

# Importance of teacher-student relationships in response to disaster trauma

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## Abstract

This literature review uses research informed by disasters including the Christchurch Earthquakes, Hurricane Katrina, Red River floods, War in Israel and natural disasters in Indonesia to identify key aspects within teacher-student relationships which result in an increase in the emotional stability of our students. These aspects include prior knowledge of students and their development, psycho-social interventions and incorporation of the disaster into the curriculum. Teacher-student relationships are highlighted as vital to a child's healing and resilience after experiencing disaster trauma.

**Keywords:** *disaster, teacher-student relationship, trauma, responses*



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Permanent Link: <http://hdl.handle.net/10092/11450>

## Introduction

On February 22, 2011 Christchurch was rocked by a devastating Earthquake in which people died, homes were destroyed and lives would never be the same. Within the Christchurch education system schools were closed, and others site-shared. This time was and still remains a traumatic time for our children who were forced to deal with situations beyond their comprehension. As a result an additional dimension was added to the teaching profession as teachers navigate the emotional grey areas experienced by students and themselves and attempt to provide support in an environment often viewed as a pillar of the community.

Kilmer, Gil-Rivas and Macdonald (2010), discuss the effect disaster trauma has on students and it is evident that emotional instabilities, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), has a negative effect on students' academic abilities through attention and concentration lapses brought on by anxiety and distress. Research into disaster trauma in areas such as those affected by hurricanes, earthquakes and war has shown the effect student-teacher relationships has on the mental healing of the students and the many facets that are involved (Buchanan, Casbergue & Baumgartner, 2010; Johnson & Ronan, 2014; Kilmer, Gil-Rivas & Macdonald, 2010; Seyle, Widyatmoko & Silver, 2013).

## Evaluating the needs of the student

Schools represent a core area of stability when disaster strikes and are seen as a vitally important aspect of the community (Kilmer et al., 2010). Research suggests students react differently to disaster trauma based on numerous different factors such as family support, death of a loved one, and displacement (Johnson & Ronan, 2014). It is important as educators to be able to identify how students are coping. Teachers, with the exception to immediate family, often find themselves in the best environment to assess students' need emotionally as they often knew the student before the event and can notice subtle differences in reactions, engagement and behaviour (Johnson & Ronan, 2014). Students develop through a range of overlapping contexts; home school and community as is recognised in Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological model. It is also recognised that student development can be hindered as a result of disaster trauma (Buchanan et al., 2010). An unexpected disaster can impact some of these development contexts more than others, so it is vital the teachers remain as a stable support system for students who are struggling.

Teachers are seen as a trusted source of information and through their prior knowledge of the children and their development are able to adapt their practices to suit their students and they can fill a critical space in addressing the mental health needs of students (Johnson & Ronan, 2014). Ultimately teachers need to put the needs and emotional wellbeing of the students first as opposed to school policy which can relate to lessons, dispelling rumours

which are causing anxieties and facilitating class discussions and peer interactions surrounding the topic of the disaster (Johnson & Ronan, 2014). It has been recognised that within some schooling contexts, teachers may struggle to support students emotionally as they feel they do not have the training and are therefore hesitant to address the situation as they do not want to inflict more pain onto the students (Johnson & Ronan, 2014). Research from Franklin, Kim, Ryan, Kelly and Montgomery (2012) has shown additional training for teachers does not have a significant impact on the level of support the students receive; the most important factor is the knowledge of the student and their trust in the teacher.

## Interventions in the classroom

The relationships formed between teachers and students are vital when working with the third party organisations that are often employed post-disaster to ensure that students are getting the support they need (Kilmer et al., 2010). External assistance is often provided to alleviate the stress on teachers; however it is often the teachers who are able to recognize the students who are struggling. This can be seen through changes in mood, behaviour and attention span (Buchanan et al., 2010). Research has demonstrated that school-based psycho-social interventions by teacher can be successful in supporting the students, as the relationships formed within the classroom often exhibit an unparalleled level of trust compared to receiving treatment through an individual who has no history with the students (Seyle, Widyatmoko, & Silver, 2013).

Classroom management techniques are seen as the most effective form of behaviour management intervention and they have been shown to significantly decrease the number of behaviour management issues as well as act as a preventative measure for behaviour issues. They also have positive implications for reducing the development of more serious developmental and emotional issues (Franklin et al., 2012). The line between counsellor and teacher often overlaps and as a result this can increase the workload of teachers. However, it is generally accepted that all teachers will have intervention methods in their classroom which involve positive behaviour management, clear rules, consequences and positive reinforcement (Franklin et al., 2012).

Research into teacher interventions in a war-torn area in Israel showed protocol interventions which focussed on resilience enhancement was an effective method to grant students coping skill to deal with potentially traumatic events that occurred in their home and community life (Wolmer, Hamiel, & Laor, 2011). Resilience enhancement also focussed on the students' ability to cope with daily stressors and transfer knowledge that would enable them to cope with severe life events, process them and recover to regain a normal routine quickly (Wolmer et al., 2011).

## Using curriculum for students' needs

Following disaster events teachers often find themselves torn between mentioning the event and changing their curriculum to relate or avoid the topic with the thought that additional information will exacerbate the symptoms of emotional distress (Johnson & Ronan, 2014). Following Hurricane Katrina it was found that many teachers continued with their planned curriculum without acknowledging the events surrounding them. However, when looking into responses following the Red

River floods it was found that altering reading, writing and oral activities to incorporate students' experiences proved beneficial in enabling students to process what they had been through (Johnson & Ronan, 2014). It is vital that teachers listen to what the students have experienced, through work and conversation. Teachers should then adjust accordingly while avoiding prejudice that can often be seen through the media in disasters such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Buchanan et al., 2010). In response to the Christchurch earthquakes, many teachers adjusted their curriculum to incorporate disaster-related lessons which included activities such as expressive writing and research into accounts of Christchurch living (Johnson & Ronan, 2014). It is important to note Johnson & Ronan's (2014) research does not differentiate between primary and secondary education and it appears many of the curricular responses are aimed at a primary level. Within secondary education strict assessment guidelines and timelines may inhibit teachers incorporating disaster events formally into their lesson. Specific subjects such as the Social Sciences, English and Science can lend themselves to enabling students to better understand the experiences they went through (Johnson & Ronan, 2014).

## Implications for Teachers

Teachers play a critical role in supporting the mental health of students, however when it comes to trauma experienced through disasters it is important to recognise the mental health of the teachers. Research conducted by Seyle et al. (2013) after earthquakes in Indonesia demonstrated that teachers who suffered from earthquake related trauma such as depression and PTSD, often brought these negative emotions into the classroom. Depression is often associated with lower levels of motivation which manifested itself in the classroom as the allowance of a higher level of negative behaviour from the students (Seyle et al., 2013). This is an example of a feed forward reaction where the increased level of negative behaviour from students contributes to an increased feeling of depression among teachers (Seyle et al., 2013). PTSD was shown to effect teacher's belief of their own self efficacy in the classroom due to a decrease in the physiological arousal level of the teacher and students as a result. (Seyle et al., 2013). Seyle et al. (2013) were able to identify that there were low cost resources available to teachers which resulted in a significant drop in PTSD and depression symptoms. However this drop did not have an effect on the teacher's belief of their own self efficacy in the classroom. This intervention can have a positive effect on the community and school environment and enable teachers to be better able to support their students (Seyle et al., 2013).

## Conclusion

Disaster events such as the Christchurch Earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 have the huge potential to emotionally traumatise students and their families. The effects of these events can be ongoing and result in developmental delays, behavioural issues and a decrease in academic achievement (Buchanan et al., 2010). Schools and their teachers are a source of stability in difficult times and the relationships formed between teachers and students prior to disasters can be utilised to heal emotional wounds as teachers are in a position of trust (Johnson & Ronan, 2014). Integration of disaster events into the curriculum and psychosocial intervention from teachers can work to allow

students to understand what has happened in their communities and to process the changes in their lives (Johnson & Ronan, 2014). It also provides students with coping mechanisms to deal with the instability they find themselves surrounded with (Wolmer et al., 2011). It is important within the education system that there are resources available to teachers to help them to deal with their own emotional trauma so they can support their students to the best of their abilities (Seyle et al., 2013). Teachers have the potential to play a major role in student recovery following disaster events and this should never be underestimated.

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