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COVID-19 AND THE EXACERBATION OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN NEW ZEALAND

ABSTRACT

New Zealand's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was "to go fast and go hard". This directive meant closing the borders, requiring returning New Zealanders to go into two-week self-isolation and, on 25 March 2020, putting the entire country into full lockdown. Schools had a short period of time to get ready to offer online learning. The move highlighted the country's social, economic and educational divide. On television we were shown children with laptops working at home in their designer living rooms, talking to their teachers through Zoom with their parents hovering around supportively. However, this was not the reality for all. There are parts of the country with limited or no Internet connectivity. There are high poverty areas where households do not have basic materials, let alone computers or other devices suitable for use as learning platforms. A survey of schools showed that only half the schools in the country felt that their students would be able to access online learning. The Ministry of Education had to quickly organise the delivery of learning packs of printed materials to outlying areas, laptops and modems to low-income communities and set up a home-learning television channel with programmes in English and te reo Māori (the indigenous language). Studies are now revealing that despite these efforts, and as the COVID-19 economic impacts begin to bite, New Zealand's at-risk students have fallen even further behind. This article discusses these research findings and highlights what was learnt from the COVID-19 experience in order to begin to redress these disparities.

Keywords: COVID-19, school closures, lockdown, educational disparity, digital divide

1. INTRODUCTION

On 25 March 2020, in response to the arrival of the COVID-19 virus in New Zealand, the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, put the entire country into strict lockdown. Schooling was suspended so that the Ministry of Education could assess readiness for converting educational delivery to online teaching and teachers could have time to prepare and upload teaching programmes. The Ministry of Education's assessment revealed that only half the country's approximately 750 000 students in the compulsory

schooling sector would be able to easily access their learning through electronic means (New Zealand Government, 2020).

Since adopting neo-liberal economic policies in the 1980s, the gap between rich and poor in New Zealand has widened (Mutch, 2012). Increasing economic disparity has led to higher levels of poverty, food insecurity, poor housing, domestic violence, child mortality and youth suicide (Ministry of Health, 2019; Statistics New Zealand, 2020). In the education sector, the divide manifests itself in what is colloquially known as “the long tail of underachievement” (Snook *et al.*, 2013). It appears that those most affected by poverty, poor housing and lower educational attainment are New Zealand’s indigenous people, Māori, and migrants from the various Pacific Islands (Haig, 2018). Pacific people are often referred to by the term, Pasifika, to denote New Zealand residents or citizens of Pacific descent (Samu, 2006)

The news that that half of New Zealand’s school students would be disadvantaged by a digital divide was tempered with the recognition that students in lower-socio-economic areas, such as Māori in rural locations or Pasifika in high density urban suburbs would be most negatively affected. In this article I will outline how the educational and digital divide manifested itself during the pandemic and what attempts were made to alleviate it. I will discuss what we have learnt about how successful those attempts were and what lessons we can take from the lockdown experiences into the future. First, I will outline the chronology of the pandemic’s arrival and impact on New Zealand, then report the steps taken to support students’ online learning during the lockdowns. Next, I will review the recent studies, mostly surveys, that have been undertaken in New Zealand to gauge the impact of the lockdowns on students’ achievement and wellbeing, supplementing this with some preliminary insights from my own qualitative study. In the conclusion, I will argue that while the pandemic and consequent lockdowns threw the economic, social and educational disparities into sharp relief (Cook *et al.*, 2020), the return of a Labour government by an outright majority in the October 2020 elections, provides the opportunity to take up the challenge to address the disparities that are prevalent in our education system.

2. THE ARRIVAL OF COVID-19 IN NEW ZEALAND

When news of a novel coronavirus first reached New Zealand in January 2020, it was initially considered to be another flu epidemic that would be under control before it reached our shores. As death rates overseas began to climb and cases started arriving in New Zealand, it soon became clear the country would need to take the virus seriously. Health systems in other countries were struggling to contain the virus and concerns were being raised here that, with decades of chronic underfunding of our health system, public health authorities and hospitals might not cope. One analyst said: “The key message was, if things gets out of control, our health system will be overwhelmed and very quickly, and it will be disastrous” (Cameron, 2020: 4).

Contrary to the response in many other countries, the New Zealand government acted quickly. The Prime Minister began gathering expert advice and weighing the options. Table 1 provides a timeline of just how quickly the virus arrived and infections spread. Several large gatherings, now known as super-spreader events – an international conference, a wedding and a St Patrick’s Day celebration – bringing people together from different parts of New Zealand, were responsible for the virus spreading quickly around the country, even to the isolated West Coast of the South Island, which recorded the country’s first death on 29 March 2020.

Table 1: COVID-19 in New Zealand from first infections to first lockdown

<p>January 2020</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A new strain of the coronavirus, named later in short form, as COVID-19, is reported in Wuhan, China • 27–28 January 2020, the New Zealand government activates the National Security System and the Ministry of Health activates the National Health Co-ordination Centre in case the virus arrives in New Zealand
<p>February</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Travellers from or through China are barred from entering New Zealand • A repatriation flight brings New Zealanders trapped in Wuhan home • The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet organises a team of analysts to lead a government response strategy • Despite pleas from universities, foreign students from China are not granted exemptions to return to or begin their studies in New Zealand in the new academic year • Public health modellers and biomedical experts are called in to support policy development and decision making
<p>March</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cases arrive in New Zealand from Italy and Iran where the virus is spreading quickly • Further restrictions are placed on incoming travellers who are now required to self-isolate for two weeks on arrival • An attendee at a large international conference on the South Island tests positive for COVID-19 and other linked cases begin appearing around the country • Gatherings of more than 500 people are banned and, several weeks later, no more than 100 people are allowed to meet together • Epidemiologists and other experts contribute to the growing pool of expertise informing the Director General of Health’s response plan • Cases in New Zealand continue to rise • Severe concerns are raised about the under-preparedness of the country’s health system and its inability to cope • The Prime Minister creates an ad hoc cross-party committee to manage the pandemic response • New Zealanders overseas are told to make plans to return home as quickly as possible • Debates begin about the best approach to take – lockdown (as per Wuhan) or herd immunity (an approach championed by Sweden) • A scientific paper from Imperial College London paints a stark warning of the possible consequences of the virus and swings the debate in favour of a “stamp it out” approach • The Prime Minister requests the creation of an alert level system, such as the familiar geological hazard system, Geonet • Alongside the level system, a communication plan is devised with a simple message: “Unite against Covid-19,” with four recommended actions: “wash your hands; cough or sneeze into your elbow; stay home if you are sick; and be kind” • On 20 March 2020, the four-level alert system is presented to the government: Level 1 – prepare; Level 2 – reduce; Level 3 – restrict; and Level 4 – eliminate • One day later the country is put into Level 2 • On 23 March 2020 the country moves to Level 3 • On 25 March 2020, the country goes into full lockdown at Level 4, where it is announced it will stay for at least four weeks • The Prime Minister and the Director General of Health, Dr Ashley Bloomfield, begin the first of their regular daily televised 1pm briefings to inform the country of the latest numbers (infections, hospitalisations, recoveries and, from late March, deaths) • School holidays, due to begin on 9 April 2020, are brought forward several weeks to allow the Ministry of Education and schools to prepare for online learning

Sources: Cameron, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2020; Ministry of Health, 2020; New Zealand Doctor, 2020; New Zealand Government, 2020; Radio New Zealand, 2020.

In Level 4 lockdown, people were restricted to interacting only with those living in their immediate household. The analogy of a bubble was used. People were to seal themselves in their bubble, not to burst someone else's bubble by mixing with people from a different bubble and not to allow others into their bubble. While an effective metaphor, it instantly separated families, friends and neighbours, adding to social anxiety and dislocation. Elderly people aged 70 and over, and others at risk were to stay indoors. In my own extended family, for example, an elderly aunt passed away early in lockdown. My sister who works at the local hospital was in a different bubble than my mother. She relayed the sad news through an open door and they stood and cried unable to offer physical comfort to each other. In my aunt's family, no one could go and see their mother before she was hurriedly buried.

Social distancing and masks became a reality. Families were to choose a designated shopper who would be their contact with the outside world for exempted activities such as getting medical supplies or going to the supermarket. Bubble groups were allowed out to take exercise as long as they stayed local and maintained a safe distance.

Looking back, it was a time that felt as if a black cloud hung over the country. Each day we tuned in to the televised one o'clock COVID-19 briefing to watch the national and international numbers steadily rise. In retrospect, we can see that the "go hard and go fast" approach, along with the exhortations to "be kind", seemed to work. New Zealanders were mostly compliant and the virus was seemingly contained. After eight weeks, the country's restrictions began to lift and we re-emerged from our small bubbles into a nationwide bubble with closed borders. Since then, a community case of unknown origin put the Auckland region into a local lockdown for several weeks in August. In general, however, the lockdowns, public health measures, border closures, two-week quarantines for returnees, regular community testing and tracking and tracing procedures have seemingly worked. We are in relative freedom compared to much of the rest of the world where they are still dealing with rising case numbers or second waves of infections.

3. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SCHOOLS

To coincide with the March Level 4 lockdown, the Ministry of Education brought forward the April school holidays by two weeks. Students went into lockdown in their family bubbles. It was not a holiday for principals and teachers, however, as they used the break to quickly plan and prepare for online teaching and learning. Table 2 below outlines the chronology for school closures and re-openings.

Table 2: Timeline outlining the impact of COVID-19 on the education system

March 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17 March 2020 a Dunedin high school closes temporarily as a student tests positive for COVID-19 • Calls increase for the closure of schools • The Ministry of Education announces the decision to bring the April school holidays forward by two weeks • 23 March 2020 schools are warned to get ready to close • 25 March 2020 schools are closed as Level 4 comes into force • The Ministry of Education contacts schools to assess their readiness for remote learning
April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 April 2020 a government press release notes that with only 50% schools able to provide online learning, the Ministry will roll out a four-pronged support programme to increase capacity across the sector • Most schools phase into online learning after Easter, beginning on 15 April 2020 • Level 4 lockdown is extended until after Anzac Day (27 April), then the country moves to Level 3
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13 May 2020 the country moves to Level 2 • From 18 May 2020 schools could begin a phased approach for students to return to school sites with the necessary precautions: students staying in designated bubbles, maintaining social distance and continuing strict hygiene routines
June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 June 2020 the country moves to Level 1 • The border is still closed with only returning New Zealanders, or others with exemptions, admitted. Returnees must spend 14 days in government-mandated quarantine facilities
August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 100 days pass without new cases in the community • 12 August 2020 a community outbreak puts the city of Auckland into Level 3 lockdown and the rest of the country on Level 2 • Schools in the greater Auckland area return to online learning • 30 August 2020 Auckland comes out of Level 3 lockdown and schools reopen at the newly created Level 2.5 (more restrictive than Level 2 but not as restrictive as Level 3)
September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23 September 2020 Auckland moves down to Level 2 and the rest of the country to Level 1
October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 October 2020 the entire country moves back to Alert Level 1

Sources: Cameron, 2020; Education Review Office, 2020a; Greater Christchurch Schools Network, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2020; New Zealand Government, 2020; Te, 2020; Wade, 2020.

Bringing the school holidays forward enabled the Ministry of Education and schools to buy some time. As already noted, the Ministry contacted every school to ascertain their readiness for online learning. What they found was that only half the country’s schools thought that it was possible for teachers to deliver and students to access online learning appropriately. Lack of

access to the internet and suitable devices were the major problems. In a press release on 8 April 2020 the Minister of Education, Chris Hipkins, states:

We know that tens of thousands of households either lack an internet connection or an education device at home. We're working with telecommunications companies and internet service providers to connect as many of these households as we can as quickly as possible (New Zealand Government, 2020).

Minister Hipkins explains that he wants all families to have at least one education delivery option available when Term 2 starts. He outlines a rolling four-pronged delivery strategy that would (a) increase access to the internet and provide devices to homes; (b) deliver hard copy learning packs to families in hard-to-access areas; (c) present learning via two television channels, one in English and one in *te reo* Māori and (d) make a variety of web resources available for teachers and parents.

Minister Hipkins also notes that principals and teachers are getting ready for the start of the new term to help students continue their learning. His brief comment belies the huge effort that principals and teachers were to put in, foregoing their usual break at the end of the first school term to become familiar with different virtual platforms, re-plan their programmes, revise their lessons, find suitable materials and make arrangements for their own families so that they could keep their students engaged in learning. Derek Wenmoth, an expert in educational technology, highlights some of the challenges they were to face:

For most teachers the sudden shift to remote learning, without any time for preparation posed significant challenges and exposed the need for a range of skills and knowledge required to operate effectively in these new environments and with these new tools (Wenmoth, 2020).

In Hood's study, one teacher, for example, needed to become familiar with 15 different platforms and applications that would be used by the school (Hood, 2020a). New tools were only one of the concerns raised by Moore and Andersen (2020: 6):

Distance learning brought to the fore considerations of pedagogy, content, and being fully conversant in a digital world. Social media was filled with stories of challenge and concern by teachers. For many, the intricacies of distance learning saw extensive disruption to their normal ways of teaching and thinking about teaching. Additionally, some parents were anxious that they were thrust into a more intense role of supporting their child's learning, while for many continuing to be busy with their own work and home demands.

Despite the quick turnaround time, online, remote or home schooling in some form was underway for most students by 15 April 2020. Students settled into their new routines with varying levels of success. The following section discusses findings from formal and informal studies undertaken during or following the nationwide lockdown to provide insights into the experience of lockdown teaching and learning.

4. A SYNTHESIS OF RECENT NEW ZEALAND-BASED LOCKDOWN LEARNING STUDIES

Hood notes (2020a: 6), "[t]he lockdown period brought substantial changes to the day-to-day realities of educators, students and their families". In order to understand what these changes were, a few organisations undertook quick-turnaround studies to gain real-time snapshots of learning during lockdown. Two of the studies reported here have larger representative

samples, while others use convenience or self-selected samples, but they all, in some way, provide insights into students' varied experiences. Table 3 provides the details of the studies to be discussed.

Table 3: Summary of studies conducted during or after the national lockdown

Authors and date	Study type	Sample details
Education Review Office (government evaluation agency) published in two reports (2020a and b)	Online survey Qualitative Interviews	10,000 students; 700 teachers 95 Early Childhood Centres; 110 schools
Nina Hood, The Education Hub, published in two reports (2020a and b)	Online qualitative narrative responses	251 responses from teachers and school leaders; 64 from parents; 47 from students
Heidi Leeson, Sue Duignan, Desiree Wehrle & James Beavis, The Springboard Trust (2020)	Phone questionnaire	65 principals all former participants in Springboard Trust's programmes
Wendy Moore & Irene Andersen, Evaluation Associates (2020) Melanie Riwai-Couch, <i>et al.</i> , Evaluation Associates (2020)	An analysis of students' written or video commentaries Online survey of Māori and Pasifika parents	31 students who responded to an invitation to comment on their experiences 134 participants (102 Māori; 32 Pasifika)
Greater Christchurch Schools Network (2020)	Online survey (Canterbury region only)	3 105 responses from school staff, students, parents and wider family from 150 schools

The studies mostly asked generic questions around matters such as what worked well, what could have been done better and what we can we learn from the experience. A central feature that emerged was the widely varying experiences students encountered. While anxiety around the nature of COVID-19 and loss of social interaction were common concerns, some students benefitted from supportive home environments and were able to engage in deep and meaningful learning, whereas others struggled to find focus and became disengaged from their learning.

While synthesising the findings, I created a continuum of experiences from positive to negative (see Table 4). Some of the variation is explained by the different ways that schools and teachers approached lockdown teaching and learning or in terms of the ways students engaged with and experienced what was provided for them (Hood, 2020a, b). Overall, however, the studies highlight that prior economic and social disadvantage led to a digital divide that exacerbated existing educational inequity (Education Review Office, 2020a, b; Hood, 2020a, b; Greater Christchurch Schools Network, 2020; Leeson *et al.*, 2020; Moore & Andersen, 2020; Riwai-Couch *et al.*, 2020).

Table 4: Continuum of lockdown learning in New Zealand

Continuum of lockdown learning experiences	
a. Accessible internet and device	←————→ Limited access
b. Sufficient skills for online study	←————→ Limited skills and training
c. Quiet or suitable study space	←————→ Crowded or noisy home situation
d. Relevant materials	←————→ Inappropriate or insufficient materials
e. Quality curriculum	←————→ Busy work rather than deep learning
f. Flexibility, choice or tailored activities	←————→ One-size-fits-all activities
g. Clear communication between school and family	←————→ Difficult access or unclear messages
h. Clear instructions and expectations	←————→ Confusing or vague instructions or expectations
i. Regular contact and feedback from teacher	←————→ Irregular contact and limited feedback
j. Learning support from family	←————→ Families lacking knowledge, skill, time or energy
k. Self-regulation and time management	←————→ Students struggle with managing time and focus
l. Autonomy and independence	←————→ Students lack confidence and are dependent on others
m. Less distraction	←————→ More distraction, loss of focus
n. Improved concentration	←————→ Inability to concentrate
o. Regular engagement	←————→ Intermittent or no engagement
p. Enjoyment in learning	←————→ Loss of enjoyment in learning
q. Visible progress	←————→ Lack of progress, slipping back
r. Enhanced wellbeing	←————→ Loss of wellbeing, anxiety, stress, mental health concerns

The first six factors (a–f) focus more on the learning provisions, such as digital access and devices, the home study environment and materials or content for learning. The next six factors (g–l) are more about what happened during the learning process, including what students brought to their learning and how this was fostered by their teachers and/or family. The final six factors (m–r) highlight the learning outcomes, including how the learning provisions, context and process enhanced their learning; what they gained from the experience. What the continuum highlights is that, at each step, those in advantageous situations were able to continue their learning and those already disadvantaged by the system were primed to fall further behind. Each of the three steps will be discussed in turn in relation to the studies listed in Table 3.

4.1 Learning provisions: Starting at different places

The studies highlight successes and challenges. Moore and Andersen (2020) report on a self-selected group of students who were willing to share their learning experiences in writing or by video. This study tended to attract students who found themselves on the positive side of the continuum, but it provides a valuable insight into what lockdown was like for this more successful group of students. On the positive side, students reported that they enjoyed the freedom and flexibility to choose the materials they wanted to engage with and to structure their day to suit their needs and interests. These students often found being at home less stressful, “due to being able to work in their own spaces, enjoy music and generally work more

comfortably” (Moore & Anderson, 2020: 12). Another positive aspect was having their parents more closely involved with their learning. On the other hand, not having a teacher easily available sometimes led to lack of clarity, loss of motivation and anxiety. Moore and Andersen (2020: 3) explain, “No longer could learners physically work alongside their peers and their teacher, the virtual world of Zoom, Google Meets and other platforms became the new portal for communication”. Engaging with these new technologies, however, while disruptive at first, was something that these students quickly gained familiarity with and felt could be integrated more into their learning once they returned to school.

Students who found themselves on the negative side of the ledger were impacted by inequities already present in the system. Leeson *et al.* (2020: 9) state, “Many students, despite best efforts, remained cut off from the same learning opportunities as others due to a technological divide stemming from structural inequality. In this, Covid-19 has not created new problems but highlighted longstanding ones.” In contrast to Moore and Andersen’s study (2020), findings from the other studies highlight poor internet connectivity, lack of devices and limited digital literacy as the first set of barriers that disadvantaged students were to face (Education Review Office, 2020a, b; Hood, 2020a, b; Greater Christchurch Schools Network, 2020; Leeson *et al.*, 2020; Riwai-Couch *et al.*, 2020). As Hood (2020a: 4) notes, “The most immediately apparent embodiment of this inequality was those students who did not have access to a device or internet connection at home.” The Education Review Office reports (2020a, b) highlight that Māori, Pasifika and students in low socio-economic communities were the groups most likely to have limited access to devices and connectivity or would have to share a device between siblings. While the Ministry of Education worked hard to improve access and deliver devices or provide hard-copy materials, given the urgency of the need and the difficulty in obtaining and delivering materials, these did not always arrive in a timely manner – and in some cases not all (Leeson *et al.*, 2020). One of my teacher education students, who is also a parent living in an isolated rural community, told the story of bundling her family into the car, driving 20 minutes to the top of a hill to get a signal, then each taking turns to copy down their learning instructions from a single cell phone.

The second immediate barrier that students in disadvantaged communities faced was the lack of a conducive environment in which to study (Education Review Office, 2020b; Hood, 2020a, b; Greater Christchurch Schools Network, 2020; Leeson *et al.*, 2020; Riwai-Couch *et al.*, 2020). In crowded homes, often there was not a suitable space to study or the space, along with any learning devices, was shared with other siblings. Again, the same groups of students were most affected (Education Review Office, 2020b; Riwai-Couch *et al.*, 2020), although some secondary Pasifika students in low socio-economic families reported feeling more comfortable at home than at school (Education Review Office, 2020a). In general, secondary students, especially boys, found it harder to study at home (Education Review Office, 2020a). Difficulty with learning from home increased with each year level (Education Review Office, 2020a). Parents in low socio-economic families were often juggling multiple priorities or working long hours in low-paid employment as essential workers and struggled to help their children with their studies. They did not always have the language, knowledge, skill, time or energy to support their children’s learning (Hood, 2020a; Riwai-Couch *et al.*, 2020). Older students often became responsible for looking after their younger siblings and helping them with their learning to the detriment of their own studies (Education Review Office, 2020a; Riwai-Couch *et al.*, 2020). Sometimes, older students needed to abandon their studies altogether to gain employment to help their families survive (Education Review Office, 2020b).

4.2 Learning processes: Facing different stressors

Digging deeper into why some students engaged with home learning better than others, Hood (2020b) notes that teachers explained variation as access to devices or the internet and the nature of home environment. In Hood's study, parents gave wider explanations including students' age, motivation, time management and interest. Parents also commented that the quantity or nature of the work set, the lack of clear expectations or feedback from teachers and the opportunities for student agency also contributed to the variation in engagement. Students reported being unable to cope with the workload or not receiving sufficient support or feedback to move forward as contributing to their lack of engagement or enjoyment (Education Review Office, 2000a).

Teachers in Hood's study (2020a) also indicated that there were individual student-level factors contributing to students' ability to engage with online learning. They cited foundational content knowledge, learning skills, social and emotional competencies and student self-regulation or self-management. Students also noted that they missed their teacher's regular presence as a motivator (Greater Christchurch Schools Network, 2020; Hood, 2020a; Education Review Office, 2020a).

For students in lower socio-economic areas, there were added stressors. Hood notes, "While access to a device and the internet is a very tangible (and real) representation of the inequalities that exist within education and society more broadly, it belies a deeper set of issues affecting equity in educational achievement" (2020a: 14). Schools quickly became aware that some of their students' families were financially hurt by the lockdown. Not only were they struggling prior to the pandemic but, given their precarious employment, these parents were often the first to lose their jobs as business began to close. Up to 38 per cent of parents lost a third or more of their income because of COVID-19 (Greater Christchurch Schools Network, 2020).

The Education Review Office (2020b) reports that one quarter of schools throughout the country needed to deliver care packages to their families. They provided food, clothing, face masks and sanitiser, often in conjunction with the local *marae* (Māori community centres) or the charity KidsCan. One principal in the Lesson *et al.* (2020) study reported providing around 400 lunches for struggling families. Teachers and principals reported that many Māori students attending *kura* (Māori immersion schools) or regular schools, along with Pasifika students and their families, needed ongoing support to combat hardship (Education Review Office, 2020; Leeson *et al.*, 2020). Some families ceased contact because of high levels of stress or moved because they could no longer afford to remain in their present location.

4.3 Learning outcomes: Exacerbated inequities

While the lockdown provided "silver linings" for some individuals and families (Foon, 2020) including more time spent together as a family and living in a quieter, less busy environment, this was not the reality for all. Those already at a disadvantage rarely caught up with their more advantaged peers. For example, students without devices prior to lockdown, even when they gained access, progressed at a lower rate than those who already had access (Greater Christchurch Schools Network, 2020).

Two-thirds of parents needed to continue working inside or outside the home during lockdown (Greater Christchurch Schools Network, 2020). Stressors built up as time went on to the point that some families took the step of opting out of home schooling altogether (Hood,

2020a). Levels of psychological distress, family violence and suicidality increased (Foon, 2020). The Education Review Office (2020b) report notes that one third of principals had concerns about the safety and wellbeing of particular students. Distressing family situations or violent incidents were referred to Oranga Tamariki (the relevant government agency) or to the police to follow up. At risk students were also slower to return to schools when they reopened. These students had lower attendance rates, were difficult to contact, displayed high levels of trauma and had more unsettled or challenging behaviours (Education Review Office, 2020b). Sometimes families had separation anxieties post-lockdown or worries about their children mixing with other students because of the impact it might have on the vulnerable members of their extended family (Education Review Office, 2020b).

A further lockdown in August closed schools in the greater Auckland region for several weeks. Anecdotally, teachers reported to me that their students found this lockdown harder than the first because it brought home the reality that regular lockdowns might become the “new normal”. Auckland is home to some of the more disadvantaged communities in the country and this was to put the students in these schools even further at risk. As Hood (2020a: 4) notes, “The lockdown period shone a light on the range of inequities, disparities and divides within New Zealand’s educational system, as well as potentially exacerbating them”.

5. THE VOICES OF DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS

In order to give voice to the young people whose educational experiences were further negatively affected by COVID-19, I provide excerpts from a qualitative research project I am currently conducting on young people’s responses to learning in lockdown. While the data collection and analysis are still ongoing, I have selected examples from interviews with students in one Auckland, low socio-economic, urban, multi-cultural high school with a high proportion of Pasifika students. Their stories resonate with the findings relating to economic and structural inequities and exemplify the way in which students in this demographic experienced their learning during the lockdowns.

Access to the internet or learning devices often hindered the students’ engagement or progress. This student was working on a joint project with another student, making a documentary for one of her classes while in lockdown:

Um, sometimes we, we couldn’t communicate with each other, ‘cos one or the other, like, didn’t have internet or didn’t have a device to communicate with each other. So that... that also, like, disrupted our work of continuing to finish our documentary. ... a lot of effort was put into, into the documentary and there’s a lot of times where I wanted to give up. But now it’s finished ... yeah, I guess I’m pretty proud of it ... of me and my partners’ effort to finish it. Yeah...

Students missed the social aspects of their school day. One student explains how the loss of routine and social contact was difficult for her, combined with her anxiety about the pandemic and its possible effects on her family:

Yeah. I think really, during lockdown, it’s just the whole thing, like, changed, in the way that my days used to run. I mean, I’d just come to school, see my friends, you know, do my schoolwork. It was really just a routine almost every day. I mean, we’re so used to having contact and, you know, physically, seeing our family and friends and connecting with each other. And then all of a sudden, that just got cut off and, like, we had to stay at home. And I guess a lot of us were really scared for ways that our families or ourselves

could be affected by the virus, especially since my mum works at the airport. So, she was on the front line and welcoming people. And up until last week, she was still working at the airport, all through the lockdown and stuff. Yeah, so, it was real scary.

Many students from this community live in extended family groups in crowded housing. One student shares her experience:

Yeah, it was quite stressful. Because at my dad's house, we have, like, a big family. So, we've two younger siblings. And, like, I'm trying to help them with their schoolwork because my dad's an essential worker. And then there's my stepmother who lives there. My great grandmother, my cousin. So, it's, like, really hard just trying to do everything as well as my schoolwork because your parents they're telling you to do all this stuff, but you have this huge load of schoolwork to do, so it was really stressful.

The families of students from disadvantaged communities often work in precarious low-paid employment and were the first to be laid off. One student says:

In the beginning, I really liked the idea of lockdown, no school. Yeah. And then a couple weeks, and, um, my dad couldn't go to work because it was level 4 and he's, like, a trainee, so he couldn't work. And then I started seeing the financial effects that started kicking in and things aren't the best at home. Yeah, so yeah, it was really hard trying to, like, keep doing schoolwork and then trying to enjoy things at the same time and keep a focus on mental health and everything.

Alongside attending school, some students work after school to help support their families. Another student discusses having to continue working as an essential worker while trying to keep her family safe and do schoolwork:

From my family, even I am... we're working as essential workers. So, we continued to work during lockdown. And the added precautions of being at home and taking care of your family as well. And thinking of their safety along with yours is kind of nerve-racking at times. So, like, when we get home, we're hand sanitising and taking our clothes off and going straight for a shower and all that. And the same goes for most of my friends in Year 13. They have to do the same.

Another student talks about the lack of support from home because of the added stress in her family:

...it was just so hard to just do my schoolwork at home because, like, I don't know, my household just then ... I live in a really small house. So, it was really hard to get work done with my family there. Yeah, 'cos, I didn't have much support at home. So, it was really hard to do my schoolwork. Yeah. Because my mum and my sister were essential workers. But when they came home, they'll just get angry at me for like no reason, and it was really hard to just, you know, be there...

In the end, some students struggled to focus, became overwhelmed and even gave up. This student explains how it affected her:

... I was one of those people that just tried to pass or when teachers would email me work, I would just, just do it when I could. Not when they asked for, I just, sometimes, I'd be doing work at, like, one in the morning for, like, no reason, because I had nothing else to do. But the work was there. But I just never did it. I just felt like I couldn't do it. Like, I didn't know what I was doing. Even though the teacher was telling me what I was doing. I still was confused and it was just stressful.

The voices of these students clearly resonate with the findings shared earlier. In early 2021, the Education Review Office (the government agency that evaluates the quality of education in all schools in New Zealand) stated that over half of the schools they surveyed reported that lockdowns had affected student progress and achievement. Schools suggested that some students would begin the new year up to 10 weeks behind, with students in low socioeconomic communities being most affected (Gerritson, 2021). Meanwhile, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, (the agency that monitors secondary school examinations and qualifications) has instigated a system of “learning recognition credits” to acknowledge the disruption to students’ learning during 2020 .

Given that research findings to date confirm the extent of educational disparity, Hood exhorts us to make good use of this knowledge:

The lockdown as a whole, plus the experiences of teachers, students and parents, present an opportunity. However, it is easy to fall back into business as usual and not to follow up on the questions the experiences raised, the opportunities it presented or the challenges it uncovered or exacerbated” (Hood, 2020a: 9).

6. CONCLUSION: WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The leadership of the Prime Minister through the COVID-19 pandemic in New Zealand garnered much international acclaim. In the October 2020 elections, her party received the majority of the votes and the mandate to govern alone without the need for a coalition partner. Three years earlier, Prime Minister Ardern had promised a transformational government. The mosque massacre of 2019 and pandemic of 2020 took the focus away from this goal. With COVID-19 vaccines on the horizon, there is an opportunity to use the COVID-19 economic recovery to tackle the chronic housing shortage, increase employment outcomes, reduce poverty, improve the health system and address educational disparities. Several of the studies reported on in this article ended with sets of recommendations for policy and practice that are worthy of serious consideration. As political commentator, Rod Oram highlights, if New Zealand can pull together as a country to overcome COVID-19, we can do the same to create a more socially just nation for all our citizens, in particular, for the children and young people who are our future. Oram (2020) concludes:

Indeed, these are no ordinary times. Covid-19 is teaching us we have to respond decisively, collectively and comprehensively. To do so, we have to prioritise, communicate and support each other. Then we can learn as we go in this fast, all-encompassing crisis. These things we have done well as a society, showing great purpose, innovation and resilience during the pandemic. Now we have to apply those lessons to solving our pre-existing and interdependent social, economic and ecological challenges.

Kia kaha, kia maia, kia manawau.

(Māori proverb: Be strong, be brave, be steadfast)

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