

Children researching their own experiences

Lessons from the Canterbury earthquakes

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KEY POINTS

- The literature on children and disasters suggests that children need to process the events in order to move forward with their lives.
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises that children should participate in decisions that affect them.
- In post-conflict and post-disaster contexts, adults tend to revert to making decisions on behalf of children.
- In this study, conducted after the Canterbury earthquakes, adults supported children's participation in markedly different ways.
- The study's findings led to a framework for considering how and when research decisions can be made *for*, *about*, *with* or *by* children.

New Zealand has faced an unprecedented series of disaster events in recent years. The Canterbury earthquakes provided an opportunity to document the role that schools played in supporting their communities to respond to and recover from such events. It is important that we capture what we have learnt from these experiences to help other schools in the future. This article discusses the researcher's experience of working with three school communities following the Canterbury earthquakes. This led to a conceptual model of children's participation in research. The model highlights the ways in which adults frame children's participation and how this shapes the research design. The article argues that we need to be more aware of how adult perceptions enhance or limit children's authentic participation in research-based and other decision-making activities.

Research context

The earthquakes that struck Christchurch and the surrounding districts of Waimakariri and Selwyn in 2010/11 are well documented (see, for example, Aydan, Ulusay, Hamada, & Beetham, 2012; Potter, Becker, Johnston, & Rossiter, 2015). Two quakes in particular caused the most damage: the 7.2 magnitude earthquake that hit at 4.35am on 4 September 2010 and the 6.3 magnitude that hit in the middle of a school day on 22 February 2011. Following each quake, schools were expected to undertake a multitude of new roles. They became community relief hubs, school leaders became emergency managers, and teachers became responsible for children's immediate safety and longer-term psychosocial recovery (Education Review Office, 2013; Mutch, 2015, 2016).

The Christchurch Schools tell their Earthquake Stories research aimed to help schools record their experiences and support children's emotional processing of these traumatic events (Prinstein, La Greca, Vernberg, & Silverman, 1996). At the same time the stories would provide archival material for generations to come. The various projects are written up elsewhere (see, for example, Mutch, Yates, & Hu, 2015). The aim in this article is to examine in more depth how the understanding of children's participation was framed differently by each school and how this affected children's engagement in decision making. The framing of children's participation has implications beyond these particular post-earthquake projects because it resonates with how we view children as participants and decision

makers in ways that enable or limit their wider engagement in school and society.

Literature summary

Children's rights have taken on more importance since the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Dockett & Perry, 2011; Loveridge, 2010; Nairn & Clarke, 2011). We have moved from the view of childhood as a biological construction, whereby children are adults-in-the-making, to one where they are autonomous and capable individuals in their own right (Coppock & Gillett-Swan, 2016; Loveridge, 2010).

Children's rights in disaster contexts are often viewed from a "child-at-risk" perspective (Gibbs et al., 2013). This means they are portrayed as vulnerable and passive, and it is assumed that adults will need to make decisions for them. Disaster researchers note that children's particular concerns and interests are largely ignored (Cahill, Beadle, Mitch, Coffey, & Crofts, 2010; Save the Children, 2006).

There is significant literature that discusses the short- and long-term impacts of disasters on children's social, emotional, and educational development. Researchers note behavioural changes such as bedwetting, clinginess, anxiety, irritability, impulsiveness, and aggression (Bonanno, Brewin, Kaniasty, & La Greca, 2010; Cahill, et al., 2010; Prinstein et al., 1996). Such symptoms are common in the first few months, but fewer than a third of children will be of ongoing concern and most will recover within a year or two (Bonanno et al., 2010). Returning to normal roles and routines and distracting children

from dwelling negatively on the events are activities that support their recovery (Prinstein et al., 1996).

Children not severely traumatised benefit from opportunities to process the events. Talking to a caring and trusted adult, finding support from their peers, expressing their feelings through creative, physical, and arts-based activities or guided conversations are ways that support emotional processing. These activities help children to view the events more objectively, to integrate or assimilate them into their personal histories, and to look towards a hopeful future (Cahill et al., 2010; Gibbs et al., 2013; Mutch & Gawith, 2014; Prinstein et al., 1996). While it is important to prevent harm and exploitation in post-disaster contexts, there is untapped potential in children that could be better utilised to support community recovery and revitalisation (Save the Children, 2006).

Research methods

The research approach taken in Christchurch Schools Tell their Earthquake Stories was participatory and emergent. The aim was that each school would receive a completed version of their earthquake story, which they would own and could disseminate as they wished. The researcher would facilitate the process by accessing funding, resources, and expertise to bring their ideas to fruition. In return, they would agree to the researcher keeping the raw data. Copies of the completed products would be made available to the funders (for example, UNESCO) and to Archives New Zealand as part of New Zealand's historical records. Because schools were co-designing the projects there was no preferred method. Five schools took up the opportunity and three school projects are reported on in this article. The participant selection, data gathering, sense making, and product completion depended on how schools conceived that their collective story might be collated and recorded. The data gathered as part of the wider project were video and audio interviews, children's stories and drawings, photographs, project plans and the completed products, which included two video documentaries, an interactive website, an illustrated book, and a community mosaic.

Ethical considerations took on heightened importance. Participants had experienced a traumatic event and it was critical that they were not further traumatised by the research activities. All participants were assured that their involvement was voluntary and that they could stop, take a break, or withdraw at any time without repercussions. Systems were also put in place, such as school counsellors or support teachers, in case the revisiting of earthquake experiences became too distressing.

Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework of children's engagement in research arose as the data were analysed across the different schools. A continuum was used to explain how adults framed children's involvement and consequently shaped the research approaches. The continuum has links with other bodies of literature on children's participation (Cheminais, 2008; Hart, 1992) and children's voice (Cheminais, 2008; Fielding, 2001, 2004), some of which also offer progressions towards more genuine or enabling forms of children's involvement and decision making in matters that concern them.

In this article, our continuum is used to highlight three school scenarios within the framework. The earthquake projects were not clear-cut, but as each one progressed, each school's overall approach to children's participation tended to cluster around a particular perspective on the continuum, as displayed in Figure 1. The continuum is not a prescriptive framework, but rather a tool to assist in examining or justifying the choices researchers and adults responsible for children make and how these choices might shape the way the research proceeds.

FIGURE 1. CONTINUUM OF ENGAGEMENT OF CHILDREN IN RESEARCH

Research <i>for</i> children	Research <i>on or about</i> children	Research <i>with</i> children	Research <i>by</i> children
Child-related research	Child-focused research	Child-centred research	Child-driven research
Adult as conductors of research	Adults as managers of research	Adults as co-constructors of research	Adults as facilitators of children's 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. Adults design and carry out 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. Adults design and manage the research. Children might participate, for example, through interviews, observations, experiments, or assessments. Adults conduct the data analysis.

Research *with* children (child-centred or child-guided research) is more participatory. Adults engage children in the design, implementation, and/or sense making so that the children are treated as partners in the research. Approaches might tend to be more qualitative or arts-based but could still involve quantitative methods at a

level appropriate to children's skill and understanding.

Research by children (*child-driven* research) is at the far end of the continuum, whereby children are the major drivers of the research from design to completion. Adults play educative, facilitative, or supervisory roles. As children are not limited by research conventions, the approaches can be very innovative. The focus might be as much on the process as the product.

I have chosen projects in three schools (Kahurangi, Karaka and Kākāriki—not their real names) to discuss in more depth because they exemplify different ways in which the adults framed children's ability to engage in a research project that was about their experiences. These three schools represent aspects of research *about*, *with*, and *by* children. While I have placed these schools at different places on the continuum, this is not meant as a critical judgement of any school. Each school cared passionately about their students and put them first in their endeavours. What is of interest here is that each school made different decisions about what was best for their students, and as a consequence students' involvement was shaped by these views to a greater or lesser extent.

Three case studies

Kahurangi School: Research *on* or *about* children

After discussions between the lead researcher and the principal, teachers, and parents, Kahurangi School settled on making a book of the school's earthquake stories. The data-gathering interviews would be video or audio-recorded and the book would be created from edited transcripts. Two children at Kahurangi School had lost a parent in the earthquakes, so Kahurangi's approach to children's engagement was cautious and protective.

The school played a hands-on role in managing the research process. They chose the interview location, organised the distribution and collation of consent/assent forms, and made up an interview roster. Children were interviewed in small groups—with their siblings, classmates, or parents. A staff member remained present when children were interviewed to give reassurance or to be ready to provide emotional support. The interviews were conducted by two interviewers, who took turns to lead the conversations while the other kept an eye on the children's wellbeing.

As interviewers, we were careful 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 have never experienced one, to imagine

they were telling the story of their experiences to their grandchildren, or to discuss what they would like to see as their city was rebuilt.

As the children felt more comfortable with the interviewers they opened up and talked more about their memories and fears. Their memories were vivid and colourful. They could clearly remember the noise, the physical sensations, what they saw, what they were doing, and what they did next. Children were able to talk about how the experience had changed them and how they now realise what matters most in life. Their stories were not all bleak—they recalled moments of courage, of pride and even of humour.

When the interviews were transcribed and edited they were returned to the participants—in the case of children, via their parents. A period followed of negotiating amendments, rephrasing or deletions. Eventually the book was published, and a copy was given to each participant and a set given to the school.

This school exemplified research *on* or *about* children. Children were given safe opportunities to make sense of the events through carefully guided conversations. They were able to step back from their personal experiences and see that they were not the only ones who were coming to terms with the enormity of what had happened. The adults involved—the principal, teachers, parents, and board of trustees—decided that in the context of this school, a process that kept tight management of children's involvement would do the least harm. It was a very valuable activity that generated rich research data while assisting children to assimilate their experiences into their personal histories.

Karaka School: Research *with* children

The September 2010 earthquake was to have a marked effect on Karaka, which lost a third of the town's buildings. 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 Years 7 and 8 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.

Two researchers worked with the students 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. A circular mural with four panels emerged as the preferred design. The first panel would represent their town in early times, including Māori settlement, followed by the arrival of the Europeans. The second panel would portray their town in modern times with people going about their

daily lives. The third panel would be their town being torn apart by the earthquakes. The fourth would represent their hopes for the future. The mosaic was named “River of Emotions” after a comment made by one of the students as he was working on a panel design.

A fine arts graduate managed the project. The school provided an empty classroom to use as workroom and storeroom. The children were shown 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. The mosaic is bright and colourful yet full of significant and thoughtful images that highlight what the town meant to the children, what they lost in the earthquakes, and what values they have learnt from the experience to take into the future.

The mosaic project was very much a partnership between adults and children; that is, research *with* children. The adults managed the project technicalities, but the children made the artistic decisions. As well as being allocated class time, many children worked on it in their break times. Community volunteers came in response to a call for materials and assistance. It took over a year to complete and provided a community space for adults and children working side by side to make collective sense of what had happened to their town. The mosaic is the site of yearly earthquake memorial events.

Kākāriki School: Research *by* children

The Kākāriki school community was hit hard by earthquakes throughout the 2010/11 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” (not suitable for habitation). Kākāriki school made it clear that they wanted a project that was about “kids talking to kids”. Some of their senior students (aged 10–12) had shown an interest in video making. The school chose a project team, which comprised four students and a liaison teacher.

There was still a role for adults in this project. First, they had a duty of care, especially given that they were working in a post-disaster environment, to ensure that no physical or emotional harm came to any participants. There was always a teacher or researcher within reach in case someone being interviewed became distressed. Second, adults needed to help the students achieve their goals by providing equipment and any necessary training. The researcher organised 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. The students designed the interview questions and practised interviewing and filming each other before they were ready to interview the participating students and teachers.

The project team had decided that their interviewees could choose where to be interviewed in order 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 resulted in stories that grew more organically out of the setting in which students were being filmed. Being outdoors for many interviews caused difficulties with background noise, but no one minded, as the sophistication of the product was less important than the authenticity of the participation.

The child-led nature of the project, an example of research *by* children, allowed the participants to feel safe with what they shared, and the medium of documentary making helped them to see their story as someone else might see it, thus enabling them to step back from it. The experience of children being interviewed by their peers also provided interesting insights. Children said they felt brave enough to tell *their* story *their* way. One student noted that it was “alright to tell a happy story about the earthquake”. These comments reveal how adults might sometimes unintentionally frame children as passive victims. When children talked to their peers, they felt as if they could be themselves, and take more control of how they framed their own stories and their process of recovery.

Conclusion

This article has briefly explored notions of children’s rights, participation, and decision making in the context of the Canterbury earthquakes. The case studies highlight the relationship between the way adults frame children as participants with particular decision-making rights and the opportunities for children to engage authentically in matters that concern them. This relationship was expressed in a diagrammatic framework—a continuum of engagement of children in research (Figure 1).

The scenarios on the continuum have implications for educational researchers. They pose a challenge to consider and justify the choices made about children’s participation. While at different times and for different reasons different scenarios might be chosen, what matters is that the choices are thoughtfully made. Researchers are challenged to consider in what ways their choices give or take away children’s agency and enable or limit their authentic participation.

There are also implications for this continuum model beyond research contexts. In what ways are children’s

rights or their involvement in decision making limited by adults in everyday contexts? Are there times when the adults responsible for children could move themselves along the continuum to give children more opportunity to engage in authentic decision making? The experience from this research shows that children relish the opportunity to become engaged, and the results go far beyond the limitations adults might have expected of them.

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