Children’s knowledge of vulnerability and resilience to bushfires

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I would have been about 12 or 13 years old when it happened. There was no warning. When we looked out our door, the sky was red and there were embers everywhere. It was just the most amazing thing I’d ever seen. We just looked out with this awe. My Mum and I went off in our car. We were intending to go to the Macedon Family Hotel but we didn’t leave until about half ten or later and by that stage it was well and truly on us. In the end, we couldn’t see where we were going at all because the smoke was so thick and we were driving into trees. We somehow got into somebody’s backyard: we drove straight into their pond, nose first into it. It was quite deep and we just stayed there, in the car, in this sludge, down the bottom of the pond. I was like, “Right, that’s it! I’m out of this car! I’m leaving and you’re coming with me!” Mum had to try very hard to make me sit there and not move: she said “No, you cannot do that. We have to stay in the car. It’s safer in the car. You must stay in the car”. But I didn’t know that as a 13 year old. All I could see was that I wanted to leave. We had some bedding inside our car, so we took the doona out of the car, we wet it and we put it over the car and sat inside and then, when it dried off, we got out again and wet it again and we stayed in the car. I guess that’s what saved us from the radiant heat. I think as the hours went on, Mum started to panic a bit more because we were watching this fire go around us. We had a shed near us and things were exploding in the shed as they were catching on fire and there was a huge tree near us that was on fire and we were worried we were going to get flattened by this tree and so I said to Mum, “C’mon, we’ll put the radio on. We’ll listen to this”. So, in a way, I think we kind of helped each other to keep it together.

- Mother and Ash Wednesday survivor (Macedon, 2009)
Declaration of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis, nor does the thesis contain any material that infringes copyright.

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The research associated with this thesis abides by the international and Australian codes on human and animal experimentation, the guidelines by the Australian Government’s Office of the Gene Regulator and the rulings of the Safety, Ethics, and Institutional Biosafety Committees of the University.

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Briony Clare Towers

31st May, 2012
ABSTRACT

Following the Black Saturday bushfire disaster in 2009, the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission strongly recommended that bushfire education be incorporated in the national school curriculum. This recommendation, and its adoption by state governments around Australia, represents a unique opportunity to address the long neglected area of bushfire education for children. However, an extensive literature argues that the success of any hazards education program depends on the degree to which it accommodates the existing knowledge and perspectives of the learner. Yet, to date, there has been no research on children’s knowledge of bushfire hazards and disasters or the actions that can be taken to mitigate or prevent their impacts.

To address this research gap, this thesis presents a detailed analysis and theoretical rendering of children’s knowledge of bushfire hazards in south-eastern Australia, as studied from children’s own perspectives. A constructivist grounded theory methodology and child-centred qualitative research techniques, such as focus groups, drawing and puppet play, were employed to examine children’s knowledge of the conditions and processes that cause bushfire hazards and disasters and the conditions and processes that mitigate or prevent them. The role of environmental and socio-cultural context in the development of children’s hazards knowledge was also examined in-depth.

The analyses of children’s knowledge and perspectives culminated in the development of a substantive grounded theory titled Seeking Adaptation. The theory is comprised of three major components: the problem of perceiving vulnerability; the process of building resilience; and a set of contextual and modifying conditions which include direct experience with fire, the school, the family, and the research process itself. The theory of Seeking Adaptation identifies children as active participants in bushfire management who have the potential to make substantial contributions to household and community resilience. However, capitalising on this potential will require education programs that accommodate their perspectives and provide ample opportunities for genuine and purposeful engagement with the physical and social world.
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This thesis is dedicated to the children who lost their lives
on Black Saturday, February 7th, 2009.
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