

Provision of Support to Schools and Early Childhood Services after the Pike River Disaster

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On November 19 2010, 3.44pm, the first explosion at Pike River Mine occurred. Initial reports were unclear, although it was subsequently confirmed 29 miners were trapped, two miners walked out. A second explosion occurred the following Wednesday afternoon, November 24. Police believed, and stated at the time, that no-one would have survived the second event. There were third and fourth explosions, although smaller.

Why did the Ministry of Education have a role and assist the community in this instance?

Following traumatic events, that potentially affect the well-being and education of children and young people, the Ministry has an expectation that disruption to their learning is minimised and that the school as a community can provide much needed support through routines, peer interactions, age appropriate activities, caring and supportive adults for children and young people. When routines are disrupted, the event can challenge our perspective of certainty and safety with reported feelings of uncertainty, disbelief and anxiety for those affected.

Provision of external support services for early childhood services and schools is essential – education settings are potential moderators of the impacts of traumatic events. There is benefit to be gained for the community from supporting the education sector to enhance their sense of self efficacy, social togetherness and preparedness for future events.

Positivity after a crisis may not be enough on its own. Those affected may no longer have the sense that they can predict anything with certainty. Following crisis events, children, and others around them, can have

difficulty accessing solutions and may feel immobilized or overwhelmed. They seek clarity, security, hope and connection in the process of making sense of their position. Supplementary, but culturally relevant, support may be required in order to help a community construct new meanings, to access and build on their resilient foundations. As each crisis event and each response is unique, crisis supporters are challenged with the task of ensuring culturally relevant support on every occasion.

This is the framework that encouraged the cohesion and planning, communication and guided recovery strategies after the Pike River Mining Accident. It assumed that how we plan, respond and what we think – are important to consider, this was guided by “*Managing emergencies and traumatic incidents – guide and resources*”, 2010, www.minedu.govt.nz - keyword: traumatic incident.

It is important to acknowledge that local (West Coast) Ministry staff led our response with support of experienced colleagues (from Nelson, Christchurch and Wellington). The existing relationships local staff had with early childhood services and schools were important. They knew the people, the engagement and relationship was reciprocal. Local

Ministry staff were able to quickly identify, respect and align their actions with the cultural practices in the local community, largely as a matter of course. They approached crisis response with the intention of building on strong foundations, utilizing the natural supports of the individuals and communities experiencing this unexpected event.

This supplementary, but culturally relevant, support strengthened the communities ability to problem solve, access their cultural resources and build on their resilient foundations. Local ministry knowledge of the social history, reflected in individual and distributed knowledge and practice, played in discerning appropriate responses. Without insight into the local perspective, authentic interpretation of crisis events and responses would not have been possible.

In hindsight this response could be thought of in three phases. Initially the first 48 hours, secondly, up to and including the second explosion, and finally the following week(s). The community responded paradoxically. Initially school and ECC staff and the community expressed fear, worry, and uncertainty, “*I’m not sure, I don’t know what I have to do*”. At the same time the community responded with increased cooperation, they became very cohesive and collaborative, this

was significant in terms of their ability to cope – strong reliance on each other.

Our initial response, during the first weekend (Sunday evening), was to present general information, outlining some of the key principles of psychological recovery, to the education sector and key members of the community. The local Service Manager contacted and invited all the early childhood services and schools in the Greymouth area to that presentation (110 people attended representing schools and the early childhood sector). At that point we didn't know what had happened but knew there were 29 people missing.

Over the following two weeks we assisted ECC and schools, directly and indirectly, to support their staff and students. We discussed with staff practical ways they could support each other and students through maintaining structure, routine and normality. We shared information on the need to remain calm, maintain social connection, inclusiveness, group efficacy – having a plan, and maintaining hope.

In some cases we provided direct advice and guidance to parents and teachers who held specific concerns about individual children and young people. Those few people that were identified as higher risk of developing more persistent problems, information

was made available about access specialised intervention.

The Ministry also supported and coordinated additional staffing – with teachers from the Nelson area and Christchurch, volunteering to assist in schools. We took an inclusive team approach with one meeting space, decisions were discussed and shared, no-one acted alone. The focus was on supporting local staff with a mix of outside experience. The team was led given the convergence of help – the response needed to be managed, planned, integrated and coordinated. With a routine and process established (24 hour cycle of planning and debrief), actions and meeting minutes were recorded, daily contact was established and maintained with other key agencies – including Police, MSD, Health and NGO's, with reports on our response completed each day for Wellington and the Minister.

Subsequent feedback from the education community and teachers stated the initial meeting was helpful, it brought people together and allowed them to consider how they might respond that week in support of each other and their students. They indicated that allowing local ministry staff to lead the work was important – they knew and trusted them. They told us we had a clear framework, structure and tools, both informative and practical.

Seven days after the first explosion our work was largely completed. Access to resources, coordination with other agencies and internal process was effectively established that follow up, if requested, could be provided by local staff.

The importance teachers have in supporting children and young people following any traumatic event was highlighted earlier this year, in Christchurch, by Sir Peter Gluckman and Robert Lord Winston. They talked to students and staff at a local Primary School, following the June earthquakes. They stated the teacher role is crucial to children and student recovery and for the community – it is acknowledged that children and young people are best supported by those they know and trust. Teachers are effective at being “in role” and despite their own stresses they accept the responsibility to support others.

I want to acknowledge the West Coast community, Greymouth in particular. For those Ministry of Education staff involved it was a privilege to assist the local education and wider community to deal with the grief and disruption to their lives.

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