

Research protocol

Project title:	Politics, participation and pandemics – growing up under COVID-19
Nuffield Ref:	WEL/FR-000022571
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Research summary

The research aims to understand how the evolving COVID-19 crisis effects young people’s everyday lives – both individually, and as a group within society. We propose to recruit young people (14-18-year olds) in diverse circumstances to take part in a qualitative study, supporting them over 14 months to document their family life and peer relationships, education and their participation in society as the pandemic unfolds.

The study will include 70 young people from seven countries, to juxtapose young people’s realities within the UK, with those of their peers from Italy, at the epicentre of the European outbreak; Singapore, where the SARS outbreak is still within memory, and Lebanon, where a fragile civil society and quarantine for refugee young people have particular implications for the pandemic. The study will use digital methods, drawing on ethnography to empower young people as co-researchers and experts in their own lives, combined with researcher-led methods such as qualitative interviews and focus groups. It will be conducted entirely online, using virtual forms of communication to mirror changing modes of social interaction during the crisis.

The outputs will include an interim and final study report of publishable quality. In addition, we will produce concise online research briefings and blog posts in a visually accessible format, providing key messages for society at large to use as well as key messages for public authorities, professionals, and NGOs. The research will inform the development of appropriate tools and measures to promote and safeguard young people’s well-being and their rights during the crisis.

1.1 Aims and research questions

Nature of the issue to be addressed:

With many countries on lockdown and school closures widespread, young people stand to be affected by the pandemic in quite specific ways. As a comparatively 'safe' population, the immediate risk to health and wellbeing is thought to be lower than for adults, and attention has been focused on older citizens. Yet, as a once-in-a-generation global health crisis unfolds, young people's social realities and futures are set to change. There is an urgent imperative to examine the implications for young people; to hear their views and concerns, and to understand their role in mitigating against the potential scarring effects for a generation growing-up under COVID-19.

Aim of the study:

To generate rich qualitative evidence about how young people are experiencing and responding to COVID-19 as it unfolds.

Research Questions:

1. How is Covid-19 (and associated public health responses) affecting the everyday lives of young people in diverse personal, familial and socioeconomic circumstances?
2. How do young people experience and make sense of the social impacts and implications of COVID-19 for themselves, their families, their futures and society at large with respect to social values and priorities, moral responsibility and intergenerational social justice?
3. What can we learn from young people's experiences in countries at different stages of the crisis and with different cultural, socio-economic and political contexts and what are the transferable lessons for politicians, public bodies and wider society about how best to respond?
4. What are young people's views about the measures and actions taken by politicians, family members and wider public in response to COVID-19 and what contribution do they see they can make as active citizens?

1.2 Theoretical influences

Given the exploratory nature of the study, we do not want to presuppose theories and hypotheses, instead to adopt an inductive approach to theory building out of our inquiries. However, our project is informed and framed by three theoretical influences:

A whole systems approach

We aim to understand the dynamic interaction between Covid-19 and young people in terms of multiple layers of contextual influence that play out in their lives – their family, peers, community, socio-structural position, political economy and virtual worlds (Bronfenbrenner 1979). This is consistent with a 'whole systems' approach to inquiry (Burns 2007). We are also cognisant of a socio-ecological model of child wellbeing, which looks beyond young people/s immediate peer and familial influences to consider the macrosocial structures within which they are embedded (Earls and Carlson, 2001).

This framing is valuable in respect of the transnational dimension. We are not undertaking an international comparative study per se, nor do we aim to provide a country-representative view of young people's experiences. Rather, we are concerned with the global nature of the pandemic, and the ways in which individual experience is mediated through a "*constellation of environments and relationships*" (Ibid., 2001, p.143). In our study, these constellations are enriched by the varied national political and cultural contexts and diverse local settings and circumstances providing the backdrop for action research

Child-centred and rights-based

The study adopts a youth-centred, rights-based approach towards engaging young people as co-researchers in understanding the extent to which their needs are met. It is explicitly concerned with young people's agency and recognises that the contexts within which young people become affected are shifting and unpredictable and are mediated by their emotional, intellectual and material resources.

The study acknowledges that young people are citizens and rights-bearers rather than subjects of the research. It recognises the 1989 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as the principal vehicle through which child rights are enshrined in international law. We have cross-referenced the Convention and the 54 Articles when developing the preliminary list of themes and topics.

Learning in action

Given the unprecedented nature of the current situation, the study will necessarily be emergent, learning in action as the crisis unfolds, using principles of Action Research. Action Research is an ongoing process of learning from experience, reflecting on and discussing that learning, and using this to develop new decisions and actions. It starts with the premise that the research is with rather than 'about' young people (Skågeby 2011), engaging participants as experts in their own lives (Thomson 2008; Abebe 2009).

We will use action research to 'learn in action' (Reason 1988) with children in the 'real time' of COVID-19 as it happens. This involves cycles of inquiry and reflection with children and stakeholders sharing and critically reflecting on stories and perspectives from experience using their own frames of reference and means of expression (Reason and Bradbury 2001; Torbert 2004; Percy-Smith et al. 2019; Ray 2010). Wider stakeholders (parents, professionals, policymakers) will in turn be engaged in considering implications of emerging findings for informing strategies for action.

1.3 Analytical framework

Our proposed analytical framework sets out the target groups / population, geographical focus, sampling criteria, time periods to be covered, and a preliminary set of themes and topics. These criteria will underpin the design of the research tools and templates.

Target groups / population

The study will engage young people aged 14-18 years as direct participants in the action research process, in accordance with their capacities and capabilities. The focus of the research will, however, extend beyond this to consider the situation for family members, siblings, peers, and commentary on the impacts of children and young people in society.

Sampling framework

Our sample frame will operate at two levels:

- a) a selection of seven countries, applying a set of framing criteria (below), and
- b) a selection of individual participants within these countries.

Our methodology is qualitative and situational - we do not intend to extrapolate from the results to generate causal inferences at a population level as might be the case with a quantitative design. Rather, we propose to adopt elements of comparison (with country status treated as a contextual variable), and pooling, to elicit commonalities and differences within our sample as a whole.

Country selection

The study will involve seven countries – the UK (including the four nations), Italy, Singapore and Lebanon. Our rationale for adding a transnational dimension is threefold:

- to reflect on the global nature of the COVID-19 public health emergency
- to learn from diverse contexts beyond the UK; and
- to establish a dialogue between children and young people, beyond the narrower frame of national cultures of participation.

We have pre-selected countries to reflect contextual differences in the political and cultural backdrop to the crisis; varying public health responses; and different cultures with regard to fundamental rights and political representation. These criteria are summarised below:

UK

- Geographical (Sub)region: Western Europe.
- Political economy: liberal democracy, high income but high inequality.
- Child rights: varied and inconsistent position.
- Crisis response: phased national response based on containment, becoming more acute, with closures to schools and public services.

Italy

- Geographical (Sub)region: Southern Europe.
- Political economy: liberal democracy, high income.
- Child rights: strong national political culture of child rights and representation.
- Crisis response: currently European epicentre, with high mortality rates and a full national lockdown response by government.

Singapore

- Geographical (Sub)region: Southeast Asia
- Political economy: authoritarian democracy, high income.
- Child rights: overall high levels of child wellbeing, moderate levels of youth activism.
- Crisis response: government-led, oriented towards contact-tracing.

Lebanon

- Geographical (Sub)region: West Asia / MENA
- Political economy: authoritarian, middle income.
- Child rights: recent history of youth protest and civil unrest.

- Crisis response; based on containment; specific challenges pertaining to quarantine situation for Syrian refugees.

Panel recruitment

We will recruit panels of young people from each country, who will be engaged and supported throughout the study. In total, we aim to recruit 70 participant action researchers – comprising virtual groups of 10 young people per country, with the exception of the UK where we will work with 10 young people in each home nation (an increased sample reflecting the Foundation’s priorities). These numbers will facilitate working collaboratively with the participants both individually and in groups to implement an action research process with fidelity and ensure the rigour of the outputs.

We will recruit participants via a combination of social media, NGOs, public authorities, established forums / youth councils, and organisations representing specific groups (e.g. BME, or young carers), with attention to participants’ language requirements, ages and developmental stages. We will purposefully seek to recruit diverse groups of young people between 14 and 18 years, with attention to gender, ethnicity, SES, family structure and health conditions, as well as groups facing specific disadvantages (e.g. ethnic minorities, LGBTQ, and children in care). We are mindful that these categories are not mutually exclusive, and the interplay between social context, public health discourses and vulnerability is central to understanding the implications of the crisis for child rights.

Time periods covered

The study will cover the following time periods, vis-à-vis the Covid-19 pandemic:

- **Retrospective** – young people’s recall of circumstances prior to the crisis, as a basis for understanding what has changed and how, and to locate their agency within this.
- **Short-term** – the immediate public health emergency and its different phases.
- **Medium-term** – the transition beyond lockdown (or equivalent arrangements), as restrictions are lifted and arrangements return to ‘normal’.
- **Long-term** – hopes and aspirations for the future, recommendations for policy and practice measures that are needed for future crises, safeguarding child rights beyond Covid-19.

Topic framework

The preliminary framework of themes and topics is presented overleaf. We will adopt an iterative approach to build upon and refine this set. The three waves of data collection, analysis and reflection will facilitate continuous review and adjustment, and will ensure that the study reflects new and emerging topics identified by young people.

Key themes (1) – implications of Covid-19 for young people’s lives

<p>1. Family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family roles and relationships¹ • family routines and traditions • emotional support and caregiving² • privacy and personal space 	<p>2. Friends and peer relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • leisure activities • friendship groups and personal and social networks³ • intimate relationships
<p>3. Work and income</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work, remuneration and family responsibilities • financial or material support⁴ • poverty and hardship 	<p>4. Access to services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • access to food, medicines, sanitation and other essentials • access to professional support • access to information⁵
<p>5. Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • schooling and educational resources • formal and non-formal learning (incl. validation of learning under lockdown) • parental engagement in education • effects of missed education / transition to school or work 	<p>6. Health and wellbeing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • physical health and exercise • social and emotional wellbeing⁶ • health-related vulnerabilities and their impact⁷ • personal safety⁸
<p>7. Identity and freedom of expression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • outlets for personal or creative expression (culture, music, art) • observation of religious or cultural practices • political expression during the crisis (e.g. blogs/vlogs, social commentary) 	<p>8. Civic and social participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting out • informal support within the local neighbourhood • participation in organised activities (e.g. youth councils, NGO affiliation, or fund-raising activities) • Helping others⁹
<p>9. Crosscutting themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobility and freedom of movement • Spaces and environments (e.g. learning, social or digital environments¹⁰) • Gender, ethnicity, sexual identity and faith • Vulnerability and disadvantage¹¹ 	

¹ Including how the quality of relationships may have changed positively (increased interaction with young people) and negatively (for example where relationships become strained, or worse, where domestic violence may have occurred).

² Including parents / carers and siblings, and with attention to multi-household or separated families.

³ Including any changes to membership of networks, and purpose / frequency of contacts (on and offline).

⁴ This might include loss of income due to sickness, unemployment or bereavement.

⁵ With attention to public health, or other relevant information about rights and entitlements.

⁶ With attention to thought patterns and behaviours during the crisis; managing stress or anxiety; loneliness and isolation, potential impacts where families experience bereavement.

⁷ Including potential impacts of confinement or shielding, perceptions of ‘risk’ from Covid-19.

⁸ With attention to risk-taking behaviours, exposure to online harms such as cyber-bullying, or sexual exploitation, and exposure to neighbourhood crime or violence, or domestic abuse.

⁹ Exploring themes of empathy, social justice, personal responsibility.

¹⁰ Implications for digital skills, connectivity (e.g. online networks, engagement with global issues).

¹¹ How/ whether the public health emergency compounds existing forms of adversity within young people’s lives and / or creates new adversities.

Key themes (2) – young people’s social commentary and recommendations

- 1) **Young people’s perspectives of emergency measures taken** – perceived sufficiency of the speed and type of actions by government and other public authorities: school closures, social distancing, restrictions placed on mobility and privacy (e.g. contact tracing, monitoring of citizens’ movements, forfeiting of rights and freedoms).
- 2) **Views on impacts for young people as a group within society** – perceived social justice and fairness (e.g. trade-offs between young people’s education and public health); intended or unintended consequences for young people of emergency legislation; concerns about groups who are vulnerable within society OR overlooked.
- 3) **Commentary on societal values, attitudes and behaviours** – perceptions of media coverage of the pandemic and how young people are portrayed; reliability of information; unexpected positive consequences of the crisis (e.g. reduced travel and carbon emissions, community support, collective responsibility and acts of kindness).
- 4) **Future proofing** – learning from the Covid-19 crisis for safeguarding child rights in future emergency situations: actions needed at municipal, national or global scales; views on spending priorities for recovery after the crisis – economic, public health, welfare and social justice, and mechanisms to ensure that young people have a voice.

1.4 Methodology and work programme – overview

Our work programme is organised around four main stages: a rapid inception and development stage to finalise the framework and protocols will be followed by three substantive waves of data collection and analysis. This structure will facilitate a ‘formative’ aspect to the project, with regular feedback loops to allow for adjustment. Three main reports are scheduled– interim in November 2020 and May 2021, and a final publicly available report in September 2021.

The phasing and tasks are as follows:

STAGE 1: PROJECT INCEPTION AND DEVELOPMENT (APR-MAY 2020)

- Task 1.1: Inception meeting, drafting of detailed project plan
- Task 1.2: Ethics protocol, risk register, and clearances
- Task 1.3: Development of sampling strategy, coding framework and research tools
- Task 1.4: Desk review, and key stakeholder interviews - country contextual orientation
- Task 1.5: Recruitment and engagement of study participants

STAGE 2: WAVE 1 DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS & REPORTING (JUN-NOV 2020)

- Task 2.1: Researcher liaison with participants - panel management (ongoing)
- Task 2.2: First wave of qualitative interviews, charting of qualitative data
- Task 2.3: First set of online focus groups – country-level and transnational
- Task 2.4: De-briefing, updating of research framework and tools
- Task 2.5: Wave 1 thematic analysis and synthesis
- Task 2.6: Preparation of first interim report - Wave 1 emerging study findings

STAGE 3: WAVE 2 DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS & REPORTING (DEC 2020-MAY 2021)

- Task 3.1: Researcher liaison with participants - panel management (ongoing)
- Task 3.2: Second wave of qualitative interviews, charting of data
- Task 3.3: Second set of online focus groups – country-level and transnational
- Task 3.4: Wave 2 thematic analysis and synthesis
- Task 3.5: Preparation of second interim report - Wave 2 emerging study findings

STAGE 4: WAVE 3 FIELDWORK, ANALYSIS & FINAL REPORTING (JUN-SEPT 2021)

- Task 4.1: Researcher liaison with participants - panel management (ongoing)
- Task 4.2: Third wave of qualitative interviews, charting of data
- Task 4.3: Third set of online focus groups – country-level and transnational
- Task 4.4: Wave 3 thematic analysis and synthesis
- Task 4.5: Preparation of draft final report
- Task 4.6: Report finalisation and executive summary, final dissemination

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