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Engaging Children in Participatory Research in Sensitive Contexts

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Abstract

Following the 2010/2011 Canterbury earthquakes in New Zealand, I worked with five primary school communities on research to capture their earthquake stories. The aim was that we would co-design projects to create a permanent record of each school's experience. The projects took place over several years and led to different outcomes from an illustrated book to a video documentary and a community memorial. I wanted children's participation to be a key element, but in the nature of participatory research, I let each school choose for themselves how they wanted children to be involved. This case will use three of the school projects to illustrate the different ways in which children's participation was framed by the adults responsible for them—from passive victims who needed protecting to active participants who could exercise agency over their decision making. The experience of working with these different schools led to creating a conceptual framework based on a continuum of engagement of children in research about themselves—from minimal to maximal involvement. The case will use the three school project examples to highlight principles for researching in a participatory manner and the methodological, ethical, and practical challenges of researching with children in sensitive contexts.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Have a better conceptual understanding of engaging children in research
- Develop awareness of the role of arts-based methods in disaster contexts
- Understand the methodological and practical challenges when working in a sensitive context
- Articulate the ethical considerations of working in a sensitive context
- Devise a set of principles to underpin their research approach when using a participatory approach in a sensitive context

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Research Context

On Saturday, September 4, 2010, at 4:35 a.m., a 7.2-magnitude earthquake struck the Canterbury region of the South of Island of New Zealand. The ground buckled and shook. The residents of the city of Christchurch and surrounding districts of Waimakariri and Selwyn were violently awoken. Inner city buildings collapsed; homes, schools, and businesses cracked and slumped. Transport, power, water, and waste infrastructure ceased to function (see Figure 1). Liquefaction and flooding added to the chaos. Because of the time of day, there were injuries but no deaths. First response teams clicked into action; communities rallied round and began

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the huge task of cleaning up. The steps to recovery seemed daunting, but people set about rebuilding their lives with grit and determination. Less than 6 months later, on February 22, 2011, this time in the middle of a working day, a 6.3-magnitude aftershock centered closer to the city's business district threw the buildings a meter in the air to finish the demolition the first earthquake had begun (see Figure 2). Schools, shops, and workplaces were filled with people going about their business, and many already fragile buildings did not stand up to the second assault. Over 4,000 people were injured, 185 fatally (see Figure 3). A total of 1,200 inner-city buildings were destroyed beyond repair and 140,000 homes received further damage. The trauma did not end there as the city faced over 12,000 aftershocks over the next 3 years which hampered the repair and recovery process.

Figure 1. Road slumping after 2010 earthquake.[1]

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Figure 2. Collapsed buildings after 2011 earthquake.

Figure 3. A cross to mark an earthquake death in 2011.

I was in another city on that February day and watched live television coverage as rescue services and passers-by rescued people from the collapsed building in which I shared an office. A total of 18 people never made it out of my building alive, and I was left with the

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realization that not only would my life never be the same again, but that I also had a duty to use my expertise in ways that would help the people of my shattered city.

Research Overview

Having been a teacher and teacher educator in the city, my attention was drawn to the role of principals and teachers in supporting children, families, and the wider community cope with the aftermath of the major quakes and the on-going aftershocks. I spoke to a school principal I knew and suggested that I could help them gather their stories, as a historical record of this significant time in New Zealand's history and also to acknowledge the role that schools had played in the disaster's response and recovery. She discussed it with her staff and school board and we cautiously began. I held meetings with teachers and parents to outline what I had in mind and also to assure them that this was their project and they could decide how it would proceed and who they might want involved. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and my university provided funding to get the project underway, and my university gave ethical approval. A second school showed interest and I repeated the pattern of meeting with relevant people and listening to their ideas and concerns. Then a third school asked to join and the research began to take shape. Each project was completely different. In one school, for example, I only interviewed the principal; in another school, every child and teacher participated. I have chosen three of the school projects to discuss in more depth because they exemplify different research relationships, research designs, and outcomes. They also exemplify different ways in which the adults (teachers and parents) framed children's ability to engage in post-disaster research. I will talk about each school in turn, using a pseudonym based on their relative geographic locations within the disaster zone—Hillview, Riverside, and Beachlands.

Conceptual Framework

Although I conceived the conceptual framework (Figure 4) after the data analysis, I will explain it here first to frame the stories of each school's research journey.

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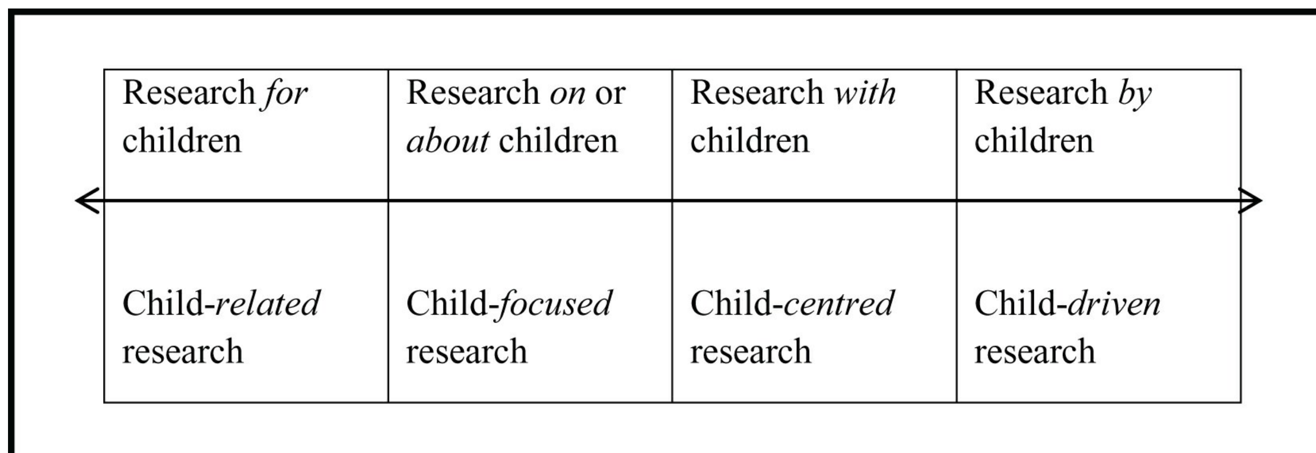
Figure 4. Continuum of engagement of children in research.



Research that is *for* children (child-*related* research) is research that aims for positive outcomes for children but does not necessarily engage them in the research. An example of such research might be the analysis of existing statistics, such as health or educational data, to inform policy-making.

Research *on* or *about* children (child-*focused* research) has at its heart investigating children and their lives. Children might participate in the research, for example, through interviews, observations, experiments, or assessments.

Research *with* children (child-*centered* or child-*guided* research) is more participatory. Children might be engaged in the design, implementation, or sense-making in ways in which the adults treat the children as partners in the research.

Research by children (child-*driven* research) is at the far end of the continuum where children are the major drivers of the research from design to dissemination. Adults might only play a facilitative or supervisory role.

Hillview School: Research *On* or *About* Children

Research Design

In February, Hillview School children watched the city's business district collapse before their eyes (see Figure 5). Two children at Hillview lost a parent in the earthquakes and thus Hillview's approach to children's engagement was cautious and protective. After preliminary discussions, the school agreed to extend the invitation to join the project to anyone in the school's community who wished to participate. The interviews were to be video- or audio-recorded and the transcripts would be shaped into book with children's illustrations (see Figure

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6). In the end, there were over 30 participants of whom half were students.

Figure 5. View of city from Hillview School.

Figure 6. Children's artwork after February earthquake.

Research Practicalities

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The school had oversight of the interview location, order, and process. Participants were interviewed in small groups—children with their siblings, classmates, or parents. A teacher remained present when the children were interviewed to give reassurance or to be ready to provide emotional support, if necessary. The interviews took place in the school library and were conducted by two interviewers, who took turns to lead the conversations. When the interviews were transcribed and edited, they were returned to participants (and, in the case of children, also to their parents). Changes were negotiated and the book was published. The school received enough hard copies for all participants and extras for the library. The school also received the PDF files so that they could make further copies if they wished. In return, I was able to keep the raw anonymized data to use in academic publications.

Method in Action

We were careful, as interviewers, not to ask direct questions that would bring up traumatic memories, so we had children reframe their experiences in different ways. We asked them to explain what happens in an earthquake to children who had never experienced one, to imagine they were telling the story of their experiences to their grandchildren or to discuss how they might plan a new city. As the children felt more comfortable with us, they opened up and talked more about their memories and fears. But they also talked about what they had learned about themselves and their hopes for the future. Their stories were not all bleak, they recalled moments of courage, of pride, and even of humor. There were tears, but we worked through these moments gently, and in the following days, both children and parents said how beneficial their participation had been.

Practical Lessons Learned

Although we were both experienced researchers, we were new to disaster contexts. We took great care to build relationships with the school and our participants. We took advantage of working as a pair of interviewers in different ways. The interviews were emotionally intense, so taking turns allowed us to manage our energy levels. As one person was interviewing, the other could observe, reflect, or contribute as appropriate. We also used the fact that one researcher had been in the earthquakes and therefore could respond more empathetically, and the other, who hadn’t, could ask more naive questions.

Conclusion

On reflection, we were pleased that we had taken things slowly and built trust with the school. It meant that we felt that our relationship was reciprocal. The school ended up with a product that they were proud of and we gained valuable insights into disaster response and recovery. Having two researchers working together was a strength. We could build a safe research

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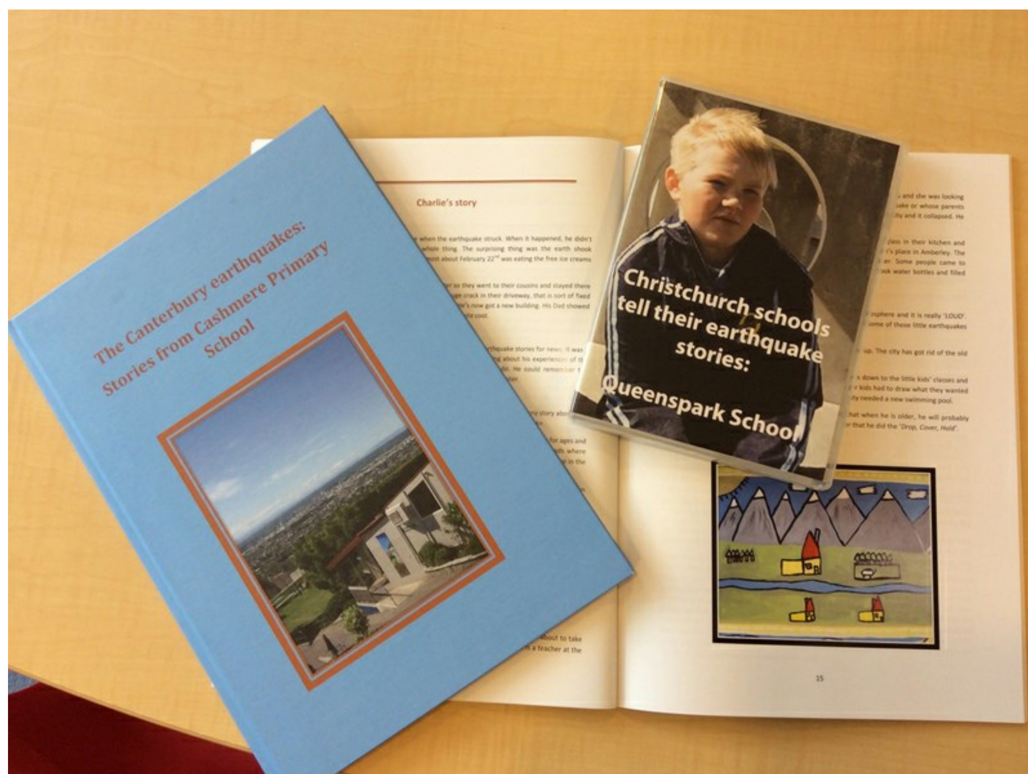
environment as well as support each other. It was important that we were experienced researchers. It was not a place for novices. We were always alert for indications that we might be pushing our participants a little too far. We needed skill to know when to pull back, deflect, redirect the direction of the interviews, or draw them to a close. It was exhausting. It was also a longer process from interviews to published book than we anticipated, but it was absolutely worthwhile (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Completed book of Hillview's experience.



Riverside: Research *With* Children

Research Context

The September 2010 earthquake was to have a marked effect on Riverside, with high levels of liquefaction, slumping, and damage, especially to the town's historic buildings. The damage was exacerbated in the 2011 quakes. The school wanted to design a memorial seating area where the school and community could come and contemplate what they had been through and how they had survived. When the project began in 2012, students from Year 8 (aged 11-12), the final year of primary school, were chosen to pull together ideas and design a theme for the mosaic mural to frame the seating area. In the following year, the next cohort of students would create the mosaics. The school had already been considering how to recognize what the town had been through, so the opportunity to be supported with external funding was timely.

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Thus, it took much less time to gain approval and buy-in from the school community.

Research Design

The first step was getting the senior students to brainstorm ideas that could be pulled together to give the design coherence. Again, I worked with a colleague using a blend of discussion, group work, and arts-based activities to get the students to come up with ideas that would guide the mosaic design. A circular mural with four panels emerged as the students discussed lost buildings and cultural icons. The first panel would represent their town in early times, including the indigenous Māori people, who had a major settlement there, followed by the arrival of the European settlers who set up farming and industry. The second panel would portray their town in modern times, prior to the earthquakes, with people going about their daily lives. The third panel would be their town being torn apart by the earthquakes, with collapsed buildings, cars falling into cracks in the road, and ambulances taking people to hospital (see Figure 8). The fourth would represent their hopes for the future. As the students were working in groups on the panels, one boy drew well-known local sailing ship. When asked what it represented, he said it was "sailing through a river of emotions," and that became the project's title.

Figure 8. A close-up of the panel representing the earthquakes.

Research Practicalities

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Once the content of the panels was decided upon, I needed to find an artistic project manager to assist me to work with the students to produce the mosaic. Although I could use my teaching skills to work with classes of children to create the images to go into each panel, I needed someone who understood the technicalities of mosaic-making on a large scale. A recent fine arts graduate took on this role. We had no idea of the task we had set ourselves! We needed a bulldozer to prepare the ground, special gravel for drainage, concrete, bricks, tiles, cutters, storage—the list goes on. It would not have been possible if the community hadn't volunteered their services, materials, and time. The school also gave us an empty classroom to use as workroom and storeroom. The children's idea was to make the mosaic out of "broken bits of their homes." We collected donations of crockery and tiles. The children were taught how to cut tiles, prepare the individual items using cut paper mosaics as templates, and how to place and glue the pieces onto the prepared mosaic site and fill the gaps with grout. By the time the last tile was laid at a special ceremony, every child in the school had taken part in the mosaic's creation (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Two participants discussing their part in the mosaic production.

Method in Action

It might seem to an outsider that this was an art project rather than a research project. How did we generate "data." Unlike the first project I discussed where we had interviews to transcribe and analyze, the data resulting from this project might appear almost incidental. Yet, they were

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rich and varied. We had a video recording of the first workshop where the children came up with the panel concept. We had multiple iterations of the panel designs and the individual images that would fill the panels. We had a photographic record of each stage of the process. We had formal recordings of interviews with students at different times and we had notes of informal conversations as groups of students worked on different aspects of the mosaic production. The challenge was how to make sense of the types of data and how to compare data across the different projects. Although I have mainly used a case study approach to date, there is so much more that can be done with the data and many different theoretical or analytic lenses that could be applied.

Practical Lessons Learned

The lessons learned with this project were many. It was a major logistical challenge. We had to work with the school and within their timetable and commitments. We had to manage large numbers of children and adults, who all wanted to be part of the project. We needed to sequence aspects of the project carefully so that things were done in a timely manner without losing momentum or enthusiasm. We were at the mercy of the weather, the availability of the community contractors, the necessary tools and resources, and people’s willingness, time, and skill. It could not have worked without goodwill on both sides. I was committed to helping the school achieve their goal even if it took up more time and money than I had been prepared for. They were willing to accommodate our presence and the interruptions to their regular program because they saw the benefits to their students and their community (see Figure 10).

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Figure 10. Children playing alongside the mosaic on their school field.

Conclusion

The mosaic project was very much a partnership between adults and children. The adults managed the project technicalities, but the children made the artistic decisions. The panels evolved from the original designs as children discussed the best colors to portray emotions or where the various visual elements complemented each other. In addition to being allocated class time, many children came and worked in their break times. It took over a year to complete, and fittingly, the children who had become most closely involved with the mosaic were asked to lead a ceremony that recognized what the school and its community had achieved. The mosaic is now the site of yearly earthquake memorial events.

Beachlands: Research *by* Children

Research Design

The Beachlands community was hit hard by four earthquakes measuring over 6 on the Richter scale throughout the 2010-2011 earthquake sequence. Families would remove the liquefaction, dry out their homes after flooding, and repair the cracks, only for it to happen all over again. Many streets were "red-zoned" (flagged for demolition). My contact at Beachlands school made it clear that they wanted a project that was to be led by their students or as they put it, "kids talking to kids" (see Figure 11). Some of their senior students (aged 10-12) had shown an

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interest in video-making. This project provided an opportunity to build on this interest and apply it to an authentic context. The school chose the project team, which comprised four students and a liaison teacher. Participant information sheets and consent forms were sent home to parents of interested students and a filming roster was set up.

Figure 11. A student being interviewed by a peer.

Research Practicalities

We provided a video camera and microphones and brought in a trainee film director to mentor the students on the basics of filming, directing, interviewing, and editing (see Figure 12). The project team students designed the interview questions and practiced interviewing and filming each other before they were ready to interview the participating students and teachers.

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Figure 12. The trainee film producer working with the students.

The project team had decided that their interviewees could choose where to be interviewed to best tell their earthquake stories. This resulted in interviews taking place in a range of locations —in the school library, in the playground, by the school garden shed, or even at the beach, where one class had been on a school trip. This meant managing logistics that we hadn't anticipated, such as transport, weather, and noise.

Method in Action

There was no doubting the enthusiasm of the project team, and as time progressed their skill levels improved immensely. They came to understand lighting, framing, and using background (see Figure 13). They gained confidence with interviewing and showed remarkable flexibility in adapting the questions to suit the age of the students or the flow of the story.

Figure 13. One of the students operating the camera.

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Although the students led and managed the project, adults still had a duty of care. There was always a teacher or researcher hovering within reach in case a student being interviewed became distressed or the team had a technical glitch. What we did find was that when the children being interviewed were given control of their stories by choosing the location and shaping their narrative, they were less anxious and more articulate. The child-led nature of the project allowed them to feel safe with what they shared, and the medium of documentary making helped them see their story as someone else might see it, thus enabling them to step back from it.

Practical Lessons Learned

I learned that each school operated differently. This ranged from modes of communication, relationship with the liaison person, managing access, arranging timetables, or how the project moved forward in my absence. Because of the nature of each project, I also needed to engage different people as part of my research team. On this site, I needed to explain to the young film producer how to work with children in a participatory manner so that he didn't take over and make the documentary an adult-led production. At this school, and others, I also needed to sensitively manage any differences of expectation or role between the supporting adults. By bringing the discussion back to our vision of this being *by* children *for* children, we could negotiate a way through their differences.

Conclusion

This, of all the projects, was the most child-led. The final documentary is of varying quality, but that didn't matter to the students or their families who attended the "premiere" in the school hall. The project team were applauded for their efforts and they were very proud of their achievements.

The experience of children being interviewed by their peers also provided interesting insights. The participants said they felt brave enough to tell their story their way or that it was "alright to tell a happy story about the earthquake." These comments reveal how, prior to this opportunity, adults may have intentionally or unintentionally viewed children as passive victims. 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.

Discussion: Research Principles

As the projects developed, a set of key overarching principles emerged that underpinned all the project interactions. These were partnership, negotiation, trust, communication, sensitivity, and reciprocity.

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The initial discussions with the liaison person at each school, usually the principal, highlighted that the approach was one of *partnership*. As the lead researcher, I would bring my research expertise, my access to funding and resources, and my project management oversight. The school would need to manage the practical realities of implementing their project, including preparation for the data collection activities, such as collecting consent forms, arranging interview timetables, and making counseling support available.

It was important that we entered the research partnership in a spirit of *negotiation*. The initial phase could take several months as the school consulted the community and as I made myself available to answer their questions. It was very important that I negotiated each research site separately as the contexts, earthquake experiences, and chosen end products were all very different. We jointly discussed the process, products, roles, and responsibilities. Over the course of the projects, as personnel or circumstances changed, we needed to review our agreements and re-negotiate if necessary—especially as each project became more complex than we ever anticipated.

The third principle was *trust*. It helped that I had been a teacher and teacher educator in the city and that I was living through the aftermath of the earthquakes alongside them. The schools needed to feel that I had their best interests at heart and that I was genuinely interested in their stories—not just gathering data for my own ends. I needed to trust that the agreements we negotiated would be carried out in a spirit of goodwill. After the February 2011 earthquake, I was commuting from my home in the earthquake zone to another city for work. Every moment of my time was precious, and the projects required each partner school to carry out their agreed responsibilities in a timely manner.

To manage multiple projects across different sites with my limited on-site availability required regular *communication*. Having a single liaison person at each school made this easier, especially as the different projects required other personnel, such as the artist managing the memorial project or the trainee film producer helping the student documentary makers, to gain access to the schools. In turn, schools felt they could raise concerns with me and we could find ways to solve these amicably.

All the while, the city was experiencing constant aftershocks; families were moving in and out of temporary housing; classes were being held in tents, church halls, or on shared sites; and exhaustion was setting in. This meant that people's welfare—students, staff, or project volunteers—had to take precedence over data gathering or project completion. It was important that we proceeded with heightened *sensitivity* and adjusted expectations to suit.

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Finally, because the research was a partnership, it needed to provide *reciprocity* for everyone involved. The schools were supported to make sense of the events, record their stories in a permanent form, and were given ownership of the completed products. The schools agreed to provide copies, where relevant, to the funders (UNESCO and my university) and to Archives New Zealand. In return, it was agreed that I could have the raw data (interview transcripts, notes, relevant school documents, video footage, children's drawings, and photographs of the activities) to conduct thematic and cross-case analysis to add to our knowledge of the role of schools in disaster response and recovery.

Researching in Sensitive Contexts

Researching in a sensitive context, such as a disaster zone, provides challenges for both the researcher and the researched. Van Zijll de Jong et al. (2011) note how little discussion on the realities of working in disaster zones appears in the research literature. They raise questions about how researchers can be supported as they navigate topics such as grief, loss, destruction, or mental and physical damage, with their participants.

Although there are clearly established ethical research protocols for protecting participants from any harm, the physical, social, and emotional vulnerability of disaster victims means that researchers must take even more care to act in a safe and ethical manner. When the data gathering involves the recalling of traumatic events, and takes place in an insecure and uncertain environment, the usual understanding of the roles of researcher and participant becomes more fluid and negotiated.

The nature of the context also affects research design and methods. As Spence and Lachlan (2010, p. 104) explain, "Unpredictable circumstances may necessitate the use of atypical practices in terms of design, data collection and analysis, and certain conventions concerning collection and analysis may be called into question." I conduct mainly qualitative research, which has the advantage of being of smaller scale and more responsive to changing circumstances. But, by its very nature, that of gaining insight into people's lived experiences, it involves revisiting traumatic incidents.

Some writers even note inherent dangers, such as researcher emotional or physical safety, forming attachments outside the research parameters, or compassion fatigue and desensitization (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007; Watts, 2008). Yet, these writers also stress that building an empathetic rapport is essential to sensitive research. It values the experience of the participant and enables the researcher and researched to make an emotional connection, which acts "as a 'doorway' to the inner terrain of people" (Watts, 2008, p. 8).

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Research Ethics

Writers also note that doing research in sensitive contexts involves more than ethical concerns in relation to the participants; it also presents dilemmas throughout the entire research process, from selection of participants and gaining access, to entering the field and conducting the research, to then leaving the field, analyzing data, and disseminating findings (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Watts, 2008). At each step, I needed to ask myself whether this was the best way to do things and whether it would cause anyone any harm.

To gain ethical approval from my university when working with children, a researcher needs to assure them of four things: (a) that the research will be of benefit to children; (b) that their participation is necessary; (c) that the methods are appropriate; and (d) that the research provides for their physical, emotional, and psychological safety.

All participants in the earthquake projects were assured that their involvement was voluntary and that they could stop or withdraw at any time without fear of censure. Because of the age of the child participants, we also needed parental consent and to frame our agreement processes for children in language that they could understand. Systems were also in place, such as school counselors or support teachers for children, in case the re-living of the trauma became too disturbing. In each project, researchers and/or teachers worked together to look out for signs of distress in the participants and to support each other.

As the final products were narratives of real people in a historical situation that would become part of New Zealand's archival records, participants needed to understand that it would be difficult to guarantee the anonymity of their school or themselves. The agreement reached was that the products that the school owned and disseminated would include real names and places, but when I wrote up material for academic dissemination, I would use pseudonyms so that the emphasis would be on key themes rather than individual attribution.

Researching With Children in Sensitive Settings

What everyone involved in the different projects came to learn was, unless children were suffering serious trauma, such as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), that carefully designed projects, which enabled children to make sense of their experiences, through methods, such as guided conversations, arts-based processes, or student-designed activities, appeared to be more helpful than harmful. This is supported by the research literature (see, for example, Cahill, Beadle, Mutch, Coffey, & Crofts, 2010; Prinstein, La Greca, Vernberg, & Silverman, 1996). What we also found was that these processes could not be forced, hurried, or put children under pressure. They needed to evolve in an environment of trust in which

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children were seen as having valuable contributions to make. Although our sample is too small to make definitive claims, we did notice that when children were treated as research partners and given responsibility to make decisions, the projects had creativity, richness, and authenticity that we feel we wouldn't have been able to obtain in adult-dominated projects.

The conceptual framework of engagement of children in research was conceived as a tool to help researchers to begin to consider how and why they might make appropriate use of children's participation in their projects. What the rest of this research methods case has set out to do is then provide practical examples of how this has played out in practice at different places on the conceptual continuum. What is hard to convey in words are the rewards of working with children—of what their insights teach us about ourselves and our world. It is of some importance and urgency that we stop and take time to listen.

Note

1. All photographs were taken by the author and/or are reproduced with permission.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. In this case, a post-disaster setting has been described as sensitive. What other contexts would you describe as sensitive and how might this influence your research design?
2. The projects described in this case follow an emergent qualitative design. What are the advantages and disadvantages of working in this way?
3. The projects described in this case used arts-based data gathering and presentation methods (narrative story-telling, mosaic production, and video-making). What considerations are needed before using these approaches?
4. The conceptual framework places children's engagement on a continuum. Discuss and justify where you would place other research with children that you are familiar with.
5. This case outlines the set of research principles that emerged as the projects proceeded. Are there other principles that you would want to add to this list when undertaking participatory research?
6. This case stated that ethical decisions are not just made at the beginning of a research project but throughout. Compile a timeline of a research project and discuss the possible ethical decisions that might need to be made as the research proceeds.
7. The research described in this case set out to promote children's engagement in research that was about them. To what extent do you think the research succeeded? How might the engagement have been improved?

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Further Reading

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