



## Research Reflection January 2016

### Starting School in Shaky Town – the Canterbury earthquakes and their continued impact on children

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In September 2015, almost five years to the day after the first 2010 Canterbury earthquake, an article in The Press caught my eye. The piece was titled ‘Canterbury schools seek help for kids with post-quake delays’ and it described the effects of post-traumatic stress (PTSD) on children who were born around the time the quakes began. Learning issues and more extreme stress responses are reportedly more evident in this cohort of five-year-olds to a greater extent than those who began school prior to the earthquakes.

As a parent of a child born in September 2010 I am especially interested in emerging research around the effects of quakes on children. Many parents could easily assume that their very young children may not have been old enough to be aware of or affected by the events surrounding Canterbury’s recent natural disaster. But it was not just one event – the region’s communities lived through a series of serious quake events spanning around eighteen months, with the additional impact of ongoing insurance and repair issues. For many families the tangible effects of the quakes are still very much present in their lives, particularly in the eastern suburbs.

The article references Dr Kathleen Liberty’s Canterbury of University study of five-year-olds, which showed a prevalence of more than double the usual percentage of PTSD symptoms post-quake. Some schools have responded to the resulting effects on children’s school readiness with a stronger emphasis on play-based learning for new entrants and other anxiety reducing strategies.

Prior to reading about Liberty’s findings I hadn’t anticipated that our youngest quake survivors would experience a school entrance so dramatically affected by the effects of the disaster. There was a second, related news article from The Press that I hadn’t seen when it was originally published in early 2014. This older article, titled ‘Quake stress hurting our young’, highlights Liberty’s earlier work around PTSD in young children affected by the Canterbury quakes. Her involvement with research of school entrant children and asthma prior to the quakes gave Liberty an unexpectedly helpful baseline for comparing school readiness before and after 2010.

The 2014 article also refers to work conducted in this area by other researchers, including Dr Carol Mutch. She has worked with Canterbury schools on projects that involve healing strategies, supporting children to tell their own quake stories in a variety of ways. Some have built mosaics, others have created books or filmed their own documentaries. This processing experience is important for survivors of all ages, including adults and also the very young.

The body of data being gathered locally by researchers such as Liberty, Mutch and others strikes me as vital in several ways. In a very practical way it adds to the research already conducted in other disaster zones internationally, helping communities prepare for and handle future events. In an emotional sense it also assists our own collective understanding of the experience of natural disaster shared by all of us who were in Canterbury during the earthquakes. The findings inevitably throw up questions about how our youngest community members will fare in both the short and long term, and what support they may need in the future. But I think the work is also hopeful as it helps our communities construct a picture of recovery and support.

Below is a bibliography of related papers and resources. The list is by no means exhaustive, and not all items are open source. However it should help provide a starting point for anyone interested in further reading on this topic.

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Sepie, A. (2015). *PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING: COMMUNITIES, FAMILIES, YOUTH & CHILDREN (0-18 years); A literature review and qualitative analysis of psychosocial postdisaster adaptation considerations following the Canterbury sequence of earthquakes and aftershocks*. The Collaborative Trust for Research and Training in Youth Health and Development.

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