

Gently, Gently

A school-university participatory research partnership in a post-disaster setting

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This article reports on a school-university partnership that emerged gradually and respectfully as the partners came to know and understand each other. It was set in the context of a city coming to terms with a series of devastating earthquakes. The lead researcher had been a teacher and educator in the city and saw first hand the way schools had risen to the occasion to support students and their families through this traumatic time. Once the initial emergency response phase was over and schools were beginning to recover, offering the resources of the university and the skills of its personnel to assist schools to process and record the events appeared to be one way of giving assistance. As well as supporting students to process their experiences, it was hoped that due recognition might be given to the role that principals and teachers had played throughout this difficult time. This article charts the process undertaken in this sensitive context as the research team from the university gently moved forward to engage schools and build relationships. Many lessons were learned along the way and that is the purpose of this article – to share these experiences and analyse the factors that made the school-university partnerships in this project rewarding for both parties.

The article begins by discussing the disaster literature and the particular earthquake context in which the project was set. It then reviews relevant literature on school-university partnerships before describing the approach undertaken in this project – one that would be participatory, flexible, ethical and sensitive; one that respected the schools' experiences and in which both parties had children and young people's wellbeing at the core. The story of engaging each school is told in a narrative style to reflect the sometimes convoluted and serendipitous path that the project took.

To conclude the article, we reflect analytically on the process and outline the factors that contributed to the project's success. The factors emerging from this analysis are *dispositional*, *relational* and *contextual*. We argue that, for a school-university partnership to be successful, both parties need to have a disposition of goodwill based on mutual trust, respect, sensitivity and openness. From that base, an approach that is genuinely participatory,

flexible, authentic and purposeful can be negotiated. Problems can be solved willingly, creatively and sensitively. Finally, an understanding of the purpose of the collaboration and the context in which it will evolve, including articulating responsibilities and benefits, is important in building and sustaining a relationship that sees the joint activity through to a rewarding conclusion.

DISASTERS AND SCHOOLS

Disasters can be defined as ‘... the consequences of events triggered by natural hazards that overwhelm local response capacity and seriously affect the social and economic development of a region’ (Ferris & Petz 2012, p. xix). Most descriptions in the literature highlight the suddenness or lack of preparedness, the unexpectedness of the size of the event and ensuing damage, and the inability of existing systems to cope. There can be large-scale death or dislocation, and often a lack of immediate access to food, water, shelter and medical aid (Cahill et al. 2010; Ferris & Petz 2012; Ferris, Petz & Stark 2013; Mutch, 2014a; Smawfield 2013; Winkworth 2007).

Schools play a range of roles in disaster response and recovery. Schools can be the site of the disaster, as in a school shooting, kidnapping or building collapse. They can be immediately affected by a natural event, such as earthquake, flood, tsunami, tornado or bushfire. They can be in the vicinity of a technological disaster, such as a nuclear meltdown, plane crash or factory explosion. Or they can be affected by other disasters or traumatic events, such as war, terrorist activity, epidemics or famine.

If a disaster or traumatic event happens at school, principals, teachers and other adults must make life-saving decisions for the students in their care. They then need to act *in loco parentis* until students are reunited with their families or are cared for in a safe place. Many vivid accounts have come out of the 2011 triple disaster in Japan, which began with a magnitude 9 earthquake off the coast of Japan on 11 March 2011, followed by a devastating tsunami reaching 30 m (98 ft) in height. Students were evacuated to the top floors of their schools or to higher ground. Teachers then looked after cold, hungry, distressed students with no food, no water, no power, sleeping on the floor and singing to keep up their spirits (Ema 2013; Japan Society 2011; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2012; Parmenter 2012).

Post-disaster protocols encourage getting children and young people back into education as quickly as possible, often in very difficult circumstances. For example, the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China disrupted schooling for 2.5 million students (Zhong 2013). Locations for schooling needed to be found and students prioritised. Students preparing for examinations were the first priorities and were sent to neighbouring provinces or housed in prefabricated classrooms or tents. Child Friendly Spaces provided

day care for young children, informal education for school-aged children, life skills training for adolescents and support for parents (Zhong 2013).

Schools that are undamaged are often used as safety shelters, community hubs, or drop-in centres. The principal at Riverside School in Canterbury, New Zealand, whose school was an earthquake shelter during the 2010/2011 earthquakes, recalls:

We were set up as a Civil Defence base, so for the first week and a half there were families from not only our community but the other schools as well coming here to receive support from Civil Defence. There was an overnight area in our hall where people stayed so we were getting a good picture of the needs of our community ...
(Mutch 2014b)

When disasters happen off-site to students, their families or the community, this also impacts on schools. In 2008, a group of New Zealand school students and their teacher were swept away and drowned in a flooded river. The tight-knit school community was in shock. The principal needed to deal with multiple priorities such as liaising with police, families, media, the Ministry of Education and his own staff. He needed to draw on his skills as a leader and the relationships that he had already established in order to bring his school through this tragic time (Tarrant 2011a,b).

Most school-related disaster recovery literature focuses on strategies and resources for the social, emotional and psychological recovery of students. Disasters can have serious long-term effects on children and young people's health and wellbeing (Australian Psychological Society 2013; Bonanno et al. 2010; Brock & Jimerson 2013; Norris et al. 2002), but the severity of their reactions often depends on risk factors such as (a) pre-existing experiences, for example, previous traumatic experiences or mental illness and (b) exposure to the event – the level of physical destruction, injuries, loss or dislocation (Bonanno et al. 2010; Brock & Jimerson 2013; Lazarus, Jimerson & Brock 2003a,b).

Many children and young people experience symptoms of distress and anxiety but, for most, these usually reduce over time (Australian Psychological Society 2013; Bonanno et al. 2010; La Greca & Silverman 2009). Their sense of safety and security, their ongoing development and their social relationships may all be compromised (Gordon 2004; McDermott & Palmer 2002; McDermott et al. 2005). Children and young people who survive disasters report that the loss of loved ones and places, order and opportunity upsets their sense of a predictable and hopeful future (Betancourt & Kahn 2008). They might become irritable or aggressive, not want to go to school, display sleeping or eating disturbances, learning problems, poor concentration, or loss of interest in friends and activities (Australian Psychological Society

2013; Bonnano et al. 2010; Cahill et al. 2010; Lazarus, Jimerson & Brock 2003a,b; National Association of School Psychologists 2008; Prinstein et al. 1996).

Children and young people severely affected by trauma need specialist support (Australian Psychological Society 2013; Lazarus, Jimerson & Brock 2003a,b; National Association of School Psychologists 2008), but those not severely impacted benefit from opportunities to process the events without dwelling too much on the aspects they find distressing. Talking to a caring and trusted adult, finding support from their peers, expressing their feelings through creative activities and returning to normal routines are ways that support young people's recovery (Cahill et al. 2010; National Association of School Psychologists 2008; Prinstein et al. 1996).

Research on helping children and young people adjust after trauma suggests that emotional processing (Caruana 2010; Gordon 2007; Prinstein et al. 1996) is an important post-trauma activity. Emotional processing is defined as 'a diverse set of physical, cognitive and affective actions that lead to absorption of emotional disturbances ...' (Prinstein et al. 1996, p. 464). Without appropriate absorption or opportunities to put events into perspective, reminders of the event can interfere with normal functioning, resulting in nightmares, distress or listlessness. Carefully managed and repeated exposures through calm rehearsals, relevant conversations, drawing, play or drama can contribute to appropriate absorption.

Apart from inclusion in post-trauma psychological or medical studies, children and young people are often underrecognised or ignored in wider disaster research (Cahill et al. 2010; Gibbs et al. 2013; La Greca 2006; Save the Children 2006). As Cahill et al. (2010, p. 6) suggest, 'Caught between the perceptions that infants are the most vulnerable and adults are the most capable, there can be a tendency to overlook their needs'.

Our wider study, 'Christchurch schools tell their earthquakes stories', collected children's and adults' stories to assist school personnel to process their experiences and help them frame a more positive future (see Mutch 2013 and Mutch & Gawith 2014 for more detail). The focus, in this article, however, is on the process involved in building relationships between the university researchers and the participating schools post-disaster.

THE CANTERBURY EARTHQUAKES

On 4 September 2010, a 7.1 magnitude earthquake struck the city of Christchurch and the surrounding region of Canterbury, New Zealand. The earthquake caused major damage to buildings, transport links and infrastructure such as electricity, water supply and waste removal. A state of emergency was declared. Fortunately, as the first earthquake struck in the early hours of the morning, no deaths occurred. Many residents found accommodation in emergency shelters until they were able

to assess what had happened and consider what to do next (Canterbury Earthquakes Royal Commission 2012).

Over the next three years, a further 12 000+ aftershocks, including four major quakes (over 6 on the Richter scale), each causing more damage and disruption, prevented the mammoth task of removing, repairing and rebuilding from getting underway. The worst of the aftershocks occurred on 22 February 2011 – a 6.3 magnitude jolt with an upthrust of twice the force of gravity. Thousands of people were injured, 185 people were to die, over 100 000 homes and businesses were damaged, and the city’s central business district was demolished (Canterbury Earthquakes Royal Commission 2012).

Following the September 2010 earthquake, many local schools became evacuation or drop-in centres for local communities. When schools reopened several weeks later, they continued to provide support to their students, staff, families and wider communities. When the February 2011 earthquake occurred on a school day, school personnel played a more immediate role in disaster response as they evacuated, calmed and cared for students until they were collected by family (Education Review Office 2013).

At the time of the earthquakes, Carol Mutch, the lead researcher on the project discussed in this article, was working for an evaluation agency that had an office in Christchurch. Prior to that, she had been a long-time teacher and teacher educator in the city. She knew first hand how principals and teachers had looked after the children and young people in their care in the immediate aftermath and then returned to schools, once they reopened, to support their students, despite the chaos and distress in their own lives. As principals were later to tell her:

I’ve just been so amazed with some teachers in particular whose homes were badly damaged in town and they were offered discretionary leave to sort out their own lives but all of them wanted to be here for the children and when I asked them (or pleaded with them)—they said, ‘We deal with that outside of school hours. This is a fantastic distraction for us. We want to be here for our children, for our classes.’ I’ve just had so much admiration for the teachers throughout the whole process. (Principal, Riverside School)

Teachers are great. I can’t say enough about how much strength, how much integrity, how much they would go the extra mile to drop kids off, to look after kids in their classrooms after school, to buy them special treats, take them to McDonalds, all those sorts of things ... to find clothes for them, to find a pram for a mother who didn’t have a pram to wheel her baby to school ... (Principal, East Avenue School)

The dual purpose of supporting children and young people’s post-disaster wellbeing and recognising the role principals and teachers played in disaster response and recovery required a negotiated approach, where schools felt the university was genuinely engaging with their lived experience and not simply

taking advantage of their situation of vulnerability. Before describing how the university research team approached this challenge, we review some of the available literature on school-university partnerships.

SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

Institutions, such as universities, engaged in the social and educational development of children and young people need to build positive relationships with schools. As Patton (2012, p. 13) states: 'Both parties are committed, at least in part, to continuous learning and intellectual development, and both play a major role in socializing and preparing ... youths for future roles in society.' Further, if it is necessary to go on site to observe the everyday workings of a school, to implement or evaluate a program, or to gather data for a research project, supportive relationships are needed to smooth access, foster communication and reduce difficulties (Chorzempa, Isabelle & de Groot 2010; Patton 2012; Richmond 1996).

In the field of teacher education, the necessity for pre-service teachers to experience the reality of the classroom has been long understood (Goodlad 1993; Martin, Snow & Franklin Torrez 2011; Trent & Lim 2010). Other professions, such as counselling or social work, also use schools as sites of clinical practice. In educational research, the phenomenon of teaching and learning, and those who engage in such undertakings, has grown in interest over the past century, as have the ways in which this research is conducted.

Unfortunately, such significant relationships have often been fraught with tension. Patton (2012) reports that lack of mutual trust and respect between the partners, poor communication about the purpose and direction of the relationship and reliance on one-time or infrequent interactions have marred these relationships. Researchers frequently note that in university-school relationships the power differential favours the university (Clavier et al. 2012; Hooper & Britnell 2012; Richmond 1996; Trent & Lim 2010). When using schools for research purposes, Hooper and Britnell (2012) conclude that schools are often suspicious of university-generated research because of a history of hierarchical relationships, resulting in the interests of the school rarely being incorporated in the study. The researchers generally hold the funding, expert knowledge and resources and, despite using the school to achieve their goals, they do not often reciprocate or return research results. Trent and Lim (2010) suggest that universities need to understand that each partner comes to the relationship from an organisation with differing structures, purposes and cultures. Martin, Snow and Franklin Torrez (2011, p. 300) agree, and comment: 'To that end, understandings of how university-based educators actively work towards bridging boundaries and establishing collaborative relationships are critical.'

University-based researchers undertake their work in schools across a range of fields, such as teacher education, subject disciplines, counselling, public health, mental health and youth

work. They bring a range of theoretical stances. In reviewing this literature, we found systems theory, socio-ecological theory, social constructionism, third space theory, Bourdieu's field theory, Schön's reflection on action/inaction, actor-network theory, post-colonial theory and critical theory. Methods ranged from positivist and quantitative, such as randomised experiments, to narrative or arts-based qualitative approaches. In general, where the quality of the partnership was the focus, more participatory approaches were used, such as action research, participatory action research, reflective practice, communities of practice, appreciative inquiry, and culturally responsive research practices. In these participatory approaches, the emphasis is on mutual benefit. As Martin, Snow and Franklin Torrez (2011) explain, they require cultivating multiple interactions, negotiating webs of relationships, navigating the school-university interface and understanding the joint venture as social and dynamic.

To conclude the literature review, we have synthesised the development of positive school-university partnerships into several phases (as shown in Figure 1). In reality, the process can be more fluid and circular, but by setting it out this way we highlight key aspects to be considered along the way. The phases are: (a) setting up; (b) maintaining; and (c) concluding the partnership (Atweh, Kemmis & Weeks 1998; Chorzempa, Isabelle & de Groot 2010; Davis et al. 2012; Duncan & Conner 2013; Goodlad 1993; Hooper & Britnell 2012; Luter, Lester & Kronick 2013; Martin, Snow & Franklin Torrez 2011; McLaughlin et al. 2006; Mutch & Wong 2008; Patton 2012; Reason & Bradbury 2008; Richmond 1996; Trainor & Bal 2014; Trent & Lim 2010).

Figure 1: Negotiating successful school-university partnerships

Setting up the partnership requires:

- Clarification of the need for the partnership
- A tentative approach through gatekeepers, networks or a facilitator
- A preliminary phase where the request is made and agreement reached
- A willingness to negotiate respectfully within the relevant parameters
- A shared understanding of the purpose, timeframe and anticipated outcomes
- A clear understanding of lines of accountability for different aspects
- A developing understanding of each other's contexts, situations and limitations
- Trust in each other and respect for what each partner brings.

Maintaining and sustaining the partnership requires:

- Navigating ongoing relationships
- Communicating clearly
- Acting in an ethical and sensitive manner
- Providing accurate information
- Sharing decision-making
- Respecting diversity
- Employing culturally safe practices

- Maintaining the authenticity of the activity
- Continuing trust
- Providing time for reflection
- Continually revising purpose, methods and expectations
- Keeping the bigger picture in mind.

Concluding the partnership or an activity within the partnership requires:

- Agreeing ownership of various outcomes
- Agreeing dissemination formats and outlets
- Assuring reciprocity of shared benefits
- Acknowledging time and effort
- Keeping promises, such as returning findings.

Successful partnerships, we argue, work best in an ‘ethic of care’ (Nugent & Faucette 2013, p. 569), with thoughtful design, nurturing over time and realising, as is often found, that partnerships are much more complex than they might appear (Martin, Snow & Franklin Torrez 2011).

Despite the inherent difficulties, much research reports positive outcomes for both parties (Duncan & Conner 2013; McLaughlin et al. 2006), but as Patton (2012, p. 13) concludes, ‘Yet despite this apparent synergy, there are relatively few published examples of successful partnerships between schools and university [programs] aimed at mutual development and improvement.’

METHODOLOGY AND ETHICS

Research in ongoing disaster settings, as was the case in Canterbury, suggests 12–24 months after the onset of the ongoing disaster event to be a useful time to start to make sense of what happened (Bornemisza et al. 2010). As schools are intimately involved in the aftermath of disasters, they are logical settings in which to conduct research that explores how children and young people might be affected (La Greca 2006; Smawfield 2013).

There are advantages and disadvantages when using schools for disaster-related research. One of the advantages is that researchers can select from large representative samples; another is that they can interview children in familiar surroundings (Gurwitch et al. 2002; Prinstein et al. 1996; Silverman & La Greca 2002). The challenges include that schools themselves might have suffered damage, school staff might be coping with their own home and family issues related to the disaster, communication and transport might be affected, and schools might prefer to focus on re-establishing routines or catching students up on missed work (La Greca 2006; Smawfield 2013).

The ‘Christchurch schools tell their earthquake stories’ project was an attempt by the lead researcher, Carol Mutch, to capture the stories of principals, teachers and students as they came to terms with the traumatic events. It was also conceived as a way of recording the impact of these events for history – for the participants, schools, communities and the nation.

The stories of students, principals and teachers from the wider project can be found in Mutch 2013, Mutch 2014a, and Mutch and Gawith 2014. The emphasis in this article is on the process rather than the outcomes.

The first step was for Carol to discuss her ideas with a principal in an affected school. The principal thought it was a good idea but wanted to talk it over with her school board and staff first. Meanwhile, Carol put together a research design and a funding application and began the process of applying for ethical approval from her university. She also checked with the Canterbury Primary Principals' Association about how they thought their members might feel about the project. Being known in the city's education circles helped in gaining their approval. As the city was still reeling from the disaster and struggling with ongoing aftershocks and post-disaster recovery, it was important to move cautiously and build confidence and trust in the first school. She attended meetings with the school staff and community, listening to their concerns and reshaping the research design to suit. It helped that she had experienced the earthquakes herself and was able to empathise with their situation. It still took five months from the initial approach to the first day the research team arrived on site.

The first funding application was unsuccessful, as the funder did not think there was a significant need for such a project. Luckily, UNESCO provided seed funds to allow the approach to be trialled in the first school. UNESCO was willing to allow Carol and her team to use a flexible, facilitative and participatory design.

Because of the nature of the undertaking, a sensitive, contextual and ethical approach was needed (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). Ethical considerations included the common requirements of informed consent, right to withdraw, school and parental permission for children to participate, children's assent, and confidentiality. As the project was also an archival record of real events with real people's stories, anonymity was negotiated to suit the purpose. For the school's records, for example in the illustrated book, real names were used and participants were able to review anything that used their names before it was published. When raw data were aggregated in cross-case analyses and shared more widely, such as in conference presentations or journal articles, pseudonyms or numerical identifiers were used instead. Finally, it was important to have support mechanisms, such as a trusted teacher or counsellor available, in case the interviews or activities caused distress.

CHRISTCHURCH SCHOOLS TELL THEIR EARTHQUAKE STORIES

The next section of the article tells the story of gaining access, building rapport and engaging four of the schools in the project – Hillview, Riverside, Beachlands and Forest Park (not their real names). All schools are mid-sized (200–500 students) full primary schools (students aged 5–12 years).

Hillview School

Hillview School wanted their stories to be told in an illustrated book that could be made available to the whole school community. They wanted it to have a range of stories from children of all ages, teachers, parents and the principal. Two of the children at Hillview had lost a parent in the earthquakes and the school was still feeling very fragile. They were very concerned that the retelling of earthquake stories might cause more distress. The school asked that the interviews be in groups – of children from the same class, of siblings, or of children with their parents. As researchers, we also suggested that we find ways to get children to talk about the events without being too direct or dwelling on the aspects that might upset them. We used a variety of strategies. Children were asked to describe earthquakes to people who had never been in one; to imagine they were grown up and telling their grandchildren what it was like during the earthquakes; to explain to visitors to the city how to be prepared; or to reimagine the city in the future.

The school organised the groups and the logistics of moving children to and from class. Interviews were videoed or audio recorded, according to the participants' wishes. The interviews were undertaken over several days. There were two experienced researchers working in tandem at each interview. One led the interview, while the other watched participants to ensure they were feeling comfortable and not showing signs of distress. Two of the research team also shared parts of their own stories so that the children could feel that we understood what they had been through. Although we did not foresee it, we found the group interviews very intense for the interviewers – asking, listening, rephrasing, empathising, probing, and anticipating how far to push and when to pull back. By alternating as interviewers, we could regain equilibrium between each group.

On the first day, we interviewed students in their groups. They were initially nervous, so we used a conversational style to put them at ease. As we built rapport, they opened up and shared vivid descriptions and thoughtful insights. While tears were sometimes close to the surface, we were able to acknowledge their feelings but gently deflect them so that they could begin to see their own experiences in a broader context. The group situation worked best for the older students as they were able to interact with and build on each other's comments.

Not all the children's stories were sad. A favourite story was how the local café, whose freezer was defrosting because of the power outage, sent bags of ice creams to the school for the children. They also talked about what they had learned and what they were most proud of. A brother and sister discussed how they had learned that '*... stuff didn't matter – you can buy new stuff but you can't buy someone's life back*', and others told how they had overcome their fears: '*I'm pretty proud of me because I haven't become a scaredy cat*'.

The next day, teachers and parents reported that the children were not distressed but in fact felt pleased that they

had taken part. They were more confident about recalling their experiences, so much so that we had more people asking to be interviewed the following day, including their older siblings. Over the next few days, we interviewed the principal, teachers and families. We continued interviewing until people stopped asking. We were eventually able to compile a book of the school stories and a DVD of the children's interviews to give to the school. In return, as a research team, we were able to use the interview transcripts for more detailed analysis and cross-case comparison (see Mutch 2013, 2014b; Mutch & Gawith 2014). The participants (and families) whose stories were in the book were involved in negotiating the way their transcripts would become published stories. It took a further year of the book script going to and fro between the researchers and the school before the book was launched. The principal made particular note of how the process had been sensitively handled, as well as expressing the school's appreciation of the finished product.

Beachlands School

The success of the partnership with the first school meant we were able to get further funds from the lead researcher's university to continue with the project. The Deputy Principal at Beachlands School was known to one of the research team. He was keen for us to come to his school but he wanted a project that was not adult driven but involved 'kids talking to kids'. The school had senior students (aged 10–12) who had been learning how to film and edit videos. We discussed how best to proceed, what level of skill the children had and what support they might need. We organised a trainee film director to support the students with filming, directing, interviewing and editing. The students designed the interview questions and practised on each other until they felt comfortable.

The students who wanted to be interviewed chose the setting for their interview, often where they were when the February 2011 earthquake happened – in the library, in the playground, by the school garden shed, or on a school trip to the beach. The student interviewers showed remarkable flexibility in adapting the questions to suit the age of their peers or the flow of the story. As the students' stories unfolded, they talked of where they were, how they felt and what they had learned from the earthquakes (see Mutch 2013). In case children became distressed, a teacher or researcher kept within watching distance of the interviews. Because the children being interviewed were able to frame their story as they wished, they were remarkably candid and calm. Preparing their story for others to view meant that they were able to gain a measure of objectivity and see their story as others might see it. Framing the concept, designing the narrative flow, selecting the location and rehearsing the production meant that they were able to normalise the events and begin to absorb them into their personal history (Cahill et al. 2010; Gordon 2004; Prinstein et al.

1996). Their stories were lucid, engaging and insightful. Here is an excerpt that exemplifies the stories told on camera. This boy was on the school trip to the beach (Mutch 2013, p. 451):

All of a sudden a huge earthquake struck. I tried to crawl away but the earthquake threw me back down again. They always say that your life flashes before your eyes before you die and I was waiting for that to happen. This was something that was completely unreal. I didn't think this would happen at all, especially here at Canterbury ... I was really nervous and was wondering: 'how was my brother coping, how was mum coping, how was my dad coping?' ... We made our way across to [a nearby school]. I felt sorry because there were little five year olds there and every time an aftershock came, they were crying and I thought this is no way for a five year old to live ... (Student, Beachlands School)

Several hours of video footage was edited and trimmed to create a video that could be shared with the community. On the third anniversary of the February earthquake, children and their families gathered in the school hall to view the video. Some of the older children who had since gone on to high school returned for the occasion. The children involved in making the video were immensely proud of what they had achieved – it was their story, told their way.

Riverside School

At the same time as we began working at Beachlands, we also began discussing the project with a school on the outskirts of the city most affected by the September 2010 earthquake. This partnership was again based on a prior relationship. The principal had been a student teacher when Carol was a teacher educator. The Riverside School principal's first reaction was that he felt the children had done enough talking and writing about the earthquake. He wanted the children to do something for the community – to create a memorial in which the experiences of all the children and their families would be represented and remembered. After wider discussion, the idea that emerged was to create a garden and seating area within the school grounds, where the property had been 'red-zoned' (designated for demolition), populated with plants from the families' gardens. The garden was also to include mosaics, as one student said: '*with bits of bricks from broken houses*', which would tell the community's story.

At the end of 2012, two of the research team facilitated a brainstorming session with a group of senior students (aged 10–12). They wanted people in the future to know what had happened: '*To remind them of what was there in the past and of what had been lost*'; '*We want them to know what we went through*'; '*... how we stayed together and worked it out*' and '*for memories of people who died*'. The students discussed lost buildings and icons, both in their town and the nearby city of Christchurch. They wrote and drew pre- and post-earthquake symbols and representations that would form the basis of a set of four panels. The first panel would be their town

in early times, the second would represent their town in modern times and the third would show their town being torn apart by the earthquakes. The fourth would identify their hopes for the future, framed by words such as *courage, community, stay strong, kia kaha (stand tall), faith, band together* and *new world*.

One researcher took the ideas away and drew a rough sketch of the four panels as they might appear when completed. She took the drawings back to the students to check they felt all their ideas had been captured and were represented as they wished. The local river became a motif that connected all four panels. One boy had drawn a well-known sailing ship that was anchored in the river. When asked what it represented, he said it was '*sailing through a river of emotions*', and when asked where it was going, he replied, '*getting to calmer seas*'. The ship has pride of place in the final panel and the name of the mosaic became '*River of Emotions*'.

It was a huge undertaking, which took over a year to complete. The school wanted every child to be part of the project. This required careful organisation to coordinate the researchers and timetable the activities so that every child was cycled through the various stages of turning sketches into bold shapes that could be 'mosaicked', cutting tiles, cleaning bricks, or placing, gluing and grouting tiles on the mosaic panels. A fine arts graduate student from the university, Sarah Yates, was employed as art director and project manager. The mosaic was mainly created inside in a spare classroom. Outside, the site had to be prepared – bulldozed, drained, filled with gravel, rolled, concreted and bricked. The project was so huge and time consuming that it went far beyond the resources that either the school or the university had budgeted for. Sarah was not deterred. She contacted local organisations and community newspapers. The community responded with goods, services and labour. A local men's organisation built the seat to go in the centre of the four mosaic panels. A group of youths on periodic detention, under the watchful eye of the probation officer, laid the bricks. Community members dropped by and cut and laid tiles alongside the children. To ensure that every child participated, even the newest children at the school, who arrived as the panels were being finished, were given a tile to place in the mosaic.

In 2014, to commemorate the February earthquakes, a community unveiling was arranged. The children, their teachers and parents, and the 72 community volunteers were invited. The final piece of the mosaic was laid by a local Member of Parliament. The ceremony was led by students who explained the meaning of the four panels and then presented Carol and Sarah with flowers: Carol for believing that nothing was impossible and Sarah for making the impossible happen.

Forest Park School

In 2012, the Government announced that it was going to close or merge schools in Christchurch that were no longer viable because of earthquake damage or population shifts. Principals, teachers and communities were shocked and angry, saying the proposal was '*unfair and cruel*'. As one teacher commented:

School is the SAFE place that they [schools] have tried to provide. Children were at school for the big February earthquake and it created a stronger bond in their communities, so it is very challenging when the Ministry wants to break that up in some communities and schools. (Teacher, Forest Park)

There is not space in this article to discuss the further disruption and trauma this caused the affected school communities.

One school that was slated for closure was Forest Park, which approached us to help them tell their story. The school itself was only moderately damaged in the earthquakes, but all around it homes were shattered and abandoned. Despite many families being relocated, they made their way across the city daily to continue to drop off their children because they had such loyalty to the school and because it had been so supportive of their children during the earthquakes. Over a hundred children from the school, with teachers and parents, had been at a local swimming complex learning water safety skills when the February earthquake struck:

My thoughts then were never, 'We aren't going to get out' or that it would collapse, but my thoughts now when I look back is that the whole place could have fallen in. We were so jolted that we stood up then we were jolted back down the force was so great. There was a group of children in the boat and all we could see was the whole thing swamped with the big waves and we couldn't even get to them. We tried to stand and go forward but we were just knocked back ... the lights went out and the children were screaming. All I remember is the siren noise and I went and grabbed a few of the Year 4 children out of the pool and I just huddled with them. (Teacher, Forest Park)

Forest Park School closed at the end of 2013, with the staff and students being merged with another school to create a new school. The acting principal of Forest Park, appointed to see it through to closure, stated: *'In military terms, it would be called "collateral damage".'* He continued:

How does that affect the staff? The emotional ties and the relationships are torn apart; families that have been associated with the school for decades have gone. That kind of link and historical connection, and knowledge of the community and the school and its involvement goes as well. History goes; it travels with the people. [Forest Park] has been around for 141 years ... it's not a place of recent history, we're looking at quite a significant place in the community and the community's grown up around the school. (Acting Principal, Forest Park)

Late in 2013, after yet more funding had been found, a social psychology graduate student, Chris Hu, supported a teacher to help the students gather the school's stories – both earthquake stories and school closure stories. Chris and the teacher created a video documentary, while Carol interviewed the principal, teachers and parents. The final video showed students walking around their

school and saying what they liked about it, what it meant to them, how it had helped them get through the earthquakes and how they felt about it closing. In May 2014, Chris returned to interview participants in their newly merged school, or in schools they since had moved to. He was welcomed back, not just because they remembered him, but because he represented someone who cared enough about them and their situations to return and find out how they were coping.

DISCUSSION

Although Carol was an experienced researcher, this was a new experience for her. From the start, there was no pre-determined research design beyond a wish that, with her help, schools in her home town in the post-disaster recovery phase could record their experiences in a way that worked best for them. At the same time, she could gather data that might contribute to the growing understanding of the role of schools in disaster response and recovery.

When we finally took stock of what had been achieved, we were exhausted but exhilarated. The project had far exceeded our expectations. Carol's initial idea was that she might undertake some interviews, compile a few case studies and return these to the schools to share with their communities, all in a space of a few months. What happened, instead, was a fluid and unpredictable project, spanning three years and involving hundreds of participants, including principals, teachers, students, parents, families and community members, which consumed as much time and energy as the ever-growing research team could give it. And it's not finished. The journey with Riverside, for example, is continuing. Another of the university's arts-based researchers is returning to Riverside to help them make a permanent record of the mosaic-making story. Carol is aiming to link project schools with schools in other disaster contexts. She is currently facilitating a link between one of the schools and a school in Victoria, Australia, whose community is recovering from devastating bushfires.

In hindsight, what are the features that made the project so successful? We summarise these below as a mixture of dispositional, relational and situational factors. The factors are interdependent and the balance of each might differ with each partnership and context, but we discuss each separately here for clarity.

Dispositional factors are the values, attitudes, experiences and expertise that each person who engaged in the project brought with them. The strongest of these factors was trust – they were people who were trusting and trustworthy. They engendered trust with their openness, willingness to listen and ability to engage with others in a genuine way. Prior relationships helped get the environment of trust underway quickly, but other factors were required to maintain it. First of these was sensitivity. All members of the research team, whether local or not, were entering into a world where people's lives had been turned upside down, literally and figuratively. The

approach needed to be empathetic yet not patronising. The second factor that helped sustain trust was respect. Each partner had to respect the ideas, experience and expertise of the others. This didn't mean we would always agree, but it meant that discussions started from a base of goodwill. The varying strengths and areas of knowledge of the partners were also valued. The lead researcher brought credibility as an educator, local knowledge because of her own earthquake experience, and expertise in the field of research. Her research team were selected, first, because of their qualities of openness, interest in others and willingness to try something new and, second, for particular areas of expertise – qualitative interviewing, video-production, art-making, social psychology, or arts-based research. Luckily, they also had unlimited potential in risk-taking and creative problem-solving.

The second group of factors was *relational*. The partnership began with a high-level discussion between the lead researcher and the principal (or deputy principal). They agreed to a tentative approach, timeline and outcome before other people were brought into the partnership – teachers, students and parents on the school side; funders, administrators and other members of the research team on the university side. Relational factors included reaching agreement on purpose, roles, participants, approaches, communication and dissemination. Trickier factors such as ownership, benefits, responsibility and accountability also had to be negotiated. For the partnership to flourish, agreements had to play out in the practice of shared decision-making, shared problem-solving, shared commitment, and renegotiating tasks and timelines as needed. When difficulties arose, and they did, they needed to be handled in a way that kept the relationship intact. The reciprocity needed to be authentic, articulated and acknowledged. In fact, part of the success of this project was that each partner thought that they had the best end of the bargain – schools were delighted with the process and the end products; the research team were delighted with the privilege of the experience and the richness of the data generated.

The final set of factors was *contextual*. Each setting was completely different. Each school was located in a different geographical and socioeconomic area. Each had a different ethnic mix. Each had a different earthquake experience. Each had a different school culture and way of operating. Approaches to gaining access, managing logistical arrangements and engaging staff, students and families all varied. What worked in one setting might not necessarily translate to another setting – or if it did, it would shape up differently. The research team could not make assumptions, have set expectations, or readily generalise from one school to another. For the project to be successful for *both* partners, each of the sets of factors needed to come together in particular ways, in order to craft an authentic relationship and a unique process for each context.

CONCLUSION

This article describes the process of one university research team building relationships and negotiating a process with four different schools participating in the 'Canterbury schools tell their earthquake stories' project. The project began with the lead researcher wanting to support schools affected by the 2010/2011 Canterbury earthquakes. The project developed gradually as schools felt there was value in participating. The size, make-up and roles of the research team varied to match the needs of each individual school. The partnerships with each school developed in different ways but always had the students at the heart of the agreed outcome. The willingness of both partners to work together in an emergent and collegial manner, in which the power was shared and the decisions jointly made, strengthened the partnerships, the process and the outcomes.

In this article, four school projects within the wider research project are described to give a detailed insight into how the research team tailored each individual school's process. These cases go some way towards offering counter examples to the way school-university partnerships are sometimes portrayed (Hooper & Britnell 2012; Patton 2012) and adding to the literature that suggests more positive possibilities (Goodlad 1993; Luter, Lester & Kronick 2013). The factors that led to the successful partnerships are explained as dispositional, relational and contextual. These provide a lens, not only for examining this project, but also a categorisation that will prove useful to other school-university partnerships as they conceptualise joint ventures designed to meet their mutual goals.

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