Joining the dots to reimagine community resilience: empowering young people

Peer reviewed

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Abstract

Historically, disaster response management for children and young people, people from linguistically diverse cultural backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been shaped by a vulnerability and risk discourse, informed by trauma-informed and risk mitigation strategies. These are vital, but the vulnerability discourse has moved into other areas of disaster prevention, preparedness, response, recovery and resilience. Vulnerability has been linked to pre-existing, socially produced inequalities and power structures. This has worked to homogenise, marginalise and diminish the capability of community members in resilience efforts. The United Nations *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030* [Sendai Framework] calls for governments and relevant stakeholders to 'advocate for resilient communities and an inclusive and all-of-society disaster risk management' (UNDRR 2015, p.23). This includes the meaningful engagement of people who are marginalised from resilience building. The Sendai Framework makes a specific argument for engaging children and young people, declaring they are agents of change who should be given the space to contribute to disaster risk reduction. The aim of this paper is to consider how the Sendai Framework has influenced the inclusion of young people in disaster resilience and to introduce emerging evidence of how young people are joining the dots to reimagine community resilience.

Introduction

The Sendai Framework (UNDRR 2015), outlined 7 global targets and 4 priorities for action. The priority actions are to understand risk, to strengthen disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk, to invest in disaster risk reduction for resilience and to enhance disaster preparedness for effective response. Not surprisingly, the result of the increasing frequency and intensity of disasters is that more people, assets and environments are being exposed or displaced. This presents new risks as the exposure of people and assets has 'increased faster than vulnerability has decreased' (UNDRR 2015, p.10). The Sendai Framework calls on nations to take a 'people-centred approach to disaster risk' (UNDRR 2015, p.10). The framework also focuses on action at all levels and sectors but advocates for 'resilient communities and an inclusive and all-of-society disaster risk management' (2015, p.23). This requires governments and stakeholders to reconsider the labelling of groups placed under a vulnerability discourse who have been disproportionately affected by disaster. The Sendai Framework calls for an engagement with all relevant stakeholders, explicitly naming women, children and young people, persons with disabilities, older people, Indigenous peoples and migrants (UNDRR 2015, p.10).

The framework singles out children and young people, declaring them to be 'agents of change' who should be involved in disaster risk reduction (UNDRR 2015, p.23). Yet, while change is evident, roles for children and young people in disasters remain firmly grounded in trauma-informed, risk discourse. Young people[1] should be included at all levels of emergency and disaster management (MacDonald 2021, MacDonald *et al.* 2023). However, the focus of this paper is on resilience building in communities as this is where the consequences of disasters is 'first and foremost experienced' (NEMA 2022, p.7).

Engaging children and young people in building community resilience is vital when we consider that 10 to 24-year-olds make up 24% of the world's population and, in some regions

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1. The phrase 'young people' in this research are those aged 12 to 24 years. This aligns with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare definition (see www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-youth/contents/introduction).

(e.g. east and south Africa and west and central Africa), they make up 32% of those nations' populations.[2] In the Australian context, children aged under the age of 15 represent 33% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, compared to 18% of other people of the same age. The result is that, within Australia's 2019–2020 bushfire-affected areas, more children and young people experiencing 'the diverse effects of bushfires' were from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Williamson, Markham & Weir 2020, p.3).

To reimagine how young people can be active in community resilience requires new ways of thinking about children and young people to 'acknowledge young people's skills attributes and capabilities as agentic, informed and creative thinkers who are capable of constructive and active participation' (MacDonald *et al.* 2023, p.3).

Background

While all social groups have unique or specific needs, the label and dominance of a vulnerability discourse has resulted in some specific groups, such as those identified above, being 'less prepared for a natural disaster, more susceptible during it, hav[ing] higher mortality rates, and poorer outcomes in the recovery period' (Howard *et al.* 2017, p.140).An intersectional and critical perspective reveals that the vulnerability narrative in emergency and disaster contexts is related to pre-existing 'process[es] of marginalisation' (Gibb 2018, p.329). From this perspective, the intersection of vulnerabilities in disasters 'are to a large extent socially (re)produced' and recognises the entrenched and pre-existing power structures and hierarchies that exist in communities (Kuran *et al.* 2020, p.6). To achieve 'enhanced resilience for those who are currently side-lined' (Kuran *et al.* 2020, p. 6), it is important to move beyond the homogenisation of marginalised groups that pre-exists disaster events (Gibb 2018, Kuran *et al.* 2020). In doing so, we can enact the Sendai Framework's call for social action towards 'inclusive and all-of-society disaster risk management' (UNDDR 2015, p.23).

Young people are the focus of this paper and we provide evidence of how a capability and empowerment discourse around young people acknowledges their skills and capabilities as agents of change (MacDonald 2021; Macdonald *et al.* 2023). We are not alone. Researchers have long called for the skills, capabilities and capacities of young people to be recognised in emergency management (Mort, Rodriguez-Giralt & Delicado 2020; Peek 2008; Peek & Domingue 2020). These are arguments to complement the vulnerability discourse with a capability and empowerment discourse that acknowledges that engaging young people increases their resilience in disasters and 'contributes to increasing the resilience of families and entire communities' (Peek 2008, p.20).

Literature review

The urgency and call for action in disaster risk reduction identified in 2015 has intensified and we continue to experience the increasing incidence and severity of disasters around the world. Disasters are complex and Aldrich (2012) argued that it is problematic to define a disaster as either natural or man-made as the effects or destruction are often a combination of both. He described disasters as *'an event that suspends normal activities and threatens or causes severe, communitywide damage'*[3] (Aldrich 2012, p.3). The effects at the local level are significant and community resilience building is a key strategy in preparedness. Funding and other systemic enablers are required, alongside large-scale investment, to enable communities to undertake locally focused resilience building (NEMA 2023).

Our investigation of young people's active involvement in resilience building begins with the scoping review undertaken by Bessaha, Hayward and Gatanas (2022) that reviewed 214 articles published between 1990 and 2021. They identified a total of 19 articles that met their inclusion criteria. Of these, 5 focused on themes of young people's participation or youth-led efforts in community mobilisation and resilience and 9 on education-community partnerships. The majority of articles aligned with the United Nations Youth Forum for Resilience and the broader aims of the Sendai Framework but were not explicitly a response to the framework. That review is not replicated here, but we acknowledge their findings that young people 'can be actively involved in the development, planning, and engagement of future disaster risk reduction activities and interventions' (Bessaha, Hayward & Gatanas 2022) and the call for future research to focus on young people and community resilience.

Methodology

Review of literature

A traditional review was undertaken of existing literature to identify the influence of Sendai Framework over time and across research disciplines (Hart 2019). The review was not a systematic review of all literature but was a focused investigation to identify any shift in the research and programmatic and practical engagement with young people in disaster resilience. A search of Google Scholar was done of articles from 2010 to 6 June 2023 using the search phrases, 'disaster resilience', 'young people' and 'agents of change' anywhere in the article. The results are summarised in Table 1.

The search was extended to 2022–23 publications to include 'community resilience' and 'disaster'. This identified 2,300 articles, which suggests that community has been a primary focus of much of the 2,480 resilience research papers published between 2022 and June 2023.

Interviews with partner organisations

This research is part of a large-scale pilot program, 'Future Proof: young people, disaster recovery and (re)building communities' (YACVic 2023) that promotes youth participation in community resilience efforts across fire- and flood-affected communities in regional Victoria. As a part of this project, young people have been employed in local councils, Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations and non-government organisations across 12 regional areas in the north-east and east of Victoria.

We conducted mid-project, semi-structured interviews with the manager, youth worker and young person employed in each

2. Statistics are taken from the global population as of mid-2022, by age (see www.statista.com/statistics/829732/global-population-by-age/).

3. Italics in original

Table 1: Numbers of articles published as identified via Google Scholar including the phrases 'disaster resilience', 'young people', 'agents of change'.[4]

Year range	Number of published articles
2010–2015	1,180
2016–2018	3,040
2019–2021	5,050
2022–June 2023	2,480

4. It is acknowledged that Google Scholar does not include reports, grey literature and non-peer reviewed publications.

organisation. The mid-project interviews captured the opportunities, challenges and barriers experienced in promoting youth participation in community resilience in regional and rural communities. The 90-minute interviews were conducted in May and June 2023. The data and the discussion present observations and participant experiences from the first 4 partner organisations interviewed in May 2023. At the time of publication, interviews and data analysis for the remaining partner organisations are ongoing. These insights from the preliminary analysis are shared to demonstrate how community resilience is being reimagined by young people and the organisations they work in.

Emerging evidence

Interviewing participants at the halfway point in the project enabled a better understanding of the specific experiences and allowed us to capture the perspectives of the people filling the roles in each organisation. There have been challenges and opportunities through this project and the findings will be detailed in future publications. At this stage of the project, our semi-structured interviews have enabled the uniqueness of each place-based organisation to emerge. An outcome has been the positive effects of employing and embedding young people in councils, Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations and non-government organisations and the links this creates in building community resilience. Young people, with lived experience of cumulative disaster event, employed in regional local council partners reflected:

And how do we ensure that [young people are] prepared for an emergency? I think that's why we come back to that buzzword of resilience because, if you can build resilience and get people to build relationships, that's not just going to support them for an emergency, that's going to support them in all these other worries they're having.

(Young person, partner organisation 1)

From day dot, I have just been given so much support and freedom; creative freedom. It's just unreal. I do come to work and I'm not just the token young person that sits at the desk in Council. I am part of the team – I feel as though I'm part of the team, so because of that I'm then learning skills, I'm learning communication skills, stakeholder skills, what it means to be in a team. I love buddying up with different portfolios.

(Young person, partner organisation 2)

I think it goes both ways. This program has made it evident to the emergency management team that it's important [to engage with young people] and I've learned how to communicate those needs and those recovery needs through the emergency management team.

(Young person, partner organisation 3)

A focus of the program is on professional youth work, both employing youth workers and the principles of working with young people (Corney *et al.* 2022). Youth workers are supervising the young people employed in this project. A youth worker employed in a council reflected on the value of employing young people to enable local community resilience work.

…building that resilience …building those relationships with their communities, and also building the [young people's] relationships with other key stakeholders, whether it be the CFAs or the whatever.

(Youth Worker, partner organisation 1)

It does build resilience, it does highlight young people, it does make [young] people feel valued.

(Youth Worker, partner organisation 1)

Managers in the project partner organisations play a vital role. They reflected on the value of employing and embedding young people to improve community resilience:

[Employed young person] has been able to change so many of the mentalities that might exist around young people's competence and capabilities, and she's obviously exceptional, but people are just constantly surprised and in awe of what's coming out of that team. And we would like to do this [employing young people in council] more often.

(Manager, partner organisation 2)

The other opportunity as well is that [employed young person and youth team] have really integrated themselves really well with the other departments that [community resilience project] touches. They've done a really good job reaching out to our emergency management team. So I'm actually really confident that the next time, and it's inevitable, we have a disaster we will have young people involved and leading the recovery and the response.

(Manager, partner organisation 2)

I think that the program has definitely broadened that awareness of the importance of young people in emergency management within our organisation. This has meant that this lens of young people 12–25 [years] has become more of a focus for our emergency management and resilience team and our recovery.

(Manager, partner organisation 3)

Discussion

The partner organisations have previously worked with young people, particularly in the current environment with most partner

organisations receiving disaster funding as a part of recovery efforts from different sources. Their previous and current experiences working with young people included pre-existing youth advisory groups and targeted events or activities. Participant managers and youth workers reflected that the young people were often involved in short-term projects, isolated from other parts of their organisations and had no previous involvement with emergency management teams.

The participant managers and youth workers reflected on the benefits of employing a young person with lived experience of disaster in their organisation. Managers from partner organisation 2 and 3 spoke of the building of formal and informal relationships and networks that demonstrated the competence and capabilities of those young people and, importantly, raised the profile of young people within their organisations. They linked the benefits of their young person directly to community resilience teams and the positive outcomes of these connections. The benefits are mutually beneficial with the benefits of being 'part of a team' expressed by a participant young person.

All participant managers and youth workers described a shift in their emergency management teams and stakeholders' perceptions of young people. They described how the expertise and lived experience of the young people are actively sought by emergency managers and community resilience teams within their organisations. This is consistent with the findings from a youth engagement emergency management initiative in the Macedon Ranges Shire that found that increased involvement of young people led to emergency managers coming to 'regard the ideas of young people as having a valid contribution to emergency management planning and response' (Hocking, Taylor & Tupek 2014, p.58).

The benefits for young people are also evident as they reflected on their role within organisations and in building community resilience. The effects were not constrained to their organisation. Young people are also connecting with other organisations such as the County Fire Authority (as mentioned by the youth worker in partner organisation 2).

Community resilience building is the outcome and the beneficiary. The youth workers reflected on the significance to resilience building but also their sense of value. This is evident in youth workers' reflections and also the young person in partner organisation 2 who said that they were 'not just the token young person'. Furthermore, partner organisation 1's young person recognised that building resilience has benefits for their community beyond emergencies and disasters.

Creativity and opportunity

Having highlighted how young people have been able to 'change so many of the mentalities' (Manager, partner organisation 2), we want to explore the creativity of young people and the opportunities that are missed if we don't enable a capability narrative to sit alongside the vulnerability discourse. Capturing evidence related to the roles and benefits young people bring to this program provides valuable insights into what they are capable of. Importantly, this evidence highlights what is missed if we do not enable a capability and empowerment narrative to 'flip the script' on an entrenched

vulnerability discourse. The phrase 'flip the script' is used intentionally as, increasingly, evidence supports the introduction of a capability and empowerment discourse over the dominant vulnerability and deficit discourse in which young people are viewed.

Ultimately, the Sendai Framework is calling for governments, stakeholders, community organisations, communities, everyone to try something different. Given the opportunity, young people demonstrate their ability to develop creative solutions, but they cannot do it alone. Partner organisation 1's young person acknowledged this in their reflection that the creative freedom that they had was 'unreal' because 'from day dot I have just been given so much support'.

Young people are concerned about disasters, climate change, mental health and their communities, but they are also keen to find solutions. Their perspectives about environment, climate, health and wellbeing, diversity, inclusion, human rights and social justice bring fresh and creative ideas to address issues that concern them (MacDonald *et al.* 2023, Walsh & Black 2018). They want to learn as well as be respected. The young person from partner organisation 3 acknowledged this as they reflected on how the program goes 'both ways'. For them, learning how to communicate the needs of young people to the emergency management team has been invaluable.

Building community resilience is complex with many challenges, traditional structures and multiple stakeholders. What is revealed by the reflections of the young people in this study is a desire to be involved, to share their experience and to learn. By employing young people in disaster-focused roles and allowing them to participate in resilience building, we can tap into their resourcefulness and creativity.

Australia's midterm review of the Sendai Framework

Australia's midterm review of the Sendai Framework acknowledged the progress that has been made and that there was 'still much to be done by 2030' (NEMA 2022, p.6). Work with children and young people was acknowledged, including the Future Proof project as well as work being undertaken by the Australian Red Cross and state-based projects across Australia's states and territories. The review reported that:

> The inclusion of disaster resilience education into the Australian curriculum has the potential to spark a cultural and generational change in the way Australians interact with hazards and think about vulnerability. Until this is operationalised, as a nation, Australia could look at scaling up place-based organisations which look to embed the tenets of disaster resilience (NEMA 2022, p.54).

This is a bold approach to cultural and generational change, but focusing on an educational curriculum for children 4–18 years and only those who access early childhood and school-based learning is not sufficient. The evidence highlights the benefits and potential of involving young people in place-based organisations. The aim is to share evidence of the benefit, potential and positive effects of young people in place-based programs, interventions and decision-making.

Conclusion

This research introduced a capability and empowerment discourse alongside the current vulnerability and risk discourse for young people in emergency and disaster management. This includes challenging the vulnerability discourse that is a product of pre-existing and socially (re)produced inequality and power structures in society. This discourse homogenises young people and restricts the 'inclusive and all-of-society disaster risk management' approaches called for by the Sendai Framework (UNDRR 2015, p.23). This paper considered how the framework's call to include children and young people as agents of change in disaster risk reduction has influenced the involvement of young people in resilience building since 2015 and introduced emerging evidence that demonstrates how young people are improving community resilience. While this research is ongoing, the emerging evidence demonstrates that employing and embedding young people in local organisations has an integrated and positive impact. Young people are creating relationships and networks within their organisations and externally with emergency management and other organisations. The benefits are evident as young people speak to their upskilling, engagement and opportunities to share their experience and expertise. Managers in partner organisations reflected on how young people have become more involved in their emergency management and resilience teams. As such, young people can help to join the dots between themselves and their organisations to reimagine better community resilience within their own communities.

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