

# Culture and Crisis Response in New Zealand

**Dr Jean Annan**

Senior Lecturer, Massey University

**Shelley Dean, Geoff Henry, Desiree McGhie and Roger Phillipson**

Ministry of Education: Special Education



## ABSTRACT

New Zealand is a bicultural nation, founded on the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi by the native Māori and the British Crown. It is also home to people from many countries, cultures and ethnicities. Therefore, culturally-relevant response to crisis events has become a significant aspect of the Ministry of Education's interdisciplinary Traumatic Incident Teams' work. The Traumatic Incident Teams, which aim to support school communities and early childhood centres in the aftermath of crisis events, are mindful that people and communities recover best when supporters work within the cultural, religious and philosophical beliefs of those affected. In New Zealand, particular attention is paid when working with Māori to support processes of tangihanga (traditional mourning ceremonies), and cultural practices according to the protocols of Māori groups. This paper discusses three separate responses to crisis events in New Zealand and the place of cultural relevance and sensitivity in recovery.

## Practice paper

**Keywords:** *Bicultural, crisis response, traumatic incidents*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns the place of culture and context in crisis intervention and makes reference, by way of illustration, to the practice of three educational psychologists who were involved in responses to separate traumatic events in schools. Each of the practitioners considered culture in ways that reflected the specific cultural contexts resulting in three different types of support.

Traumatic incident response teams take a key role in supporting school communities to restore stability following traumatic events and to come to terms with unexpected change. The current recognition and acceptance of the diversity inherent in educational communities has meant that cultural sensitivity has risen, and come to the foreground of crisis response. Response team members are now encouraged to observe familiar local cultural practice in crisis situations and

to consider the diversity represented within the response teams that develop in relation to events (Jimerson, Brock & Fletcher, 2005). In short, they identify, respect and align their actions with the cultural practice in the local community, largely as a matter of course. They approach crisis response with the intention of building on strong foundations, utilising the natural supports of the individuals and communities experiencing unexpected events.

In recent reviews of crisis response, culture has been shown to be a significant factor in constructing acceptable recovery and growth. For example, Moscardino, Axia, Scrimin and Capello (2007) conducted a study to determine the extent to which indigenous cultural values and religious belief systems contributed to caregivers' reactions to the school siege in Beslan, Russia. The study found that cultural values and social support emerged as powerful forces in shaping caregivers' reaction to events.

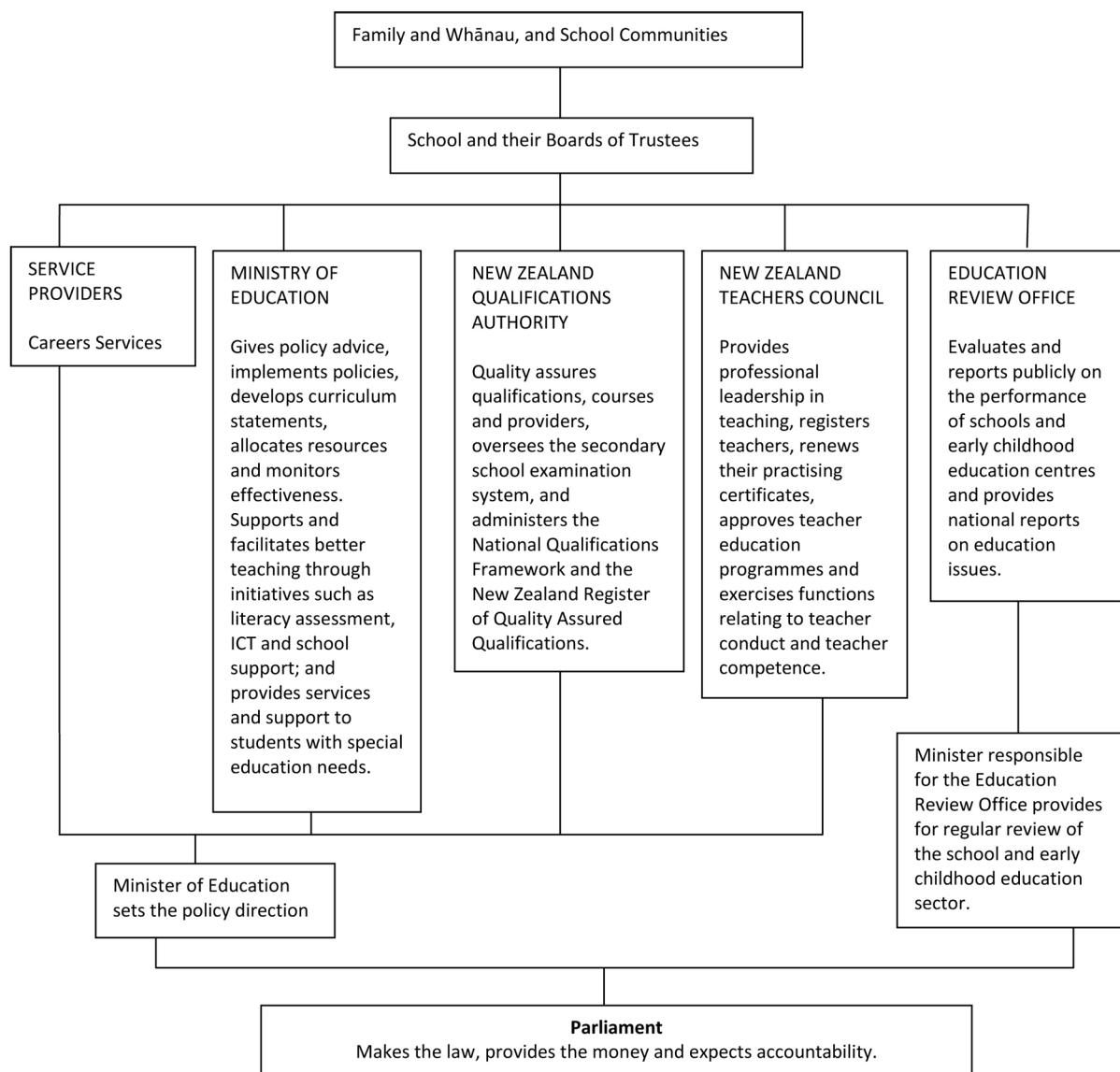
Following crisis events, children, and others around them, can have difficulty accessing solutions and may be immobilised and overwhelmed. They seek clarity, security, hope and connection in the process of making sense of their position. However, as Abel and Friedman (2009) observed, children are not always able to rely on familiar adult support as adults themselves may be in a crisis state. Supplementary, but culturally-relevant support may be required in order to help children construct new meanings and to access and build on their resilient foundations. While many children may search for such meaning, they do this in specific and sometimes tacit ways that fit with their cultural practice. As each crisis event and each response is unique, crisis supporters are challenged with the task of ensuring culturally-relevant support on every occasion. Abel and Friedman (2009) reviewed the contextual and cultural aspects of several studies in Israel. They highlighted the importance of understanding cultural discourses about matters such as what constitutes strength and the specific values placed by groups of Israeli people on certain responses to trauma. In their review the authors illustrated the role that knowledge of social history, reflected in individual and distributed knowledge and practice,

played in discerning appropriate response. Without insight into the local perspective, authentic interpretation of crisis events and responses would not be possible.

Crisis response support is a collaborative process that, in most cases, involves bringing together groups of people who have experienced an event in different ways and whose notions of appropriate action may vary (Heath, Nickerson, Annandale, Kemple & Dean, 2009). In order to accommodate and align the diverse perspectives of those involved in incidents, response team members must come to the site well-prepared and strongly familiar with principles of crisis response so that the facilitation of intervention can be flexible. They need to work collaboratively from the outset to quickly learn about the expectations, beliefs, values and patterns of interaction in the community. Agency response teams must search

with local people connected to those involved in the crisis, to access information about cultural practice in relation to trauma, and knowledge of the beliefs implicit in these practices. Culturally-sensitive crisis response requires communication in familiar languages and recognition of dimensions, for example spiritual aspects, that may be beyond the understanding or perception of crisis workers.

Specific responses are constructed in collaboration with members familiar with systems similar to those involved in order to support healthy recovery and to avoid the imposition of processes that are not relevant, not helpful or even harmful. In New Zealand, crisis response in schools and early childhood settings is largely facilitated through the Ministry of Education in collaboration with school communities. We explain how traumatic incident response is placed within the New Zealand education system.



**Figure 1.** Diagram showing the relationships between the New Zealand Government and the School Community.

## **Crisis response in New Zealand schools and early childhood settings**

New Zealand schools are self-governing with an elected Board of Trustees (BOT) who are responsible for the governance of the school. The board is the employer of all staff in the school and is responsible for setting the school's strategic direction in consultation with parents, staff and students, ensuring that its school provides a safe environment and quality education for all students. Boards are also responsible for overseeing the management of personnel, curriculum, property, finance and administration. In Early Childhood Education (ECE) management groups in the centres are expected to fulfil this role. Principals and school/ECE management groups provide day-to-day leadership of the school or ECE service. The Ministry of Education develops and provides policy advice, supports initiatives, develops curriculum, allocates resources and monitors effectiveness across the whole of the education sector.

New Zealand Law (New Zealand Education Act, 1989) requires every Board to prepare, maintain and report on their School Charter to the Ministry of Education. The purpose of a School Charter is to establish the mission, aims, objectives, directions, and targets of the Board in relation to the Government's National Education Guidelines (NEGS), National Administration Guidelines (NAGS), (The New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009a) and the Board's local priorities. National Administration Guideline 5 (NAG 5), requires each Board to: (a) provide a safe physical and emotional environment for students; (b) promote healthy food and nutrition for all students, and (c) comply in full with any legislation currently in force or that may be developed to ensure the safety of students and employees (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009b).

In New Zealand, legislation relevant to health and safety are contained in the Health and Safety in Employment (HSE) Act, 1992 and the Crimes Act, 1961. These Acts state that boards have a duty to:

- make all (reasonable) practicable steps to ensure the safety of employees and other people
- identify hazards and take steps to eliminate
- isolate, and/or minimise hazards; develop emergency procedures and provide employee training
- keep a register of incidents that have seriously harmed or might have seriously harmed staff or students
- take all practicable steps to ensure that no employee's action or inaction at work harms any other person

- provide the necessities of life, including food, clothing, and medical treatment
- use reasonable care to avoid danger to human life when working with dangerous goods/things.

Other relevant legislation regarding accidents, employment, food safety, transport and privacy also apply. It is also a requirement under the HSE Act that every employer ensure that all employees have the opportunity to be fully involved in the development of procedures developed for the purpose of dealing with or reacting to emergencies or imminent dangers.

In New Zealand, Specialist Education Services (now a division of the New Zealand Ministry of Education) first started providing support to schools and ECE settings after a series of emergencies or crises had disrupted education communities in which the organisation was already working. Prior to 1996, the Specialist Education Service helped schools on an ad hoc basis, mainly by offering individual counselling to people affected by crises. This approach changed in the late 1990s from an individual focus to BOT and school management committee support. The support service created, called the Traumatic Incident Service, worked alongside Boards of Trustees, school ECE management groups and teachers to restore stability in learning environments and to provide support for their liaison with the local communities. In 2002 this support service became part of the Ministry of Education, Special Education. Special Education (SE), together with schools and early childhood education services, provide services to children and young people in New Zealand with special education needs. Today, the Traumatic Incident Service assists schools and ECE management to plan and prepare for unexpected events before crises occur and work alongside school management teams to restore and stabilise the learning environment during and following such events.

The approach taken by the Special Education Traumatic Incident Service recognises the importance of prior planning and local leadership to restore familiar routines. It also acknowledges the need to provide support to those affected, especially children and young people, by those they know and trust in order to increase a sense of comfort and safety in the community. The development of the service has been guided by professional knowledge and the lessons learned in both local events (Coggan, Dickson, Peters & Brewin, 2001) and those abroad (La Greca & Prinstein, 2002; Vernberg, 2002). Comments such as the one below from Littleton, USA, after a school shooting (Doll, in Brock, Sandoval & Lewis, 2001) have provided powerful insights that have

underscored the need to involve familiar people in crisis response.

While our thanks go out to national leaders and experts who came to Littleton to help, it was the local "insiders" who led the community's response who were most valued by the Columbine students and staff and their families. They were inside experts, familiar and trusted faces, who knew the history of the school and the community, were part of a shared culture and shared the loss (p. 66).

In New Zealand, the Traumatic Incident Service recognises that crisis events also represent complex encounters between those experiencing crises, the external responders and emergent and temporary 'crisis' cultures especially when contrasting worldviews, cultures, and lifestyles are confronted. The emergent support that arises during these encounters has the potential to become a resource and support for those affected, or conversely, a source of stress that undermines efforts provided by outside providers (Marsella & Christopher, 2004). When a crisis occurs, the formation of an external Ministry of Education team considers the nature of the crisis being experienced, the culture of the setting and community with the recognition that local leadership and external support teams working together can represent a complex cultural encounter. The complexity of this encounter is particularly influenced by concepts of health, illness and death (*ibid.*, 2004). For Māori, illness, dying, death and grieving are considered a central part of life. They are imbued with tapu and kawa with the formal rituals and practices determined by the customs and traditions of the local iwi or hapu (Ngata, 2005). When crises involve Māori, or Pasifika children, young people, or staff, the Ministry ensures and Pasifika staff lead the external response within the education setting recognising that the beliefs, values and traditions of the local culture are sustainable, effective tools for supporting and providing meaning about events for local communities.

### **Crisis Event 1. School adventure trip tragedy**

Six students and a teacher died in a river tragedy while on a school adventure trip in 2008 in a bush-clad, mountainous area of New Zealand. This story illustrates how recognition of the school community's Christian faith supported the group who took responsibility for comforting those affected and for the recovery of the school in the aftermath of the tragedy. The impact on the school community was profound, extensive and ongoing. Confounding the recovery was intense media attention.

### *An educational psychologist's story*

I was telephoned at home at 8:30pm on a Tuesday in April 2008. The call was from a Board of Trustees' member of a private Year 7-13 School who informed me that several children were missing on an annual school trip. The Board member asked if I would come to the school and support them as they waited for news. When I arrived, at approximately 9:00pm, a group of people had gathered outside the school. I made my way to the Principal's office, where I found a number of people, including the Principal, two Deputy Principals and the Board of Trustees' Chairperson. I was welcomed and the group seemed pleased that I was there.

During the next two hours the tragedy unfolded as news came in of one death after another. Everyone in the room was clearly traumatised. At about midnight, the principal realised that no more could be done and that he needed to prepare the school. He turned to the group and asked, "How should we proceed?" I reflected for a moment and thought, "How can I support this group, in this situation?"

At this point I was pleased of my training in the New Zealand version of Psychological First Aid (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009c), a stepped guide that would provide me with a basic framework and principles of response to take things forward. I was able to recommend a place we might start; to make a suggestion to which the group could respond. I was aware that everyone, apart from myself, knew all the deceased personally. Decisions about response had to come from this group with my support. The Principal started the proceedings with a prayer; this seemed to provide synergy among the people in the group and enabled all of us to focus on what needed to be done. At this point it was clear that working within the community's familiar and shared faith enabled those involved to unite in their sense of purpose. Calmness came over us as I outlined the process and we set about planning for the next day. Communication within the community was given high priority and we planned to inform everyone of what had happened and what the expectations for the day would be. We were also aware that there would be extensive media coverage and that the nation would be watching to see how things were being done.

I reminded myself that working within the belief system and familiar practices of a community was paramount. The Principal and the group were in agreement that, once they had briefed the staff, they wanted to have a school assembly and to pray. I was unsure, at the time, that this was the most helpful way to proceed. I wondered if an

assembly might escalate expressions of grief in some of the children; a situation I had experienced many times. However, the Principal and his Board were determined that this was the right thing to do in this situation. The effect of that decision strengthened my resolve to recognise and value routines that are familiar and meaningful to a specific community. The planning for the first day of the traumatic event went according to the plan the school had devised, and it was the prayer time before meetings that seemed to give the teaching staff the strength to get through an ordeal that was truly traumatic in every sense for everyone involved.

Similarly, the events of the school assembly illustrated the value of working closely with those who know and understood the cultural practice of the community in crisis. By the time the children gathered in the school hall many were aware of what had happened, but there were also others who did not know that the tragedy had occurred. Many children were crying. As the Principal began to speak, a sense of calmness spread and the children and staff were observed to be wholly attentive and reflecting on what had happened and what the Principal was saying. It was clear that there was a shared sense of grief and loss but there was something more. By drawing on the community's religious knowledge and beliefs the group had assigned meaning to the event. They located the event in a greater plan and were comforted by the belief that those who had been taken were not lost forever but had moved to a higher place. There was a communion, a sense of religious fellowship and a sharing of thoughts and emotions. This familiar and meaningful activity undoubtedly helped members of the school community to manage the feelings of loss and devastation generated by this tragedy.

### **Crisis Event 2. Death of a newly enrolled student**

The Traumatic Incident Response Team of the Ministry of Education was alerted by a call from an intermediate school that a 12 year old Māori girl, recently enrolled in the school, had died by suicide. The young girl had been a member of the school's one whanau class in which children's schooling was immersed in Māori language and culture in order to nurture their cultural identity. She had not yet had the opportunity to establish any friendships at the school and was not known by other students as she had recently moved into the area.

#### *An educational psychologist's story*

My first response was to call in the District Māori Advisor and local Kaitakawaenga (Liaison Officer with knowledge of Māori cultural practice), who

were also employees of the Ministry of Education, to meet with the Traumatic Incident Management Team. Before travelling to the school, we came together to discuss initial actions. The District Māori Advisor opened the hui (meeting) with a karakia (prayer; recognition of a spiritual presence) that acknowledged the loss that people were experiencing and that set the pathway for the team to support the recovery process. This hui provided the opportunity for Traumatic Incident Team members and the Management Team to ask questions and to discuss freely how cultural support could be ensured in this particular circumstance. The team view was that working together with sensitivity to culture and team professionalism would support a pathway of recovery.

By the time the team entered the school the team was confident that the foundations of support to the school were available. We identified key participants as a first step to, whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building). This involved the inclusion of the kaumatua (respected Māori elder), school staff, mātua (parents), community networks, agencies and marae (central meeting place) and whānau (family) contacts. The Board of Trustees' Chairperson, Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour Māori, and the tutor of the school kapa haka (Māori performing Arts) group became the immediate network.

We facilitated an opportunity for all staff to become aware of the death of the student and to work with us to plan and prepare for the school response. The plan for the response was developed on solid foundations of cultural understanding and professional guidance. All of the agencies involved in the response worked together to align the response plan with the school community's principles of tika (what is right), pono (accountability) and aroha (love).

The recommendation by the District Māori Advisor that the school, whānau class and staff attend the tangihanga (Māori funeral) reflected the knowledge of cultural practice in relation to death. As a team, we were aware that, with the support of the District Māori Advisor, we would need to carefully and respectfully raise school community awareness of the range of possible responses of other students and staff, and to ensure that culturally-sensitive plans were in place to support student and staff safety (tapu and noa). This involved extensive discussion concerning the protocols and Māori cultural practices of tangihanga.

In most circumstances, Traumatic Incident Team members would not be directly involved in

tangihanga. However, in this particular situation the attendance of the District Māori Advisor and the Kaitakawaenga was viewed as appropriate by the school community and the family of the young person who had died. The acknowledgement and validation of cultural practice in this local community served to provide a foundation for recovery and growth (whakawatea) for school, staff, students and community alike.

### **Crisis Event 3. Loss of a young life in the local community**

In the far north of New Zealand a young male Māori student died. The educational psychologist's story below explains the team's initial response, their entry to the school, the collaborative planning with the school community and the implementation of a culturally responsive plan.

#### *An educational psychologist's story*

At 7:30am, a Ministry of Education staff member received a telephone call from the principal of a Kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori school). The principal advised the staff member that a student had died in the night. This information was then passed to the District Manager of the local Ministry of Education office. Immediately, an initial Traumatic Incident Response Team was organised to support the school. Each of the team members was Māori and on site at the Kura Kaupapa Māori by 9:30am.

On arrival, the Ministry of Education Traumatic Incident Team was formally welcomed by the kaumatua (respected Māori elder), school staff and students. Together we participated in the morning karakia that acknowledged the loss that had occurred and set the scene for everyone to move forward and plan together. The Kura Kaupapa Māori was also supported by other key agencies, kuia (respected female Māori elder), kaumatua and a school social worker from the closest town to the school. My colleague, and I gave our mihi (Maori formal speaking structure) to the staff and the kaumatua and kuia. This provided a level of connectedness among the group as the iwi (Maori tribe) of the community involved in the tragedy was the same as that of my colleague and me. The marae, hapu, moana and maunga were all places these people knew and to which they were able to whakapapa (link to genealogy). It was our whakawhanaungatanga (connection) with the other people that allowed us to make a contribution. It made sense to all of us in this situation.

The first task was to set up a group of people who would work to manage the response to the traumatic incident. This process would include the principal, kaumatua, kuia and senior staff, as well as my colleague and me. The group worked

together to put a plan in place which aligned with the school and community's principles of tika, pono and aroha. All discussion about ways to move forward in response to the student's death reflected these principles as did the plan that emerged from the collaborative interaction.

The principal played a key role in leading, supporting and implementing the process through her knowledge and determination to make the plan right for staff, school and the community. Of most urgent concern was communicating with staff, students and parents. Many students were already upset and talking about the event. We knew that we had to ensure that a clear and accurate message was given to the community and we worked with the school to organise this communication. We also talked with staff about whether the students should travel out to the marae and to be there when the student's body arrived. My colleague and I affirmed the decision of the team to be at the marae and agreed that this was a customary and familiar process for Māori in relation to death. The staff members had already got other students involved in preparing food that could also be taken to the marae. The familiar routine of food preparation had an easing effect, providing some interim relief for students while they came to terms with what had happened.

There was a point where there emerged a difference of opinion between school community members. We had suggested that the school establish a risk register which could include students and staff who may have been adversely affected by the student's death in ways that may require additional care. The kuia stated quite strongly that all students should be included on that register, not one or two. We explained the rationale for the risk register was that we needed to be conscious that some students and staff may be more affected by this incident than others and that we needed to limit numbers, although we recognised that others would naturally be affected. This matter was resolved through dialogue among team members with the continued development of the risk register but in a way that was satisfactory to the school principal, the kuia and response team members.

In discussion, some time after the death of this young person, we reflected with the principal about the response process. The staff of the Kura Kaupapa Māori recognised the value of the Traumatic Incident Response Team and considered that the school had been supported by the process built around the familiar and valued concepts of tika, pono, aroha and whakawhanaungatanga.

## DIVERSE PRACTICE BASED ON COMMON PRINCIPLES

In each of the three examples discussed in this paper, the Traumatic Incident Team members were clear about the purpose and parameters of their work. They offered support for the adults who were themselves in crisis and who were faced with the task of supporting the children for whom they cared. The psychologists worked with their fellow team members to help the school staff and community to continue in their roles and to establish a secure environment for the school community.

Each of the practitioners responded in ways that recognised and built on the cultural values of the community and the social support available. Through their collaborative processes they were able to establish relationships with those who knew the culture well, those who were part of the everyday lives of the children and those who held a particular position in relation to the passing of the young people. In each of the events, key local community members, knowledgeable of the beliefs and practices of the people affected by the deaths of the children, came together with the Traumatic Incident Team to form a unified but diverse team. These were powerful connections in every case. The formation of teams that included local community members allowed the processes to proceed in ways that recognised critical dimensions of the experience of affected people. In one situation, the connections among the wider team members and the diversity of perspective allowed for dialogue and resolution of differences in team members' views of appropriate process. In all cases, the events of the crises were interpreted by those who had applicable cultural knowledge. For example, the karakia and the prayers at the school assembly provided important connections with the spiritual world. In addition, the engagement in familiar practices, such as food preparation and assemblies, seemed to provide periods of reprieve and opportunity to build strength.

In New Zealand, as in many other parts of the world, (see examples in Abel & Friedman, 2009; Krumm, 2007) communities are supported to create their own solutions within their existing structures. In all cases, the school principals continued to lead the responses to the traumatic events and coordinated the diverse teams. It was the school principals who continued to manage the interface with the communities, a task that was part of their regular practice. The school had an obligation to provide a safe environment for their children. Through the school maintaining their regular structure of leadership, they were well-positioned to offer the children and the wider

school community the support required at the time. The role of the Traumatic Incident Team members was clearly to support the principal in each school to carry out this difficult and unexpected task.

The Traumatic Incident Team members actively supported the school community to respond to the events and to restore stability to the school communities. They contributed their particular knowledge of traumatic event response, gained through training and experience, but did not impose a particular process. They were able to offer their knowledge but did so in ways that allowed it to be considered alongside local knowledge of tradition and practice. At times, the decisions made by the school community challenged the educational psychologists as their considered or planned actions could have been counterproductive. In such cases, the Traumatic Incident Team members considered the rationale for the planned actions and supported the decisions of the school principals. Such decision-making requires that Traumatic Incident Team members be knowledgeable, flexible and able to consider planned actions in relation to the contexts of the events.

In the events reported in this paper, the Traumatic Incident Team members were supported by various types of knowledge. They all came to the situations with a clear notion of the roles they would assume and the types of actions they might take in the response. The Traumatic Incident Team members were supported by prior knowledge and principles for initial practice, e.g. Psychological First Aid. The working relationships formed would not have been possible had Traumatic Incident Team members not been thoroughly familiar with their own team processes, able to successfully communicate and negotiate their role with those in crisis, be ready to value and welcome diversity, and be skilled in working in partnership. Some of the Traumatic Incident Team members were supported by familiarity of and identification with the local community, contributing further depth through their knowledge of history and cultural practice.

## CONCLUSION

The Ministry of Education provides support to schools and early childhood centres to help educational facilities meet their obligation to provide a safe environment. They do this through provision of the services of the Traumatic Incident Team that provides support for local leadership in their efforts to restore stability in culturally appropriate ways. Throughout the three traumatic incident responses reported in this paper, common principles of practice were evident. All three responses implied the view that effective

response involved collaboration with the local community. However, there was wide diversity in the expression of these principles in the three specific contexts as local communities contributed cultural knowledge that shaped the responses. Particular care was taken to ensure that responses to traumatic events involving Māori children and communities were culturally-sensitive and, from the outset, involved those with cultural knowledge. The three responses were supported by the flexible practice of the Traumatic Incident Team members who contributed extensive knowledge of crisis response theory and practice. Familiar with their practice, team members were able to work openly with local communities to plan and implement culturally-appropriate response plans.

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## AUTHORS' PROFILES

### Dr Jean Annan



**Dr Jean Annan** is a senior lecturer at Massey University and is coordinator of the PGDipEdPsych programme. She is a registered psychologist who previously worked for the Ministry of Education, her work in that organisation including response to traumatic events and the coordination of response teams. Her current research interests are in educational psychology consultation and professional development.

EMAIL  
[j.annan@massey.ac.nz](mailto:j.annan@massey.ac.nz)

**Shelley Dean**

**Shelley Dean** is a practice advisor in the Professional Practice Unit, Special Education, Ministry of Education who has previously worked as a science teacher at secondary school level before training and working as an educational psychologist. Shelley has been directly involved in traumatic response teams in schools before working for the Ministry of Education providing direct support, coordinating response teams and facilitating team training. In her current role she has developed resources and systems to support schools and early childhood services experiencing emergencies and traumatic incidents.

## EMAIL

[shelley.dean@minedu.govt.nz](mailto:shelley.dean@minedu.govt.nz)

**Geoff Henry**

*Kō Omapere tōku moana  
Kō Te Ahu Ahu te maunga  
Kō Ngātokimatawharua tōku waka  
Kō Ngāpuhi tōku iwi  
Kō Te Uri Taniwha tōku hāpu  
Kō rawhitiroa tōku Marae  
Kō Geoff Henry tōku ingoa*



**Geoff Henry** worked in Specialist Education Services/ Ministry of Education from 1998. He started his work in the organisation as a Speech Language Therapist and, in 2004, completed his educational psychology training. In recent years Geoff took up a service managers position and, as part of his educational psychology work, was involved in several team responses to traumatic events. Geoff is currently working in the business sector.

## EMAIL

[geoff@bsn.org.nz](mailto:geoff@bsn.org.nz)

**Desiree McGhie**

**Desiree McGhie** is an educational psychologist who has been working for the Ministry of Education at Albany, Auckland for the past nine years. In her work Desiree has shared the task of coordinating the area traumatic incident response team, has been directly involved in response team work and has facilitated team training for traumatic events. She is a trained teacher who has worked at primary and intermediate school levels and has been a Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour on the North Shore.

## EMAIL

[desiree.mcghie@minedu.govt.nz](mailto:desiree.mcghie@minedu.govt.nz)

**Roger Phillipson**

**Roger Phillipson** has a professional background in teaching in the UK, his country of origin, and counselling and educational psychology in New Zealand. He is currently working with the Ministry of Education where, in addition to his work alongside schools in his local area, he is the project manager of a parent training programme and coordinator of a traumatic incident response team.

## EMAIL

[roger.phillipson@minedu.govt.nz](mailto:roger.phillipson@minedu.govt.nz)