Children and Young People's Perspectives on and Experiences of COVID-19 in Global Contexts

This special issue was proposed by *Children & Society* editors specifically for the journal's strategic aims to enhance its internationalisation; and to embrace children's perspectives and experiences in producing knowledge about childhoods in challenging times and underrepresented contexts (Berriman et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic is such an ongoing challenge and has profoundly affected the daily lives of children around the globe (Cowie & Myers, 2021). Lockdowns, social distancing, and quarantine increase children's anxiety and stress, and reduce access to vital family members, friends, and care services. The COVID-19 pandemic re-sets boundaries and spaces of formal education, by bringing it directly into homes across the globe and shifting the family involvement of children's education and care. In addition to social, developmental and mental health issues caused to children due to lockdowns and constraints with learning (Cowie & Myers, 2021), there is a high proportion of children worldwide who live in difficult circumstances and experience issues such as poverty, lack of food, water, sanitation or hygiene, domestic violence and abuse, special needs, conflicts, and those who are refugees and migrants (UNICEF, 2020). They may have already been in those disadvantaged situations, and the COVID-19 pandemic unfortunately has worsened the circumstances for them.

In the time of the pandemic, home has become a more visible quasi-public space through digital technologies for some children, but has also further rendered invisible children living in digitally impoverished contexts (Iyer et al., 2020). Digital contact in the hybridisation of public and private spaces raises concerns over child protection and safety for many children (Iyer et al., 2020). Nevertheless, little is known about how space (physical and digital) has been experienced by children who were confined to their homes. Even less visible in scholarship concerning children and young people's experiences of and perspectives on COVID-19 are those from children living in contexts other than mainstream notions of 'home' and from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Set against this context, this special issue examines the challenges that have faced children and their families across a range of different cultural and geographical contexts. These include countries from six continents of the world, namely: Europe (Belgium, England, France, Ireland, Italy, Northern Ireland, Switzerland, Turkey), Asia (India, Pakistan, Thailand), North and South America (Brazil, Canada, Chile, Cuba, US), Africa (Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, South Africa, Uganda) and Australasia (Australia). Specifically, the papers included have focused on the perspectives and experiences of children from diverse (and marginalised) groups. Authors

follow participatory research frameworks, such as Tisdall (2017), in foregrounding the co-production of knowledge with children to understand their experiences from their perspectives.

To capture the depth and diversity of children's experiences of the pandemic, our special issue is formed around five guiding themes. In what follows, we reflect on the contributions made by each paper to these themes.

1. To understand how children and young people experience the pandemic in various aspects of their life (e.g. childcare, education, health, digital space, etc.).

All of the papers provide rich insights into the diversity of lived experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, education, childcare provision and engagement with the digital world took on new meanings and required new daily rhythms and routines for families globally. Education provision moved online for many children and this had a profound impact, both positive and negative, on children's family life and mental health as highlighted by Haffejee et al. (2023) in their research in five Majority World countries (Brazil, Kenya, Pakistan, South Africa and Turkey). O'Hagan and Byrne (2023) noted the importance of continued access to in person healthcare, education and community groups for the autistic young people in Northern Ireland whose lives they researched, noting that their experiences were more negative than positive during the lockdown periods of the pandemic. Their recommendations for provision in these areas highlight the need for multi-agency coordinated efforts to ensure the minimum disruption in the event of future national lockdowns.

Not only did formal education move online but also extra-curricular activities, for example in Brownell's (2023) research with child-DJs based in Louisiana, US, using radio and podcasts to reflect on and express their experiences of the pandemic. The space provided a creative and agentic outlet for young people to share and process their varied and diverse lived experiences.

Whilst education moved online in many country contexts in the global north and south, this was not the case everywhere. For example, in developing nations such as Uganda, access to education ceased soon after the start of the pandemic as evidenced in the work of Datzberger et al (2023). Their research highlights the challenging contexts facing low-income families when schools closed as there was no possibility for education to move online. Similarly, the move to digital classrooms was not available to many children in Ghana. Indeed, as Mohammed (2023) showed there was limited access to education provision during the pandemic, resulting in many children in rural areas risking becoming child labourers and

working with their parents on farms or streets. This example highlights the unequal effects of COVID-19 pandemic on those children from poorer and rural areas.

2. To (re)theorize global childhoods from children and young people's own perspectives in the time of and post COVID-19.

The research presented in this special issue confirms that global childhoods are nuanced, contextual and subject to temporal shifts. The importance of attending to space and place in research on the pandemic is reflected in the very different national policies adopted and enacted during COVID-19 pandemic. These different policies highlight the varied emphases placed on public health messaging, education provision and community relations. Yet despite the multiplicity and diversity of children's lived experience, a common key theme from our papers is the theoretical importance of developing our research to foreground the child's perspectives; so that children actively participate in all levels of their life - political, social, and cultural.

Haffejee et al. (2023) show that children and young people in the above mentioned five countries, aged 8 - 17, agentically responded to the challenges caused by the global health crisis. Those children further provided their vision of a post-pandemic world that addresses social inequality issues they were aware of. In Italy, public discourses during the pandemic stigmatised adolescents as either victims or criminals; whereas the stories told by Italian adolescents themselves about their life disrupt those stigmatizations (Favretto et al., 2023) highlighting tensions in these accounts. Indeed, the adolescents in Favretto et al.'s study produced representations of being responsible citizens, adapting to new rules and caring for their families and friends.

Drawing on the diaries, letters and drawings of young people (4-17 year olds) from nine different countries during lockdowns, Kirby et al. (2023) highlight the importance of embracing uncertainty in global education as a 'lesson' learnt by the young people. Using the 'hide and seek' game as a metaphor, Koller et al. (2023) vividly depicts how young people in Canada actively negotiated with their immediate surroundings when their rights to play and education were restricted due to the pandemic.

Although the manifestations of gender stereotypes in Chile emerged in the pandemic when children got more free time, Díaz et al. (2023) remind us that children's active participation in reproducing gendered norms is a persisting phenomenon globally (Meland & Kaltvedt, 2019; Xu, 2020). Challenging gender stereotypes in education requires ongoing involvement of

children as agents of change. Child labour is another prevalent issue especially in developing contexts. It has been worsened by the pandemic, as found by Mohammed (2023) in Ghana. A child-centred approach to address child labour will need more research that captures children's own voices.

3. To empower children and young people as co-constructors of knowledge through innovative methodological approaches in circumstances of crisis

Careful attention has been paid throughout the papers to empowering children and young people by valuing their knowledge and the contributions they have made to constructing new knowledge. We, the editors, note the debates about the limits of giving children a voice in research (Facca, Gladstone, & Teachman, 2020), oftentimes associated with issues of power and inequalities in constructions of childhoods. Yet despite these challenges, by foregrounding child voice across these different contributions, the papers individually and collectively highlight the depth and breadth of children's insights and perceptions of the global health crisis. A good example is Brownell's (2023) work, which argues that children enrolled in Be Loud's after-school program in the US were able to amplify their role as community 'knowledge creators' with limited adult intervention, thus providing them with an outlet to express their emotions and experiences of COVID-19 in their own words and on their own terms.

In Kelly and Diskin-Holdaway's (2023) study, an online experimental platform was developed to prompt children to share their lockdown experiences with a smiling teddy bear on screen, which was creatively evolved from a community activity called 'bear in window' during lockdowns in Australia. Kelly and Diskin-Holdaway (2023) discusses the strengths and limitations of this method, which informs future studies adopting digital methods in research with children. In addition to discourse analysis, the authors also explore the linguistic patterns in children's responses, which provides innovative new insights into how children form and express their voices.

Koller et al. (2022) conducted online virtual interviews with young people (7-12 years old) in Canada to understand their lived experiences during the pandemic. They adapted the Mosaic approach by employing a variety of prompts to facilitate the online discussions with young people. Their reflections on the research methods and the hermeneutic approach to data analysis contribute to the debate on capturing young people's lived experiences in research.

4. To discuss whether and how children and young people's voices are enabled or constrained by adults in a global pandemic context

Several of the papers highlight that children were both enabled and constrained by the adults around them relative to space and time but also embedded sociocultural locations and social relations as noted by Waboso et al. (2023). These findings highlight the constraints and limits of enabling the child's voice in the research process.

However, children's voices were enabled in many instances. For example, the children of modern slavery survivors, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and victims of criminal exploitation are a socially marginalised and vulnerable group whose rights have been severely ravaged by the pandemic. To record those children's voices is challenging but not impossible. For instance, in Jiménez et al.'s (2023) work, the children's voices were enabled by adult survivors of modern slavery and stakeholders of anti-slavery organisations. The authors contended that the pandemic should be used as an opportunity to promote policy change to ensure children's rights, and in particular their right to participate in the development of anti-slavery policies.

Dympna et al. (2023) worked with a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) to explore primary school children's experiences during school lockdown in Ireland. As co-researchers, the children of CRAG actively engaged in dialogues with each other and with the researchers through Zoom meetings. Their reflections on the CRAG digital dialogue meetings highlights the empowerment of children as co-researchers to enable their voices during research process.

5. **To situate children and young people's voices in their diverse socio-cultural contexts globally.**

The papers provide insights into how children and young people of diverse backgrounds negotiate with their immediate and broader environments to enact their agency in a variety of socio-cultural contexts in the global south and north. For example, the home and the school are principal sites for the construction of middle-class childhood in India, however, the sudden lockdown in responding to the emergency of Covid disrupted the geographies of parent efforts to provide a middle-class childhood. Barn et al. (2023) embraced a relational, sociological framework that explored this group of children's routines of daily life and educational aspirations under such circumstances. Their analysis revealed that "the way children negotiated new routines and 'rescheduled' life depended upon a range of structural issues concerning household composition and familial resources" (p.6).

Pastore and Salvi (2023) attempted to bridge the gap pertaining to the experience of Mozambican children in response to their daily practices during the lockdown. Although the lockdown induced limits on their daily lives, these children did not passively respond to the social restrictions imposed on them. Instead, they actively embraced structural constraints in ways that make sense to them. The results of this study highlight the heterogenization of childhood in a Global South context and further contribute to current theorisations of agency that are culturally and locally informed. Similarly, Dympna et al. (2023) demonstrate how children exercise their agency in different ways to share their diverse experiences, by involving children from primary schools of diverse backgrounds in Ireland.

Implications

The collection of papers in this special issue contributes to the knowledge about diverse childhoods during and beyond the context of COVID-19 pandemic, specifically and jointly through children's perspectives and experiences. The papers present contextualised manifestations of children's agency in negotiating time, space, and their various needs in the time of the pandemic. For children living in disadvantaged and/or marginalised backgrounds, the visibility of their agency as enabled through research conducted with them creates important knowledge for policies and intervention programmes that aim to support those children's empowerment. Both in terms of the pandemic and other public events, children's participation in relevant policy making is a key message that this special issue conveys.

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