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Rural Childhood in New Zealand: A Unique Site of Children's Agency and Social Participation

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This article reports on a qualitative research study that explored the perspectives and lived experiences of children in a range of New Zealand rural environments. Thirty-six children, aged between 6 and 11 years, were interviewed about living in the country and also contributed artwork and photographs. They came from four specific rural locations, ranging from 'rural with high urban influence' to 'highly rural/remote'. Children expressed positive views about aspects of rural living, such as opportunities for being outdoors and participating in social relationships, confirming a positive discourse of the rural idyll. Their accounts highlighted children's agency under complex and sometimes challenging conditions. Children also, however, experienced some aspects of rural life as dull, dangerous or difficult. The complex and nuanced constructions of rural childhood uncovered in this study point to the critical importance of consulting with children in order to understand their experiences and best meet the needs of rural children and families.

■ **Keywords:** rural, constructions of childhood, agency, children's perspectives

It is somewhat surprising, given the important place that rural life holds in the material realities and social imaginings of Antipodean people, that little is known about children's own experiences of rural childhood. Rurality is a core component of the Antipodean identity whereby 'the rural' counts as 'the real' in New Zealand (Nairn, Panelli, & McCormack, 2003), and many Australians' image of themselves is based in rurality and the 'bush ethos' (Beeton, 2004). Rural childhood has a particularly cherished place in popular affections for both nations, and is something of a benchmark for a 'real' childhood, a sense of what an authentic childhood should be. It is both aspirational and inspirational, incorporating adults' hopes and dreams for their children with yearnings for an imagined and treasured past.

Although there has been substantial urbanisation in New Zealand and Australia, families living rurally continue to make up a sizeable proportion of the population. In New Zealand, 14% live in rural areas (Statistics New Zealand, 2009), whilst in Australia, 2.4% live in remote or very remote areas, 9% in outer regional areas and 20% in inner regional areas (Baxter, Hayes, & Gray, 2011).

However, despite the emotional attachment to rural childhood and the sizeable rural population, children and families living rurally have received little specific research attention. This article contributes to addressing this gap in the research, drawing on findings from a study that explored the everyday, lived experiences of children in rural New Zealand environments from their own perspectives. Following a brief overview of the relevant literature and background, the article describes the methods used in the study, before presenting the findings. Particular attention is given to children's agency and competency, the diversity of rural children's voice and experience and the implications of this for policy and practice.

Research and Conceptual Background

The study was underpinned by a Childhood Studies theoretical framework, which draws on a number of disciplines

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and addresses childhood as a complex social phenomenon (James & James, 2008). Children are viewed as having agency and the capacity to act independently, both shaping their social environment and being shaped by it (Prout & James, 1990). Childhood is understood as socially constructed in particular cultural contexts, rather than being a universal experience. Rural childhood is thus conceptualised in this article as a social construction built on culturally contextualised discursive and material meanings, and shaped by three main interacting factors: social discourses related to rural childhood, the rural locality and children's own lived experiences.

Despite the dearth of research, rural childhoods are increasingly gaining recognition internationally as an area of interest (Panelli, Punch, & Robson, 2007). In the developed world, the primary research focus has been on children's experiences in relation to constructions of rurality, most notably exploring and deconstructing the notion of the rural idyll (McKendrick, 2000). Rural childhood is ideologically located at the intersection of two powerful discourses, the spatial discourse of the rural idyll, and contemporary discourses of childhood. The romantic discourse of childhood is particularly relevant, constructing childhood as a time of innocence and naïve exploration, and equating this with the natural world as the appropriate setting (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; James & James, 2008). The discourse of the rural idyll includes aesthetic and moral components (Kraak & Kenway, 2002); incorporating the picturesque elements of the natural world and the vision of a close-knit, harmonious community, free from the corruptions of urban life (Valentine, Holloway, Knell, & Jayne, 2008). The intersection of the romantic discourse of childhood and the rural idyll provides 'a vision of considerable potency' (Jones, 1997, p. 158).

In Antipodean contexts, another dimension intersecting with these predominantly European/Pakeha constructions of rural childhood is the 'rural myth' that mythologises the pioneer experience (Phillips, 2009).[1] The harsh realities of Antipodean geographies did not conform to the romantic, Arcadian, pastoral expectations of early European immigrants. The countryside was a place of hardship, danger and drudgery, requiring hard work to conquer and transform the landscape (Beeton, 2004; Phillips, 2009). Aligned in some respects with the Australian 'bushman' identity, a strong work ethic, physical prowess, versatility and moral wholesomeness became part of the New Zealand national identity (Bell, 1997; Fairburn, 1975; Phillips, 2009). The pioneer image gained legendary status, despite the negative impact of European settlement and conflict over land on the Indigenous Maori population (Phillips, 1987). A potent rural myth evolved, as New Zealand developed into a primarily pastoral, agricultural nation, shaped by the idyllic rural imaginings that existed alongside the actual experiences of the European settlers (Alessio, 2008; Fairburn, 1975).

Regardless of the harsh reality of rural New Zealand life, which included heavy physical labour, poverty and disadvantage, a rural childhood was portrayed as physically and morally superior to an urban one (Goodyear, 1998). The rural childhood idyll persists as a dominant discourse, but alternative constructions of rural childhood with more negative connotations also exist. In these, rural childhood is characterised by dullness, horror, isolation, deprivation and social exclusion (Driscoll, 2014; Panelli, Nairn, & McCormack, 2002; Powell, Taylor, & Smith, 2013), reflecting traces of early Antipodean experiences. Despite longstanding opposition between discourses of rural dullness and the rural idyll, Driscoll (2014) suggests that in contemporary Australia these co-exist and work together, influencing migration flows and social practices.

Rural childhood research internationally has mostly been from the perspectives of adults (Matthews, Taylor, Sherwood, Tucker, & Limb, 2000). However, recent research has sought the views of children about their own rural lives. This research shows us children are active participants in the productivity of family farms (Cummins, 2009; McCormack, 2002; Riley, 2009; Zepeda & Kim, 2006) and creative in their pursuit of leisure and recreational opportunities (Jones, 2000; Lee & Abbott, 2009; MacDougall, Schiller, & Darbyshire, 2009; McCormack, 2002). Rural young people manage peer conflicts and form social groups (Dunkley & Panelli, 2007; Matthews & Tucker, 2007), even in the face of adult disapproval (Kraak & Kenway, 2002; Panelli et al., 2002), using a range of strategies to position themselves within the community (Driscoll, 2014; Smith et al., 2002; Tucker, 2003).

The research-based literature challenges the perception of one distinctive rural New Zealand childhood in which social experiences are uniformly positive (Nairn et al., 2003; Panelli et al., 2002). The social discourses and physical localities of rural childhood provide a context within which children, in partnership with others, act independently and creatively. In doing so, rural children reveal that they are indeed capable of much more than traditional views of childhood would allow.

Methods

This study uses an interpretive method, based on a relativistic, constructivist ontology, which assumes there is no objective reality or knowledge independent of thinking (Grbich, 2007). Reality is assumed to be socially embedded, with multiple realities and constructions of childhood arising from the varying social and cultural contexts experienced by the participants (Krauss, 2005). Of interest is how people, in this case children, in rural areas, interpret and make sense of their lived experiences (Grbich, 2007).

In accordance with the underpinning Childhood Studies theoretical framework, children were conceptualised as competent social agents (Prout & James, 1990). The research was further guided by understandings regarding children's rights (as articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child), in particular, children's right to participate in matters that affect them, such as research about

their experiences. This theoretical orientation underlies the emphasis in this study on children as competent research participants who are capable of articulating their ideas, and are indeed entitled to do so.

Data was collected through individual interviews with children and children's construction of visual representations of living rurally, including artwork and photographs. Thirty-six children[2] (21 girls and 15 boys), aged between 6 and 11 years, from 24 families, participated in the study (36 parents were also interviewed, but parent data is not included in this article). Children were recruited from four specific, significantly different rural locations, each intentionally selected to reflect a range of rural New Zealand contexts. The urban/rural profile classification (Statistics New Zealand, 2004) was used to identify and select areas from each of the four rural categories: 'rural with high urban influence' – Canterbury; 'rural with moderate urban influence' – Rodney; 'rural with low urban influence' – Northland and 'highly rural/remote' – MacKenzie.[3] Two areas were in the North Island and two areas were in the South Island. The participants included 12 children from Canterbury, 10 children from Rodney, 5 children from Northland and 9 children from MacKenzie.

Recruitment was carried out through the provision of information packs to selected schools, which children took home, with parents subsequently contacting the researchers if the family wished to participate. An initial consent interview (ICI) was held with children several weeks prior to the data collection taking place, to obtain their informed consent to participate in the study. The ICI helped structure and explain the research process, and contributed to addressing ethical considerations – it aimed to ensure voluntary participation by avoiding any subtle pressures on children to participate, and provided an opportunity for questions and explanations. The ICI took place immediately before parents were interviewed, so that the children were aware that the interviewer was there for a purpose other than ensuring the child's own participation. At the ICI, if children agreed to participate, they were given disposable cameras and selected art materials, and asked to take photographs and construct artwork that would aid our understanding of (a) where they lived and (b) things that were important to them.

Children then participated in an in-depth, semi-structured individual interview a few weeks later using their visual material (photographs and artworks) as prompts to elicit information about their experiences of rural childhood.[4] All the interviews were less than an hour in duration and were conducted in the child's home, which had the advantage of offering convenience, privacy and familiarity for the children. Follow-up interviews with all 36 children were undertaken a year later to address any gaps in the data from the first interview, obtain further participant validation and to determine whether participants' perspectives had changed over time. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

The range of data collection methods provided opportunities for flexibility and for children to participate in ways in which they felt comfortable, as well as contributing to the study's robustness through methodological and data triangulation. Data analysis included a thematic analysis of the interview material. Data from transcripts were coded into categories based on similar features or themes. Initial coding involved deconstructing the data, breaking it down and reconceptualising it (Liamputtong, 2009), looking first at the meanings and relationships within the data for individual participants, then identifying recurring themes and patterns within the data collected from the participants as a group. Through constant comparison, comprehensive data treatment and an ongoing revision process, emerging and linked themes were identified and broadly conceptualised as clustered around personal, psycho-social, physical environment and socio-economic categories. The photographs and artwork were analysed using a process of enumerative content analysis with a thematic slant (Grbich, 2007), which involved systematically recording the frequency of themes emerging from the data (Liamputtong, 2009). Codes were developed, including nature, recreation, agriculture, friends, school, pets/animals, family, home, and self, and then the data were scrutinised for the appearance of these coded categories.

Results and Discussion

Rural childhood was constructed positively by children living in rural New Zealand. Essentially, children in our study liked living in the country. There were things that some said they would like to be different, and aspects that were less enjoyable, but overall they preferred it to their perceptions of urban living. A third of the children thought the most important thing for people to know about living rurally was that it is fun, particularly with the space available for doing things outdoors.

Children's agency was apparent in a range of contexts, four of which are considered here: outdoor recreational experiences, social contexts, home environment, and farm and agricultural settings. These contexts are not mutually exclusive and there is considerable overlap between them.

Outdoor Recreational Experiences

Children engaged creatively in places that held special meaning for them, emphasising the outdoors as a site of everyday experiences. This was reflected in the dominant themes apparent in the photographs and drawn artworks, across all four rural areas, of outdoor recreation, pets/animals and nature.[5]

The outdoor environment was the site of physical play, with children valuing activities such as biking, building huts, climbing trees and swimming:

> After school if it's hot I go for a swim with my cousins. There's a special place, with a waterfall, down by the trees across the road. I go with my cousins, some of my cousins live there.

> Sometimes we go swimming down by the bridge. Not adults, it's just a kid's thing. I wouldn't take *[little sister]* 'cause it's too muddy, too deep, she'd be scared. It's for kids over six years old ... that can swim. Some teenagers go there too. (Hannah, 11-year-old girl, Northland)

> I like climbing hedges, at school and outside home. There's always gaps in the corner and you climb up through the inside to get to the top. People can see you at the top, but inside they can't and that's where I always hide, in the middle. I discovered it and only told *[friend]*. We climb to the top and make huts and put booby traps inside the hedge ... We put buckets on ropes from the hedge and drop them down to put food in. (Dante, 9-year-old boy, Canterbury)

The outdoors was also the site of imaginative and exploratory play, for children playing alone and with family members, friends and pets. Available space was used in innovative ways and transformed into play spaces (James & James, 2008). Children's outdoors activities tended not to happen in designated play places, but in spaces that they appropriated for their own use (Spencer & Blades, 2006). We found, in keeping with an Australian study (Lee & Abbott, 2009), that rural children made do with the available options and used space creatively, including natural places, such as forests, riverbanks and hedges:

> We use croquet mallets to try and climb the cliff like mountain climbers. Me and *[friend]* pretend we're mountaineers. We kind of jump down, stop just before the river. It's fun there, specially in summer 'cause it's got long grass. We can hang onto it, then it breaks, like a rope breaking, we either fall on the bank or into the river. (Poseidon, 9-year-old boy, Canterbury)

Children formed emotional attachments to specific places (Derr, 2005), such as the riverbank in Poseidon's imaginative mountaineering play. Social and cultural meanings became attached to these spaces, as children used them for particular activities, individually or with specific people. Some special play spaces were located away from home, for example, Hannah's swimming place with the waterfall, allowing exploration and play to be controlled by children without adult intervention (Derr, 2005; Punch, 2001). Other play spaces were closer to home, such as Dante's hedge.

As well as using natural places to play, children also used polymorphic spaces, which were within adult structures but could be used for other purposes (Jones, 2000), such as one 11-year-old girl's use of sheep pens as a location for playing games with her friends. Some of the play spaces came about as 'opportunistic exploitation of situations' (Jones, 2000, p. 42), that were available unexpectedly or fleetingly, for example, Alice and her friends swimming during the flood, and 'ice skating' with material appropriated from a house renovation site:

> We muck around at *[friend's]* place. There's a river and we go swimming there. He made a swimming hole. There's a log to jump off into the deep part. When it's rained heaps we can't go in it because of the tide, so we have to go in the shallow end. But one time it was flooding and we went in ... and everyone was floating away. So funny ... And he had these big long white things *[from house renovation]* – we stand on them, go ice-skating on them, down the ramp. We joined more things together and had races. (Alice, 11-year-old girl, Northland)

Social Contexts

Whilst children were enthusiastic and positive about living rurally, they were also aware of the constraints it placed on them socially:

> One thing is getting friends over to play ... there's loads of fun stuff, but it's sometimes tricky getting people over. (Josh, 10-year-old boy, Canterbury)

> I can't do everything. I can't go to town or have people over in the weekends. The things I do on the weekends I enjoy and at the same time I want to have people over ... Mostly I ride *[horses]* at the weekend, do social stuff at school during the week. I want both, but I can't have both at the same time. (Laurie, 11-year-old girl, MacKenzie)

Social isolation from peers, as a consequence of geographical distance, was an issue for rural children, particularly those who live in more remote locations. However, unlike findings from Cummins' (2009) Canadian study, children in our study did not identify loneliness as an issue. Rather, they acknowledged the distance from peers, and employed a range of creative strategies to maximise opportunities for social participation, demonstrating their capacity to influence the social world.

Children's social strategies included attending and hosting sleepovers, coordinating visits to town-based friends with activities in townships and using social media networking websites. They played with family members and neighbours, even if this meant engaging in less interesting games than they otherwise would with close friends. For example, one 10-year-old boy talked about preferring complex fantasy games to other sorts of play, but agreeing to do more 'basic stuff, like playing on the trampoline' in order to socialise with a neighbour.

School and sporting activities were identified as important sites for social participation for rural children in our study, consistent with other studies (Lee & Abbott, 2009). The time some children spent travelling on buses also made these vehicles a site of social importance, with engagement in reciprocal social interactions with peers and drivers. In particular, children living in relatively isolated locations appreciated the social opportunities afforded them by their time on the school bus:

> One time the bus was broken down and we had to use the other bus. And all the people from two different buses went on the same one. So we were on the bus for even longer, maybe an hour ... It was quite cool, we got to see all our friends. (Alice, 11-year-old girl, Northland)

Rural childhood experiences involved social inclusion and participation with adults in a range of contexts.

Community is an important notion in the construction of the rural idyll (Panelli et al., 2002; Valentine, 1997), and social participation in the local community was an important feature of rural living for children. This was sometimes initiated by necessity, with the lack of available babysitters, for example, often resulting in children's attendance at social functions with their parents. The value placed on community cohesion and social participation in rural New Zealand areas has historical roots, in the cooperation required by small communities to meet social and economic needs (Toynbee, 1995), with continued relevance today.

Research studies indicate that young people can experience the close-knit community and limited social spaces in rural areas as claustrophobic and restricting (Davis & Ridge, 1997; Driscoll, 2014; Matthews et al., 2000; Tucker, 2003). However, younger children generally express more positive views of the rural lifestyle (Giddings & Yarwood, 2005; Matthews et al., 2000). The children participating in our study considered social closeness to be a positive aspect of community. They talked about the friendliness in the community and the sense of knowing everybody and of being known themselves. Children, like the parents in Valentine's (1997) UK study, mobilised the notion of community in constructing rural life as caring and safe:

> Important to know everyone in *[area]* – they always try to get to know you and they bond with you. So you gotta know that they'll be there for you. (Bill, 11-year-old boy, Rodney)

Rural children feel a sense of belonging and being part of a community, in which they are social participants. Participation can be defined in terms of the agency expressed in the multiple relationships children, and other citizens, engage in (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Through engagement in reciprocal relationships, with family, friends, whānau[6] and community, rural children had the opportunity to exercise agency and voice in the context of everyday social participation.

Home Environment

Across a range of dimensions in the home environment children influenced the social world around them. Childhood as a time for passive dependency received little support, as these rural children took responsibility for the care of pets and animals, contributed to reproductive unpaid household work that sustains family life and other productive work for profit or payment,[7] engaged in recreational activities, and cared for family members:

> Nana lives right next door. I see her every day, most days, when she gets back from work. She gives me chocolates and lollies. I help her do the dishes, washing her clothes, putting them on the line. I nearly fell off the bucket the other time! Sometimes I sleep over there. One time my Nana got a big flu and I ran over there 'cause I heard her calling out and I had to hit her on the back to help her sick it all up. I like going over to Nana's if she's home. I feel sorry for her, 'cause she's lonely, she's got no mokos[8] there, she's living by herself now. (Princess Fiona, 9-year-old girl, Northland)

Pets were particularly important to most rural children, being cast in the roles of friend, confidante and dependant, and considered members of the family by some. Nearly a third of the children interviewed took care of individual farm animals, preparing them for participation in school Pets' Days and area Agricultural Shows. Findings from Derr's (2005) study indicate that children develop a strong sense of social responsibility and accomplishment through the care of animals. Similarly, in our study, children demonstrated empathy, knowledge and understanding of the needs of animals, and responded accordingly:

> I've had Star *[calf]* since she was one week old. Looking after her involves brushing her, feeding her, get her to learn how to lead. Have to feed her formula calf milk. I do that. When you first try to put the halter on they get a bit of a fright and don't want to see you again. Have to leave the halter on and start slowly. You need to start with a longer lead rope, tug it a wee bit, then take the pressure off when she takes a step. I do the practice in the paddock. This is my fourth calf, so I've been doing it since I was seven. (9er49er, 11-year-old girl, Canterbury)

Cummins (2009) suggests that children rely on farm animals and pets to provide comfort and security in coping with loneliness. Whilst loneliness did not emerge as a strong theme in our study, pets undoubtedly provided comfort and friendship, as described by Laurie:

> The animals – you can talk to them about it and they listen the whole time. You get an adult, like Mum, and she'll say her thing and it might upset you. (Laurie, 12-year-old girl, MacKenzie)

Many participants engaged in work around the home, feeding and looking after animals, and doing household chores, including mowing lawns and washing cars. Children met their parents' expectations of competence in household and farm tasks, with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Children took pride in their ability to be self-sufficient and to manage during times of adversity, and were knowledgeable about aspects of rural self-sufficiency. They talked about horticultural and agricultural practices, and identified important aspects of rural living related to the maintenance of utilities, such as water, power and rubbish disposal.

Although most children felt safe from crime, environmental dangers in the rural setting were acknowledged. However, in keeping with the legacy of the pioneering spirit, incorporated in the rural New Zealand myth (Fairburn, 1975), environmental risk was rationalised and normalised by some children in this study as being part of learning:

> In the country you can get a whole lot of broken bones and bruises 'cause you experience the new things, but I think that's a way of learning what not to do and what to do. Like, I like to climb trees too and I haven't had a broken bone yet, and if you find a branch and it's a bit hard to get to and then

> you accidentally fall off and you break a bone or get a really bad injury, you learn that you can't really get up there or that tree's too high for you. I have had some bruises from doing that. (Sharpay-A, 9-year-old girl)

In common with the findings of a recent Australian study (MacDougall et al., 2009), it was observed that children's knowledge of dangers, relative to their own environment, allowed them to determine where it was safe to play:

> There's not really anything I don't like, only if there are little kids they could go into a bull's paddock, and electric fences, some trees could be unstable – just growing and some branches could be thin and break and then they *[children]* could fall. And horses running in their paddocks down steep hills. They might not have, my Mum says, brakes, and might not be able to stop and they might run into you. (The Simpsons, 8-year-old girl, Canterbury)

Some children indicated an awareness of environmental dangers, including those associated with swimming and motorbike riding and provided a rationale for restrictions on certain areas or activities. However, the impression gained was that certain 'risky' behaviours were not perceived as such, or were minimised, by children in the rural social context. Children talked about going shooting, swimming, driving vehicles and riding motorbikes unsupervised, thus appearing to have greater responsibility in determining physical and behavioural boundaries.

MacDougall et al. (2009) suggest that for rural children there is 'a process of learning to appreciate the opportunities and dangers inherent in the environment, and making sensible decisions to maximise their range of movement whilst minimising risk' (p. 201). Children in our study appeared to respond positively to their parents' guidance around safety protocols and expectations of capability and responsibility, usually demonstrating skill and competency in challenging situations.

Farm and Agricultural Settings

The farm is a unique context within rural localities. Farm children live and play at their parents' worksite and are, themselves, an important part of the labour force, whether in New Zealand or other countries such as the UK and US (Riley, 2009; Zepeda & Kim, 2006). They have a role in sustaining farming activities as active participants who hold responsibilities for various tasks. Most children were willing to undertake the responsibilities associated with farm work and enjoyed doing so, routinely participating in tasks such as mustering, feeding out and docking:

> I love farming. It's fun. I like helping Dad on the farm. Mustering takes ages, it's hard too. Really annoying with sheep because when one goes, they all go. Dad's voice gets all hoarse from shouting. I really like mustering because I like the dogs. (Melissa, 10-year-old girl, MacKenzie)

> I like doing the lambing and calving beat. When ewes are having lambs we go out and check on them every day. Usually have them in the closest paddocks. I do the lamb beat out on the truck around the outside of them all. I do it with Dad and on my own. If there are problems I come back and tell Dad. (Laurie, 12-year-old girl, MacKenzie)

Like participants in Cummins' (2009) study, children showed an awareness of the hard work required of their parents and a sense that their work was a normal part of farm life. Children also indicated that it involved monotonous, unwelcome chores, such as feeding animals and working on the farm, when there were other things they would rather be doing:

> Yesterday me and *[brother]* had a good swim, then we had to get out and go and muster a hundred sheep. Then we got to have another swim . . . Nah, I don't like helping mustering, I'm more into swimming. (Sam, 7-year-old boy, MacKenzie)

> Sometimes it's quite hard work, but you just have to get on and do it. (xXx, 12-year-old boy, MacKenzie)

Children took responsibility for these tasks in, at times, challenging conditions. As a consequence of their life experiences and social environment, they acquired and demonstrated competencies at much younger ages than would be expected in the context of dominant discourses. In a Rodney farming family, for example, the 7-year-old girl and 9-year-old boy both had their own motorbikes, which they used for farm work:

> I like motorbike riding. Got my own motorbike. I got stuck in the mud and Dad said 'that means you're riding your motorbike properly' 'cause I'm going more places now. . . . Sometimes I work on the farm with Mum and Dad. If Dad needs help I go on my motorbike and shift sheep. Once I got them in by myself on my motorbike. It felt great! I was eight when I did that. (Luke, 9-year-old boy, Rodney)

Riding motorbikes and driving vehicles was a regular occurrence for many children. More than half the children in our study, most of whom lived on farms, talked about this and it was apparent they considered this part of rural living and it was sanctioned by parents, despite the high risk of motorbike and quad bike accidents associated with rural New Zealand children (Campbell, 2008). Four children discussed restrictions on motorbike riding intended to increase safety, whilst others described risky behaviour such as having to 'steer around the baby' on the motorbike, without apparent concern:

> I can just go on my motorbike wherever I want to at the weekends. I go with *[brother]* sometimes, otherwise on my own. I'm not allowed going on the road. Not allowed going too far away from the house. And not in the sheep and cow paddocks. I'm not allowed to go down the steep hills, 'cause it's too far away from the house. (Victoria, 7-year-old girl, Rodney)

> I have to get the motorbike *[quad bike]* up the hill. It's quite grunty. Sometimes I have the baby with me ... I'm holding the baby and trying to steer around it. (Roxy, 11-year-old girl, MacKenzie)

A unique component of farm life is the close family-work relationships, particularly the greater contact of fathers with children (Cummins, 2009; Zepeda & Kim, 2006). In the absence of childcare, children living on farms joined their parents at work on the farm and in caring for younger siblings:

> We go down to the woolshed when Mum and Dad are working down there, but if we get bored then we come up here *[home]* and just watch TV. If *[younger brother]* comes up then me and *[older brother]* have to go check on him. (Victoria, 7-year-old girl, Rodney)

Children developed an identity that is anchored to the farm, incorporating their agency and transformative capacities, as they experienced and gained knowledge in different aspects of agricultural practice, formulating their own views and undertaking farm tasks. The parental expectations and scaffolding of learning, providing experience on farms, gave children a farming identity in which they had self-efficacy and were active, valued participants, influencing the world around them.

The farming environment constructs a unique childhood across localities. However, the specific rural locality was also an important contributing factor as more remote farming families were confronted with extreme and challenging conditions engendered by the isolation and severe elements. Specific weather events impacted unevenly, but significantly, on rural children. Similarly to participants in other studies (Cummins, 2009), farm children demonstrated an awareness of the weather-related restrictions and stressors placed on their families, and adapted in accordance with these, thus modifying the social environment around them. Social responsibility is apparent, for example, in children's participation in strategies to manage water during a drought, and in their increased contribution to farm work during a heavy snowfall:

> We had to go snow raking. In the truck you get a rake in front and behind you and it rakes the snow out of the way and makes a pathway for the sheep to get to the feed and water ... The first few days were alright, then it got harder 'cause we couldn't muster the sheep down the hills. So we had a shepherd on each hill and Dad ran out of shepherds so I had to go out and help him. We got a bit frustrated 'cause the path wasn't wide enough for the sheep. It was frustrating 'cause we couldn't get through this bit or that bit and then we'd fall in a ditch. The snow was probably the height of the table. (Laurie, 12-year-old girl, MacKenzie)

Limitations

This study has the usual limitations related to small-scale qualitative studies. The small sample size does not allow for generalisation of findings, however, it does provide for an in-depth exploration of the perspectives and experiences of a particular group of people. Although the motivations for participants' self-selection into the study were not investigated, some children stated that they thought it would be interesting and others indicated that their parents had wanted to take part.

Since participants in the study predominantly identified as European/Pakeha, an important limitation to note in the reporting of the findings is the lack of differentiation between European/Pakeha and Maori participants. The small sample size and the intent of this study led to this article focusing on rural New Zealand childhood generally, without distinctions being drawn between Pakeha and Maori. However, given the range of experiences reported here and the implications discussed below, the perspectives and experiences of contemporary rural living for Maori, and indeed other Indigenous, children and families should be an important focus for further research.

Conclusions

Rural childhood is positively experienced by New Zealand children as respectful of their agency and creativity, and socially inclusive. Their agency arises from contexts which are shaped by social discourses, spatial relations and social relationships, and children's personal characteristics (Robson, Bell, & Klocker, 2007). In rural New Zealand contexts, parents scaffold their children's development through opportunities to participate in household and farm tasks, contribute to agricultural work practices and perform complex tasks in challenging conditions. Through engagement and partnership with others in these social contexts, children develop competency and agency (Smith & Bjerke, 2009), undertaking challenging tasks not usually associated with children of this age and negating traditional, dominant views of children as incompetent and dependent. Children's pride in their contribution to rural and farming life suggests that their constructions incorporate components of citizenship, such as competence, responsibility and respect for hard work and equal participation (Taylor & Smith, 2009).

Social resourcefulness, self-reliance, social participation and an outdoors focus, features strongly aligned with social constructions of mythologised rural New Zealand, are key to children's discourses about rural living. The findings highlight idyllic aspects of rural childhood alongside children's enjoyment of rural living. The children, however, also discussed aspects that are inconsistent with the dominant idyllic discourse, including experiencing danger, boredom and social isolation. Importantly, children do not omit or downplay negative facets of rural living. Rather, these are portrayed as co-existing with positive aspects, without apparent tension and contradiction. Dull, dangerous or difficult features are part of rural living, alongside the idyllic ones, in children's experiences.

The diversity of rural children's voices and experiences is also highlighted in the findings. There is no single rural New Zealand childhood voice. Particular aspects of rural life

are associated with, or amplified by, geographical remoteness, agricultural and farming contexts, and environmental dimensions. These aspects impact on children and families in different ways.

Thus, a more robust and authentic understanding of rural childhood is achieved by hearing directly from children about their lived experiences – one that incorporates children's agency and participation, both positive and negative aspects of rural living, and the diversity of rural experience. This has important implications for policy-making and service delivery in rural communities. The dominance of the rural idyll and the 'rural pioneer' discourse in New Zealand popular culture has the potential to obscure, minimise or deny some of the harsher realities of rural life. Similarly, the dominance of rural voices advocating for the farming sector in policy debates in New Zealand can render other rural dwellers largely invisible or insignificant. Provision of policy and services that genuinely meet the needs of rural children, families and communities is contingent on gaining an accurate and comprehensive understanding of contemporary rural life. Historically, children's voices have been subsumed within families, or silenced altogether. However, studies such as ours indicate the rich contribution that children can make to understanding, and thus potentially improving, social conditions.

Endnotes

1 The constructions of rural childhood presented here are predominantly European/Pakeha constructions. The authors acknowledge that culture and ethnicity contribute to distinctive constructions of rural childhood. Participants in this study predominantly identified as European/Pakeha, with few Maori participants. Given the sample size, and the intent of the study, this article focusses on rural New Zealand childhood as a whole, without making distinctions between Pakeha and Maori.

2 Children's real names are not reported, but rather pseudonyms selected by the participants.

3 The names of these four areas (Canterbury, Rodney, Northland and MacKenzie) are the district names in which the study areas were located. Each district is sufficiently large, containing a number of similar areas, for the localities used in this research to not be readily identifiable.

4 Six children chose to be interviewed with a sibling present.

5 The children produced a total of 933 photographs and 119 drawn artworks.

6 Maori language word for family, and extended family.

7 Productive work is 'work, for profit or family gain in cash, or in kind', whilst reproductive work is 'unpaid work that sustains family life' (Levison & Murray-Close, 2005, p. 616), for example, domestic tasks, chores and childcare.

8 Moko is an abbreviation of the Māori language word Mokopuna meaning grandchild.

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Emeritus Professor Anne Smith, an internationally renowned researcher and child advocate, sadly passed away in Dunedin, New Zealand, on 22 May 2016. Her 40-year academic career was devoted to advancing children's rights, development and well-being in early childhood education,

the family and schools, and in the child protection and family justice systems. Anne was the foundation Director of the University of Otago Children's Issues Centre from 1995–2006. She prioritised the ascertainment of children's perspectives during an era when children were pretty much invisible in social policy, research and practice. This article on rural childhood, which she co-authored, is dedicated to her memory.

■