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Children, youth and disasters: Listening, learning, and moving towards democratic engagement

Provocation

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Overview

Hurricane Katrina hit the U.S. Gulf Coast on August 29th, 2005. The hurricane and flooding that followed resulted in a disaster of historic proportions. Over 1,800 people lost their lives and more than one million were displaced. Tens of thousands of homes, businesses, and schools were damaged or destroyed. Katrina remains the most costly disaster in U.S. history, with financial losses exceeding $80 billion.

Katrina, like other disasters before it, was not an equal opportunity event. Early reports showed that the elderly and people with disabilities suffered higher death and injury rates. African American and low-income neighborhoods were the most likely to be flooded, and the residents of these areas were displaced the furthest distances from home. Although children and youth are also widely considered vulnerable to disaster, less was written, at least initially, about how they were affected, and about how their voices were included (or excluded) in the disaster recovery process.

In this Provocation, sociologist and disaster recovery expert, Associate Professor Lori Peek draws on research insights from her co-authored book *Children of Katrina* (University of Texas 2015) and co-edited volume *Displaced: Life in the Katrina Diaspora* (Texas University Press 2012) to discuss the contributions of children and youth to a more sustainable and democratic disaster response and recovery.

I met a teenage boy named Isaiah in New Orleans in 2011. At that time, nearly six years had passed since Hurricane Katrina. I had sought Isaiah out because I wanted to learn more about his work with Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools – a youth organizing and leadership development group that uses participatory education and action research to build skills among New Orleans youth. As we stood together in one of the neighborhoods with still visible scars from the floodwaters,

his confidence, hope, and optimism demonstrated that recovery from disaster is wholly possible … even among the youngest survivors and even among those who have suffered grave losses.

Isaiah was only a sixth grader when Katrina made landfall. When the levee system ringing the city failed, the neighborhood where he and his family lived suffered extensive damage. Isaiah, like hundreds of thousands of other children and youth, was displaced from his home and school. Upon returning to New Orleans, Isaiah became a 'Rethinker' and subsequently got involved in several social justice initiatives. He told me that it "changed my life." When I asked him why, he said that once he joined Rethink, "That was the first time that I felt like people would really listen to me. I realized I could make a difference."

Isaiah and a fellow Rethinker present their research findings and recommendations for action to a local group in New Orleans. (Photo credit: Lori Peek)

Being listened to – feeling acknowledged and heard – changed the course of Isaiah's life. He went from being a shy and quiet boy to a powerful leader bound for college with a plan to major in mechanical engineering. Isaiah was a member of an organization that fostered exactly the kind of participatory and democratic engagement among youth that public intellectuals and leaders are increasingly calling for around the world.[1] But how can researchers do a better job of including child and youth voices before and after disasters? And why does this matter so much?

Ways to include child and youth voices before and after disaster

In 2008, I had the opportunity to assemble a comprehensive review of the research literature on children and disasters.[2] One of the things that the review revealed was that much of the research up to that point had relied on the reports of parents and teachers to describe children's disaster experiences. I wrote then, and still believe now, that there is obvious value in learning as much as possible about children's experiences from the adults in their lives. At the same time, we know there are limitations with this approach. Adults may under-report levels of distress or other behavioral

[1] Hayward, B. (2012) *Children, Citizenship and Environment: Nurturing a Democratic Imagination in a Changing World*, London, Routledge.
[2] Peek, L. (2008) 'Children and Disasters: Understanding Vulnerability, Developing Capacities, and Promoting Resilience', *Children, Youth and Environments* 18(1): 1-29.

issues among children and youth.[3] Children and youth may actively hide their feelings and actions from adults, and therefore adults may simply be unable to accurately report on how the children in their care are actually doing.[4] Moreover, as sociologists of childhood have argued, it is problematic that children have historically been "written about but rarely consulted" regarding their own values, perspectives, and behaviors.[5]

In that same review article, I wrote about gaps in this particular field of study and argued that: "We need to develop participatory, child-centered research methods and approaches that offer youth the opportunity to give voice to their own thoughts and interpretations of events." Today, in 2016, I am pleased to share that much progress has been made in terms of conducting new kinds of mixed methods *research with children,* as well as engaging *children as researchers* and *children as change makers* when it comes to disaster risk reduction.

Research with children

Over the past decade, there have been a number of graduate theses and dissertations, as well as scholarly publications, dedicated to reporting on research by adults with children. Much of the presently available adult-led, but child-focused, research in the disaster area draws on widely-used social scientific methods, including close-ended survey questionnaires, qualitative interviews and focus groups, and ethnographic observations. Increasingly, however, adults are beginning to use more creative and active methods – such as photovoice, videovoice, graphic animation, and participatory mapping – to encourage children and youth to generate artefacts as they tell their own stories of disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.[6] Moreover, researchers are gathering poetry, journals, drawings, and other materials that children and youth produce as primary data generated by young people.

Lori Peek and Alice Fothergill interview a kindergarten class in New Orleans. (Photo credit: Jennifer Tobin-Gurley)

[3] McFarlane, A.C. (1987) 'Family Functioning and Overprotection Following a Natural Disaster: The Longitudinal Effects of Post-Traumatic Morbidity', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 21: 210-218.
[4] Fothergill, A. and Lori P. (2015) *Children of Katrina.* Austin: University of Texas Press.
[5] Irwin, J., Waugh, F., and Bonner, M. (2006) 'The Inclusion of Children and Young People in Research on Domestic Violence', *Communities, Children, and Families Australia* 1(1): 17-23.
[6] For example, see Youth Creating Disaster Recovery and Resilience (YCDR[2]): http://www.ycdr.org/.

Children as researchers

Local grassroots organizations have long championed not just researching children, but engaging children as researchers. Academic researchers will likely follow suit. For now, there are lessons to be learned from organizations such as the Rethinkers in New Orleans, from Plan International, and from other child-centered groups. They have clearly shown that, with the proper support, children and youth can do an outstanding job collecting and analyzing data. As children go through this process of surveying and interviewing others, they also develop many tangible skills.

In response to the need for more youth-centered research and action, I collaborated with David Abramson to co-found the SHOREline youth engagement and disaster recovery program. In the years since, we have worked with high school students in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and New York in the United States. We ask these teens to first identify and research a challenge or problem that is facing their school or community. The students then develop and implement a solution that would help to solve the issue. The students have created a number of innovative solutions to pressing problems. For example, ARTSY (Artistic Relief and Therapeutic Support for Youth) is a SHOREline program developed by students at Benjamin Franklin High School in New Orleans.[7] Many of these students' lives were severely disrupted by Hurricane Katrina and the displacement that followed. As part of SHOREline, they joined together to create a mentoring program that engages high school youth in working with younger children in elementary schools in the city. The teens engage in arts-based and team-work activities with the children as part of their afterschool program. The ARTSY students have also developed a research and evaluation component, so that they can assess how the intervention works with young children, and how it also changes the teen mentors.

The Benjamin Franklin SHOREline chapter stands under the friendship oak tree on the University of Southern Mississippi-Gulf Park campus. (Photo credit: Maria Do)

Children as change makers

Whether children are the 'researched' or the 'researchers', it is important that we work together with young people in our communities to figure out how best to share their stories, insights, and knowledge. Robin Cox and our Youth Creating Disaster Recovery and Resilience (YCDR[2]) team and community partners worked with girls and boys in Canada to create videos that told their stories of recovery after a devastating flood. The youth then had the opportunity to show those videos to

[7] For more information, see: http://artsybfhsshoreline.wix.com/artsy.

elected leaders and members of their local community. Sharing their video creations and stories sparked an ongoing dialogue about how youth could be better engaged in disaster recovery.[8]

Children have much to say, but because they do not vote and do not sit in positions of power, they often lack a platform for sharing their ideas.[9] How that space can be created is both a challenge and an opportunity, especially as children represent between 20-50 per cent of the population in countries around the world.

Why it is critical to include child and youth voices before and after disaster

Globally, children make up nearly half of those affected by disasters. The threats and risks they face are growing. Mounting evidence suggests that climate change-related disasters are already on the rise. This trend is likely to accelerate in the near future. Indeed, the advocacy organization Save the Children estimates that during 2010-2020, as many as 175 million children every year will be adversely affected by disasters.[10]

More children are coming of age in an ever-more turbulent world. They did not generate the risks they face. There is thus a moral and ethical imperative that we pay attention to their voices, since they are inheriting many monumental environmental, economic, and social challenges.

There are many other reasons to engage children and youth before and after a disaster. My colleagues and I have interviewed disaster-affected children and youth across the United States. The one message that we have most consistently heard from these young people is that they want to help. They want to be of assistance to their families, in their schools, and in their communities – but they often confront barriers to participation. This raises many important questions, including: How can we protect children and youth, while not diminishing their strengths and desire to be part of disaster risk reduction efforts? How can we ensure that there are age-appropriate activities and youth-centered opportunities for young people to get involved before and after a disaster?

One of the lessons that Alice Fothergill and I learned over the decade we spent studying children after Katrina, was, that by helping others, children and youth are able to contribute to their own recovery, as well as the recovery of those around them.[11] Children, like adults, need to regain a sense of control in the face of environmental threats, and chronic and acute disasters. One of the best ways they can do this is through being actively engaged in the places where they live, go to school, work, and play.

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[8] Fletcher, S., Cox, R.S., Scannell, L., Heykoop, C., Tobin-Gurley, J. and Peek, L. (2016) 'Youth Creating Disaster Recovery and Resilience: A Multi-Site Arts-Based Youth Engagement Project' Forthcoming in *Children, Youth and Environments.*

[9] Anderson, W. (2005) 'Bringing Children into Focus on the Social Science Disaster Research Agenda.' *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 23: 159-175.

[10] Save the Children. (2007) "Legacy of Disasters: The Impact of Climate Change on Children." London: Save the Children.

[11] Fothergill, A. and Peek, L. (2015) *Children of Katrina.* Austin: University of Texas Press.