Co-Researching With Children in the Time of COVID-19: Shifting the Narrative on Methodologies to Generate Knowledge

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Abstract
Children and young people’s participation in decision-making has substantially increased in the last 3 decades; although, their participation in research has been more problematic due to traditional views that exclude them from the realm of knowledge generation. This article critically reflects on the way that 12 children and young people engaged as co-researchers in an inter-generational research project that explored the perspectives of children and young people during the COVID-19 outbreak. Drawing upon the experiences of these child researchers, the author discusses the methodological and ethical complexities of their engagement—which is already a disputed topic—in the context of the global health crisis characterized by lockdowns, isolation, and social distancing. The author outlines the strategic role that the child researchers had in reaching their peers and collecting relevant data, which would not have been possible without them, due to the circumstances of the pandemic. Furthermore, it is argued the need to rethink the role of children and young people as partners in research, especially in times of crises, and to embrace the epistemological position that they are able to deliver quality research results. The generation of collective knowledge is intertwined with relations, situations, and contexts, and together they influence each other, making the research project dynamic and unconceivable without the child researchers.

Keywords
action research, community based research, emancipatory research, PAR—Participatory Action Research, methods in qualitative inquiry

Introduction
As the result of the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children and young people’s participation in decision-making has gradually become considered a positive practice to enable their engagement in society (Archer, 2004; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Verhellen, 2015). However, the implementation of the right to participation has been problematic and limited as this entitlement challenges positions of power that place children and young people as passive members of society to one that places them as active actors in decision-making, implying a power negotiation between them and adults (Percy-Smith, 2011; Thomas, 2015). Children and young people’s participation in research, in particular, adds an additional layer of complexity to an already challenging discussion. Yet, if effectively implemented, this engagement has the potential to shift the narrative away from vulnerabilities and lack of capacity to one that recognizes children and young people as rights-holders with expertise, skills, and abilities to participate as defined by the UNCRC (Tisdall, 2017).

Studies engaging children and young people in research in times of crises, especially in armed conflict contexts, show that their contributions are valuable as the data collected are potentially richer than conventional adult-only research, and the research process offers direct benefits to the children and young people who participate, including the acquisition of transferable skills and a sense of self-efficacy (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019; Hart & Tyrer, 2006).

Throughout this article, it is discussed the engagement of children and young people in research and issues around consent as outlined extensively in childhood studies literature (e.g.

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Alderson, 2001; Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Coady, 2010; Coyne, 2009; Houghton, 2015; Maguire et al., 2018). In line with ethical board review positions, a growing practice advocates for embracing a process of empowering children and young people to give informed consent. This, however, requires involving parents or legal guardians and gatekeepers to ensure children and young people’s engagement in research is meaningful, legal, safe, and ethical, while respecting the position that children and young people are competent social actors (Heath et al., 2007; Kustatscher, 2014; Ost, 2013; Powell et al., 2016; Skelton, 2008; Turner & Almack, 2016).

Generating Knowledge
Cornwall and Fujita (2012) argue that knowledge generation relies mainly on the work of researchers. However, there are many other ways to produce knowledge; for instance, knowledge can be generated by non-academically trained individuals, including children and young people. Cornwall and Fujita base their argument on the World Bank’s Consultations with the Poor, a methodology guide which has influenced international development organizations in their establishment of foundations for consulting with children and young people, one of the most excluded and disadvantaged groups when it comes to participation in decision-making. Participatory action research paradigm scholars promote the involvement of traditionally excluded populations, including children and young people, in the construction of their own accounts as a means of producing knowledge and addressing the disparity in knowledge creation (e.g. Anyon et al., 2018; Hordijk & Baud, 2006; Pinter & Zandian, 2015).

A growing body of childhood studies literature attests to the importance of engaging children and young people in research and recognizes the value of analyzing whether they are able to untangle the difficult encounters of conducting research (e.g. Fleming, 2011; Sharpe, 2015; Shier, 2015; Skelton, 2008). Evidence from the childhood studies field show that children and young people are progressively taking on different functions within research projects, including roles as research advisers, data collectors, co-researchers, or lead researchers (Collins et al., 2020; Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019; Schäfer & Yardwood, 2008). While in the past, children and young people were often excluded from research processes, a new wave of researchers from multiple disciplines have been influenced by the children’s rights agenda and the epistemological position that views children and young people as social actors, increasingly engaging them in research and validating their contributions toward addressing research questions (see Lundy et al., 2011; Punch, 2002b; Spyrou, 2016; Tisdall, 2018; Van Blerk, 2019; Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2017).

Traditional views, those which perceive children and young people as incompetent beings dependent on adult control due to a belief that they are incapable of making decisions (Mayall, 2000), often dismiss children and young people from active roles in research. This exclusion is intensified during disasters and crises and their capacities and participation spaces are undermined on the premise of their vulnerability and need for protection (Martin, 2010). The COVID-19 outbreak is no exception. This global health crisis, caused by a new strain of coronavirus, has locked down entire countries, closed millions of schools, and isolated and confined an unparalleled number of people worldwide (Bender, 2020). Children and young people are massively affected by COVID-19 as school closures have had an impact on more than 1.5 billion students—370 million of whom are in jeopardy as the closures directly influence their safety, health services, nutrition, and protection situations (Thomson, 2020). Furthermore, strategies to contain COVID-19 have been criticized for being adult-centered and reducing children and young people’s right to participate in public decision-making on the premise that social and economic rights are more relevant than their participation rights (Goulds, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated unequal social structures, which in turn has caused those in power to disregard children and young people’s ability to participate in solutions to the pandemic. This raises a fundamental question of how to weigh children and young people’s engagement in collective actions against safety restrictions placed by governments to control the pandemic. With this comes complexities for researchers to balance participation and protection rights, research ethics, and the intersectionality of multiple contexts and participatory rights. Learnings from COVID-19 pandemic show that it is pivotal to open up potential opportunities for meaningful engagement of children and young people in research. This article contributes to the discussion about the opportunities that arise when children and young people are well-trained in research skills. When given the necessary tools, they are able to conduct fieldwork in times of quarantine and confinement when no one is available. Children and young people are able to reach their peers and the most marginalized and inaccessible populations using social media platforms and a network of child researchers across communities and countries to collect data.

Children and Young People’s Participation in Research
Over the past 3 decades, due to changes in the global political and policy landscapes, credited in part to the UNCRC as well as to theoretical thinking and new ideological conceptualizations of childhood (e.g. Archard, 2004; Mayall, 2000), there has been an increasing recognition of children and young people’s right to participate in public decision-making. Academia and practice have progressively observed a growing engagement of children and young people in research, despite the norm continuing to, for most studies on children’s issues, rely only on adults’ involvement in these projects (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Fleming, 2011). Hence, where spaces have been created, children and young people actively participate in a range of capacities, from respondent to co-researcher to lead researcher (Cahill, 2007; Kellett, 2010; Shier, 2015). In exploring the factors that have contributed to this shift from adult-only research to meaningful inclusion of children and young
people, childhood studies scholars (Collins et al., 2020; Kellett, 2011; Punch, 2002a; Thomas, 2015) and practitioners (Centro de Servicios Educativos en Salud y Medio Ambiente (CESESMA) et al., 2012; Participation Works, 2009; Spalding, 2012) concur that there are a number of crucial factors and processes that have facilitated this emergence, such as the (a) acknowledgment of children and young people as competent social actors, (b) UNCRC’s recognition of them as rights-holders, and (c) development of participatory research methods (e.g. Alderson, 2001; Cornwall & Fujita, 2012; Lundy et al., 2011; Shier, 2015).

In terms of the first factor, one of the core tenets of childhood studies is that children and young people are competent social actors in their own right, meaning that they are individuals with their own identities and active participants in creating knowledge (James & James, 2012). This position recognizes that children and young people are “active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them, and of the societies in which they live” (James & Prout, 2008, p. 4). Equally, Tisdall (2018) argues that this view challenges traditional assumptions that perceive children and young people as incompetent or passive research subjects to one that focusses on their abilities, knowledge, and experiences, enabling them to contribute without needing intermediaries to interpret their lives (see also Alderson, 2001; Spyrou, 2016). However, this position also raises necessary questions around whether research is inclusive enough to represent accurate views of a large group of children and young people (James, 2007), how power dynamics among the young participants themselves and with adult facilitators may have an impact on the research process (Lundy et al., 2011), how children and young people’s capacity to express their views is taken into account (Prout, 2011), and how to replicate this practice within mainstream research as it has been relegated to special issues or conferences (Van Blerk & Barker, 2008).

In turning the discussion toward how the UNCRC’s rights framework has influenced children and young people’s participation in research, Lundy (2018) argues that the UNCRC has made an impact on enhancing their engagement as active participants in research as a way to exercise their participatory rights. Wyness (2013) also points out that Article 12 of the UNCRC and related provisions recognize children and young people as competent actors and introduce a participation-based rights discourse that has been largely influential. Equally, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009), in their General Comment No. 12, indicate that children and young people are not required to have a comprehensive knowledge of all matters affecting their lives, but rather a sufficient understanding that enables them to form their own views in an appropriate way on the matter at hand.

Another domain of influence in this engagement is the discourse on methodologies of participatory research, such as emancipatory, social action, and feminist research (e.g. Cahill, 2010; Kellett, 2010; Sharpe, 2015; Spalding, 2012). Emancipatory research, developed in the early 1990s, illustrates several ways in which traditional research paradigms can be changed; for instance, by challenging conventional research practices, developing new methodologies that enable people to engage in research, and describing good practices that exemplify these types of research (Oliver, 1997). Oliver argues that the exclusive creation of knowledge by scientific research methods can be contested, as this is not the only way to produce knowledge. This position is supported by other scholars who assert that people beyond academia and research institutions are entitled to contribute to knowledge creation through an inclusive approach that has the potential to bring forth largely underrepresented and historically excluded perspectives and audiences to the debate (see also Cahill, 2007; Dold & Chapman, 2012; Hordijk & Baud, 2006).

Participatory research approaches are characterized by the involvement of participants across various (and potentially all) stages of the process, and seen as particularly important for research involving hard-to-reach populations, marginalized groups, and those with communication difficulties (ESRC Framework for Research Ethics, 2015). However, scant attention has been paid in the literature to research that includes children and young people as active participants in a number of roles, such as data collectors, co-researchers, or lead researchers (Fleming, 2011). Scholars have advocated for more approaches to broaden the inclusion of marginalized children and young people, whose perspectives are often excluded, in research.

Academia and research, which have been bastions of adult power over knowledge, need to ensure children and young people’s participation is not only the subject of such knowledge production but also part of the process of such knowledge production. (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020, p. 172)

With this, shifting the focus from being a research subject to participant provides promising opportunities to generate a more inclusive knowledge that can be used in shaping policies and practices, ultimately creating change that leads to better lives for children and young people (see also Skelton, 2008). However, Liebenberg (2018) warns that using participatory research methodologies does not automatically mean that the process is meaningful and participants are empowered to make decisions. This requires an analysis of each stage of the project based on mutual collaboration, capacity building, shared goals, and contexts where these are conducted.

Children and Young People’s Participation in Times of Crisis: COVID-19

At the beginning of 2020, the whole world experienced an unparalleled global health crisis due to COVID-19, which in few months affected more than 200 countries and territories. Despite various efforts by governments and individuals around the world to “flatten the curve” and stem the pandemic, COVID-19 continues to sicken and kill people around the world, collapse national health systems, and affect the most vulnerable populations. Furthermore, the Global Partnership
to End Violence against Children (2020) states that the related consequences of COVID-19, including social isolation, movement restrictions, increasing poverty, and high levels of stress and anxiety are putting millions of children and young people at risk of being subjected to violence and abuse at home during quarantine.

The engagement of children and young people in research is a challenging practice; however, when this is done in times of crises or emergencies, restrictions and boundaries are excessively placed. Evidence show that children and young people in situations of humanitarian disasters and crises have less opportunities to realize their right to participate in social life due to constraints in their environments and the widespread belief that they are essentially vulnerable and defenseless victims of a crisis (e.g. Bennouna et al., 2017; Hart & Tyrer, 2006). However, it is suggested that children and youth, even in times of turmoil, are able to contribute their views and actions as a way to cope with the many issues and problems they face (Hart & Tyrer, 2006). For Caputo (2017), the main challenge lies in balancing the UNCRC’s protection and participation rights in a manner consistent with a rights-based approach that avoids focusing only on children and young people’s protection as this could unintentionally undermine their ability to cope with adversity and diminish their resilience (see also Tolfree, 2004). The COVID-19 global health crisis brings us once again to the same dilemma around meaningful spaces for children and young people to engage in research, the balance between their protection and participation, and the ethics of conducting research with children and young people in times of social distancing and isolation.

**Methodology**

The critical background for this article is the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this context, two adult researchers, in collaboration with 12 children and young people, ages 12 to 17, conducted a research to explore children and youth people’s reflections on and perceptions of the COVID-19 outbreak (Cuevas-Parra & Stephano, 2020). These 12 children and young people—from Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mongolia, Romania, and Sierra Leone—were members of World Vision’s Young Leaders Advocacy programme, a global initiative to give children and young people spaces and opportunities to learn skills and tools to conduct their own research as part of child-led advocacy work (Stephano, 2017). Through this programme, the young participants in this project were trained on research skills and built a network of child researchers who carried out child-led research projects on issues relevant to them, including exploring the issue of child marriage in Sierra Leone, cyber-bullying in Romania, and discrimination-based violence in Brazil (Stephano, 2017).

The intergenerational research conducted by the two adult co-researchers and the 12 child researchers during the COVID-19 outbreak and the co-investigators’ role in collecting and analyzing the data while isolating and social distancing was examined and critically discussed. The questions that guided the project included: (a) How did child researchers engage in research to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of their peers? (b) How did child researchers find the intergenerational nature of this research project and their results? (c) How did child researchers perceive the advantages and disadvantages of conducting research in the COVID-19 context?

The project embraces a qualitative research design which serves to draw out the personal views and experiences of the participants. Within the qualitative paradigm, the use of a case study approach is helpful to gain a deeper knowledge of individual, group, organizational, and social occurrences with the aim of understanding complex social phenomena (Yin, 2014). This approach, which has been used across a range of disciplines, is helpful to explore and understand reality by using a structured process where case studies are designed, conducted, and analyzed (Stake, 2006). The project includes a purposeful sample of 12 members from the Young Leaders Advocacy programme, ranging in age from 12 to 17. This focus on age recognizes that children and young people are competent social actors with the ability to (a) contribute and generate knowledge and (b) shape the research findings with their expertise (e.g. see Lundy et al., 2011; Shier, 2015; Thomas, 2015). The main method of data collection was one-to-one, semi-structured interviews using virtual platforms, including Skype, WhatsApp, and Viber. The selection and sequence of this method was influenced by the timeframe of the project and the contextual issues around COVID-19 issues, such as the unlikely use of face-to-face interviews due to lockdowns and social distancing measures, and the respondents’ locations, as they lived in different countries. The online interviews, despite a number of limitations, were useful in capturing a wide range of rich and deep experiences and perceptions from research participants, especially when trying to understand the complexity of their role as co-researchers in their home countries (e.g., Gunawan, 2015; Janghorban et al., 2014).

The project follows ethical guidelines on researching with children and young people to ensure respect, reflection, and good practices were monitored (Morrow, 2008). Ethical approval was granted by the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen’s University Belfast. Participants were recruited with the assistance of World Vision’s Young Leaders’ project manager, who acted as the gatekeeper. Children and young people were provided information leaflets and consent forms in their native language, and they freely and voluntarily consented to participate, knowing that they could accept or decline the request without any consequences and were free to withdraw from the project at any time (Morrow, 2008). Parents or—in their absence—caregivers or legal guardians were contacted and given a consent form and information leaflet to obtain their informed consent as well. The gatekeeper’s safeguarding policy indicates that consent from one of the parents or legal guardians is a requirement for any participant under the age of 18 to engage in research.

In terms of children and young people’s informed consent, extensive childhood studies literature and well-rehearsed
children rights approaches have emphasized the necessity of seeking informed and ongoing consent and assent from children and young people (e.g. Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Coady, 2010; Kustatscher, 2014; Morrow, 2008; Preston-Shoot et al., 2008; Skelton, 2008). With the understanding that there are different paradigms and that ethical issues are never settled, the researcher, in line with the childhood studies position, developed mechanisms to ensure that the children and young people participating in this research were able to give informed consent and actively engage in decision-making during the research process (see also Abebe & Bessell, 2014; Bennouna et al., 2017; Maguire et al., 2018). These structures were put in place in recognition that children and young people’s consent is equally as relevant as their parents’ and/or legal guardians’ consent and is a well-established practice in childhood research cross-nationally (Coyne, 2009; Powell et al., 2016; Woodgate et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the involvement of vulnerable children and young people always requires different levels of ethical reviews, including mitigating strategies to respond to any risk or potential harm (e.g. Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Houghton, 2015; Powell et al., 2016). This process also requires adult researchers to engage with gatekeepers to ensure children and young people’s engagement is meaningful, safe, and ethical (Floyd & Arthur, 2012; Heath et al., 2007; Ost, 2013).

In terms of reflexivity and positionality, the author participated in the “Children’s voices in the time of COVID-19” research project as one of the two adult co-researchers who engaged with the child researchers. While insider research can be problematic, Floyd and Arthur (2012) argue that it can be beneficial in terms of having direct access to the research setting and an existing, good working relationship on which to build trust. Research projects have much to benefit from insider investigators; for instance, the access to the respondents, the familiarity with the topic, and shared experiences (Berkovic et al., 2020). For instance, this facilitates to reach out the respondents quickly and enable to follow the organization’s safeguarding policies. In order to assess the key issue of quality and independence of this research, a reflection on the position as an insider researcher was conducted and this practice was used to gain self-awareness on how the academic stance and professional role of the researcher might potentially affect the research, and he also shares these thoughts with outsider colleagues (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

Building a Network of Child Researchers: Rethinking Spaces and Opportunities in the Context of the COVID-19 Outbreak

Even though unintentionally planned, one key finding is that the existence of an established, active network of child researchers was central to the project’s success as these child researchers were able to facilitate access to the target populations and carry out the research due to their training in research skills as part of their participation in the Young Leaders Advocacy programme. Many of the participants had already engaged in their own research projects in their communities, thus the use of research methods was familiar, although the COVID-19 context was new. This investment by the gatekeeper in building networks of child researchers in several countries proved critical as the adult co-researchers were unable to access participants directly due to travel restrictions and social distancing. The major concern was how the research project could reach children and young people, especially the most vulnerable and those without Internet access. The strategy to engage child researchers from the Young Leaders Advocacy programme was successful due to the availability of a well-trained group of children and young people who were able to act quickly in support of the adult co-researchers in a time where it was unmanageable to conduct fieldwork.

The child researchers were keen to engage in the project as they considered themselves well-equipped, the topic relevant, and their involvement critical to reaching the target audience, which would have been impossible otherwise. This strategy echoes Sanders’ and Mundford’s (2017) views that, more important than focusing on the marginalization or vulnerabilities of children and young people, it is critical that the researchers—being adults or children and young people—have a sense of ownership of the project, sympathize with the complexities of children and young people’s lives, and respond to challenges. Based on this premise, the child researchers mobilized their networks in a time where fieldwork was challenging or unmanageable and made the research project feasible by putting in their time, skills, knowledge, and access to their peers. This was confirmed by one of the child researchers:

I felt that it was very important for us to do the research because if we don’t do it, and [we] don’t ask the questions to other children, how are the adults going to get the information? So, we collaborated to find out the information. So, we can say that we children helped do the research. (Ashi, age 15, Bangladesh)

The sampling and recruiting strategy used was perceived as successful, but brought some issues around the purposeful selection of respondents and potential bias in engaging the participants, with the additional issues of power among the peers (for further discussion, see also Löhr et al., 2020). That said, the research project conducted by the adult and child researchers did not intend to claim to be representative in terms of sample but rather a theoretical generalization drawing conclusion from other studies.

Another clear finding was that the child researchers felt like their participation was needed, useful, and rewarding. They considered their role to be essential in reaching more children and young people during this time of isolation and social distancing, but, above all, they perceived this as an opportunity to make their views heard and provide data that could be used to improve their lives and the lives of many other children and young people. A child researcher reflected:

It was an amazing experience. It was very interesting to find out about other children’s opinions. The research gave me the chance
to realise I was not alone as many other children were also suffering from the coronavirus pandemic. And the research gave me the chance to do something important, which was to listen to children and tell their stories to others. (Nejla, age 14, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Significantly, the child researchers who participated in the project pointed out that they rarely had opportunities to engage in relevant activities during the COVID-19 outbreak, besides the traditional tasks assigned to them, such as online school and household chores. Hence, they valued the space to engage with other peers on a project that was stimulating, pertinent, and treasured in a time where they felt demoralized and isolated due to the lockdown and school disruption. When asked whether they felt burdened with the invitation to be a co-researcher and interview their peers, they collectively agreed that the project was not an inconvenience to them, but, on the contrary, they considered it to be an opportunity to use their skills and free time for a common good (for similar findings, see Tisdall, 2017). A Romanian child researcher noted:

I found it very interesting because I could know how the COVID-19 situation was in other countries and how kids and young people are [reacting] in this situation. It was great because I did interviews, and I really know how children are now. It was easy to interview [the children and young people] because they were my age and they were open to answering these questions. (Irina, age 16, Romania)

According to participants, what made their engagement in the “Children’s voices in the time of COVID-19” project different from other initiatives was their desire to connect with other children and young people during a time when their friendships were restricted. They wanted to connect to others to support them and contribute to a change. Their willingness to engage reflects the position that children and young people are not vulnerable victims or passive recipients of aid. They wanted to use their abilities to contribute as they were confident that this project was critical to raising their views and perspectives. This echoes Percy-Smith (2011) who suggests that the engagement of children and young people in research reflects the willingness to engage, and on the other hand, implies re-conceptualizing adult-child relations and determining the way participation spaces are created to be conducive to fruitful intergenerational learning experiences. Daniel, from the Democratic Republic of Congo, reflected:

It helped me too much, this [project] was the only action that proved to me that there are people who think of us, the children, and are motivated to work with us and help us... They [the adults] want us to make this project as part of our way of seeing, meaning, and engaging in our protection. It helped me a lot because our children’s rights are suspended, and we wanted to put ourselves, the children, at the centre of our protection. (Daniel, age 15, Democratic Republic of Congo)

In turning to the question of the role of the Child Advisory Group as part of this research project, a growing practice in childhood studies research (for further discussion, see Collins et al., 2020; Houghton, 2015), the adult co-researchers invited four of the 12 child researchers to participate as members of a Child Advisory Group to provide integral feedback on the research process. This decision was made based on a frame of reference that considers that there are many versions of childhood that are constructed and shaped by multiple cultural, social, and political structures, and the best way to understand them is to listen to children and young people (e.g. James & Prout, 2008; Mayall, 2000). In the same line of thought, Lundy and McEvoy (2012) point out that inviting children and young people to advise researchers on studies is an empowering and beneficial practice as the advisory members can ensure that the research is connected to the interests and expectations of the participants. A child adviser noted:

At the beginning, I was nervous because I did not know if I am going to do well with my interviews. As we started working together with the adult researchers, everything was relaxed. They were easy-going and understanding with our limitations... I feel we became friends with them, and I am not shy anymore. I am so happy as this was an amazing chance to be a researcher and to learn from other researchers. (Nejla, age 14, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Being a child adviser is not a simple task due to age, knowledge, and power disparity between the researchers. On the other hand, setting up a Child Advisory Group is a challenging process as well. It requires a well-thought reflexivity process to understand adult researchers’ roles within a project and how they could influence the child advisers and make their contribution only symbolic. Collins and colleagues (2020) argue that it is critical to develop mechanisms to acknowledge, accept, and address children and young people’s input to ensure genuine participation of child research advisers. Truly collaborative work requires time investment and flexibility to adapt the research to match their feedback and recommendations. One child researcher from Mongolia revealed:

Being a research adviser, I felt pressured because I needed to give feedback, and I wanted to show that I was taking this project seriously and was really trying to help. But I did not know what to say. I was reading and reading to try to find something to give feedback. It was stressful. I found something to correct, but I was hesitant to say it or not to say it. That was a lot of pressure. I think my problem was that I wanted to give smart opinions, and I wanted to say something that the researchers will be impressed with. (Sarnai, age 14, Mongolia)

This account exposes that there is also a conditioned tendency to reinforce the authority that adults have over child participants based on knowledge, age, and social position. This echoes Vanner’s (2015) position that in order to ensure emancipatory objectives, it is critical to be aware of the level of influence that adult researchers have and how this has an
impact on the child researchers. For the adult co-researchers, it was critical to reflect on their own biases in order to acknowledge and transform a traditional position of power into one that recognized children and young people as competent social actors with the abilities and opportunities to be co-researchers (for similar findings, see also Plows, 2012; Törönen & Vornanen, 2014). Though, this stance does not guarantee that others who support this understanding maintain their views with the same intensity in all aspects of their interactions with children and young people—from being facilitators, teachers, co-researchers, or parents.

**Considering the Ethics of Conducting Research on the Global Health Pandemic: Incorporating Excluded Perspectives**

The involvement of children and young people in research on intricate contexts or sensitive issues—like COVID-19—leads to ethical complexities that need to be acknowledged, reflected on, and addressed, including consent, safeguarding standards, and adequate methodologies (see also Houghton, 2015; Morrow, 2008; Powell et al., 2019). Hence, in circumstances of crises, additional concerns for safety and ethics arise, especially when children and young people engage in active research roles, such as co-researching, which may potentially stifle their innovative ideas and abilities to contribute based on the premise that is not ethical or safe (see also Caputo, 2017; Hart & Tyrer, 2006). In terms of balancing these participation rights and protection, the ethics of involving children and young people during crises increase the difficulty of deconstructing widespread vulnerability narratives that place child protection as a central concern, potentially restricting children and young people’s right to participate on issues relevant to them (for further discussion, see Tisdall, 2017).

The adult co-researchers deliberated extensively about the ethical challenges of including children and young people in research during the COVID-19 outbreak. The scope of their ethical reflection was beyond discussing informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. It also touched on three additional key areas: a) balancing participation and protection, b) embracing children’s rights approaches, and c) contributing to positive outcomes for children and young people during the outbreak. While recognizing the critical importance of child protection, it is argued that removing obstacles preventing participation is the correct approach, as it respects the principles outlined in the UNCRC and the core tenets of childhood studies (for further discussion, see Caputo, 2017; Ergler, 2017; Lúcio & I’Anson, 2015). In addressing these tensions, the focus of the analysis should include the conceptual principles embedded in childhood studies and global policy discourse on the UNCRC and UN General Comment No. 12, which frame the ethical involvement of children and young people in research to ensure they engage in issues that they are interested in exploring, not just those that directly affect them.

In weighing risks and benefits, it is contended that conducting this intergenerational research during COVID-19 did not imply any risk, but the evidence bring a number of advantages, such as increasing visibility of the children and young people’s views and insights on the pandemic and providing opportunities to reach the most marginalized and inaccessible children and young people via the child researchers based in those communities. In terms of risk mitigation strategies, the adult co-researchers made sure that safeguarding protocols were in place to ensure the safe and meaningful participation of the child researchers and respondents. From a methodological perspective, this approach opens up new opportunities for researchers to engage with children and young people to produce reliable data and strong research findings that are constructed between the adult and child researchers. This process, however, is not the panacea for participatory studies, but provides opportunities and new avenues to conduct research while this needs to be constantly problematized and evaluated in order to understand its impact.

One of the key considerations toward the decision to include child researchers was the need to ensure a clear contribution to positive outcomes for children and young people in the COVID-19 context. This is considered a moral imperative in childhood studies research but is also transferable to other disciplines within qualitative methods. Furthermore, methodologically, an intergenerational research project creates opportunities for the both, adult and child researchers, to generate new knowledge that includes broader perspectives based on a more collective analysis that enriches the nature of qualitative methods and generate positive results (for further discussion, see Liebenberg, 2018; Shier, 2015). Data suggest that there were no negative consequences, but there were two positive outcomes: (a) an increase in a personal sense of self-realization and (b) the making of children and young people’s views on COVID-19 known. One child researcher summarized this in their reflection:

My research was a way that I can help others to understand what is happening to children . . . I feel like I am the bridge between the children and important adults because I was able to pass good information . . . I love interviewing children and catching what is going on. (Sarnai, age 14, Mongolia)

This perception was consistent across the participants. Childhood studies scholars also recognize this as a common finding in their research (e.g., Clark & Percy-Smith, 2006; Cornwall & Fujita, 2012; Le Borgne, 2014; Tisdall, 2013). The child researchers observed their engagement in their research project to be a rewarding experience where they learnt new skills and contributed to a relevant process. They highlighted that their engagement was beneficial to cope with the lockdown they faced and social isolation they felt. They also reported a positive impact on their lives with the gained self-esteem and self-confidence, in addition to the feeling of being listened to and valued as co-researchers. They collectively agreed that their participation gave them a sense of belonging to a group of child researchers around the world where everyone was able...
to contribute to making the project a success. One recurrent positive theme was the sense of giving something back and supporting those who were more vulnerable than them, within the understanding that all the child researchers were from vulnerable populations as well. A child researcher from Brazil said:

We live in the periphery; we are all poor, disadvantaged, and marginalised. But we have more opportunities than others who are more deprived, so we want to help them. I am confident that raising their voices is a way to empower and protect them. But we are also benefiting from being a part of a project where I feel liberated (Carolina, age 15, Brazil)

This resonates with evidence from studies that show that when children and young people engage in participatory research they feel that their interactions with peers are helpful in terms of gaining knowledge, but also bringing visibility to the views of hidden or excluded children and young people (see also Cahill, 2010; Fleming, 2011). One of the child researchers, Nejla, from Bosnia and Herzegovina, said, “I want to continue being a researcher as I am interested in telling more stories from children, stories that no one knows.” Data reveal that one of the key motivations for the child researchers was the ability to include perspectives from children and young people traditionally excluded in their communities. Most of the participants perceived that their views and opinions were often excluded from the decisions made about their lives. This situation is exacerbated when children and young people are from minority groups, do not attend school, or live in abusive households. Hence, their incentive was to contribute by drawing attention to the perspectives of the excluded and exploring issues in a different way than many adult researchers.

**Conclusion**

Involving children and young people as co-researchers is a limited but growing practice that owes much to the vital tenets and principles of the UNCRC, new ideological conceptualizations of childhood, and the discourse on participatory action research. The convergence of these three conceptions is relevant to understanding the challenges and opportunities of the engagement of children and young people as co-researchers in an intergenerational research project in the time of COVID-19. However, the learnings and discussions of how to incorporate children and young people into participatory research processes by creating meaningful, safe, and ethical spaces to engage in issues relevant to them and preventing their exclusion based on the premise of ethical or methodological concerns, go further than this particular pandemic and can be extrapolated to other crises and emergencies.

It is crucial for researchers and advocates to rethink spaces for children and young people’s engagement in crisis contexts in general and the COVID-19 outbreak in particular. One way to achieve this aim is to create opportunities for children and young people to explore issues that are relevant to them and actively participate in research. This implies the need to develop a culture of participation that is built on the understanding that children and young people are competent social actors and rights-holders. Child researchers who participated in the “Children’s voices in the time of COVID-19” project articulated that being child researchers was a worthwhile experience where they learnt new skills, explored new topics, interacted with others, were able to share their perspectives, and above all, had the opportunity to make a change by raising the voices of the most vulnerable and excluded children and young people.

A consistent learning was that the network of child researchers was pivotal in giving children and young people the skills and tools to engage in research in a time when no one was able to conduct face-to-face fieldwork due to quarantine and confinement measures. The child researchers were keen to contribute to the research, able to reach their peers using social media platforms, and able to collect meaningful data. On the other hand, a recurrent concern was the ethics of engaging children and young people in research during a crisis. This, while it has been widely explored in childhood studies (see also Caputo, 2017; Houghton, 2015; Morrow, 2008), needs to be critically analyzed and addressed in this particular context. The project shows the criticalness of reflecting on the tensions between viewing children and young people as competent social actors versus subjects of protection. A lack of a critical stance on this issue could leave them locked between these two positions in a place where they are considered competent to make decisions, but, when it comes to safeguarding issues, they are prevented from making judgments for themselves (for further discussion, see Caputo, 2017; Powell et al., 2016; Skelton, 2008). Findings show that when ethics and methodologies are well thought out, children and young people’s participation brings multiple benefits to the research and the participants. This includes, for instance, the generation of new and significant data that would not have been conceivable without them and a sense of self-realization by the child researchers.

The conclusion support, firstly, the spirit of the UNCRC that recognizes children and young people as rights-holders and not passive, helpless members of society. Secondly, the research findings acknowledge the core tenets of childhood studies that position children and young people as social actors who are co-constructors of their lives and social structures. Thirdly, data recognize the participatory research theories that view children and young people as individuals able to deliver quality research results and generate collective knowledge based on their experiences and expertise on their own lives.

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Notes
1. In this article, the author uses the term “children and young people” to refer to children up to the age of 18, following the definition within the UNCRC.
2. COVID-19 is the official name of the disease causing the 2020 global pandemic. “CO” stands for corona, “VI” for virus, “D” for disease, and “19” indicates the year of its discovery. It is a new virus from the same family of viruses as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of the common cold (Bender, 2020).

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