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Children as co-researchers in pandemic times: Power and participation in the use of digital dialogues with children during the COVID-19 lockdown

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Abstract

This paper documents co-participatory research with children in six primary schools in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores the use of what we term digital dialogues with diverse groups of children aged 9–10 years as members of Child Research Advisory Groups. The paper conceptualises the digital dialogues as sites of resistance as well as constraint, empowering children to articulate their voices in relation to schooling and the pandemic, whilst mediated by power dynamics—between adults and children, and between children, in the articulation of those voices.

KEYWORDS
children, Covid 19, education, participation

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written and researched about the health impacts of COVID-19, but the societal impacts, especially in terms of lockdown, physical distancing and social isolation are only now becoming matters of concern. Less understood is how younger generations were also affected by the disruption of the pandemic to their everyday lives. The directed closure of schools globally to stem the tide of the pandemic is unprecedented, marking a significant disruption to children's

everyday lives. On 12 March 2020, all schools closed unprecedentedly due to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland. For the remainder of the school year, children finished their schooling from home. The school closures not only impact children's education rights but also their right to participation as the traditional spaces, structures and forms of being heard were severely impacted because of the COVID-19 restrictions (Mallon & Martinez-Sainz, 2021). In a moment in which children's voice and participation are crucial to assess and fully understand the impact the pandemic has had on children's lives, opportunities for participatory research with children were severely hindered.

This paper contributes to the emerging evidence that captures children's voices during the pandemic (Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Hall et al., 2021; Lomax et al., 2022; Lundy et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2022; Zorec & Peček, 2022). Whilst such research foregrounds the impact of the pandemic on children's everyday lives, absent is a focus on the power dynamics at play, especially between adults and children. This latter is crucial considering the invisibility of children in the public policy space and the absence of their voices in framing national policy in the area (Devine, 2020). In this paper, we highlight research conducted with children as co-researchers during the unique digitally mediated context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We were interested to explore not only how the children experienced the disruption to their school lives during the pandemic, but also how digital methods could be used to empower children to exercise their voices with adults at a time of significant change. The paper explores the use of what we term *digital dialogues* with children aged 9–10 years as members of Child Research Advisory Groups (CRAGs) and the challenges and opportunities that arose in the process. It highlights the layered power dynamics at play as the dialogues evolved, and how these were mediated by the children's relationships with their teachers as well as their peers.

CHILDREN'S VOICE, RIGHTS AND INTER-GENERATIONAL POWER

Socio-historical analyses of children's positioning in society highlight the centrality of schools as key sites for the exercise of power between adults and children (Foucault, 1979). Within Foucault's framing (1980, 1982), such power is exercised through discourses, shaping actions and interactions, the very identities of children and indeed the adults who teach them (Devine, 2002). A focus on inter-generational power requires us to consider not who has power in adult/child relationships, but rather how that power is being exercised, be it by adults and/or children (Devine & Cockburn, 2018). This is not a linear process, however—it is dynamic and changing, a reflexive 'agonistic struggle' (Foucault, 1982: 211) characterised by freedom as well as constraint, with individuals simultaneously in the position of undergoing as well as exercising power (Foucault, 1980: 96). Power is thus never finite, it is fluid and changing, with children, being the recipients (subjected to) as well as creators (subjects) of discourse through their everyday interactions in schools. Discourses around children's voice and agency have increasingly been given effect in the burgeoning field of Childhood Studies (Kjorholt, 2007; Spyros et al., 2018; Tisdall & Punch, 2012), and more widely with respect to the rights of children as articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). Resonating with Foucault's analysis of power, rigid dichotomies of 'adult' power and 'child' passivity have also been queried, alongside a greater emphasis on the inter-dependence of adult/child relations centred also on love, care, belonging and ultimately negotiation within shared social spaces (Mayall, 2020). Such perspectives align with those in the field of children's rights where the need to support and empower children to articulate their voices and rights is also emphasised (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012).

There is a need to consider how 'shared social spaces' differ in terms of their power dynamics, and how such dynamics mediate the realisation of children's participatory rights in practice. Schools are especially pertinent in this regard, reflecting often contradictory discourses with respect to children and childhood, and generational orders within them. Whilst child-centred curricula and pedagogies, for example, affirm the centrality of children's voice, in practice research consistently highlights the lack of consultation with children over their learning experiences and the tokenistic incorporation of student's voice primarily in relation to disciplinary policies in schools (Arnot & Reay, 2007). The pandemic has added an additional layer to these dynamics. Not only did the closure of schools limit the rights of many children to access education, but it also limited children's right to be heard on matters that directly affected them. Research suggests that more traditional adult/child power relations have remained intact, including a consistent lack of consultation with children about the pandemic's absence from decision making (Lundy et al., 2021; Mallon & Martinez-Sainz, 2021).

Taking on board Foucault's maxim that discourse operates *through* power in sites of resistance/freedom as well as constraint, the remainder of this paper documents our work of consultation with children through a process we term *digital dialogues*. In so doing, the paper highlights not only how digital dialogues empowered children to articulate their voices in relation to the pandemic, but also how power dynamics—between adults and children, and between children themselves mediated the articulation of those voices.

CHILDREN AS CO-RESEARCHERS IN PANDEMIC TIMES

To fully appreciate the impact of the pandemic on children's lives, and to plan for post-pandemic recovery, child-engaged research is critical (Brushwood Rose & Bimm, 2021). Co-participatory research is increasingly being used in which children are the primary researchers, and where their 'insider knowledge' is especially beneficial in reaching their peers (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Collins et al., 2020; Cuevas-Parra, 2020). The data that is generated from children researching their peers can be different than that generated through adult-to-child enquiry (Mann et al., 2014), and requires continued sensitivity to power dynamics and the establishment of trust and openness both between adults and children, as well as between children themselves (Collins et al., 2020; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015).

One of the most notable mechanisms for working with children as co-researchers is through a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG), enabling adult researchers to work alongside children more successfully (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018; Dunn, 2015). A CRAG is a small group of children, who self-select to join the group and represent the interests of the larger group of children to which they belong. CRAG members act as co-researchers, along with the adult researcher to explore experiences and issues of pertinence to the larger group of children. Through a dialogical relationship between adult and child researchers, working collaboratively on an agreed goal, power inequalities are reduced. Bourke and Loveridge (2018) assert that the use of a CRAG can also reduce the likelihood of the exclusion of marginalised voices, facilitating greater autonomy for diverse groups of children to highlight matters of direct importance to them (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Mann et al., 2014). During COVID-19, the possibility of technology-mediated socially distanced participatory research with children has emerged (Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Hall et al., 2021; Lomax et al., 2022; Lundy et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2022). This paper extends this work by focusing on the power dynamics that are embedded in these participatory approaches and how these can influence children's participation.
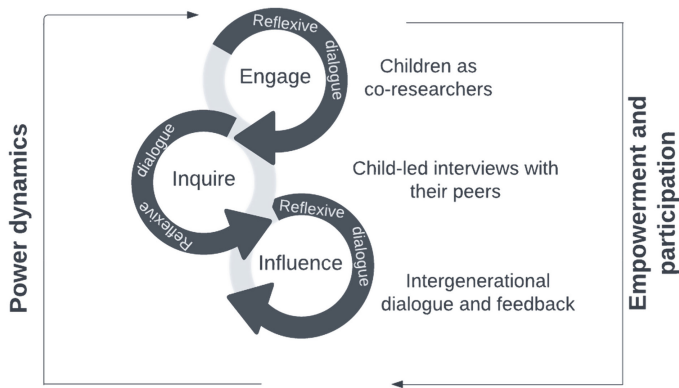
FIGURE 1 Digital dialogues

In this paper, we conceptualise the participatory work with children in terms of an evolving cyclical process of co-research between adult and child researchers. This is reflected in Figure 1. Our framing of the method in this manner takes account of the essential conditions for authentic and meaningful research with children through processes of reflexive negotiation for empowerment and participation.

The remainder of this paper outlines the process involved in terms of two guiding questions:

1. How did the digital dialogues empower children as co-researchers to reflect on their experience of the pandemic in school?
2. How was their participation influenced by the dynamics of power between adults and children and between children themselves?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The digital dialogues presented in this paper are part of the national longitudinal study of primary schooling in Ireland, *Children's School Lives* (www.cslstudy.ie). The CSL study follows two representative age cohorts in 189 primary schools that represent the full spectrum of school types in relation to size, patronage, socio-economic status, gender and urban/rural settings. The digital dialogues methodology was developed in response to social distancing regulations introduced during COVID-19 and the necessity for the research team to work remotely with the children (Symonds et al., 2020). Given the redesign of the study, additional ethical approval was secured and granted. All digital dialogues were recorded, transcribed and coded using MAXQDA software. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Participants

The CSL study has a sub-sample of 13 case study primary schools, also representative of the diversity of school settings in the Irish primary school system. Our research in these latter schools involves more in-depth immersion where peer, classroom and school cultures are studied using

TABLE 1 Members of the CRAG groups by CSL case study school

School	Type	Gender	SES	CRAG boys	CRAG girls
Fastnet	Rural town	Girls	Working class	—	4
Skellig	Rural town	Co-Ed	Working class	2	2
Tuskar	Rural	Co-Ed	Middle class	1	2
Mizen	Urban	Co-Ed	Working class	2	2
Poolbeg	Urban	Boys	Working class	4	—
Rathlin	Urban	Co-Ed	Middle class	2	2
Total				11	12

Abbreviations: CRAG, Child Research Advisory Group; CSL, Children's School Lives; SES, socio-economic status.

multi-modal, child-centred and participatory methods, in addition to interviews with teachers, school principals and parents in the case study classes. This paper draws on data involving children who at the time of the pandemic were in the 4th class of primary school and was conducted in the Spring and Summer term of 2021. All children in these classes had consented previously to participation in CSL and ethical approval for the study had been secured through the University human ethics research committee (Morrow, 2008).

Four CRAG members were selected through random selection from volunteers in each participating class, (agreed with the children) facilitated by each class teacher. In total there were 23 researchers in six CRAGS for this wave of data collection as reflected in Table 1.

Methods of data collection

The data collection period covered 4 months, during which the study children had alternate experiences of being in full lockdown with schooling conducted remotely, to being back in the classroom, but working in designated 'pods' of four/five children in which social distancing regulations applied. During the period of school opening, however, no external visitors were allowed into schools. What evolved then was a hybrid and evolving form of research in which the adult researcher co-researched remotely with the children. For their part and depending on the time and phase of the data collection period, the children were, within the limits of social distancing guidelines in their classrooms, enabled to co-research whilst physically present with their peers. A similar format was implemented in working with each CRAG, accommodating the remote format of the research. This format aligned with the conceptual framing of the digital dialogues method in phased cycles of engagement, inquiry and influence to empower participants whilst widening their participation through reflexive enquiry. The process is reflected in Figure 2.

Digital dialogues with children as co-researchers: From participation to empowerment

Children in each class were introduced to the process through an initial 'zoom' meeting held by the adult researcher (Aoife) with the whole class. A brief 5-min video, developed by the researcher was shown, reminding the children of the CSL study and introducing them to the idea of the CRAGs. This occurred whilst all children were at home from school, learning remotely. This initial introductory meeting was crucial to ensuring that all children, irrespective of whether
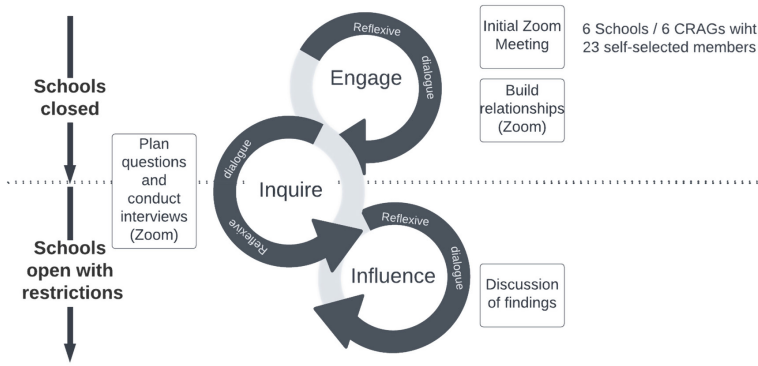
FIGURE 2 Evolving methodological design. CRAG, Child Research Advisory Group

they were members of the CRAG or not, felt included in the research, something they were familiar with from previous research visits by the CSL research team (prior to the pandemic). Of note in these discussions was the novelty for the children in being asked about the pandemic in this way, highlighting their wider invisibility in adult discourse related to the pandemic, despite the significant disruption of COVID-19 to CSL. We see this in the following excerpt from Rathlin primary school:

> *Aoife:* Okay. So, my question was: 'Did anybody ask you what you thought about all the changes that have happened in schools because of COVID?'
>
> *Child 1:* No one really asked us.
>
> *Child 2:* I agree .... It feels like a question that could be asked but it's not asked at all.
>
> *Aoife:* And why do you think it's a question that could be asked?
>
> *Child 2:* Well because people are asking a lot of questions about COVID-19 right now. Like, say if you had COVID, 'Oh how are you? Are you okay?' But they don't really ask you questions like 'How are you getting on in school because of COVID?' (Rathlin primary)

All subsequent meetings involved only the CRAG members and the researcher, again conducted through Zoom. The focus here was on training the CRAG members in the process of co-research, ethical considerations and the conduct of interviews with their peers. This meeting provided a space to build trust, assign responsibility as co-researchers and share reflections on the process. A key task following this meeting was for CRAG members to identify from amongst their peers (who were all placed in learning 'pods') up to 10 questions they would like to have included as part of the research.

The relatively open-ended nature of these discussions, including the initial introductory Zoom meeting with the whole class gave rise to comments amongst the children about their delight in just having free contact with others, something they missed during this phase of remote school learning. They referred to this as 'social time':

> The social Zoom call is good ... it's so good to see everybody as well. (Child, Skellig primary)

Notwithstanding there were also the practical technological challenges of conducting the meetings via Zoom: *I can't hear you; Are you on mute?* in addition to some humorous interruptions

from pets and younger siblings, because the children were based at home. Children's participation as co-researchers involved reflective dialogue not only with the adult researcher but also with their peers. Some brainstorming occurred within the CRAG as to various topics about school the children might consider and clarifications over the process of interviewing.

During the second phase of the digital dialogues cycle, the schools returned to the classroom and the children were thus able to plan for their interviews in person with their peers. The focus then was to refine and agree to the final list of questions that would form the CRAG member interviews with their peers. Issues related to techniques for interviewing, and confidentiality were also discussed as the children's evolving sense of their own agency, and competency as subjects (Foucault, 1980, 1982) became evident through their role as co-researchers:

> They were hard to come up with because you kind of want to have unique questions. (Skellig)

> I found it easy enough, but I only got six questions done. (Rathlin)

For the most part, the questions the children suggested covered topics related to their friendships but also to querying aspects of the school in which they felt they had little voice and agency, or where they were subject to (Foucault, 1982) the power of adults/teachers including, for example, the clothes they would wear, the topics they would study, the completion of homework and whether they should have to go to school:

> Who is your best friend? Who is your friend the longest in school?
> If you could design a school uniform, what colours would you pick? If you were the teacher for a day, what activity would you do with the class?
> What kind of teachers do you like? Strict teachers or just normal chill teachers?
> Do you think we should get more subjects such as astronomy, biology etc.?
> What do you think is the point of homework?
> Who is your favourite SNA?

> **Child 1:** 'Do you think bad behaviour gets rewarded in school?'

> **Child 2:** I have two. One is 'Do you think that school is fair?' Like, 'do you think we should be going to school?' And the second one is 'Do you think that the teacher has too many pupils to get around to'? (Rathlin primary)

Not surprisingly their priorities also included questions in relation to remote schooling during the pandemic, their words uniquely encapsulated their concerns:

> Did you like school more before Covid or do you like school more now?
> What do you miss from before Covid in School?
> What is school to you? (Poolbeg primary)

> If you could change one thing about school, what would it be and why?
> Did COVID effect your learning, did it make it better or did it make it worse? (Skellig primary)

> What are the good things and bad things about Covid? How is Covid helpful? (Mizen primary)

The final meeting with each CRAG group took place following the Easter break. By this time, all the children were fully back in school but our meetings with them continued digitally. Our focus here was upon recounting the outcomes of their co-research with peers and identifying/thinking through what they had learned about the experience of co-researching. The children shared how they worked through the challenges, including sourcing different interview locations and managing the challenges of social distancing regulations in their schools and classrooms:

> We set it up in the hallway ... only one person came in at a time. [...] It was like private so the person that was answering the questions was comfortable. (Tuskar primary)

Evident was their growing confidence and competence as co-researchers and the feelings of pride in their roles:

> **Child 1:** '...at the beginning it took me a while to get used to it but then I was just like just asking the questions, writing it down and then job's done'.

> **Child 2:** 'The first interview felt odd. But then gradually and when it came to less people to have to interview it got better. I enjoyed it. It was easy and some questions were quite easy to ask, some kind of took a bit more time. [...] It wasn't too bad, and I enjoyed it like'. (Tuskar primary)

Through their participation as co-researchers, children significantly developed their research capacities, from interviewing techniques to re-thinking questions and meaningful approaches. As agents exercising new forms of power (Foucault, 1982) through their 'researcher' roles, they skilfully worked through the constraints, influencing the research process, with suggestions for how to continue the work in the future, through on-going collaboration with CSL. This included considerations regarding managing their time, honing their methods and questions and engaging with their peers. Their efforts are evident in some of the richness of perspectives they captured, creating new discourses and important knowledge in relation to children's experiences of the pandemic in primary schools. This is perhaps best reflected in the CRAG discussion in Rathlin primary when one child referred to the comments of one of her peers that Covid 'broke' not only children's learning but also their friendships with peers:

> One person said that it kind of broke learning. So, like learning wasn't as fun because you missed out on a bunch of stuff. ...and people were saying that it broke kind of being with your friends because you have to social distance from them now ... it broke the happy things in school. (Rathlin primary)

Their research also highlighted the disruption experienced due to the multiple transitions during each wave of the pandemic, but also the distinctions the children drew between 'real' school and 'home' school, and the positives as well as challenges of both. For some, 'real' school provided their 'own' space away from 'annoying' siblings, as well as structure to their day. For others, it was the relative freedom from the routine that was enjoyable about 'home' schooling. These insights and contrasts were evident within each class, rather than between the different schools:

> I was kind of surprised that more people didn't say home-schooling because if I thought of our class, I would think people didn't like school ... but I guess the real

school would probably be better to learn and it would be easier. So, I can see why more people went for real school. (Skellig primary)

Everyone in my group said yes. One person said that the reason they like school more is because you can interact with your friends more but mainly, their siblings kept annoying them. Another person said that learning from home you don't have as much of a structure in your day whereas in school you do maths, you do Irish, you have your lunch, you do English, you have big break … it's like a schedule whereas when you're at home you're just slumped on a couch most of the day. (Rathlin primary)

Whilst it was clear children felt some relief at being back in 'real' school, it was far from their 'normal' experience, as CRAG members also captured the frustrations of their peers at the social distancing requirements. This was encapsulated in one child's comment from Fastnet primary 'you can't touch your friends'. Children also noted how social distancing cut across more collaborative and 'fun' ways of learning:

Child 1: Before COVID [I preferred school] because they didn't have to distance or like … you could more around more freely and before COVID you could sit in groups …

Child 1: [Because of COVID] you can no longer work together in pairs and groups. (Tuskar primary)

They said that everything that was good in school is now gone and all the parties and the going down to the library and stuff as well. (Rathlin primary)

For one child in Mizen primary, the more open discussion enabled through the child-led interviewing highlighted some children's critique of 'the sharing' that is typically required in school, with the social distancing in Covid enabling *freedom from* having to be sociable, as well as greater (personal) spatial autonomy:

Aoife: What answers did you get there, when you asked people is there any good thing about COVID?

Child: I got one from […] and he said the same thing, he said 'Finally, no more "sharing is caring"'. And I got another one that says you can have your own space now. (Mizen primary)

The children's growing confidence and sense of expertise in relation to their voices was a key outcome of the digital dialogues process. Through the dialogues, they were empowered to express, for the first time, how the pandemic had influenced their lives. In Foucault's framing, the digital dialogues enabled the exercise of power in transformative terms, as sites of resistance to children's wider invisibility in pandemic discourse. Through such power, children's experience of themselves as subjects/agents also deepened. CRAG members were enabled to act upon themselves and others (Foucault, 1982) to make their voices visible not only in relation to the pandemic and their experiences of remote schooling but also to their experience of school more generally. Yet, the success of the dialogues was not guaranteed, nor did they operate seamlessly. As Foucault (1980) notes the exercise of power is messy and complex. The dialogues required a

great deal of negotiation, and sensitivity to power dynamics, which significantly influenced the quality and depth of the children's participation. These included power dynamics between adults and children, as well as between children themselves.

The centrality of power dynamics and reflexive negotiation

Whilst the digital dialogues were child-led, adults were central to facilitating the children's actions, highlighting the dialectical interplay of power (Foucault, 1980) between adults and children in the process. At a practical level, given the digital context of the method, there was considerable reliance on teachers as facilitators of the process. They were the main point of contact between the adult researcher and the CRAG members, sending zoom links by email to individual CRAG members. When school reopened, they supported CRAG members to find spaces and digital devices to enable them to conduct the research with their peers, just at the time when schools were grappling with returning to learning on-site and adapting to social distancing guidelines. As a 'space apart' from the everyday classroom life, however, also present in the dialogues was an inversion of traditional discourses of adult/child (in)competency that at times was influenced by the digital method itself. This was especially the case in terms of technological competency—with teachers working outside of their comfort zones, unsure for example of setting up the zooms and that the links were all in order:

> Okay. I will talk to you all later boys and girls. Thanks a million Aoife, and I think I will just … now hopefully I make myself leave and not everybody leave! (Class teacher, Skellig primary)

The extension of children's agency, and their possible actions (Foucault, 1982) through such facilitation was challenging at times for them, altering more traditional understandings of teacher/adult/child power over what children did in school. Their struggles (ibid: 211) are reflected in the multiple queries they raised related to their 'freedom' in conducting their tasks, anxious they would make a 'mistake' and not do it 'correctly':

Mark: Do we have to do them?

Aoife: If you would like to. It would really help you as a researcher Mark

Mark: When do they need to be done for? … Can we do five? …. I'll try to get the 10 done. (Mizen primary)

Child 1: What if let's say me and Patrick and Martha came up with the same question, what would happen then?

Aoife: Okay, so that's going to happen.

Child 2: Then that would be like nearly one of the most important questions if we've all came up with it. (Tuskar primary)

Here, the importance of adults scaffolding the children's leadership by gently supporting their actions was key. This reflexive negotiation is evident in the researcher affirming and nudging the

children's reflections in the excerpt above, whilst in the excerpt below the children assign an interviewer role to the teacher:

Child: The teacher did the [interview for the] little group.

Aoife: So, you gave your teacher a job to interview the other pod?

Child: Yeah.

Aoife: That was a great idea. Why did you think of doing that or what?

Child: Because there is nobody else out of us that were in their pod so the teacher had to interview them. (Fastnet primary)

The teacher's own willingness to be assigned a role in this way, highlights the dialectic of inter-generational power at play, which structures and extends the children's own capacities to act and influence the situation. In the second excerpt, the children turn interviewers of Aoife, the adult researcher giving rise to her revelations about her own struggles with the research process. Whilst this occurred spontaneously, through the 'playing' with ideas for questions during the second round of the digital dialogues in Poolbeg primary school, the lessening of more linear adult/child power dynamics was instrumental in building trust and enhancing children's own confidence and competencies as co-researchers:

Aoife: Tomás, any other ones coming up in your head?

Tomás: No, not really but I want to ask you a question. Do you feel good or bad about you being the researcher?

Aoife: I feel good but sometimes I'm a little scared about it because I don't really know sometimes what answers I'm going to get ... sometimes I might get worried, I might say oh what if I don't get loads of information ... I think being a researcher is great but I think when you guys join, our team is just even stronger. So, I think that's a great question to ask me. Thank you very much. Does that answer your question?

Tomás: Well yeah.

This opened a much deeper range of questions from the boys ('tell me why you don't know?') but also an opportunity for sharing their anxieties regarding the process in general. This process of deliberation was key to the children thinking of their questions in clusters, but also to reflect on questions that probed further. We see this in the efforts made by the children in Tuskar primary to be more probing in their phrasing:

Child 1: I have a few ... I thought that maybe 'what would you do if you could do all the decisions about school?'

Child 2: Which do you prefer, before COVID when there was school or now ... I doubt everyone would have the same opinion.

Child 3: I didn't say like, 'What subject has changed the most?' Like 'Have some subjects just became harder or easier and what are some of the subjects over lockdown like?

Child 1: I think that .... do you prefer to just ... to have it told to you or just try to do it yourself? Or to recap everything and things like that?

Child 2: There's no real questions about a teacher. Teacher is a teacher. Our teachers are one of a kind. They might all be called teachers, but they all have differences. I'm sure they have one thing that's different about all of them. (Tuskar primary)

Within the CRAG group itself, the negotiation was required as to who would ask what questions and which questions would be chosen in the final list to ask their peers. This was again facilitated and mediated by the adult researcher with a clear emphasis on negotiation, and for the children fairness in the decisions made:

Child 1: Just to make it fair, could you not pick three questions? If we could have three questions each.

Child 2: Two questions.

Aoife: Okay, well I'm just going to ask the group so let's see if everyone in the group wants to do it. And that way OK, go on, yeah?

Child 3: Like we could have two of your questions, two of Joan's questions and two of Ann's questions.

Child 2: That'd be good.

Aoife: That'll be alright? So, will we do it that way?

Child 1: Yeah.

Aoife: Okay. So, I love that idea, and that way, just as you say, Martha, it makes it fair. (Fastnet primary)

Child 1: I think that you should do a vote and if there's more people that want to do that question, we should do the question. If there's more people that don't want to do the question, then we don't do it, so that it's fair.

Aoife: That's a great decision, Danielle. Would people agree to that? Would people be happy to do a vote? Okay, right. So, give me a thumbs up if you agree, or whatever way you want to show me that you agree. (Rathlin primary)

Child Research Advisory Group members' emphasis on fairness in who got to ask which questions also points to the importance of power dynamics between peers in the enactment of the dialogues. This was possibly the most challenging aspect for CRAG members precisely because it required an inversion of their more usual 'child' roles within the classroom. As a form of power,

the dialogues opened possibilities for new fields of action (Foucault, 1982), and with-it new fields of influence that was not without risks. As 'co-leaders' of the dialogical process, their primary concerns related to a fear of not being taken seriously by their peers as well as their competency in asking 'good' interview questions:

> I think that it was easy, some of the questions, but some of them were hard ... I think it'd kind of be like embarrassing if you had like a bad question, if there was a weird question or something. (Rathlin primary)

Gendered dynamics were also in evidence here, with boys in Poolbeg, an all-boys working-class school, most expressive of not appearing silly in front of their peers:

> But what if people start messing? What if they don't take it seriously? ...We ask them 'if I can ask you a couple of questions real quick. (Poolbeg)

For others, in contrast, the potential to exercise *control over* peers emerged, in addition to their concerns to neutralise the 'annoyance' of some peers through the collection of 'evidence':

Child 1: Okay, or what about a recorder, if you could record it like on a digital recorder, The conversation?

Child 2: That would be much better.

Aoife: I have a recorder.

Child 3: They would probably just shout out even with the recorder.

Child 2: Oh my God! ... then *we could show how annoying they are*.

Child 1: Yeh, the recorder please! (Skellig primary)

Child Research Advisory Group members had to learn then how to exercise their power in a collaborative way, to 'manage' 'difficult' or 'un-cooperative' participants and to come up with solutions of their own. This included trying to get their peers to engage with the interviews, take turns in speaking and not provide what the CRAG members label as 'silly answers':

Child 1: 'It was actually a bit difficult to interview because they were all just talking and then if they wanted to say something but then I had to give a few of the other people a go at answering questions, even if they didn't want to'.

Child 2: '[...] but only some people, some of them are actually quite respectful'.

Child 3: '[...] once people were shouting out then so then I had to try and make them put up their hands'.

Child 4: '[...] I made them take turns. They still tried to shout out though'. (Skellig primary)

Their responses highlight the dialectical play of power with their peers—their positioning as *subjects*, actively leading and working with their peers as CRAG members whilst simultaneously

being *subjected to* the norms of banter, indifference and status hierarchies within their peer groups. Un-cooperative behaviour from their peers not only manifested in 'silly answers' but sometimes in a complete lack of answers. Members of the different CRAG groups shared their frustration when something like this happened during the interviews, and solutions they come up with to address the problem:

> When I asked the person, he just starts laughing for no reason. I asked him how was school this year. And then he just starts laughing. [...] He just didn't take it seriously. (Poolbeg)

Child 1: 'I interviewed five ... I had to poke them to get them to [respond] because they weren't listening'.

Aoife: What did you do to try and get them to listen?

Child 2: I came over to them and I asked them could they answer me and they said no because they didn't hear me and I said no because you weren't listening. (Fastnet)

The children also became alert to certain challenges when doing focus groups, including encouraging their peers not to 'copy' the answers of others. Through these dialogues, the children also reflected on the dynamics within different groups and the quality of responses that ensued. For one child this related to the 'energy' of the group:

Child 1: I had to give a few of the other people a go at answering questions, even if they didn't want to.

Child 2: I think it's not really about the number, I think it's about the energy of the group.

Aoife: Okay, can you tell me more about that?

Child 2: Say if you have about three people but their energy is really high and they keep butting in and when you're asking questions that would probably be more difficult of doing a group with say, five or six people with low energy. (Skellig)

The children's intimate knowledge of their classmates, coupled with their growing confidence as researchers gave rise to shared commentary about who said what and were surprised sometimes at the opinions their peers expressed. The dialogues then provided an important space for children to listen to one another in a new way, deepening their understanding of one another. In the excerpt below, we see the CRAG members in Skellig primary growing in their own sense of competency—what they term 'sensible' and 'good' answers, commenting on their peers in this respect:

Child 1: I actually interviewed six.

Aoife: Okay and how did that go?

Child 1: So, it went well but the person who gave me the most answers, which I wouldn't guess that they would give the most answers, was Nora.

Aoife: Nora?

Child 1: Yeah. That's the only person who gave sensible answers at my table.

Aoife: Was that a good surprise that that person …?

Child 1: Yeah, because Nora she's normally all shy, she doesn't really express much things.

Child 2: She's not shy.

Child 1: She is.

Child 3: She is.

Child 2: She's only shy when [teacher] asks her a question and she doesn't know the answer. She won't talk.

Aoife: Okay, so Mark, you were definitely surprised?

Child 1: Yeah, I was really surprised and well she gave me all kinds of answers but Mary and Pat gave me really good answers and on question 6. (Skellig)

This emphasis on 'sensibility' was also reflected in the discussion by the CRAG in Tuskar that a co-researcher 'role' and/or performance was required, which was equated to more adult modes of self-presentation.

Gráinne: at the beginning it took me a while to get used to it but then I was just like just asking the questions, writing it down and then job's done.

Aoife: Good that's a really good attitude. And how about you Grainne?

Gráinne: It felt proper business style, I guess.

Aoife: Did it?

Gráinne: All we need is suits.

Máire: Yeah, all we need is proper clothes.

Paul: And a nice tie.

Gráinne: Yeah. The first interview felt odd. But then gradually and when it came to less people have to interview it got better. I enjoyed it. (Tuskar)

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This paper foregrounds the voices of children as experts in their own lives, including and perhaps especially during pandemic times. It extends the analysis of the lack of consultation with children

globally and the impact on their rights (see, e.g. Lundy et al., 2021) by focusing specifically on their school lives. The paper also extends the current analysis by framing these experiences in the context of power dynamics (Foucault, 1979, 1980), and the invisibility of children in a wider (adult) discourse of the pandemic as an outcome of inter-generational power. Through their voices, it highlights children's awareness of their absence in discussions about the impact of the pandemic on their school lives, yet their fluency and competency in articulating key concerns. These related primarily to the lack of physical contact with their peers, in addition to the multiple disruptions to their schooling as they switched between 'remote' and in-class learning. As articulated by one group of children, the pandemic 'broke' their happiness and learning.

The paper also builds on the analysis of research methodologies with children during the pandemic (e.g. Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Lomax et al., 2022) by framing the use of digital methods (what we term digital dialogues) in the context of power dynamics, not only between adults and children but also between children themselves. In doing so it highlights the fluid, contingent and negotiated nature of power, in which children (as well as adults), through their mutual inter-dependencies re/create new forms of knowledge—about themselves and others, about the pandemic and about the processes of conducting research. Within this 'powerful' lens, it is how power is exercised—both in terms of freedom as well as constraint, as Foucault notes, that is key. The dialogues proved to be important sites of resistance and agency for the children, in a wider context of constraint. On the one hand, the dialogues facilitated the children's participatory rights and voice in being a 'space apart' in which they experienced deep engagement and connectedness, respect and relative freedom. On the other hand, the success of the dialogues, and the digital method itself was dependent on adults (teachers and the adult researcher) to guide, facilitate and support. These power dynamics framed the boundaries and possibilities of the children's mutual sharing, and ultimately their understanding of themselves (Foucault, 1980) as co-researchers in the process. Importantly it was how power was exercised over time through the cycles of dialogue that facilitated the nature, impact and outcome of the discourse(s) they generated. Inter-generationally, the dialogues challenged both the adults and the children involved: to commit to the process, to be willing to negotiate, to be vulnerable and to be willing to lead. For CRAG members, this required a (positive) shift in their construction of themselves; an alteration of more traditional norms of authority and competency in both their relations with their teachers (and researcher), as well as with their peers. This latter proved especially challenging, but also enlightening as they acquired skills in negotiation, group management and persistence, as they grew into their competency and autonomy. The dialogues also opened windows to the children for new forms of expression, that sometimes caught them by surprise, but which highlighted both the potential and importance of this kind of critical engagement between children for deepening insights and mutual understanding.

These power dynamics and the potential of the digital dialogues were also mediated by the structural conditions of children's lives, especially in the contrasting social, cultural and economic resources CRAG members could draw upon to enact their roles (Devine, 2020). In Rathlin and Tuskar, both schools serving middle-class children, the fluency, ease and confidence with which the children spoke from the onset, contrasted with children in Fastnet, an all-girls disadvantaged school with a high immigrant population. Building trust with a group of working-class boys in Poolbeg, overcoming their concerns, especially around vulnerability in the face of peers, was especially important. The paper thus affirms other emerging research (e.g. Lomax et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2022) on the pandemic on the importance of participatory digital spaces in facilitating the voices of those who are most marginalised. It highlights how the digital dialogues provided a safe space for these children, amongst those who

are commonly less likely to voice their concerns—children in poorer communities and those from immigrant communities and opened the window for rich conversations and their willingness to participate in the process. Of note however was the extent to which the dialogues needed to be facilitated by the teacher during school hours, in the absence of digital resources at home, something which differed greatly in households. Timetabling with siblings' needs for limited digital devices, and poor or non-existent access to wifi proved to be obstacles to many. The research points to the power of working digitally with marginalised children but also the importance of creating the means to do so, in the absence of resources at home. These challenges raise important considerations for adult researchers of building children's research capacities in an equitable manner, including, as Lomax et al note (2022) the diverse strategies and methods required to do so.

The digital dialogues proved to be a fit-for-purpose methodology by providing the children and each CRAG autonomy to develop meaningful and contextually relevant questions related to their everyday lives in school. Central was the development of a rights-respecting methodology that enabled children's capacity building as co-researchers, within the constraints posed by the pandemic itself, not only during the closure of schools but even when opened, of the social distancing regulations required. This was especially challenging considering the qualitative inquiry and the desire for meaningful and rich engagement with children and their peers. In so doing, it highlighted the possibilities (and perhaps importance) of drawing on digital research tools in researching children's voices through co-research with peers, in addition to being used as a tool for inter-generational dialogue. This has practical implications for participatory research with children in the recovery phase of the pandemic when child-engaged research is particularly needed. As Luo et al. (2022) also note in their research with younger children, it is possible to take advantage of and utilise the digital environment to rethink the way in which children engage with and take ownership of their participation in research projects. Notwithstanding some of the technical challenges involved, the digital dialogues enabled a flexible approach to research that was especially important when schools were closed. This not only generated unique insights into how the children experienced their learning and schooling more generally in 'real time' during the pandemic, but also captured salient issues in their everyday lives of living and learning: the centrality of their friendships, the power struggles within, their relationships with teachers, their worries and concerns as well as their pragmatic and reflective dispositions to negotiating their transition through the fourth class.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Research data are not shared.

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