

## WELLBEING AND THE CURRICULUM: ONE SCHOOL'S STORY POST-EARTHQUAKE

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### Keywords

Health, physical education, curriculum, school, support, community, response

### Introduction

This is the post-earthquake story of how we as the staff and community of Ōpāwa Primary School have lived with the tremors (literally and metaphorically) and trauma of this national tragedy, whilst endeavouring to maximise student learning and enhance the wellbeing of all the members of our school community. This is not founded on research but is an account of what the earthquake has meant in our school. We share this to help bring to light how as a school we have negotiated the ongoing issues associated with living in a disaster zone, and how positioning wellbeing as a central focus of our work we, with the support of our community, are getting on with living.

### Context

On Saturday September 4th 2010, at 4.35 am, a magnitude 7.1 earthquake occurred near Christchurch, New Zealand. Fortunately, due to the time of the shake, there were no casualties and only a few serious injuries. The worst damage was to older buildings, chimneys, and properties flooded with 'liquefaction'<sup>i</sup>. The eastern suburbs of Christchurch, were most badly affected by this quake, due to flooding of the rivers, liquefaction and damage to new homes.

Five months after this, on Tuesday 22 February 2011, an aftershock of magnitude 6.3 hit Christchurch at 12.51 pm. Several thousand people were injured and 185 people killed. One of our Year 4 students described the morning of September 4, 2010 as 'a big scary monster stomping down the street'. The central city was hard hit and more than half the buildings in the central business district (CBD) have since been demolished. Christchurch was in chaos and a national state of emergency was declared. Power, water supplies and basic amenities were affected and approximately 70,000 people left the city in the weeks following (McSaveney, 2013b). Schools were closed and many Canterbury children were enrolled in towns and cities elsewhere (McSaveney, 2013a). People were, (and still are), struggling to cope with a range of issues and on a range of different scales. This includes bereavement, ill health, badly damaged properties, moving house, finding temporary accommodation, loss of employment, and battles with EQC and/or insurance companies. The effects of these issues manifested in different ways, for different people. Some people couldn't sleep; some became hostile; others withdrew. Pressure on families and relationships escalated. Sleep problems increased; tears increased; toileting issues increased there was a sense of loss—loss of tangible items, loss of family and friends. These challenges continue for many today.

For the community of our school, Ōpāwa School, nestled on the banks of the Heathcote River (Ōpāwaho) in eastern Christchurch, the 22 February earthquake meant we were closed for three weeks, as the school had no power or water, broken glass and lights, and learning resources littered everywhere. Locally, we were dealing with liquefaction, pollution in the river, portaloos as toilet facilities, bridges out, roads closed, and no public facilities open. As a school community we had always taken pride in looking after each other, and this was even more evident post-quake and more recently post flooding. Each member of our school community, the 400 students, 1000+ whānau (family) and family, 19 teaching staff, three senior managers and 13 support staff have been, and

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<sup>i</sup> A liquid mush of soft sand and silt caused by the earth shaking.

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continue to be, affected by the fallout of the earthquake and flooding. A key to managing and supporting each other has been focusing on strengthening both the individual and the collective culture of wellbeing. How we have done this as a school is the story shared in the following sections.

### **Re-evaluating our priorities—A focus on wellbeing**

It was evident that anxiety in our community escalated after the earthquakes and we realized that we needed to address this as a school, in order to ensure that student learning continued to be a priority. While it is not possible to detail everything that occurred over the last three plus years, the following examples provide an account of how a focus on wellbeing, as articulated in the learning area Health and Physical Education (Ministry of Education, 2007), has been central to establishing a learning environment and workplace where all members of the school community can flourish.

Prior to our school re-opening, every family was contacted by a staff member to ascertain the initial impact of the earthquakes on them and their children. This strengthened the relationship between home and school and was the platform for more open communication with many families.

While damage to the facilities of the school were always going to necessitate some changes in how we worked, it was a major realisation on the first day back at school that many parents did not feel comfortable leaving their children. As one Ōpāwa parent outlined as part of the Women's Unheard Voices project "it was terrible when it came to having to take the children back to school ... I did not really want to let them go" (Gordon, 2014, p.13). While "determined to drop them off and not stay 'hanging around the school gates like some of the other mums', she did not want her fears and insecurity being passed on to the children. 'That was really hard ... I cried every time I left the school gates'." (p. 67). Other parents congregated in the staffroom and supported each other, as their own anxieties came to the fore. In my role as Deputy Principal it was affirming to hear a parent reassuring others about how well the staff had looked after the children on the day of the quake and that the school was organised about safety, but at the same time I was made aware that not only did we need to help students transition back to the new normal, but also the central role the parents and whānau would play in how smoothly this occurred. For the staff, it made us question what learning was of most importance now and therefore what we would need to spend time on (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 35).

The Ministry of Education provided a range of materials to support parents and educators (see <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/EmergencyManagement/Responding/TipsAndTools.aspx> for more information). While this proved useful, it did not necessarily help us address the range of issues we were experiencing. While we initially, sought external counsellors to work with our students, and senior staff attended seminars about how to manage anxiety in young people, last year we became increasingly aware that many of our students were still suffering as a result of the earthquakes two years on. We were experiencing a spike in extreme behaviours caused both directly by the earthquakes, or triggered by them, as students continued to deal with a lack of sleep due to sharing rooms and/or being in different homes due to earthquake damage to their own home; increased turmoil at home due to increased stress; and a multitude of general worries and anxiety.

We were forced to accept the challenges posed by the earthquakes and "to reflect on the nature of wellbeing and how to promote it" (Ministry of Education, 2007), beyond the work we have always done in this area. This is when the learning area of Health and Physical Education (HPE) really came alive for our staff and students. The Term 1 theme was 'Learning through Play' and the learning programmes were adapted to meet the emotional and social needs of the students following the earthquakes. All four of our learning intentions ('We are learning to'—W.A.L.Ts) were directly linked to HPE achievement objectives detailed in the New Zealand curriculum (NZC). Our main aim was to re-establish our routines, while also altering the content to allow for more opportunities for creativity and for children to express their emotions and deal with their anxieties.

The Health and Physical Education curriculum continued to be at the forefront of learning for us throughout 2012. We became the first school in New Zealand to utilise *The Wellbeing Game*<sup>ii</sup> that was a joint initiative developed by Healthy Christchurch, The Mental Health Foundation of NZ, and the Community and Public Health division of Canterbury DHB. Senior students took responsibility for running this and it was an ideal way for us to strengthen crucial links between home and school to celebrate ‘wellbeing’. Families could accumulate points for recognizing and displaying evidence in their daily lives of the five key areas of wellbeing as defined by the game: connect; give; take notice; keep learning; be active. We encouraged competition and collaboration. The family from each of our four school houses<sup>iii</sup> that amassed the greatest number of points over a two-week period won prizes. We held an official launch for the game, in conjunction with The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand and The Canterbury District Health Board. Prizes for each of the winning families were presented at this assembly. In addition, the whole school enjoyed an afternoon of leisure activities during which families/whānau were invited to come along and join in.

More than anything, one of the major changes is that we have made the teaching of wellbeing more explicit in our school curriculum. For example, areas such as resilience and teamwork became far more relevant and important after the earthquakes and were taught explicitly in classes. A variety of Physical Education games were utilised to help children develop an understanding of the importance of everyone knowing strategies for working together and explored developing resilience through game play. As part of our ‘Onboard at Ōpāwa’ (see Appendix 1) learning, these concepts were then adapted to consolidate children’s understanding of what it meant to be a good crew (team) member.

Children were encouraged to discuss and express their feelings much more as part of daily school life. Masks about the earthquake were designed and created that helped children focus on identifying and naming feelings and emotions, and then brainstorming future goals (see Appendix 2).

Office staff and senior managers were also pivotal in information gathering, as they were often the first people to become aware of issues for particular students and/or their families/whānau, both by being told directly, or by observing changes in behaviour. Parents, families/whānau were encouraged both verbally and through the school newsletters to talk with each other and with classroom teachers, if they required additional support, or were aware of specific challenges or anxieties their children were grappling with. This helped us redevelop specific learning activities to flexibly respond to the information we were getting.

### Help from external agencies

This flow of information was also used by senior staff to make connections between specific external agencies, programmes and parents, families/whānau. We utilized outside agencies to assist with dealing with stress and anxiety, for staff and students. Barnados was one such agency and they ran specialist programmes such as ‘Stormbirds’ and ‘Journey of Hope’. Due to our strong relationships with family/whānau, and our understanding of our students, teachers identified which children would benefit most from these programmes, and worked alongside the people from Barnados to ensure the learning opportunities they provided linked to the needs of students in our school context.

In a similar vein, the Methodist Mission began working in our school in 2012 under the umbrella of The Education Wellbeing Response Team. We had a social worker assigned to our school, as well as a mentor to work part-time with individual students and small groups. They offered programmes such as ‘Wise Up’, which targeted small groups of students who needed additional support with processing their feelings and managing stress. This programme also made genuine and explicit links to both the ‘Relationships with Other People’ and ‘Healthy Communities and Environments’ strands of the

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<sup>ii</sup> This game is no longer available for students or schools to play, however the website’s (<http://www.thewellbeinggame.org.nz>) opening page gives some insight into the initiative. Much of this initiative appears to be based on The 5 Ways to Wellbeing highlighted in research by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) for the United Kingdom Government’s Foresight Project (<http://www.neweconomics.org/projects/entry/five-ways-to-well-being>).

<sup>iii</sup> All children are placed into houses. This is to build a sense of belonging, and we often have events, such as Cross Country, where children can earn ‘house’ points. Our school houses are called Waimakariri, Heathcote, Avon, Rakaia.

Health and Physical Education curriculum. Support for parents was another key area that the Methodist Mission specialized in. They ran a parenting course on site, did home visits and assisted with housing, financial and food issues. Much of this work continues to be crucial to the wellbeing of our school. Strong and trusting relationships have been established with the key workers from the Methodist Mission. We are currently exploring ways to sustain the work that they do, for when we are no longer fortunate enough to have them working with us, and our community.

### **Nothing is that simple**

While our collective endeavours appeared to make a difference for most of our students, the post-traumatic stressor continued to impact on some students more than others. For six of our students, a combination of factors contributed to them escalating their behaviours to very anti-social and non-compliant behaviour at the end of term 3, 2013. We believe that the earthquakes exacerbated their challenging behaviours to the point where they could not function in their regular homerooms. Although each of these students was receiving a combination of individual counselling, mentoring and Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTL) support, they were completely disengaged from their learning. As a school, we adopted our own approach to try and meet their behavioural and learning needs. This was a radical move, yet one we collectively determined was necessary. We called it an 'Alternate Programme' and placed each student in a junior class and required them to complete their own set work in this class. The whole school was on-board, as were the parents of the individual students. Each day, the student could be invited back to their homeroom, if, and when they had completed their set work in the alternate (junior) class. A school-wide record of their compliance was kept and a very clear message was given to the students and to the whole school—working with your own class is a privilege and has to be earned. The homeroom rules and culture must be respected; teacher's instructions must be followed. There was a clear link made to how disruptive behaviours impacted not only on their ability to learn but on the learning, and wellbeing of their peers, and therefore was unacceptable.

This approach was somewhat unorthodox, and there were some who were in direct opposition to us using it. Nine months later, we no longer have any students on an 'Alternate Programme'. These students are still receiving some support, but they are back in their homerooms, more engaged and more motivated. As one student who was on the Alternate Programme said, "I think that Alternate Programme thing you had me on, was the turning point." With a wink, his best friend nodded in agreement.

### **Ongoing challenges**

Following the earthquakes, education in Christchurch got its own shake up from The Ministry of Education. The reshaping of education in Christchurch involves closing, merging and creating new schools. This future focus for education in Christchurch has created a massive ripple effect and has unnerved many of our staff, adding another layer of uncertainty in already very uncertain times. As part of the reshaping, our school has become part of a Learning Community Cluster. We have had to develop a strategic plan to improve outcomes for children within Ōpawaho Cluster. This has meant meeting and collaborating with several other schools and educational providers in our area (cluster) and has included thinking about provision for Technology for our Year 7 and Year 8 students, as our Technology provider (Philipstown School), will be closing at the end of 2015. We are also currently working with The Ministry of Education to complete master planning as part of the Greater Christchurch Education Renewal Programme. Despite these multi-layers, and multi challenges, staff have soldiered on and continue to provide quality teaching and learning, when in reality, many of our teachers are still struggling with their own personal battles with insurance companies, EQC and their own mental health, as a result of the trauma caused by the earthquakes. A number of other issues have also surfaced for individual teachers as a result of the earthquakes. Managing and prioritising their personal wellbeing is an on-going challenge. As teachers we were given the opportunity to utilize EAP (Employee Assistance Programme) services, which includes free counselling. This opportunity has been presented to staff at regular intervals and was provided by The Ministry of Education. While such services work to support teachers, the disconnect between policy (education, insurance, EQC, council) means that the wellbeing of children and teachers is often neglected.

## Conclusion

What have we learnt from the past three years? Our philosophy that people and their wellbeing matter has been strongly reinforced. Without a ‘well’ community, positive and productive engagement in learning and school life is limited. There has been a real feeling of reciprocity and resurgence of relationships within our school and school community since February 2011. People rely on each other far more. Our school hall, despite its cracks and crumbles, has been a focal point for a range of community groups, due to the damage to their own facilities. We now regularly host indoor bowls, a church group, an amateur theatrical group and Zumba classes. Our students can attend holiday programmes, based in our hall most school holidays, with mentors and youth workers from the Methodist Mission. We needed to accept that we didn’t have all the answers. We accepted external assistance. We asked for help ourselves and we tried to ensure that our own wellbeing was taken care of. Modelling how to self manage is crucial.

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) gave us license to design our school curriculum so that it was based on community and learner needs. The life changing events in Christchurch have really pushed us as a school to think about this and move beyond the traditional notion of what learning looks like. Being adaptable and flexible when planning learning programmes was an area that we learnt was vital. We had to be responsive to our students’ specific social and emotional needs, and adjust the focus of the learning accordingly. Learning now looks quite different to pre-quake learning. We learnt to trust our awareness, knowledge and understanding about our students, particularly in relation to how they were coping following extreme events.

Wellbeing for success, with a particular lens on student wellbeing, was a key focus for The Education Review Office (ERO). In February 2014, almost three years to the day that the big earthquake shook Christchurch, we hosted ERO. Our reviewers commented that student and family wellbeing was a prime focus for us and was evident in the high level of support provided. As a school, we were recognized by ERO as the centre of the community and it was acknowledged that the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes continue to have an impact on the emotional and social wellbeing of students, staff and parents (Education Review Office, 2014).

There has been much talk about the ongoing mental and emotional anguish caused by a natural disaster, particularly three years after the event. The experience of the earthquakes and the 10,000+ aftershocks would challenge most, let alone the flooding that occurred early in 2014 in our community. We continue to work closely with our staff, students, families/whānau to ensure that people receive any support that they need. Wellbeing matters. At present almost 15% of our community are receiving additional support through our networks for their ‘wellbeing’. We are also mindful that there are many more who receive help from other sources, independently from us. We are conscious that sustaining such high levels of support will be a challenge and are actively working through how we can do this when the post earthquake supports run out, because as we have had affirmed throughout the past three years: People matter:

He aha te mea nui o te ao?  
He tangata! He tangata! He tangata!  
What is the most important thing in the world?  
It is people! It is people! It is people!

## Acknowledgements

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## Appendix 1: Term unit plan

Rooms Term 1 2011  
Weeks 1–11

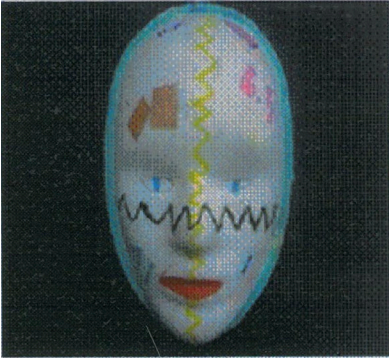
Play		
Topic/Theme	Strands	Levels
Learning through Play	Health	2/3
Being part of a team means, we are expected to contribute to the team.	Physical Education	2/3
What is play and how does it help us learn?		
Focus Objectives		
<b>W.A.L.T</b>	<b>We know we have achieved this when we can:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Be a member of a team.</li> <li>* Identify our strengths and weaknesses.</li> <li>* Develop a variety of tools required to be an effective team member in various team situations.</li> <li>* Build resilience.</li> <li>* Take risks and face new challenges.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Work co-operatively in a team.</li> <li>* Describe our own personality.</li> <li>* Consistently use our Te Ara Tika values.</li> <li>* Identify a variety of skills required for various team situations (inside and outside) and understand when and how to apply these.</li> <li>* :Willingly attempt new challenges—solve problems in a positive, safe way.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Achievement Objectives:</b></p> <p><u>Personal Identity:</u> L2: Identify (L3: describe how their own feelings, beliefs and actions and those of other people contribute to their) personal qualities that contribute to a sense of self worth,</p> <p><u>Relationships:</u> L2: Identify and demonstrate ways of maintaining and enhancing relationships between individuals and within groups. (L3: compare and manage changing relationships.)</p> <p><u>Challenges and social and cultural factors:</u> Develop and apply rules and practices in games and activities to promote fair, safe and culturally appropriate participation for all.</p>	<p><b>Key Competencies:</b></p> <p><u>Crew Member:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Becoming an active listener.</li> <li>* Co-operating positively with others.</li> <li>* Participating in a group developing negotiating skills.</li> <li>* Sharing ideas.</li> </ul> <p><u>Going Solo:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Self assessing and reflecting.</li> <li>* Taking responsibility.</li> </ul>	
<b>Children that need differentiation:</b>		
<b>Assessment</b>		
<b>Resources/Equipment</b>		
<b>Evaluation and future direction/Next steps</b>		

Appendix 2: Children's responses to the earthquakes through Art—a Health Activity


# Marvellous Masks

about the

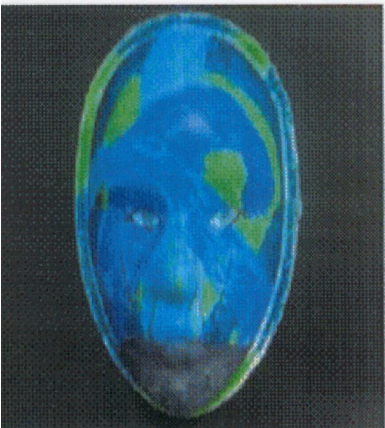
## EARTHQUAKE



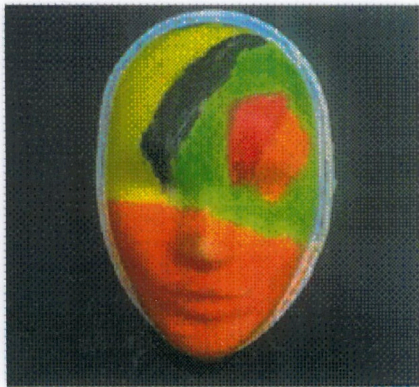
My mask describes the six point three on the Richter Scale. The bricks are for the bricks that fell off people's houses.



Across the mouth of my mask is the fault line. The cut out bits represent the cracks in the buildings and the ground. The 6.3 is the size of the earthquake .



The wave on my mask represents sadness that spread over our city on that seemingly calm and peaceful afternoon. The black patch at the bottom of my mask represents the black sun that rose the afternoon of the earthquake. Though some were blind to the happiness that this event might bring but I know our normal yellow sun will rise again.



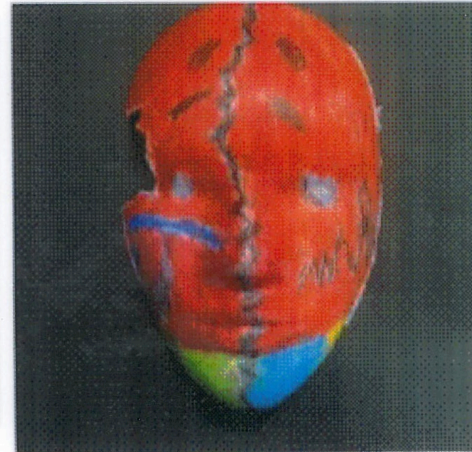
My mask is about our broken city. The orange is for the bricks broken on houses. The house is my house and it was flooded with liquefaction. The day started sunny then it changed.





My mask shows the people that got covered in rubble and the rain that poured down the first night. It shows the hard work it took to clean up the liquefaction.

The two eyes are smashed windows. The crack through the middle stands for the cracks from the road. It represents buildings falling down, broken sewerage pipes and 6.3 on the Richter Scale.



New Zealand is calling for help and Japan has a big tsunami so they both need a helping hand and to get rescued and safe.

In the 6.3 earthquake there were sad faces, sore people, liquefaction, no power, no water, buildings falling down and nature squashed by bricks and also a hopefully better future.

