

# Quiet heroes: Teachers and the Canterbury, New Zealand, earthquakes

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## Abstract

*This article argues that teachers deserve more recognition for their roles as first responders in the immediate aftermath of a disaster and for the significant role they play in supporting students and their families through post-disaster recovery. The data are drawn from a larger study, 'Christchurch Schools Tell Their Earthquake Stories' funded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and the University of Auckland, in which schools were invited to record their earthquake stories for themselves and for historical archives. Data were gathered from five primary schools between 2012 and 2014. Methods concerned mainly semi-structured individual or group interviews and which were analysed thematically. The approach was sensitive, flexible and participatory with each school being able to choose its focus, participants and outcome. Participants from each school generally included the principal and a selection of teachers, students and parents. In this study, the data relating to the roles of teachers were separated out for closer analysis. The findings are presented as four themes: immediate response; returning to (new) normal; care and support; and long term effects.*

**Keywords:** *disaster studies, schools, teachers, first responders, psychosocial support*

## Introduction

The February 22, 2011 earthquake in Canterbury, New Zealand hit in the middle of a school day. Some secondary school teachers were attending a union meeting in the Town Hall but elsewhere, across the region, teachers evacuated, calmed and reassured students until they were collected by a family member or had somewhere safe to go. When school resumed, teachers coped with difficult conditions, teaching in relocated, damaged or temporarily repaired classrooms, tents, community centres or church halls. While other first responders have been praised and received awards for their efforts, teachers have remained largely unrecognised, except by their school communities.

*All these teachers are quiet heroes. I know there are teachers here that have lost their homes and some of them are living in the same situation as we are and they come to work and they get on with it. They do their job as best they can and they never ever show their frustration to the kids.*

(School E, Parent 4)

The data for this article come from a larger study, 'Christchurch Schools Tell Their Earthquake Stories,' in which five primary schools shared their on-going earthquake response and recovery experiences. Findings from the wider study have been published elsewhere and have focused on children, principals, schools and communities (see, for example, Mutch, 2013a; Mutch, 2014a; Mutch & Gawith, 2014). The current article puts teachers at the centre, in order to recognise and celebrate these 'quiet heroes'. After providing relevant background and introducing the small body of literature on the experiences of teachers in disaster contexts, the findings are outlined under four themes: immediate responses; returning to (new) normal; providing care and support; and long term effects. The article concludes with reflections on the methods used, and on implications of the current findings.



## Background

The Canterbury earthquakes were a sequence of large jolts (four over 6 on the Richter scale) and multiple aftershocks. The sequence began with a 7.1 earthquake at 4.35am on the morning of September 4, 2010. Located in the vicinity of Greendale, this first jolt became known as the Darfield earthquake, after the nearest town, but more colloquially referred to as the September earthquake. It caused major damage to infrastructure and buildings. Fortunately, due to the time of day, no one was killed but the city of Christchurch and surrounding districts of Selwyn and Waimakariri faced liquefaction, flooding, ruptured and sinking land, and on-going aftershocks (Aydun, Ulusay, Hamada & Beetham, 2012; Canterbury Earthquakes Royal Commission, 2012). Many people had to move out of their homes, and schools were closed until they could be inspected and repaired or relocated (Education Review Office (ERO), 2013).

While the region was still recovering, a 6.3 magnitude earthquake, centred closer to the city with an upthrust of twice the force of gravity, hit at 12.51pm on February 22, 2011. It destroyed much of the central business district, killing 185 people and injuring thousands more. There was further liquefaction and flooding, further damage to infrastructure, and further dislocation for families and businesses. Tens of thousands of people left the city. This earthquake, officially an aftershock of the September quake, became known as the Christchurch (or February) earthquake (Aydun et al., 2012, Canterbury Earthquakes Royal Commission, 2012). It hit in the middle of a school day and principals and teachers became first responders as they helped up to 100,000 children and young people in their care. Schools were again closed for several weeks until premises could be checked, repaired, relocated or until alternative modes of educational delivery could be found (ERO, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2012; Shaping Education, 2013).

When schools reopened, teachers returned to work and began the exhausting task of getting the normality of school life up and running, while supporting each other, students and families. At the same time, they were coping with the trauma of loss, disruption and dislocation in their own lives amid on-going aftershocks. This article provides an insight into how they juggled these multiple priorities and the toll that this took.

## Literature

A literature review by Mutch (2014b) showed that there is a growing body of literature on the role of schools in disaster settings but the majority focuses on pre-disaster contexts. There was very little literature on schools in disaster response and recovery contexts and even less on the specific role of teachers post-disaster. The literature that does concern response and recovery contexts is mainly descriptive – accounts written by teachers themselves or by researchers who interviewed teachers in different post-disaster settings. The next section briefly summarises some of the relevant international literature where teachers are mentioned.

A discussion of the role envisioned for teachers in disaster response and recovery is included in a collection of disaster articles edited by Smawfield (2013). This collection highlights how teachers are expected to go well beyond their normal duties and functions, from administering first-aid in the immediate aftermath to providing psychosocial support as part of longer term recovery. The discussion noted that teachers need to be provided with training to fulfil these expectations and that it is also important to remember that teachers, too, might need support following a disaster (Smawfield, 2013).

Several authors in this collection of articles discussed the disaster-related experiences of teachers (for example: Beaton and Ledgard, 2013; Ema, 2013; Zhong, 2013). Literature concerning the 2011 Japanese earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster and other sources complements those accounts (for example: Japan Society, 2011; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2012; O'Connor & Takahashi, 2013; Parmenter, 2012). Themes that emerge from the sum of all these accounts are: (a) how teachers put students first when the disaster hits; (b) how they often prioritise their school situation over their home situation; (c) how they manage in difficult post-disaster teaching environments with few resources and increased workloads; and (d) how they provide on-going psychosocial support for students and their families. Zhong (2013) stated that teachers receive little recognition for this work:

*Teachers themselves were among the hardest hit groups in the Sichuan earthquake, although this has not received sufficient attention. During and after the earthquake, the teachers shouldered the role of protectors to their students and schools, but the*

*teachers themselves were also victims who suffered all kinds of losses; losses from which it takes a long time to recover.*

(pp. 143-144)

## Methodology

The 'Christchurch Schools Tell Their Earthquake Stories' project, funded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and The University of Auckland, took place between September 2012 and May 2014. The funders allowed the current author to design a sensitive, flexible, facilitative and participatory approach, which was so necessary in this Canterbury post-earthquake environment. As well as ensuring that regular research ethical considerations were respected, it was important to take time to build a relationship with each school and have support mechanisms, such as a counsellor or teacher, available in case the data-gathering caused distress. The principal investigator had been through the earthquakes herself and this helped build rapport and trust with each school.

Participants varied from school to school but usually included the principal and selection of senior leaders, teachers, school support staff, students, parents and other family members. A range of qualitative and arts-based methods was used to gather detailed data in a way that assisted participants to see their experiences as part of the larger story of this significant time in New Zealand's history, without distressing them (see: Mutch, 2013a; Mutch & Gawith, 2014). In brief, each school negotiated the process, participants, data gathering and dissemination concerning their own school. In one school, audio and video recordings of small group discussions of participants with their peers or family members became an illustrated book. In another school, the students made a documentary drawn from interviews they conducted with other students, teachers and parents. In yet another school, the students designed a community memorial mosaic which involved every student and many community members. The schools each owned their final product with the proviso that the research team could use the raw data (audio transcripts, video footage, observations, field notes, stories, drawings and photographs) to conduct cross-case analysis and produce written material for academic journals. The detailed process of facilitation, negotiation and agreed outcomes is outlined in full, in Mutch, Yates & Hu (2015).

The current article draws from approximately 25 semi-structured qualitative interview transcripts where principals, teachers and parents spoke specifically about the role of teachers. The term *teachers* is used generically and includes teacher-aides and support staff, such as librarians. The original interviews were video-recorded, audio-recorded or recorded in note form. Sections of focus group and video transcripts from children were also reviewed for this article. While this study did not initially aim to investigate the experiences of teachers, many teachers volunteered to tell their stories. Other accounts of teachers' experiences were provided by principals, parents and students, so there was sufficient data available for analysing this particular dimension of the Canterbury earthquakes. It seemed important to extract and collate this data and examine it more closely so that the experiences of teachers could be specifically acknowledged.

The data were analysed in a constant comparative manner, outlined by Mutch (2013b). Each set of interviews was independently analysed for codes, categories, concepts and themes. These were then compared and contrasted horizontally (across all participating schools) and vertically (within each theme). The following four themes emerged from the teacher-related data set: (a) immediate responses; (b) returning to (new) normal; (c) providing care and support; and (d) long term effects. The findings section will discuss each of these themes in turn. Verbatim quotations are used to illustrate these themes with the authentic voices and emotions of the participants.

## Findings

**Immediate responses.** Because the September earthquake occurred on a weekend, teachers' response stories were mainly about their families. By the time Monday came, teachers became aware of the size of the disaster and that their schools would be closed for some time. One teacher recalls her first thoughts were to protect her own children. Once her children were safe and the power came back on she could take stock. She phoned her mother in Dunedin, who said, "Did you feel the Alpine Fault at 4 this morning?" to which she replied, "Mum, that was us; it was in Christchurch" (School A, Teacher 3).

February was different. It was at lunchtime and teachers were commonly supervising children eating lunch in classrooms or school playgrounds. Although many children were frightened, most schools had

been practicing earthquake drills since September, so everyone knew what to do. This was outlined by Parent 6 at School A: “The school was phenomenal. The children streamed out of the classrooms and down onto the field. The teachers were incredible. It was very prompt and calm”.

Other schools faced more dramatic situations. This student was on a school trip to the beach:

*All of a sudden a huge earthquake struck. I tried to crawl away but the earthquake threw me back down again. They always say that your life flashes before your eyes before you die and I was waiting for that to happen.*

(School C, Student 1, 11 years)

Another school had over a hundred children plus teachers and parents at the local swimming complex. One teacher recalls:

*...my thoughts now, when I look back, is that the whole place could have fallen in. We were so jolted that we stood up then we were jolted back down the force was so great. ... We tried to stand and go forward but we were just knocked back ... the lights went out and the children were screaming. All I remember is the siren noise and I went and grabbed a few of the Year 4 children out of the pool and I just huddled with them.*

(School E, Teacher 2)

Teachers reported that they had no time to think, and that they had to react instinctively, getting children under desks or into the turtle position. What teachers did next however, was often a blur. They reported feeling unable to register what had happened. One school, located on the Port Hills, watched as the cloud of dust from the collapsed city rose in front of them. It all felt quite surreal. This feeling of disassociation is commonly reported in disaster contexts (Borrell & Boulet, 2009) but teachers had to refocus on their responsibilities to their students, for example “We put on that teacher smile, took a deep breath and carried on” (School A, Teacher 1).

Children were evacuated to the school fields or returned to school. Here teachers checked that everyone was unharmed and accounted for. The ERO (2013) reports that no child was killed or seriously injured on school or early childhood premises in the February earthquake. Teachers then calmed and comforted children until parents arrived. They remained until all children were

collected or alternative arrangements had been made, for example:

*We had to wait until all the parents had picked up the children. I had one girl in my class whose mum didn't come for a very long time.... When the mother arrived, she was in a real state ... in tears and red-faced and she was like: “The Cathedral's gone, there are people dead in the streets....” That was like the moment of reality.*

(School A, Teacher 2)

Teachers reported moments of panic when they thought about their own families. One principal made a decision to let staff leave if they needed to:

*There were staff who had families elsewhere at other schools – their partners working in town. Because the mobile network wasn't reliable, there was no information coming in for them – so we had to review which staff could be released first to go for their personal reasons.*

(School B, Principal)

After slow and difficult journeys home, teachers found their houses in varying states of disrepair. They needed to attend to distraught family members, check on neighbours and relatives, make their homes habitable or find alternative accommodation, for example:

*In February our house broke in three places. We had water coming in with the rain, which was great with three young children. We had liquefaction to knee deep right through the backyard again, but luckily not through the house... It was horrendous.*

(School A, Teacher 3)

**Returning to (new) normal.** Schools were closed for several weeks. In the interim, principals and teachers kept in touch with each other and their school communities, as much as was possible, for example:

*I can't remember the first contact we had, I think our senior teachers e-mailed or texted or made sure we were okay over the next few days. We obviously knew because it was state of emergency schools would be closed anyway.*

(School E, Teacher 2)

Before school opened, staff met socially where they could. Teacher 3 from School E stated that: “Even when the school was closed we still got together as a staff and just processed everything”. Gordon (2004) and Lazarus,

Jimerson & Brock (2003) report that reconnecting after a disaster is an important recovery activity. This was reflected by teachers re-bonding with their school colleagues, for example:

*We had a big debrief in the staff room. We had a chance to connect with the other staff to find out about all their different situations as some of the staff had lost homes and really suffered. The session was not just about commiserating, we were also celebrating that we were all still here.*

(School A, Teacher 2)

Once schools were given the green light to open, principals, teachers, caretakers, support staff and parents arrived to undertake repairs, clean rooms, pick up furniture, replace books, empty lunchboxes and tidy playgrounds. As well as making the physical environment attractive and welcoming, they met to consider how they would support students when they returned. Teacher 2 from School A said that:

*The staff got given a list of possible short and long term symptoms or effects of trauma that children can have after a natural disaster. When children were acting out we weren't to automatically assume that they were being naughty. We could consider that their behaviour could be a long term effect of the earthquake.*

Teachers were anxious about how children would feel. For example:

*As teachers, we didn't really know how to deal with children after a natural disaster especially after they had had a month off school. So we were worried about how the children were going to be.*

Teachers were relieved when children nonetheless appeared ready for school, as reported by Teacher 2 from School E:

*We had a preparation day where kids could come in and see the school was still normal. The kids were amazing, we couldn't get over it, like it was security for them; it was really good.*

Schools prepared for what might happen when children came on the first day. Counsellors were available and teachers had been briefed on how to deal with different responses. They knew that many children were still at school in other parts of the country and they also expected to receive new children temporarily. According to the Principal of School D:

*Half of them didn't come back, of course, because some of them had shifted away. Some of them were too scared to come back. Some parents were too scared to let their children come back so there were a whole lot of different reasons why we didn't have our normal cohort.*

Students reported having more games and fun activities when school first started. Teachers said it was because they wanted to impress upon children that school was a safe and happy place to be. Teachers also explained that with children living in damaged houses or shifting frequently, it was important that there was one place that was recognisable and consistent. Teachers were keen to make things as normal as possible, for example: "The children were just so resilient and just wanted to get back to normal" (School A, Teacher 1). Students reported getting back into routines quickly, for example: "The teachers kept all the routines going and they tried to make it normal" (School A, Student 15, 12 years). Returning to routines and distracting children from rumination are two activities that can support children's recovery. Psychologists recommend reinstating routines where possible at home and school to provide a sense of normality and security in the aftermath of trauma. (Australian Psychological Society, 2013; Lazarus, Jimerson & Brock, 2003). Research also suggests that physical activities such as games or calming activities such as listening to music can distract children from dwelling too much on the negative aspects of their experiences (Cahill, Beadle, Mitch, Coffey, & Crofts, 2010; Prinstein, La Greca, Vernberg, & Silverman, 1996).

Teachers also provided opportunities for students to safely process their experiences. For example: "Were they going to want to write about it? And how would they want to process it?" (School E, Teacher 1). Emotional processing, where children begin to normalise their experiences and absorb them into their personal histories, is important for children not exhibiting severe trauma. Researchers suggest activities such as relevant conversations, drawing, play, story, drama and dance (Cahill, Beadle, Mitch, Coffey, & Crofts, 2010; Prinstein et al., 1996). Children reported talking, writing and drawing about the earthquakes. Teachers reported using a range of activities and resources: video cameras for children to record their stories; engaging in the 'Teaspoon of Light' drama activity; reading the picture book, 'Quaky Cat'; and using curriculum resources, 'It's Time to Hope Again' and 'Lion Quest'.

Earthquake drills continued and schools reviewed and improved their processes. Counsellors were available for staff, students and families and the on-going earthquakes were a constant reminder not to become complacent. One student discussed the subsequent earthquake in June, 2011:

*We were told to be prepared for lots of aftershocks. However, it was a big wake up call when we had another 6.3 in June – just when we thought they were only going to be small aftershocks. Everyone knew what to do and they didn't freak out as much. They went straight to the field – teachers didn't have to worry about getting the stragglers.*

(School A, Student 15, 12 years)

**Providing care and support.** A Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) (2014) survey of Christchurch residents found that the earthquake had impacted on all aspects of their lives and the rebuild was testing their patience. They felt negatively impacted by living in a damaged environment surrounded by construction work with the on-going loss of many facilities. Teachers coped by throwing themselves into their work, for example:

*I've just been so amazed with some teachers in particular whose homes were badly damaged in town and they were offered discretionary leave to sort out their own lives but all of them wanted to be here for the children and when I asked them (or pleaded with them)—they said, "We deal with that outside of school hours. This is a fantastic distraction for us. We want to be here for our children, for our classes.*

(School B, Principal)

Teachers were committed to being at school to support their students, for example: "They've been really good. If we need help or if we're struggling, there's always teachers to talk to and lots of us struggle with change" (School E, Student 14, 10 years). One student said they thought it must be hard for teachers to "keep calm and carry on" (School A, Student 9, 12 years). He felt there was pressure on teachers to look after children and make them feel safe (School A, Student 9, 12 years).

Teachers were also there to support the students' families, for example:

*...straight after February, teachers rallied round. Teachers are great. I can't say enough about how much strength, how much integrity, how much they would go the extra mile to drop kids off, to look after*

*kids in their classrooms after school, to buy them special treats, take them to McDonalds, all those sorts of things... to find clothes for them, to find a pram for a mother who didn't have a pram to wheel her baby to school....*

(School D, Principal)

They became key figures in supporting the emotional wellbeing of their communities, for example:

*We've always had a really strong positive school culture but once we got through the initial emotions of the earthquakes, we've galvanised a lot more. Teachers and staff are more aware to support the children emotionally than they have done in the past.*

(School B, Principal)

Through all this, they also needed to recognise their own need for support: "I've had a really supportive team and they have got in counsellors for staff and children and parents" (School E, Teacher 3); and to look after each other:

*The school looked out for the staff. There were constant e-mails and messages at morning teas and lunchtimes – that if staff were not coping to let management know as there was support and funding for relief teachers. Also, if we needed to go and sort things out with our houses, then we were encouraged to do so.*

(School A, Teacher 2)

**Long term effects.** One of the difficulties with earthquakes is that there has been no endpoint. Over 12,000 aftershocks continued into 2014. Long after the immediate impact of an event subsides, survivors can face secondary stressors that slow their recovery. These stressors can include financial concerns, repairing or rebuilding homes, loss of possessions and resources, health issues, family matters, education concerns, and changes in their understanding of the world and their place in it (Lock et al., 2012). Teachers reported health concerns, such as, stomach cramps, bowel disorders, panic attacks, headaches and sleep disorders. Teacher 3 from School E stated that:

*If you looked at the stress-related illnesses since the earthquake – the number of parents that have had cancer, heart attacks, brain tumours – it's horrendous. And we're all dealing with that as well as everything else. There's been some very sad stories at school – we lost a staff member from a*

*stress-related heart attack – it's just been one thing after another....*

They also mentioned mental health issues, worrying about elderly parents, moving or rebuilding houses and worrying about the long-term impacts on their children, for example:

*It's the cumulative things we are dealing with. People have got so many responsibilities, so much is going and the big decisions are just not under our control. A teacher's performance has to be affected. It is not possible to carry on being the person of usual everyday circumstances.*

(School A, Teacher 4)

Sometimes the impact of what had happened did not hit them until they had time to stop and reflect, for example:

*I'd have to say that right from September til we shifted out four or five months ago, I coped really well. It's not til I moved out and I had time to look back that I find I get upset quite easily.*

(School E, Teacher 5)

Some teachers thought there might be some positive outcomes, for example: "Kids in the school in future will be really resilient and able to deal with a lot of stressful situations" (School A, Teacher 1). Others were ready to continue with their lives and had hopes for the future.

*I hope Christchurch will be a better place. I know my neighbours now. When we first moved to [our old house], we didn't know our neighbours and it wasn't until we had the earthquake that we really got to know them. When we moved to [our new house], the first thing we did was to get to know our neighbours.*

(School A, Teacher 3)

*For others, they had new challenges to face. In a post-earthquake review of educational provision in the city, the Ministry of Education decided to close School E. How does that affect the staff? The emotional ties and the relationships are torn apart; families that have been associated with the school for decades have gone. That kind of link and historical connection, and knowledge of the community and the school and its involvement goes as well.*

(School E, Acting Principal)

Teachers at School E found they had to draw on inner strength to support their school community through what one parent referred to as "another aftershock"

(School E, Parent 2). Yet through all this, they put their personal feelings aside, drew on the resilience that they had garnered during their ordeal and chose to cope by what Teacher 3 from School E described as: "...making it a positive thing for myself, staff and students – looking forward, moving forward and knowing that out of this we will create another great school."

## Reflections and conclusion

This section explores three areas in more depth. Firstly, a brief review of the strengths and limitations of the methodology is provided. Secondly, a reflection on the findings is outlined. Finally, this section provides a conclusion which includes a discussion of certain implications from the current findings.

Much has been written about researching in a sensitive setting, where researchers are cautioned to gain familiarity with the nuances of the context, build trust with the gatekeepers and participants, use methods that do not cause unnecessary distress and act ethically throughout each phase of the research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). In the current study, a participatory approach was envisaged where the process and outcomes could be negotiated between the researcher and each school. What was not envisaged was how long a negotiated process takes nor the complexity of taking a participatory approach.

Having goodwill on both sides and being prepared to be flexible and listen actively to each other helped solve issues arising while maintaining the overall momentum of the research. In terms of research rigour, such a process might appear to have limitations. There was no definitive research design. Likewise, the data gathering methods and participants varied from school to school and the small sample of schools (5) limit the generalisation of conclusions to schools across the entire Canterbury region. However, the in depth approach taken by the current research is also a strength. The iterative, fluid and on-going process meant that many hours of video and audio data were collected from over 100 children and 30 adults along with drawings, photographs and field notes over a period of three years. This data could be then examined across schools, across age groups, across roles and over time. The results have therefore provided rich in-depth portrayals of the lived experiences of those who experienced this traumatic time in New Zealand's history.

Subsequent findings, have been discussed through outlining four themes that emerged from the data: immediate responses; returning to (new) normal; providing care and support; and long term effects. These themes highlight how teachers in this study were the 'glue' that supported students, families and communities through the immediate aftermath and recovery phases of the earthquakes. On the day of the 2011 February earthquake, teachers became first responders. Examples from the present study demonstrate that where students were out of the regular classroom, such as on field trips or at the swimming pool, teachers put their own lives at risk to remain, rescue students and guide them to safety. Similarly, where school buildings or the local geography put lives in danger, they quickly found alternative routes to safety. Even when the school buildings were relatively secure, they put their personal fears and anxieties aside and ushered students to the agreed meeting points where they calmed and comforted them, waiting for hours until each child had somewhere to go. Staff, students and parents from School E in the current study spoke of a particularly enduring bond arising from the trauma they had faced together.

When schooling resumed after the earthquake in repaired or relocated classrooms, teachers arrived to teach day after day, despite the chaos in their own lives. They balanced a return to academic learning with on-going pastoral and practical care for students and their families. With constant aftershocks and family dislocation, teachers provided security and regularity. They also remained vigilant for students and fellow staff members who were not coping and who might need specialist help. These themes resonate with themes from the earlier review of the literature: that teachers put students first when the disaster hits; that they prioritise their school situation over their home situation; that they manage in difficult post-disaster teaching environments; and that they provide on-going psychosocial support for students and their families. This was also the case with the teachers in this study. An additional theme identified during the current research is the stress that these responsibilities put on teacher's emotional and physical well-being and how this may impact on their own recovery.

There are several implications arising from the current research. Firstly, there are implications for further research. As noted in the literature review, there is a dearth of studies on the experiences of teachers following a disaster event. A useful place to start

would be to collate and synthesise research arising from the Canterbury earthquakes to provide a broader understanding of the roles and issues experienced by teachers. It would be useful to conduct a survey to find out how many teachers: (a) stayed in Christchurch and continued teaching; (b) stayed in Christchurch but left teaching; or (c) left Christchurch; and their reasons for making these choices. It may also be useful to research the ways that teachers reconfigured their roles to balance educational and pastoral care roles. As discussed below, this aspect of teachers' experiences has important practical implications. Another study could examine the role of secondary stressors, such as teachers' own housing, insurance and family issues and how those impacted on their ability to undertake their teaching roles satisfactorily. Broader research syntheses, both national and global could then continue to expand our understanding.

Secondly, several recommendations arise from the current findings and findings from surrounding research. One recommendation concerns teacher preparation and training. Pre-service or in-service programmes could consider alerting teachers to the possibilities of unexpected events, how they might respond and where to go for assistance. Another recommendation is that disaster response and recovery agencies need to actively involve teachers and principals in emergency planning and training, given that at any one time during a school day, thousands of students could be in the care of teachers when a major emergency event occurs.

Finally, it seems important to stop and reflect on what teachers did on that day in Canterbury and over the weeks, months and years that followed. Through each step of the response and recovery process, they put their personal concerns aside and acted with calm professionalism. The findings in this study illustrate their courage, selflessness, practicality, thoughtfulness and empathy, perhaps at the expense of their own health. Teachers shared their stories modestly, often through tears, always downplaying what they had done and turning the spotlight on the achievement of others. The current article provides an opportunity to recognise their efforts, their resilience and the major contribution they have made to Canterbury's earthquake response and recovery process. This goes some way towards addressing the concern articulated by the Acting Principal of School E, that "teachers have not been recognised as first responders to this disaster", by giving them due acknowledgement.

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