

Appendix 19

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To Whom It Concerns,

Background: I am a clinical family therapist with twenty-five years' professional experience, based in Christchurch. The focus of my clinical work consists of working with families so that they may better meet the challenges and stresses of various psychological, emotional and physical stressors. Over recent years I have provided training and education at a post-graduate level for the universities of Canterbury and Otago. I also provide therapy consultancy to clinicians of the local district health board, in addition to the provision of clinical supervision and training to various other groups and organisations. Since late 2010 I have had considerable clinical involvement with many families experiencing earthquake related issues.

I have been asked to make comments by the Redcliffs School Board of Trustees regarding particular areas of concern, and I do so as follows.

- *How important are local communities to psychosocial recovery, following natural disaster events?*

Local communities play a very important role in the various stages of psychosocial recovery of communities following a natural disaster. Research has demonstrated time and again, that in the face of significant disasters (such as the earthquakes that hugely affected the Redcliffs community), there is a curative factor that comes from belonging to a community in which stability and predictability are present. When homes are lost or severely damaged, it is the elements of community that bind people. These elements include connections with others, and with core services such as schools, shops, churches and sports clubs literally providing the physical base by which those connections can be forged and maintained.

Although five years have elapsed since the main earthquakes occurred, many Redcliffs families are still awaiting major home repairs or complete re-builds. Families are stressed as they continue to negotiate their way through endless bureaucracy, and it is inevitable that some of the stress is transmitted to children. In the midst of this protracted process, a healthy community provides connection and grounding as an antidote to some of the stress that is on-going.

My own clinical work has demonstrated the importance communities play in recovering from a natural disaster: those clients who have been more active in their communities, and are more

connected, seem to have better outcomes, and were observed to finish therapy sooner than those who were more insular or were disconnected from their communities. The literature repeatedly stresses the role communities play in psychosocial recovery from natural disasters (Baggerly & Exum, 2008; Hawkins & Maurer, 2010; LaLone, 2010).

- *Do communities, such as Redcliffs, have unique identities? How do you consider that the unique identity of a local community is relevant to the social recovery of its members?*

It is likely that residents of many neighborhoods and communities the length of New Zealand would describe the identity of their own community as unique, and for Redcliffs, this is no exception. There are several factors that bind the Redcliffs community and which contribute to strong connections amongst its residents. Apart from the core elements that might be present in other communities, Redcliffs' naturally occurring geographical boundaries make it unique. It is very clear to all residents as to where Redcliffs physically begins and ends, so in that sense it has the feel and appearance of a small town or village, rather than being a suburb of a larger city.

In addition to these physical boundaries, services such as a supermarket, medical centre, gas station, take-away outlets, churches, sporting clubs, early childhood centers and a library etc., are all present within that community and thus contribute to making it feel quite self-contained. Community members accessing these resources develop relationships and experience constancy and connection which contribute to a sense of safety, essential in ameliorating the traumatic responses experienced in the post-earthquake environment.

- *Can you comment on the importance of local schools within local communities as part of psychosocial recovery, for children and parents in the school community, and also other community members?*

The Ministry of Education has itself described the importance of children being able to go to schools in their own communities (NZ Education Gazette, 11/03/13). Local schools are important in times of "regular functioning," so in a phase of irregular functioning, such as post-disaster, as is the case for Redcliffs currently, the need for a local school is magnified. For enhanced mental health, local children and families need to continue to have as much structure and predictability to their lives as is possible, and this requires them to conduct as much as their lives as is feasible within their own neighborhood, thereby maintaining their significant relationships in the local community. Other literature also stresses the importance of schools as being part of the fabric that can help to bind communities in the years that follow a natural disaster (Bukatko & Daehler, 2012).

It is right to consider psychosocial recovery, and the role of community is crucial to this. Otago University's Mental Health Clinical Research Unit has indicated an overall 8% increase in diagnosable mental health disorders in Christchurch since the earthquakes commenced.

Although the city (and communities such as Redcliffs) are on track with where they would be expected to be post-recovery, it is never the less a lengthy process, it is not about to finish anytime soon, and increased mental health diagnoses are part of that process.

- *What effect do school closures have on local communities in general?*

The literature that describes the core components of healthy, functional communities (Hawkins & Maurer, 2010) mentions elements in those communities around which such functioning is based – a school is inevitably one of those elements. Children would identify less with the local community, whereby the loss of Redcliffs School would contribute to a less cohesive and less supportive community for both children and adults alike.

There are many examples in New Zealand where the closure of local schools has had deleterious effects on the local community. The closure of a school inevitably leads to a decision amongst young families as to whether to settle in that area, or to move to enable accessibility to a local school. This in turn leads to a potential change in the social demographic of that community. The closure of the school then brings the eventual outcome of Redcliffs transitioning into a community populated largely by older or retired people, with young families being less likely to want to put down roots in the area.

- *Comment on the likely effect of the closure of Redcliffs School at the end of 2016 on both the school community and wider community, in the context of the recovery phase, against the background of the previous disruptions which the school and community have managed over the past 5 years?*

As mentioned previously, the closure of the school would not bode well, for either the families directly affected, or the broader community. On a practical level, children from the school community would need to be transported at least 3-4 kilometers to attend a school in another neighborhood. The increased distance reduces the chance for children to develop age-appropriate independence by taking themselves to their local school.

In addition to the increased distance, there would also be additional safety factors to consider, should families still encourage their children to make their own way to school. This would include having to spend longer periods of time on busy roads in one direction, and in the other direction, also negotiate a busy road, in combination with needing to come into much closer proximity to a very high rock-face – ironically much closer, than their proximity to the cliffs in question at Redcliffs.

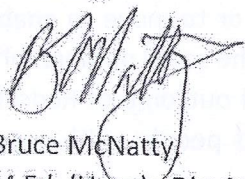
At an interpersonal level, children who might be connected with each other through neighborhood events such as sports, etc., are likely to now be attending different schools.

None of this is likely to enhance the mental health of Redcliffs children or their families.

At a broader community level, there is also the potential for the loss of connections and relationships between families across time, due to the increased amount of time that would be spent away from the neighborhood, in addition to the loss of the school and its historical role as a focal point and a meeting place in the community.

In summary, the closure of the school will not bode well for either the students of Redcliffs school, or their families. There will also be longer term implications for an already fragile community, as it continues to recover from an extreme natural disaster. Whilst the natural disaster could not be predicted or controlled, the closure of the school could be. The closure of the school can only serve to protract the community's earthquake recovery.

Sincerely,



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