

# New Zealand librarians in lockdown

By *Miriam Tuohy*

## Snapshot

We welcome Miriam Tuohy writing her first article as our regular author of the new *Synergy* section 'New Zealand Landscapes'. We look forward to learning from our colleagues in New Zealand. In this article Miriam discusses the responses from their library community to the recent restrictions and outlines what we can take away from these most unusual experiences.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made this year a particularly tough one. We've all had to do extraordinary things in circumstances that are both challenging and still evolving. In New Zealand our [Covid-19 elimination strategy](#) saw the whole country shut down in late March, with schools closed and everyone outside of essential services working from home. After a brief return to almost-normal life, restrictions were put in place again to contain another outbreak of Covid-19 in our largest city.

Since March, school library staff and National Library Services to Schools teams alike have had to adapt what we do, and how we work, to try and meet these challenges while still providing ongoing services and support.

## The nationwide lockdown

### National Library Services to Schools Covid-19 response

By mid-March, we were talking about possible school closures and how we'd provide support if that happened. When the move to [Alert Level 4](#) was announced, we had plans in place. With the challenge of working and learning at home ahead of us, we first had to look at what was going to be *possible*. Then we could decide what was the *most meaningful* work we could do.

Our top priority was making sure people were OK — looking after our well-being, balancing work and family responsibilities while at home.

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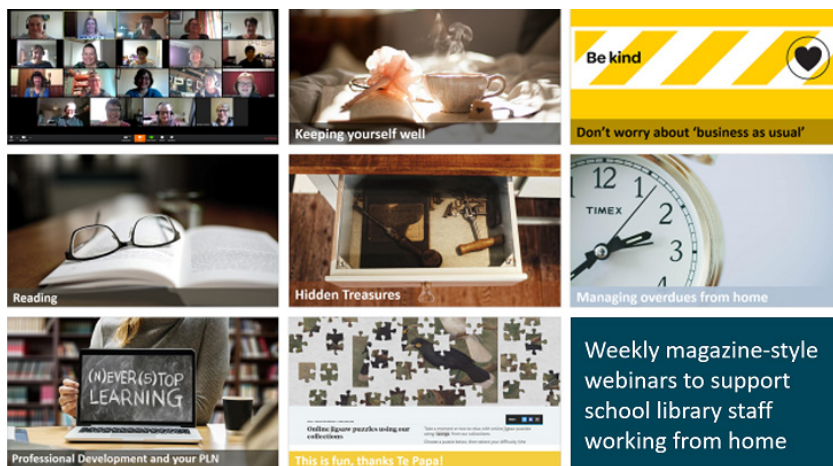
Our existing online services were given a boost.

- We extended the hours of our [AnyQuestions](#) online service to help students with research and inquiries so they could get help throughout the school day.
- We reviewed and updated key pages on our website for [supporting reading and learning at home](#) and made them easy to find.
- We began a major review of [Topic Explorer](#) (curated digital resource sets for curriculum support) — more than 90 topic sets have now been updated.

- We offered our online **professional learning** free of charge. Staff from more than 60 schools signed up to learn about collection development, and resources to inspire and inform inquiry learning.
- Help with login information for the **EPIC databases** (funded by the Ministry of Education and managed by the National Library) was in demand during lockdown, and in June we recorded the highest usage rates ever!

We were also able to try new things:

- We hosted webinars to support school library staff working from home. Our team kept participants informed, entertained, and most importantly connected during lockdown.
- The school library network groups that Services to Schools facilitates were moved online, with social catch-ups via Zoom scheduled first. Term 2 network meetings via Zoom included our first-ever national meeting for intermediate (for Years 7-8) schools.
- We trialled a new channel for online learning, with a short email course entitled “Your school library is still open”, designed to help schools set up an online presence for their library as quickly as possible.



Slides from our first webinar supporting school library staff working at home during lockdown.

## School library services during lockdown

In preparation for lockdown, school library teams made a huge effort to get as many books as possible out to their students to take home, with record numbers of items issued in the last few days before Alert level 4 came into force.

During lockdown, some school library staff were able to stay in regular contact with their colleagues, students and families but others could not. In Services to Schools’ first webinar for school library staff working at home we polled attendees



Services to Schools Capability team members working from home during lockdown.

about communicating with colleagues, and with students and their whānau (families). Email polled higher than all other channels as shown in Figures 1 & 2.

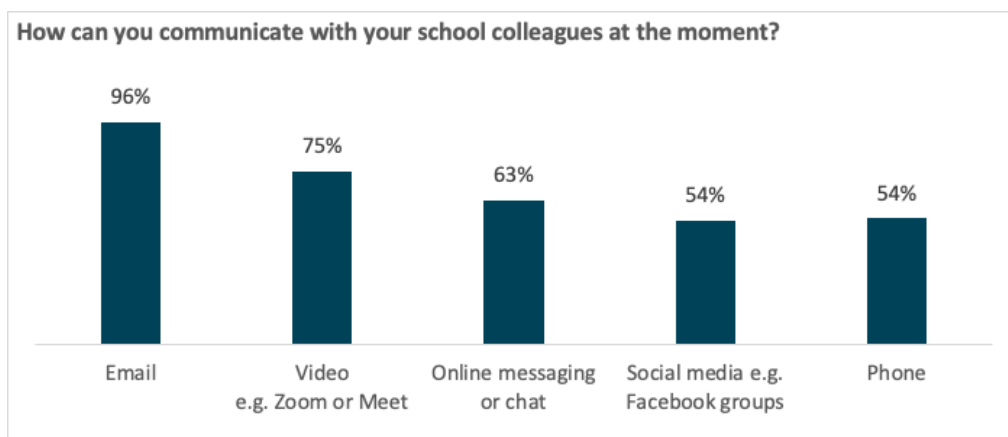


Figure 1: School library staff communication with colleagues during lockdown (n=113)

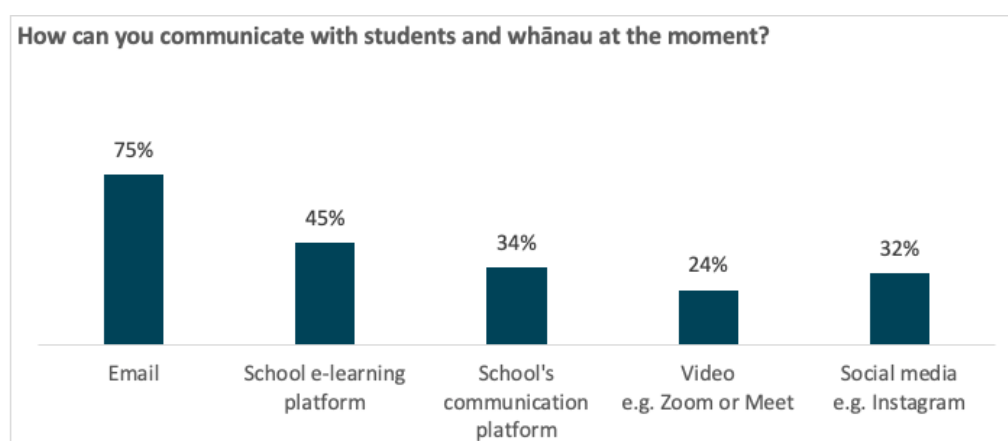


Figure 2: School library staff communication with students and their whānau (families) during lockdown (n=93)

Those who were able to stay connected with their community were mindful of the stresses for children and their families during lockdown and took care to focus on supporting wellbeing and learning where possible, while not overwhelming people with information.

## Access to digital resources and technology

Schools with an eBook platform continued to promote this service, and those without encouraged their communities to make use of their local public library eBook systems. There was renewed interest from some schools in providing eBooks as part of their future planning.

Some school libraries with managed sets of devices were able to make these available to students over lockdown. The Ministry of Education embarked on a massive rollout of Wi-Fi and personal devices (as well as print 'hard packs' with workbooks) to support learning at home.

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School library staff curated free eBooks, audiobooks, and other digital resources for their community, and produced videos and other 'how-to' information to promote and encourage their use.

## Virtual story-times

The [Coalition for Books](#) worked with the publishing and library sectors here to develop arrangements and guidance for running virtual story-times. Some school library staff made this a regular feature of their support for students during lockdown, reading live on YouTube or joining in class video calls to read aloud.

## School re-openings

New Zealand's Covid-19 alert level system uses the term '[bubble](#)' to describe the concepts of self-isolation and social distancing. When schools re-opened at Alert level 3 in late April, some library staff returned to school, working alongside small class bubbles in the library.

A handful of schools set up click-and-collect services to make books available again for students and their families.

On 13 May 2020 New Zealand moved to Alert level 2. Services to Schools lending service centres in Auckland and Christchurch re-opened and our Capability Facilitators were again able to meet face-to-face with school staff. Finally, on 8 June 2020, we moved to Alert level 1 where we stayed for the next 9 weeks.

## Auckland schools back to Alert level 3

On 12 August 2020 the Auckland region moved back into Alert level 3, and the rest of New Zealand to Alert level 2, after a new community outbreak. Schools in Auckland were closed, and all non-essential workers were once again working from home. At the time of writing, the whole of New Zealand is at Alert level 2, with all schools able to open again and most people back at their regular place of work, but with social distancing and gathering sizes restricted.

## How librarians can prepare for challenging times

If you think about the key elements of a school librarian's role, developing the skills to do these well will help us be prepared for future challenges.

- We focus on the needs of our community and include them as we make informed decisions about what library services and resources will work best for them.
- We develop and use systems to organise information and stories, to make access easy for our community.

- We create safe and welcoming environments where people can read, work and learn together or alone.
- We keep up-to-date with literature and information published for children and young people and do our best to make these available to our community.
- We keep up-to-date with new technologies, tools and platforms and explore how to use them ourselves and to support others.

Over and above that, there are some key traits I think librarians need to develop – regardless of where we work – to help us deal with challenges.

**Resilience:** recognise that challenges, uncertainty and change are inevitable. If there is one thing we've learned from the Covid-19 pandemic it is the importance of well-being and kindness – looking after ourselves so we can look after others. We need to develop strategies to help bounce back when we've been stressed or stretched in new ways. In our work, we need to design services that are flexible and adaptable, that reduce challenges, and give people options that work best for them.

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**Reflection:** when you look back at the challenges you've faced in 2020, think about your actions and interactions. Which were the most meaningful, and why was that? How can we focus our attention on those good bits and build them in to our every-day lives and work? How are we different now, and what impact will this have on our roles?

**Future-focus:** what do you think your biggest challenges will be in future? Will they be different to the challenges you have now? When you hear about new ideas, resources and tools, think about their potential impact on your library's services. It's important to keep learning all the time – [evaluating what we do and looking for ways to improve](#).

**Connections:** good relationships are fundamental to our work. Maintaining connections and keeping lines of communication open with our communities were so important during lockdown.

**...good relationships are fundamental to our work.**

What we have seen is that it's often those who are most isolated – whether geographically or socially – who need extra support to connect. How can we strengthen relationships and make our face-to-face and online interactions as positive and impactful as possible?

## Changes resulting from the pandemic

Despite the difficulties this year, we have also seen some bright spots, and positive changes. Responding to the pandemic has brought out strengths people and teams didn't know they had.

Creative problem-solving has led to innovative changes in the way we do things. Understanding what really matters to people helped us focus on how we can have the greatest impact.

The weeks of lockdown here gave school library staff time to reflect on how the library is working for their school community – their collections, the spaces, and the services the library offers – and to make plans for change and improvement.

For National Library's Services to Schools, some of the changes we introduced during lockdown are becoming business-as-usual for us now. Our online learning courses will remain free for the rest of 2020. Webinars will become a regular feature of our PLD programme, as will sector-based Zoom network meetings bringing together intermediate or area schools from across the country, for example.

We expect the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic to be with us for some time yet. For example, there may be schools with lower levels of non-government funding (related to a drop in fee-paying international students, or financial hardship in the community) who aren't able to support their library as they have in the past. In time the flow-on effects of school closures and disruptions will be clearer, and there will be ways for school libraries to help mitigate any learning loss.

At Services to Schools, we will work alongside schools in the months ahead to help them further strengthen the contribution their library can make to student learning and wellbeing. We hope it isn't too long before we can do that face-to-face with all our school library colleagues!

**Miriam Tuohy** joined the National Library of New Zealand's [Services to Schools](#) as School Library Development Senior Specialist in 2016. Her involvement in the New Zealand education system spans early childhood education, primary and secondary school and tertiary libraries. Miriam was a member of the [School Library Association of New Zealand Aotearoa](#) (SLANZA) National Executive from 2010-2016 including a year as President in 2015-16. As part of her current role, Miriam has contributed to the publication of Services to Schools [framework for school library development](#), the [2018](#) and [2019](#) reports of the nationwide surveys of New Zealand school libraries. She is also involved in developing and delivering professional development for school library staff and teachers, and is a regular contributor to the National Library of New Zealand's [Libraries & Learning blog](#).

## Appendix 1. Feedback

“Really enjoyed attending the meeting. I hope you can continue to offer online meetings. They work much better for us, we were forced to become really good at online meetings over lockdown.”

“Thank you for all the marshalling and organising and guiding us you do. We are much enriched by being a group, with the opportunity to share and communicate.”

“Thank you all of you – I’ve really loved the weekly webinars and they’ve been a lifeline to the library community.”

“I have really enjoyed the webinars and found them really supportive and useful – thank you and your team so much for all the hard work you have put into preparing them.”

“Thank you for producing this brilliant series of webinars. I have enjoyed them, have investigated almost all the links and plan to put some into action as soon as I have organised whatever happens at school when I eventually return. I am in my 7th week off school, with no way I can access my library or programme, so can do little except the PD you are offering.”

“Thanks for your amazing webinars over the last 4 weeks. I have been really inspired and have enjoyed the very professional presentations.”