The International and Canadian Child Rights Partnership (ICCRP)

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ICCRP

Background

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) was created 30 years ago to demonstrate a commitment to protecting young people's participation rights. Since then, a host of researchers in the Global North and South have been at the forefront of promoting children's rights, seeking to ensure that children and young people's experiences and perspectives are included in matters that affect them (Kellett 2010; Spyrou, 2018). A substantial body of research has emerged involving children and young people as research participants themselves, rather than relying on adults' views (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Our child rights-based research, the ICCRP project, speaks to the emerging and on-going conversations in the research methods and childhood literature, about how to marry ethical regulations and practice with co-production (Houghton, 2015), the need to recognize children and young people's own project journeys (Oliveras, Cluver, Bernays, & Armstrong, 2018), and how to achieve cohesiveness and learning experiences (Tisdall & Punch 2012; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2019). Definitions of child and youth participation identifies various challenges experienced in participation in practice, ranging from tokenism and having minimum impact on decision-making processes, selection processes for children and young people, to who will be included or excluded (Caputo, 2017; Collins, 2017; Fylkesnes, Taylor, & Iversen, 2018; Lundy, 2018). Child and youth participation has various types and definitions with the most cited being the UNCRC Article 12(1), illustrated in the diagram below:

(Lundy, 2007)

Methodology

The ICCRP project involves 14 male and female children and young people (10 to 24 years of age), including practitioners and academics across four countries (Canada, Brazil, China and South Africa). The project has three phases. Phase I involved establishing the International Child and Youth Advisory Committee (CYAC), conducting literature reviews in Portuguese, Spanish and English, as well as interviews with international experts. Invitations were extended through partner organisations whereby children and young people could voluntarily join the CYAC. From late 2017 to 2018, Phase II involved in-depth investigations of how to monitor children's participation in particular international child protection activities involving partner organisations. The international CYAC meetings are held every two months, with 17 meetings having taken place thus far. At the international level, all meetings are virtual, using internet technology, while some local meetings were held in person. CYAC members' recommendations for the project are anonymously noted during meetings to respect confidentiality, after which they are considered by adult researchers. As of 2019, the ICCRP is in Phase III, which is focused on incorporating learning from Phases I and II, undertaking knowledge exchange and identifying next steps. The methodology for this project was more akin to participatory action research, where emphasis is placed on collective inquiry and experimentation, followed by reflection and change (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The CYAC were invited to give feedback on their experiences at a collective meeting or individually. Researchers considered all this information, undertaking thematic coding (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) to identify key themes.

Results

The ICCRP's ambition for an international CYAC posed complex challenges amplified by working across time zones, languages, and contexts. Three of these themes are discussed below:

Theme I: Ethical regulation

A considerable body of literature currently exists focussing on ethical considerations related to children and young people's participation in research (Graham, Powell, Tayler, Anderson, & Fitzgerald, 2013). Such challenges were encountered in the ICCRP project, in relation to institutional ethical regulatory requirements prior to and during the process of the CYAC involvement. The project essentially developed without significant dialogue with children and young people in the initial phase, which led to the recognition that they needed to be engaged more actively moving forward. Ethical requirements from some participating academic institutions were particularly gruelling, involving extensive paperwork and subsequent revisions, which then required further agreement across all institutions. Children and young people were critical of some of the conditions needed to meet institutional ethical requirements. The South African CYAC, for example, found the consent form to be lengthy and too complex to elicit meaningful consent from children and young people. As the wording of the consent form could not be changed, the CYAC advised creative changes to process of obtaining consent, which enabled the form to be understood. Working in partnership, the adult researchers and CYAC, created a series of activities, games, and interactive sessions, to explain concepts which enabled young people to understand what they were agreeing to.

Theme II: Children and Youth's own project journeys

Adult researchers were challenged by the CYAC members regarding how the advisory committees would function and what they would address. The views of the CYAC members enabled adult researchers to recognise, that they preferred to meet in their own space, at times when they could engage with greater ease, separate from regular on-going monthly adult meetings and agendas. CYAC members and adult researchers came together effectively, with the productive joint presentations for dissemination of research outcomes, at several international conferences in 2018 and 2019. The CYAC also expressed the need for more time to get to know one another and the adult team members. They identified some initial disappointment about 'research' being the primary focus and some reported *"feeling bored and feeling they had little to contribute"*, with no interest in joining research team meetings again.

A Chinese CYAC member expressed:

"Meetings involving children shall not be as tight and serious as adults' meeting".

This contrasted with CYAC members' excitement and interest in learning about each other's context and realities, sharing their knowledge and insights regarding children's rights within their countries and regions.

A Brazilian CYAC member shared her view:

"The theme of diversity is important. We see people creating a group from different backgrounds like we are, and the focus is often on creating a homogenous group: discarding the differences and only looking for the similarities. If we address our differences too, we can achieve much more interesting and valuable work…we connect and celebrate our diversity…our differences make each country's case unique".

The feedback challenged adult researchers' assumptions and supported them to identify, together with the CYAC, spaces for co-working, collaboration and meaningful participation. Prior to the second ICCRP meeting, all team members including both CYAC and adult researchers - shared their biographies including photos, drawings, and details of their country. Meetings then began and ended with cultural greetings, including interactive culturally diverse icebreakers and music, to learn more about – and respect – each other's cultures, and feel comfortable with one another, as well as restructure power imbalances.

Theme III: Implications of the virtual, the international and the local

Considerable challenges were faced working with a diverse group of young people in the international CYAC, particularly in relation to language and communication. Recruitment was challenging, at times, as the ICCRP tried to identify English-speaking young people from each of the four countries. Even with a shared language, the research and thematic terminology proved challenging as participants' understanding of English varied greatly. To resolve this problem and ensure equal participation, the concept of a *"Jargon Buster"* was introduced, which enabled CYAC members to stop the conversation every time jargon was used. A glossary was made of these jargon words, which was distributed with all the research materials for young people. Lessons were learnt about the limitations of virtual communication as well. Presumptions about the global reach of the internet and the advanced abilities of young people to access it (Martin & Stuart, 2011) were belied by the CYAC experience. In rural South Africa, for example, where internet access is very limited, the ICCRP researchers had to travel to children and young people. Meaningful participation in virtual meetings was dependent on receiving documents in advance and in South Africa this information could not be sent electronically via email and had to be couriered or posted. There were other challenges, even in areas with more stable internet access, such as China where Facebook is banned and the project relied heavily on voice notes and short YouTube style videos to overcome language and literacy barriers. The CYAC members felt that even though language was a challenge at time, they describe feelings of inclusion, feeling valued, appreciated and supported.

A South African CYAC member expressed:

"Language can still be a challenge when participating, especially for those whose first language is not English. This refers both to meetings and project documents".

A Brazilian CYAC member also shared:

"English is my second language. Sometimes, my translation gets lost while I am speaking. It is helpful for me to talk to other CYAC members in order to learn in collaboration on certain English words, and help each other".

Creative and innovative strategies were adapted to facilitate and enhance communication – at local, international and virtual platforms – with significant contributions from the CYAC members. User-friendly documentation, such as glossaries of key terms and demystified research and rights-based language jargon, created opportunities for both CYAC members and the adult researchers to develop shared understandings of core terms and processes.

Conclusion

This project attempted to give effect to the general principles of non-discrimination and participation, as well as an anticolonial approach, to overcome the imbalances of power across contexts, lived experiences, and intergenerational roles, while recognizing the influential roles of children. A willingness to engage in dialogue is key to a reflexive response, which the ICCRP would argue should be a core part of any research education and training for those engaging in research.
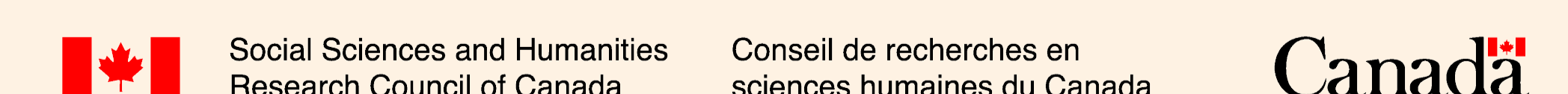
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