Global Studies of Childhood

Research with, by, for and about Children: lessons from disaster contexts

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ABSTRACT There is a need for critically informed studies that include children's perspectives on the role of children in disaster contexts, given the increased incidence of disasters resulting from the global forces of climate change. Three case studies are presented from two different disaster contexts in Australia and New Zealand, where the notion of child empowerment fits within the broader political culture of liberal democracy. Each of these case studies promotes children's right to participate, consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In attempting to provide opportunities for children to articulate their perspective on disaster, this study recognizes the manner in which the increased prevalence and scale of disasters may further complicate and distort possibilities for the actualization of children's participation rights. In doing so the authors recommend a theory-informed approach, including recognizing the complementarity of competing theories of childhood, and advocate for children's capacity and right to participate in decision-making which affects their lives. This article promotes these concepts while still recognizing their right to safety. It also demonstrates how the use of distancing and framing provides a safe space for child involvement within disaster-related research, and provides examples of appropriate methodologies to engage children and provide opportunities for meaningful contributions. Finally, implementation partnerships are discussed as a means of embedding the research within existing supported environments.

Introduction

Every child deserves to experience a life that is safe, healthy, socially connected, and which offers both opportunity and agency in the direction their life leads (UNCRC, 1989). Public health research allows us to identify priority child health issues and enables insight into the social determinants which influence child health outcomes and health inequities. However, the majority of this research is adult-centric in determining both the influences of health status and the drivers of change. There is a need for critically informed exploratory studies that include children's perspectives in understanding the issues and for engaging children in identifying solutions. This will

be demonstrated below in relation to disaster recovery, an area of importance across a range of disciplines as the global forces of climate change result in an increased number of natural disasters.

It is well established that natural disasters have serious impacts on mental health and social functioning (Norris et al, 2002). Mental health and well-being impacts may be manifested in different ways for different age groups, and can have a delayed onset (McFarlane, 1987; Norris, et al, 2002; Peek, 2008). It has been suggested that children and adolescents may have particular vulnerabilities in relation to psychological impacts following a disaster experience (Anderson, 2005; Peek, 2008; Caruana, 2009; Hawe, 2009). Children's sense of safety and security, their ongoing development, and their social relationships, may all be compromised (McFarlane, 1987; Gordon, 2002; McDermott & Palmer, 2002; McDermott et al, 2005). Concerns about these risks and vulnerabilities leads to a *children at risk* discourse (Gill, 2007; Leonard, 2007; MacDougall, 2009) which is reflected in a positioning of children as passive victims resulting in research and practice often overlooking the perspective of children and young people and their capacity to make a contribution. However, this representation of the child as vulnerable is being contested and examples are emerging internationally of children's capacity to actively contribute to planning, preparedness, response and recovery efforts, and the apparent positive mental health benefits of this involvement (Anderson, 2005; Peek, 2008). Involving children in these processes is consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 – particularly Article 12 which states children's right to participate in all matters which affect them (UNCRC, 1989). This perception of the child as an active citizen is reflected in the 'citizen-child' theory of childhood which recognizes children's right and capacity to contribute to the decisions affecting their lives (Morrow, 2003).

Further research is needed to ensure we can fully understand children's perspectives on their roles and what is supportive for positive disaster recovery. It is also required in order to develop mechanisms that transfer knowledge to relevant agencies and government departments. In recognition of this, the Citizen Child Collaboration has been formed. It is a research partnership with a focus on research with, by, for and about children, as a lens for agency in disaster contexts. The name Citizen Child Collaboration is based on the citizen-child theory. We apply this through research activities that promote children's capacity and their right to participate through a range of age-appropriate and ethical methodologies that also recognize children's rights for safety.

The forming members of the Citizen Child Collaboration are a multi-disciplinary team from three universities, conducting research in Australia and New Zealand. We bring to this study expertise in child health and well-being, education, citizenship, applied theatre, public health, psychology, and community partnerships. We have completed or are currently engaged in 29 studies with child participants, of those 29, seven are concerned with citizenship, and twelve are set in a disaster context.

The citizen-child approach seeks to problematize and address power relationships between the child and the researcher, and we consider examples of the construction of individual and social agency, both within the research frames and the wider context of child citizenship. Three conceptions of citizens have been identified (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) which different education programs aspire to produce and incorporate into their work. The first are the *personally responsible* citizens – people who will obey the law, pay their taxes and be kind to others. In disaster situations these citizens follow instructions and, when not personally involved in the disaster, give generously to disaster relief. The second type of citizen is the *participatory* citizen. These citizens join organizations, vote in elections, and volunteer to help others. In disaster situations, they organize and participate in relief efforts. The third, more *socially critical* type of citizen will investigate why the situation is like it is and fight to restore justice. In a disaster, they lobby governments and disaster management organizations to ensure that relief supplies are distributed fairly, the hard-to-reach communities are not forgotten, and that democracy is not overridden. Our studies have attempted to scrutinize the view of children as passive and compliant citizens, and seek to enhance opportunities for children to become participatory citizens, and to begin to see their role in the world as advocates for social justice.

In this article we report on the research experiences of the members of the Citizen Child Collaboration, drawing on studies conducted in two different countries, with two types of disasters and derived from different academic disciplines. We present three examples from our research to highlight how we have struggled to move from abstract theorizing about the citizen-child approach

towards the practical reality of engaging the citizen-child in the extremely difficult circumstances of disasters. Details are provided in each case of the methodological development and reflexive practice involved in our efforts to engage children meaningfully and ethically in post-disaster research.

The Three Case Studies

Below is a summary of the impact of the earthquakes that hit the city of Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2010 and 2011. This provides background for the reader to contextualize the first two case studies describing the work of Peter O'Connor and Carol Mutch in researching with children in disaster settings.

Description of 2010-2011 Canterbury Christchurch Earthquakes

September 4 2010. An earthquake measuring 7.1 on the Richter scale rocked the Canterbury region, including the city of Christchurch. It caused widespread damage to buildings and infrastructure. Liquefaction and flooding affected many areas and made moving around the city difficult. The quake caused billions of dollars' worth of damage. Thousands of people were removed to emergency shelters in local schools and sports centres. It was expected the city and surrounding districts would take years to recover. Continuing aftershocks hampered much of the recovery effort.

February 22 2011. A hundred and eighty-five people died and thousands more were injured or made homeless when a shallow 6.3 magnitude aftershock, situated much closer to Christchurch's city centre, devastated the already fragile city. The central business district was cordoned off, and a stunned city tried to come to terms with a bigger disaster, more damage, and an even longer recovery time.

June 13 2011. Another 6.3 earthquake further damaged an already vulnerable city and surrounding suburbs. Many people talked of this quake as the one that 'broke their spirit'.

December 23 2011. Yet another 6.3 earthquake amid the 10,000 aftershocks to rock the city of Christchurch. Many aftershocks measured at over magnitude 5 on the Richter scale and they continued to damage the city, and shatter frayed nerves.

Case Study 1: Teaspoon of Light

The first example is drawn from Peter O'Connor's work with children in Christchurch following the earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. Peter comes from a critical theory perspective that uses applied theatre as a tool for creating, analyzing and representing research data. Children are encouraged to take agency over the expression of their experiences, through creative arts-based activities (O'Connor, 2012).

All theatre involves its participants, actors and spectators, in meaning-making. Applied theatre, as a form of participatory theatre-making, often concerns itself with the process of making explicit understandings about the world in which we live, and the manner in which we might see that world changed. While applied theatre has been consistently used in communities as a site for meaning-making, Peter's recent work has simultaneously used applied theatre as a site for data-generation and community regeneration. This approach positions research participants as actors and allows them, through various aesthetic approaches (drama, music and dance), to explore the changing world in which they live. Typical of most forms of participatory action research, the data which arise from these approaches, and the aesthetic products as data, are collected by researchers and analyzed, often with the assistance of research participants. Central to applied theatre as research methodology is the notion that, as well as expressing or presenting existing knowledge, creative practices can produce new knowledge. Applied theatre as research recognizes practical and embodied knowledge can develop through arts practice, and that ideas and theories can arise from creative work (Norris, 2009; Fels, 2011; Gallagher, 2011; Hughes et al, 2011). In traditional research, findings are usually represented in numbers or words. Applied theatre, as research, seeks artistic

forms of expression that move beyond the constraints of words and numbers. Simply put, the arts exist because of the human need to find other ways for expressing what we know and feel about the world. This is particularly the case when working in the posttraumatic worlds that follow natural disasters.

Helen Cahill (2006) and Diane Conrad (2004), found similarities between participatory action research (PAR) and applied theatre. Applied theatre, like PAR, often involves a process of inquiry based on a topic, theme, or problem relevant to the participants (Nicholson, 2005; Thompson, 2006; Prendergast & Saxton, 2009; Prentki & Preston, 2009). Cahill (2006, p. 63) observes that both traditions 'are centrally concerned with dialogue, praxis, participatory exploration and transformation' and involve 'collective processes of enquiry, action and reflection'. In both processes there are collaborative relationships between the researcher/practitioner and the participants. Therefore applied theatre, like PAR, is seen as an affective methodology for researching with young people. Young people tend to be excluded from problem-solving activities relating to their own affairs (Wyn & White, 1997). They are commonly pathologized or glamorized in health and education discourses and, once relegated to the role of object of research, can only with difficulty be seen as the source of solutions (Cahill, 2006).

Following the earthquakes in Christchurch, children were constrained to perform roles purely of victims. In theatre terms, they were constrained to play the role of spectator, seen as having little to say of value about the new world in which they live, and how they hope it might be changed. Rather than questioning children about the trauma of the earthquake, Peter was interested in reframing children, as actors and agents with some control over events. He hoped to engage them with questions centered on considerations of how they might begin to reimagine, and hope, for better futures. He wanted to use theatre, not only to interact and add to the lives of the children he worked with, but also as a way of collecting and telling the stories of hope children held about their city.

Ten days after the devastating February 22nd earthquake in Christchurch, Peter worked in Christchurch with children as they returned to school. Using an interactive drama approach, the children worked with a story he presented about a cloth of dreams that had been torn. When asked to help the girl in the story with the torn dream cloth, the children created one for her to borrow while they got her one fixed. The children drew their own dreams onto large pieces of blank material. The children decided they needed to create a magic thread to be able to fix the cloth and together they worked out the list of ingredients they needed. One seven-year-old boy suggested three bales of belief. When asked if belief was heavy or light, he said it was heavy. They had to push hard as they rolled the belief into the cloud bowl they had imagined. Cups of love, and handfuls of giggles, were also added. An eight-year-old girl in role as a dream-maker added the final ingredient into the bowl. Asked for the final ingredient, she said she had 'a teaspoon of light from the darkest tunnel.' As she sprinkled the light into the bowl, she stood back and said, 'See, the light goes through everything.'

This extraordinary moment of classroom drama has been the catalyst for a partnership between the University of Auckland, UNESCO, and the Mental Health Foundation. This partnership has seen the Teaspoon of Light project work with thousands of children across Christchurch. The focus has been on using the arts to help children see themselves as people with agency to repair dreams, rather than as victims of the quakes. Data are generated in different forms for analysis within the project. Enabled to decide how to repair the cloth, we listen carefully to the children talk, we watch them paint and draw, and we dance alongside them as we bring the dreams back to life. We demonstrate within the drama research process that their voices and opinions are valid. Facilitators and researchers on the project collect multiple recipe cards, video the work and watch for patterns and themes as they arise. Teaspoon of Light has therefore provided the opportunity for children to express their hopes for the city they live in, and offer their advice on how they feel the city should be repaired. The project confirms that children have much to teach, and by offering ways for them to engage authentically as citizen-children with difficult and challenging issues, sees them drawing on depths of emotional wisdom we rarely acknowledge in children. This repositions them as *participatory* citizens and shows their potential for *socially critical* roles.

As a research method, the applied theatre process allowed children to talk, very soon after the quake, about how they felt about events, and also about how to reframe their futures. The fictional

story provided a distancing away from the actual events, so that although the children never spoke directly of the quake, the metaphor of the torn dream cloth provided a safety for the children to explore and express their feelings, about the disaster and its aftermath. This emotional distancing which often occurs over time can be arrived at through the fictional role taking soon after the event, without the threat of retraumatizing the children in keeping with *child at risk* discourse (Ackroyd & O'Toole, 2010; Belliveau & Lea, 2011; Bresler, 2011).

Case Study 2: a school-based approach

The second example draws on Carol Mutch's work between 2011 and 2013 with school communities in Christchurch and surrounding districts, who were coming to terms with the earthquakes and their repercussions. Her interest, like O'Connor, was in reframing the view of those affected by the earthquakes as active citizens learning from their experiences and reshaping their futures, rather than victims (see for example, Mutch, 2011). She was particularly interested in the ways schools could empower children to enter into a research partnership to participate in and shape a research experience.

Children represent a large, but often under-recognized, population group in disaster research, yet as La Greca (2006) suggests:

> The loss and disruption of life that ensues after a disaster may lead to school closings, school
> absences, and reductions in academic functioning; to reduced opportunities for social
> interactions with friends; and to increased exposure to major life stressors such as family illness,
> divorce, family violence and substance abuse. (p. 141)

Where schools have been used as settings for disaster research, there are both advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages is that researchers can select from large representative samples, or interview children in familiar surroundings (Prinstein et al, 1996; Gurwitch et al, 2002; Silverman & La Greca, 2002). The challenges include that schools themselves might have suffered damage, school staff might be coping with their own home or family issues related to the disaster, communication and transport may be affected, and schools might prefer to focus on re-establishing routines or catching students up on missed work (La Greca, 2006).

In the case of the Canterbury earthquakes, all schools were affected to some degree. From closure for several weeks as city infrastructure such as power and water was restored, to having their schools demolished, being moved to temporary sites, or sharing sites with undamaged schools. At the time of the earthquakes, the researcher witnessed at first hand the role of schools as they became communication and support hubs for their local communities, as school principals and teachers selflessly returned to work despite their own personal tragedies within the city's ongoing struggles, and as children came to terms with the events they had witnessed and the resulting disruption to their lives. Carol wanted to preserve these stories for the schools themselves, as part of the history of the city, and of the nation. She also wanted to capture what the participants had learned about themselves as individuals, as a community, and as a nation, as the world around them was literally turned upside down.

Funding was gained from UNESCO and the University of Auckland to undertake a pilot study of five school communities. The research had several aims: (a) schools would each get a record of their particular experience in a format of their choice, for them to keep and share as they wished; (b) this record would be made available to UNESCO for their website and to Archives New Zealand for historians and researchers to access; and (c) the researcher would have access to all of the raw data for undertaking cross-case analysis.

Once the hurdles of ethical approval and access were cleared, especially given the emotionally charged setting of the research, five willing schools with varying experiences needed to be found. The researcher took a sensitively staged approach – first a phone call to the principal, followed by e-mailing through the research brief, following this was a personal visit, attendance at a staff or parent meeting followed, and so on – until the school finally felt as if all questions were answered, and fears allayed. Once a school agreed to participate in the study, the next challenge for the researcher was encouraging schools to allow children to have a more significant role within the design, data collection, synthesis, and presentation of the school's story. It is understandable that schools and parents felt they needed to be protective of their children, and they were concerned for

their children that reliving these experiences might cause distress. As well as researching to provide evidence that creative ways for representing their stories would be an emotionally and psychologically healthy activity for children, who were not exhibiting high levels of post-disaster trauma, the approach was to talk to schools in pedagogical terms, using language that educators would be familiar with. The researcher could do this by linking the project to inquiry learning, key competencies, child-centred pedagogy, and experiential learning (Ministry of Education, 2007).

The following section outlines the diverse approaches undertaken by three primary schools in the pilot group. The three schools – Hillview, Riverside, and Beachlands (not their real names) embraced a child-centred approach, but each with different interpretations and applications. Hillview chose to compile a book of their experiences. The book would contain the narratives from interviews with children, parents, the principal, and teachers. These narratives would be supplemented with photographs, children's stories, and drawings: many completed immediately following the major earthquakes. Hillview School wanted children to be the centre of the story but some of the adults were concerned too much emphasis on children's individual experiences could be upsetting for them. Consequently, children were interviewed in a variety of combinations – in small groups from the same class, with their siblings, or with their parents. The interviews were very conversational in tone and often began with a warm-up activity to make the children feel more comfortable about participating. The research was framed in a way that allowed children to distance themselves a little from the trauma of their experiences by, for example, asking them to imagine themselves as a grandparent telling their grandchildren about the earthquakes. The families have since reported, rather than the children being upset by the interviews, they have been catalysts for families re-telling their stories to each other, and even sharing experiences that hadn't been talked about before. In this way, children have become active constructors of their family histories, as well as participants in their own school's history.

Beachlands School also wanted children to be at the centre of their project. They wanted to take the opportunity to build on the skills and interests their senior students had shown in video-making. They were adamant that their project was to be about 'kids talking to kids'. The project required a trainee film director to be brought in to mentor the senior students on the basics on filming, directing, interviewing, and editing. The students designed the interview protocol and showed remarkable flexibility in adapting the questions to suit the age of the students they interviewed or for the flow of the story. The teachers within the school chose children from each of their classes who they believed would make good interview subjects, or for whom they thought participation would be a good experience. The final question in the interview protocol asked the interviewees what they thought of the project. The answers provided interesting insight as children said they now 'feel brave enough to tell their story their way' or it was 'alright to tell a happy story about the earthquake'. The children's insightful comments revealed how many adults had kept children inside the passive victim role. When children talked with their peers, they felt as if they could be themselves and take more control of how they framed their own stories.

The third school, Riverside, wanted the children and their families to *all* be represented and remembered within their project. They wanted to create something that was both a memorial to mark what happened to their community, yet would also celebrate their resilience and look towards the future. The idea that emerged was to create a garden and seating area within the school grounds, populated with plants from the families' gardens, especially where the property had been zoned 'red' (to be demolished). The garden was also to be filled with mosaics made from 'broken bits' from their homes. A group of children brainstormed ideas and these formed the basis of a set of four panels. The first panel is their town in early times, the second represents their town in modern times, the third their town being torn apart by the earthquakes, and the fourth identifies their hopes for the future. The local community has already planted the garden around the seating area. A local artist has agreed to help with the practicalities of turning the design into a living piece of art. The students are excited that when they have grown up and moved away they can come back to the site and find a part of themselves and their stories still living and standing strong.

The learning for the researcher, and for the schools that chose to take up the challenge, was that with careful facilitation and support for children, they could draw on their personal experiences of traumatic circumstances (Public Health Agency of Canada, British Columbia Ministry of Health, Emergency Management & Development, 2007; Bonanno et al, 2010). They were able to begin to see these in a broader context, within which they could take agency for the

representation of their stories. Children connected with the idea of a citizenship role – contributing to something much larger and longer lasting; something that preserved their stories, their schools' and their families' experiences for history. This experience enabled the children to begin gaining different perspectives and allowed them to discuss their experiences more objectively. They were moving from the particular ('my story') through the more general ('our story') to the conceptual ('What does our story tell us about who we are?'). In doing so they were able to envisage a role as *participatory* and potentially *socially critical* citizens.

The final case study focused on work with children following the 2009 bushfires in Victoria, Australia. Below are some statistics for readers to understand the scale of the disaster.

Description of the February 2009 Victorian 'Black Saturday' Bushfires

A combination of climate change, a decade of drought, and high fuel loads contributed to the unprecedented catastrophic bushfires in February 2009 across the State of Victoria, Australia. One hundred and seventy-three lives were lost, leaving 16 children orphaned and many more injured and traumatized by their experiences. Over 450,000ha were burnt, including 40 townships. More than 350,000 buildings were destroyed including 2059 homes.

Case Study 3: hearing children's voices

The final example comes from the work Lisa Gibbs and Colin MacDougall undertook to determine if it was ethical and appropriate to involve children in post-disaster research, following the devastating Victorian bushfires of February 2009. It describes a methodology that has been prepared through extensive consultations, piloting and refinement. Although the methodology has not yet been implemented, the consultative preparatory process provides many insights into the feasibility and acceptability of post-bushfire research with children. They drew on methodologies developed in previous studies with children and with post-trauma youth, engaged in a process of international consultations with child research and trauma experts, and held discussions with affected Victorian communities, to progressively develop an ethical framework for child research participation, which subtly shifted the power of agency from the adult to the child. This proposed approach involved a staged introduction of the methods. This was to allow for progressive informed consent, combined with a research process that allowed for child influence over the direction and extent of the research discussion (Gibbs et al, in press). Specifically it proposed the use of mobile methods (Ross, 2007; MacDougall et al, 2009; Ross et al, 2009; Kullman, 2010), by inviting children on a walking or driving tour of the local area, with the child acting as a tour guide, pointing out to the researcher and photographing features of their local area that have significance for them. They will then be invited to organize the subsequent collection of photos in terms of which local features or places support their feelings of connection to that place and their community, and which ones counteract that. Alternatively, children will be able to use specialized software for converting photos and stories into cartoonized images, forming a de-identified storyboard for the child's use, and potentially for local exhibition. All of this will be done by individual participants or alongside their friends and family, according to each participant's preference. In some cases it may be more valuable to observe a parent and child discussion in order to gain access to the child's views through a trusted adult, and to understand the role of the parent-child interaction when forming and activating knowledge and beliefs in a real-life setting (Irwin & Johnson, 2005). There will also be an opportunity for a follow-up interview for those who are willing to specifically explore how views of local places have changed over time as a result of the bushfires and related recovery initiatives. The follow-up interviews will explore the ways in which people form and reform, meaningful relations with local places and communities (Lewicka, 2011).

This methodology has been situated within a large multi-site, five-year study of individual and community post-bushfire recovery trajectories, 'Beyond Bushfires: community resilience and recovery'. As this study is being conducted in partnership with local communities, service organizations, local government, state-wide government and national emergency management agencies, it ensures the research with children is contextually relevant and embedded within a broader understanding of the issues for communities affected by the Black Saturday fires. The

participatory approach also provides strong and ongoing opportunities for knowledge translation between all partners (Israel et al, 1998). This close connection between the researchers and the communities highlighted additional considerations which influenced the implementation of the proposed methodology.

The progressive shift on issues of concern for post-disaster communities over time means that the content and methodology of research developed in response to an event can potentially become out of date before it is initiated. The original purpose of this research method was to give children a voice in relation to their disaster experience and recovery activities. However, in the medium-term recovery period (in this instance almost four years post bushfires) the advice from parents and service providers was based around the idea that young people were 'over' bushfire talk, and would not be interested in participating in bushfire-related research. In addition, parents were understandably very protective of children and youth in relation to any post-disaster activities. Parents described not wanting to risk a return to trauma for their children who had struggled with the experience, and were now getting their lives back on track. This is reflected also in the very low completion of quantitative surveys by parents and caregivers for children and by adolescents themselves for the Beyond Bushfires study. There was some suggestion by parents that involvement could be a useful way for parents to open discussion with children who seemed to be suppressing the post-trauma impacts. Many adults also expressed appreciation of the recognition, implicit in a long-term study, that the impacts of the fire experience may be an ongoing experience. Fortunately, the main focus of the proposed methodology, on current attachment to place, may help to distance families and young people from specific bushfire discussions. This may also maintain its relevance over time.

A citizen-child research methodology to address potential vulnerabilities in these children should demonstrate good practice relevant for all groups. However, in order to reach groups who are potentially marginalized or disengaged, it is important to form partnerships with, and work through, community leaders and service providers who are already connected with and trusted by the groups (Israel, et al, 1998). These partnerships provide essential expertise in relation to language and targeting of research materials (e.g. to ensure age appropriateness), assistance with recruitment and data collection, and contribution to interpretation and dissemination of findings (Gibbs et al, 2008). In the context of the Beyond Bushfires study, these partnerships include community organizations within all of the participating locations, specific connections with organizations supporting young people (for example, a well-established youth group in a town severely impacted by the bushfires), primary schools in affected communities, the State Government Office for Youth, and youth counsellors responsible for conducting youth participation activities. This reliance on developing partnerships with community members and organizations who are already working with children assists with the engagement of children, and providing a safe, supported context for the research activities. The research partnerships with government, agencies, and service providers also allow an opportunity for children's perspectives to be heard outside of child settings. However, it is likely that local mechanisms would need to be deliberately set up to enable meaningful and ongoing contributions of children to local disaster-related policy and practice decisions, in order for their role as *participatory* citizens to be realized. However, there is always the potential for *socially critical* citizenship to be expressed through alternative mediums and to subvert existing systems.

Discussion

In attempting to articulate child experiences of disaster we recognize the manner in which the increased prevalence and scale of disasters through climate change may further complicate and distort possibilities for the actualization of children's participation rights. In our studies, we have applied a citizen-child perspective to frame children as active agents who use agency to shape the world in which they live. In order to actualize this framing, of children as citizens who can exercise agency, it is essential for us as researchers to engage, not only in theoretical and methodological debates, but also in critical reflection on the power we bring as researchers in general, and as adults researching with children in particular.

Complementary theories of childhood informed this research with additional theory, specific to the context and methods of each approach. These theories became a coherent underpinning that

helped to guide our research reflexivity and decision-making. Open-ended emergent study designs were employed to allow best practice to emerge from a theory-informed participatory approach. Providing an opportunity for children to contribute their perspective (citizen-child) was a central feature of each approach, shifting them from simply *personally responsible* or compliant citizens, respecting and supporting children as active/*participatory* contributors and their potential as *socially critical* citizens. Ethical and age-appropriate methodologies were developed, such as discussions of a mythical dream cloth for children in Christchurch, assigning children the role of grandparent storyteller in the school-based approach, and a focus on attachment to place, rather than the fire experience, for children who experienced the bushfires in Victoria. The research mechanism of distancing from the trauma event created a safe space for children to risk talking about their feelings and perspective on their experiences. The school-based approach in Christchurch also demonstrated how direct discussion about the disaster event within the research process can also help children to frame, and make sense of, their trauma experience. These approaches were all carefully designed to ensure they did not exacerbate post disaster trauma (*child at risk*). To do this they acknowledged the child as an expert or co-researcher who guided the researcher through the activity, helping to direct both the content of the research discussion, and the research activity itself. This ensured the child was not taken into places, in the physical realm or in conversation, which are uncomfortable or painful to revisit. It is also a first step towards encouraging active citizenship for children in their communities. Finally, each approach adopted methods that accommodated children's interests and competencies. This included: applied theatre, video-making, storytelling, photography, and mobility methods.

An important consideration when researching with children in disaster contexts is the credibility and capacity of the researcher. Central involvement of a senior researcher is advisable to ensure they have the skills, flexibility and authority to adjust their approach in response to emergent issues. In addition, by working in partnership with trusted local agencies, we have demonstrated how to embed research within local contexts, and how to progressively develop methodologies and approaches in response to child, significant adult and community feedback. This not only provides opportunities for children to participate in research that has personal relevance, but also allows them to contribute to 'something bigger' and enables them to appreciate their own role within a broader, shared experience.

Conclusion

This article presents theory- and practice-informed strategies for involving children within research, initially relating to disaster experiences and with applicability to broader research. The citizen-child approaches such as reflexivity, distancing, and engaging children as co-researchers combine to support safe and meaningful contributions from children. The article also highlights the importance of implementation partnerships to support children in active research and potentially active citizenship. These partnerships are characterized by long-term commitments by the researchers to the communities of research, and also by mutual obligations and reciprocity in terms of knowledge transfer.

Empowering children to contribute to understandings of disaster experiences and to potentially participate as active citizens is particularly critical in light of a continuing emphasis on shared responsibility in disaster management and recognition of the importance of the contribution of community to disaster-related decision-making and prioritizing. This provides an opportunity for children to have a meaningful influence on how their disaster experience and recovery is shaped. However, it will not happen without supportive community and policy frameworks to ensure children's contributions do not remain restricted to child settings. Broader child citizenship is possible when decision-making systems are designed to be inclusive by offering opportunities for all ages to contribute using various mediums which accommodate different levels of literacy and means of communication – for example visual, oral, written, technology-based, art-based, drama-based and mobility-based. Families, schools and other child-adult group partnerships can provide important scaffolding for child contributions provided the partnerships enable true child engagement and are not simply adults speaking on behalf of the children (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

By examining how a citizen-child approach works in disaster contexts, we intend to contribute to research that makes a difference to children's lives. At the same time, the research skills honed in the complexity of disaster contexts should make a valuable contribution to the broader goal of promoting the role of children in theory, research, and practice. In doing so, it has potential multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary applications in terms of child health and well-being, with particular relevance to disaster preparedness, response and recovery.

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