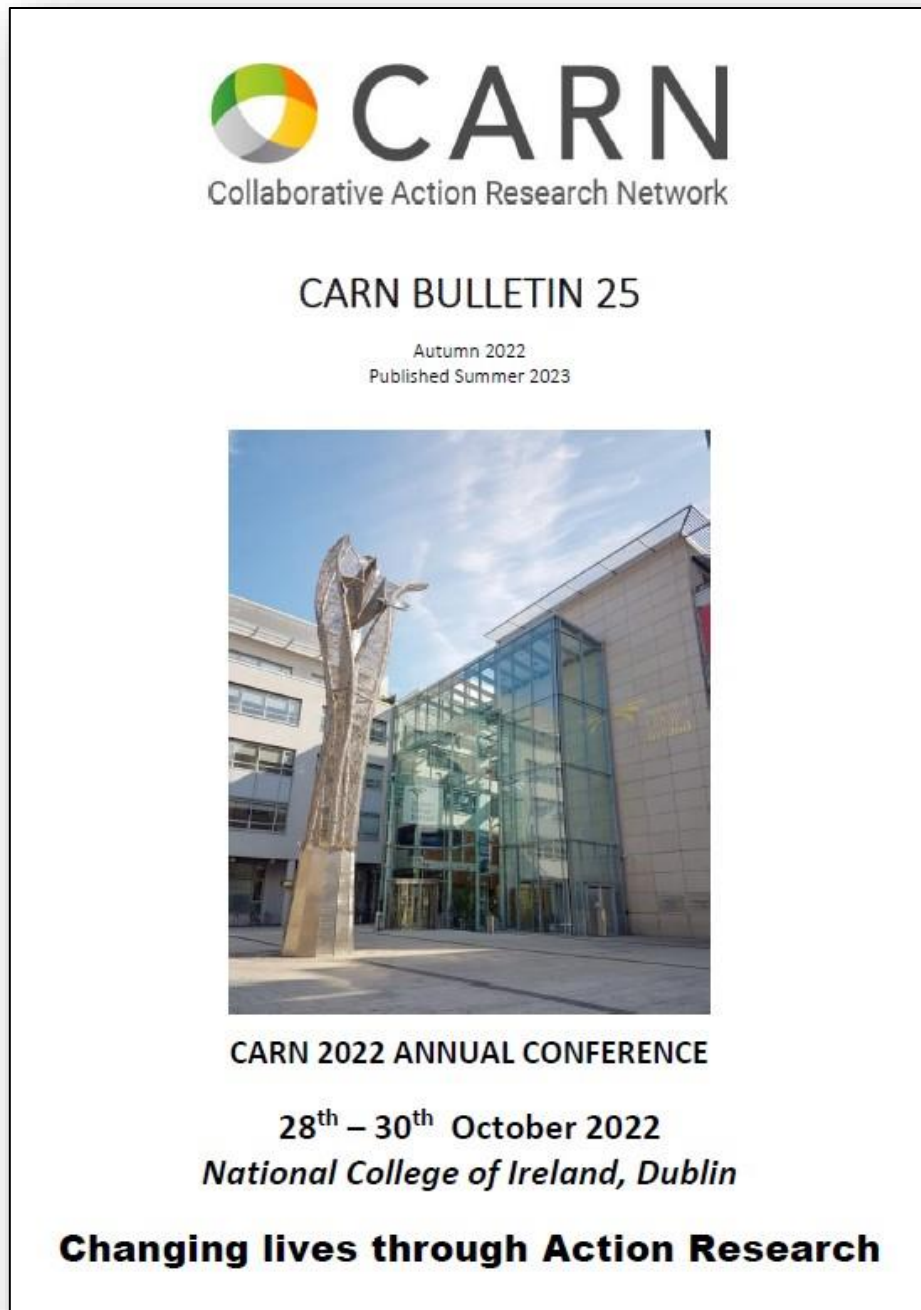


COVISION – Children as Innovators: An update and some reflections

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About COVISION

During the COVID pandemic, there was always a tendency to discuss children as victims, suffering disrupted lives and educational deficit. However, children and young people repeatedly showed themselves to be capable of responding positively and creatively to the challenges presented by COVID-19, helping themselves and others to survive and thrive in taxing times.

COVISION is an international collaborative research project, coordinated from UCD in Dublin, with partners around the world, set up in order to:

- explore the way children’s creative and innovative responses have helped them and their friends and families adjust to changes during and after the pandemic;
- work with children and young people in several countries to develop proposals for new initiatives to support children and young people building long-term resilience in the face of disasters and pandemics;
- enable children and young people to present their ideas in face-to-face dialogue with senior policy makers, and so influence future public strategies.

For the full COVISION project protocol, see McAneney et al (2021).

The COVISION Co-Design Workshop

The culmination of the COVISION project was our COVISION Co-Design Workshop, which aimed to support children and young people:

1. to develop creative new ideas, coming from their own perspective(s), to help build resilience in children and families in times of pandemics and similar crises;
2. to pitch their proposals directly to senior policy-makers (those who have the power to make things happen), and get a commitment to action in response;
3. by implementing this process in parallel in different countries, to share and incorporate the perspectives of children and young people in different contexts, working in solidarity to strengthen each other’s initiatives.

When the CARN conference happened at the end of October last year, the COVISION Co-Design workshops here in Ireland was in full swing. During the previous months I had been working with a team of 15 children and young people, aged 10-17, to identify priorities for change, and develop concrete proposals for what needed to be done. At CARN, I wasn’t able to report outcomes, but instead shared some reflections on the methodological challenges we had faced and how we were tackling them. These challenges included working with children and young people on-line during lock-down, working with children and young people in five countries across four continents, ensuring the trustworthiness and reliability of our findings, and ensuring appropriate recognition and credit was given to the young people involved (Shier 2021). You can see my CARN presentation in full at <https://tinyurl.com/mpm2i8jk>

What happened since CARN?

For this Bulletin, I want to provide an update on what happened next. While I was responsible for co-ordinating the international programme and liaison with partners in the other participating countries, the Irish team is the one I worked with personally and got to know, so I will focus this account on their experience. But as you read what follows, remember that the four sister Co-Design teams were pursuing similar but different processes in parallel, in Mexico, Taiwan, Australia and the USA, with great local facilitation in their own countries, and linking up via internet.

I gave my CARN keynote in Dublin on Sunday 30 October 2022, and just two days later, on 01 November, the Ireland Co-Design team gathered at the Office of the Children's Ombudsman to pitch their ideas to top decision-makers and policy experts.



COVISION Ireland Pitch Day presentations (all photos by COVISION, used with informed consent of co-design team members and guests)

All 15 team members turned up on time, and by lunch-time they had rehearsed and fine-tuned their presentation and were ready to go. The competence and commitment of the children didn't surprise me at all. What was a pleasant surprise, however, was the impressive turn-out of senior policy-makers and government officials who turned up after lunch to listen to the young people's proposals. For me, pulling together this audience to listen to children and young people was one of our biggest achievements, so please bear with me while I tell you who turned up:

- The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth;
- The Children's Ombudsman;
- The Assistant Secretary, Child Policy Division, Dept of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth (DCEDIY);
- Principal Officer, Research and Evaluation, DCEDIY;
- Principal Officer, Parents and Learners Unit, Department of Education;
- Principal Officer, Communications, Department of Education;
- National Clinical Advisor and Group Lead for Children and Young People, Department of Health;
- National General Manager for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support, TUSLA (Government Children's Agency);
- Head of Researcher-Led Grants, Health Research Board.



COVISION Ireland Pitch Day presentations

Facing this audience, the children and young people made an impressive and detailed presentation. First they introduced themselves and outlined their methodological process, in order to emphasise for their audience that the proposals they were about to put forward had not been conjured out of the air in an idle moment. Then they gave detailed proposals for policy initiatives in each of their three priority areas. The full proposals will be published elsewhere, and are too detailed to present here, so I will just give a few headline ideas for each topic:

FIRST IDEA: Making on-line schooling work better

- Train all teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) on how to do online classes.
- Have more active classes (e.g. Educational games).
- Organise student-student interaction and group activities.
- Share a work-plan for the week, with weekly homework.

SECOND IDEA: Keeping children active during lockdowns

- Get the whole community to take on a challenge.
- Post ideas and activities on social media.
- Organise a community fund for equipment.
- Encourage people to share, and lend sports equipment.
- Include pets and nature activities.
- Encourage everyone to join in. Help them if they are shy or nervous.

THIRD IDEA: Elected representatives to take children and young people’s ideas directly to those in power

- The system should be set up by the Department of Education, together with the Irish School Students’ Union (ISSU).
- Representatives will be elected by school students, using a fair system to elect the reps.
- Ideas from students would go directly to the elected reps, who meet to discuss them.
- The reps have a guaranteed direct route to the Department of Education.
- Organise a trial in a few schools and see how it works.
- All kinds of schools would be involved (including a similar system for primary schools).



*COVISION Ireland Pitch
Day presentations*

Policy experts' feedback

After the children's presentation, the policy experts – all nine of them – took turns to offer feedback to the young team. I took several pages of notes, and, once again, this is not the space to share these in full, but all the adult experts commented positively on the way the team had worked to develop their proposals and put them forward with assurance and conviction. Here is a taste of what else they said, reconstructed from my notes:

- “It’s clear you were involved in a complete process from analysing the issues right through to dissemination.”
- “Impressed with your international work – involving so many different countries.”
- “It’s time to revisit the problem of online schooling.”
- “Schools need more input from children and young people in developing their policies.
- “All schools should have a student council.”
- “Closing down community playgrounds during COVID-19 was a big mistake.”
- “Your idea of elected representatives would be wonderful. There could be a regular on-line forum involving government ministers.”
- “We will take your ideas on board and you will see it reflected in future decisions we make.”
- “Our aim is to get ALL of government to think of children first when they respond to a crisis situation.”
- We need to get better at communicating back to children and young people on what we are doing.

As I mentioned earlier, this process was replicated – with adaptations to local context – in four other countries: Taiwan, Mexico, Australia and the USA. Though I have focused on our experiences in Ireland, all the teams generated positive outcomes on their own terms, and all are being written up for publication elsewhere.



*COVISION Ireland
Pitch Day*

What have we achieved?

We have seen the members of the Co-design teams grow in knowledge, skills, confidence, understanding, recognition of their own contribution and capacity, and the importance of their voice; in other words, they have become empowered.

We have embraced the opportunities – and the challenges – of using technology to enable international collaboration. As a result, children and adults in five countries have learnt from one another, exploring and appreciating similarities and differences.

We have seen how listening to children and young people can help government respond more effectively, understand young people’s perspectives, and ensure government services and initiatives meet their needs.

The COVISION project shows how this can go beyond a simple consultation, and become a genuine process of dialogue, deliberation and co-design.

This way, governments can work with children and young people as partners and allies. Children are not just victims of pandemics; they are also active citizens, ready to collaborate to face the challenges.

Finally, a concluding thought from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child:

“If participation is to be effective and meaningful, it needs to be understood as a process, not as an individual one-off event.” (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009)

Presented at CARN in Dublin on behalf of COVISION at the UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems www.covision.ie. Harry Shier is now an independent writer, consultant and activist for children’s rights: www.harryshier.net

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