

# The Education Welfare Response Immediately Following the February 2011 Earthquake

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The February 2011 Christchurch earthquake was of magnitude 6.3 centred 10 kilometres south-east of the centre of Christchurch. It caused widespread damage across Christchurch, New Zealand's second most populous city. 181 people were killed in the earthquake, which was New Zealand's second-deadliest natural disaster. The purpose of this paper is to briefly outline and reflect on some of the key aspects of the Education Welfare Response in the *immediate* aftermath of the February earthquake. Many Ministry of Education, Special Education staff were involved in the response and this paper is an attempt to recognise their work.

The Education Welfare Response (EWR)<sup>3</sup> was a part of a larger Ministry of Education (MOE) response included a wide range of activities: working across early childhood (EC), primary, secondary and tertiary sectors: property, payroll, resourcing, leadership, involvement with the Minister, ICT, facilities management, finances, special education provision, relocation of students to other areas, interagency liaison, communication, donations, international students, and MOE business continuity.

Valuable experience was found in the MOE building, being surrounded

by dedicated people who worked very hard for extended periods of time, and were highly committed to their work and the well-being of those affected by the earthquake.

There were a number of elements to the EWR immediately following the earthquake which led to ongoing support for schools and early childhood centres. These included:

- Formation of a core team of experienced TI practitioners
- Liaison with other ministry groups and the management group
- Figuring out the best thing to do
- Initial contacts with schools by the core EWR team
- Presentations to several large groups of school /early childhood staff
- Creation of a help sheet
- Creation of and direction to web based resources
- Formation and support of the larger liaison staff group
- Record keeping.

A core team of experienced Traumatic Incident practitioners was quickly brought together by MOE management. This included staff from Canterbury who had experience of the previous earthquake, and others from elsewhere in the country who were there for varying amounts of time. Some of these staff had worked together previously, which certainly assisted team formation. Those from outside were aware that local staff would in the end be the ones carrying on, but wanted to be helpful in the short-term: "*We were just there for a little while..*" and "*Locals will provide the long term support*". They were also very aware of the stress that local staff were often under, and the commitment these staff made by turning up to work in the EWR when often things at home were chaotic. The team was led by a Special Education manager who was part of the wider MOE leadership group and provided liaison with other MOE groups, but this liaison also became the responsibility of other EWR members who rapidly learned a great deal about MOE acronyms and roles.

Figuring out what to do was an important aspect of the intensive team environment. Members of the core

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<sup>33</sup> The Education Welfare Response (EWR) name was chosen instead of Special Education's traditional Traumatic Incident (TI) response name to better reflect the scale of the disaster and changes in processes to extend the capacity of the Ministry of Education's (MOE) response.

team had considerable experience in assisting schools and early childhood centres with Traumatic Incidents, but of course most had little or no experience of a disaster of this kind. Consequently, the “figuring out what to do” was a part of the team process. We wanted to help but had little idea what to expect. Even the minor quakes on the first day in the Ministry building, which was partially damaged, were quite alarming, and the team would stand around looking brave but quite frankly, worried.

The EWR team developed over time. The theme of flexibility of roles has emerged from review interviews with staff involved at the time, and seems significant in retrospect, as the work often involved staff finding and taking on roles that they were most comfortable with within the team, and often being challenged in their roles. Review interviews with team members have shown that they were willing to be involved in a range of tasks. Comments such as “we did what needed to be done” and “I didn’t know what we would do but it soon became obvious” reflect the rapid development and collaborative nature of the EWR. Overall, members of the EWR quickly felt valued by the Ministry of education management support and then by the education sector, so that being part of it was a valuable experience for them.

Working as a team and being aware of self and others’ capacity was a significant theme from review interviews. Historically this kind of awareness has always been a value within the TI service. Checks occurred informally within the team in an ongoing way, and were particularly important because at times there was a real sense of urgency in wanting to help which had the potential to exhaust any individual’s personal resources.

Figuring out the best thing to do was an on-going team process for the team that drew on previous TI experiences. Review interviews have shown that a core value in this process, that was perhaps unspoken at the time but has always been implicit in the TI service, was the value of rapid and responsive practice. The

team made considered decisions, but acted on them as quickly as possible.

Things that helped with the “figuring out” process included regular scheduled meetings and diligent record keeping. Minutes of team meetings with action steps that could be reviewed at the next meeting really helped. We set up and maintained a register of contacts with schools and early childhood centres which helped ensure that issues and needs discovered were addressed in a systematic manner by the team and, as needed, passed on to other parts of the ministry. Given the large number of schools and centres in the area, careful management of large amounts of information was essential.

Initially, the EWR team made contact with outlying schools that were functioning or almost functioning. Principals welcomed and valued the contact. Many schools were enrolling new students. A number had staff affected. Some had a need for follow up and support which the team then planned and delivered.

Another of the first jobs the EWR team did was to create a relevant help sheet. This contained some principles of responding to traumatic incidents – restoring and maintaining normal structures, ensuring inclusion of those in the school or EC community, addressing and ensuring communication, and consultation – developing understanding of responses to loss and grief. It contained some specific ideas relevant to schools and centres. It also contained the relevant helpline contact numbers. For the EWR this sheet served two purposes at least – it was something concrete and helpful, with a simple and consistent message, to share with the people that we were working with, and it also helped the team identify our own common beliefs and approaches, helping our own group formation and coherence.

The national practice advisor on Traumatic Incidents was also involved from Wellington in providing help and support, and in providing web based resources. The comments we had from schools were that it was easy to access

this information and that it was helpful to them.

Schools were at different stages in recovery and they moved from stage to stage. The most affected schools were assigned MOE project teams which included a Special Education person with welfare experience.

The EWR team proactively offered presentations to a number of groups of school and early childhood principals and teachers, and some other groups, based on the previous experience with the earlier Canterbury earthquake. These were attended by hundreds of teachers and principals, and were well received.

As the EWR progressed, the formation of the larger ECE/School liaison staff group began. About sixty five staff volunteered to be part of it, which was a significant proportion of the total Canterbury Special Education team, and said a great deal about the commitment of staff who were often personally affected by the earthquake themselves. Training sessions were held for these staff covering traumatic incident principles, organisation, resources, and first steps. Staff were assigned to groups of schools and early childhood centres, worked in teams of two or three, and were supported by the experienced core EWR team members. The role of the liaison staff was to connect with the leaders of early childhood centres and schools to assist them to support the return and well-being of staff and students. The role was not always straightforward as “schools have an expectation that they will be supported without necessarily knowing what they need.” This was a new way of working for our service, but our experience has been that it was valued and helpful, and that this model of working received very positive feedback from ECE and schools.

In addition, the liaison team model was also a very valuable model for some of the Christchurch staff, who were often affected by the earthquake themselves in different ways. Ensuring inclusion of those involved in traumatic incidents has been a key theme in our TI work and this was the case for our own staff too.

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The feedback which we have was that for them, helping others was a way of helping themselves. It is interesting to reflect on the worth of people being involved in this way using Seligman's (2011) description of the components of well-being which include not only positive emotion but probably more importantly, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement.

As one person put it, "It's about people doing whatever they can do at

the level they can." Another said "You do what you can at the time." And another said "it also allowed me to work alongside really experienced people and I learned so much from that. The ownership and involvement offered in the role helped me move past my own circumstances." She talked of "Experiencing the wonderful feeling of being able to help just a little."

**Reference**

Seligman, Martin E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*. New York: Free Press.

**Author Note**

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