Framing children's lives through policy and public sphere debates on COVID-19: unequal power and unintended consequences

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Abstract: In this paper we analyze five dominant policy frames adopted by governments in their responses to children during the COVID-19 pandemic – the institutional, developmental, pathological, normative family and rights-excluding frames. We argue that these frames serve to meet the interests of non-child stakeholders in politically expedient ways, rather than addressing the needs of children and their families. We provide some suggestions for alternative policy approaches that take into account the interests of children, including understanding the ambivalent implications of lockdown, taking into account the social ecologies of children, and a renewed focus on children's rights, most importantly children's participation rights.

Keywords: children, childhood, public policy, framing, COVID-19

Introduction

In the middle stage of the COVID-19 crisis, there is a political contest around policy responses in favor of children versus other organized interests. This contest contributes to the continuing framing of the problem in particular ways, to the exclusion of more child-oriented frames. In much of the Anglophone world, children are rarely involved in debates within the public sphere and are disadvantaged in policy deliberations. In some cases, such as in the UK, Canada and Australia, institutionalized advocacy in the form of Children's Commissioners can exert a child-focused influence on policy, however this varies according to their linkage to core executive decision making, prominence in the media, and the extent to which a commitment to a child rights-based framework is in place across government (see Williams 2005). Aside from elected officials, a range of 'child experts' are most able to exert influence upon debates, especially pediatricians, developmental psychologists and educationalists. Whilst governments appear to treat

parents as key stakeholders, it is rare that parents or parents' groups exert power over decision-making. Furthest removed from power are children themselves.

Frames in Operation

In the COVID-19 crisis, the most powerless groups around the world have been least able to have their interests met. As a disenfranchised social group, children are often unable to articulate their demands in the public sphere (Kulynych 2001) or are dependent on others to do so. As such, what children need and how their interests can be met, framed in terms of their 'best interest', is used as a strategic resource by other stakeholders to advance their own interests. In the continuing calculation of infection risk, policymakers balance public health concerns against other problems, such as economic decline and security. But despite reference to 'data driven' calculations, risk assessment is also highly political; some social interests are better able than others to cause political trouble for governments. In the case of children, initial fears about the risk of child-borne infections were understandable, particularly given the prevalence of influenza transmission between children. While the role of children as transmitters of COVID-19 remains contested in light of the effect of variants of the virus (Hyde 2020), the rate at which children obtain the infection remains lower than adults, children are more frequently asymptomatic or experience only mild symptoms (CDC 2021). During initial outbreaks where evidence also demonstrated that children hardly transmitted the coronavirus, school lockdowns were maintained in many instances in order to minimize risk, while international travel was still permitted and non-essential businesses remained open. Ultimately, the small risk of opening schools has been superseded by the larger risks posed by other social activities. Even once vaccines became available, only in

some places, such as California (reported in The Los Angeles Times, 19 February, 2021), have teachers been prioritized for vaccination to support schools reopening.

Beyond this general political asymmetry found in COVID-19 policy risk-balancing, we identify five interrelated frames of children and childhood, of variable influence, in government policies and public sphere debates. While we primarily use examples from the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and the United States, these frames represent modes of political expediency for governments and other non-child policy actors in general. We would argue that these have little to do with the interests of children.

i. The institutional frame

The most prominent is the *institutional* framing of the problem and policy responses in regard to children. This framing emphasizes the role of institutions, especially educational institutions, in organizing childhood, and uses benchmarks of performance within these institutions as norms for what a good childhood should be (Qvortrup 2009). During the pandemic, the importance of school closures and parental labor market participation demonstrates this frame, perceiving children's needs through the lens of institutional operations. At the same time, it assumes a particular way of looking at intergenerational relations, in which child care given by schools supports parental employment and autonomy. Here, the crisis has exposed the extent to which schools play a key role as an institutional bedrock of advanced industrial societies (Hendrick 1997). The closure of schools due to COVID-19 across the developed world has disrupted this fundamental institutional support, the significance of which is evident in the clamor to make schools the first to open and last to close in regard to lockdown

policy (UK Prime Minister Johnson; BBC News 2021). The restoration of a fully-functioning school system is as much a priority for social and economic life, as it is for the education of individuals.

The link between schooling and the economy is evident in public debates about homeschooling in many nations. Even in societies in which telecommunications technology has enabled many parents to work from home, a considerable share of public debate has focused on the difficulties of parents in coping with homeschooling, as they struggle to deliver a quality education while also engaging in paid employment. Middle class professionals engaged in intellectual labor have been the most vocal in this respect. The scope of the problem is evident in business concerns that, for all the initial claimed revelations about increased productivity, research suggested that this was not universal (Morikawa 2020), especially in the case of working families. Productivity, the real measure of capitalist prosperity, has stalled under home working conditions. Homeschooling has also had the unforeseen consequence of impacting upon the gender distribution of child care, with this disparity increasing significantly, reversing trends towards a gender balance in the private sphere (Jenkins and Smith 2021). As lockdowns extended for longer periods, for example in the UK and the US, pressure was exerted by employers upon parents working from home to compensate through extra work hours in normal leisure time in order to meet output goals. This, in turn, put pressure back on schools to provide care by hosting children of ‘essential workers’, including the extension of this status beyond emergency health care workers, in order to accommodate the labor demands of employers.

An even stronger framing effect arises from the issue of institutional authorization of education and judgments about competence. The long periods of school closure, along with the highly uneven progress made by students in homeschooling conditions, disrupted the conduct of examinations, particularly for secondary school students. The success of educational policy is directed through quantitative performance indicators, such as the PISA study (OECD 2018) rather than alternative measures, such as student happiness (Rappleye, Komatsu, Uchida, Krys and Marcus 2019). In the UK, the difficulty of processing final year students because of lost lessons led the government to introduce compensatory grading measures, which they cancelled in a policy backflip, producing a fiasco surrounding results (BBC News 2020). While complaints made by parents on behalf of children were understandable, the public scale of the crisis acted to reinforce the institutional frame as the dominant interpretation of child well-being — in particular, a judgment grounded in the competence of institutional operations rather than the fostering of human capacities — such that the pressure to avoid future public crises has become very high. But what is the experience of children within schools, even when they have been open? How have they experienced social distancing measures in the classroom? How has their play, a key learning behavior, been affected by the division of classes into bubbles and by the restriction of physical objects in the playground? The institutional frame neglects consideration of such measures, instead reinforcing the idea of institutionalized education as the provision, and quantifiable measurement, of basic literacy and numeracy.

ii. The developmental frame

The institutional frame supports a *developmental* focus on children as not-yet-adults. In this frame, we find a series of concerns related to children's future development, temporally associated with the kinds of adults they will become, to the neglect of their current lifeworld. This frame therefore assumes a normative concept of a desired adulthood, against which children are assessed through a battery of administrative tests, such as the likelihood that they will obtain productive employment. The frame also supports developmental measurements of the *absence* of risk factors that inhibit the successful attainment of adulthood, for example, juvenile crime, substance and alcohol abuse. A common instance of this frame is articulated in concerns about 'lost learning'. The assumption in such a frame is that school supports a linear trajectory of human development; missing out on core lessons reduces ability and intelligence. We see similar concerns around children's health more generally, expressed in ideologies of 'healthism' (Crawford 1980), which project adult anxieties about the future onto children's lives in the present. Examples include public health campaigns around obesity which, as Evans (2010) argues, conceives of children's bodies as public health sites to be acted upon now, so as to avoid a 'dystopian' obese future.

Notably, this frame creates winners and losers amongst children. If institutionalized schooling is the social norm, then children who transgress this norm by dropping out of school, or who truant, are typecast in the well-worn frame of idleness producing *deviant youth*. International concern is apparent over the absence of children from school, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation into criminal activity (UNODC 2020). Education policy becomes synonymous with crime prevention, evident in programs sponsored by the UNODC (2021) globally. In Western countries, concerns focus on teenagers and anti-social behavior (see report in *The Guardian*, 6 February

2021: 4). Typically, such frames fail to recognize that teenagers meeting one another outside of educational institutions is normal behavior (Blakemore 2018). This reveals the problems for teenagers of being confined at home, and the importance of policy to at least permit outdoor meetings.

Regardless of education research showing that learning is a holistic phenomenon (Morris 2020; Marquez and Main 2021), the developmental frame appeals to commonsense understanding about learning. Critics employing such arguments are endeavoring to lobby on children's behalf, but the flipside reinforces the developmental frame and delimits potential policy responses. For example, the UK Institute of Fiscal Studies costed the effect of COVID-19 on children's development in financial terms (Sibieta 2021). It models a linear developmental learning trajectory; for every six months of schooling lost by children, they each lose an average of £40,000 (USD$66,000) in future income. The proposed remedy is to increase compensatory learning time to rebalance the equation between institutionalized learning and development.

An alternative would be to rethink the basis of education in terms of other values. Research shows that experiential and collective learning is more effective. And schools, as key social institutions, spread risk over a number of years, such that learning is not 'lost' but can be recovered over a long childhood. With approaching automation in many industries, we should be asking whether traditional models of schooling are up to the task of preparing children and young people for the future of work and whether school assessment should move away from standardized testing, in order to support and

reflect the range of talents of children and young people (see, https://rethinkingassessment.com/about-us-ra/).

iii. The pathological frame

Time at home in isolation, away from peers and the routine of school life, has focused attention on children's *mental health* and the capacity, or more aptly children's lack of capacity, to be resilient in the face of adversity. Research has found an increase in mental health problems since the pandemic began; for instance, England has experienced a five-percentage point increase to 16% of children aged 5-16 years (Newlove-Delgado et al 2021). Globally, the closure of schools indicates how, as with their role in underpinning industrial economies, schools also occupy a role as social welfare providers. For many children, especially those from deprived families, schools deliver not only education but also food, warmth and social care. Lockdown removes children from this resource and leaves them, in some cases, at home with vulnerable parents who may be unable to adequately care for them. Once more we can see an intersection between the pathological frame and other problem frames, in ways that delimit the possibility of alternative readings. Clearly, children already in mental distress and living in vulnerable environments are more at risk of further problems due to lockdown conditions. Isolation from peers resulting from the curtailing of their normal social ecology represents a major change in children's everyday experience of life. These concerns are tempered by discussions about children's ability to 'bounce back' in the face of adversity, despite the limited evidence to support these claims (Tso et al. 2020). Along with such concerns, the pathological frame also supports assumptions of the institutional frame, in which institutionalized learning and the

routine of school life are assumed to be the norm for all children. Time outside school medicalizes the mental state of children as a pathological problem, a risk to good mental health, which is assumed to reside in full institutionalization into school life.

While children benefit from school, it is not a one-way benefit. In comparison with community-driven approaches to schooling (Pittman, Moroney, Irby and Young 2020), the institutionalization of children within schools has been criticized. Moreover, the focus on distress provides a skewed concept of children's experiences during lockdown. Emerging qualitative research obtaining children's perspectives has found that their experiences are far more diverse than this policy frame suggests, with children identifying aspects of the lockdown that they would like to continue once it is over (Stoecklin et al. 2021). The policy problem frame should rather ask, how are these benefits socially distributed? For some children, lockdown has meant more contact with parents, less playground bullying, learning not being restricted to fixed time slots, and conditions which allow children more time for immersive learning experiences. For other children, learning at home through online classes can increase their autonomy and independence. This amounts to a positive payoff in resilience, finding their own ways to thrive, quite differently from the institutionalized definition of resilience as the ability to 'push-on-through' in the face of difficulty, which children feel neglects their concerns and lowers their confidence (Brown and Dixon 2020). It also shifts our understanding of children's well-being as the absence of harmful aspects in their lives towards an understanding that emphasizes the presence of desired aspects, the latter construct remaining surprisingly absent in policy and most attempts to measure children's well-being (see, for example, the Greater Manchester Young People's Wellbeing Program -

https://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/social-responsibility/civic/greater-manchester-young-peoples-wellbeing-programme/).

iv. The normative family frame

Initial responses to the pandemic were premised on the *family* as being ready and able to take on the task of daily child care and education. In the UK, 'family' was initially assumed to be two adult carers, living in one dwelling. Children living between the homes of separated parents brought a greater risk of viral transmission. A more serious problem has been the failure of social care support systems for vulnerable children. As in many other jurisdictions, the UK children's care system is in crisis, with some vulnerable children being housed in unregulated care facilities, placing them at significant risk of abuse and neglect (as reported in *The Guardian*, 6 January, 2021). For at risk children living at home, the lack of professional support visitors, as well as lack of contact with General Practitioners, means that routine checks are not spotting signs of abuse and neglect (Green 2020). Furthermore, the ability of social services to put in place family support to prevent abuse and neglect has been severely hampered. The distinction between family types indicates the extent to which the pandemic has increased risks to those already at risk, in stark contrast to children with stable home environments.

v. A rights-excluding frame

The implementation at the national level of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989 depends on the degree to which states have institutionalized a *child rights* focus across government. Despite ratifying the Convention, many states have not utilized a rights perspective in framing children's needs in the pandemic, nor in responding to them.

Global mechanisms exist to support a child rights-inclusive policy frame. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF 2021) Rights Respecting Schools program provides an opportunity to integrate human rights into children's everyday experiences of school. However, it has not become a unifying mechanism for defending children's rights around access to education in the pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO 2020a) has been instrumental in providing guidance about measures for safe return to school. In their joint publication, the WHO, UNICEF and UNESCO clearly state that the wellbeing of children is a priority and they recommend that schools only be closed as a last resort (WHO 2020b). In many countries, this has not been observed. UNICEF reports that 91% of the world's children have had their schooling disrupted by closures and warns of an impending child's rights crisis (UNICEF 2020). While the effects in terms of educational outcomes are broad-reaching, UNESCO warns that the closures are likely to widen the learning gap between children from lower-income and higher-income families. Children from low-income households are far less likely to have a reliable internet connection, access to books or live in homes in which they have a suitable place to do homework, factors required for homeschooling. Unsurprisingly, then, the impacts are felt unequally.

Despite this, while WHO evidence shows children present a lower risk of transmission, the interests of children are still weighed against the risk to adults. In a study in Canada, Finland and the United Kingdom, teachers expressed the feeling of being 'caught in the crossfire of health advisories and government or school board indecisiveness or inaction', which resulted in them feeling ill-equipped and unsupported in their roles as front-line workers (Collier and Burke 2020). The media pits teachers' safety against that of children (BBC 2021). Were Rights Respecting Schools practices institutionalized, children and teachers would be brought together in ways to jointly deliberate their response to the pandemic; children would necessarily be included in decision-making that affects their interests.

Conclusion: The framing politics around children and COVID-19

The OHCHR (2021) argues that the unintended consequences of COVID-19 policies will be felt across the human rights spectrum and that this will define the success or failure of the public health response. At the moment, for children, an understanding of the implications of the lockdown for their 'lifeworlds' is absent. We need to quickly produce such knowledge for policymakers. This should aim to uncover the specific impacts of policy on the everyday experiences of children and their families, including impacts on their quality of life. This includes knowledge outside the dominant frames currently informing policy, such as the ambivalent implications of lockdown, some of which might be beneficial for children: the reframing of time and space; resilience; closeness within households; and skills in digital technologies. Such knowledge should also consider the social ecologies of children, including relationships with peers, beyond extended families. Moreover, what do children who are marginalized or disadvantaged

because of their social position have to say about the effects of COVID-19 on them, which would allow us to gauge the impacts of social inequalities from children's perspectives? Finally, there should be a renewed focus on child rights, most importantly the rights of children to express their views freely and to have those views given due weight.

With the necessary urgency of COVID-19 policymaking, the framing of children and childhood is performed without reflection. This leads to unintended consequences, which impact heavily upon children. A politics of framing is being played out through the many rapid policy responses, such that several frames are in operation at any one time. It is uncertain how this will develop once some policy responses become institutionalized. However, given the lack of counter-framing opinion by children in the public sphere, along with their raw power deficit in relation to other social interests, a properly child-oriented policy frame is unlikely to be put in place unless children's experiences are adequately represented.

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