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THEMED SECTION • Living, caring and researching: family life during COVID-19

article

Creating online participatory research spaces: insights from creative, digitally mediated research with children during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Our article draws on research undertaken with children during the 2020–21 COVID-19 pandemic in order to consider the potential of digitally mediated participatory research for child-centred research practice. Our specific focus is on how children's inclusion can be centred in the absence of opportunities to meet in person. We reflect on how we sought to support children's engagement through offline and online creative activities and explore how these digitally mediated spaces can facilitate children's inclusion, creative engagement and dialogue. We offer examples from our arts-based, digitally mediated research to consider how researchers might work remotely, yet inclusively, in contexts where children have been marginalised and their voices silenced. Our research suggests that scaffolding creative activities through bespoke digital animation and asynchronous chat can facilitate children to participate in ways of their choosing. However, to address equity of inclusion researchers must attend to the contingencies of children's digital, material and social exclusion.

Key words participatory arts-based research • COVID-19 • creative digital methods with children

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Introduction

The unfolding of the 2020–21 COVID-19 pandemic transformed, curtailed and redefined children's everyday lives, relationships and education (Karki, 2020; OECD, 2020; UN, 2020). Globally, over 770 million children have been without access to any form of in-person schooling as schools closed in more than 190 countries (TACPHA, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). In the UK, policy responses have included national and local lockdowns, school closures and quarantine, thereby limiting children's free movement and engagement in social, cultural, sports and other activities (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020; Montacute, 2020). In the wake of these changes, this article draws on our creative, digitally mediated research undertaken with primary school children aged 9 to 11 (educational year groups 5 and 6, in schools in England) to consider the possibilities for child-centred, socially distanced participatory research practice.

Our focus emerges from two interconnected concerns. First, the need to hear directly from children about their lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Armitage and Nellums, 2020); and second, the specific challenges presented by seeking to research with children at a time when measures in the UK have meant that face-to-face research is not possible (Lupton, 2020). We explore how we sought to mitigate these challenges through the development of digitally mediated methods encompassing creative visual arts (animation, collage, comic strip, drawing, craft, digital photography and film making) supported by bespoke digital animations collaboratively designed by the research team and posted on password-protected online asynchronous platforms hosted by the participating schools.

The article highlights examples of our research practice in these digital spaces where, in the absence of in-person contact, we sought to scaffold children's engagement through the development of creative activities designed to enable children to participate in ways of their choosing (Theron et al, 2011). In focusing explicitly on how the digital resources (bespoke animations and activities), together with the asynchronous chat function on the online forums framed children's engagement, our intention is to contribute to a broader dialogue about the methodological implications of online participatory research spaces and to address the possibilities and challenges for participatory research practice. In responding to the ways that children have been marginalised and their voices silenced during the pandemic in the UK (Morgan Jones et al, 2020; Rowland and Cook, 2020), our research considers how to support children, including those at most risk of being marginalised, to generate rich, experiential visual and textual data about their lives.

Lockdown and the silencing of children

The development of the research project began as the UK moved into national lockdown. On Monday 23 March 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced schools would close for all children except the most vulnerable and children of key workers (The Guardian, 2020a). No date was suggested for when primary schools might reopen. In the subsequent months, MPs (members of parliament) and the Prime Minister issued regular directives, guidance and frequent COVID-19 pronouncements along with changes in the law and regulations (such as shielding, quarantining and social distancing). Information was primarily aimed at adults and

guidance was later released for parents and carers: for example, advice on supporting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic (Public Health England, 2020).

While internationally there were examples of young people mobilising to exercise their agency during the pandemic (Cuevas-Parra and Stephano, 2020; European Youth Forum, 2020), in the UK children's rights to articulate their views (UNCRC, 1989, Article 12) were largely overlooked and actively marginalised (Morgan Jones et al, 2020). Rowland and Cook (2020: 1) note that those aged under 18 were prohibited from submitting questions to the government's daily COVID-19 briefing, a 'stance [that] completely devalues the expertise that children have to bring and silences their voices'. This was in contrast to countries where children have been directly addressed and offered the opportunity to ask questions of government. In Scotland, for example, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon responded to queries put to her by Scottish children (YouTube, 6 April 2020), and in New Zealand children were actively addressed by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. By contrast, Prime Minister Boris Johnson did not directly address an audience of children until 10 July – after the first wave of the pandemic in England. The Prime Minister's speech was notable both for its absence of opportunities for questions from children but also for its resolutely upbeat portrayal of the impact of the pandemic on young people who 'would look back with pride' and become 'one of the most important and influential generations in the peacetime history of our nation' (Murphy, 2020).

In the absence of active dialogue with children by the government in England, discursive distinctions have emerged wherein children are positioned as plucky strivers and passive recipients of policies in the face of the pandemic. These twin narratives of compliance and heroism are further evident in national guidance, in which children are addressed, primarily through their parents, about how they should 'stay safe and protect other people and make the best of their time at home' (Children's Commissioner for England, 2020). Messages about how children could help are a central feature of such information. For example, 'My Hero is You', a storybook promoted on the Public Health England website to be read to (not by)¹ children explores 'How kids can fight COVID-19!' by staying inside and urging others to do the same while travelling the globe on a large red dragon. The heroic narrative evident in 'My Hero is You' and in the Prime Minister's speech continue to be seen in wider public narratives: in print, news and social media, which draw on notions of children's pluck and fortitude. This encompasses an assumption of ready compliance with each new policy decision limiting outdoor play, social contact and schooling (Russell and Stenning, 2020; Spray and Hunleth, 2020). More particularly, it includes children's active, visible support through the public spectacle of national clapping and the display of hand-painted rainbows and thank-yous to key workers in the windows of their homes (BBC News Online, 2020; BSMHFT, 2020; SEHSCT, 2020). These public demonstrations of children's contributions were invoked and encouraged, including by some in the NHS who sent back thank-yous to children (London Ambulance Service, 2020). However, in the UK, distinctions are made in these media and policy spaces between the tractable younger child and the less sympathetic portrayal of older children as risk-takers in the reporting of young people contravening lockdown and social distancing rules (The Guardian, 2020b; Mail Online, 2020; Rosney, 2020).

School closures: impacts on children's learning and wellbeing

During the first lockdown (March, 2020), many schools across the UK pivoted rapidly to develop virtual home learning environments (Alevizou, 2020) as children's everyday lives rapidly became 'digital by default', with online learning platforms as well as social technology becoming the primary means of teaching, setting schoolwork, playing, hanging out with friends and seeing family (Livingstone, 2020). However, these effects were not evenly experienced. Evidence, provided early in the pandemic, demonstrated stark inequalities in the opportunities of the richest and poorest children, compounded by the digital exclusion of children from the most disadvantaged families and inequity of access to quality indoor and outdoor space (The Children's Society, 2020; Judge and Rahman, 2020; OECD, 2020; ONS, 2020).

Differences in the extent and quality of teaching, the availability of digital and learning resources (books, internet-enabled devices and digital connectivity) and parental time to support children's learning, suggest an increased risk of 'learning loss' (Donkin, 2020) for the most disadvantaged children, as well as negative impacts on mental wellbeing (Andrew et al, 2020; Cattani et al, 2020; The Children's Society, 2020; Cullinane and Montacute, 2020; Education Select Committee, 2020). These analyses, which are based almost entirely on quantitative surveys of adults (teachers and parents) suggest a dire picture, particularly for the most disadvantaged children. However, the particular experiences of children in the context of extant and emerging conditions of inequality remains unexplored. As Spray and Hunleth (2020) note, 'we have heard very little from one important group of stakeholders — children themselves'. Children's lack of voice and status as 'partial citizens', dependent on adults to advocate for them (Cohen, 2005: 226), risks children's experiences and expertise about the issues pertaining to them being overlooked. What matters to children, from their perspectives and in contexts of childhood diversity and adversity, remains scarcely visible. As Morgan Jones et al (2020: 172) suggest, while the pandemic potentially alienates different communities, 'Children and young people [...] have faced unique challenges, but their voice in policymaking [is] severely limited'.

Sample and recruitment

It is in the context of the unfolding global crisis and the silencing of children that we sought to research with children, working inclusively with them as experts in their own lives (UNCRC, 1989). This was important in order to help us to make sense of their affective, embodied and material lived experiences, as well as their perspectives on the impacts of government policy on them, their relationships and education. Committed to working participatively with children (Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Blaisdell et al, 2019), we began co-creating the research with four primary schools in order to include the perspectives of children, their parents/carers and teachers in the research design and methodology. The schools invited children in year five (ages 9–10) to take part, initially contacting both the children and their parents. Sixteen children (ten girls and six boys) self-selected and consented to take part in the research, with consent also from their parents. A tiered consent process was developed through which the children were consulted about their participation, and the use of their creative data at each stage of the research (Clark, 2020; Lomax, 2020; 2021). This included

the development of a child-centred animation (Lomax and Smith, 2020; 2021) at the outset of the research to explain the project's aims and the children's rights as participants before any fieldwork commenced.

The schools were selected as representative of a diverse population of children, including disadvantaged children identified as being particularly at risk from the impacts of school closures and quarantine (Andrew et al, 2020; The Children's Society, 2020; Cullinane and Montacute, 2020). Three of the four schools are part of an academy trust² located in the 10 per cent most deprived localities in England, including: children living in poverty; in overcrowded conditions and without access to outdoor or study space; children with special educational needs; children in receipt of free school meals and pupil premium grants; children of key workers; and digitally excluded children. The inclusion of a fourth, more affluent, village school (for example, no children in receipt of free school meals) included digitally excluded and looked-after children, children of key workers, and children with special educational needs, thereby enabling the research to explore the resources available to a diverse constituency of children with varying and multiple risk factors for wellbeing and education (Bradbury-Jones et al, 2018; Montacute, 2020). It is important to note, however, that these broad demographic characteristics can mask the particular circumstances of children in the sample and how these forms of disadvantage unfolded during the pandemic. Some children were economically disadvantaged or became disadvantaged during the research; for example, living in a family in receipt of (or eligible for) free school meals and/or in receipt of low-income benefits during the pandemic. Others, meanwhile, were unable to spend time with a parent or access services, factors which put them at greater risk of mental ill-health and learning loss (Andrew et al, 2020; Armitage and Nellums, 2020).

Reframing creative participatory methods for the pandemic

While participatory methods with children vary greatly in their methodological approaches and in the extent to which they involve children in decision making, we utilise participatory action research (PAR) as a means of moving away from conventional research approaches in order to actively involve children in most aspects of the research process (Cahill, 2007; Lomax, 2015; 2020b; Woodiwiss et al, 2017). Children are valued collaborators and emphasis is placed on foregrounding their perspectives in the design, generation, interpretation and dissemination of research (Stirling and Yamada-Rice, 2015). However, PAR research planning and fieldwork practices were challenged by the pandemic and policy responses, prohibiting face-to-face contact, raising questions about issues of access, consent and co-production as well as the relational work that usually frames participatory research practice (Bland and Atweh, 2007; Eldén, 2013; Clark et al, 2014; Shamrova and Cummings, 2017; Facca et al, 2020; Luttrell, 2020). We sought to address these challenges through the development of creative, digitally mediated visual arts, supported by digital animation and hosted on a secure online space. Our commitment to creative, arts-based methods as a means of research generation and knowledge exchange is derived from our previous creative research with children and young people (Lomax, 2012; 2015; 2020b), and, more particularly, our belief that, framed carefully as part of rights-based approaches, creative arts can 'support children's participation and

offer new perspectives on children's ways of knowing' (Lomax, 2020: 55), as well as opportunities to exercise agency (Lundy, 2018) and a medium with which to reflect, remember and imagine (Hunleth, 2019). As Leavy (2020: 21) suggests, arts-based methods can offer a means of engaging with children 'allow[ing] research questions to be posed in new ways' and a 'diversity and complexity of expression that exceeds verbal communication alone' (Parry, 2015: 90). The following section explores how we sought, using digitally mediated arts-based methods, to visually communicate and scaffold children's engagement in order to facilitate children's inclusion, creative engagement and dialogue.

This first stage of the research was iterative and emergent as we negotiated with the schools and children to set up the first phase of the fieldwork. We were also driven, at this time, by a sense of urgency and pragmatism as the school holidays were due to start and we wanted to provide an opportunity for children to participate independently during this period. The discussion in this article is, therefore, confined to the first phase of our longitudinal research project in which we worked with children using bespoke arts-based resources and sought to adapt online spaces to create an inclusive research space for children during the first school lockdown and the school summer holiday in England. Subsequent phases of the research, in which we conducted socially distanced, photo-elicitation interviews, art workshops and continue to research with the children, is beyond the scope of this article.

Designing online research with children

The first design phase of the research was undertaken in collaboration with children, teachers and parents from four primary schools in the North of England. The aim was to explore how these younger children, from diverse socioeconomic contexts, experience the pandemic and its impact on their everyday lives, relationships and learning. Six broad, iterative and interrelated prompts that focused on dimensions of children's wellbeing were co-developed with the primary schools in order to provide a flexible and supportive framework for the research and to encourage children's reflective inquiry (Hunleth, 2019). The wellbeing prompts focused on 'things you have noticed', 'the environment', 'giving', 'relationships', 'physical activity' and 'learning' (Aked et al, 2008; Abdallah et al, 2014), to enable the children to look at connections between their everyday activities and their sense of wellbeing. In so doing, and in contrast to knowledge generated by researchers' questions alone, our methods sought to centre reflective inquiry in order to develop understandings of the particular situations and perspectives of participants (Reason and Heron, 2008). Creating online participatory research spaces was not, therefore, a matter of collecting data in response to predefined questions, but was developed with meaning and relevance for the children themselves (Fink and Lomax, 2016). The six prompts provided a starting point from which to build on the children's participation, opening up a space for the research team to engage with them and for children to choose their own creative ways of working and to champion the issues and priorities most relevant to them. In this way we could work with children's reflections on what supports their education and wellbeing, capturing their lived experiences of school closures, reopening and the kinds of material, familial and personal resources available to them during the pandemic.

The research was designed to evolve in three broad phases to be undertaken over time and with ongoing negotiation with the children, parent/carers and schools.

There were challenges in designing the different phases – most significantly the disruption of being unable to meet in person to develop the research design phases with the children (Lupton, 2020). In order to digitally mediate participation, the research team and the primary schools set up, during this design phase of the research, an online workshop bringing together some of the children and teachers to discuss and develop the research. At the workshop we discussed how we might work together and children contributed their ideas, including their familiarity with the online platforms and perspectives on wellbeing as used in the school context before and during pandemic. In keeping with the participatory aims of the project, this online encounter at the outset of the research enabled children to voice their perspectives and to begin to shape an inclusive online research space that would support a participatory dialogue between the team and the children over time. This meeting, in which we exchanged ideas and our commitment to inclusive, child-centred research, framed from the outset our collaborative research practice in which we sought to create spaces in which to listen and reflect on what children and teachers shared with us in order to inform each stage of the research. We raise this point in order to make visible the ways children’s participation can be structured in digitally mediated spaces to increase their participation over time and to create a reflexive and iterative research process, a practice that emanates from a PAR commitment to reflexively interrogating research practices (Hunleth, 2011; Haaken and O’Neill, 2014; Fink and Lomax, 2016).

During the first phase of the research on which this article is focused, 16 children (aged 9–10) researched with us, at a distance, using creative visual arts (animation, collage, comic strip, drawing, craft, digital photography and film) to ‘chronicle’ their lived experiences. Over a period of six weeks in England during July–August 2020, we sought to scaffold the children’s participation, developing six creative activities during the summer holidays, which derived from the aforementioned wellbeing prompts. The activities, which can be viewed at Lomax and Smith (2020; 2021), were not prescribed to avoid ‘setting up norms of appropriate engagement’ (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008: 507); instead, they offered multiple ways to encourage creativity and support a participatory dialogue between ourselves and the children. The assemblage of activities went well beyond a simple list of digital online creative methods, and allowed for the research team to acknowledge and reflect on the emergent approaches of digitally mediated participatory research with children (Chesworth, 2018). The prompts were also developed by the participating children and emerged as highly relational to each other. For example, a cartoon strip of shopping for a grandparent (Bethany³) and a photograph of a picnic prepared and delivered to a shielding relative (Elliot) exemplified the importance of caring for or ‘giving’ (week 3) in children’s personal relationships. Similarly, responses to the ‘physical activity’ prompt (week 5) included Ben’s digital animation of ‘playing football outdoors with friends’ and a photograph of ‘walking my dog with my brother’ (Pierce). Children’s images and texts illustrate the centrality of their relationships with friends, family and pets during lockdown, responses which were not confined to a specific prompt but spanned their visual and textual contributions throughout the period of creative work. The following sections interrogate and make visible our research practices in these online spaces to consider how they enabled and challenged us to create an inclusive research space, to foster children’s creative engagement and to facilitate dialogue between the child-participants and ourselves.

Supporting children's creative engagement in online spaces: animating methods

An advantage of working alongside the primary schools included access to the schools' digital platforms (Google Classrooms, Seesaw) which provided a secure, password-protected online space in which we could engage with children remotely and where children could, themselves, upload their creative data. These digitally mediated spaces offered the potential to support participation in ways that had become established in the schools during lockdown and were familiar to the children, some of whom had been offered Chrome Books to enable them to participate in remote learning and research.

To facilitate dialogue with children in these online spaces, we worked closely with visual artist and co-author, Belinda Walsh (henceforth referred to as 'Belinda') to create a set of seven digital animations: one introducing the project and one for each activity during phase one of the project (Lomax and Smith, 2020; 2021). The animations were intended to be much more than a description of the project aims and methods. Rather, they were carefully designed and scripted to visually communicate our inclusive, child-centred approach, as well as being a first step in building rapport in the absence of offline spaces in which to do this in person. The first of these, which can be viewed online (Lomax and Smith, 2020; 2021), introduced the research team through an animated line-drawing likeness of the research team (Helen and Kate), which included Helen 'speaking' directly to the children through a recorded voice-over in which she explained the purpose of the research, commitment to hearing from children, what involvement in the research could entail and the various individual choices children could make about their own participation. Each animation offered a range of creative opportunities for participation, suggesting a variety of media that children could use to share their experiences. Stop-start animation, cartoons, line drawings, collage and photographs were used both to visually communicate the process of consent, as well as illustrating the variety of creative possibilities and encouragement to work with any 'combination of these or something else that we haven't thought of.' The central motif in the animation is an image of the coronavirus (a photograph of a spiky dog-toy) surrounded by line-drawn images of children. As can be seen in Figure 1, the spherical 'virus' appears symbolically to float in space, encircled by what might be interpreted as a representation of global childhood. Designed by a separate group of child-artists working with Belinda (a process described in the following paragraphs), the drawings suggest, through the depiction of a variety of skin tones, hair styles and clothing, children from different cultural backgrounds. The placement of these images of children around the image of the coronavirus invokes the idea of children mobilising together in the face of the pandemic, an interpretation which is reinforced in the subsequent sequence in which one of the line-drawn children 'zaps' the virus to the sound of Helen explaining how children can be involved in the research.

Working closely with Belinda to animate the images, we sought to visually move away from the notion of children's passivity and silencing during the pandemic, encouraging their right to articulate their experiences of living in a pandemic and the impacts of government policies on their lives at this time. This image, designed by Belinda and the child-artists seemed to us to advocate how children can have a voice in research about the pandemic, and was adopted as the project logo and used

Figure 1: The CHEER 'logo' – 'Coronavirus encircled by children'

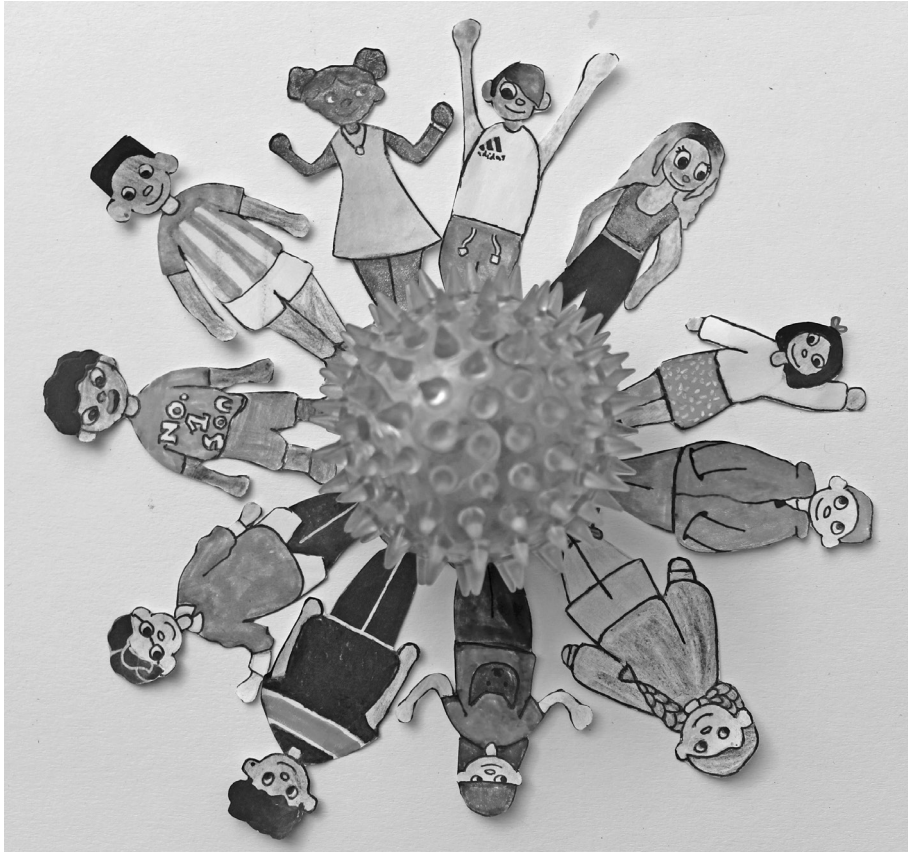


Image by Belinda Walsh with Katie

in project communication with the children and in research outputs. The animation was posted on the two online platforms being used by the participating schools (Seesaw and Google Classrooms). To access these open access resources please see [Lomax and Smith, \(2020; 2021\)](#).

A further six digital animations continued this design theme. Each was short (under two minutes in length) and included a voice-over in which Helen explained what we wanted children to think about and share with us. The six scripts were focused on the aforementioned wellbeing prompts – ‘things you have noticed’, ‘the environment’, ‘giving’, ‘relationships’, ‘physical activity’ and ‘learning’ – while being flexible enough to support a breadth and diversity of lived experiences. In selecting these six areas to scaffold children’s reflections we were acutely aware of the potential to oversimplify children’s voices, reducing their focus to narrow predefined topics ([Clark et al, 2014](#); [Shamrova and Cummings, 2017](#); [Facca et al, 2020](#)). To mitigate this, we used an extensive range of original sound files and images (cartoons, memes, drawings) to visually communicate a diversity of possible lived experiences and expressive arts to communicate their ideas. Our aim was to offer a range of creative possibilities and different lenses to open up the possibilities for children to ‘exercise their own voices’ in an enabling, reflexive research space ([Chappell et al, 2014](#): 389) as opposed to responding to a set of prescribed tasks. For example, as can be observed

in the ‘relationships’ animation in week 4 (Lomax and Smith, 2020; 2021), there were a range of possible relationships that children could think about – with family, friends, animals (wildlife and pets) – narrated in both the voice-over and through the visual illustration. Here, the photographs, film and ‘junk’ art illustrations of human and non-human relationships were designed to support children’s reflections on a variety of social relationships and how these might be ‘the same’ or ‘different’ during the pandemic.

The range of experiences and creative possibilities depicted in each animation was enhanced by the involvement of an additional, separate group of eight children and young people (aged 11–16) as artists. These young people, personal contacts known to us and Belinda, whose work with us developed organically through the first phase of the research, generated photographs, memes, drawings and sound recordings for the animations. This helped to illustrate and inform our thinking on each prompt as well as providing important feedback on early versions of the scripts. Through this iterative process between young people, Belinda and ourselves, we were able to reflect on the appropriateness of the methods and the diversity of children and young people’s experiences. This enabled us to include representations of everyday activities that young people themselves were engaged in during the pandemic in each animation. In this way we sought to avoid re-presenting a romanticised, privileged, version of childhood, which might exclude or marginalise the experiences of some children (Fink and Lomax, 2016; Kaneva et al, 2020).

In addition to the animations, we also produced a number of creative activity guides that could be viewed online or downloaded as a printable to accompany each digital film. We included these as a visual reminder of each prompt as we considered that it would be frustrating for children to have to watch and re-watch the animation in order to recall what was being asked. The activity guides, which can be viewed online (Lomax et al, 2020) served as both prompt and stimulus through the inclusion of links to creative resources to encourage children’s reflections. For example, the activity guide that accompanied the ‘relationships’ animation in week 4 (see Figure 2) asked children to reflect on whom they had seen and those they had not been able to see, continuing the animation narrative of ‘what’s different?’ during the pandemic.

Images from the animation were also included as visual prompts alongside a host of creative suggestions to inspire and encourage children’s reflections. How to make stop-start animation, create a storyboard and a link to the Tate Kids’⁴ ‘Top 5 Family Portraits’, in which diverse families are rendered in a range of art media, were included. The inclusion of these art forms offered the child-participants and research team alike ‘a primary way of understanding and examining experience’ (McNiff, 2008: 29) in order to support children’s thinking and representational practices.

The potential of digitally mediated research practice to support children’s creative participation is reflected in the richness and variety of children’s week-by-week reflections and creative outputs. Children responded to the digital animations and activity guides, creating a breadth and depth of art work, including images (drawings, flip books) of novel experiences that emerged from spending time at home. This included ‘trying a pepper for the first time’ (Bryony, line drawing), learning the recorder (Eddie, digital video), playing board games and online bingo with family members whom children could not see in person (various drawings, photographs and comic-strips). Art work included digital animations, drawings and photographs of walks, holidays and day-trips, experiences that arose and were shaped by the

Figure 2: 'Relationships' activity guide

RELATIONSHIPS

How did your relationships change during the pandemic?

As schools were closed, you may have seen a lot more of your family and a lot less of your teachers and friends. Show us who you were with by making a group portrait. (Use frame on next page or make your own) be sure to include your pets!

Remember you can use any medium, draw, paint, bits of rubbish, photo, collage, clay, pebbles..... check this link for ideas

<https://www.tate.org.uk/kids/explore/top-5/top-5-family-portraits>

Now imagine an animator from Pixar Studios is coming to make a short animation about the relationships in your life during the pandemic.

Think back and try to remember who was there?
Who wasn't there? who did you miss the most?
Did you chat with friends or family online? on Zoom?
on multiplayer games? on FaceTime?

You could make a storyboard (one attached) to help the animator understand what it was like for you.

This link will help with storyboarding. <http://www.animationchefs.com/blog/animation-chefs-storyboard-secrets>

Maybe you are interested in making your own stop motion animation. You can make stop motion animation with a phone or iPad by downloading one of the many free apps available.

The Animation Chefs have lots of tutorial videos on you tube, find them here... <https://www.youtube.com/user/animationchefs>

Remember these are just ideas to get you started , if you have other ideas be sure to share them with us , we d love to see/hear them all!

'Play seriously , remember insignificant doodles might turn into great ideas' Greyson Perry

By Belinda Walsh

pandemic and policy responses. This included joyful portraits of a canal boat holiday (in place of a planned holiday with another family) (Ella) and a visit to accident and emergency with restrictions on who could attend (Charlotte). The wealth of creative and textual data generated in this initial phase of the research in which the children adapted and went beyond the suggested topics attests to the diversity and complexity of children's lived experiences of the pandemic. Self-portraits of children

putting out recycling, making bird feeders, planting seeds and growing vegetables, together with collages and digital animations exploring feelings about lockdown and the significance of relationships with siblings, parents and relatives whom the children lived with, could see rarely or not at, all made vivid the children's lived personal, familial and material resources.

Supporting children's inclusion in online spaces: asynchronous dialogue

Utilising the digital platforms provided by the primary schools, we posted an animation and an activity guide weekly throughout the school summer holiday, emphasising choice and flexibility of participation at all times. Both the animations and activity guides were 'conversational', whereby expansive questions ('Have you ...', 'What do you ...', 'Tell us about ...') were used to signal our openness to the children's reflections and insights. Moreover, we strived continuously to ensure an informal tone as a deliberate strategy to flatten power relationships between ourselves as adults and the child-participants. While, more usually, adults are positioned as being both more directive and more knowledgeable than children, we endeavoured, through phrases such as, 'something we haven't thought of!', to signal our recognition of the children's expertise, as unique and distinct from our own.

To ensure that the children had a more central role in decision making about participation, each child's post – information and news that a child posted online on the closed project space on each school's learning platform (Google Classrooms or Seesaw) – was individually responded to. For example, on Seesaw, this included using the voice function to record a message, and on each of Google Classrooms and Seesaw, the text function to post replies. Each of these responses to individual children was carefully considered in terms of how we acknowledged information that children chose to share and to ensure the response was child focused: in other words, did not impose an adult agenda on the children's reflections. This is exemplified in the following segment, part of a much longer post during week 4 of the project in which Amy uses the chat function to tell us what she has been doing this week. Her spontaneous commentary about her 'busy week' seeing cousins, her auntie and new puppies adds a further layer of interpretation and meaning making to the photographs she has uploaded in response to the 'relationships' activity.

Amy's post and Helen's reply: Google Classroom, week 4

Amy: For week four's task I have been busy spending time with my family and playing with my Auntie's new puppies. I have seen my cousin for the first time in ages – I realised I have missed her more than I knew and I was so happy to see her. I am enjoying the 50% off food and so is my mum because she is sick of cooking and so is my auntie Jane as you can tell by her face in the photo 😊.

Helen: Hi Amy, Thank you for sharing your experiences of your relationships during the pandemic – it's really moving to hear about you spending time with your mum, cousin and Auntie (and puppies!) and how you are using technology to stay in touch. I know how your Auntie feels about cooking!!

Amy's online post coincided with the lockdown easing, and in her images and post she makes explicit reference to this. Her humorous post 'I am enjoying the 50% off food and so is my mum because she is sick of cooking and so is my Auntie Jane as you can tell by her face in the photo'⁵ offers a sense of the impact of government directives and policy responses on her own life and her family. Helen's reply responds dialogically to Amy's chat, which is not just limited to the theme of 'relationships', but rather supports a broader participatory dialogue on a range of related themes emerging in the children's posts, about the importance of pets and other animals for children's wellbeing and the important role of digital technology in supporting children to connect with friends and family.

The post from Amy and reply from Helen is one of many digitally mediated encounters between ourselves and the children. However, responding to the individual children's posts and ensuring our online responses were child focused was sometimes challenging, given the existing category descriptions of the online learning platforms. Labels such as 'instructor', 'student' and 'classwork' embedded within the online platforms could be seen to suggest a pupil-teacher relationship which was antithetical to our participatory research practice. The team worked to dismantle some of these power dynamics by choosing words and responses carefully in our posts to children, including through voice notes which enable a warmer, more personal tone. This is illustrated in the following sequence in which Helen uses the voice function to record a longer, more personalised response alongside her shorter text post to Eddie. Her voice message both acknowledges and expresses enthusiasm for Eddie's creative sharing of what he has 'been doing, experiencing, seeing and feeling', while also checking that he was able to see the next activity. Eddie responds with a 'thumbs up' emoticon 'Hi Helen, received your message loud and clear 👍'

Eddie and Helen – Seesaw, week 2: text post, accompanying Helen's voice message to Eddie

Helen: Hi Eddie, Thank you for sharing your experiences of noticing. I was really interested to see all the things you experienced. Best wishes, Helen

Eddie: Hi Helen, received your message loud and clear 👍

Using the voice message function along with the chat function enabled us to use a much more informal, personal tone, to express a range of emotions including warmth and appreciation of the children's contributions, and to display our own position as novice users of these technologies.

Concluding points

Children have expertise about their lives and the right to have their views given due weight on all matters that affect them (UNCRC, 1989). Social research is urgently needed to document and explore children's everyday experiences of the ongoing global crisis and the impacts of government policies on their lives (Raman et al, 2020). Moreover, we also, as childhood researchers, 'need self-reflexive accounts of practice evaluating what works and what does not' (Cahill, 2007: 299) in eliciting children's viewpoints and lived experiences. The new and emerging context of the pandemic

means that researchers need to consider how, when we cannot meet with children in person, we might best respond to and not lose sight of the important and explicit shifts in practices toward doing research *with* rather than *on* children (Lomax, 2015). This is imperative if we are to contribute to understandings of how children have experienced and been affected by the ongoing crisis in which they continue to be marginalised and their voices silenced.

Our research has explored some of the ways that digitally mediated participatory research can offer an inclusive research space, foster children's creativity and support participatory dialogue between researchers and children. We have offered examples from this initial phase of our longitudinal research with children to reflect on how researchers might work online with children during times of global crisis in order to hear directly from them about their lived experiences at a time when we cannot research in person with children. We have sought to highlight examples from our practice in which we navigated some of the challenges of researching remotely through the co-production of creative, digitally mediated methods with children. Our research suggests that 'animating methods' through bespoke digital animations and scaffolding creative activities, alongside online asynchronous chat, can support children to participate in ways of their choosing. Through images and soundscapes (our own voices, music created by children), using drawings and photographs created by children as resources for children, we make available a set of unique digital resources for childhood researchers and practitioners to speak directly to and connect with children, to support them to generate rich, experiential visual and textual data about their lives. (Lomax and Smith, 2020; 2021). While we acknowledge that these online digital technologies are not without their challenges for researchers as well as children, there may be potential for using and adapting these approaches to engage with groups other than children. We suggest that in times of global crisis, creating online participatory spaces can serve to facilitate children's inclusion, including children living with multiple disadvantage and identified as being most at risk from the pandemic. Researching with children in these digital spaces can offer new, creative ways of asking questions with children and the potential for children to offer their own insights and perspectives in contexts of global crisis where they have been silenced.

Notes

¹ 'It is not encouraged for children to read this book independently without the support of a parent, caregiver or teacher' (IASC MHPSS RG, 31 March 2020, our emphasis). This advice has since been removed from the Public Health England website, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-supporting-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-wellbeing/guidance-for-parents-and-carers-on-supporting-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-wellbeing-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>).

² Academy schools are state-funded schools in England which are directly funded by the Department for Education and independent of local authority control. An academy trust operates more than one academy school.

³ All names are pseudonyms.

⁴ Top 5 Family Portraits', <https://www.tate.org.uk/kids/explore/top-5/top-5-family-portraits>.

⁵ A reference the UK government's 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme, introduced shortly after initial lockdown easing in England during August 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-a-discount-with-the-eat-out-to-help-out-scheme>.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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