was fortunate that my son had been collected by his father so I could focus my energy and commitment to ensuring our centre community remained safe.

As the children and families started to leave, teachers also started to make their way home. We worked this on a 'need to go' basis and teachers were very fair about being there to support centre families for as long as possible. Teachers with young families were the first to

go, followed by others who had to travel the furthest. The last child was left with three teachers present. When his father arrived, he shared how he had biked to get his child as that was the only travel option that was available from the roads being unusable due to burst water mains, liquefaction, cars stuck in liquefaction holes and traffic jams. When he had got to the bridge, just down the road from the centre he had needed to climb up the bridge with his bike on his shoulder (while at the time being told not to go on the bridge what-so-ever due to safety) as it had lifted up considerably due to the earthquake.

Once the last parent left I gathered what seemed important things to take and we tried to secure the centre as much as possible, which was limited due to doors not closing. Over the past few hours I had come to realise that this was a serious event which was going to be ongoing for quite some time so I needed to take important information such as enrolment details for each child, all our Ministry of Education information, our business information such as banking, insurance, and contacts of contractors we engaged services of. This was around 5 pm, only just over 4 hours since the first earthquake. At this stage we had only been focusing on the wellbeing of our centre community so were unaware what was unfolding in greater Christchurch. Driving home, trying to make your way on undriveable roads, seeing destruction all around, people in utter shock and bewilderment the actual reality of what we had just experienced and were continuing to experience hit me and I felt overwhelmed and really needing people around me.

Importance of family and community in New Zealand early childhood education

Early childhood teacher education degrees emphasise to student teachers the importance of including whānau (family) in everyday early childhood practice as much as possible. Student early childhood teachers could gain further knowledge around the importance of involving whānau specifically in disasters by accessing the stories of the teachers in this article. Prior research investigating the care of children who have been involved in a natural earthquake disaster recommend the importance of children's connections with family members where 'Preventing separation when possible and reuniting families as soon as possible during disaster recovery is critical for the well-being of children' (Yonekura, Ueno & Iwanaka, 2013, p. 1051). In the teacher reflection above we see how the teachers instinctively knew that connecting children back with their parents was an imperative in the ongoing situation. As mentioned before, New Zealand teachers are guided by the national curriculum Te

Whāriki, which has four principles and five strands, one of the principles being ‘family and community’ or ‘Whānau Tangata’ in te reo Māori. As such, this principle guides students teachers and practicing teachers to acknowledge the importance of family and community connections in their everyday practice with children. The underpinning philosophy that guides this practice is Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) where connections to family and community are imperative in supporting children’s social and emotional needs. Of interest here is how Te Whāriki acknowledges children’s learning within Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system, ‘Learning is about the way in which children perceive and deal with their environment’ (MoE, 1996, p.19).

The Christchurch earthquake was a traumatic experience for the children and their families, particularly where children were separated from family members during the event. Listening to children’s voices about their earthquake experiences is important to learn from, where they recommend that children stay as close to family as possible and where ‘Family relationships were by far the most important factor in recovery mentioned by children and young people’ (Freeman, Nairn & Gollop, 2015, p. 113). This aspect of supporting children’s social and emotional wellbeing is not only important to teach to student early childhood teachers in New Zealand, but is just as significant for student early childhood teachers globally. Due to the increase in natural disasters worldwide, student teachers need to be armed with knowledge that will help guide them to support the children and families they are working with should they find themselves in a disaster situation. As such, it is argued here that all early childhood education degrees should contain subject content around how to manage a natural disaster.

Once the day of the earthquake event was over the teachers began to plan for such recovery as best they could in their situation. They now discuss the first days after the event and the challenges that they encountered.

Part four

Following the earthquake – teacher reflections on the first days and weeks after the event

The first few days following the main earthquake, Christchurch was in a state of emergency, with people being advised not to leave their homes unless absolutely necessary. The city continued to be rocked by multiple aftershocks, many still very powerful. Most of Christchurch had lost essential services such as power, water and landlines. We were also advised to only

use our cell phones if necessary as the networks were very unstable. As a family, that meant us all sleeping together, using our BBQ to cook with and boil water, creating alternative means for toileting and many hours huddled around our wind-up radio listening to others share their stories. This really served a purpose as it was reassuring to hear others talk about their experiences and it also made you feel very grateful that you were ok, unlike many others. From this a strong sense of community was formed, neighbours came together to share resources, (our neighbour had a generator and so kept many of our freezers cold until the power came back on several days later), look out for each other and be there when some needed extra help or support. My partner's car was in the central city area and he attempted to collect it. However, the inner part of Christchurch was cordoned off by the Army, with tanks and soldiers blocking the streets. This really brought home the severity of damage and loss in our city centre.

In this state of limbo, we decided that we really needed to reach out to our centre community to see how everyone was getting on and what needs they had which we as a centre could support. Social media played a big part in this initial contact, having a group centre page on Facebook meant that we could post asking after everyone's wellbeing and where-a-bouts. We also used the centre cell phone which had each family's contact details programmed into it to send out group messages asking people to let us know how they were doing. The east side of Christchurch where our centre is located, was strongly affected by the earthquakes with much damage to the environment. Due to this many people left the area, either short-term or for longer periods, depending on their circumstance. After initial contact with our centre families, over 1/3 of our families left the area. For the ones that remained, many joined in community gatherings throughout the day, often run by various groups and churches, there to offer support through food, entertainment and social networking. This became the highlight for many in our community, a place to go and be with others and share stories, to get through the days the best they could. Others though really needed to get some normality back into their days, whether it be getting back to work or trying to sort their issues around housing etc. We recognised that our centre was not going to be open for some time and knew this placed a pressure for some. It was at this time we decided we needed to provide a place to offer this support.

This is when Care on Grimseys was formed. My house was in a far less affected suburb so I opened my house to families who needed to get back to work or just have some time without their child/ren. This was shared with our centre community and several families started bringing their children, grateful for the support. Several of our teachers came daily to care for

the children, this felt better than staying at home waiting for the centre to reopen. Parents did not pay for this, it was about enabling our community to work through the immediate pressures of getting through a disaster. Each day I would head to the centre (with management and at times the Board) to work through the requirements needed to re-open our centre and each day my house would be full of children, teachers and families, happily sharing the days together. At the centre we were creating a new normal, planning for operating a centre with Port-a-loos for toileting, no running water access and many alterations to practices due to these restricted conditions. A key to success in these early weeks was making sure we communicated regularly with our families. Social media, texts and emails were a great way to reach all, along with the face to face contact which was created through Care on Grimseys and popping into various community events where we could keep in touch with not only our families but the happenings within the local community.

Getting the centre re-opened took just over 5 weeks and was a 7 day a week role. We worked tirelessly engaging in and meeting formal regulations from both the Ministry of Education and our local council. It was a new territory for all involved, so at times decisions were made but then requirements changed so we all needed to show patience and flexibility. Back at Grimseys, children and teachers adapted very quickly to the new routines and practices. This was a happy little hub amongst an uncertain Christchurch. The centre re-opened for children on 28th March much to the delight of all involved. By this time most families were desperate to have routines re-established and get their lives going again. Child attendance on that first day demonstrated this, every child on the roll turned up that day. We had a new normal but one which we were ready to embrace and that we all knew very clearly our responsibilities and roles in order for success.

As the Manager, I had researched information around supporting children's emotional well-being and as a team we had many discussions around what practices would best support our children. Key to this was being present for children, listening to what they had to share with us, wanted to know and engage in, and then us building upon this. We also recognised very quickly that the immediate environment around us was rich with new opportunities as our landscape changed from day to day and much newness appeared. We became investigators, researchers, theory makers of life around us while having the strong relationships in order to keep us feeling ok and safe. Our programme became quite focussed on our environment and the on-going changes to it. This was the new normal and our children were fascinated with

what was going on. We documented over time changes to flooding areas, new equipment being brought in to fix things, new language which became our everyday language. We were surrounded in earthquake and its affects, we needed to recognise this and play with this, ponder our ideas and create new knowledge. Our playground was soon full of children in the roles of surveyors, road workers, sewerage truck drivers, building inspectors, all very apt within these roles, speaking in their new languages and applying knowledge which was never held before. We took trips on foot exploring our community, noticing changes and watching with interest as the many workers repaired and rebuilt our environment.

Teacher strategies for post-earthquake recovery

The teachers discuss an important point regarding the big changes that were managed through everyday talk with the children. Most research investigating trauma talk focuses on therapy sessions in specially dedicated clinical settings with therapists. However, for the children and teachers of New Brighton Preschool post- earthquake, the majority of their time was spent talking with each other about their situation, or ‘the new normal’ as they articulately describe. The way that the teachers talked with children about the earthquake in the following days, weeks and months was impromptu and more spontaneous than talk with therapists, and important to study as ‘increased understanding about how children play out and talk about their trauma experiences in everyday activities is particularly important, as it is during this everyday play where symptoms of trauma or PTSD will first manifest (Bateman, Danby & Howard, 2015, p. 412). The role of the early childhood teacher, then can be seen by all as imperative in the lives of their children in their everyday interactions with children post-disaster. This is another important point that needs to be included in early childhood teacher education, along with the strategies for engaging in such talk with children in authentic and meaningful ways.

One strategy that the teachers used was to provide time and space for play opportunities for the children. This involved sourcing the centre with artefacts that had become common in the community, such as high visibility vests, traffic cones, clipboards and tape which the children used to cordon off areas of their centre. These props offered opportunities for fantasy play where the children could come to terms with the trauma from the earthquake (Bateman, Danby & Howard, 2013a; 2016).

Documenting the earthquake event was also a strategy used by the teachers and a useful strategy for students teachers to learn about, particularly when learning about Learning Story documentation. In New Zealand, early childhood assessment is documented through Learning Stories. Learning Stories are written by teachers about children's achievements in everyday activity. The child is the main character, and the learning that the child has engaged in is the central theme. Once written the Learning Story is taken home for parents to add comments, so to include family as much as possible in the child's learning. Learning Stories can then be explored with the child in the future, where reading a catalogue of learning achievements supports the child to see themselves as competent and capable, developing a learner identity (Carr & Lee, 2012). The teachers and children together documented the earthquake experiences as Learning Stories, compiled as a book, these were set out for children to access every day. The children were observed often reading the stories with one another, and using them as a prop for collaborative discussions about the earthquake, where sharing stories of the same experience co-created a 'whole picture' of the event (Bateman & Danby, 2013).

Children were familiarised with their 'new' surroundings through teachers taking impromptu walks into the immediate community to investigate earthquake damage and discuss the situation with children (Bateman, Danby & Howard, 2013b). The teachers often initiated talk about the earthquake on these community walks in order to prompt children to give their opinion and have their voices heard (Bateman, Danby & Robinson, forthcoming).

Part five

Teacher's final reflections and looking to the future

Several years on we are still in an earthquake affected city. Our central city is in the process of being rebuilt and this will be going on for years. Our centre is now operating as usual after having to move premises for several months in order for earthquake repairs to be completed. This was again another big hurdle to overcome but one we did successfully due to strong planning and communication with our community.

To get through an event like we did I think is a real reflection of our community and centre team. As a team, we really had to focus on the well-being of children and their families and make sure we could engage in play, and have fun in a time of strong uncertainty. Our centre needed to be the safe place for children so we were very mindful of the conversations around

children. In the early days particularly, families often needed to share their concerns or fears. We were very intentional that this didn't happen in the learning space but instead we could chat over a hot drink in the office.

As management we needed to ensure that communication with our community and authorities was very strong and regular. We had to be flexible in our thinking and ways of looking forward. Plans had to consider all aspects of well-being and the key was to keep everyone safe holistically. We had to be responsive to our community needs and very practical. Sharing this planning was essential to ensuring everyone felt confident about moving forward, knowing that planning was in place to cover the uncertainty which was the current reality. Emergency resources needed to be on hand and in different spaces in the centre so we could access if needed, and these resources needed to be very practical. We refined our plans around getting and keeping in contact in an emergency and what roles the centre team could do to offer practical support. Folders containing copies of important business information were kept in several locations and could be accessed at any time and procedures were created to ensure all information is kept up to date. Having multiple communication channels reassured families and enabled us to reach our community. To this day we are still seeing aspects of this event effect how we are as a community. Two years ago, Kaikoura had a strong earthquake which caused evacuation of the eastern suburbs due to a tsunami warning. While this tsunami alert did not come to fruition in the New Brighton area, it meant many children were woken from their beds to leave their homes for higher ground. It brought back many memories for some and it was the final straw, they chose to leave the area. New Brighton is very proud of its natural environment; the sea, river and forest all close by but it does offer a sense of vulnerability to the natural world. People who have stayed love the place and the community. It's the strength that lies here that makes it all worthwhile.

Final thoughts: Advice to early childhood teachers for future disasters

As natural disasters increase (note the recent earthquake in Lombok, Indonesia on Sunday 29th July 2018 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-44996035>), special issues of journals which focus on practical advice for teachers around supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of children during and after disasters are essential. Academics and early childhood teachers need to work together to investigate strategies for helping support children, families and communities through such difficult times. Early childhood teacher education has to be

recognised as having an important role in educating early childhood student teachers in how to practically manage when caught in a natural disaster whilst caring for young children. It is essential globally for early childhood teacher education to include content from research that offers practical strategies for supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing in disasters due to the current environmental situation.

The teachers in New Brighton Preschool were courageous in their actions during the earthquake event, and worked tirelessly to re-build their community in the hours, days, weeks, months and years following the earthquake. They now offer advice to their wider community of early childhood teachers nationally and internationally, speaking from their own experiences in the hope that their experiences will be helpful to those in future situations. The teachers reflect:

This experience has really stretched us as a centre and community but also with it we have learnt so much. Throughout this time, there were key aspects we learnt which really supported our children:

- *Familiarise children with the new normal of their surroundings by introducing artefacts such as safety jackets, traffic cones and clipboards into the centre.*
- *Explore the local community, noticing the changes and situate learning around this. Take photos, document change, discuss with children and document their working theories around what is happening. This supports children in making sense of the situation and gives them some agency.*
- *Make time for families to come in and talk, but in a private space away from the children. Communication with families is critical so make sure there are many different ways you can manage this. Keep the conversations in the centre learning space child focused and positive.*
- *As a team work in your individual teachers' strengths. Plan with your team about what role/s each can manage and be flexible with this. Spend time planning multiple options, the more you plan, the readier you will be in an event.*

Dedication

This article is dedicated to the children and families of Christchurch who, with courage came together in their communities to get through this challenging time and particularly to those who lost ones in the Christchurch earthquake on 22 February 2011, forever in our memories and hearts.

Hutia te rito o te harakeke
Kei hea te komako e ko
Ki mai ki ahau

He aha te mea nui o tenei ao
Maku e ki atu
He tangata, he tangata, he tangata!

If the centre shoot of the flax is pulled out (and the flax dies) where will the bellbird sing?
If you were to ask me what is the most important thing in the world. I would reply:
It is people, it is people, it is people!

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