Building Reciprocal University-School-Community Relationships to Explore the Impact of Covid-19 on Rural Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand

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We report on findings from research conducted by a team of university researchers in the *Te Whakatere au Pāpori*[1] research network at the University of Auckland as part of collaborative study into rural schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. The initial interest in rural schools came from Tatebe's involvement on a school board in their own rural town. As urban sprawl encroached on formerly rural towns like Tatebe's, schools and their communities faced dramatic change. Established small rural schools became overcrowded and new schools on the outskirts of housing developments were hastily constructed. As a result, communities and their schools needed to undergo rapid adjustment. This rural school study commenced in 2018 but, when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, the Tatebe initiated a pivot to take account of the unexpected conditions and challenges. That we were able to proceed at all with our research was testament to the relationships that Tatebe, the university research team, the school leadership team, and their community had forged in the early stages of data gathering. In this chapter, we share the findings from the data gathered before and during the COVID-19 pandemic to highlight how rural schools built a sense of community that helped them cope with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent interruptions and closures that they faced.

Much has been written about the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of education both internationally (e.g., UNESCO, 2021) and nationally—in our case, in Aotearoa New Zealand, (e.g., Hood, 2020). We (Tatebe and Mutch) are members of the *Te Whakatere au Pāpori* research team [please specify how many members of the research team] and we were planning the next iteration of our research to cover traumatic events and wider social issues that schools face when the government put Aotearoa New Zealand into a full national COVID-19 lockdown on March 25, 2020. When the country emerged from the first 2020 lockdown on April 27, 2020, the *Te Whakatere* team pivoted our research to focus on schools' responses to COVID-19. In this chapter, we focus on how the pandemic impacted

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[1]Te Whakatere au Pāpori was the name gifted to the research network by Hemi Dale, a Māori (Indigenous) scholar at the University of Auckland. It loosely translates as 'navigating social currents'.

rural schools in Aotearoa New Zealand that, due to their rural or remote locations, feel under-recognised and marginalised in mainstream educational discussions and research.

We begin this chapter by placing our research in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic before reviewing three relevant bodies of research literature regarding (a) the role of schools in disaster and crisis events, (b) the place of rural schools in Aotearoa New Zealand, and (c) university-school-community partnerships to foster educational research. The conceptual framework, arising from the three themes in the literature review will set the scene for the later discussion section. We next outline the sensitive and emergent qualitative research methodology that was important for engaging schools and their communities in our research. We will share two overarching themes drawn from the data, including how rural schools build a sense of community and how that sense of community supported them through the COVID-19 pandemic. In the discussion section, we will discuss the two themes from the findings before highlighting how the relationship between Tatebe and the members of the school communities that were built before the pandemic helped sustain research momentum despite the situation that was unfolding. We conclude the chapter with recommendations drawn from our research for building future university-school-community research collaborations.

Background

In this section, we outline the arrival of COVID-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand and set the scene for the impact that it had on schools. Aotearoa New Zealanders first became aware of this new strain of the coronavirus in January 2020, but it was not until February that the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, called a group together to plan the government's response strategy (Cameron, 2020). When people with COVID-19 began arriving in the country and several super-spreader events resulted in the transmission of the virus across the country, the government announced its four-level COVID-19 alert system (Unite against COVID-19,

2022). The aim of Alert Level One—Prepare was to introduce measures to help the country be better prepared, Alert Level Two—Reduce measures were intended to reduce the spread, Alert Level Three—Restrict measures restricted movement to stem the spread of the virus, and Level Four—Lockdown measures were intended to eliminate the virus altogether. On March 21, 2020, the country was put into Alert Level Two and on March 23 into Alert Level Three. By March 25, the entire country was moved to Alert Level Four and remained in lockdown until April 27 (Cameron, 2020; Mutch, 2021).

This sudden announcement of a nationwide lockdown meant that school leaders did not have much time to adjust to delivering off-site learning. The Ministry of Education decided to bring the April school holidays forward by two weeks so that schools and the Ministry of Education would have the opportunity to prepare resources and delivery modes (Mutch, 2021). A survey conducted by the Ministry of Education indicated that about half the schools in the country felt that their students would be able to pivot easily to online learning (New Zealand Government, 2020). The survey finding spurred the Ministry of Education to rollout a four-channel package: first, improve access to internet providers, modems, and devices; second, where internet access was unaffordable or limited, send out hard-copy curriculum packs so that children could continue their education at home; third, commission two television learning channels, one in English and one in *te reo Māori* (the Indigenous language); and finally, use the Ministry of Education website to promote a range of readily available internet resources for teachers and parents (New Zealand Government, 2020).

One of the biggest challenges for teachers and families was their lack of familiarity with the range of digital platforms that were being used to communicate, distribute materials, or deliver online learning. In one study (Hood, 2020), a teacher reported that they needed to become familiar with 15 different platforms and applications. Despite the short timeline, online, remote, or home schooling was underway for most students by April 15, 2020. Over

the next two years, there were a series of national and regional lockdowns as the government tried to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus, especially as new variants arrived.

Studies conducted on the impact of COVID-19 on schools in Aotearoa New Zealand (e.g., Education Review Office, 2020; Hood, 2020; Riwai-Couch et al., 2020) highlighted that the lockdowns caused disruption to students' education and increased the workloads of principals and teachers and exacerbated the social and educational disparities in Aotearoa New Zealand. Students who were able to engage successfully across the four channels typically had easy access to the internet, appropriate learning devices, and a supportive home environment. They received suitable resources, instructions, and support from their schools and made progress with their learning. Some even thrived. On the other side of the ledger, however, there were many children and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand who had limited internet access, unsuitable devices, lived in crowded or noisy home situations, found the instructions from their schools confusing or vague, had little contact with their teachers and were unable to gain learning support from their families. These students lost focus, were unable to engage in positive learning, and suffered from high levels of anxiety and stress (Education Review Office, 2020; Hood, 2020; Mutch, 2021; Mutch & Peung, 2021; Riwai-Couch et al., 2020).

Literature Review

This brief review of the literature covers three main themes: (a) the nature of disasters and crises and the role that schools play in these events, (b) rural schools in Aotearoa New Zealand, and (c) how to set up successful university-school-community partnerships to enhance educational research.

Theme 1: Schools in Disaster and Crisis Events

While a pandemic does not fit many narrow definitions of a disaster, it does meet some of the criteria. A disaster is often described as 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 (Mutch, 2014; Smawfield, 2013).

Disasters do not spread themselves equally across the globe, but within the regions affected, the impact is greater on some communities than on others (Cahill et al., 2010; Ferris & Petz, 2012; Smawfield, 2013). In general, countries with higher median incomes, higher educational attainment, stronger financial systems, and less bureaucracy experience fewer losses (Ferris & Petz, 2012; Smawfield, 2013). The sectors in the affected societies with less financial, political, and social capital are the hardest hit and take the longest to recover. Women, children, the disabled, and the elderly are often the most vulnerable populations in disaster situations, especially those in lower socio-economic communities (Cahill et al., 2010; Smawfield, 2013). Characteristically, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted countries, regions, and communities unequally.

As a large proportion of any community's population goes to, or is connected to, a school-related setting, schools are profoundly affected by local disasters and crises (Mutch, 2016). Schools might be the site of the disaster (as in a school shooting), affected to a similar degree as the rest of the community (as in an earthquake), or slightly removed but dealing with the emotional and psychological aftermath (as in a plane crash). School buildings might have been destroyed and children, parents or staff might have lost their lives, or the school might be requisitioned as an emergency and relief centre. Few systems prepare schools well for such eventualities. When disaster strikes and schools are physically unscathed, they often have the facilities and personnel to assist in response and recovery. The roles schools play through the response and recovery phases is a theme in the literature (Education Review Office, 2013; Mutch, 2014; Smawfield, 2013). They might become relief sites, communication centres, supply depots, or locations for support agencies. As places of pastoral care, they might be able to provide access to services or personnel to attend to social,

emotional, and psychological needs of students and families. Getting schools up and running post-disaster is often seen as one of the first signs of normality. For students, schools can be a place of safety and calm in an uncertain and confusing time (Johnson & Ronan, 2014). Schools also play a part in the recovery of their communities by providing a stable location and social meeting space (Mutch, 2017).

While there is an emerging body of literature on schools and disasters (Johnson & Ronan, 2014; Mutch, 2014; Smawfield, 2013), there is only sporadic literature on prior epidemics or pandemics as they relate to schools. One example is the H1N1 influenza pandemic (Cauchemez et al., 2011). Most studies are conducted by medical researchers and take a mitigation approach rather investigating the impact that epidemics have on the functioning of schools. The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of schools worldwide have brought the role of schools beyond their education function into sharp relief. Our study will add to our understanding of the wider roles that schools play, especially in times of disaster or crisis, such as a global pandemic.

Theme 2: Rural Schools

Prior to the arrival of Europeans in Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori children learned alongside their extended families in a communal apprentice-style setting. As settlers, mainly from the United Kingdom, arrived in the 1800s, they began to farm in many remote areas of the country with limited transport links. They set up small, multi-age classrooms to educate local children (Blundell, 2005; Swarbrick, 2012). As Swarbrick (2012) noted, "In remote areas some schools were in *whares* [Māori dwellings], spare rooms and cottages" (para. 1). School supplies and finances were provided the local Education Boards. In 1877, there were around 730 primary schools around the country. By 1900 there were over 1,600 state primary schools, 30% of which had fewer than 21 pupils. Blundell (2005) noted,

These fledgling institutions, with their small clusters of wooden buildings, became the linchpin of local rural life. In many areas the school building predated the community hall, thus serving—and in many areas continuing to serve—as the social centre of the district. (para. 8)

With the arrival of bus services and reviews of rural education in the 1930s, many smaller schools were closed, and children were bussed to newly consolidated schools. Numbers of primary schools decreased from 2600 in 1927, to 1900 in 1947, despite population increases (Swarbrick, 2012) and reviews and consolidation of rural schools have continued. A government report in 1988 noted that rural schools "also acted as a marker of continuity, something that held together the fabric of a community, indicating the well-being of a district and the active investment made by the community in the education of its children" (cited in Blundell, 2005, para.7). Yet, the 1990s and early 2000s saw further closing and consolidation of rural schools (Blundell, 2005; Mutch, 2017; Witten et al., 2003). The president of the teachers' union said at the time:

With a school there comes a sense of belonging. If you look at some of these rural communities, the old Four Square store is boarded up, the village hall is in disrepair, the post office sign has faded and the Mobil petrol station is a rusting edifice. The last physical sign of that area is the local school. Take that away and you've taken the last community focal point. (Colin Tarr, cited in Blundell, 2005, para. 52)

As the country's population has increased in this century, and housing developments have encroached on rural land, many rural schools have had to adjust to increased numbers of families arriving wanting to enrol their children. New classrooms have been built on some school sites and completely new schools have also been built to keep pace with increasing urban fringe growth (Tatebe, 2021). In this chapter, we highlight both established rural schools that have been forced to expand and newly built schools in once rural locations.

Theme 3: University-School-Community Partnerships

Universities engage with schools for a variety of reasons (Duncan & Conner 2013; Martin et al., 2011; Mutch et al., 2015). Teacher preparation programs need their students to observe in classrooms and undertake periods of practical teaching. Other professional programs such as counselling or social work might also need students to have clinical placements in schools. Education faculty members need to conduct research on many aspects of school organisation, educational leadership, pedagogy, or curriculum implementation. Researchers in other fields might want to trial programs, test applications, seek feedback, or otherwise engage with schools. Whatever the purpose, supportive relationships smooth access, foster communication, and reduce difficulties (Chorzempa et al., 2010; Mutch et al., 2015; Patton 2012).

Building and sustaining these relationships is not always a smooth process. Patton (2012) claimed that a lack of mutual trust and respect between the partners, poor communication about the purpose and direction of the relationship, and reliance on onetime or infrequent interactions have sometimes marred these relationships. Hooper and Britnell (2012) observed that schools are often suspicious of university-generated research because of a history of hierarchical relationships, in which the interests of the school are rarely considered.

Mutch et al. (2015) outlined phases of relationship building and maintenance they used to keep the integrity of their research endeavour and the dignity of both parties to the fore during the (a) setting up, (b) maintaining, and (c) concluding a partnership. Setting up the partnership required clarifying the need for the relationship, the parameters of the relationship, the development of a shared understanding of the roles and activities and clarity regarding expectations and timelines. Once the activity was underway, maintaining the relationship required communicating clearly and regularly, acting ethically and sensitively,

engaging in shared decision making, respecting each other's roles and boundaries, carefully managing any issues that arose, and being prepared to be responsive and flexible. In concluding the activity, partners needed to broker agreement around ownership, presentation and dissemination of various outputs or outcomes, ensure reciprocity of benefits, acknowledge time and effort invested and, above all, keep promises.

Despite the inherent complexities, positive outcomes for both parties are feasible (Duncan & Conner, 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2006), but, as Patton (2012) warned, "despite this apparent synergy, there are relatively few published examples of successful partnerships between schools and universit[ies] aimed at mutual development and improvement" (p. 13). In this chapter, we share our experience of building and maintaining a positive university-school-community relationship that is on-going, despite the ravages of the pandemic.

Conceptual Framework: Schools as Community Hubs

Most governments aim to create a cohesive society that has common values, social order, solidarity, networks, and place attachment (Kearns & Forrest, 2000). As Gordon (2004, p. 1) suggested, "communities provide a shared life based on a common locality, culture and routine within a communicating group in which members are united in their common identity in spite of personal differences" (p. ?). Communities consist of physical, structural, and human resources, which, along with social, cultural, and built assets, create *community capital* (Callaghan & Colton, 2008). Neighbourhoods with accumulated community capital, such as strong pre-existing networks and connectedness, recover equilibrium more quickly following a disaster or crisis event (Mutch, 2017; Thornley et al., 2013).

Within communities, some organisational structures hold a more significant role in maintaining the bonds in a community than others. These are sometimes termed *community hubs* or *anchors* (Community Alliance, 2009; Mutch, 2018). A community hub could be a

place of worship, a community centre, a sports club, or a local school. As schools are places of community history and identity with wide-reaching networks, they are often significant community hubs. In Aotearoa New Zealand, principals and teachers can choose the schools where they teach and the communities in which they locate themselves. Making this choice signals a commitment, not just to the school but to the community, and provides a sound footing for relationship building.

In the literature discussed above – schools as community hubs, schools in disaster contexts, and university-school-community partnerships – are common elements. This literature, and our prior research, highlight a set of principles that resonate across all three fields. Schools become hubs of their communities when they foster relationships for both the educational function they are charged with, in addition to the social cohesion function expected by society. They do this by setting out clear expectations of activities and roles but in a manner that builds on mutual trust and respect, ensuring that everyone has something useful to contribute to the success of the partnership. When this is done successfully, schools and their communities have a strong foundation for supporting each other through a disaster or crisis. If universities want to engage in activities that will benefit their organisation, then we suggest that the same set of principles of reciprocal trust and relationship building need to apply – as outlined in Figure 1. In alignment with this conceptual framework, our methodology in this research exhibited relationship building, mutual trust, respect, and reciprocity.

[Place Figure 1 about here]

Methodology

The theoretical underpinning of this study is social constructionism, in which experiences are viewed through social, historical, and cultural lenses (Burr, 2015). Rather than seeking to establish reality, our approach focused on how the participants constructed

narratives of their lived experiences and how they made sense of the events in order to absorb them into their own personal histories. Our research design was primarily qualitative and emergent (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). We adopted a case study approach to facilitate our use of a range of data gathering methods (Stake, 1995), all focused on rural schools in changing demographic times. Our methods included gathering and analysing documentary and digital data and conducting qualitative focus group and individual interviews to gain deeper insights. To date, we have gathered data from 84 participants across 18 school communities, including from school principals, school board chairs, and prominent community members, such as local mayors. The school communities are part of the larger study in four different rural locations (Tatebe, 2022). For this chapter, we focused on data drawn from 18 interviews with principals and board chairs about their schools during the pandemic lockdowns.

Ethics

We received ethical clearance from the University of Auckland and adhered to the usual ethical principles of informed consent, anonymity of the school community and personnel, confidentiality of data, and observance of cultural protocols. Given the nature of the topic (rural schools facing change) and the context (the COVID-19 pandemic), it was even more important to approach and work with the school community in a sensitive manner. There are many precedents for using sensitive and flexible approaches in difficult situations (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Mutch & Weir, 2016). Building relationships is a guiding principle of sensitive research. Tatebe took the time needed to build authentic relationships with the schools through a staged approach—a phone call to the principal, followed by e-mailing them the research brief, then one or more personal visits, until the school leaders felt they were ready to make the choice to participate in a free and informed manner. To build a sense of reciprocity, a *koha* (gift) was provided to the schools, usually in the form of a morning tea for the school staff. On-going reports on the research, including interview

transcripts, were returned to the participants to ensure that they felt comfortable with how their words and the school situation might be portrayed later in academic presentations and articles. Once our larger research agenda is completed, articles, chapters, or presentations drawn from the data will be made available to the school communities as a way of saying "thank you" and to provide an opportunity for community members to learn from our findings. Executive summaries will also be forwarded to relevant government agencies and community councils to offer their employees insights into the needs and perspectives of those who benefit from the existence of rural schools.

Analysis

Initial codes were assigned to the interview data based on the strength or quality of the idea, pattern of thought, insight, or explanation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). These codes were revisited many times we added addition data were added to the NVivo (https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home) database. When our analysis reached saturation point—when we assigned no new codes—we grouped the codes into more abstract themes. For this article, we highlight the insights our interviewees provided into the role that rural schools played in supporting their communities before, during, and after the peak of the pandemic. In the findings section, we quote the interviewees to exemplify the themes we discerned (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Findings

We discerned two themes from our analysis of the interview data, each with several sub-themes. The first theme focused on the nature of rural schools and their relationships with their communities and how the schools in this study built and sustained a positive sense of community. The second theme focused on how building this sense of community supported the teachers, the students, and their wider communities served by the schools through the pandemic.

Theme 1: Rural School Communities

Discussions of community and community building pervaded the interviews, and the term community was used to describe two groups. The first group included the members of the immediate school community comprised of students and their families, teaching staff, and the board of trustees. The second group included members of the wider school community comprised of residents and members of interest groups, such as businesses and organisations, whose members may have had connections to the school. Rural identity and rural school culture were central to the understanding of community for both groups.

Principals and board members discussed rural identity and rural school culture in different ways. Strong involvement of parents and *whānau* (families/extended families) was a common element of rural identity and rural school culture, exemplified by the mantra of "everyone pitching in." For principals, an emphasis on a commitment to rural identity and rural school culture was a consideration for staff recruitment and retention. Teachers who were new to rural school teaching were explicitly informed of their obligation to attend school and wider community events. The second common element of rural identity and rural school culture was the tie to agriculture and farming. However, interviewees acknowledged how urbanisation was slowly shifting this agricultural base and creating more diverse school and local community demographics. We now discuss three sub-themes: the nature of rural school communities, the school as the heart of the community, and community-building strategies.

Sub-Theme 1: The Nature of Rural School Community

The importance placed on a strong school community was highlighted by each school board member and principal. Several principals identified the flexibility of teaching staff as the strength of the community. Principal A stated, "I'm so fortunate to have such an adaptive, flexible group of humans that just are committed to what they do. Our [school] community

are right behind us as well." Others principals described how teachers and staff of smaller rural schools were able to know their students and parents more deeply and thus be receptive to their needs "I think that [teachers] felt they were supporting the community in the way they needed to" (Principal ?). Approximately half the school principals participating in this research were either teaching principals with part-time classroom teaching duties or took regular classes as teaching relief when teaching staff were absent. School board members also highlighted the strength of the school community. For example, New School Board Member ? said:

> We've found the school community being extremely welcoming... [the] kids have settled in really quickly. You know, I've joined the board and [my partner joined] the PTA. And so, we've gotten involved. But that's because the community welcomed us with open arms as a school community that we've jumped [in] and done that.

This comment demonstrates the reciprocal benefit of building a strong school community of parents, whanau, and students that fosters and maintains a community culture of belonging. Principal ? said their school was "like a family." Principal ?'s reference to the school being an extended family including students, parents, caregivers, and the local community residents was reinforced by their statement, "It's a bit like *Cheers* (the TV show) here, where everybody knows your name."

Although all [how many?] school principals and [how many?) board of trustees members discussed the importance of a rural school community to varying degrees, some were speaking with an authority engendered by their long-standing heritage (e.g., some schools that had been around for over 100 years), whilst others who served in newer schools found it challenging to develop a sense of school community from the ground up. As Principal ? of a newly established school explained, as they faced the pandemic, "I guess a disadvantage for us was that we just didn't know our [school] community well enough."

Principal ? identified the same challenge of building a school community upon recently transitioning from an urban school. They explained how, two weeks into their first rural principalship, they realised that they did not know "the plan" or their new rural school's "way of doing things." They quickly had to "make relationships and build connections." Principal ? of another newer school explained how:

> One of the other challenges that we've had within a community is that when you first start out … from school perspective, you spend a lot of time consulting with families and, and growing a belief in what you do, and why you do it, and helping your community to understand the why around the type of environment and the kind of approaches you are providing. And you spend, you know, significant time doing that.

Sub-Theme 2: The School as the Heart of the Community

Positioning the rural school at the heart of the community was amongst the most common way our interviewees discussed the relationship between the school and the wider local community and its residents. School principals and members of boards of trustees often commented on their school communities:

> It's tiny. It serves quite a big area, but it's very much the hub of the community. Yes, and when we have events in the hall on the domain, which is just down the road, hundreds of people will turn up. People are very involved in the school. (Chair, Board of Trustees A)

This same Chair drew on the example of the school's 150th anniversary to illustrate the depth and longevity of interest and commitment to the school. They described how, "plenty of people turned up [to the 150th celebration], people who've been at the school generations before." Other principals discussed how, in their schools, everyone was welcome, from family, whanau, and caregivers, to former students and local community groups. The sense of local community within the schools was evident in the ever-present strong

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contingent of parent volunteers. Principal ? described how local businesses had often

"chipped in" with odd jobs around the school or through small donations because parents had

mentioned the need for resources.

Sub-Theme 3: Community Building Strategies

Based on our interviews, school personnel—led by principals and members of boards

of trustees—engaged in a range of internal and external community building strategies. The

most common internal community building initiatives included open-door policies for

parents, caregivers, and the community, special school events, and communication strategies

such as newsletters, Facebook pages, and digital school apps. Typically, school

communication came from the school principal, however, one Chair of a board of trustees

mentioned writing a weekly column in the community newsletter and specifically asking

readers "How's it going? We'd like to hear from you. Give us your thoughts." Special events

like Calf Club Day (children rear calves at home and bring them to school to be judged),

school field trips, and working bees served as methods of internal and external community

building. For instance, Principal ? described several new community-focused initiatives:

> I'm on a big journey so I've got a long way to go, long way to go. We're having a
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> Matariki[2] breakfast at the end of this term, bringing the whānau, bringing our whole
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> community in to celebrate Matariki with us. That's going to be new for our school. So,
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> you know, [we have] lots of things that we've got going on here, such as, we've
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> invited the *iwi* (local tribe) down to join us, so it's not all us taking from them because
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> it's a partnership. [We consider] what can we offer them as well, how could we
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> support them.

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[2] "Twinkling in the winter sky just before dawn, Matariki (the Pleiades) signals the Māori New Year. For
Māori, the appearance of Matariki heralds a time of remembrance, joy and peace. It is a time for
communities to come together and celebrate. From 2022, a public holiday marking Matariki will be held in
June or July each year." https://teara.govt.nz/en/matariki-maori-new-year

The idea of inviting different groups into the school to participate in special events was echoed by Principal ?. They shared their "Whānau Friday" vision in which "families would feel able to come in on a Friday and basically spend the day here if they're free to be with their families." The same principal held regular open-door school-wide *hui* (gatherings/meetings) or assembly times where families and community members were welcome to attend. These community-focused events extended to smaller scale initiatives. For example, Principal ? decided to have a morning tea. They explained how it was a low key, informal event where anyone could "come and have a coffee with me, sit down...and ask questions [and] I could talk to them." The concept of making schools and principals open and accessible to school families and the public was a common element of the community building strategies amongst schools in our study.

Theme 2: Sense of Community as Support Through COVID-19

Our second theme focused on the extent to which the sense of community forged prior to the pandemic sustained both the members of the schools and the members of the community in which the schools were located. In this section, we discuss two sub-themes: the impact of COVID-19 and how schools maintained their sense of community.

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted rural communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. For the rural schools in this study, the implications of COVID-19 varied by context. Participants from the six schools that were in the region impacted by the 2010/2011 Canterbury earthquakes felt that they fared better than others. They cited their experience with the earthquakes for helping them put in place processes analogous to those they had initiated to that earlier disaster to respond to COVID-19. Principal ? explained how "similar to the earthquakes, where we were working through procedures...it was easier to get that shaped up." They went on to describe how, as an outcome of the earthquakes, the school had

moved all parent communication online, so the school community did not experience any communication disruptions when COVID-19 lockdowns arrived. Principal ?, another Canterbury principal, echoed these comments about earthquake preparedness that served the school well during COVID-19. They said, "I don't know what it was like for schools that didn't experience the earthquakes... it helped teach us to set things up."

Despite differing levels of experience with emergency preparedness, several recurring COVID-19 themes emerged. All principals and members of boards of trustees discussed varied access to learning resources, and the additional stresses on teachers of struggling to balance working from home and supervising the education of young children – their own as well as the children in their class. Another key issue for school leadership was concern for staff, student, and family wellbeing and welfare.

Reliable internet and access to Ministry of Education learning packs were the two main sources of frustration, as evidenced by Principal ?'s comment:

> One of the things that I underestimated, and in the COVID thing, was the pitiful internet reception there is out in this part of the rural area. Because I know for many of our families in this part of this district, the reception and the connection to internet was really poor. And, so they couldn't, couldn't do a lot of the online things.

Principal ? shared that digital technology access "was a big issue for some of our families." To mitigate the lack of connectivity and related diminished sense of community, school principals responded by quickly supplying hardware from their school budgets. Some school principals approved sending iPads and laptops to students: "We did a lot of work, actually, to support families, and we delivered. We delivered devices." Principals and teaches at some schools discussed purchasing modems and SIM card top-ups for mobile hotspots. With a school roll of just under 30 students, the smallest school participating in this study

was also the most remote. Principal ?'s commentary about lack of digital access illustrates the level of frustration experienced by some schools. They described how:

> None of our kids; they don't have modems and WiFi...and then we've got a third lockdown and I still don't have it. So, I'm still following up [with the Ministry of Education] saying our kids still don't have WiFi and their response is, "Oh, yeah, well, we were supposed to come and try and connect."

The lack of access to digital hardware and internet directly influenced the students' opportunity to learn. One member of a school Board of Trustees discussed at length how some "kids weren't engaged. It was hard to do that." Schools offered two common responses to this universal concern around access and connectivity. First, they offered different "versions of work" to help support families, including online and hard copy options. Secondly, schools quickly created their own learning hard packs. For example, Principal ? recounted how

> we created our own school-based pack because we knew that the Ministry's were going to be weeks and weeks. So, we gave them all scissors, coloured pencils, books, pens... and [gave families] of all of our breakfast supplies. Then [a teacher] and I went, filled up my ute [pickup truck] and drove into the hills and just dropped everything off.

Principals in all the schools in our research were critical about the delays in receiving the promised Ministry of Education hard packs. Most did not receive the packs at all, or those that did received them in the tail end of lockdown which was not ideal. Principals had mixed feelings about communication from the Ministry of Education. Some schools appreciated the daily emails from the Ministry offering guidance on teaching, learning, and operational matters: "I mean, none of us have navigated that sort of environment before." Others found the frequency of emails too much to process. Numerous principals described the number of

daily emails as "overwhelming." Principal ? shared how they, "so often dreaded those daily bulletins, because it was always another 'now do this' kind of thing." One Board member complained that amongst the long Ministry emails, they "didn't really differentiate between preschool, primary, or high school. So, you had to read the whole thing to get the pieces that you really needed." These many challenges led to a range of different techniques for schools needing to maintain relationships with their communities, as described in the next section.

Maintaining a Sense of Community

Schools focused on the specific needs of their local school communities during COVID-19 as their key response to the pandemic. Maintaining a sense of community operated at three levels (a) within the schools, (b) between the school and the school community, and (c) between the school and the wider community, including other schools. Operating within a challenging, "unknown" environment, school principals and members of Boards of Trustees demonstrated compassionate and responsive leadership. All principals involved in our research spoke with great empathy for their teaching staff, students, and their families. Within the school, principals relied on the existing relationships with their school staff members to make lockdowns work as smoothly as possible. They recognised the varied personal and professional contexts of staff members in responding to varying COVID-19 scenarios. Principal ? said, "I very much had the focus of staff, parent, and student welfare, in the forefront of my mind."

After ensuring the safety and wellbeing of staff, principals and members of Boards of Trustees then moved onto organising the shift to online learning. The same care was extended towards children and families. The message was to "do what you could," which acknowledged the varied ability of parents and whanau to support online learning. As Principal ? recalled,

teachers worked really hard to help the children set up some ability to work within the family and what the family constraints were. So, while some families were able to be beside their children quite a bit when they were working online, others had their own work to do as well. So, you know, there was a real mixture with families or children as to how much time they spent with the teacher online.

Communication with families and students was the primary method of maintaining a sense of school community. For some schools it meant, "just the daily check-ins with people." These check-ins occurred via Zoom, as with teacher one-on-ones with students and families, but also extended to principal-teacher meetings. For some of the more remote rural schools, check-ins were more challenging. Principal ? spoke at length about numerous families who did not have a mobile phone or landline. Thus, being "out of zone, or out of service area" during lockdown meant that school personnel were unable to get in touch at all during lockdown. To maintain contact, the principal and teachers physically went to these family homes, standing in driveways to maintain social distancing, or talking to them over the fence. However, there were a few families where in-person visiting by staff members was impossible because of the cultural requirement of their needing an invitation to come onto the *marae* [Māori communal meeting place]. Principal ? described the benefit of the focus on health and well-being for staff, students and their families. They indicated that, in responding to the pandemic, school personnel had "demonstrated effective leadership . . . and care for our families. It put a lot of credit in the bank really for us in terms of building relationships with our families."

A benefit of wider community building came within the principals' networks. Some principals pointed to the value of the local *Kahui Ako* (Community of Learning)[3] as key

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[3] Kahui Ako is a Ministry of Education-funded initiative where education providers (from early childhood to higher education) in a location can join together for mutual support in meeting the needs of their school communities.

sources of advice and support during the pandemic. Principal ? noted: "the leader of the [Kahui Ako] group organized a daily check-in with the principals in the area. And that was really valuable, as well . . . it was an opportunity to, I guess, to support one another as leaders." The differing experiences of members of Boards of Trustees were also identified as a measure of support. Principal ? described how the member's voice

> was important because they came from other fields of life. So, they could say, well, in our workplace, this is how we're dealing with it or, in this group that I'm involved with, this is what the leaders are doing to manage their staff and team.

> School personnel, members of Boards of Trustees, and members of their communities had to find alternative ways to communicate and maintain a sense of community throughout the pandemic. Whether school personnel engaged in online or in-person communication strategies, the story of navigating a messy, uncertain landscape was abundantly clear.

Discussion: Reciprocal and Authentic Relationships and Community Building

As highlighted in the conceptual framework, building reciprocal and authentic relationships among school personnel and local community-members is the thread that holds this discussion section together. We open this section with a discussion of our rural school findings in relation to the theme of the school as the hub of the community. Next, we highlight how the building of a strong community identity supported the school communities through a disastrous event, in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we discuss how the relationships built during the set-up phase of our research enabled our study of rural schools to proceed despite the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. We end with suggestions for other university researchers working with schools and their communities in ordinary and extraordinary times.

Rural Schools as the Hubs of their Communities

Theinitiatives undertaken by the leaders who participated in our study exemplified the importance of the school in rural communities, as discussed in the literature (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Haynes, 2022; Witten et al., 2003). In some cases, trust had been built up over many years, as in the long-established schools, such as the one established 150 years ago. As we have previously discussed, in that case, the Chair of the Board of Trustees noted that hundreds of wider community members would come to school-community events. Witten et al. (2003) noted, "Schools have histories and special characteristics born of place that in turn offer particular experiences to that community and facilitate the development and assertion of local knowledges and identity" (p. 206). In more recently established schools in our study, several principals described their need to be quite deliberate in their consultation and relationship-building strategies to develop a sense of community identity. Our study also highlighted that the idea of school community consisted of two layers (a) the immediate group of school staff members, members of the Board of Trustees, students, parents, and families, and (b) the wider neighbourhood or district and the local businesses and organisations. As Haynes (2022) noted, "A publicly funded school in a small community is often the institution with the most far-reaching impacts on citizen's daily lives as it provides a source of employment, social, cultural and recreational opportunities" (p. 66). This was a responsibility that the principals of the newly established schools took seriously.

A school acting as a community hub was not a feature that happened by accident. As Hargreaves (2009), stated:

> The school gate maybe a community 'hub' for parents of school-age children (Countryside Agency, 2001, 2008), but despite recent calls for rural schools to be recognised as community hubs, parents congregating at the gate does not necessarily constitute a school-community relationship." (p. 123)

In our study, creating the feeling of the school as a community hub involved a set of reciprocal expectations that were built through communication, engagement, and invitations. The literature highlights that this reciprocal approach has long been part of Aotearoa New Zealand school communities: "For many New Zealand localities, schools were among the first community buildings erected, and, for generations, voluntary labour and resources, as well as tax revenues, have contributed to the maintenance of schools as a central community resource" (Witten et al., 2003, p. 220).

School leaders, mostly principals but also the Chairs of their Boards of Trustees, took the opportunity not only to set clear communication channels in place to provide information but also to seek feedback. School principals extended open-door invitations for parents to come to the school, either to spend time in their child's class, as in Whānau Fridays, or to meet with the principal over coffee.

Building Community Capital for Coping with Disasters and Crises

All the effort that school personnel put into relationship and community building stood them in good stead when the pandemic arrived. Prior research on schools in disaster settings found that where there was a strong sense of community, local leadership, and active community networking, prior to the disaster, communities were able to thrive despite the odds (Mutch, 2016; Thornley et al., 2013). In the school community contexts in our study, building community capital (Callaghan & Colton, 2008) was a reciprocal venture. Prior to the disaster, school personnel used invitational strategies to communicate and engage their communities in educational and social activities. In response, members of the immediate and wider communities responded by supporting events, volunteering their time or providing resources. When the pandemic arrived, school personnel knew who the families were that lacked internet connectivity and devices or would struggle to provide basic learning supplies or even food in this difficult time. Community members responded by also supporting

families in need in their community, such as setting up a community pantry, where anyone with surplus food could drop it off and anyone who needed it could collect it without embarrassment.

The members of some of the school communities in our study found that prior experience of a traumatic event prepared them better for what they were to face. They already had learning and communication strategies in place for such eventualities. They also had an awareness of the disruption that such events cause and the need to be agile and adaptable. Nevertheless, as is the nature of rural and remote communities, some families were inaccessible, or their living situations meant that it was not possible for their children to engage in or be assisted with academic learning. The pandemic exacerbated the social, economic, and educational inequalities experienced by vulnerable these children and young people (Education Review Office, 2020; Hood, 2020; Mutch, 2021; Riwai-Couch et al., 2020). In the most deprived rural areas, many young people did not return to school because they had lost motivation or because they had already left to find work to support their families (Mutch & Peung, 2021). Some school principals in our study expressed their frustration at the Ministry's not being more proactive about engaging with rural issues or providing adequate support. Given that our research was conducted in this fraught context, in the next section we discuss how it was that our research project not only continued but was welcomed.

Building Reciprocal and Authentic University-School-community Relationships

A primary principle in our study was building reciprocal and authentic university-school-community relationships. For many schools involved in our study, it was the first time that they had ever been involved in research. Common initial responses from members of School Boards to our research invitation were "Why?" and "What would we say?" Many principals we approached were delighted to be asked to participate in our research. Several

principals specifically stated how they felt overlooked by the Ministry and the large-scale educational studies discussed in the media. Building authentic relationships with the personnel in these rural schools involved demonstrating a willingness to invest time and care for the school members and their communities. We employed three strategies to build these relationships – personal connection, visibility and communication.

Building authentic relationships with each school involved our taking the time to focus on the people and places in their communities. We believed it was important to understand the nature of rurality (Haynes, 2022). School principals often held a gatekeeping role in terms of access to the members of Boards of Trustees. We devoted significant time to meeting with principals, some of whom were curious about the nature of the research invitation, having limited prior experience of formal educational research. The relationship building process involved explaining the impetus for the study and the role and background of Tatebe, and reiterating the goal of providing a platform for personnel in rural schools to share their experiences of rural school life. It often took several months of phone calls, in person meetings, and even attendance at Staff Meetings and Board Meetings before we were formally welcomed into a school to begin data gathering.

Our being seen in the local community furthered our identification with the school. Each visit with the school principal included asking about the local community. Learning about the geographic region and investigating some of the local landmarks and businesses demonstrated our genuine interest in building this new university-school-community relationship. Being able to talk about eating at the local cafe, describing driving around the new housing development, and even speaking with the locals was highly informative and illustrated the care and time that our research team would invest in each rural school community. In subsequent years of the study, Tatebe volunteered to participate in school events, such as Calf Club Day, school barbeques, school fairs, and local annual community

events and fundraisers. Where geography and time were limitations, regular check-ins with the school principal and virtual attendance at Board Meetings facilitated staying connected.

Regular communication with school principals and members of Boards of Trustees was integral to our research. Communication included our sending back all data to the schools for their review and records, along with informing school personnel of our progress on the study through reports, emails, and phone calls. Tetebe also made efforts to forward relevant research and documents for members of Boards of Trustees and principals to read. Regular communication demonstrated our commitment to working with and alongside members of rural schools and communities rather than on or about them (Mutch, 2018) and reinforced Tatebe's ethic of care (Noddings, 2013) towards the study participants. Understanding more about rural schooling and rurality in Aotearoa New Zealand and abroad facilitated more informed discussions with members of School Boards and principals, while also minimising Tatebe's identity as a rural "outsider." Thus, rather than being seen as a burdensome interruption, our research was welcomed by the personnel in the participating schools as a genuine partnership in which they would have the opportunity to share their experiences with a wider audience and possibly influence policymakers.

Conclusion

Our chapter makes several contributions to the relevant fields. Firstly, it highlights the nature of schools as hubs of their communities and provides concrete examples of how such status is attained. Secondly, it provides insight into a rural environment that is distinctly different from that discussed in the many rural education studies based on the United States context (Haynes, 2022)-- the rural schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. Thirdly, it takes up Smawfield's (2013) suggestion of conducting further research on the roles of school personnel in disaster and crisis contexts by sharing stories of their initiatives to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, it addresses Patton's (2012) request for more examples of

successful university-school partnerships. In essence, successful university-school partnerships rely on three Ps – people, project, and principles.

All relationships begin between people – while they might represent an organisation, it is the bond of trust between individual people that builds and sustains relationships. In Aotearoa New Zealand, we talk of *manakitanga*[4] – mutual care and respect for and between people. This underpins our approach to building our research relationship, as exemplified by Tatebe's involvement in setting up this study. Part of *manakitanga* is that it requires time for *kanohi ki te kanohi* (literally eye-to-eye), signifying the imperative to sit down with people face-to-face and share something with them –conversation, stories, food, or, most importantly, time.

The second P is the project. What is it that brings and binds partners together? *Kotahitanga* is the Māori concept of togetherness, coming together as one. What is the *mahi,* or task, that partners have come together to complete? *Whānaungatanga* is about building authentic communal relationships for a mutual goal. It was important to us throughout our project that all parties felt informed, engaged, respected, and valued.

Finally, the third P is for principles. What are the principles that underpin the research and the values that each party brings to the endeavour? It is important that partners articulate these in words and actions. *Pūmanawatanga* invokes the power and intimacy of a beating pulse or moral purpose. If a research endeavour puts people first, builds authentic relationships, and treats the endeavour as *taonga* – a treasure – then partners have a sound footing on which to proceed. We close with the following Māori whakataukī (proverb) that speaks of coming together and sharing for the greater good.

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[4] It is challenging to maintain the multiple nuances of cultural meaning in translating Māori concepts into English. Our apologies for our shortcomings in this regard.

Nāku te rourou, nāu te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi

With your food basket and my food basket, we will sustain everyone.

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Figure 1

Common Principles to Inform School-Community and University-School-Community

Partnerships

Schools as the
hubs of their
communities

**Common
Principles**

* Relationship
building
* Mutual trust and
respect
* Clear agreements
on expectations
and roles
*Reciprocity and
shared benefits

Schools in
disaster or
crisis contexts

University
researchers
engaging with
schools and communities