Submitted copy of: Everything to everyone: Educational leadership in unprecedented times

Introduction

This chapter discusses educational leadership for equity and access in the context of COVID-19's exacerbation of existing educational inequities in Aotearoa New Zealand. The chapter begins with an introduction to the long-standing inequitable circumstances for particular groups in Aotearoa New Zealand. A brief overview of relevant literature follows the introduction before introducing two qualitative studies from which the data were drawn relating to school leadership during COVID-19 lockdowns. The data are presented using a crisis leadership framework, created by [Author 1] (2015a), that presents the dispositional, relational and situational attributes school leaders use when facing a crisis. After the school leaders' experiences are shared, the chapter turns to a discussion of how inequities that already existed in Aotearoa New Zealand were thrown into sharp relief and even expanded to groups for whom issues of educational access or food insecurity were previously unknown. The expansion of school leaders' role to manage the deepening crisis was something that they felt unprepared for but took on willingly despite the toll that it took on them personally and professionally. The chapter's conclusion highlights how COVID-19 has changed the educational landscape but suggests that there are positive lessons that can be taken away from the experience.

The context of educational inequity in Aotearoa New Zealand

Aotearoa New Zealand's education system is internationally recognized as one of high quality, yet low equity (OECD, 2018). Inequitable access to a system that serves all students has been formally recognised by the country's Minstry of Education (2018), and educational research (Ell & Grudnoff, 2012; [Author 2], 2021). The Ministry has identfied four priority learner groups: Māori[1], Pasifika[2], students with disabilities, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, whose progress is evident in proportionately lower national student achievement (Education Counts, 2020; OECD, n.d.). Similarly, these groups have less success in meeting university entrance crtieria (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

A number of educational policies have been developed in attempts to address these equity gaps for some of the priority learner groups. Examples include the Ministry of Education's (2013) *Ka Hikitia: Accelerating Success 2013–2017* document targeted at raising Māori student achievement via culturally relevant practices. Similarly, the *Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030* (Ministry of Education, 2020) share a focus on working with Pacific communities to improve the disparity of educational opportunities for Pacific children and youth. For students with disabilities, the *New Zealand Disability Strategy* (Ministry of Social Development, 2016) strives for inclusive mainstream education accessibility and inclusive education as a "core competency for all teachers and educators" (p. 25). A comparable policy for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds does not yet exist. There are however a range of smaller educational and social initiatives aimed at supporting children and young people from this group of priority learners. Politically, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's has made it her priority to address child poverty by taking on the role of Minister for Child Poverty Reduction. Through this portfolio, numerous Government initiatives in fiscal policy,

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[1] The Indigneous people of Aotearoa New Zealand
[2] *Pasifika* are students from the Pacific Islands of Sāmoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, Tuvalu, and other smaller Pacific nations – who are now living or being educated in New Zealand.

social services and school-based programmes, like free healthy lunch delivery and enhanced school-based health services, seek to improve the lives of children experiencing poverty. Additionally, a range of philanthropic and private businesses contribute to a range of school meal, material hardship and extracurricular opportunities for children disadvantaged by poverty.

As indicated, the equity challenges for school leaders in the Aotearoa New Zealand educational context are significant. The primary goal has been, and will foreseeably continue to be, to provide equitable access to teaching and learning opportunities that benefit *all* learners. While there have been gains in raising educational achievement levels amongst the four priority learner groups, the equity gap firmly stands. In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic deepened the nation's educational and social disparities. While, internationally, Aotearoa New Zealand has fared better than most in containing the COVID-19 virus (Cameron, 2020), the country did not escape the pandemic's impact on schools and the children and families they serve ([Author 1, 2020a]. Educational leaders in particular found themselves in uncharted territory, coping with limited guidance due to the unprecedented nature of the pandemic's crisis (Education Review Office, 2020). The following literature review briefly introduces literature on educational and crisis leadership, to frame the context in which the two empirical research studies are set.

Literature Review

Given that leadership styles vary across environments, contexts, and situations, this review focuses on three leadership definitions. First, leadership in a broad sense, which could cover people who hold positions of power in any sector. Second, educational leadership, focusing on education settings and the people who work in those contexts. Third, crisis leadership, a concept that has gained heightened importance as we face this global pandemic.

What is leadership?
While leadership has been widely researched, it is still a misunderstood and contested concept (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016). Kruse (2013) provides a generic definition, viewing leadership as "a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal" (p.3). Other literature highlights that providing direction and exercising *influence*, rather than *authority,* is important to ensure successful organisational outcomes (Leithwood & Riehl, 2004; Kruse, 2013). To be an effective leader it is important, among other things, to have a purpose or goal in mind and a sense of direction on where the organization is heading (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Much of the literature outlines essential skills for leaders, such as, reflective thinking, effective communication and relationship building (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; D'Auria and De Smet, 2020). When complex adversity arises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Blomquist et al. (2018) suggest that an interdisciplinary leadership approach that can view the problem from different perspectives is more powerful than a single leadership style.

Educational leadership
Leithwood and Riehl (2003) describe school leaders as "those occupying various roles in the school, who provide direction and exert influence in order to achieve the school goals" (p.2). In Aotearoa New Zealand, this could be a Board of Trustees member, principal or team leader. Effective educational leaders are those who identify and articulate a vision, create a sense of community between teachers and staff members, creating high expectations, have effective communication and partnership with parents and families and allow children to

grow in themselves and in their learning (Able et al., 2017; Leithwood & Riehl 2003). The New Zealand Ministry of Education (2021), using Indigenous Māori concepts, highlights four different qualities that educational leaders should aspire to in order to lead a school effectively. The first is demonstrating *manaakitanga*, leading with a moral purpose and clear goals. The second is *pono*, having self-belief that they are able to lead a school successfully and, when adversity occurs, overcome the challenges. The third is *ako*, seeing themselves also as learners, in order to keep learning and growing. Lastly, *awhinatanga*, refers to guiding and supporting the interpersonal relationships within the school.

Crisis leadership
The COVID-19 pandemic has presented the world with a range of challenges especially to those in leadership positions. Boin et al. (2010), defines crisis leadership as "recognizing emerging threats, initiating efforts to mitigate them and deal with their consequences and once the crisis period has possessed, re-establishing a sense of normality" (p.1). [Author 1] (2015a) explains that "crisis leadership is different from everyday leadership because of the complexity, uncertainty and constant changing circumstances" (p.43). Smith and Riley (2012) note that during a time of crisis some of the critical attributes of effective leadership include being resilient, authentic, creative and able to respond quickly and effectively. VanSlyke and Simons (2020) add that successful leadership requires being adaptive to all sorts of situations, but at the end coming out stronger than before.

Crisis leadership in an education context
Smith and Riley (2012) identify five different steps for responding to a crisis: (1) Get the facts of the crisis or incident; (2) implement the relevant contingency plan, or quickly adapt one to meet the current situations; (3) be decisive in decision making; (4) show concern and empathy regarding the situation; and (5) communicate effectively with the people in the situation whether it be teachers, students or parents.

[Author 1] (2015a,b) describes how the role of a principal changes when a crisis occurs. Principals shift from being an educational leader to a crisis manager, needing to respond effectively yet differently each time. Literature reporting on leadership responses to Covid-19 notes that principals felt under prepared with what they were facing, and how they were going to tackle the problem and find a solution ([Author 1], 2020a; Education Review Office, 2020; Leeson et al., 2020). Although the lockdown provided many difficulties for principals, a survey by the New Zealand Education Review Office (2020) found that 8 out of 10 teachers felt that their school had responded well and that the leadership team communicated with them effectively.

Research studies

For this chapter, [Authors 1 and 2] combined data from two independent studies, where participants included school leaders discussing their experiences leading up to, during and after the Covid-19 lockdowns that forced schools to close during 2020 and early 2021. Both studies were qualitative case studies of schools, involving principals, Boards of Trustees, teachers, support staff, parents and community members and were approved by the University of [Removed for review purposes] Human Ethics Committee. Author 1's study focused on schools' responses to COVID-19, whereas Author 2's study was on the changing nature of rural schools, but with the arrival of the virus, questions were added to include schools' responses to the pandemic. Data gathering was mostly through semi-structured

interviews and document analysis. Interviews were transcribed and coded independently before the excerpts relating to principals were extracted and re-coded as described below.

Findings

Following her work on schools in disaster contexts, [Author 1] created a crisis leadership framework, which has since been used in principal preparation programmes. It is used in this chapter to provide an analytic framework for examining the data across the two studies. Three sets of leadership attributes in crisis contexts form the basis of [Author 1's] framework (see Figure 1). *Dispositional* attributes are what educational leaders bring to the leadership role which they can draw on to support them when a crisis occurs. *Relational* attributes refer to an educational leader's ability to develop and maintain relationships prior to, during and after the crisis. *Situational* attributes refer to an educational leader's ability to assess and respond promptly yet flexibily to the crisis while maintaining day-to-day functioning.

Dispositional	What leaders bring to the event from their background, personal qualities, experiences, values, beliefs, personality traits, skills, areas of expertise, and conceptions of leadership.
Relational	The ways in which leaders offer a unifying vision and develop a sense of comunity within the organisation, engendering loyalty, enabling empowerment, building strong and trusting relationships and fostering collaboration.
Situational	How leaders assess the situation as it unfolds, understanding the context, being aware of different responses (including cultural sensitivities), making timely decisions, adapting to changing needs, making good use of resources (both material and personnel), providing direction, responding flexibly, thinking creatively and constantly reappraising the options.

Figure 1: Crisis leadership attributes

The data from the two studies were combined and grouped using the categories *dispositional*, *relational* and *situational* and then further analysed for illustrative themes within each category, an approach which Sandaña (2016) calls descriptive coding. Initially, a cross-case comparison between the urban and rural contexts was considered but the themes derived were remarkably similar, only varying because of contextual factors, such as location or school size. Thus, the combined findings are presented for each theme under each of the crisis leadership categories, from a total of 12 school leaders. In presenting the data, school leaders are each given an indvidual code (e.g., P,1 = Principal 1).

Dispositional

In coding the dispositional category, findings emerged that highlighted the personal, experiential or leadership attributes that the school leaders displayed. While school leaders were not asked to articulate their leadership approaches, some did. Most approaches or attributes were gleaned from the way in which the leaders talked about their values or the considerations that underpinned their leadership styles.

Leadership approaches

Ways in which leaders discussed their practice included being pragmatic, inclusive, collaborative, humanistic, people-focused and child-centred. One principal explained how, during the Covid-19 pandemic, he moved from a pedagogical leadership style to a stronger pastoral focus:

> ...the role in the sense of the pedagogical leader... it stayed... but it was more. Usually it's around learning and succeses of what we're doing, but now it was the succeses 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 – and being really intensive with pastoral... [P,11].

Another school leader highlighted the complexity of trying to navigate a professional approach for these new times:

> The challenge is just wanting to do a good job, and not knowing... I suppose internally everyone has their own stresses as well with Covid.We didn't know what was going on.... So, you've all got your own personal stuff, and then you're trying to do the best for the families and the children, your classes, and wanting to do a really good job. [P,4]

The metaphor of juggling competing priorities was used several times as with this leader, who also articulates his approach as realistic but humanistic:

> I guess my biggest challenge in all of these things is being realistic because, as a principal, a school leader... you want to support your families to get the best that they can. And you're also juggling that alongside the needs of your teaching team as they deal with their own families and navigate their own way of working through Covid. You've got multiple stakeholders involved in this process. And my natural way is operating from a human perspective of wanting to solve the problems or the barriers, but also nurture our community.... [P,5]

Leadership attributes

In our study, we identified many leadership attributes, including being compassionate, thoughtful, nurturing, consultative, collaborative, reassuring, responsive, creative, calm, trusted and hardworking. In this quote, a principal can be seen displaying decisiveness, consideration and consistency:

> 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. ... I said to the staff, let's make things fun and engaging. And we don't want families to be under pressure at home – they're not teachers. We don't want them to be stressed around what their kids do, or don't do, know, or don't know. That's our job. [P,3]

Another of the attributes was experience. This principal drew on his experience and intuition to read the signs of a possible golbal pandemic:

> We were able to watch that picture and what was happening within schools [overseas] and all that planning prior to the world lockdown. ... I posed the question to the staff back in February. 'Look, just on the off-chance, if anything happens here, how would this look?' We started to develop some ideas and plans. ... So we want to make sure we can support learning ... we don't want them to drop because we don't know how long this lockdown is going on for. So, the programme really evolved. [P,11]

Relational

In our initial data analysis, the largest theme was related to building and maintaining relationships. In the disaster recovery literature, the networks and connections that a community had prior to the event, proved to be a significant feature in a community's ability to respond and recover (Thornley et al, 2015). We organised the data into groups with whom school leaders had significant relationships. Students and their families were often at the front of leaders' minds and were often refered to as their 'school community'.

School communities

One principal summed up the importance of relationships: "But really, I mean, relationships are everything. Relationships and connections are the most important things" [P,9] and another principal put it this way:

> I very much had the focus on staff, parent and student welfare in the forefront of my mind – that was more important to me than anything else. Whether it was just, you know, sending a text out to a family that we hadn't seen and just checking everything was ok or doing some fun things with kids on Zoom. [P,3].

One principal spoke of trying to support the different needs and expectations of families, "I think the lesson I have learned is, or have learned so far, is just the importance of really knowing your community, and being able to be proactive." That principal continued:

> Just knowing what is that happy line, or happy medium between those families that wanted a lot – they wanted almost like a replica of the school day, and those families that were in a space, in a mental space where they weren't really in a capacity to engage in supporting their children – and learning through that process. So you were in a constant space of balancing the varied needs .... [P,5]

Teaching and support staff

School leaders were very conscious that not only did Covid-19 impact families in different ways, it also impacted school staff in varying ways. One school leader expressed this concern:

> I think as the princpal and the deputy principals in the school, we were all well aware that for some of our staff, they had their own children at home ... and there are some of our staff whose partners have lost jobs ... [and] a relatively high number of staff have family who live overseas, so we were well aware of what was going on for them. [P,1]

School leaders tried to support their staff but the learning curve was steep for everyone:

The on-line situation was challenging for the teachers ... all the teachers from Year 1 to 8 to try and remain in contact with all the children and do the best by them. And they spent hours and hours doing it – with the younger children, heaps and heaps of individual messages and trying to assess their work.... And for the teachers of older children having three different on-line meetings a day.... [P,9]

And the expectations eventually took a toll on teachers' health and wellbeing:

For teachers, they're tired, now. We're all tired. Teachers are generally tired at this time of the year but there's not a lot left in teachers' tanks. And I think we're all very aware; we look at the rest of the world and we are hugely in awe of all those teachers who are having to be back at school. So we are aware how lucky we are, but there are tired and emotional teachers here. [P,7].

Other networks

School leaders turned to a range of channels for their own support – to other principals, to their Kahui Ako (local school cluster), the school's Board of Trustees or external mentors. Ths princpal was a member of a Kahui Ako:

We're also part of a a learning community or Kahui Ako down here and the leader of that group organised a daily check in with principals in the area. And that was really valuable as well. And an opportunity to, I guess, support one another as leaders, but also to have some consistency around messaging. [P,6]

Another principal had a board chair who was an experienced mentor:

[P] and I, he was was my Board chair at the time, we would keep in regular phone contact. His work is as a leadership adviser working with beginning principals. So he was very, very in tune with what was happening in other schools and how other leaders were feeling. And that was a valuable resorce for me actually, to be able to talk with him regularly. [P,5]

Relationships with the national Minstry of Education varied. Some school leaders felt well-supported and others did not. One principal talked of 'death by email from the Ministry' [P,4], whereas another principal felt positive about the experience:

It was just a good example of how the Ministry can work with schools and support schools. It was a good model to work alongside and be backing the schools when decisions needed to be made, so that schools feel supported with what they need to roll out. [P,1]

Situational

The Covid-19 situation in New Zealand went through four phases – a brief preparation phase, the first full national lockdown, the gradual re-opening of schools (including intermittent regional lockdowns) and the return to regular schooling.

Preparation for lockdown

The school year in New Zealand goes from February to December. In 2020, schools had only been open for a short while before the first lockdown was announced. Some principals were already preparing; others were watching the events unfold and waiting to see what would happen:

> ... there were a couple of times, we had board meetings on Zoom, and I was super honest with my board members just saying, 'the latest Ministry advice was saying this and I don't know what it means for us. And I'm not sure and I don't want to make a decision. I'm just going to wait a few days and see what other principals do and not rush in and make rash decisions. [P,9].

Schools found themselves in different states of readiness. This principal was responsible for a newly-opened school just as the Covid virus arrived in New Zealand:

> So we were open for six weeks and then had to close and like all schools we moved to online learning. And I guess a disadvanage for us was that we didn't know our community well enough. In a more established school, if I think back to my last school, in that same situation, I would have immediately known the dozen or so families that I would have to reach out to more to make sure they had Internet and computer devices and things from school. [P,6]

School busied themselves following up on whether families had devices or connectivity to the Internet. As one principal said, "We identified those families that were at risk ... in the end what we did is, we delivered our own devices, kind of like contactless delivery through to the familes that needed it." [P,5]. Other school leaders arranged classroom supplies:

> So we got our own hard packs together. We spent multiple days making hard packs and sending things out for everbody, including things like glue sticks and crayons and craft paper and paper... because nobody was prepared for that length of lockdown. ... So we provided quite a lot from our own costs. [P,2]

Some schools had to go further and pay for Internet connection, lobby wth Internet providers or provide food and other groceries as for the families that they knew would be in need. One principal reported:

> I think what happened in many schools across the country, our teachers and our support staff, everyone who's involved with the school just got together and did what they possibly could. We are aware that many of our families are living on the poverty line, basically, so ensuring that their wellbeing came first was really essential for us. [P,8]

Teaching and learning in lockdown

Communicating with and reassuring parents was a common theme: "...parents needed a lot of reassurance from me and the other senior leadership about accepting the fact that some kids will thrive at home, some won't, and it's just how it is ... each child is different." [P,1] School leaders learned the best way to communicate as they went along:

> I think the other thing is just the power of communication, just the daily check-ins with people. I think our community really needed to know that we had this under control and knew what we were doing, even if we didn't really. And that was something I learned along the way.... So then I made sure all my messaging was around certainty and predicatability and that came across better. [P,6]

Time and time again, the school leaders in our studies emphasised that the wellbeing – material and emotional – of their students and their families was key As this principal notes:

> And wellbeing was actually our priority for everybody. So over that time we made phonecalls to our families ... the teachers would be ringing, support staff ringing. We attached support staff to each Zoom session... and where people knew that families couldn't come on to Zoom, we would ring them... and it was really more of a checking up on how they are and if they needed anything. [P,8]

Re-opening schools

When schools re-opened after the first lockdown, strict hygiene and social distancing measures were still in place. Schools prepared for their returning students in different ways. Some schools prepared families through Zoom meetings, videos of what to expect, or leaflets delivered to homes. One principal explains:

> We used things like our [School] TV, which are just little snippets of learning that we put on YouTube and send a private link through to our families. And so we modelled coming back to school – what it would look like. How we would be at two different stages ... returning to school for 'bubble' learning. [P,5]

Once schools reopened, school leaders took different approaches:

> We knew that coming back to school we wanted to go really slowly. We go pretty slow here anyway, it's not a school that rushes but we knew that the most important thing was to read stories, to go outside and play, to just take time to get back in here. That was quite deliberate on our part, just doing that, doing lots of art, just sort of being together. [P,7]

This principal acknowledges that their approach after the first lockdown was not the best:

> So we got it wrong the first time. After the first lockdown, I said to the staff, 'we know we need to get back into learning, we'll have some gaps to fill, we need to get up and running and back into our normal way of being at school as quick as you can.' In hindsight, this was not the right thing to do .... The second time when we focused more on just getting back to school and gently getting back into routine, [there was] a much better feel in the school. [P,3]

The general feeling of school leaders was that their students "needed to be back" [P,4]. For some children it was because they missed their friends or the familiarity of school: "... the children were happy to be back. I think for them they realised how much they missed about all the the bits of school that are important." [P,7] For others, where children had difficult home lives, "the kids were better off here." [P,1]

Returning to (new) normal schooling

By 2021, schools were back on site running their normal programmes but always waiting for the next move up the social restriction levels into lockdown again:

> There was such as sense of 2020, we can't wait to write that year off and move on, and that once it became 2021 again, it will be fine. And then all of a sudden, level restrictions did come in again in Auckland and it was like, 'it's not over, we're still dealing with it.' [P,6]

Sometimes, schools were able to put their learning from lockdown into practice in their schools:

> In the first lockdown when we were trying to do on-line Zoom and teaching sessions, up until 12 o'clock, there was hardly any engagement from the intermediate students [aged 11-12]. So we started at 12 o'clock and 50% engagement became 90-95%. So our core teachng now, when we've come back, of literacy and numeracy, happens in the middle block [of the school day] and has more engagement. [P,10]

Or into practice when future lockdowns occurred:

> This time around, we sent out a Google slide presentation, because our theme in Term 1 was all about culture and identity. There's about a dozen slides and it was all about the kids. It was talking to families – family trees, why am I called my name – and those opportunities for families to just converse and talk about who they are as a family. [P,3]

However, the repercussions of the psychological toll began to be felt:

> We have a few children in intermediate [aged 11-12] particularly, for whom it has been really difficult. We have had increased incidence of children cutting [themselves]. We have about three or four children with quite, quite serious mental health needs. The centre are inundated with referrals, there are no private psychologists or counsellors available. The emotional side, particularly for those children and the children around them and obviously their teachers; it's been huge. [P,7]

Discussion

[Author 1]'s crisis leadership model, employed in this chapter as an analytic framework, illuminates some of the long-standing educational equity debates in Aotearoa New Zealand. This discussion focuses on three themes arising from the findings viewed through an equity and access lens. First, the commonalities of access and resourcing inequities is reflected in data from both studies. Next, the findings show that educational inequity extends beyond traditional socioeconomic lines to include a wider range of families. The final section of the discussion re-focuses on educational leaders' experiences and the new educational landscape they face in an uncertain pandemic future.

Equity gap continuation

Principals in both studies were aware of particular financial family needs, demonstrated by their creation of food parcels, arranging for bills to be paid, and acknowledgement of the lack of Internet and connectivity at home, which generated the need to develop and deliver school hard copy learning packs and check in via telephone. Principals commented that "some of our families were not fine ", or that there were familes they "couldn't connect with over that time, just because there was, you know, no way."

Other school communities brought unique challenges demonstrated a wider range of family needs. One principal explained how his school was:

> … sandwiched between essentially your business working in the city folk through to Work and Income New Zealand [WINZ][3], who were struggling. Lots of them lost their jobs because of the lockdowns and COVID." [P,11].

Faced with a similar challenge of balance, a principal, cited earlier, shared the complexities of managing varied parental expectations of learning during lockdown, in a comment about seeking a happy medium between families that had high expectations and families that had no capacity to support their children's learning at all. School leaders were thus recounting an unfortunate yet familiar narrative – disparities in family social and financial situations continued, and arguably deepened, during COVID-19. The full impact of the inequitable access to, and engagement in, learning may not be known for some time. This data makes visible an 'inconvenient truth'(Thrupp, 2008) – that equity gaps can no longer be dismissed.

COVID-19's extension of equity gaps

While COVID-19's impact has illuminated some of the life-long challenges of poverty and disadvantage, access to necessary learning tools, and greater pastoral care and wellbeing needs, previously only experienced by a minority of students, it went on to impact a wider range of students. The quick move to online learning due to unprecedented national lockdown had a widespread effect on many school communities. Principals were direct about the changing impact on their school's families, as noted in this principal's comment:

> I know that some of our families really struggled and not [the] low level income families. It was also it was across the board... so, you know, the impact of [COVID-19] made some families probably reprioritize what's important. I think, families, as you know, are playing catch up ... because, you know, in 2020, they largely suffered.

The concept of extending traditional equity gaps went beyond family demographics. As another principal in a higher socioeconomic community explained, "we spent multiple days making hard packs and sending out things to everybody... nobody was prepared for that length of lockdown." This principal's comment highlights how the uncertainty of lockdown contributed to a wider pool of families being challenged by the pandemic.

Meanwhile parents' capability to assist with their children's online learning became another example of how COVID exacerbated and extended disparity. For instance, one principal commented, "many of our parents struggle with digital technology. The digital divide is well and truly alive." This observation about parent and family digital literacy skills adds a new

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[3] WINZ is a government department that helps those not in employment or with low incomes with financial and housing support.

layer of complexity to the issue of online learning serving as an example of widening national learning disparities.

The extension of COVID-19's impact to the wider school population is where the pandemic's real 'inconvenient truth' lies. Through the experience of national lockdowns, students and families, who previously did not face social, economic or educational disadvantage – those Thrupp (2008) formerly described as having 'middle-class advantage' – came to understand the meaning of inequity. They were introduced to the injustice that many families, educators and social justice advocates have been talking about for some time. The invisible has been made visible. It is now up to the government's pandemic recovery policies to redress longstanding social challenges associated with, amongst other factors, poverty and disadvantage (Boston, 2014; Gordon, 2014), disability (Morton, 2012), and marginalised cultural identities (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003; Webber et al., 2018).

Potential silver linings

The pandemic marked a shift in focus for educational leaders in Aotearoa New Zealand. Wellbeing and pastoral care, along with significant empathy for parents struggling with managing new home and family dynamics, and the added role of home learning, took priority over student progress and achievement in these unprecedented times. It is not that student learning was not still important but as one principal highlighted: "I'm really passionate about relationships, they are the key. All that other stuff we do, it's not important if you don't have good relationships." COVID-19 has opened the door for more flexible thinking and empathetic action. Numerous principals reiterated how "each child is different" and family life is complex with one acknowledging how:

> Some kids will thrive at home—learning from home, some won't ... so you might have three kids at home and one's very diligent and does their online work and the other one doesn't, so reassuring them as, as a school, we understand that. [P,1]

This new mindset of "manage as best you could and think about the child's welfare first" as "more important than anything else" does hold hope for continued, similar empathy for students and families who have always experienced the social, economic and educational disadvantage. Now that the precedent of extended school support or what one principal called "access to things" which kept his school families "feeling safe and connected to the school and like someone had their backs", illustrates a potential pathway forward from an equity perspective. This principal's thinking suggests how some schools may continue with this new line of thinking. It will be intriguing to see if and how questions raised about student, parent and staff well-being, the realities of learning, and the possibilities of catering to student specific needs during COVID times may or may not continue as the world moves into an equally uncertain post-pandemic learning landscape.

New challenges for principals: Everything to everyone

The conclusion of this chapter returns to the the chapter title of "everything to everyone." The data from both studies highlights the new and complex role of educational leaders during COVID times. To varying degrees all school principals described the additional workload they experienced during the pandemic. The workload included their physical presence getting school learning packs, food parcels and in-person check-ins with families delivered and completed throughout the first and subsequent lockdowns. The extra responsibilities also

included time sensitive and time intensive task of communication and relationship building with families, the Ministry of Education, and school staff. Most educational leaders took on this communication task on their own initiative with many noting their dissatisfaction with the Ministry of Education's communication style. The toll on educational leaders was undeniable. The quotes below demonstrate the strain on principals who were taking on many new responsibilities and operating in uncertain times. As one leader bluntly stated, "none of us have navigated that sort of environment before. So we're kind of making it up as we're going along, and just trying to get it right." The next quotes demonstrate the personal toll on our educational leaders: "It nearly broke me. You know the new role in terms of everybody...doing everything...you know you're a person in your family [too]". In a deeply personal reflection, another principal echoed the sentiment of her colleague saying, "I know I was a good principal, [but] I was not a good mother." To conclude on a note of promise, one principal's commentary leans towards the possibility of moving forward with an equity mindset emphasising a continued focus on collaboration for student learning and wellbeing. She shares how:

> 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. Whereas, we're all on the same boat here. So let's think how we can... lets think how we can help each other [P,12].

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