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Children's Experience, Participation, and Rights During COVID-19

Edited by
Ruby Turok-Squire

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Children's Experience, Participation, and Rights During COVID-19

“This edited collection presents a compelling range of voices that illuminate how children’s lives have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It draws on cutting-edge methodological and theoretical approaches to present the often-unheard voices of students and children themselves as well as researchers and those from civil society organisations. Written in a clear and accessible style, it will be a gripping read for anyone interested in the impact of the pandemic on global childhoods.”

—Ann Phoenix, *Professor of Psychosocial Studies, Thomas Coram Research Unit, Social Research Institute, UCL Institute of Education, UK*

“This is an extraordinary, inclusive, multi-layered and multi-actor critical analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the rights of children and young people. Its editor’s genuine concern to promote a sustainable debate that effects participatory, positive change on the lives of children is reflected in the choice of authors and perspectives presented. Young people, practitioners, and academics invite readers on a journey of understanding and thinking in manners that will undoubtedly lead them to act for change, and that will encourage further academic, political, and public debates in which childhood is re-positioned and the practice of listening is made central.”

—Sofia Leitão, *Senior Advisory Board Member at ‘Hope For Children’ CRC Policy Center, Cyprus, and Senior Development Manager at Rinova Ltd., UK*

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Ruby Turok-Squire
University of Warwick
Coventry, UK

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FOREWORD

Catastrophes may be individual, familial, national and regional. They may be due to individual or societal breakdown, inability to cope, loss of control, wars and military destabilisations, national or regional famine or environmental disasters. They are rarely global. But the COVID-19 pandemic was global and it was catastrophic. It marked a sudden shift in the order and ordering of our lives. The pandemic was clearly constituted as a medical emergency, but its impact was and is also manifest as social, psychological, cultural, political, economic and technological.

This collection of chapters presents a powerful social document regarding the impact of the pandemic on a single demographic: children and young people. But children and young people do not constitute a unitary and homogeneous group. Rather, they are differentiated by other demographics of social class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and disability, and by the geographical context and stability of their residence. The impact of the pandemic became differentiated through young people's access or lack of access to resource and capital.

The pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities. The daily struggles due to those inequalities were made more difficult. The words repeated in this volume and beyond about this group of people are that during the pandemic they were invisible, hidden and unheard. But I also hear that this is a group who were struggling before the pandemic, because of being ignored or unheard.

This pandemic affects all, regardless of gender, race and ethnicity. But those in care, those with disabilities, those in abusive relationships and situations, those in poverty, those in migration, those who are homeless

and those who are Roma are shown to be hit hard. Those most at risk were those already deemed ‘vulnerable’. But as the volume makes clear, ‘vulnerability’ as a label can be a weapon that wounds even deeper, causing further isolation, exclusion and, for example, denial of access to school or college learning and friends. Young people’s rights are formally protected across most jurisdictions through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), but as many commentators note, rights are always contextualised and protected or not through practice, from below and as living rights.

These chapters are snapshots at a moment in time. Other accounts, across the generations, provide documents of the uneven impact of COVID-19, given the systemic inequalities and injustices of race, gender, generation and ableism. The snapshots here are from the West and largely from the UK. They are one response amongst many and they tell one part of the broader story. But they are important because they present children and young people centre stage. As one author states, the mainstream media in the UK was rightly concerned with the working conditions of parents working from home, with hospitality and tourism and with the everyday value of a haircut or a visit to the pub, but the media voiced those concerns at the expense of largely ignoring the deeply harmful impact to children’s learning, friendship, play and mental health. We were often neglectful of the full impact of the pandemic on young people and we have often been ignorant of their constructive agency over this time.

This volume begins to set the record straight. The long-term impacts of the pandemic are yet to be properly understood. The extent of the scarring to structural, political and economic national and international relationships, but also the opportunities that arise through the crisis, for example, through the acceleration of remote learning and working, is still playing out. The agency of children and young people in these new contexts and the impact of these changes on them are yet to be fully felt. This volume, one particular response to the global impact of COVID-19, becomes an important piece of the puzzle as we work towards a better understanding.

University of London
London, UK

David Oswell

David Oswell is Professor of Sociology and Pro-Warden for Research, Enterprise and Knowledge Exchange at Goldsmiths, University of London, UK. He is the author of *Television, Childhood and the Home: A History of the Making of the Child Television Audience in Britain* (2002), *Culture and Society: An Introduction to Cultural Studies* (2006) and *The Agency of Children: From Family to Global Human Rights* (2013), and editor of *Cultural Theory: Vols 1–4* (2010).

The Story of *Children's Experience, Participation and Rights During COVID-19*

It has been my honour to see this collection grow into its current form so organically over the past year. I will describe the story of *Children's Experience, Participation and Rights During COVID-19*, before Cath Larkins and Lucía del Moral-Espín map out a path through the book for readers. In March 2020, as lockdown set in, myself and Li Liu, my colleague from the University of Warwick, began talking about what it might be like for children and young people to be finding their way through the pandemic. As we walked around streets so empty they almost echoed, we began noticing the rainbows springing up in people's windows, rainbows that children had painted or drawn or stuck together from whatever they could find, some with cotton wool clouds or sequins around their edges. These rainbows were like small signs of children's voices still sounding. It was as if they were not only reminding us of the presence of children, and of their different and perhaps more hidden perspectives on our situation, but also giving us hope that there were ways to recover from the pandemic that might be even better than we could imagine at that moment.

Inspired by what we could see, and intrigued to know more about how children were experiencing the pandemic, Li and I designed an online, interdisciplinary conference entitled 'Rainbows in Our Windows: Childhood in the Time of Corona' (<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/research/conferences/coronachildhood>). We invited teachers, students, authors, young people, members of humanitarian organisations, psychologists, academics and policy advisors to come and speak. Around

30 people agreed and volunteered their time. Over the course of a single very long day, over 250 people from around the world attended 6 different panel sessions. I chaired most of the discussions and watched in amazement as contributors discovered similarities between their approaches that might lead to new collaborations. One young person, an author of a children's book, gave a presentation and it seemed clear that thinking *with* children and young people about how to listen to young people was an area in need of further exploration. Spontaneous discussions filled the breaks between presentations. The day ended and it felt like something had just begun.

Recordings of the conference (sponsored by the University of Warwick Retired Staff Association) were published by the English Association and are still available online (<https://englishassociation.ac.uk/no-15-rainbows-in-our-windows-childhood-in-the-time-of-corona/>). I went on to edit a special issue of 'Issues in English', which detailed the conference proceedings and contained expanded contributions from various researchers. In one of those inexplicable moments of coincidence, I then contacted an editor at Palgrave Macmillan just as she was about to contact me to ask about developing the conference proceedings into a book. We ended up going one step further: two books have been created, *Children's Experience, Participation and Rights During COVID-19* and *COVID-19 and Education in the Global North: Storytelling as Alternative Pedagogies*, each containing some chapters by contributors to that original conference and many from new collaborators.

From the initial conference onwards, this project has been about encouraging a process of dialogue at a time where disconnections threatened to plunge our communities into silence. It seemed obvious that only through keeping an open mind could we find ways to address a new crisis. While proposing and editing these books, I have remained committed to including new voices and encouraging diversity of tone and subject matter. It was never a question of thinking about how a new chapter might fit with a preconceived idea about how the books would be. Instead, it was about asking what new direction a chapter might take the books in and how an author might best say what they wanted to say. Readers might sense a varying texture to these chapters; there are different styles of writing, different balances of theory and empiricism and moments where observational approaches or practical suggestions for change dominate. This variety forms part of our aim, in that we hope that by appreciating and cultivating a certain roughness amongst authors' various perspectives, we might reach insights that might otherwise be smoothed away.

Earlier this summer, while I was on a countryside walk with one of the contributors, we mentioned to each other that these books may end up becoming time capsules. They have the courage to speak of a crisis at that moment of crisis itself. They may be necessarily incomplete, but they are all the more vivid and powerful for it. They demonstrate a collective commitment to learning from a situation that challenges our ability to reflect, act and stay connected. They believe in the value of listening to individual children's perspectives on their own experiences and to those adults who most closely support them. They seek to understand and even to extrapolate from the experiences of children who are particularly vulnerable during this crisis. They integrate practice and policy with theory. Ideas accumulate within them, perhaps in a sedimentary fashion, without a final goal in mind, the process becoming the goal. That process may encourage ways of thinking with children and young people about their experiences, education and rights to become more holistic, dynamic and sensitive. I hope that many of the authors of these pages see themselves as not only contributors to a book but to an ongoing project of learning, of which this is one concrete realisation.

University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
City, University of London, London, UK

Ruby Turok-Squire

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruby Lindiwe Turok-Squire completed her LLM in International Development Law and Human Rights from the University of Warwick, UK, in autumn 2021 and is now studying for the Graduate Diploma in Law at City, University of London, UK. She is an assistant on a new Creativity Accountability research project at the University of Warwick. Recently, Ruby has worked as General Operations Assistant for Action for Child Trauma International and as a research assistant for the Central England Law Centre. She previously taught English as a second language to refugees in Canada and the UK; worked as an editorial assistant for *Lacuna Magazine*; studied English literature and drama at the University of Warwick; taught Shakespeare at President Kennedy Secondary School, Coventry, UK; and studied English and music composition at Oberlin College and Conservatory, Ohio, USA. Ruby has been awarded a Watson Fellowship to study the music of animals, and a BMI Student Composer Award. Her first book of poems, *The Phantom Fundamental*, was published in the UK and USA.

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Introduction

Cath Larkins and Lucía del Moral-Espín

Abstract Across successive waves of the pandemic, children’s experiences have been overlooked and their concerns not taken sufficiently to heart during decision-making. Recovery from the economic and social consequences of the pandemic will take time, but it will also be an opportunity to think about what in the old normal was not working, and make the relevant changes. By reflecting on the insights in these pages, academics, practitioners, policy makers, and children and young people themselves may find echoes of their own experiences and inspiration as to how children’s rights may more effectively be promoted in the years ahead. In this introduction, for audiences unfamiliar with this context, we provide some background information about COVID-19 in the UK, while suggesting that the book has wider relevance. We then provide an overview of the eight chapters contained in the volume. They all contribute to denouncing the invisibility of children in public debates and budgets related to the pandemic. Some suggest that protection has been given

C. Larkins (✉)
University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK

L. del Moral-Espín
University of Cádiz, Cádiz, Spain

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priority over participation, according to paternalistic and adult-centric parameters. Some are guided by an explicit or implicit intersectional approach that helps open a debate around resources and children's meaningful participation in shaping and realising their own rights. We conclude this introduction by drawing together emerging themes across the chapters, that might be explored in further depth with children and their allies when seeking to enhance long-term responses to the pandemic.

Keywords Covid-19 • Children's experiences • Policy • Invisibility • Intersectional approach • Participation

Across successive waves of the pandemic, children's experiences across the globe have been overlooked and their concerns not taken sufficiently to heart in processes of decision-making. Not enough has been done to respect, protect and promote children's rights, not only in the present but also in the long term. Effective public health, community and global responses must be developed in collaboration with children, as the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has stressed (UN Com RC, 2020). As previous research has shown (Mort et al., 2020), the involvement of children, learning from their experiences and ideas, and shaping communities, services and policy with them, lead to more robust responses to risks and disasters.

This book contributes to addressing the failure to fully consider children's views by foregrounding children's perspectives and connecting their views and experiences to wider political and economic contexts. It draws on research by and with children and young people, as well as consultations with professionals and theoretically informed critical discussions. Recovery from the economic and social consequences of the pandemic will take time, but it will also be an opportunity to think about what in the 'old normal' was not working, and make the relevant changes. By reflecting on the insights in these pages, academics, practitioners, policy makers, and children and young people themselves may find echoes of their own experiences and inspiration as to how children's rights may more effectively be promoted in the years ahead.

In this introduction, we provide some background information about COVID-19 in the UK, while suggesting that the book has wider relevance. We then provide an overview of the chapters contained in this volume. We conclude by drawing together emerging themes across the

chapters that might be explored in further depth with children and their allies when seeking to enhance long-term responses to the pandemic.

BACKGROUND: COVID-19 IN THE UK AND BEYOND

The novel COVID-19 virus, first identified in autumn 2019, reached the UK in early 2020. The risks posed to children were evident immediately, as one of the sources of the virus entry into the UK was reportedly children returning from a skiing trip in Italy (a country already seriously affected by high infection rates). A government advisory group (SAGE) was established and pre-existing emergency response protocols were set in motion to monitor the evolving situation. As the virus spread, the scale of infection and the health impacts on diverse communities became clear and the UK quickly became one of the most affected countries worldwide. On 23 March 2020, the prime minister announced a UK-wide lockdown. Schools were closed for most pupils (except those perceived as the most vulnerable or whose parents were judged as essential workforce) at least until 1 June 2020, and then again from 1 November 2020 until 8 March 2021. Across the four devolved nations of the UK, there were and continue to be divergent responses to the virus, with Wales and Scotland being faster to introduce precautionary measures such as circuit breakers, mask wearing and vaccine passes (Institute for Government, 2021).

From October 2020, an inquiry of the UK government Health and Social Care and Science and Technology Committees heard evidence from a wide range of professionals (including senior politicians). The report, published in October 2021, revealed some details of the underlying causes relating to the poor handling of the pandemic. Planning had been too closely based on a Flu model. Rather than adopting the successful and rigorous South Korean track and trace approach, the UK embraced the herd immunity model, fatalistically accepting that it would be impossible to contain the virus. Community testing was halted, leading to a paucity of data. There was a lack of transparency, accountability and internal or international challenge in the relationships and decision-making of senior scientists and elected officials. Economic concerns and beliefs about the importance of maintaining ‘normal’ health and social interactions led to the decision to lockdown coming too late. Track and Trace systems were also established too late to prevent further lockdowns.

In line with historic inequalities of status between health and social care, the social care sector was largely absent from national

decision-making until May 2020, and this is judged to have caused unresponsiveness to risks and shortages of PPE. At times, government ministers have ignored scientific advice and prolonged freedoms where lockdown or other restrictions were likely to have limited the spread of infections. Existing health inequalities have been exacerbated. Infections and hospitalisations were higher in communities experiencing industrial decline, low employment levels and a history of lower investment in health services. Too slowly, the fact that people of Black, minority ethnic and Asian heritages were at greater risk of more serious illness was recognised. Some people entering hospitals with learning difficulties were issued ‘Do not attempt CPR’ notices without any consultation with their family members, carers or advocates. These political, emergency response failings arose in the context of longstanding funding shortages in social care services and within health systems that were already struggling to meet demand. Some health services were already running at the limits of their capacity, with no capacity to flex for crisis response (UK Gov, 2021).

The consequences of failing to adequately respond to the pandemic are being felt by children across the globe. As the United Nations (UN, 2020: 2) have highlighted:

This is a universal crisis and, for some children, the impact will be lifelong. Moreover, the harmful effects of this pandemic will not be distributed equally. They are expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, and in the poorest neighbourhoods, and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations.²

At the same time, children, alongside adults, have responded as workers and volunteers, formally and informally providing health and social care support, often at great personal cost. In schools, childcare and leisure settings, children, teachers, carers and other professionals have adapted and responded to ever changing conditions, often with creativity and generosity (Larkins et al., 2020). Children and adults are collaborating across the globe to try to ensure that children’s views are listened to, and responded to with actions that will change children’s lives for the better (e.g. see the #CovidUnder19 research: <https://www.tdh.ch/en/projects/covidunder19>).

As chapters in this volume highlight, the need to look in depth at the differing experiences of children in divergent circumstances is pressing. As we write this chapter (21 December 2021), a further wave of the

pandemic is emerging and the cumulative death toll in the UK is approaching 150,000 (Coronavirus Dashboard, 2021). We know that some children—for example, those who are politically and economically marginalised, care experienced, young carers and experiencing familial or structural violence—are carrying heavier consequences than others. The overview of the chapters that follows provides some indication of the urgent issues to address and the means by which this might be achieved in collaboration with children.

OVERVIEW

The eight chapters in this volume (five focused on UK contexts and three taking a broader approach) denounce the invisibility of children in public debates and budgets related to the pandemic. Some suggest that protection has been given priority over participation, according to paternalistic and adult-centric parameters. The explicit or implicit intersectional approaches that guide some chapters help to open a debate around the meaningful participation of children within the shaping and realisation of their own rights.

Within the UK context, Kirsty McNeill’s chapter (Chap. 2) addresses three relevant questions: what do we know about some of the main implications of the pandemic for children, what do we still not know and how might a social movement for children be built? Based on the work of Save the Children throughout the crisis, the chapter suggests five points for an emerging research agenda that help to refine interventions supporting children and families with newly established patterns of family life. Considering these five issues and taking a long-term approach, the author calls for mobilising diverse groups in a concerted effort to exert pressure on behalf of (and together with) children. Three principles are suggested as forming at the base of such a movement: at a strategic level, putting the protection of childhood at the heart of the tough economic choices to come; at a narrative level, replacing the current narrow focus on child poverty with a wider story about good childhoods; and at a policy level, building the case for child poverty as primarily an experience of diminished purchasing power and, therefore, exclusion from collective life.

Within a UK and European context, in Chap. 3, we (Cath Larkins and Lucía del Moral-Espín) draw on research conducted from Spring 2020 with professionals from across 20 European countries to provide early evidence of how children’s participation in responding to the pandemic was