



## Editorial

## Supporting children and young people's psychosocial recovery post-disaster: Internal and external protective factors



This special issue had its genesis in a seminar hosted by the School of Social Psychology at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in September 2014. A group of southern hemisphere researchers came to meet northern hemisphere counterparts to discuss how children and young people are supported in post-disaster contexts. Many writers in the field note that children and young people in disaster contexts are under-researched [1–3]. There is a strong body of work that examines children's psychological trauma, especially those most at risk [4,5], however, there is little research that examines children's experiences in the broader social and emotional post-disaster context, in particular, research that gives voice to their experiences [2].

Following the seminar, presenters were encouraged to rework their papers for a special issue of the *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*. A call was made for other submissions that might meet the special issue's aim of illuminating the experiences of children and young people in disaster contexts and of acknowledging the people and processes that support their recovery. From the submissions, the eleven papers in this special issue made it through to publication. They represent many members of the original LSE seminar (Brown, Gibbs, Ireton, Locke, MacDougall, Marlowe, Mutch and Shah) and others whose contributions came later. The authors and contexts discussed span the globe and include both Western and non-Western contexts and contributors – New Zealand, Australia, Palestine, Bangladesh, Iran, Burkino Faso, Indonesia and Bolivia. The traumatic events include earthquakes, bushfires, floods, cyclones and armed conflict. The special issue also aimed to provide a range of disciplinary and conceptual lenses on children and young people's disaster experiences. Thus, psychology, population health, education, refugee and migrant studies, early childhood studies and philosophy are all represented. Similarly, the research methodologies include qualitative, interpretive, participatory and arts-based approaches as well as quantitative and mixed methods.

In order to bring coherence to the special issue, the articles are organised to align with the disaster phases – preparedness, response and recovery, acknowledging that there is, of course, overlap between these phases and that the articles might span more than one phase. The articles also cover a range of protective factors, as in socio-ecological theory [6], which suggests that children are surrounded by layers of protective factors from the micro to meso, exo and macro. For the purposes of this special issue, three layers of protective factors are viewed as: (1) the children and young people themselves; (2) the family and school;

and (3) the wider community and related agencies. Fig. 1 shows how the articles in the special issue fit within this matrix.

In the preparedness section, Jennifer Tatebe and Carol Mutch synthesise both empirical and grey literature as it relates to children, education and schools. Ralph Brown draws on research from positive psychology in his review of resilience building strategies that are useful tools in everyday life but that take on particular relevance in times of stress and trauma. Jay Marlowe and Rachel Bogen report on the adaptive capacity of refugees settled in another country, who then find themselves in a disaster situation.

In the next section, researchers examine different responses to disasters. Yasamin Izadkhah and Lisa Gibbs analyse children's understanding of disaster through drawings. Syeda Akhter and colleagues provide a detailed insight into the plight of children in extreme disaster contexts, where women and children are at most their most vulnerable. Kirsten Locke and Sarah Yates revisit a community mosaic in which schoolchildren retold the story of a disaster's impact on the local community. Sally Carlton describes responses that young people made to the disaster in their city by creating opportunities for others to engage in community activities. Cecile de Milliano examines the notion of resilience as it applies to responses to disasters in diverse global contexts.

The articles in the final section are more reflective, in that they focus on the recovery period and/or gaining a broader perspective on the events that occurred. Ritesh Shah discusses the results of an evaluation conducted on resilience programmes in schools in a conflict situation, while Carol Mutch examines how school principals provided leadership to support the post-disaster recovery of children, their families and the wider community. This section, and the special issue itself, concludes with Lisa Gibbs and colleagues providing a comprehensive view of support mechanisms used by children, families and communities in a post-disaster context.

Three key themes arise from the articles in the preparedness section. First, Tatebe and Mutch highlight the significant role that a wide range of agencies and organisations expect education to play in disaster risk reduction. The authors note, however, that the multiplicity of reports, guidelines and handbooks leads to a fragmented rather than integrated field. They suggest the need for shared language and collaborative approaches as well as more representative and inclusive coverage if the materials are to be fully embraced. The second theme, and one which is threaded throughout the special issue, is that of the place of enhancing individual and collective resilience. Brown argues in his synthesis of key research from positive psychology, that much is already known

	Children and young people	School and family	Community and agency
Preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building children's resilience through positive psychology (Brown)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education and schools as conduits for family and community disaster preparedness (Tatebe &amp; Mutch)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledging and using community capacity (Marlowe &amp; Bogen)</li> </ul>
Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children's responses through arts-related programmes (Izadkhah &amp; Gibbs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The needs of children and families post-disaster (Akhter, Dutta, Sarkar, Khanom, Akter, Chowdhury &amp; Sultan)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging young people in community projects (Carlton)</li> </ul>
Recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross country comparisons of young people's resilience factors (de Milliano)</li> <li>• Long term psychosocial recovery through emotional processing (Locke)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School principals as crisis managers and the role of schools in supporting children's recovery (Mutch)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resilience programmes for children in conflict zones (Shah)</li> <li>• The place of family, peers, school and community in disaster recovery (Gibbs, Block Harms, MacDougall, Snowdon, Ireton, Forbes, Richardson &amp; Waters)</li> </ul>

Fig. 1. : Layers of protective factors from internal to external.

about what builds individual resilience. There is also evidence to support the argument that the strategies that build resilience to everyday setbacks can play a role in disaster preparedness. Brown suggests that one of the key pieces of the 'jigsaw puzzle of resilience' is striving for a sense of control. Adults who work with young people can help them develop a sense of agency so that when disaster strikes they can face the events with confidence, hope and healthy optimism. The third theme in this section, is the focus of Marlowe's article, that within social and cultural networks, such as the refugee communities he worked with, there is unacknowledged and untapped capacity in young people. His study found that young refugees act as cultural brokers and mediators, bridging the world of their parents and the one in which they now find themselves. Tapping into this capacity can play a connective role in the community's everyday interactions as well as a protective role in disaster response and recovery contexts.

Yasamin Izadkhah and Lisa Gibb's article on very young children's perceptions of earthquakes straddles the sections on both preparedness and response because the participants in the study had not yet experienced earthquakes but, given their location in Iran, already had a fund of knowledge about them. It is rare to gain the insights of very young children on this topic but it is a timely reminder of the need to assess children's level of accurate knowledge and also find out where misconceptions might need to be addressed.

In the remaining articles in the second group, notions of vulnerability, emotional processing and participation are raised and the theme of resilience is revisited. The article by Akhter and colleagues, provides stark examples of women's and children's vulnerabilities in disaster contexts such as post-Cyclone Aila, in 2009 in Bangladesh. Children suffered starvation, malnutrition, disease and psychological trauma. Girls were especially at risk of physical harm, sexual exploitation or forced into early marriage. A point made by the authors was around the unintended consequences of work done by well-intentioned aid agencies. They cite the example of building sanitation facilities without understanding the cultural context and thus putting women and girls further at risk.

Locke and Yates investigate children's immediate and longer term responses to the damage caused by an earthquake in their community. Researchers [1,7], suggest three ways to support children's recovery – distracting children from unhelpful rumination, reinstating routines and a sense of normalcy, and providing

ways to process the event and assist children to absorb it into their personal histories. Locke revisited a school where Yates had helped the children create a large mosaic that told the story of their town prior to, during and after the Canterbury earthquakes in New Zealand. In this way, the children were able to see their experiences as part of a much larger picture (both visually and metaphorically). The article discusses how the mosaic became an integral part of children's personal disaster stories, and Locke argues for the importance of providing opportunities for appropriate emotional processing in order to support children's long term recovery.

Moving the discussion from school age children to young adults, Carlton examines the opportunities that post-disaster disruption in Canterbury, New Zealand, offered to groups that normally sat on the margins, such as refugees. Through participation in activities, for example, joining the Student Volunteer Army, refugee youth, especially young women, found opportunities for engagement and leadership, which led to enhanced agency and an increased sense of belonging. It also provided an opportunity for them to 'give back' to a community that had helped them when in need. De Milliano was also interested in the views of young people and set out to explore what factors, both internal and external, enhance young people's resilience. These factors were explored in three non-Western contexts – Indonesia, Burkino Faso and Bolivia. She found that it was not an 'either/or' matter but that both internal and external factors had protective functions. Spirituality and social relationships were the strongest external factors across the three contexts. Individual factors, such as cognitive and behavioural factors, increased with age as external factors decreased. She also noted that females received less support from both types of factors. The variation across cultures also serves as a reminder to ensure that approaches to enhancing resilience are contextualised to local conditions.

In the recovery section of the special issue, the theme of resilience is revisited and interrogated before the role of schools in disaster response and recovery is examined in more depth. Attention is then refocused on the purpose of this special issue – supporting children and young people's psychosocial wellbeing post-disaster. As de Milliano (in this issue) states, 'resilience has become a fashionable term in recent years.' It is important that enhancing resilience is not seen as holding more promise than it does – and that is the conclusion that Shah comes to in his article. He recognises that children in conflict settings, such as the Occupied Gaza Strip, are vulnerable in both direct and indirect ways.

Humanitarian interventions designed to build children's resilience are often viewed as a way to support them through these difficult times. What Shah's study found, however, was that while such programmes provide short-term benefits, they are insufficient. They do not address the underlying injustices and inequities perpetuated in conflict zones and therefore serve to increase acceptance of intolerable situations.

Mutch's article on school principals as crisis leaders, steps back from the immediate experiences of children and young people and focuses instead of one of the external factors that supports children's recovery. How New Zealand schools provided for needs such as shelter, food and comfort in the immediate aftermath of the 2010/2011 earthquakes, and psychosocial and educational needs in the longer term, is clearly seen in the schools represented in this article. Mutch notes that while the expectation is that education will continue post-disaster, little recognition is given to what principals and teachers do to ensure that this happens. In the context of the Canterbury earthquakes, principals and teachers were themselves victims of the disaster and its aftermath, yet they were instrumental in supporting the children and their families through this time, despite working in difficult conditions at home and work.

In the final article, Gibbs and colleagues revisited communities destroyed in the 2009 Victorian bushfires in Australia. The authors provide a comprehensive picture of a the spectrum of protective and supportive factors that are discussed throughout this special issue. The study's findings highlight that children and young people found safety and stability at home and school or through social, recreational and work interactions. The young people demonstrated their capacity to deal with adversity and absorb their disaster-affected surroundings into their lives. They developed a sense of self-efficacy and were included in significant family decision making, which the authors note, demonstrates that they had learned to become 'competent survivors' of the experience.

In conclusion, what does this special issue add to the field? It confirms some ideas that are already well accepted; it extends the field's understanding of some less researched aspects and it holds some established ideas up to scrutiny. It confirms that children and young people constitute a group worthy of closer investigation in disaster research and that they have a role to play in disaster recovery and community regeneration. It provides examples of strategies and activities that enable children and young people

to cope with and even thrive in adversity. This special issue offers particular insights into children and young people's experiences and highlights risk, resilience and protective factors. Arguments are given for looking more closely at local and cultural differences, considering more diverse and inclusive responses, and making better use of existing capacity. Arguments are also given for recognising the interplay of families, schools and communities in children's post-disaster wellbeing. Finally, concepts, such as vulnerability and resilience, are problematised, offering a more nuanced understanding of how such notions play out in the complex, volatile and elongated process that is the aftermath of a disaster.

In bringing this special issue to fruition, tribute is paid to all the subjects of our collective research. Thank you for your willingness to share your stories, answer our questions and challenge our assumptions. In a world where scientists predict climate change and technological advances will lead to disasters on an increasing scale, your insights will contribute to disaster risk reduction becoming a more significant agenda item in policy and practice.

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