# 'Maslow before Bloom': Implementing a caring pedagogy during Covid-19

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## ABSTRACT

*This article draws on interviews undertaken with 20 teachers as part of a larger study on the impact of Covid-19 on schools. Although the schools varied by location, level, and socio-economic status, teachers' experiences were remarkably similar. Teachers found the sudden move to on-line learning stressful, and the constant demands of delivering a different style of pedagogy, maintaining contact with students and their families, and looking after their own family situations exhausting. Participants who worked in isolated or less advantaged communities were also attending to delivering learning devices, food and basic supplies to their families and communities. In this article, we present the data in in both thematic and poetic styles to highlight the nature of the caring pedagogy that they undertook as schools moved in and out of lockdowns, despite the toll that it took on them, personally and professionally.*

## INTRODUCTION

The speed at which the novel coronavirus, known as Covid-19, spread around the world in early 2020, has been well-documented. Countries closed their borders, cities and regions went into lockdown, schools and businesses closed and hospital geared up for an influx of patients (Cameron, 2020; OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). On March 25, New Zealand went into Level 4 lockdown, the most restrictive of the government's alert level system. The school holidays, due to start on April 9, were brought forward two weeks to give the Ministry of Education and schools a chance to prepare for school-led home learning. A survey of schools highlighted that only half the schools in the country felt they could deliver learning fully online, with lack of devices and limited Internet connectivity being the major problems (New Zealand Government, 2020). Most schools moved into home learning on April 15 and continued until after May 18, when the country moved down to Level 2. On return, schools needed to alter their approaches to comply with social distancing and hygiene requirements until the country returned to Level 1 in June. In August 2020, Auckland schools closed again and yet again several times in 2021 (Cameron, 2020; Education Review

Office [ERO], 2021; Henrickson, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2020; Mutch, 2021). The arrival of the Delta variant in Auckland communities, in late August 2021, led to further regional lockdowns, some of which are still in place at the time of writing.

This article draws on in-depth qualitative interviews with 20 teachers, from a range of school levels, socio-economic levels, and geographic locations across New Zealand, in either late 2020 or mid-2021, as part of a larger study of New Zealand schools' responses to Covid-19. The article begins with a short synthesis of research literature on teachers' responses to lockdowns overseas and in New Zealand. The methodology for our study is briefly outlined before describing the 'caring pedagogy' theoretical framework that underpins the approach to this article. The findings are presented in a semi-chronological order, from teachers' preparation, to implementation, to returning to school. The findings are interspersed with 'found poems' created by the researchers from verbatim transcripts to highlight teachers' voices. The discussion section revisits the concepts in the article's title, that is, 'Maslow before Bloom.' The overall purpose of our article is to portray the tension between teachers' willingness to adopt a caring pedagogy and the toll that it took on them, personally and professionally.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Education across the world faced unprecedented challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic and accompanying lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. Mass school closures forced teachers to move their classrooms to home learning via online platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, or Education Perfect (OECD, 2021). Estimates suggested that as many as 1.5 billion children and young people had their education moved online (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). Teachers had to adapt to delivering the curriculum through virtual means, synchronously and asynchronously (Hood, 2020; Jones & Kessler, 2020). Yet, international and national sources noted the significant challenge a shift to online learning would pose for most teachers (e.g., OECD, 2021). In Ireland, for example, 70 percent of teachers had never taught online pre-pandemic (Marinoni et al., 2020). Similarly, in New Zealand, Wenmoth (2020) notes the sudden shift to online learning exposed teachers' lack of knowledge and preparedness for using online tools and approaches. In Hood's (2020) New Zealand-based study, a teacher reported having to become familiar with 15 different online packages or platforms.

Schools were given a short time to prepare themselves for this new reality. In New Zealand, the move to home learning highlighted the inequities that already existed in the education system (Greater Christchurch Schools Network, 2020; ERO, 2021; Hood, 2020; Hunia et al., 2020; Leeson et al., 2020; Mutch, 2021; Riwai-Couch et al., 2020). Not every household had sufficient access to the Internet or suitable devices for online learning. Schools found themselves developing educational packs and materials to deliver to students during the early lockdown period (ERO, 2021). Not only were schools and teachers preparing to provide academic support, but they were also preparing to deliver food and other essential supplies to families or working alongside community organisations such as KidsCan or local marae (Fleming, 2020; Freeman et. al., 2021; Leeson et al., 2020).

As teachers began to teach through various remote modes, they faced other challenges (Jones & Kessler, 2020). First and foremost, they had to build

and maintain strong communication links and relationships with their students and families. ERO (2021) noted that 90 percent of schools cited an increase or improvement in communication as being crucial to the support they provided to families. Schools used a combination of strategies to contact students and families, such as phone calls, emails, video calls and other digital means (ERO, 2021; Thornton, 2021). Secondly, teachers needed to adapt their pedagogy to a virtual mode (Hood, 2020). Rapanta et al., (2020) noted that not only did Covid-19 alter approaches to learning and assessment but that teachers had to redevelop their 'teacher presence'. They suggested that teachers combine a *cognitive* presence, where the teacher is deliberate about preparing themselves and their students for online pedagogy; a *social* presence that maintains open and easy communication between teachers and students and students and their peers; and a *faciliatory* presence that provides supportive modes of learning and engagement. Establishing positive interactions between themselves and their students, and between students, was key to promoting collaboration and ensuring an engaging online social presence (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). Thirdly, many teachers had to balance their teaching with looking after their own family members while also supporting students' and families' pastoral care needs. Poncela et al., (2021) reported that teachers were overwhelmed and exhausted by the first week of lockdown and found it difficult to balance personal, professional, and family life. To relieve some of their stress and anxiety, teachers found that positive collegial relationships improved their sense of wellbeing (Hollweck & Doucet, 2020; Kim et al., 2021). Teachers leaned on one another for both professional and personal support. Kim et al., (2021) noted that social media played an important role in helping teachers stay in touch with each other.

Prior to re-opening, schools needed to become familiar with the relevant guidelines on social distancing, making hand sanitizer available, and preparing for a staggered return of students (Müller & Goldenberg, 2020). When students returned, there was concern that they might display a range of emotions, from worry about catching Covid, to anxiety about returning, through to excitement at seeing their friends (Thabrew, 2020). Being away from peers or support networks, could impact their mental health and behaviour (Capurso et. al, 2020; Thabrew, 2020). Some students might lose all sense of purpose and self-identity because of the loss of school, community activities and support systems. At the extreme end, abnormal behaviours such as accidental toileting or engaging in self-injurious behaviours (cutting or burning themselves) could occur (Henderson et al., 2020). When returning to school, teachers therefore focused on students' wellbeing by allowing them to reflect, narrate, discuss, and share their thoughts and feelings about their lockdown experiences (Capurso et. al., 2020). O'Connor and Estellés (2021a) highlighted the importance of an arts-informed curricula to strengthen students' wellbeing and help them see that there is hope after experiencing trauma. They discuss the success of the Te Rito Toi programme, which was accessed thousands of times by teachers in New Zealand and abroad (O'Connor & Estellés, 2021b).

## THEORY: CARING PEDAGOGY

A theme in the literature was the way that teachers came to see their roles during the pandemic as 'care workers' as much as educators (Poncela et al., 2021). Since Nel Noddings (1984) introduced the notion of an 'ethic of care', it has

gained wide acceptance. In Noddings' writing, she outlines four characteristics of a caring educational relationship: *modelling* what it means to care, engaging in open and reciprocal *dialogue*, providing opportunities to learn and *practice* empathy, trust and attentiveness, and giving *confirmation* by affirming and encouraging ethical caring behaviour (1984, 2010, 2013). Velasquez et al., (2013) suggest that pedagogical care is imparted through listening and empathy while supporting students and their learning. Walker and Gleaves (2016) highlight the need to foster and maintain caring pedagogical relationships by enhancing trust, acceptance, attentiveness, reciprocity, authenticity and consistency. They also suggest putting the teacher-student relationship at the centre, where teachers feel *compelled* to care.

   In relation to Covid-19, Christopher et al. (2020) note the need for deliberate caring during remote learning, especially when using asynchronous modes. They state, "[p]hysical separation and social distancing, intertwined with new expectations of asynchronous remote learning, impact student psychological well-being and learning through heightened stress, fear and anxiety" (p. 822). They recommend the idea of *communitas* (caring communities) in which reciprocal relationships in safe, culturally responsive, and accessible learning modes, using inclusive and strengths-based teaching practices, lead to meaningful student learning. Czerniewicz et al. (2020) remind teachers to be especially mindful of student inequality. They state, "[i]n a certain sense, the pandemic, and the pivoting to on-line made visible, the invisible, or ignored manifestations and mechanisms of inequality" (p. 4). They highlight three types of inequality: (a) *vital*, that is, unequal life chances; (b) *resources*, such as the digital divide; and (c) *existential*, that is, the denial of recognition and respect due to individual learners.

## METHODOLOGY

Following the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, we set out to ask: "What can we learn about schools' responses to Covid-19 that could inform future responses to large-scale crises?" The objective was to gather detailed information that focused on schools as case studies through document analysis and interviews with principals, teachers, Boards of Trustees, and parents on schools' experiences during the pandemic. The study used an emergent qualitative design underpinned by a constructivist framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The data were analysed first vertically, that is giving each data set, such as participant interview, a focused analysis, before analysing horizontally across data sets for significant themes (Mutch, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). We conducted further interviews in 2021, to gain insights into what Auckland schools had learned as they went into further lockdowns.

   For this article, we have revisited the teacher interview transcripts that were embedded in the school case studies to delve deeper into the concept of caring pedagogy, in order to illuminate a range of teachers' experiences. The 20 teachers whose interviews we are drawing on, range across geographic and socio-economic locations, school types and levels, and years of teaching experience. Our interest was in finding the commonalities, despite their differences. After re-analysing the data and reducing the codes and categories to common themes, we found that some of the impact of different teachers' lived

realities was lost. In order to honour our teachers' voices, we returned to the vertical analysis and selected extracts from across the edited transcripts that powerfully displayed teachers' experiences through their own words. We (the researchers) repackaged the extracts into 'found poetry', taking their verbatim statements and (re)presenting them for dramatic and emotional impact (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Janesick, 2016). We have chosen to place a poem in each of the three findings sections that follow, to complement the data provided, and illuminate some of the immediacy that can be lost in the more traditional reductive thematic presentation of qualitative findings.

## FINDINGS

### Preparing for lockdown

#### Poem 1:  If I knew lockdown was coming: A conversation
"If I knew lockdown was coming,
I would have planned it better"

"It was just so sudden
Like, you'd hear about it
on the news"

"Oh, my God!
      This is going crazy round the world!"

"We weren't prepared
      We didn't know what was going to happen"

"It was a new experience
but it was not something
that happened overnight
We kind of knew it was coming"

"We knew it was coming
      but we didn't get a lot of opportunity"

"I guess you can't really prepare
      for a crisis like that
They tend to take on
      a life of their own"

"All the preparation
      in the world
      could not provide
      for all the twists and turns"

"Day by day
      Everyday
      Something new
      What am I supposed to do?"

Early on in the pandemic, rumours abounded, and schools noticed that parents started keeping their children home from school. Some schools were making plans, just in case:

> How we worked here is that we did have a plan ready to go, if a lockdown did happen. Which helped massively. So, when it did happen, we went straight to our plan. We picked it up and went with it. So that made things a lot smoother and easier, rather than it happening and everyone stressing out…. (Teacher A)

As lockdown and remote teaching became inevitable, schools needed to assess which students would be able to access their learning from home. Some schools felt better equipped, for example, in this school, "the Years 4 and up, they have their own devices, so it was a lot easier for them because the teachers already had access to communicate with them on Teams and OneNote" (Teacher A). Whereas, in other schools:

> We were telling the Ministry about students that didn't have either modems or devices. We gave out a huge number of our devices to students in the community because there are a lot of families that don't have the ability to be able to provide for these students. (Teacher B)

Schools prepared hardcopy packs of learning materials and activities for students without internet, or to provide an alternative to online learning:

> Our team had packages for our children, at their level, for doing the work that they were able to do. That was a big challenge as well, to get those sent out to individual children, to the extent that we were stopping off on the way home and posting them in letterboxes. So that was how we got through the learning. (Teacher I).

Schools were also aware of their vulnerable families, who might not be able to provide for the basics during lockdown:

> Before we went into full lockdown, Level Four lockdown, we actually got as much food together as we possibly could and got that out to families, however we could really, and we did that throughout the lockdown as much as we could. (Teacher O)

A task for teachers and their teaching teams was to translate classroom activities to virtual teaching:

> So, it was rebuilding sites for classes, and making sure that what was on the sites was also achievable for other classes down the school. So, formulating a timetable, where, built within that timetable, were activities that all families could access easily. So that took a lot more time. (Teacher H)

Individually, teachers had different levels of skill and confidence with on-line platforms, applications and resources. One teacher said:

> I'm quite comfortable using computers and things like that. There were some programmes that I hadn't used before, that took me a while to get used to. I've never made a YouTube video before, so that side of things was new learning. (Teacher A)

Other teachers struggled:

> My role changed in that I had to become a learner. For a start, I'm not very conversant with Google programmes and the computer. It wasn't going to get any better because in my class alone we only had six I-pads for 25 children. (Teacher I)

Once schools opened online, teaching settled into its own routine. As Teacher B states: "Initially, there was quite a radical increase in the workload, because you were doing your best to prepare your resources for the digital platform. [But], it levelled out and created its own routine."

**Preparing for lockdown**
Initially, many of our participants reported being unsure about how much work their students would get through, depending on their circumstances:

> We just presented it and they could do whatever and how much they needed to do and could do. There will be an obvious group of children that would just plough through the work and a lot was just consolidation, not trying to teach anything new. (Teacher I)

Some teaching teams spread the preparation across the team members to ease the workload. Here is a secondary maths example:

> But the best thing was we had one plan; each teacher doesn't have to plan all their own lessons … one maths teacher will plan one topic and all the maths teachers are going to follow the same thing for their classes. So, one lesson for all Year 9s -- all the classes are basically studying the same stuff. (Teacher D)

Similarly, a primary school maths example:

> In the beginning, say, for example, we all did something different. I did a measurement video, someone else might do a geometry video, someone else might do algebra etc., And same with literacy. So, we would make the video and we would upload it to YouTube and send out the YouTube link with the daily timetable. (Teacher A).

Adjusting to a different daily schedule to meet students' availability and needs led to an increased workload:

So, in a normal world, on my weekends, that's the time that I spend with my family and the people that I care about. But, you know, during the pandemic, students were emailing me and sending me work on a Sunday evening, and so you just answer them on a Sunday evening, because that's just the kind of world that you're in at the moment. (Teacher B)

But for me, for my intermediate class, I was online pretty much from nine in the morning 'til ten o'clock each night. And that was really running out grabbing a sandwich and running back and waiting just in case someone came back online. *Because what I found is, if you were not there and available, they would give up.* So, you actually just needed to be available that whole time, just in case somebody else came on and they always did. They would always pop back for encouragement or advice. (Teacher H)

### *Poem 2: School is like the safe place*
Rumours going around:
"Children who coughed or sneezed
           Would be tested at school
                  Without parental permission"
Kids were scared:
"What's going on?"
"Is everyone going to get Covid?"
We had kids who were
           worried their parents were going to die
Kids were really confused
What could we say?
They're so young.

Lots of children were self-conscious
           About their background
Some of them didn't have a desk
           Or a room to study

They would have big families of nine or ten people
           In a three-bedroom home.

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

It was a different experience
    for the students who had difficulties at home
    or whose parents lost jobs
    and they were really suffering
    and struggling for food and things.

They didn't bother about learning
    because learning was the last thing.

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

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

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

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


Eventually, teachers realised that neither they nor their students could keep up the hectic pace. They explained to parents that they weren't expecting students to do six hours of focused schoolwork but short bursts, interspersed with activities that were still about learning but in a less structured way:

It wasn't until I called up the parents and they shared their fears and concerns and I explained, "You can turn the TV on and put on a programme, that's science. Go into the garden, that's science and maths. And, if they can do the stuff we sent out, that's fine but it isn't supposed to stress you out." (Teacher I)

We created lots in line with our school values, like kaitiakitanga, guardianship of our environment. It would be really simple things, just to get the kids off the screen. Like making a nature display, write this word with leaves, or time yourself in the shower to reduce the Auckland water shortage … We did dance challenges. And it was really great to see whānau engaged with the students' learning…. (Teacher C).

Building and maintaining relationships with students and their families took on increased importance:

> I mean in terms of relationships with parents, with some parents it strengthened the relationship quite a lot. And you're in contact with them a lot and they're asking lots of questions, especially with the juniors when they are helping them. The older kids could get on with it by themselves, but with the juniors, they needed a bit of support to do some of the activities. (Teacher A).

> We're a small community, and we have good connections with our community anyway, and it was a really good opportunity to stay in touch. I spent a lot of my time phoning the parents and just saying, "Hey, how's it going? This is just a temperature check, to see how you're going with the family and how you're going with […] and his learning." So, keeping in touch with all the parents and families was a really good outcome. (Teacher B).

Lockdown learning created a rhythm of its own and some children flourished while others did not, or could not, engage:

> Some of my students have very structured days with their parents who make sure they get out of their pyjamas. So that's when it was quite successful. Others we didn't see for weeks. So, the students that were engaged learned how to use different digital tools – things that they would never get to do during class, and compared to how much they produce in class, they produced the same amount in a short amount of time at home without any distractions. (Teacher R)

> Even with the zooms and online learning, it was very disconnected. I didn't feel I was getting a very good idea of exactly how things were going for all the children. Some children we didn't hear from until we were back in Level Two. Some children I heard from every day, I saw on Zoom, I saw in our class online learning. Parents texted and called but then for others, it wasn't the case. And so, there were those children who were on my mind. And I was thinking, are they okay? Are their families okay? And that caused a lot of anxiety for me about their wellbeing. (Teacher N)

Through all this, teachers faced a range of challenges, including frustrations with this new way of teaching, and coping with their own family stresses:

> I think the biggest challenge was the frustration because it was hard, it was a lot of work, not only doing the planning, but making sure it was achievable work, that they could do potentially without the support they needed – making sure it was challenging and interesting and kind of fun to engage with. And there was that other frustration to find that they haven't even opened it up to see if they could or would enjoy doing it. (Teacher Q)

I think that the bit that doesn't get spoken about is that, actually, the majority of educators out there also have their own families that they were having to deal with – supporting their own children, dealing with the partner who could have lost a job. And, so while they were out there doing what they had to for their communities, they also at the same time had their own personal issues as a result of Covid. (Teacher K).

Teachers reported gaining support from their leadership teams and their colleagues:

We're really lucky, we have a really great principal. And she's like, you know, "Just go back to our values and our school strategic goals, which are whanaungatanga, building relationships, and hauora, as foundations for learning…". It was good having clear communication from our principal, deputy principal and team leaders. (Teacher C).

Collegially, what I think went well was to have regular contact with colleagues which took away the feeling of isolation. It was great and I'd look forward to seeing them each day and my colleagues were great as they helped me through the processes to be confident and informed. (Teacher I).

**Returning to school**

As cases numbers reduced and the government lowered the alert levels, schools cautiously opened at Level Three for children of essential workers:

So, when we were going back to school, it was at Level Three, I think, that we partially opened for essential students only. … I went there, I met my students, and when I came home, it was like, "Okay, I'm going to sanitise myself 100% and then shower, change my clothes, wash my clothes and everything before I see my baby. Yeah, so it was quite anxious when it was Level Three. (Teacher D)

Later, schools needed to prepare to open for all students, but as Teacher A explains: "It was quite different at school because while we were still at school, it wasn't exactly going to be the same as when they left it."

First, how to prepare them? So, prior to coming back, I took a little video of the classroom because we had to set it up differently, with a social distancing. I videoed that, so when they came in, they would know what to expect, you know, the whole sanitising thing and I think that helped, just sending that to them. (Teacher F).

Teachers reported that students were both anxious and excited about coming back to school:

When they first came back, they were quiet and withdrawn, I think they were frightened. The classroom wasn't the style they were used to.

> You had to have social distancing. The school was supposed to supply handwashing, but one bottle wasn't enough for me! I bought hand towels, bottles of handwashing soap, everything I could think of to make them feel safe. (Teacher I)

> The Year 9s were just ecstatic to be with their friends again, I think they missed the sociability that's at school, you know, the social environment. But the Year 11 and 12s, not quite so evidently excited, because it's not too cool to show that you're excited. But with some of the seniors there was a degree of anxiety: "We've missed out on this, so how do we catch up? What do we do about the credits?" (Teacher B)

Parents also needed reassurance:

> We sent home so many newsletters about how they would be safe, because a lot of the parents needed to have that trust built up that their child would be safe. So, we sent home lots of information about the safety of their child and what the school would be doing. I created a movie of them coming back, playing and being happy. And then we put that on the website for all the parents to show that the kids are safe. (Teacher H)

Many schools chose to ease into routines and focus on student wellbeing:

> So, we had a transition week. And it kind of went on to the following week, because the first week of school, we didn't have that many students, I think I had half of my class. For the whole first week, we would just do transition activities, which would focus on relationships, like team building activities. And we transitioned slowly from online… And we really put their wellbeing at first, so we made sure that they were happy and safe. (Teacher C)

As part of focusing on student wellbeing, many schools engaged in arts activities to help students process their experiences. As Teacher I says: "So, what did I do? Well, we did those wellbeing activities and arts and crafts. It wasn't until we were sitting around doing arts and crafts that they started talking to one another and they weren't scared anymore."

> So yeah, we actually dropped all digital devices for two weeks after every lockdown, so no devices at all. And it was all about relationship building. And every single time we came back from lockdown was just purely about relationships, using Te Rito Toi [an educational arts-based website] and other process drama and everything in there, nothing else, nothing digital. (Teacher H)

But not all students eased back into school smoothly:

> You know, they didn't all come back at once. They did trickle back. And we didn't have all of the students back until we were completely out of lockdown in its entirety. And, no, actually, we did lose some of them altogether. Some of them started working, and they just didn't stop. They just didn't bother coming back to school. (Teacher B)

> Some of the students are getting counselling because they couldn't cope. In my form class of 30, I had three girls who were really good before lockdown but are now getting anxiety treatment, because they were away from their friends, and their family environment was not that good. They were not the same people when they came back, which was really sad. (Teacher D)

Auckland schools were to face several more lockdowns. The second one in August 2020:

> And when we went into lockdown round two, we kind of just picked up where we left off. And started the same as how we finished lockdown one. Which was really good because parents and children knew kind of what to expect, no time was wasted, [laughs], we got back into it which was good because I mean it was overnight, we didn't find out till 10 o'clock that night! (Teacher A)

> The second lockdown was better. We had more engagement with students, more students attended, and students who had not attended the first lockdown. They transitioned really fast into the second one. But I guess in the second lockdown, one of the challenges was still continuing learning for our students who need extra support. (Teacher C)

And on into 2021:

> It's not until this year that I've gone, "Oh, it has affected some kids." One of my boys who's new to my class this year, I didn't have him last year, he has a real germ phobia. And it started with Covid. And then it impacted on his friendships because, he's not wanting to get too close to people or interact with people. So that's been a bit of a work in progress with him. But for most of the kids, they felt safe with what the plan was. And I guess they kind of knew why. And with the subsequent lockdowns, "Okay, the virus is back, we're gonna go back home and be safe in our bubbles." (Teacher F)

As time went on, teachers began to reflect on what mattered:

> I kind of knew it already but it just highlighted the power of a few things: the power of relationships with parents, how important that is. How different everyone's homelife is and how that can impact their learning.

It highlighted how powerful collaboration within the team is. (Teacher A)

And Covid has really made me reflect on that, about how communal and how vital and human learning is, and that we are meant to be together. And that the unnatural notion of pandemics, when we make a circle around each other, runs risks for all of us, you know. We felt that in our own families; it's no different for schools or institutions. (Teacher T)

I think, for me, the biggest takeaway was how amazing our students can be with student agency and learning really independently. We just had a task board up, and then we said. "You choose what you want to do, when you want to do it, as long as you want to do it" but we still had high expectations of them, as a teacher. And then another big takeaway for me, was that the importance of 'Maslow before Bloom', the idea of prioritising student wellbeing before any learning can actually happen. (Teacher G)

### *Poem 3: Just soldier on: Advice and response*

We were educators
being given an opportunity
to test the values
we often talk about…

> *That was mentally challenging*
> *Just lots*
> *and lots*
> *of challenges.*

Take it slow, take your time
We are doing it for the first time
We will make mistakes
We just need to learn from our mistakes…

> *I felt very useless*
> *Perhaps that's too harsh a word*
> *I couldn't be physically there*
> *And that was very hard*
> *because most of our job*
> *is just being there*
> *in their everyday lives*
> *in their learning.*

Just deal with what's in front of you
You're still a teacher
You're a professional
A facilitator of learning

> *There was only so much you could do*
> *You were being paid to be a teacher*
> *but there was only so much*
> *you could do.*

You've got to just soldier on
Expect the unexpected
Work smarter not harder
Don't try and be superhuman
Just do you best
You know you can make a difference…

*And I've never worked so hard*
*By the time I got back to school*
*I felt I hadn't had a break*
*I'd worked right through*
*from Term 1 to Term 3.*

I think what happened
Across many schools in the country
Our teachers
Our support staff
Everyone involved with the school
Just pulled together
And did the best
They possibly could…

*But it was tough*
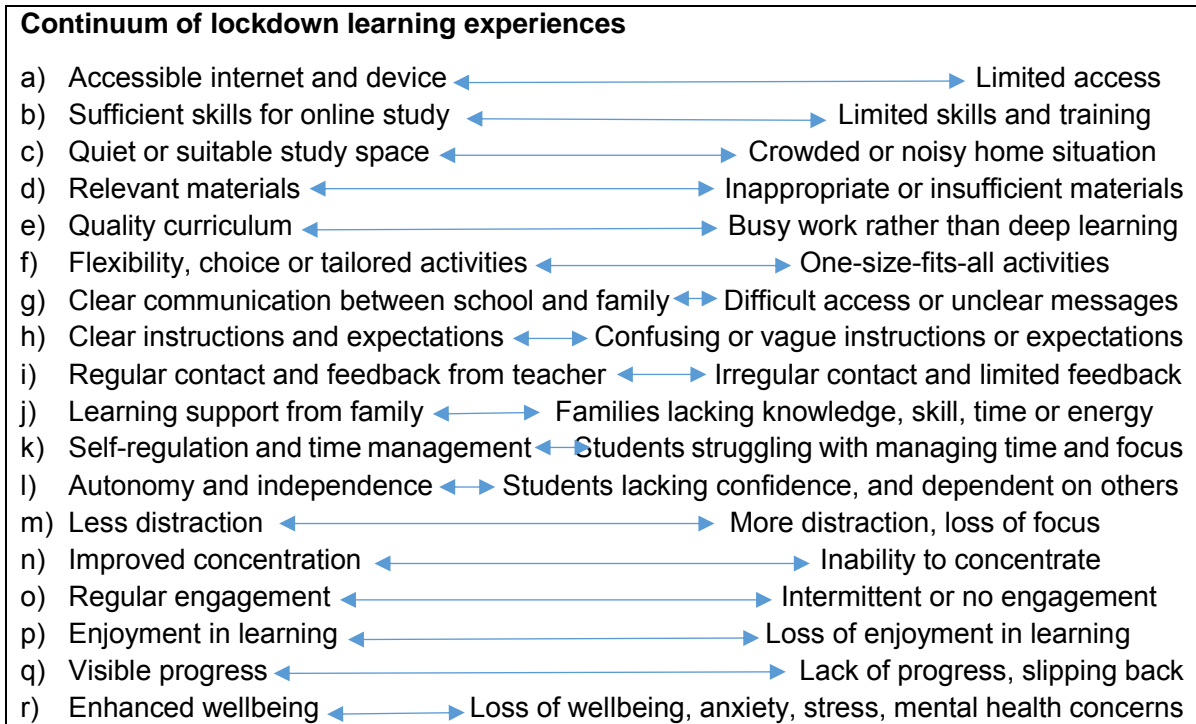*It was tough*
*It just about broke me.*

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The phrase 'Maslow before Bloom' is commonly used in education circles (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021) highlighting that it is difficult to focus the cognitive aspects of learning until a student's basic human needs are met. The phrase was mentioned by several of the teachers in our study. As is evidenced in our findings, there were many needs to be met, including the most basic – food, housing and safety – before any productive learning could take place. As was highlighted in the literature and in our study, students' states of readiness to undertake learning during the Covid-19 pandemic varied markedly as a result of the inequities already present in society and, indeed, lockdowns exacerbated these inequities (Hood, 2020; Mutch, 2021).

In a prior article (Mutch, 2021), drawing on a comprehensive review of the literature, a set of continua were created to highlight the range of factors that might impact on students' learning during lockdowns (see Figure 1). Factors (a)–(f) focus on the learning provisions, such as digital access and devices, the home study environment, and materials or content for learning. Factors (g)–(l) concentrate on the learning process, including what students brought to their learning and how this was fostered by their teachers and/or families. Factors (m)–(r) highlight the learning outcomes, including how the prior factors impacted students' educationally, socially, and psychologically. What the factors highlight is that, at each step, students who begin with a range of advantages, are able to sustain or even improve their academic progress, while those already disadvantaged only fall further behind. Where individual students sat on the continuum, served to compound the amount of time and effort teachers needed

to put in to access or support them – and the anxieties they faced when they were unsuccessful.

**Figure 1:** Factors impacting learning during lockdown (Reproduced from Mutch, 2021, p. 249)

**Continuum of lockdown learning experiences**

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

What our study highlights through a Maslow-before-Bloom lens is that there are even more factors at play than are displayed in Figure 1. As Teacher D said, "They didn't bother about learning because learning was the last thing. They had so much other stuff to deal with, which we totally understand." Teacher D, along with the other teachers we interviewed, recognised this conundrum and tried to mitigate it as best they could – whether it was organising food parcels or working with agencies to get families rehoused. Schools also lobbied telecommunications providers or paid out of school funds for devices and connections to get some learning underway.

In our study, teachers were more than just facilitators of learning. Their caring pedagogy extended to all their students, those who were able to engage successfully in learning and those who were facing difficulties. Poncela et al., (2021) group the kinds of caring demonstrated by teachers in their study into three types: *emotional* caring – caring about students' wellbeing; *pedagogical* caring – caring about students' learning and academic achievement; and *social* caring – enhancing a culture of care with and between their students, and within their schools. Our teachers demonstrated all three types of caring. Emotionally, they put their students at the centre, feeling *compelled* to care (Walker & Gleaves, 2016) or as Culshaw and Kurian (2021) suggest, moved from "the 'duty *of* care' to a 'duty *to* care'" (p.1). Teachers worried about students' and their families' situations and wellbeing, and tried to ensure that families would receive basic supplies to help them survive lockdown. Pedagogically, they tirelessly prepared resources and activities to match students' needs and interests, kept up support and encouragement, and made themselves available at all hours, just in case

their students needed them. Socially, they kept in regular contact with students and their families and supported their own colleagues, enhancing a culture of care within their schools and communities (Poncela et al., 2021).

Poncela et al. (2021) also note that, "…caring in teaching requires not only 'love' but also 'labour'" (p. 4). Poem 3, in this article, highlights the toll that putting Maslow before Bloom, and engaging in emotional, pedagogical and social caring, takes on teachers, especially in a fraught and fast-moving context such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Poncela et al. explain:

> This means that it is not a natural or effortless form of work, but that it entails emotional, social, material and political costs, which are often unacknowledged or devalued. In emotional terms, caring in teaching, although rewarding in many senses, can also be a source of frustration, stress and anxiety… (2021, p. 4)

Frustration and stress were clearly demonstrated by the teachers in our study. They used terms like anxious, difficult, unprepared, hard work, stressed out, tough, isolated, challenging, putting on a brave face, and nerve wracking. Teacher A said, "It definitely didn't feel the same" and Teacher B found online teaching wasn't "anywhere near as satisfying." Teachers also shared their own vulnerabilities. Teacher N felt "useless", and Teacher I said she became "a panicking learner." Many of our teachers were also parents who were supporting their children's education at home or facing other anxieties, such as fears for their very young children, elderly parents, or their own health. Yet, they also talked of pride in their students' resilience and achievements, enjoyment in working with colleagues, appreciation for their leadership teams, and a sense of satisfaction in playing their part in these unprecedented times.

To conclude, the teachers in our study were representative of schools across New Zealand – they ranged from one end of the country to the other, in urban and rural settings, in high and low socio-economic communities and in different school types and at both primary and secondary levels. Yet, their stories are remarkably consistent. Through all the challenges and frustrations, teachers focused on the roles they were committed to and the task at hand. They drew on the values and relationships that sustained them, placed their students at the centre of their endeavours and engaged in a caring pedagogy, despite the toll it took on them personally and professionally. As Teacher K said: "I think educators can be really proud of the role that they've played, because we also know that they're going to be playing a massive role in the way that the country recovers."

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