ISSOP/INRICH RESEARCH PROJECT

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| **Title** | **Childhood Interrupted: Children’s Rights and COVID-19** |
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| **Research Question** | The study will investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s rights from the perspectives of school age children. Areas to explore include:   1. Children’s experiences of the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic on their rights as they pertain to play, adequate standard of living, and education 2. Children’s right to participate in a public health crisis (e.g. engaging in self-care, infection control practices, decision-making) |
| **Background/Rationale** | During pandemics, individual rights are often superseded by public health needs. In the case of children’s rights, minimal information is often shared with children during a pandemic. This can leave them feeling confused, anxious, and ultimately “suffering for the benefits of adults” (Bruce-Barrett et al., 2007; Green, 2020; Schiariti, 2020). Although improvements in our response to pandemics and outbreaks have been made, children’s perspectives and participation continue to be overlooked, further supporting the notion of ‘invisibility’ (Barker & Weller, 2003; Koller et al., 2010; Nicholas et al., 2010; Stevenson et al., 2009). As stated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), children have the right to express themselves and have their views respected (Mayne et al., 2018). When children’s participation rights are upheld, we call attention to their social agency and our collective responsibility to keep everyone healthy and safe during a pandemic (Koller et al., 2010).  Current research on pandemics as it relates to children’s rights is relatively scarce. Most of the available literature is focused on the epidemiology of previous outbreaks and the health effects on adults. We must acknowledge that for an entire generation of children, their childhoods have been severely disrupted by COVID-19. By examining children’s experiences from a rights perspective, we can inform future policy developments that seek to find a balance between protecting children’s rights while addressing public health needs. |
| **Proposed Methodology** | Using a qualitative approach, researchers will explore school-age children’s viewpoints and experiences regarding the impact of COVID-19. In particular, issues related to social isolation, physical distancing, playground and school closures, and the level of their participation in self-care and infection control practices will be examined. In this study, children can exercise their agency by engaging in individual, semi-structured interviews. Children between the ages of 7-12 years will recruited through a community clinic to participate in an online interview. By using a child-friendly, play-based approach, participants will be allowed to shape the content and pace of the data collection process. Our objective is to provide children with the ability to discuss aspects of COVID-19 that are most significant to them.  A range of methods will be used to engage children in the interview process. Games, visual aids and a virtual white board will help facilitate the discussion, and children will also be given the latitude to choose from a variety of activities. All interviews will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. Thematic analysis will ensue with the collaboration of team members. Knowledge mobilization tasks will include publications in peer-reviewed journals, and distribution of findings through child rights networks (Canadian Coalition on the Rights of Children, Children’s Rights Academic Network). |
| **Ethical Considerations (where applicable)** | The study has been approved by the Ryerson Ethics Board. Children will be asked to sign a consent or assent form. Confidentiality will be protected. Participants will have the opportunity to view the results of the study if they wish. All data will be stored securely on an encrypted drive. Each child will receive a stipend (gift card) for their participation. |
| **Child Rights Based Approach (CRBA)** | This study focuses on how children’s rights were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The following rights will be addressed from the perspectives of school-age children:  **Article 31: Children’s Right to Play**  Play is a crucial part of wellbeing, as it can be a therapeutic intervention used to create healthy coping mechanisms in crises, such as pandemics, and can help children navigate through negative scenarios or emotions (Koller et al., 2010; Koukourikos et al., 2015; Nihjof et al., 2018). Our study will explore how children perceived their ability to play during COVID-19. For example, how did the pandemic alter their play, and which restrictions proved most difficult?  **Article 27: Children’s Right to Adequate Standard of Living**  Restrictions to playgrounds, schools, and childcare centers leave children with minimized access to play, decreased stimuli, and limited interaction with peers (Alvarez et al., 2020; Austin et al., 2013). Isolating children within their homes has been known to have harmful effects (Wong et al., 2020). Children have described feeling sad, lonely, fearful, and disconnected (Alvarez et al., 2020; Cuevas-Parra & Stephano, 2020; Koller et al., 2006a; Koller et al., 2006b; Wagner, 2020). With school closures, places where children would normally receive support were not available to them (e.g. teachers and peers). Finally, some children may have experienced difficulties with the loss of routine, and the ability to learn.  **Article 28: Children’s Right to Education**  The closure of schools raises social and ethical issues (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Cauchemez et al., 2009). Barriers to learning are created and declines in education performance have been noted in previous research (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Cauchemez et al., 2009). Attending in-class education encourages social participation and teaches children how to build and maintain friendships. This participation is crucial for child wellbeing, as it helps create a sense of belonging (Grace et al., 2014). This study will explore how children experienced online learning and other adaptations as a result of school closures. |
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| **Attached Information** | Online resource: <https://www.ryerson.ca/news-events/news/2020/03/5-ways-to-help-children-cope-during-a-pandemic/>  References listed below. |

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