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Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

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Governing in crises: Rural school board experiences of urbanisation during Covid-19

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Abstract

Encroaching urbanisation into small and rural communities across Aotearoa New Zealand is becoming increasingly common. This phenomenon is the result of multiple crises: strong and continued population growth, a housing shortage, rising housing unaffordability, and Covid-19. This paper offers a critical analysis of how these intersecting crises have intensified existing inequities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Focus group data of 18 boards of trustees illustrates how school board trustees navigated a range of social, educational, and economic challenges. Several key aspects of school governance during times of crises emerge from the study findings, including an increasing need for student pastoral care due to widening rural educational disparities such as the digital divide and the ongoing challenge of maintaining a rural identity for students and the local school communities they serve. As part of the second phase of a larger study about the impact of urbanisation on rural schools in Aotearoa New Zealand, study findings build upon existing knowledge and capacity to adapt to educational crises in a new post-pandemic landscape from a rural perspective and will also be of interest to both rural and urban schools experiencing the effects of changing demographics due to urbanisation in their local communities.

Keywords

School governance; Covid-19; rural schools; rural identity; urbanisation.

Introduction

The pace of demographic growth in Aotearoa New Zealand is unprecedented. The nation's rising population has intensified a dire need for more housing amidst an existing housing shortage leading to housing unaffordability. New housing developments on the periphery of major cities, and in some previously less populated regional areas, have emerged in light of these demographic crises. With new housing builds completed in 16–20 weeks, housing developments are rapidly transforming previously small and rural communities, and the schools which serve them. Covid-19's entry into this complex landscape has intensified and widened social, economic, and political disparities, creating new challenges for schools and educators.

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"Rurban" research

Prior rural educational research has placed emphasis on several key lines of research relevant to this study, including the unique context of rural schools highlighting issues of place and space (Arnold, 2001), school based studies discussing access and resourcing (Stelmach, 2011), and studies about teacher preparation and school leaders which highlight distinct rural recruitment and retention challenges (Eppley, 2015; Frahm & Cianca, 2021). This study delves into investigations of the transformation of rural landscapes in Aotearoa New Zealand joining others from multiple disciplines that examine the changing nature of rurality (Cloke, 1997; Salamon, 2007). Bonner (1999) coined the term "rurban" to explain how conceptualisations of rurality change as society changes. Cloke (1997) describes rurban as "the two-fold blurring of 'country' and 'city'" which highlights the "importance of rurality as a socially constructed and discursive category" (p. 368). Working in the American context, he argues that the "blurring" of country and city developed from shifting from a spatial landscape focus to a conceptual one that reflects the complex, social construction of rurality which has "become ambiguous and ambivalent in a 'post-rural' age" (Cloke, 1997, p. 369). Continuing in the American context, Salamon's (2007) review of rural community studies transformed by suburbanisation indicates the importance of unique rural community contexts, a loss of rural town identity, and "in" migration or movement of diverse people into rural towns. Meanwhile, Stephens (2019) discusses the rurban phenomena as the intersectional space where rural and urban cultures "crossover" (p. 3). Her work emphasises the complexity of rurban spaces in which "the intersection of rural values with the normalised, urban values of the rurban community" (Stephens, 2019, p. 24). She explains how these intersections were foundational to the transformation of space and place in her study, which sought to understand how different definitions of rural and urban might inform a culturally relevant curriculum for rurban students.

This article builds upon the initial pilot of a project that examined the unique context of rapid urbanisation on the periphery of Auckland—the largest city in Aotearoa New Zealand (Tatebe, 2021). Pilot study findings indicated the emergence of a new, negotiated semi-rural identity as the outcome of urbanisation's influence on rural schools. Covid-19 has added a unique lens from which to continue the exploration of urbanisation's influence on rural school communities. This article presents rural school principal and board of trustee member's experiences of governance during the pandemic which indicate the intensification of existing considerations of identity, access, resourcing, and support. Some aspects of our study findings may resonate with urban schools signalling some possible commonalities of pandemic schooling experiences. This research centres rural perspectives, and, in doing so, this article contributes to global discussions about rural education.

Literature review

Aotearoa New Zealand's rural context

Aotearoa New Zealand's history is built upon a rural legacy. As a fledgling colonial nation in the 1800s, the country was promoted to British immigrants as a rural idyll with pastoral scenes of vast farming land. Initially 60% of the population were rural residents; however, alongside the culturally embedded rural narrative was also a promise of opportunity, development and change (Statistics New Zealand, 2005). The emergence of urban centres in parallel with investment in transportation and infrastructure meant that urban and rural areas developed alongside one another (Statistics New Zealand, 2005). By the 19th and 20th centuries the rural-urban demographic profile had reversed—rural residents were in decline, with the majority of the population moving into urban areas (Mulet-Marquis & Fairweather, 2008). By 2018, just 16% of New Zealanders were living in rural areas (External Data Quality Panel, 2019).

Education and rural schools

Relevant to this study is the absence of a formal definition of rural schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Ministry of Education (MoE) currently does not have an established definition of a rural school but rather defers to the Statistics New Zealand category of an "urban-rural" area characterised by 1000 or more residents based outside urban areas (Statistics New Zealand, 2021). Outside of this limited government definition, the responsibility for defining rural lies with each researcher. Five criteria were established to identify the three regional areas for inclusion in this study. The first criterion was rapid demographic growth. As a result, the three regional areas of South Auckland/Northern Waikato, Tauranga and Christchurch were selected, as they are three of the fastest growing regions in the country. Secondly, all three regions listed above have several major urban housing developments in their local areas. The third criteria is that each area has a primary school (in Aotearoa New Zealand full primary schools cater to years 1–8 for children typically aged 5–12). Next, a school roll of 200 students or less—which, at the time, increased the number of schools eligible to participate in the study in order for study findings to be more generalisable. Finally, only state funded schools were selected. A total of 18 schools across the three regions generously participated in this research.

This research embraces a new wave of demographic change that returns the focus to rural Aotearoa New Zealand. The first rural colonial schools faced numerous challenges, including geographic isolation, student access and transportation barriers, inadequate school buildings, and the recruitment of qualified teachers (Webster, 1997). The creation of the 1877 Education Act provided free, secular, and compulsory education for all children of European descent but remained optional for Māori[i] children until becoming compulsory for Māori in 1894. While the 1877 Education Act advanced the creation of more rural schools, disparities in Māori and Pākehā school provision and access were an outcome of the two different compulsory education policies. By the 1900s, rural schools accounted for approximately 83% of all New Zealand schools, with these rural schools having only one or two teachers (Webster, 1997). However, from the 1920s onwards, rural schooling has been on the decline. By the early 2000s, the Education Review Office (ERO) identified one third of all schools in Aotearoa New Zealand as rural (ERO, 2001).

Rural Aotearoa New Zealand schools have traditionally held some distinctive environmental, social, and institutional characteristics relevant to this study. An additional layer of complexity is the way in which these unique characteristics are often interwoven into the social fabric of the rural communities they serve, including this study's findings related to the ongoing negotiation of traditional rural identities. The environment, and specifically geographic isolation, connects to this article's engagement with Covid-19's intensification of access, resourcing and support for rural schools and the students, whānau (families), and communities they serve.

Teaching and leadership

A challenge often related to geographic isolation is the recruitment and retention of teachers and principals, which poses another common challenge for rural schools. Practical, social, and career reasons are contributing factors to understanding this phenomenon from a historical perspective. In connection with the previous discussion of geographic isolation, rural school teachers are likely to live in or close to their school community for logistical reasons. Socially, rural teachers would be part of the school community and regularly interact with the rural families whose children attend the school (Webster, 1997). Thus, the professional decision to work at a rural school was also a choice to live rurally. To help recruit rural teachers, school houses were built alongside many Aotearoa New Zealand rural schools. The school teacher and/or principal would often live in the provided school house on school property. Rural school houses for teaching staff still exist today. Another historical teacher recruitment strategy was what was known as "country service" for filling hard-to-staff rural teaching roles. Under this scheme, teachers and principals held a rural teaching or leadership role for two years as means of promotion or as a stepping stone to return to city teaching opportunities.

Rural education leadership is an under-researched topic. As part of their analysis of existing rural educational leadership literature Preston and Barnes (2017) identify how effective rural school leaders are people-centred who prioritise "nurturing interpersonal relationships with/among staff members, parents, students, and community stakeholders" (p. 8). Further analysis of rural leadership literature also

suggests that rural school leaders are expected to be active community citizens with strong knowledge of their rural communities (Latham et al., 2014; Surface & Theobald, 2014). The central role of principals and educational leaders within the available rural education literature underscores their pivotal yet challenging role as they strive to balance the complex demands of rural school contexts and community needs.

School governance model

Each school in Aotearoa New Zealand is governed by an elected board of trustees (BoT). Elected parents and local community members form the majority of the BoT (Wylie, 2007). As Wylie (2012) explains, parent and community elected BoT members bring expertise from their "own employment and community contacts … and community knowledge" (p. 173). Two of the other seats on the BoT are reserved for the school principal and an elected staff representative, who bring educational expertise to the BoT. There are two additional seats available for co-opted trustees who are invited onto the BoT for their particular skills or expertise (New Zealand School Trustees Association, 2021). BoT responsibilities fall into seven categories spanning policy, financial, infrastructure and academic obligations supported by the MoE and the New Zealand School Trustees Association[ii] (New Zealand School Trustees Association, 2021). Of particular relevance to this article is the research-based evidence that self-management has been problematic for "low-income areas, small schools and rural schools" (Wylie, 2012, p. 120). The complexity of the wider rural school context discussed earlier in the article becomes relevant here, with Wylie specifically identifying challenges of adequate provision of MoE support, difficulties with teacher and principal recruitment and retention, and the challenge of building and maintaining school culture and systems as factors contributing to ongoing self-governance considerations for rural schools.

Methodology

The research

Dr Tatebe's lived experienced in a new urban development in a former rural town while also serving on the local primary school BoT was the catalyst for this research. While this article focuses on rural school BoT's experiences of urbanisation challenges during Covid-19, it is set within a larger longitudinal case study (Yin, 2003) of rural school governance conducted in three phases over a three-year period. More specifically, the study is a collective case study (Stake, 1995) involving 18 schools set across three of the fastest growing regional areas in Aotearoa New Zealand: two on the North Island, and one on the South Island. Through data collection and analysis across multiple schools and regions, study findings can be generalised to wider comparable populations. The study was granted full University of Auckland Human Ethics approval.

This article reports on data collected in 2020 and 2021 as permitted through the limitations of Covid-19 lockdowns, return to schooling transitions, and related pandemic delays as outlined in the timelines developed by Cameron (2020) and Mutch (2021). Data collection occurred through semi-structured, recorded focus groups (N=18) with principals and school BoT (some conducted face-to-face, and others via Zoom). The focus groups focused on key lines of enquiry relating to principal and BoT views about their roles, challenges, resourcing, and support and lessons learned during the pandemic, while also continuing to experience ongoing urbanisation growth in their communities. During the transcription of the audio and/or video recordings, all identifying information was removed in order to maintain confidentiality of the school, principal, and BoT participants. NVivo qualitative software was employed to facilitate the coding of data using iterative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Open coding identified initial themes based on participants' views and experiences, and the research questions informed the subsequent axial coding cycle where related codes were connected to main themes. A final selective coding process identified the most prevalent themes and relevant subthemes. Trustworthiness was addressed through a review of transcripts and coding by all research team members to ensure coding agreements and direct relevance to the key lines of enquiry.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on Fraser's (1995, 1997, 2000) social justice focused theoretical framework based on the principles of recognition, redistribution, and representation, each described briefly below. The first principle of recognition refers to cultural or symbolic forms of difference in one's identity. In the case of rural research, and this article, the claim of rurality's distinctive features as a place-based difference is an example of the principle of recognition (Stephens, 2019). Redistribution is the second of Fraser's theoretical model principles. Redistribution critiques the inequitable allocation of resources, including material goods; human labour; and cultural or economic claims, such as those relating to social class and status inequality amongst others. Of relevance to rural educational research, the challenges of space, and physical and educational resourcing, including the recruitment and retention of teaching staff, are examples of redistribution claims within the body of rural educational research literature. Representation was a later addition to Fraser's theoretical model which adds a political element to her theorising. Representation is fundamentally about inclusion and social belonging. In practical terms representation is about participation—who is able to make justice claims in order to fully participate more equally in society. This so often involves the analysis of tensions and politics between dominant and marginalised groups. With reference to discussions of rurality, this article aligns with other scholarships that critique and resist the commonplace default of the urban as the dominant cultural centre to which conceptions of rurality are often compared through a deficit lens (Fuqua & Roberts, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2018; Tatebe, 2021). The application of Fraser's theorising of recognition, redistribution, and representation provides a useful analysis of the complexity of findings in this research.

Findings

The study findings strongly identify how Covid-19 amplified some of the existing rural school challenges associated with rapid urbanisation (Tatebe, 2021). The article focuses on considerations of 1) rural identity; 2) access and capability; and 3) the pandemic's impact on children, families, and school staff amidst Covid-19's uncertainty.

Navigating rural school identity amidst Covid-19

Findings from previous phases of this project suggest an overarching "identity crisis" associated with the urbanisation of rural school communities (Tatebe, 2021). In the era of Covid-19, rural schools continued to grapple with their sense of identity in divergent ways. Some schools discussed their rural identities more generally, while for others, Covid-19 offered an opportunity to reflect on their identity.

Rural foundations

A clear sense of rurality is evident in some participants' discussions of school and learning disruptions during Covid-19. One board member repetitively spoke of the "rural way" of just getting on with things in Covid times. In his words: "That is the rural way. Yeah, that's true. That truly is the rural way. It's just kind of like, we'll sort it out … it'll … yeah, it'll be fine. And we will resolve it." A strong example of the "rural way" is reflected in this principal's statement about how rural schools function: "We have an annual working bee, done in November and spring. We do a lot of grounds work … trimming gardens, painting, or staining. In a rural school—everyone pitches in." Another school BoT member discussed their historical heritage: "I think we're in quite a unique situation and the school's been here for nearly 150 years, this year. And back in those days, you can imagine there would be a day trip into the city on a horse."

By drawing on the school's historical roots this BoT's discussion indicates the influence of its agricultural and geographic remoteness as key aspects of its rural school identity.

Focus on community

Continuing the focus on rural identity, the BoTs and principals involved in this research made pastoral care and well-being of their rural school communities a priority. The concept of looking after one another was a key aspect of a rural identity. One principal describes her ethos of care in this statement:

> For parents and to the teachers it was about kids being safe and healthy. And having some fun and doing some of those things and engaging where they could, because we didn't want to put more pressure on the families, we tried to make [the] most of the students' time and to just say, "Look after yourselves, be happy." To try and alleviate that kind of worry and stress.

Another principal shared a similar understanding with regard to her role in student and community well-being:

> In terms of my [principal] role I very much had the focus of staff, parent and student welfare in the forefront of my mind. That was more important to me than anything else and whether it was just, you know, sending a text out to a family that we hadn't seen and just checking that everything was okay.

The same emphasis on care and well-being extended to school staff:

> There's a lot of uncertainty and that constant feeling of, you know, flux around not knowing so from my perspective, as I was supporting the teachers, and we had conversations around their well-being, because a lot of some of them had families.

The strong level of care for their students and their families, staff, and the community at large, may also be visible at larger urban schools; however, the schools involved in this study made the explicit connection between their identity as rural schools as the key driver behind the "rural way" of caring for one another and the wider school community. The school as the focal point of the community, intergenerational knowledge and engagement with families and holding to rural school traditions were central to this study's participants' experiences of the "rural way" of being such as an emphasis on rural community, culture and environment, and rural school rituals and activities (Bushnell, 1999; Kearns et al., 2010).

Rural school identity, urbanisation, and Covid-19

For some schools the Covid-19 pandemic confirmed ongoing negotiations of rural identity. The findings presented here suggest a more fluid rural identity—or at least one that is being reviewed as a reflection of the changing school population. With the increase in housing in new developments in the local school area, one principal explained his perception of being entangled in an "identity crisis". Covid-19 provided the opportunity to reflect on the school identity. In his words, he states:

> I feel like there's an identity crisis. And [the board] just said, you're right. We do! We don't know who we are anymore. Because we're not a little school like we proclaim. So yeah, we've lost … we're losing our way … Let's review everything we're doing. Let's review what we stand for, who we are, what do we believe in, and then we'll start [to] back up and keep moving. But we've got to kind of sort out that identity first.

The general "identity crisis" described above is also connected to urbanisation's shifting of the school population. The same principal provides some context by discussing the increasing student roll of 72 children that year, with the majority of whom came from outside the local region. More specifically, these new students were "Covid refugees, families have been working in America, England, [and] Asian countries … [who said] okay, we're going home [to New Zealand]". The principal also makes reference to many new students coming from Auckland who then the school must "bring into our [rural] culture". Another principal summarised:

> You spend a lot of time consulting with families and growing a belief in what you do, and why you do it, and helping your community to understand the why around the type of environment and the kind of approaches you are providing.

Other principals and school BoTs spoke of the practical influences urbanisation and Covid-19 had in their schools. Discussions of buildings and resourcing and changing ways of being were relatively common. For instance, one BoT member spoke at length about changing rural school events:

> Like looking at how Calf Club day [was run] … I mean, last year, we obviously had to change it. It was great that we managed to do it in a different way. The kids enjoyed it just as much. It just didn't have the same elements that we were obviously used to.

In many Aotearoa New Zealand schools Calf Club Day is an annual key event in the school calendar. Comparable to international agricultural days, Calf Club Day typically features a range of animal showcase events including calves and lambs, alongside school fair booths, and barbeques as fundraising events.

Logistics like new buildings and new learning spaces due to rapid roll growth were also subjects of conversation. One principal recalled how the school

> started this year with all the classroom spaces needed. And we've got a multi-purpose room, we've got a library back again … we're actually at a point where we can offer music lessons again and other extracurriculars have actually got space to break out. Because we were cramming everyone all over the place.

A different BoT member lamented about the dilemma of needing to build more classrooms but wanting to resist the change because of wanting to "try to maintain our rural character". The challenge of balancing urbanisation's visible influence in physical school building changes, and the negotiation of rural school identity is evident within our data.

Covid-19's impact on existing rural educational inequities

Increasing the existing rural digital divide

Covid-19 has challenged schools to provide for the needs of their students and communities in the face of widening educational inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic. It has become clear that this situation has magnified educational disparities worldwide (Frohn, 2021). Access to technology is at the forefront of rural educational challenges amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. This phenomenon is referred to as the digital divide. Wei et al. (2011) identified three digital divide categories: a) access to devices and the internet, b) capability to use the technology, and c) computer self-efficacy. With regard to rural education in New Zealand, the data from this study provides some evidence of the above.

Schools had been tasked with delivering education online with limited notice during Aotearoa New Zealand's Covid-19 lockdown strategy. For some schools, the digital divide was a significant barrier. As some BoT members explained, although the MoE promised to provide devices and modems to all schools that applied, these devices often arrived too late— often well after the lockdowns had begun. Results suggest that in some cases, teachers and school leaders provided devices or materials for learning at home.

> I think [in] the big lockdown … the first one [the] Ministry over promised … they were saying that everyone's going to get these hard copy home learning packs, and everybody who needs it will get a modem and everybody who needs it will get a device and so a lot of our families were waiting on those things to come in.

Many rural schools in our study reported being ranked highly on the decile system[iii] due to the value of their surrounding farmland and housing developments. Yet the allocated funding from the MoE according to the student roll at the school was always retrospective and never enough to cover their existing needs. In terms of Covid-19 relief funding inclusive of digital devices, it was often perceived that the higher the decile ranking the less likely you were to receive timely support.

> I think they started at decile one schools and went year 13s down. We knew as a decile eight school, we were probably quite far down that list of what was going to come. So we got our own hard packs together. We spent multiple days making hard packs and sending out things to everybody, including things like glue sticks, crayons, craft paper, just all sorts of things, because nobody was prepared for that length of lockdown.

Some schools resolved access issues at their own cost. Because all learning suddenly shifted online, it became apparent which families had the means to participate and which families did not.

> We identified those families that were at risk [of not having], you know, internet or devices and things like that, we identified who those families … the response from the Ministry, in terms of rolling those [out] probably wasn't effective. So, in the end, we delivered our own devices … to our families that needed it. There were a couple of families that couldn't access the internet because of financial reasons.

Internet reception was also another issue. Rural communities had the challenge of lack of reliable internet access, and often no mobile phone service to access mobile internet data. "It's just not accessible. In a rural community it's really quite hard when you've no internet. It's really hard because you're reliant on reception." Although the MoE's intentions to provide modems, devices, and internet access was acknowledged, the BoTs in this study identified how the policy and delivery gap adversely impacted students from families with existing financial hardship and/or limited technological skills. Where internet and device access were not possible some BoTs explained how they created "hard packs" or printed teaching and learning material.

Covid-19's impact on children, families, and staff

The pandemic exacerbated some existing rural school challenges as BoTs now had to support more people—their staff, and the children and their families— with limited resources. Systematic reviews on the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns on child and adolescent mental health suggested that poor mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, psychological distress, anger, boredom, fear, and stress, were common among children and adolescents (Panchal et al., 2021; Viner et al., 2021; Tri Sakti et al., 2022). With the sudden switch to distance learning, many teachers suffered from a sudden increase in workload and burnout, with limited resources being provided to support their mental and physical health.

The views of rural school BoTs in our study were no exception. The first lockdown and school closure in New Zealand took place from 25 March to 13 May 2020, and the MoE started the school holidays earlier on 28 March (Saturday) to coincide with the lockdown (Education Review Office, 2021). While this bought some time for teachers to prepare for distance learning when the second term restarted on 15 April (Monday), the timing meant that teachers spent the holidays getting up to speed on online teaching rather than taking a break:

> [It was] exhausting. I think it was about a week and a half before the school holiday started, so it was kind of getting connections with families and then spending the holidays when you might get a break getting yourself as a teacher up to speed to teach online for however long it was going to be.

BoTs reported that the school population, from teachers, administrators, and students were exhausted, especially teachers who were parents themselves. As one principal explained, "When the children came back, we did notice higher levels of anxiety amongst children, and parents, and I guess staff as well." Numerous BoTs described how some staff members "did not cope coming back" and that rural schools, which already face issues with staff shortages, experienced staff resignations.

To address the adverse mental health consequences the pandemic posed to students and their families, several rural schools in the study applied for the Urgent Response Fund provided by the MoE. However, when the funding ran out, they drew on limited community resources to provide the required level of support:

> When the Ministry put out applications for the urgent response fund, I made an application to be able to bring in a counsellor one day a week to support children and families who are showing high levels of anxiety … I then made a further application to the Ministry for money to do it for two terms this year, which they approved. We're now seeking further community support to keep that for the rest of the year and we also put in some other internal therapies such as Lego therapy, and dance movement therapies … Because of those increased anxieties and because that urgent response fund is closed, I now need to find that money in our community.

Covid-19 resurfaced previous trauma for some Christchurch families. BoTs from rural schools in the Christchurch area noted that for families who experienced the 2011 earthquake, the pandemic and sudden lockdown seemed to have "brought back lots of emotional responses from the earthquake stuff", including "a lot of worry" and "uncertainty":

> … if they had come here from earthquake time and had suffered on the east side where most of the damage was done … it [the pandemic and lockdown] triggered stuff again and so some of them were very hesitant about bringing the kids back to school.

It is unclear from the BoT interviews if the MoE specifically supported the provision of mental health and well-being support for rural teachers and school leaders.

Discussion

This study's findings indicate that the existing place-based social, economic, and educational considerations of being located in rural areas were amplified by Covid-19. This discussion returns to Fraser's theoretical framework as an organisational tool to analyse the study findings.

Recognition

Fraser's principle of recognition, or the respect for difference, is most relevant to the rural school context and rural school identity. In this study, recognition was central to understanding the place-based role of rural schools in their local communities. Rural school principals and BoTs expressed the challenge of balancing their rural school identity while experiencing changing school populations—including Covid-19's influence on New Zealanders returning to Aotearoa New Zealand due to pandemic circumstances. Responses included new and ongoing negotiations of rural identity in response to these multiple identity considerations (Tatebe, 2021).

Redistribution

Fraser's principal of redistribution, or the re-allocation of social, financial, and human resources, is a useful analytic tool to unpack the inequitable structural environment of rural schools. In this research, enacting the principle of redistribution relies on the recognition and acceptance of the rural school context embodying Fraser's (1997) claim that justice requires both recognition and redistribution. This research identifies a unique set of social, economic, health, and educational factors that require targeted and specialist support for rural schools—which was intensified for rural schools undergoing rapid urbanisation in the era of Covid-19. For instance, the out-of-school factors including a school's geographic isolation and limited access to internet and other learning support resources are pre-existing inequities BoTs contended with on a larger scale during the Covid-19 pandemic. This point warrants further emphasis. For rural schools and the families and communities they serve, the influence of urbanisation and Covid-19 independently and together amplify long-standing inequities of isolation and access to social, educational, and financial resources (Salamon, 2003).

In-school resourcing factors are long-standing in rural education (Stelmach, 2011). Findings from this research depart from Biddle and Azano's (2016) systematic review of American rural educational literature that outlines four challenges specific to rural schools: facilities, community support, specific

rural teacher preparation, and school curriculum. In part, the American context is a consideration, yet many of these topics are recurring in the international literature (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Stelmach, 2011; Stockton, 2009). However, these four specific challenges of rural schools resonated in this research in slightly different ways. For BoTs, urbanisation challenges of securing adequate building facilities for the growing school populations reported in earlier phases of the study (Tatebe, 2021) were eclipsed by the more immediate Covid-19 related challenge of access to school and curriculum resources. The rural schools involved in this research had strong BoT and local community support. Likewise, rural teacher preparation was not raised as a challenge. Lastly, specific rural school curriculum challenges that traditionally focused on local agricultural knowledge (Nash, 1980) translated into responding to differing home and school expectations of online learning, as well as principals' emphasis on learning when and where possible, which acknowledged the difficult work-family-schooling balance created by Covid-19.

In terms of redistribution, in this study rural schools tailored their response strategies to the needs of their students and whānau. At the school level, principals and teachers delivered educational resources such as digital devices and school developed hard packs to students, and BoTs financially funded internet access to help mitigate their geographic isolation. At a systems level, the MoE's isolation index, which measures a school's relative isolation based on "weighted distances from population centres of 5,000 and 20,000 and 100,000 people" distributes additional targeted funding to address the additional operational and resource-based costs such as travel and access to trades and services (Ministry of Education, 2022, About the Isolation Index section, para 2.). However, schools provided an important social response to geographic isolation during Covid-19. Schools in this research embraced a community-focused approach to general well-being by prioritising personal connections to students and their families via physically distributing educational resources, which became opportunities to personally connect with students within social distancing regulations. In this research the redistribution of resources included the powerful element of people or human connection.

Conclusion

Representation is the political dimension of Fraser's theoretical model of justice. It refers to the ability of individuals and groups to participate in society by making justice claims and, therefore, is fundamentally about inclusion and belonging. Aotearoa New Zealand's unique self-governing education system has its merits and challenges. This research has raised the profile of rural schools by exploring some of the specific considerations they faced and face in relation to urbanisation and Covid-19 from a governance perspective. This article presents some rural BoTs' experiences of navigating multiple educational and social considerations during the pandemic and has confirmed the need for individualised support of rural schools which stands in contrast to the MoE's top-down approach to crisis management. Recommendations from the findings in this line of study include the need for MoE recognition of rural school specific needs, more timely MoE responses to school funding and educational resourcing requests in response to crises, and additional collaborative support from other professional organisations such as the New Zealand School Trustees Association.

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[i] Māori are the Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand.
[ii] The New Zealand School Trustees Association is the national professional body for school boards offering education development and learning opportunities, professional support and guidance and networking events. https://www.nzsta.org.nz/about-us/#who-we-are
[iii] The decile system gives an approximate measure of the socioeconomic background of student community in relation to other schools across Aotearoa New Zealand. A school's decile rating influences the targeted funding received by schools to overcome the effects of socioeconomic barriers. The lower the decile, the more targeted funding the school receives. https://www.education.govt.nz/school/funding-and-financials/resourcing/operational-funding/school-decile-ratings/