

‘We want to show people what kids can do’: a participatory student-led evaluation of the Strathewen-Arthurs Creek Bushfire Education Partnership

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On February 7th 2009, a major bushfire disaster devastated the small rural town of Strathewen. The local primary school, the old fire station, the community hall, and most of the houses in the area were destroyed. Amongst the small population of 200 people, 27 lives were lost. Ten years on, the school has been rebuilt and through a community-based partnership with the Arthurs Creek-Strathewen CFA, the Grade 5 and 6 students have been participating in an award-winning place-based bushfire education program.

Through this program, now in its fourth year of delivery, students build their knowledge and skills for assessing local bushfire risks and they investigate the actions that people can take to mitigate, prepare for and respond to bushfire emergencies. They also apply their knowledge and skills to student-led creative arts projects that centre on the production and dissemination of locally relevant bushfire education materials.

In 2017, RMIT's Centre for Urban Research conducted a summative evaluation of the program. The evaluation found that the program is a highly effective mechanism for increasing children's genuine participation in bushfire risk reduction. In 2018, recognising the importance of ongoing evaluation for strategic decision-making and continuous improvement, the school community supported the students to undertake their own multi-stakeholder evaluation of the program. The students developed the research questions, co-designed the research instruments, collected the data and analysed the results.

This student-led approach to program evaluation represents a bold step forward in child-centred bushfire risk reduction and the students are eager to share their findings with a wide audience of researchers and practitioners. In the words of the students: ‘We want to show people what kids can do. Sharing our research at this conference is a once in a lifetime opportunity’.