



WHAT IS GOING TO BUILD STRONG NEW ZEALANDERS TO FACE OUR UNPREDICTABLE FUTURE?

This year has been one which has required huge resilience. The impact of the lockdown in March was particularly hard on children and young people – many of whom found the lack of social interaction with peers and teachers a massive adjustment. Not all young people adapt to change easily, and not all families include adults who can suddenly become a patient teacher! The whole community of Aotearoa can relate to the anxiety and disruption that lockdown caused, because it was one of shared experience.

One of the key things about children and young people attending a school or holiday camp is the commonality of experience that the entire of NZ should now be able to relate to. We all know how it felt to lose our freedoms, have reduced social interaction, or have real worry about the safety of ourselves or others in our family. In the same way, attending a school camp with peers creates a shared understanding of what it is like to be away from home, experience new environments, possibly eat different food, and, as a team, challenge one another to face fears, learn new things, or expand thinking and resilience. This shared experience creates genuine opportunities back in the classroom, not to mention throughout life, to transfer these learnings to other everyday things.

Like, for instance, coping with sudden change, dealing with worry about stuff outside our immediate control, or figuring out a new way of doing things. Oh yes, the things the nation is facing right now as we fight the Covid-19 global pandemic.

As well as the important shared experience aspect that enhances learning and resilience, a school camp importantly and directly provides two other powerful health benefits that serve as antidotes to worry and enhancers of mental wellbeing and resilience: 1) connection to nature and 2) physical exercise.

Few people in fact would argue any of these points. In the March 2020 article *Education Outside the Classroom In Aotearoa NZ* (Hill, North, Cosgriff, Irwin, Boyes & Watson) it was clear that the benefits of school camps far outweigh any concerns around cost or safety. The Herald article referencing this academic paper on the 17th of August 2020 implies the imminent death of such aspects of the school experience, but this does not hold true on deeper inspection of the Hill (et al) findings.

What they have found is not new: school camps require significant commitment and determination on behalf of the school teachers and schools involved. Over the past ten years, NZ has seen a raft of extra barriers evolve which on the one hand cause school camps to be safer, arguably 'better' from an educational standpoint, and more connected to our history and culture. On the other hand, we have seen the cost of school camps rise, the time requirement of teachers increase, and, liability concerns mount. On top of all the other increasing expectations it is not surprising that something has got to give.

The world changes. Cultures evolve. Things do not stay the same from one generation to another and there is no doubt that today's generation of school students have a very different world to live in than their parents or grandparents. So we accept that things change and move forward absolutely. But what should we hold on to as a nation that is central to who we are as kiwis? What should, or could, we let go of? If we agree that school camps are in general positive outdoor experiences that provide a chance for kids to push their boundaries, grow their confidence, become more independent and share life-long memories with their peer group... if we agree that these things are essentially 'good' for us – good for our wellbeing, good for our understanding of the environment, good for our resilience during the next lockdown etcetera – then is this the best thing to cut from the many pressures that schools and teachers face in today's world?

The YMCA runs camps. It's one of the things we are really really good at. We've been delivering awesome camps for kids for over 150 years in NZ and come a long way from the days of canvas bivvies



and digging our own latrines to highly professional outdoor instruction connected closely with learning about culture, history, personal values and more. We have evolved our offering to remove pressure from schools so that camps are more accessible. We aim to reduce barriers to education outside because we believe that the learning from outdoor education cannot be replaced with day trips or movies, google or “asking Siri.” This is because of that shared experience aspect – that thing about a group of friends all knowing what it feels like to sleep under the stars, swim in the kelp, or step over the cliff. Because it is the remembering, the stories later, which connect these experiences to the life-long learning.

What makes Aotearoa New Zealand particularly special is our connectedness to the outdoors. In Maori tikanga, everything is connected to the land and the sky, the sea and the forest. In colonial culture, we are a people of farming, of DIY, of adventure. We have Sir Edmund Hillary on our \$5 note – that is how much we value outdoor adventure.

Yet the future of the classic kiwi camp is in jeopardy thanks to compliance costs and a strong sense that it’s an optional luxury.

It is commendable that schools are experimenting with alternatives like day trips and urban adventures, which certainly provide valuable experiences. However there’s something about staying away overnight, in a safe and supportive environment, that builds a kind of resilience and confidence that cannot be achieved with any number of day trips to museums. The YMCA knows this. Parents know this. We believe teachers, individually, know this too.

The Government needs to support schools to meet the costs and logistical challenges of delivering school camps. There needs to be a Ministry of Education mandate for such programmes to be included as part of the curriculum, and supported appropriately with teacher training, relief teacher costs and the costs of the camps themselves. In this way we can safeguard against the deterioration of young people’s connectedness to our physical environment and the many taonga of the sea, the mountains, the bush and the land. In particular, the state needs to ensure that there is equity – we don’t want a ‘user pays’ scenario for camps which exclude those schools who lack resources across the board due to a lack of parent contribution or fundraising. When we live in a nation like New Zealand, no child should miss out on the mental and physical benefits of outdoor education due to a lack of funding.

And for fear of mentioning the blindingly obvious – school camp providers are not profit-driven. School camp providers around New Zealand, including YMCA camps but also we could mention a raft of other outdoor camps nationwide, are not for profit. This is part of our core purpose as charitable agencies – to build strong new Zealanders, support an appreciation of the environment and enhance wellbeing and health. We are not in it for the money, but for the outcomes we see these camp achieve, inter-generationally.

Can we all be persuaded to see the value of camp beyond the compliance and logistical costs and challenges? What is the opportunity cost if we don’t? What sort of New Zealanders will we see in the future if they have not been tramping in the rain or swum in the sea? (Yes, it is true, some kids we see on camp have never swum in the sea).

The YMCA urges all New Zealanders, teachers, decision makers, parents, young people – to fight for the future of meaningful outdoor experiences at camp. This is what will build resilience. Support wellbeing. Protect our environment. This is where the real transferable life-long learning happens.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julian Baldey'.

Julian Baldey
CEO, YMCA North

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brendan Owens'.

Brendan Owens
CEO, YMCA Central

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Josie Ogden Schroeder'.

Josie Ogden Schroeder
CEO, YMCA Christchurch