

Transforming education for disaster risk reduction: Pathways towards a critical pedagogy of place

Briony Towers¹

¹ LEADRRR

Australian children are growing up in a context of rapidly escalating disaster risks. Climate change is exacerbating the frequency, intensity and magnitude of natural hazards, such as bushfires, droughts, cyclones, heatwaves and floods. At the same time, population growth, urban development, and increasing social and economic inequality are exposing increasing numbers of people to the physical, psychological, social and economic impacts of hazards and disasters. While children are particularly vulnerable to those impacts, it is important to recognise that their vulnerability is socially constructed. Specifically, it is a consequence of their exclusion from the development and implementation of disaster risk reduction (DRR) policies, strategies, plans, procedures and standards that are intended to protect them. Over the last decade, research has established that involving children as genuine stakeholders in DRR not only increases their own safety but has benefits for their whole community. This is recognised in the *United Nations Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction* which explicitly states that *'Children and youth are agents of change and should be given the space and modalities to contribute to disaster risk reduction, in accordance with legislation, national practice and educational curricula'*. While the Australian Curriculum does include DRR-related content, implementing that content in ways that position children and youth as 'agents of change' requires us to transform the way we educate children about hazards, disasters and DRR. In Australia, the dominant model of DRR education is characterized by didactic, standardised approaches that decontextualize learning from children's lived realities and constrain their agency. More recently, however, educators have begun to challenge that model through the adoption of socially critical, place-based pedagogies that privilege the needs, priorities, and interests of students and facilitate their genuine participation in meaningful and purposeful action. Drawing on findings from empirical studies in three Victorian primary schools, this paper will demonstrate how critical placed-based pedagogies can serve to build children's understandings of natural hazards and disaster risks and facilitate their involvement as genuine stakeholders in DRR. It will then explore some of the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing this approach and identify some promising pathways for scaling up in Australian schools.