



Amplifying student voice in disaster resilience education

A case study of the disaster resilience project

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Developed through a dual agency multi-hazard pilot project led by the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Victorian State Emergency Service (VicSES), the Disaster Resilience Project is a teacher-delivered disaster resilience education program for Victorian secondary school students in Years 7-9. As part of the program development process, research was conducted to involve students as genuine stakeholders in decision-making regarding program structure, content and mode of delivery. This has helped to ensure that the program accommodates the needs and priorities of students and can effectively increase their capacities for taking practical action that reduces risk and builds resilience in their schools, households and communities.

WHAT IS STUDENT VOICE?

Student voice involves students actively participating in their schools, communities and the education system, contributing to decision-making and collectively influencing outcomes by articulating their perspectives, opinions, and ideas. The importance of student voice has always been recognised in prominent theories of learning, teaching and schooling, but over the last 15 years, driven by strong theoretical advancements and large-scale empirical studies, there has been a major resurgence of student voice in education policy, research and practice. There are numerous mechanisms for amplifying student voice. For example, students can provide feedback on curriculum content and pedagogy and contribute to the development of educational resources and materials .

STUDENT VOICE IN DISASTER RESILIENCE EDUCATION

From the international to the local level, disaster resilience education (DRE) for children and youth has been recognised as a key mechanism for reducing disaster risk and building a culture of safety and resilience. As a direct consequence of this, considerable effort has been invested in the development of school-based DRE programs, in both Australia and internationally. Yet, examples whereby students have been actively involved in the development of such programs are exceedingly rare. The exclusion of children and youth from processes of DRE program development is being challenged by the UNISDR which has identified genuine engagement with these groups as being critical to the successful implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.



“Students have unique expertise and perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling, and should have the opportunity to actively shape their own education.”

- Victorian Department of Education and Training, 2016



“Governments should engage with relevant stakeholders, including children and youth... in the design and implementation of policies, plans and standards”.

- UNISDR Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2015

RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research was to provide students with an opportunity to actively participate in the development of the Disaster Resilience Project. This was achieved through a student-centred feasibility and acceptability study in which students were provided with an opportunity to provide feedback and critique on program structure, content and mode of delivery. At two Victorian schools, teachers delivered a pilot version of the Disaster Resilience Project and then 128 students participated in qualitative focus groups interviews in which they were asked to identify program strengths and weaknesses and offer their recommendations for program improvement.

KEY FINDINGS

Amongst the students, there was wide consensus that participating in the Disaster Resilience Project had provided them with valuable knowledge and skills and that the program should be delivered in hazard prone areas across the State. However, students also identified numerous program weaknesses and offered over 30 highly valuable recommendations for improvement. Chief among these was the need to make information more accessible by including more audio-visual materials and to incorporate more information on the roles and experiences of children and youth in disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness and response. Student recommendations are now being used to inform program revisions and to guide the development of additional resources and materials before progressing the program towards scaled implementation.

CONCLUSIONS

This project has highlighted the value of actively involving students in DRE program development. By providing a platform through which students can actively contribute to decision-making regarding program structure, content and mode of delivery, emergency management agencies can ensure that school-based DRE programs are providing children and young people with the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to understand local hazards and disaster risks and actively contribute to disaster risk reduction and resilience building efforts at the local level. Based on this project, it is strongly recommended that the amplification of student voice becomes standard practice in DRE program development.

For more information on the Disaster Resilience Project or this research, please contact: Matthew Henry m.henry@cfa.edu.au or Briony Towers briony.towers@rmit.edu.au