



Leadership in times of crisis: Dispositional, relational and contextual factors influencing school principals' actions



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ABSTRACT

In disaster situations, children and young people look for guidance from supportive adults. If a major crisis happens at school, they look to their principals and teachers. The expectation is that these adults will keep them safe, reassure them, reunite them with their families and help them adjust to their future circumstances. This article reports on themes drawn from interviews with four school communities as their principals led them through the events and aftermath of the 2010/2011 earthquakes in Canterbury, New Zealand. Five major earthquakes over 6 on the Richter scale, accompanied by over 12,000 aftershocks, caused major damage and on-going disruption to the city of Christchurch and surrounding districts. School principals found themselves taking on emergency management and crisis leadership roles for which they felt ill-prepared. From a constant comparative analysis of the data, this paper describes the role of school principals from immediate response, through short and mid-term recovery, to time for reflection. It uses concepts from the field of crisis leadership to frame the stories. The article concludes with a conceptual analysis which highlights three sets of factors – dispositional, relational and contextual – which help to explain the the changing role of principals in a disaster context.

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1. Introduction

As schools are located in centres of population, large and small, a disaster affecting a community will impact on local schools. Not only might schools be affected by a natural disaster or traumatic event along with the rest of the community, they are now the sites of school-centred tragedies. In disaster situations, children and young people look for guidance from supportive adults [3,24,17,40–42,46]. If a major crisis happens during school time, they look to those *in loco parentis* – their principals and teachers [13,24,25,28,36,37,40]. Children expect these adults to keep them safe, to reassure them and reunite them with their families [14,26,28,37]. When school reopens children continue to need support to adjust to their changed circumstances [12,13,21,24,25,28,29].

This article draws data from a wider study of schools in the aftermath of the 2010/2011 earthquakes in Canterbury, New Zealand, to focus on the changing role of the principal during this time. Five major earthquakes over 6 on the Richter scale accompanied by over 12,000 aftershocks caused major damage and on-going disruption to the city of Christchurch and surrounding districts [10]. School principals found themselves taking on emergency management and crisis leadership roles for which they

often felt ill-prepared [13,32]. From an iterative constant comparative analysis of the school-related qualitative interviews, this article describes the principal's activities from immediate response, through short and mid-term recovery, to time for reflection. It uses theory from the field of crisis leadership to frame the findings and then further analyse the major themes. The theoretical analysis highlights three sets of factors that influenced the principals' decisions and actions. These are: *dispositional*, *relational* and *contextual*.

2. Context

On September 4 2010, at 4.35 am a 7.1 magnitude earthquake hit the Canterbury region of New Zealand causing widespread damage to the city of Christchurch and surrounding districts of Selwyn and Waimakariri. The earthquake was to be followed by 12,000 aftershocks over the next three years, including several over magnitude 6. The most destructive was at 12.51 pm on February 22 2011. At magnitude 6.3, it was centred closer to the city of Christchurch with an upthrust of twice the force of gravity. It demolished the city's business district, killing 185 people and injuring thousands more [10]; for more technical detail see: [2]. All educational institutions, from early childhood centres to universities, were closed for several weeks following the two major earthquakes of September 2010 and February 2011 [13]. As the

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region came to terms with the death and destruction, getting schools up and running again was a government priority. This meant that schools were thrust into significant disaster recovery roles for which they were largely unprepared.

A synthesis of principals' actions was drawn from a larger study, 'Christchurch schools tell their earthquake stories', conducted between 2012 and 2014 and funded by UNESCO and the University of Auckland. The purpose of the larger study was to record the earthquake stories of schools across the region. It included interviews with principals, teachers, school support staff, students, parents and family members (see [29]). The focus of this article uses an analysis of data drawn from discussions of the principals' role, mostly from the principals' interviews, but also from other school community members, where relevant. The article provides in-depth rich description of the principals' lived experiences [27,38] at different phases of the disaster as well as drawing out key themes for further discussion.

With disasters impacting on developed and developing nations alike and scientists predicting more adverse-weather related disasters [15,19,49], it is important that we learn from principals who have experienced these situations and led their schools successfully through them [44]. Capturing and disseminating findings will help current and future school leaders prepare for such eventualities and assist their, staff, students and communities to deal with these in ways that build resilience and hope.

3. Methods

Research in on-going emergency settings suggests 12–24 months after the onset of an ongoing disaster event to be a useful time to start to review what has happened [7]. The data for the wider study were collected within that approximate timeframe, that is, between May 2012 and May 2014. The study used a naturalistic, participatory, qualitative methodology [38] in which each school co-designed, with the lead researcher, the way in which data would be gathered, interpreted and disseminated (see, [33], for a detailed description of the co-construction of each school's project). The collated raw data was then made available to the research team for further analysis. Participants varied from school to school but were usually the principal, senior leaders, teachers, school support staff, students, parents and other family members. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were undertaken with adults and conversational focus group or arts-based methods with students [11].

The first round of data-gathering strategies focused on immediate disaster response and recovery, while the later interviews included time for reflection and dealing with new crises that arose as part of the long term recovery and rebuilding phases. Interviews were videoed or audio-recorded and transcribed. They were supplemented by artwork, photographs, video clips and documents gathered or created as part of the project (see [27,31], for more detail on each individual school's project).

The wider study's collated cross-school data has produced a range of findings – those that focus on the school as a whole, or the experiences of students, staff, families and the community. From the wider pool of data, 25 interview transcripts that related to school leadership, particularly as shared by principals, but also as noted by teachers and parents, were thematically analysed through an iterative, constant comparative method [27,47] – within and across schools. The themes in this paper are those that arose from (a) an initial thematic analysis and (b) those that arose from a theoretical analysis using the conceptual framework, discussed later.

The post-disaster setting of the study meant that the researcher needed to take time to build relationships with the principals and

schools. It was important that the schools did not see the researcher as collecting data for her own ends but as providing a genuinely reciprocal process that would benefit the schools. The initial concept was shared with local principals prior to the researcher's university granting ethical clearance. Ethical considerations included the expectations of informed consent, right to withdraw, school and parental permission for children to participate, children's assent and confidentiality. Anonymity was not an expectation where schools were sharing their own projects with their communities – and schools understood and agreed to this. It was provided, however, when the research team used the collated data for cross-school analyses, comparisons and interpretations for wider scholarly dissemination (as in this article).

The researcher used purposive sampling [27,38] and began with schools that fitted the earthquake experience profile and were already known to her. This helped with establishing a level of trust. That the researcher had also experienced the earthquakes meant that she could relate to the experiences and emotions of the participants. Other schools were later recruited through word-of-mouth. The researcher took a sensitively staged approach – usually a phone call to the principal, followed by e-mailing through the research brief, then a personal visit. Attendance at a staff and/or parent meeting, if requested, was also undertaken. Data gathering did not begin until each school felt it was safe to engage in the process. Once data-gathering had begun, participants could still withdraw from the research, decline to answer any question or take a break from the interviews or activities at any time. Participants could bring a support person and facilities for counselling or debriefing were made available. Throughout the setting up phase, the principal was usually the liaison person and so a relationship of mutual trust developed between the researcher and each principal. This made the leadership interviews rich and convivial.

Four primary schools from the wider project were the main sources of the data discussed in this article. They are labelled as Schools A to D (the order in which they joined the project). Selected quotations from principal, teacher or parent interview transcripts from the four schools are used to exemplify the themes.

It is important to note, that with the advent of 'school choice' policies, children in some countries do not necessarily attend their local school, but in Christchurch, in general, especially at the primary school level, most children do attend a nearby school and local schools have good relationships with their communities.

4. Literature review

4.1. Disasters and their effects on schools

Disasters are the consequences of events triggered by natural hazards or human interventions that overwhelm the ability of local response services to manage or contain the impacts. They are usually large-scale events, which seriously affect the physical, social and economic context of the region. They are characterised by suddenness or lack of preparedness, unexpectedness of the size of the event and ensuing damage, and the inability of existing systems to cope. There is often large-scale death or displacement, and a lack of immediate access to food, water, shelter and medical aid [15,16,44,48,9]. Convery et al. [12] also note, "they are a multi-dimensional product of the social, economic and political environment, culturally, spatially and emotionally specific."

Much of the current literature relevant to school response and recovery relates to children. Disasters can have serious long term effects on children's health and well-being [1,35,6,8]. This literature focuses on strategies and resources for the social, emotional

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