“Post-COVID” Childhood-s?: Transdisciplinary Reflections on Participatory *Praxis* in the Lives of 21st Century Children

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Abstract

Despite the increased risks and vulnerabilities that children and young people face due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19), they are also some of the most active in their participatory responses to this global emergency. Drawing on transdisciplinarity, this paper considers how COVID-19 has opened up new spaces and opportunities for the participation of children. For example, young people across the globe have been actively involved in raising digital awareness about COVID-19, participating in environmental activism, and engaging in unique educational opportunities. While children and young people are often constructed as vulnerable, innocent and in need of protection, this pandemic reveals that they can transcend these adultist constructs.

Keywords

Convention on the Rights of the Child – participation – transdisciplinarity – Coronavirus

1 Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared the outbreak of a novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19, a pandemic (WHO, 2020). Indian philosopher Krishnamurti (1989) once observed that it is no measure of one's health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society, and as 2020 began few would have predicted just how unwell human societies were to become. Within weeks, we witnessed global events impacting billions while COVID-19 was quickly followed by the death of a Black American named George Floyd at the hands of Minnesota police (BBC, 2020). Seemingly discrete events such as COVID-19, the subsequent Black Lives Matter demonstrations the world over, and climate change, are interconnected and interdependent areas of human rights research and teaching, experienced the world over. While traditional approaches continue to slice and dice these topics within disciplinary silos such as law, social work, criminology, psychology, sociology, health and anthropology, children and young people¹ are the inheritors of such real-world problems. At the same time, they are key stakeholders in the present-day search for solutions.

Young people are often closest to these myriad complex concerns, and are not reluctant to question authoritative discipline-based assumptions while being manifestly and rightfully impatient at the faces of adult delay and obfuscation. Those of us clinging to any sense that 21st century human rights efforts will pay closer attention to the voices and views of the world's children desperately need a paradigm shift. Herein, we argue for re-thinking the problems we now face as a planetary collective through transdisciplinary approaches. The concept of transdisciplinarity has been widely debated since the 1970s as a programme of reform in higher education. One of its most notable early proponents was Swiss developmentalist Jean Piaget (1972). Such approaches transcend familiar gaps and competitive contests between and across disciplines

1 The terms “children”, “childhood” and “young people” are used interchangeably in this chapter and are meant to convey the definition found in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 1 – without prejudice – which states, ‘a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years’ (1989).

by including valuable non-academic stakeholders within marginalised populations, within government and within business (Montuori, 2013; Pycroft, 2014; Somerville and Rapport, 2000). While in some ways echoing the trends towards intersectionality within women's and gender studies, it takes as its epistemological foundations complex systems thinking and Quantum science rather than traditional linear thinking in Newtonian approaches to understanding and constructing "data" (Albrecht *et al.*, 1998; Pycroft and Bartollas, 2014; Reme *et al.*, 2015).

We take this approach since humanity's collective failure thus far fundamentally and effectively to address issues brought to light by the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) have been premised upon industrial-age worldviews of education, economics, science and structures of governance. While Indigenous societies have faced and survived comparable pandemics and colonialist predation for centuries, addressing the complex underlying challenges necessary to transform human societies and sustain our 21st century world requires broader transdisciplinary efforts. Indeed, the Indigenous ontology of making decisions by considering seven generations before and into the future guide our transdisciplinary arguments (First Nations Caring Society, 2016).

As co-authors, we write critically from the standpoint of settler-educators in the colonised nation-state of Canada, as former graduates and faculty in a "multidisciplinary" child and youth studies program (Bendo and Mitchell, 2017, 2018; Mitchell, 2015, Mitchell and Maharjan, 2020), each now faculty in different Ontario universities. Our perspectives have evolved naturally from common backgrounds in education, child welfare, youth justice and mental health systems within the only nation on the planet with a race-based Indian Act (1876). This historical aberration is not the focus of our paper, but has nonetheless shaped our understanding of the dominant disciplinary discourses within our pedagogical, political and cultural lives since the voices of so many First Nations, Aboriginal and Inuit children have been utterly silenced throughout our short history (Bendo *et al.*, 2019; Marinos *et al.* 2017; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015; UN Committee Concluding Observations on Canada, 1995, 2003, 2012).

The paper proceeds with five sections. First, we continue our reflections on transdisciplinary epistemologies and methodologies as a way forward for addressing the complexities facing the current generation of children, those who come after, and all those engaged in the field of childhood studies. We then include an overview of COVID-19 with emphasis on how this pandemic impacts the lived experiences of children around the world through multiple disciplinary and political lenses. Thirdly, we review Article 12 of the CRC and children's

participation rights more broadly to highlight the importance of how complex, transdisciplinary methodologies with direct participation will benefit more young people to engage as fuller citizens. Following this, we link these understandings about participation rights to the many practical ways that COVID-19 has opened up potential new spaces for enhanced engagement of children and young people. These efforts are a reminder that young people should not only be considered as affected populations, but also as highly effective partners in the response to COVID-19 and other interconnected global issues (UNICEF, 2020b). We conclude with a reflection on how transdisciplinary epistemologies and methodologies may serve to challenge and transform previous discourses surrounding participation and the efficacy of collaborations with young people.

2 Transdisciplinary Epistemologies and Methodologies

There is a 50-year old reform movement advocating transformation of western educational institutions, and pointing towards the more integrated teaching and learning methodologies recently deceased global educator Sir Ken Robinson (2020) advocates for one of his final podcasts. This approach helps students learn not only small packets of information but teaches them issues that matter to our collective survival on this planet. Our researching of child and youth understandings of themselves and their life-worlds has led us to adopt numerous “transdisciplinary tools” (Giroux and Searls Giroux, 2004: 102), including complexity theory and notions of what constitutes an “Indigenous epistemology” (Denzin *et al.*, 2008). This dawning awareness has come about since so many children of the original inhabitants have been abducted, abused and murdered in our national context along with similar predations in many nations (McCaslin and Breton, 2008; Santos, 2012, 2016).

One of the most thorough excavations of the etymology of transdisciplinarity has been accomplished by Jay Bernstein (2015) at City University in New York. He recounts how the term first appeared during a 1970 seminar on academic interdisciplinarity, co-sponsored by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the French Ministry of Education. Well-known Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget is credited with coining the term there (López-Huertas, 2013; Nicolescu, 2010; Padurean and Cheveresan, 2010, cited in Bernstein, 2015; Mahan, 1970). In his essay on varieties of disciplinary interactions, he mentions transdisciplinarity as a –

higher stage succeeding interdisciplinary relationships ... which would not only cover interactions or reciprocities between specialised research

projects, but would place these relationships within a total system without any firm boundaries between disciplines

(PIAGET, 1972: 138; CITED IN BERNSTEIN, 2015).

With hindsight, Bernstein observes, we find significance in this optimistic origin of transdisciplinarity, and in our own contexts, in terms of new possibilities for synthesis of thinking within children's research in higher education, technology and science. At the time, funding was at a peak and allowed for growth in many nations, so conditions were optimum for imagining what universities in the world of the future could become. New discoveries on many fronts led scholars and scientists to think in bigger terms of macro systems, such as Buckminster Fuller's "Spaceship Earth" and Marshall McLuhan's "Global Village" by developing more effective, holistic and meaningful linkages between all subjects. Such an orientation looked toward the planning of future curricula in the context of emerging ideas about science of the day as a source of innovation.

In their paper linking childhood studies with transdisciplinary Indigenous world-views, Mitchell and Moore (2018) point out that transdisciplinary research draws upon integrative approaches to solving complex systemic problems within the sciences, arts and humanities to augment the truths found within all disciplines. In (formerly) colonised contexts such as Australia (Christie, 2006), Canada (Mitchell, 2015; Mitchell and Maharjan, 2020), South Africa (DuPlessis *et al.*, 2014), and South American nations (Apgar *et al.*, 2009, Santos, 2012, 2016), transdisciplinarity is also linked to Indigenous science and world-views by placing humans and their actions within the larger web of planetary well-being that connects all living entities. As Christie (2006) highlights, transdisciplinary Indigenous research is different from interdisciplinary research because it moves beyond the university to take into account traditional knowledge practices. 'Indigenous knowledge traditions', Christie (2006) further notes, resist definition from a Western academic perspective in that there are practices which will never engage with the academy, just as there are 'branches of the academy which will never acknowledge Indigenous knowledge practices' (78–79). Critical theorists Santos *et al.* go so far as to identify this Eurocentric 'suppression of knowledge' from Indigenous peoples and African slaves as 'a form of epistemicide' (2007, xix; Mitchell and Moore, 2015: 398). This central distinction – the erasure of our shared planetary histories of a holistic integration of child and youth studies – necessitates shifting paradigms from Western dominance and its frequent reductionist, deterministic, deficit-laden research *on children*, to methodologies *led by children and young people in direct participation*.

Through our own advocacy efforts, we concur with Bartollas (2014) who critiques the ‘simplistic Newtonian, mechanistic’ (277–278) cause-and-effect research prevalent within global child protection and juvenile justice systems. In an edited volume dedicated to understanding and application of complexity theory in these fields he suggests:

Quantum mechanics moves us beyond positivism by observing a simple, causative model that is unable to explain complexity and the multidimensional nature of human behaviors. Quantum theory places an importance on human agency, suggesting not only that humans have free will and are responsible, but that they very much shape the reality of their lives
(SEE ALSO MITCHELL AND MOORE, 2018: 461).

Bartollas further notes that post-Newtonian paradigms present a more fluid and involved “self” than is found in traditional developmental notions of one’s fixed personal identity remaining definite and unchanging through time. The Quantum view sees the “self” as changing and open to the possibility of emergence at every moment, and as a free and not yet fully determined citizen. These perspectives are similar to Roumanian physicist Basarab Nicolescu’s version of transdisciplinarity (McGregor, 2015), as well as Edgar Morin’s (2014: 17), both of whom also challenge reductionist claims that all of us are individuals in distinct societies and within disconnected ecosystems (Morin, 2014, as cited in Montuori and Donnelly, 2016: 748). We also agree with Nicolescu’s prediction that the emergence of a new culture capable of contributing to the elimination of tensions menacing all forms of life on our planet will be impossible without a new type of education – one which takes into account all the dimensions of the human being (1999: 4; see also Nicolescu, 2008). However, as Osborne (2015) also correctly observes, ‘disciplinarity has become problematic in multiple and contested ways’ (4), and perhaps this is no more evident than within our own broad field of child and youth studies delineated by theorists and empiricists within legal studies, education (Hill *et al.*, 2004), medicine, mental health, criminology, sociology (James and James, 2004, Mayall, 2002; Mitchell, 2005) and developmental psychology (Burman, 2016; Howe and Covell, 2010).

Choi and Pak (2006), in their excellent meta-analysis of literature, noted the conflation of the terms multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity. Citing authors from the journal *Nature*, they offer an astute observation of multidisciplinary teams where *two plus two always equals four* since all are operating on the same ontological and epistemological assumptions, while within interdisciplinary teams, *two plus two can often equal five*, since the whole can be greater than the sum of constituent parts. For transdisciplinary teams sharing diverse

paradigmatic assumptions and analytical strategies, *two plus two can equal yellow* since problem-solving within complex systems often leads to outcomes that transcend current boundaries of understanding (Choi and Pak, 2006: 359, citing Dixon *et al.*, 2000: 365; see also Macpherson and McGibbon, 2014). Montuori portrays the ontological foundations of transdisciplinarity within complex systems as a 'new way of thinking' about all research (2008: xi), and offers the following list of design methods as integral:

- An inquiry-driven focus rather than discipline specific.
- A stress on the construction of knowledge through appreciation of meta-paradigmatic and epistemological dimensions. Disciplinary knowledges, and particularly those based upon western modern scientific knowledge methods, typically do not question their own paradigmatic assumptions.
- An understanding of the organisation of knowledge, and the importance of contextualisation and connection.
- An integration of the knower into the process of inquiry, which means rather than attempting to eliminate the knower as a form of bias, the effort becomes more one of acknowledging and making transparent the knower's assumptions and the process through which s/he/they construct new knowledge (see also Montuori, 2013).

Finally, we re-emphasise here how transdisciplinary authors from (post-) colonial states such as Canada, New Zealand and those in South America, Australia and Africa, now include Indigenous knowledge systems in this discourse unlike their European counterparts (see Klein *et al.*, 2001; Kueffer *et al.*, 2012; also Apgar, Argumedo and Allen, 2009; Cassinari *et al.*, 2011; Christie, 2006; Denzin *et al.*, 2008; Du Plessis *et al.*, 2014; Mitchell, 2015, 2018). In Canada's context of "reconciliation" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015; Government of Canada, 2016), reconfiguring global North child epistemologies is a challenge for anyone seeking these approaches (McPherson and McGibbon, 2014; Mitchell and Moore, 2018: 457; Santos, 2007). Such *praxis* starts from recognition of the epistemological diversity of the world which is as immense as its cultural diversity, its politics and its natural wonders (Santos *et al.*, 2007: xix; Santos, 2012, 2016; also Yawali *et al.*, 2017: 5).

3 COVID-19 and its Impacts on Children and Young People

Although young people who contract COVID-19 appear to have less severe symptoms and lower mortality rates in contrast to other groups, this global crisis has a potentially far-reaching, long-term negative impact on children and young people of all ages and in all countries (Alliance for Child Protection

in Humanitarian Action, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020; United Nations, 2020a). Similar to the climate crisis, 17-year-old Swedish teen activist Greta Thunberg has referred to COVID-19 as a 'child-rights crisis' (Laviates, 2020). As a result of COVID-19, children and young people face greater complex risks including: increased poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, mental health issues, exploitation and violence (Human Rights Watch 2020; UNICEF, 2020a). As a result, new methods and ways of knowing in the post-pandemic period are being foregrounded.

As noted in a report by the United Nations (2020a, b), the harmful impacts of COVID-19 will not be distributed equally. Rather, as with other crises, those who are young and most vulnerable suffer disproportionately (UNICEF, 2020b). Consequently, the most damage is expected in the poorest countries, in the poorest neighbourhoods, and for those children already in disadvantaged and vulnerable situations (OECD, 2020; United Nations, 2020a). Moreover, COVID-19 has the potential to create new populations of vulnerable children and young people (OECD, 2020). Indeed, traditional research and advocacy solutions now require complex systems approaches.

Social distancing requirements have transformed the lived experiences of young people in many unprecedented respects (UNICEF, 2020c). The loss of recreational and extracurricular activities, altered routines and experiences, and decreases in family income have negatively impacted physical and mental health, development, protection, recreational activities, family unity and financial security (UNICEF, 2020c). Additional known and unknown risks to young people as a result of COVID-19 are further attenuated by the closure of schools and other educational and training institutions (United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development (UN IAYND), 2020). Impacting over 90 per cent of the world's student population, the closure of schools may also result in widening the achievement gap, and contribute to a rise in drop-out rates (Human Rights Watch, 2020; United Nations, 2020b). These issues are complex systems problems that can be addressed through both transdisciplinary methods and analyses given uncertain outcomes on the horizon for both present and future generations.

Being out of school also means that young people have lost the safety, protection, routine and social interaction that school provides. Risk factors may increase for children who rely on school feeding programmes for essential food and nutrition (Buitenbos, 2020). Health challenges may also be perpetuated as schools provide education around topics such as sexual and reproductive and mental health (UN IAYND, 2020). Likewise, as children are forced to stay home, and parents face stress relating to the loss of employment, financial instability and isolation, rates of abuse and neglect have also increased (Alphonso, 2020; UN Committee on the Right of the Child, 2020).

The unprecedented global shutdown of schools has been accompanied by a transition to online learning. While online platforms are utilised to offer continued learning, this shift also magnifies inequalities, and may set back young people from marginalised communities even further (Alphonso, 2020). According to Human Rights Watch (2020), this pandemic has exposed vast disparities in countries' emergency preparedness, internet access for young people and availability of learning materials. For example, many public schools are not equipped to use digital platforms or lack the technology and equipment to provide online teaching. It is also important to note that nearly half of the world has no internet access (Broom, 2020). The implications associated with young people being disconnected from school are indeed significant. However, the unprecedented global closure of schools has also opened up conversations on how education systems might be reimagined, utilising frameworks from beyond traditional curricula such as Indigenous knowledge systems.

Although children are negatively affected by the impacts of COVID-19, they are also among the most active in global responses (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2020; Women Deliver, 2020). As the world grapples with COVID-19 challenges, young people across the globe are demonstrating leadership in their communities (UNICEF 2020a, b, c). The tremendous advocacy and participation efforts being displayed by young people demonstrates the importance of their voices being part of the solutions, not only in relation to COVID-19, but also in responding to other global challenges (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2020; UNICEF 2020a, b; Women Deliver, 2020). As reinforced by the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development (UN IANYD; 2020), attempts to address the consequences of COVID-19 require an unprecedented degree of transdisciplinary collaboration across complex systems of politics, health, governance education, and the economy.

4 **The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 12**

The implementation of the CRC adopted by 196 nations over the past three decades has enhanced understandings of young people as citizens with fundamental human rights (Bendo, 2019; Bendo and Mitchell, 2017, 2018; UN Treaty Collection, 2019; United Nations, 1989). By ratifying in 1991, Canada made a commitment to respect, protect and promote all of the CRC (UNGA, 2012). While the Convention is frequently reduced to Article 12 (right to participate), it was internationally selected by consensus as one of four core guiding principles by

CRC developers. Its interdependence and inter-connection with three other principles, Articles 2, 3 and 6 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1991), calls for sophisticated and complex methodological considerations and trans-disciplinary applications. This is particularly true as we consider current and post-COVID-19 eras.

When participation rights are implemented in a transdisciplinary approach, they support skill development, active citizenship, critical thinking, problem solving, confidence-building, decision-making, self-esteem, teamwork and civic engagement (Lansdown, 2001; Lansdown and O'Kane, 2014; Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2009; Tisdall, 2013). This perspective provides new opportunities for young people to share insights from within their own life-worlds, and could ultimately provide new stimuli for adult gatekeepers seeking to co-create new knowledge pathways in support of policy priorities and advocacy efforts (Lansdown, 2001; Lundy, 2018). Our transdisciplinary ontological and methodological emphases in this paper could even lead to greater realisation of new outcomes across health, education, youth justice and family life contexts required in this uncertain pandemic period and beyond its outcomes. Such approaches could energise and enhance new CRC research agendas as previously posited by Kellett (2009), Lundy (2007, 2018) and others.

Following development of the CRC and adoption of Article 12 as a key principle guiding the treaty, ideas about child participation focused on the importance of children's participation as a fundamental right (Lansdown, 2014; Stoecklin, 2013; Tisdall, 2013). Researchers and educators have since that time explored participation theories and models as well as children's local and international participatory experiences in councils, service delivery systems, governance and policy consultations (Gal and Duramy, 2015; Lansdown, 2014; Lundy, 2018; Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2009; Tisdall, 2019). Research on participation shows that there are difficulties to achieving quality participation, including negative understandings of childhood, misunderstandings about child competency involvement, continuity, sustainability, power imbalances and implementation in practice (Bendo, 2019; Chawla and Driskell, 2006; Collins, 2017; Goodwin-De Faria and Marinos, 2012; Kellett, 2009; Lansdown, 2001; Lundy, 2018).

Participation expert and child rights advocate, Gerison Lansdown, refers to three common models of child and youth participation: consultative, collaborative and youth-led (Lansdown and O'Kane, 2014). Consultative participation is adult initiated and managed, but recognises that children contribute valuable perspectives. This model also allows young people to influence outcomes. Comparatively, collaborative participation is an approach that is also adult-initiated and involves partnerships with young people. This model empowers

young people to influence processes and outcomes and fosters self-directed action by children over time. Finally, child and youth-led participation entails young people working together to organise their own activities and identify issues that concern them directly. With this model, adults serve primarily as facilitators instead of leaders, and children control the process (Lansdown and O'Kane, 2014).

In the context of the pandemic, young people are engaging in all three participation models in unique and innovative ways. In the following section, we outline examples of how young people across the globe are reimagining participatory opportunities in the era of COVID-19. Although research exists on Article 12 of the CRC and on participation models internationally, little attention has been paid to exploring participatory opportunities during global crises situations (Hill *et al.*, 2004; Hinton, 2008; Jans, 2004; Lundy, 2007, 2018; Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2009; Stoecklin, 2013; Tisdall, 2008).

5 Reimagining Participatory Possibilities and Opportunities During COVID-19

Also declaring COVID-19 to be a 'global child rights crisis,' the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2020) emphasises how children everywhere are:

vulnerable to violence, abuse and neglect most often at the hands of those they know and trust. This is especially evident for those children with special needs or disabilities, and diverse sexual orientations who experience inequality, and who are expected to take on an adult role (2).

Despite the tremendous risks and disruptions caused by COVID-19, avenues for growth, community solidarity and connection have also emerged, and are especially apparent in the context of young people's lives. In the following section, we discuss how COVID-19 has opened up new opportunities for children to exercise their participation rights in unique ways.

5.1 *Digital Participation of Young People*

Young people are demonstrating participatory online engagement related to COVID-19. In a recent report by World Vision, their research with 100 children between the ages of 8–18 from 13 countries reported positive findings. The goal of this research was to explore the understanding and experiences of participants during COVID-19 and how they would like to contribute to

halting the spread of this pandemic (Cuevas-Parra and Stephano, 2020). Results indicated that young people understand the crisis and require meaningful, adult-facilitated spaces and partnerships to enable them to take action to reduce the spread of the virus (Cuevas-Parra and Stephano, 2020). These findings support the transdisciplinary arguments we make here, and underscore that multisystemic engagement with the current generation of children is fundamental for their success.

Participants in the World Vision study discussed the importance of young people in providing education about COVID-19. They promoted the importance of raising awareness about social distancing and the risks associated with COVID-19 and their desire to use their voices to help those most vulnerable (Cuevas-Parra and Stephano, 2020). The utilisation of technology was noted as being especially relevant, given that typical methods of raising awareness such as child parliaments, forums and clubs are not currently feasible due to social distancing measures (Cuevas-Parra and Stephano, 2020). As participants noted, online worlds can offer a safe environment for young people to engage with their peers and community members during emergencies. As highlighted by one 15-year old from Nicaragua, 'We can use social networks, WhatsApp groups, blogs, or other tools to help disseminate the message and teach how to stop the spread of the virus and how to act if we get infected, so we are not infecting others' (Cuevas-Parra and Stephano, 2020: 25).

It is important to acknowledge that the ongoing shift towards digital technology raises questions on how this may be achieved in a safe, inclusive and protective way (Cuevas-Parra and Stephano, 2020). In addition, access to technology and digital spaces is not distributed equally amongst various groups of children. As previously highlighted, nearly half of the current global population does not have access to the internet (Human Rights Watch, 2020), and therefore many groups of children do not have equal opportunities to engage in digital participation. On the other hand, during this time the digitisation of participation and civic action through social media will enable more equitable access to some young people in contrast to other, perhaps traditional forms of activism (Pelter, 2020). While the digital divide is real, the use of technologies to provide children and young people an opportunity to create content for a wider range of audiences to whom they would typically lack access, is a growing, uncertain, multi-systemic and complex set of phenomena in both Global North and Global South settings. The engagement of young people via digital spaces may also differ from traditional uni-disciplinary ideas and forms of engagement as witnessed through artistic and creative song and dance challenges, and public service announcements. Pelter (2020) notes that young people are also more likely to incorporate humour, online memes and social media

satire into their advocacy efforts. Indeed, in a time of social isolation, the inclusion of comedy and creativity is an important aspect of participatory action.

Digital platforms also offer young people spaces to exercise participation rights as they take leadership roles in developing online initiatives such as the ongoing climate strikes each Friday in dozens of countries. Communities of support and programmes operating without typical adult-centric constraints are challenging inherent power imbalances that traditionally have constricted young people in pre-COVID-19 circumstances (see also Chawla and Driskell, 2006; Kellett, 2009; Lansdown, 2001; Lundy, 2018; Matthews *et al.*, 1999). As one example, UNICEF in North Macedonia recently launched a child-led initiative that brought together over 180 children and young people, including those under the age of 18, who are participating as activists, campaign leaders, community engagement workers and reporters (UNICEF, 2020f). Using their personal social media accounts and platforms, young people involved with this initiative interviewed over 150 people in their communities to understand pressing issues and developed over 100 potential solutions to implement during COVID-19. One action plan that was developed, called #PlantAtHome, is a gardening challenge and waste reduction initiative to encourage community members to plant and grow green spaces. This initiative also aims to support mental health and increase environmental benefits. Likewise, another action plan called "Psychology Online" was created to promote mental health and well-being and raise awareness about resources. Finally, an initiative called "movie club" aims to decrease feelings of isolation and facilitate peer networks. These are just some examples of the initiatives that young people are leading across the globe (UNICEF, 2020f).

5.2 *Young People and Environmental Opportunities*

Young climate activists are also finding new ways to bring attention to climate issues as they are required to study and remain in their homes (UN Women, 2020). The global movement, *Fridays for Future*, inspired by Swedish high-school student Greta Thunberg, has urged governments and policy makers to take action against global warming by focusing its efforts to an online format (Fridays for Future, 2020).

Young people have transformed the climate strike, *Fridays for Future*, into a social media movement online by developing a *Fridays for Future* toolkit consisting of tips on how to participate in a digital strike, how to encourage community members to engage in a digital strike, the importance of digital strikes and how to raise awareness of issues and probe decision makers to take action at an international level (UNICEF, 2020e). The toolkit instructs young people on how to create awareness about environmental issues in their communities,

schools, amongst family and friends and in the larger digital community. It provides increased accessibility opportunities for children with disabilities to participate in a movement, whereas restrictions may prevent young people from physically engaging in the movement for exclusionary reasons (UNICEF, 2020e). This initiative follows the youth-led model of participation as young people are working together to organise their own activities, tools, resources, and identify relevant issues. While adults may support these efforts, children are acting as participatory agents. They are educating adults about the importance of taking action to address environmental issues and are acting as experts in their own lives (Moss and Petrie, 2002).

At an online, live-streamed Earth Day event on 22 April 2020, Ms Thunberg reminded listeners that COVID-19 has opened up opportunities to choose new pathways and pivot to greener policies and investments, such as renewable energy, smart housing and green public procurement (Johnson, 2020; UN IANYD, 2020). Such advancements have the potential to contribute towards sustainable and resilient economies for present and future generations that children around the world have been demanding (UN IANYD, 2020). As noted by UNICEF (2020d), although climate change and the coronavirus are two vastly different challenges, they have commonalities. Both challenges are global, do not respect national boundaries and require countries to collaborate in developing solutions (UNICEF, 2020d). These observations once again underscore the need for multi-systemic stakeholders in transdisciplinary research, educational and advocacy initiatives to coalesce. As a result of COVID-19, the global community has demonstrated its ability to address a crisis, with governments, businesses and individuals taking measures and altering their behaviours. The response to COVID-19, therefore, offers lessons on the value of working together, and actively including children and young people, in order to address climate change.

In September 2019, Ms Thunberg was joined by 600,000 peers in Montreal, Canada and millions more in over 150 countries through climate strikes, actions ongoing at the time of this writing in 2021, that infer how our dominant western educational and developmental paradigms are missing essential elements for children's learning in this complex new era (Conley, 2019; Robinson, 2020). While pundits have created online backlash from all corners of the globe, this powerful young woman was recognised by the Nobel Academy with their 2019 nomination. Meanwhile, critics continued to vilify her, often citing her diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome while suggesting her criticisms of education and industrialisation are invalid since she has no comprehensive solutions (Jeanne, 2019). One of her Canadian contemporaries, 15-year old Autumn

Peltier, provides another example of how young people are challenging the status quo, after she told a 2018 audience at the UN's General Assembly, 'We can't eat money, or drink oil' (*The Canadian Press*, 2019). Ms Peltier is from Wikwemikong Unceded Territory who named her Chief Water Commissioner with the Anishanabek Nation, a political advocacy body of 40 First Nations across Ontario, Canada. Why do politicians, corporate leaders and adults in authority continue to ignore young people advocating for changes to how their own societies are organised?

5.3 *Rethinking Education*

As schools remain closed, many young people are continuing to participate in their education by finding ways to keep their peers learning. Recognising that education is a human right even during a pandemic, two high school students, aged 15 and 16, from Tallahassee, Florida, established a free, online tutoring service. Their website, called ViralTech.com, connects students who need extra assistance to high school tutors, whilst also providing a platform for social interaction (Davidson-Heirs, 2020). Likewise, two 17-year old girls from California developed a team of 90 plus volunteers to offer free tutoring to more than 350 students from first grade to middle school (Dorsey, 2020). In Los Angeles, a High School Senior founded an initiative called Quarenteens, a pending non-profit that provides free K-12 virtual tutoring services and individual sessions pertaining to a range of subjects (Lane, 2020). Similar tutoring and online educational programmes have been established by many other young people across the globe, as they find creative ways to provide learning opportunities to their peers.

Young people are also participating in different forms of learning during the pandemic, such as theatre and the arts. In Calgary, Alberta, a group of teens started a volunteer initiative called COVID-gteen to get kids moving by offering free online dance and martial arts classes along with musical and dance performances (Pullen, 2020). As another initiative, young journalists around the world have partnered to develop an initiative known as the *Teenage Reporting Project*, a platform for teenage journalists to share ways their peers are helping their communities during the pandemic. While teenagers are often perceived as not caring about social distancing, this project provides a platform for young people to share stories on how their peers are actively contributing by: leading fundraising initiatives, developing innovative products to help combat issues associated with COVID-19, as well as creating educational opportunities (Geluso, 2020). These initiatives are all examples of creative forms of learning. Engaging in creativity is especially

important for young people, as expression through the arts offers a valuable way to understand how young people are experiencing, processing and communicating their understandings of the significant challenges that the world faces (Gallagher, 2020).

The pandemic continues to open up conversations about how education systems might be reimagined. As child and youth scholars dedicated to fostering critical citizenship in our classrooms and communities, we have examined how different disciplinary points of view and epistemological assumptions have shaped how children and young people experience their human rights. We believe one of the main problems with violations of the CRC starts in the education systems that have dominated both elementary and university spaces throughout the entire globe. As previously highlighted, the recently deceased education reformer, Sir Ken Robinson, emphasised in *The Call to Unite* how COVID-19 has shut down all planetary systems of education for the first time in centuries. This time-out for humanity offers new opportunities to disrupt 'getting back to normal', since these systems have been anything but 'normal' for a very long time (Robinson, 2020). The unprecedented and historical disruption also invites complex systems analyses, and transdisciplinary methodological approaches in child rights research in contrast to our often-siloed thinking within epidemiological, legal, pedagogical, even socio-cultural and feminist perspectives. The interconnectedness and interdependence of humans with and within their natural worlds has never been more stark.

When schools do re-open, lessons learned about the importance of student well-being, mindfulness and mental health may inform curriculum decisions and persuade policy makers to reconsider traditional approaches to education which often prioritise academics and test scores over student well-being (Hughes, 2020). The issues that face ours and all other species in this realm have been largely created by systems of education beginning in the 18th century, and based upon the demands and outcomes of industrialisation. Moreover, there are two major climate crises of which the pandemic represents only one part, while the second is the growing lack of connection and fulfilment so many children feel as a result of being cut off from the natural environments and the ecosystems we depend on for survival. In one of his final pronouncements, Sir Ken Robinson also reminded us that our best estimates of planetary age are four billion plus years and humans (as we know ourselves) have been around for only about 200,000 of those years. Thinking about this in terms of the Earth being one year old, humans have shown up at less than a minute to midnight on 31 December, he dryly observes: 'I think the planet will be fine but we might not make it' (Robinson, 2020).

6 Post-COVID Childhoods: Transforming Conceptualisations of Children, Childhood and Young People

Children's participatory engagements during COVID-19 are re-constructing and transforming ideas about children's voices, agency and participation and addressing common critiques that exist about these concepts. In regard to voice, there is a difference between an adult seeking a child's views and the real involvement of young people actively and authentically participating in decisions that affect their lives. Likewise, there is a difference between a child expressing their views and adults listening to what young people have to say. While children can have a "voice", there is no guarantee that it will be heard or respected. There is also a difference between "having a say" and tokenistic engagement (ie child participation campaigns that ask a few survey questions). Children may not be asked their views and opinions, and even if they are consulted, their ideas may be dismissed. While the concept of children amplifying their voices sounds good in practice, there is more to it than just the act of speaking. Some children might express how they feel and still feel ignored, silenced or suppressed. In reality, achieving equal opportunities for authentic participation is sometimes difficult to establish.

The concept of voice is conceptually controversial when considering who has their voice heard (James, 2007). Often children with disabilities, children involved in the welfare system, young people involved in the justice system, Indigenous children and minority groups of young people lack opportunities to have their voices and views heard. According to James (2007):

[B]y reflecting the complexities of the issues that frame what children say, rather than offering the simple message that recording and reporting their voices is sufficient, it may be that children's voices will be more willingly listened to and their perspectives more readily understood (270).

In regard to agency, dominant ideas on children's development define agency as a status assumed by children once they leave childhood and biologically grow towards adulthood where agency is achieved at this end point (Mayall, 2000; Thorne, 2009). Agency is often hidden, muted or constrained by certain parents, teachers and other adults. Agency differs from voice or participation as it involves children in the home, school or other contexts having the capacity, the space and opportunity to have some involvement in decision-making processes. There are two components to agency. First, children are social actors by virtue of their social being, they are full members of society. Second, action is more fully developed into agency, in that children's actions make a

difference within a wide array of social contexts (Kraftl, 2013). As Oswell contends, 'Children are not simply beings, they are significant doings. They are actors, authors, authorities and agents' (Oswell, 2013: 3). Children as agents are immersed within the social world and thus embedded in relations within which they have a formative influence. The child agent is not only capable but also fully social. Agency cannot simply be equated with individual choice or individual autonomy, it needs to be viewed as a relational concept, an effect of complex shifting social arrangements (Kraftl, 2013).

Although we recognise that prior to the global pandemic, young people were uniquely engaging in participatory opportunities by amplifying their voices and exercising agency (as evidenced, for example, in the youth-led climate change movement), in the context of COVID-19, young people are developing spaces for increased participatory opportunities. As noted, this is particularly apparent in digital spaces, in efforts related to the environment, and in the coming post-COVID educational contexts. Complex interdependent notions of active and meaningful participation include seeking information, forming views, expressing ideas, taking part in activities and processes; playing different roles including listening, reflecting, researching and speaking; being informed and consulted in decision making; initiating ideas, processes, proposals and projects; analysing situations and making choices; and finally, respecting others and being treated with dignity. In most cases, exercising child voice and agency in order to achieve these participatory practices will be more important than ever.

COVID-19 has opened up spaces for young people to exercise voice, agency and ultimately, child participation. In turn, it is possible that these efforts are serving to challenge traditional childhood discourses that are inherent in various child-serving institutions and services including: child welfare, justice and education among others. Conceptualisations surrounding childhood vulnerability, childhood innocence and protectionist notions are better understood when thinking about resilience from the numerous disciplinary perspectives contributing to the discourse. Our transdisciplinary argument and lens appears rather benign in the face of the new challenges, but offers an innovative approach for local and international research teams attempting to address complex, post-COVID issues. Partnerships from multiple disciplinary (as well as non-academic) perspectives can facilitate young people as co-constructors of knowledge, and not simply as passive bystanders watching adult agendas unfold.

7 Conclusion

The Coronavirus pandemic will have long-lasting impacts on the lives of the current and all coming generations of young people across the globe (Human Rights Watch, 2020; United Nations, 2020a). Despite the negative impacts that have undoubtedly affected children and their families, we argue herein that the global pandemic has also opened up a myriad of potential new participatory possibilities (Efuribe *et al.*, 2020). Through our transdisciplinary lens, we observe how young people are leading school strikes online, striving to combat environmental destruction of the Earth's biosphere, and fuelling debates around systemic educational reform. These efforts also challenge traditional childhood discourses across and beyond disciplines that portray children as uninformed, vulnerable, innocent and in need of increased protection (Bendo, 2019; James, 2010; Reynaert *et al.*, 2009). Solely viewing children in these ways silences their voices, viewpoints and opportunities for meaningful engagement as global citizens in both North and South locations. Despite new opportunities for participatory leadership, we also recognise the potential for exclusion from online participation in young people's lives associated with inequitable access to technology and the internet, as well as risks associated with bullying, exploitation, violence and harassment (Ferguson and Colwell, 2016; Fredstrom *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, we further acknowledge the importance of identifying how constructs of risk may be limiting to young people (Bray *et al.*, 2014).

In navigating the new complexities presented by the pandemic, it is imperative that children have space to be part of local and global solutions, as their efforts have the potential to contribute to societal change (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2020; Efuribe *et al.*, 2020). Given that much of the emerging research is focusing on the negative impact of COVID-19 on children (Jiao *et al.*, 2020; UNICEF, 2020a), our paper makes a modest contribution to child studies literature by emphasising that transdisciplinary knowledge production is emergent, and related to the complex phenomena with which we are all currently faced with their potentials for innovative participatory opportunities. These insights are relevant to policy makers, practitioners, educators and civil society stakeholders that work with and for young people. As both epistemological and methodological perspectives, transdisciplinary approaches have yet to be fully explored in the child rights community. Considering this, our article takes a reflective approach to re-imagining post-covid childhoods, possibilities and opportunities, and that future research partnerships could be facilitated by the integration from all disciplinary and civil society perspectives to collaborate directly with young people to understand how this pandemic is impacting their lives.

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