



The Ethics of Adultcentrism in the Context of COVID-19: Whose Voice Matters?

Sydney Campbell 

Received: 20 October 2020 / Accepted: 18 August 2021 / Published online: 20 October 2021
© Journal of Bioethical Inquiry Pty Ltd. 2021

Abstract Adultcentrism is an inherent feature of the social fabrics comprising most resource-rich countries in the twenty-first century that undermines the capacities, value, and voices of young people in various ways. In the context of COVID-19, we are confronted with the question of whose voice matters and must ask: is adultcentrism ethically permissible during a pandemic? This Critical Controversy examines this question in relation to evolving concepts of childhood, children’s rights, and the capacities of young people, to highlight areas of tension, future research, and potential for critical dialogue.

Keywords Adultcentrism · COVID-19 · Children’s rights · Well-being · Childhood

For most resource-rich countries in the twenty-first century, adultcentrism—a paradigm based on the subtle, yet pervasive, egocentric belief that positions adults at the centre of everything (Florio, Caso, and Castelli 2020)—is an inherent feature of social fabric.

While this belief is supported by the various rights and responsibilities adults are afforded, it situates children and adolescents (henceforth, young people) only in reference to adulthood and can undermine their true capacities. Moreover, adultcentrism causes young people to be viewed as “others” and as objects that require adult input. As a by-product, young people’s “voices and perspectives are disqualified, ignored or reinterpreted with adult lenses,” (Florio, Caso, and Castelli 2020, ¶1 under “The adultcentric paradigm”) especially in the health sector. While this is an area of potential ethical concern in any context, during a pandemic (such as COVID-19) we are confronted with the question of whose voice matters (i.e., who do we need to hear from and include in pandemic planning discussions)—a question that is implicit and guiding within recent work completed by Victor Larcher and Joe Brierley (2020). Yet based on the enduring presence of adultcentrism within our health systems and our policies, and the simultaneous enduring silence associated with the voices of young people in pandemic policy discussions, there is a question we must ask in return: *is adultcentrism morally permissible during a pandemic?* In this paper, I situate this question in the evolving social construct of childhood and highlight the tensions that exist and areas for future research.

When we are thinking about whose voice matters in a particular context or situation, it is essential to query: (1) who the stakeholders are, (2) what risks or harms a particular population faces (as those who face

S. Campbell (✉)
Institute of Health Policy, Management & Evaluation,
University of Toronto, 155 College St 4th Floor, Toronto,
ON M5T 3M6, Canada
e-mail: sydney.campbell@mail.utoronto.ca

S. Campbell
Joint Centre for Bioethics, University of Toronto, Toronto,
Canada

more harms may have more justification to have their voices heard), and (3) what the voices of a particular population can contribute. Considering that COVID-19 has the potential to impact most, if not all, individuals, this causes all members of society to be positioned as **stakeholders**. Additionally, emerging work in the field of childhood ethics has encouraged shifting away from positioning young people as “moral objects” and human “becomings” to positioning them as “moral agents” and human “beings” (Carnevale et al. 2020). This work also aligns the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), especially Article 12 that outlines the rights young people have to meaningfully contribute to discussions that impact their lives and these rights mean different things depending on the capacities of the young person (Krappmann 2010). Considering that the UNCRC is the most widely ratified treaty in history, there is rationale for aiming to ensure that these rights are taken seriously. Moreover, so far young people have had rather unique experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic when compared to adults, potentially heightening the necessity to include them as stakeholders. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on school closures, disruptions to key services, and increasing rates of child poverty around the world have been positioned as “irreversible harms” that UNICEF has claimed are bound to lead to a “lost generation” if changes are not made (UNICEF 2020). At the same time, parents and caregivers have faced their own significant harms that have been compounded by the harms their children are confronting (Statistics Canada 2020), their need to respond to their children’s harms (since macro-level institutions are not prioritizing resource investment to support young people) and their desire to act as a protector and proxy for their children. As such, parents, too, are stakeholders, and the status quo and adultcentric paradigm dictates the importance and necessity of parental engagement.

Young people also face significant and particular **risks and harms** associated with the COVID-19 pandemic including physiological manifestations of the virus, psychosocial and mental health impacts, changes in behaviour, economic impacts, and intellectual challenges, and these impacts are especially pressing for those from disadvantaged socioeconomic positions and for those experiencing layered social and cultural disadvantages imposed by race and culture-based systemic oppression (Campbell

and Carnevale 2020). The presence and complexity of these impacts illustrates the diverse ways in which young people have been crucially impacted by the pandemic and provides strong justification for positioning young people as stakeholders and acknowledging the value in their voices. It is important to note that many of these impacts are “long-term impacts” meaning the full-scope of harm will not appear for months, years, decades, or generations. However, in many cases governments and policymakers prioritize the resolution of immediate transmission-related harms during a pandemic, which most find reasonable to avoid increasing mortality rates. Clearly, there is a strongly pragmatic approach used to drive these choices and the result is that this pragmatic focus overlooks and deprioritizes many of the young person-specific harms aforementioned. On the other hand, some may be worried about engaging with young people, as they view them as incomplete and incapable (Chapados 2020). During the pandemic, there are concerns that engagement will overwhelm young people’s limited capacities and cause them more harm, especially since timelines are generally urgent in pandemic contexts making meaningful engagement more challenging to achieve. But cases of meaningful engagement with young people in a pandemic setting, for example children and staff affiliated with the Children’s Parliament in Scotland met with COVID Education Recovery Group in December 2020 to provide input (*Children’s Parliament* 2020), are possible. These cases have shown that with advocacy, political will, active listening, and action, tokenism can be avoided.

Finally, what can young people contribute to these discussions? Throughout history, the **capacity of young people to contribute** has been called into question in various ways. Scholars relying on development psychology and traditional socialization theory—dominant conceptualizations of childhood—have positioned young people as passive and incomplete and view childhood as a mere means to the end of adulthood (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2014). These scholars would, therefore, oppose the legitimacy of young people having sufficient capacity to engage in macro level policy discussions, especially in moments of substantial need, and to relevantly contribute. However, these theories universalize the experience of childhood and ignore the alternative ways that young people

have been positioned, whereby they can ask questions that matter, that deserve adequate consideration, and that may have been overlooked based on the adultcentrism that shapes the perspective we assign to young people and their values (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2014). The Norwegian Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, exemplified this by holding a “kids-only press conference” with her cabinet ministers in March 2020 to address the concerns and questions that young people had related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Elliott 2020). In Canada, too, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam answered questions that young people sent in to CBC Kids News in early April 2020 related to the pandemic (Ram 2020). According to this view, granting young people the space to have their voices heard, rather than having their voices relayed through the mouths of adults, is important to indicate a true commitment to listening to, empathizing with, and addressing their concerns.

By strictly relying on an adultcentric lens, we risk missing out on opportunities to engage these members of society and understand the particular troubles that are impacting their lives at present and, potentially, their futures. We also, however, risk missing important questions and/or areas that are not being granted sufficient consideration. Therefore, there does seem to be justification for taking the voices of young people seriously and looking for ways to actively promote their involvement in discussions pertaining to a pandemic. However, questions remain that are associated with *how* we should include these voices and to what extent (i.e., in what context is it appropriate to include these voices)—crucial questions to address to ensure this work has practical implications. A framework related to the actualization of young people’s voices has been developed elsewhere (Lundy 2007), but it was not specific to a pandemic scenario and it did not rely on or utilize an explicit ethical lens. While this would be one area for future study, there are scholars who may wish to argue that adultcentrism is more ethically justified in times of a pandemic.

Arguments of this nature force us to thoroughly consider the harms that young people may face by being actively involved in pandemic-related discussions and sharing their voices in these contexts.

Some scholars argue that attempts to support young people’s autonomy mistakenly assign autonomy to these individuals as though it actually exists. As Hafen and Hafen (1996) have analogized, “a child is not ‘free’ to play the piano just because no physical force keeps her from walking to the piano bench. She will achieve the freedom to make music only when she has developed the capacity to obey the laws of music” (476). As such, proponents of this line of reasoning argue that to gain capacity for autonomous action, young people must “submit their freedom temporarily” to their parents, educators, and caregivers; in other words, “society has limited children’s *legal* autonomy in the short-run precisely in order to maximize their *actual* autonomy in the long-run” (Hafen and Hafen 1996, 476). In a pandemic, we must ask if young people are ready—or capable, in an agential sense—to engage in these discussions. If not, then making space for these voices to be heard may not actually benefit those young people who choose to fill these spaces. However, tensions exist related to which ethical principles or values we ought to use in addressing this question—individual liberty, proportionality, justice, or inclusivity, to name a few—and the underlying principles that are chosen will impact the way that young people are perceived. In addition, utilizing a universalist notion of autonomy, to make adult-determined claims that position all children as being incapable of obeying the “laws of music,” or incapable of possessing operational autonomy to engage in policy-related decisions, leads us to return to the critiques of developmental perspectives of childhood as aforementioned, whereby claims about what should be possible are problematic when they attempt to account for the experiences of all young people by relying on the capacities of some.

Adultcentrism is associated with significant ethical concerns. As Christopher Petr (1992) has succinctly summarized:

The negative consequences of adultcentrism can be the same as those of ethnocentrism [in which we evaluate another’s culture and/or ethnicity through reference to the culture and/or ethnicity one is personally familiar with]: miscommunication (with children), inaccurate judgments (about children’s intents and motivations), mis-

use of power (to limit children's self-determination), and undermining strengths and competencies. (408–409)

Moving forward requires careful consideration of the interests of young people in relation to overarching public health interests and the interests of parents/caregivers. All things considered, the place for young people and their voices in public health discussions has not received sufficient attention and this becomes clearer in times where we face a pandemic, including at present with COVID-19. More research is, therefore, necessary to understand the ways in which society ought to respond to, appreciate, and empathize with the experiences young people face and to explore the ethics of whether to include young people's voices in these discussions. We must also, and simultaneously, undertake research to understand whether and how young people and their parents see themselves being involved as stakeholders in pandemic policy decisions. While emerging research has indicated that young people do have interests to be involved in the context of COVID-19 (Larcher et al. 2020), it is crucial to understand what strategies and precautions are perceived as necessary by both young people and their parents for pandemic policy engagement, as mentioned above. And still, even if young people are involved in pandemic policy decisions based on advocacy for their inclusion, this is just a first step. More work must be done to critically challenge the prejudices that young people face about their capacities, wisdom, experiences, and agency as these are embedded in and fundamental to the adult-centric social fabrics that are continually operating within our lives.

References

- Campbell S., and F.A. Carnevale. 2020. Injustices faced by children during the COVID-19 pandemic and crucial next steps. *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 11(5): 658–659.
- Carnevale F.A., D. Collin-Vézina, M.E. Macdonald, J.F. Ménard, V. Talwar, and S. Van Praagh. 2020. Childhood ethics: An ontological advancement for childhood studies. *Children & Sociology* 35(1): 110–124.
- Chapados S. 2020. As schools prepare to reopen during COVID-19, are the kids alright? *The Conversation*, August 12. <https://theconversation.com/as-schools-prepare-to-reopen-during-covid-19-are-the-kids-alright-142976>. Accessed September 29, 2020.
- Children's Parliament. 2020. Engaging children around the notion of recovery across the school system. Children's Parliament, December 10. <https://www.childrensparliament.org.uk/rights-based-recovery/>. Accessed July 1, 2021.
- Elliott, J.K. 2020. "It's OK to be scared," Norway PM says at kids-only coronavirus briefing. *Global News*, March 19. <https://globalnews.ca/news/6701272/coronavirus-norway-kids-press-conference/>. Accessed June 25, 2020.
- Florio E., L. Caso, and I. Castelli. 2020. The Adultcentrism Scale in the educational relationship: Instrument development and preliminary validation. *New Ideas in Psychology* 57: 100762.
- Hafen B.C., and J.O. Hafen. 1996. Abandoning children to their autonomy: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Harvard International Law Journal* 37(2): 449–491.
- Krappmann, L. 2010. The weight of the child's view (Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child). *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 18(4): 501–513.
- Larcher V., and J. Brierley. 2020. Children of COVID-19: Pawns, pathfinders or partners? *Journal of Medical Ethics* 46(8): 508–509.
- Larcher V., M. Bittborn, J. Linthicum, et al. 2020. Young people's views on their role in the COVID-19 pandemic and society's recovery from it. *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 105(12): 1192–1196.
- Lundy, L. 2007. "Voice" is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal* 33(6): 927–942.
- Petr, C.G. 1992. Adultcentrism in practice with children. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services* 73(7): 408–416.
- Quennerstedt, A., and M. Quennerstedt. 2014. Researching children's rights in education: Sociology of childhood encountering educational theory. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 35(1): 115–132.
- Ram, A. 2020. Justin Trudeau answers kids' questions about the coronavirus. *CBC Kids News*, April 5. <https://www.cbc.ca/kidsnews/post/watch-justin-trudeau-answers-kids-questions-about-the-coronavirus>. Accessed June 25, 2020.
- Statistics Canada. 2020. Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian families and children. *The Daily*, July 9. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/200709/dq200709a-eng.pdf?st=zKDDictM>. Accessed September 25, 2020.
- UNICEF. 2020. UNICEF calls for averting a lost generation as COVID-19 threatens to cause irreversible harm to children's education, nutrition and well-being. UNICEF, November 18. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-calls-averting-lost-generation-covid-19-threatens-cause-irreversible-harm>. Accessed July 1, 2021.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.