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**USING VISUAL IMAGES TO EXPLORE YOUNG CHILDREN'S
RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS IN NEW ZEALAND**

First author:

Professor Carol Mutch (BA, MA, PhD)

Associate Dean (Research)

School of Critical Studies in Education

Faculty of Education and Social Work

The University of Auckland

Private Bag 92601, Symonds St, Auckland, 1150, NEW ZEALAND

Ph +64 9 623 8899 Ext 48257

Fax + 64 9 623 8836

Cellphone +64 27 836 5150

Email: c.mutch@auckland.ac.nz

Carol Mutch is a professor in Critical studies in Education in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Auckland. Over her career, she has also been a teacher, teacher educator, policy analyst, educational leader, researcher and writer. Her most recent research, for which she won a 2020 University of Auckland Research Medal has focused on the ways in which educators step up when a disaster or crisis strikes a community. Since Covid-19 arrived in

New Zealand, her *Te Whakatere au Pāpori* research team have conducted a range of studies on children's, schools' and young people's responses to the pandemic.

Second author:

Noah Romero (MA)

School of Critical Studies in Education

Faculty of Education and Social Work

The University of Auckland

Private Bag 92601, Symonds St, Auckland, 1150, NEW ZEALAND

Phone: +64 9 623 8899 Fax + 64 9 623 8836

Email: noah.romero@auckland.ac.nz

Noah Romero is a doctoral candidate in the School of Critical Studies in Education at the University of Auckland. His research explores nonformal learning and its implications for social change and epistemic survival. He draws from queer theory, postcolonial feminism, critical hermeneutics, new materialism, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices to analyse relational becoming in subcultural contexts. Noah's current work focuses on the unschooling movement, punk rock, and skate culture, with a particular interest in the Philippine diaspora. He is a member of the *Te Whakatere au Pāpori* research team.

Abstract

This chapter had its genesis in the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns in New Zealand. In order to get deeper insights into how young children were making sense of their new way of life, the authors used visual text to spark conversations between children (aged between 3 and 8 years old) and their parents. The study analysed children's verbal and creative engagement with a series of digital picture books about a toy bear in lockdown. Using Ricoeur's hermeneutic inquiry and writings on narrative, autonomy and responsibility as interpretive tools, the findings highlight how young children cultivated community-responsive sensibilities during the pandemic. The participating children understood the necessity for the lockdowns, showed concern for people outside of their familial household, and, moreover, were eager to help safeguard the well-being of others. By sharing our findings, in which young children responded to the pandemic with insight and thoughtfulness, we aim to contribute to understanding young children's developing sense of autonomy and responsibility in this unprecedented time.

Keywords

Visual methodologies; children; Covid-19; Ricoeur; hermeneutic inquiry

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USING VISUAL IMAGES TO EXPLORE YOUNG CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS IN NEW ZEALAND

Introduction

New Zealand's Level 4 lockdown in early 2020 created a situation in which children had to remain home from school or early childhood education. This does not, however, mean that they stopped learning. In our chapter, we begin by outlining the motivation and process for creating and disseminating a visual resource in the form of a digital story book for parents and teachers about a toy bear in lockdown. We recruited parents to record children's conversations as they listened and reacted to the stories soon after the first lockdown. We discuss how the use of contemporaneous visuals enabled children to connect intimately with the toy bear's emotions and experiences. We draw on Ricoeur's conceptions of narrative identity, autonomy and responsibility (Ricoeur, 1984, 1992, 2007) to posit preliminary insights into how, by connecting with the bear's story, children were continuing to construct knowledge and display sensibilities outside the context of formal learning. Applying critical hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1971) to an analysis of two sets of data (transcriptions and photographs) enabled us to observe, experience, and theorize the ways by which children were exercising autonomy at a time in which their routines had been disrupted and their movements restricted. Our analysis highlights children as storied beings, constructing identities in and through the pandemic, displaying a developing sense of self and others. We argue that the use and interpretation of visual artefacts has enabled us to gain deeper insights into children's sense-making during their time in lockdown.

Context

When the Covid-19 virus found its way to New Zealand in early 2020, the concern was that the hospital system would not cope with a nation-wide pandemic (Cameron, 2020). Following the advice of epidemiologists, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern declared a public health emergency, outlining a set of pandemic alert levels and restriction measures to be enacted at each level. On March 25, the entire country went into strict lockdown at Alert Level 4. Using the analogy of a bubble, people were restricted to interacting only with those living in their immediate household. Families were to choose a designated shopper who would be their contact with the outside world for exempted activities, such as getting medical supplies or going to the supermarket. Bubble groups were allowed out to take exercise as long as they stayed local and maintained a safe distance. Educational institutions were closed and students of all ages began remote learning from home (Cameron, 2020; Mutch, 2021).

The catalyst for this study was series of four digital picture books: *Bear Goes into Lockdown*, *Bear Settles into Lockdown*, *Bear Stays in Lockdown*, and *Bear Ends his Lockdown*, created by the first author, Carol Mutch, throughout the 2020 Level 4 national lockdown and distributed free online.¹ The motivation was to give parents and teachers a way to approach children's questions and experiences through a contemporaneous but relatable character. The books tell the story of a stuffed toy named Bear, who shelters in place with a family of humans during the first lockdown. Throughout the books, Bear deals with many of the same issues New Zealand's children faced while in lockdown. These include being cut off from friends and social networks, an inability to visit family and other loved ones, disruption of established routines, bouts of boredom, and a need to reacquaint themselves with the people in their bubble, such as

parents and siblings. In addition to providing prescient commentary on the book's visuals and storyline, children responded by recreating Bear's adventures while sheltering in place, writing letters to Bear or creating personal protective equipment for their toys. This chapter analyses two sources of visually related data. The first source is a series of transcriptions that capture children's reactions to specific episodes in the *Bear in Lockdown* books. The second is a set of photographs produced by children after reading the books with their parents. Before discussing the theoretical and methodological approaches to our study, we will first set the chapter in the context of the use of visual methodologies used in research with children.

Visual methodologies

Traditional social science approaches to analysing visuals produced by children tended to focus on the behavioral and psychological attributes the drawings revealed about their creators (Coates & Coates, 2006). Child psychologists and pediatricians, for example, would often ask young children to draw straight lines or figures of people. They then compared the child's outputs with a typical child of the same age to determine if the child was developing appropriately (Dobson & Jay, 2020; Pauwels, 2015). Contemporary approaches to visual methodologies instead prioritise the content, process, and relationships that inform the production of visual artefacts as opposed to their form, in order to make the best use of a rich source of interpretive insight into the social lives of children (Brown et al., 2020; Cox, 2005; Dobson & Jay, 2020, Literat, 2013; Pauwels, 2015).

Using visual methodologies has become a valuable tool for the study of children in their everyday life-worlds (Brown et al., 2020; Daniels, 2008; Green & Denov, 2019; Mayaba &

Wood, 2015; Wall et al., 2012) as well as children in sensitive or trauma contexts (Cahill et al., 2010; Peek et al., 2016; Visser & du Plessis, 2015). Writers have highlighted the increasing use of visual methodologies that can complement or work synergistically with text (Kachorsky et al., 2017), provide more nuanced depiction of emotions and concepts (Literat, 2013), especially for pre-literate children (Coates & Coates, 2006), stimulate creative and abstract thought (Literat, 2013) and enhance trustworthiness, rigor, credibility or validity of research with young or vulnerable populations (Mayaba & Wood, 2015; Wall et al., 2012). Writers also claim that visuals can mediate power relations (Fischman, 2001), and visuals produced by children can be viewed as acts of resistance that shift ideological boundaries (Bach, 2001; Lenette, 2019) producing powerful but unanticipated themes (Mayaba & Wood, 2015).

One of the strengths of visual methodologies is that there is a wide range of media, resources and activities that can be employed, singly or in multimodal fashion. Approaches that researchers have used range from paper and colouring pens (Mitchell, 2015) to making a model city out of large cardboard boxes (Boume Hulsey, 2015) or working with emoji (Fane et al., 2016). Activities can include pencil drawings, painting, mosaics, storyboards, digital methodologies, photography, video, computer animation, collage and mask making (Brown & Macie, 2015; Cahill et al., 2010; Cox, 2005; Ergler et al., 2016; Green & Denov, 2019; Lenette, 2019; Literat, 2013; Mayaba & Wood, 2015; Mutch & Latai, 2019; Peek et al., 2016; Visser & du Plessis, 2015).

Many writers highlight the importance of engaging children in visual research as active agents rather than passive objects of study (Green & Denov, 2019) and employing methods that are participatory (Fane et al., 2016; Wall et al., 2012) and flexible in time and approach (Mayaba & Wood, 2015). Another common theme was that, with the burgeoning of visual methodologies,

it is important to be reflective and critical (Brown & Mackie, 2015; Daniels, 2008; Fischman, 2001), for example, about children's rights (Fane et al., 2016), the ethics of the research (Daniels, 2008; Guillemin & Drew, 2010), methodological choices (Wall et al., 2012) and epistemological challenges (Fischman, 2001).

As the two uses of visuals discussed in this chapter are children's interpretations of a series of digital picture books (combining both photographs and text) and children's photographic responses to the themes of the picture books, we found Bach's (2001) discussion of photographic methods particularly apposite. Bach noted that photographs "slowed time into a moment, a moment that can be studied" (p. 7). In her study, Bach's participants used cameras to document their daily lives and interests. Bach then analysed the developed images with her participants. Through this process, she discovered that her participants used the photographs to compose mini-narratives about their own lives. The photographs catalysed and sustained deeper conversations, with the meaning and interpretation of each photograph changing and evolving through the course of the discussions. Bach came to view her participants as active agents fully engaged in the creation of their own life-worlds, thereby disrupting dominant conceptions of childhood.

In our study, visuals were both a stimulus and a response. Rose (2016) asks researchers to consider the varying sites of an image – the site of production, the site of the image, the site of its circulation and the site of its audience. The digital picture books used in our study were produced digitally in one site by the author in her own lockdown context about a character in a semi-fictional lockdown context, circulated openly through the Internet for an audience of children but aimed to be mediated through their parents or teachers. The text in the digital picture books was deliberately spare, requiring the reader to view the text and image together. While the purpose of

this study was not to have children specifically analyse the images, their subsequent engagement with the images provided a rich vein of discourse that we could interpret using Ricoeur's hermeneutic analysis (Ricoeur, 1971).

Methodological approach

In keeping with an interpretive stance, we used open-ended, qualitative, data-gathering methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). We recruited parents to read to, or with, their children (aged between 3 and 8 years old) any, or all, of the *Bear in Lockdown* digital books. We asked for the reading sessions to be conversational and as close to a typical story reading session that they might regularly have in their homes. Parents were asked to audio record the sessions on their phones or other devices and to forward the recordings to the researchers. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and sent to the participants for amendments and approval. The project received ethical approval from the University of Auckland and research participants were informed of the research purpose, process and dissemination of findings. Adults signed a consent form and children circled an appropriate emoticon (e.g., a smiley or sad face) once a parent had explained what they were being asked to do, using a script we provided. We were very clear that we wanted children to participate voluntarily and not be coerced in any way. For this chapter we have drawn on examples from three family groupings and two data sources to illustrate the overall themes from our analysis. The first data source is a selection of transcriptions that capture children's reactions to specific images in the *Bear in Lockdown* books. The second data source is a set of photographs (which were voluntarily and spontaneously supplied to the researchers),

produced by children after reading the books with their parents; the researchers then obtained written consent to reprint and discuss them.

After collecting and recording the data, transcriptions and photographs were analysed vertically and horizontally (Mutch, 2018). Vertical analysis focuses on a close reading of each individual data source (e.g., interview transcription, photograph or drawing) before a more iterative, horizontal analysis explores the coalescing themes across the different data sets or sources. In the initial, vertical phase, the transcriptions were bracketed by two columns. On the right, the researchers made interpretive notes about these interactions, including notes on the emotions and deeper meanings suggested in the interactions between parents and children, and the children's reactions to the events in the books. On the left, researchers linked these interpretations back to literature, providing a reference point to the source of their interpretations and a catalyst for further analysis. Some of the notes referred to literature on the use of visual methods, others referred to possible explanatory theories. The horizontal analysis resulted in an interpretive web in which parents, children, the *Bear in Lockdown* books, and possible explanatory theories all seemed to be in conversation with one another. This process brought forth this chapter's overarching themes of children developing a narrative identity in which they displayed autonomy and responsibility in response to the lockdown. Contrary to our expectations, the children in this study did not express anguish about falling behind, missing out, or being bored. They instead created a new narrative for themselves, demonstrating an understanding of the need for the restrictions and consistent concern for the welfare of others.

Interpretive framework

In order to theorise the emerging themes of a narrative identity underpinned by autonomy and responsibility, we turned to Paul Ricoeur (1971, 1984, 1992, 2007). In this chapter, we aim to demonstrate how analysing small excerpts of data through critical hermeneutics can generate insights into young children's developing social and ethical sensibilities. As Simms (2003, p. 33) explains:

The task of hermeneutics is to discover meaning. As in most of philosophy, "meaning" here means the meaning of life or, at least, meaning *in* life. But hermeneutics is based on a view of the world that sees language as the medium through which not only meanings (plural) are conveyed, but also Meaning in this grander, philosophical sense.

Hermeneutic inquiry also proposes that the meaning and power of a work will continue shifting and evolving as long as it continues to be encountered and interpreted (Ricoeur, 1971, 1984). The act of interpretation allows for the idea that texts (or images) will resonate in new and different ways depending on their particular orientations in space and time. Interpreting a text (or image) involves a reciprocity between the interpretation of the text and interpretation of self.

A text takes on new meaning when it is read by a new interpreter and an interpreter's very existence can be altered by their encounter with the text. Simms (2003, p. 43) puts it this way:

Texts propose a world which readers appropriate to understand their own world, and consequently to understand themselves. Texts are the medium through which readers

arrive at self-understanding; they are the bridge between the subjectivity of the self and the objectivity of the world.

Ricoeur suggests we make also sense of our world and our place in it by understanding the nature of time and narrative (Ricoeur, 1984). As the children in our study were following Bear's narration, they were able to connect with the parallels in their own lives, to begin to make sense of the events and produce a storied version of their own on-going experiences. Simms (2003, p. 80) elaborates:

In other words, we understand our own lives – our own selves and our own places in the world – by interpreting our lives as if they were narratives, or, more precisely, through the work of interpreting our lives we turn them into narratives, and life understood as narrative constitutes self-understanding.

Through our analysis, we discovered the recurring themes of autonomy and responsibility. In his writings, Ricoeur frequently views concepts in pairs, and often these pairings are paradoxical. Ricoeur's discussions of autonomy and responsibility (or accountability) are no exception (Ricoeur, 1992). In discussing the idea of responsibility, he pairs the concept with *accountability*. He states, “[b]ecause someone is counting on me, I am accountable for my actions before another. The term ‘responsibility’ unites both meanings: ‘counting on’ and ‘being accountable for...’” (1992, p. 165). As Simms (2003, p. 4) explains, for Ricoeur:

Being a capable, autonomous human being does not only involve a capacity for free thinking and acting, but it also implies that one be held responsible for one's thinking and acting, and even that one has obligations in speaking and acting.

Ricoeur (2007) also pairs autonomy with *vulnerability* and sees them as intricately interwoven. As the children in our study were in a state of vulnerability in regard to a global pandemic, we began to observe their understanding of their own state of vulnerability and consider how it might have shaped their sense of responsibility or ethic of care towards others (Hetteema, 2014). Drawing on Ricoeur's hermeneutic inquiry, and concepts of narrative, autonomy and responsibility we now present a nuanced account of the following visuals and transcriptions.

Findings

From our wider data sets, we have chosen three family groupings and, by juxtaposing the visual with the ensuing conversation, we interpret the interaction through a hermeneutic lens. In order to ensure participant anonymity, proper names are removed from the transcriptions. Adult participants are represented by the letter A and children with the letter C. In the first extract, the protagonist, Bear, is narrating his experience after participating in the nationwide Bear Hunt.²

[Figure 1 about here]

A1: What do you think that means? Cross-contaminate?

C1: Maybe he crosses bubbles?

A1: What do you think will happen if he crosses bubbles?

C1: If he goes to the other toys, he might make them sick.

At the beginning of the pandemic, when Covid-19 vaccines were a long way off and even testing equipment was in short supply, managing new Covid cases depended even more heavily on the enforced and widespread practice of physical distancing. In these early stages, the most effective form of halting the spread of the virus was for people who may have come in contact with an infected person to self-isolate for two weeks, which was roughly equivalent to the incubation period of the virus. Figure 1 shows a key plot point in *Bear Goes into Lockdown* in which Bear, who had previously resided in a toy box with all of his friends, explains why he cannot return to the toy box now that he has interacted with humans.

In the interaction transcribed previously, the parent uses this plot point to check in with their child. The parent asks if the child requires clarification on the meaning of various Covid-related terms, such as *cross-contaminate* and *bubble*. The child provides a thorough explanation of why Bear must form a bubble with the humans and also understands the fact that Bear might infect his friends if he goes back to the toy box. The last lines of the interaction also suggest a deeper level of comprehension:

A1: Ah. So, if he crosses bubbles, he won't be with the toys.

C1: Yes, but he can still see them and talk to them, but he can't get close. He can go into Facetime.

Here, the child demonstrates an understanding that, despite having to be away from his friends, Bear is not out of options. He can talk to his friends from a distance. He can also use videoconferencing technology, such as Facetime. At various points in the transcription, the child demonstrates that this has been their experience throughout the pandemic but does so in a matter-of-fact manner that suggests little in the way of anger or resentment. The child understands that such restrictions were deemed necessary by trusted authorities. More importantly, this response demonstrates that the child is actively engaged with the ever-shifting world around them and is cognizant of the ways and means by which people can still accomplish their goals and connect with others.

A positive and optimistic view on the value of encounters with other people also underpins children's responses to other sections of the book. In the passage that follows, Bear witnesses his humans feeling sad about the death of a relative. This event underscores the sacrifices people made during the pandemic, not the least of which included having to refrain from visiting sick family members or attending funerals.

[Figure 2 about here]

Sensing another opportunity to check in, one parent asks their child for their feelings about this passage:

A2: Can you relate to the bear?

C2: Sometimes I feel sad that I can't see my friends.

Throughout the course of the recordings, the sadness articulated above would remain with children during an extended stretch of the first book. In these pages, Bear comes to understand the extent to which life has changed as a result of the pandemic. This is most evident in a scene in which Bear realises that he can no longer play on public playgrounds. In most of the transcriptions, this scene was especially difficult for children to process.

[Figure 3 about here]

This image often served as a point of reflection for the participants, as it represented a tangible way in which Covid-19 directly impacted the lives of children. But again, the children in this study were more attuned to the possibilities afforded by these restrictions, rather than the restrictions themselves.

A2: Do you miss playing on the playground?

C2: Mm-hmm.

A2: Does that mean you're glad lockdown is over since you can play on playgrounds again?

C2: Mm-hmm.

A2: Do you think it's worth it to not play on the playground in order to make sure everyone else doesn't get sick?

C2: Uh huh. But I can still play in the backyard. The backyard is kind of like a playground.

By this point in the story, the child above has realised that their sadness is not the most important concern at present. The parent, perhaps trying to soothe the child, attempts to put the restrictions on playground access into perspective, framing it as a necessary sacrifice on the road to recovery. The child, however, has not reduced their feelings about the pandemic into simple dichotomies like freedom and restriction or sadness and happiness. The child instead states that they can simply play in the backyard, which is “kind of like a playground.” This interaction demonstrates that the child is not preoccupied with a sense of uncertainty and loss. The child immediately begins thinking about the new set of *possibilities* their circumstances have presented. To the child, it is indeed unfortunate that the playground is closed, but this closure has provided an opportunity to better appreciate the backyard and has spurred the realisation that it is, in fact “like a playground.” This reaction, when interpreted hermeneutically, illuminates this child’s capacity to think autonomously in a way that they may not have been prompted to do were it not for the pandemic’s playground restrictions.

Another theme that occurred throughout the recordings was the tension between the parents’ desire to surveil and assess their children and the children’s desires to interpret the text and, by extension, the world, in their own ways:

A2: What do you think of the flowers?

C2: I think they’re cool, they look like snow.

C3: They’re beautiful. Book 2!

A2: What’d you think of Book 1?

C2: I think it was pretty good.

C3: I think it was pretty good too.

C2: I remember the bear hunt in lockdown and it seems like that bear was doing just that.

A2: Did it remind you about anything else during lockdown?

C3: Nah.

A2: Could you relate to the bear?

C2: Sometimes I feel sad that I can't see my friends.

C3: Sometimes I feel sad that I can't see my friends too.

In this passage, the parent (A2) uses the image of trees in full blossom at the end of the first book, *Bear Goes into Lockdown*, to gauge the children's reaction and to see if they understood the themes of the book. The children give perfunctory answers to kickstart the reading of the next book. This dynamic is evinced in several instances in which the younger child simply repeats the answers of the older child, thus ensuring that the parent's question is definitively answered. The parent, sensing that there will not be other responses, proceeds to the next book.

As the readings progress, however, parents would gradually divest themselves of this mechanistic form of assessment and settle into a more rhythmic pattern of interacting with the children:

C4: I don't like flu shots.

A3: Do you remember we did that too? Do you remember where we went and what happened?

C4: I had to get a flu shot on my arm and it didn't feel nice.

A3: Did it not?

C4: No.

A3: You giggled!

C4: I know but I giggled because it feels sore.

A3: Yeah. It does feel a bit sore, doesn't it? Do you remember we just drove through in the car this time didn't we?

C4: I don't like flu shots.

A3: No.

C4: I don't want to talk about it.

A3: You don't want to talk about it. Okay, we'll go on to another page.

These interactions are mediated by the events and images of the story. In this interaction, a child has a spontaneous reaction to Bear receiving a flu shot, which the adult sensitively listens to, engages with, and helps along. This interaction demonstrates a subtle shift to the approach of the parent in the preceding example, employed at the end of the first book. In it lies the suggestion that a child's sense of autonomy and responsibility need not be coerced or convinced by a more learned figure. The emergence and manifestation of these community-responsive orientations are, instead, products of trusting engagements in which adults and children are equal and equally accountable to one another.

These communal framings of autonomy and responsibility were perhaps most evident in the following images, which depict children's efforts to protect their own toys from the virus.

[Figures 4 & 5 about here]

Autonomy and responsibility alike are demonstrated in an interpretation of the photographs, in which two participating children felt compelled to outfit their toys in PPE. The image on the left shows a doll wearing a cloth mask, clear visor, and medical scrubs. On the right, four dolls have been outfitted with face masks fashioned out of used curtains. These images warrant further scrutiny because the protective outfits depicted in them were assembled spontaneously and submitted to the researchers by the parents after reading the *Bear* books. This spontaneity suggests that they are the result of the children's autonomous actions, which further emerged out of their conscious engagement with the discourses and events that impact their lives. In other words, their awareness of the rapidly changing context inspired these children to take tangible action to protect those for whom they felt responsible (Ricoeur, 1992).

Discussion

As highlighted in the findings, recurring themes that emerged from our research were that children appeared to be developing and acting upon both a sense of *autonomy* and of *responsibility* for themselves and others. The type of autonomy suggested in the data, however, belies a standard definition of autonomy as making one's own decisions as one pleases. Our findings demonstrate that these children exhibited an autonomous drive that was rooted in a concern for others (Hettema, 2014; Ricoeur, 1992). The children's level of engagement goes beyond, for example, a mere understanding of the pandemic or of personal protective equipment. What hermeneutic analysis of their photographs highlights, is that the children were *altered* by their engagement with the story (Ricoeur, 1971) and, in turn, acted out an intervention by independently fashioning custom-made PPE for their toys. These children, in other words,

recognised the vulnerability of their toys and acted autonomously out of a compelling need to protect them (Ricoeur, 1992), displaying an innate responsibility to care for those they considered vulnerable. And, in a hermeneutic turn, they came to the states of autonomy and responsibility through the experience of their own vulnerability. In other words, children forced to stay home because of Covid-19 restrictions, finding themselves in a vulnerable position, did not just focus inwards (on missing their friends, for example) but through their vulnerability, gained a more communal understanding of autonomy that originates within the self but is unreservedly concerned with service to, and responsibility for others. For the researchers, this was the kind of “powerful but unanticipated theme” (Mayaba & Wood, 2019, p. 9) discussed in the literature. We did not begin this study with a formal hypothesis, but we conjectured that children’s reactions might be predominated by sadness, as Bear’s adventures might remind them of their loss of freedom and normalcy. Children showed, however, that they are not passive victims of this pandemic but are actively responding, and, indeed, attempting to intervene in the virus’s spread by attention to their toys’ welfare, thus producing “acts of resistance” that can shift “ideological boundaries” (Lenette, 2019, p. viii) about how children navigate their complex worlds.

The other strong theme in our study’s data was how, through interaction with the texts (written and visual), they were narrating a new identity in, and through, the Covid-19 lockdowns. We were able to observe the role that the interdependent visuals and text in the *Bear in Lockdown* books played in shaping this identity. The concepts emerging from a discussion of Bear’s situation enabled young children to articulate how their own world was changing and how they were creating new understandings of, and identities within, this world. The discussion about crossing bubbles, or coming to see their backyard as “kind if like a playground” are two

examples. Ricoeur (1984) speaks of encounters with narrative as a contest between opposing spheres of reality – the fictive world of the text and the actual world of the reader. The children came to navigate this contest with fluidity as they moved between the Bear’s fictive world and their real world, interacting with his narrative, coming to understand their world better (Ricoeur, 1971; Simms, 2003) and adapting their own narrative identity as they did so. Connecting with Bear through the books’ images supported this emotional and conceptual growth.

Conclusion

This chapter reports on close readings of selected extracts of transcripts from three family groupings who recorded the conversations that arose from reading a set of digital story books about a toy bear in lockdown. The purpose of the chapter was to explain the process we undertook to capture, analyse and interpret these conversations and in doing so, highlight what using visual elements added to our study – *substantively, methodologically* and *theoretically*.

Substantively, our findings provide evidence that rather than acting passively and feeling disempowered by lockdowns, the young children in our study engaged actively in sense making. They showed autonomy, reframing their situation in positive ways. They also displayed responsibility for their own welfare and that of others. Literat (2013, p. 87) noted “[i]mages also hold the inherent potential to generate metaphorical representations of identities and concepts and this stimulate abstract and creative thought.” Our data highlight the children’s ability to be reflective, when viewing their backyard as a playground, to grasp metaphor as in the concept of a bubble, to think creatively about alternative ways to keep in touch with their friends, and to allow them to “take part in shaping their own realities” (Literat, 2013, p. 95).

Methodologically, we have shown that the use of contemporaneous images (both textual and visual) enabled deeper insights into young children's understandings of, and responses to, Covid-19. Many writers highlight the ways in which visual methodologies allow for more nuanced understandings of children's life-worlds (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Literat, 2013). Having the children interact with the images and story of a toy bear making his own sense of lockdown, their parents, and sometimes, siblings, brought out elements of discussion that might not have otherwise occurred. Guillemin and Drew (2010, p. 178) note that:

... photographs [can] act as a kind of communicative bridge for conceptualizing and articulating their [the participants'] personal circumstances that may not have been considered; or they may not have the maturity of cognition or expression with which to formulate discussion and explanation of complex experiences and ideas.

Theoretically, we respond to the critique that the field suffers from limited theorisation (Guillemin & Drew, 2010). Using Ricoeur's hermeneutic analysis enabled us to reveal how the young children in our study not only engaged with the images and narration of a fictional character coming to terms with lockdown, but went on to navigate new narrative identities of that created meaning in these unprecedented times. Within their new narrative identities, they acted autonomously and responsibly, developing self-understanding and care for others, born out of their own vulnerability (Ricoeur, 2007).

In conclusion, visual images are, as Fischman (2001, p. 29) stated, "omnipresent and overpowering." They are powerful tools that offer new and innovative ways of revealing, interpreting and understanding the lived realities of children and young people in social and

educational settings. The field offers endless possibilities, as Guillemin and Drew (2010, p. 186) state, “[v]isual methodologies are rich, compelling and participatory, and worthy of further investigation.”

Notes

1. The *Bear in Lockdown* digital books are available at: <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/bear-goes-into-lockdown/>
2. During the first lockdown, the idea of a Bear Hunt was promoted through social media. People put teddy bears in their windows for children to find when they went out for their daily walks. This initiative sparked the writing of the *Bear in Lockdown* books.

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Figures

Figure 1

Bear joins the human's bubble



My humans let me come in
and rest on the sofa.

I can't go back in the toybox, I
said.

I'll cross-contaminate the
other toys.

I'm in your bubble now.

Figure 2

Bear learns of a death in the humans' family



I'm getting used to life with my humans.

Today, I started with a big breakfast.

But then I saw my humans were sad.

Their lovely aunty died.

When you are in lockdown you can't say goodbye in person or go and buy flowers.

Figure 3

Bear at the closed playground



I felt sad at the children's playground but we are in Level 4 lockdown and must stay away.

Figure 4

Examples of children making PPE for their dolls

