

How child inclusive were Australia's responses to COVID-19?

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Abstract

From March 2020, Australia introduced a range of policies to respond to COVID-19, most of which impacted significantly on the lives of children. This article applies a child-centred framework, developed from rights-based participatory research with children, to analyse how children have been represented in policy narratives around COVID-19 and the extent to which policy responses have been child-inclusive or child-centred. We argue that, overall, COVID-19 policy responses have failed to be child-inclusive or child-centred. This has important implications not only for understanding the impact of COVID-19 on children but also in understanding—and potentially rethinking—the place of children in policies as Australia emerges from COVID-19 restrictions.

KEY WORDS

child-centred policy, child-inclusive policy, children, COVID-19

1 | INTRODUCTION

From March 2020, Australia introduced a range of policies to respond to COVID-19. Early in the pandemic, it appeared that children's health would not be impacted severely by the virus, and not until the onset of the Delta variant did concerns emerge about children's vulnerability

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to COVID-19. However, restrictions on social engagement, lockdowns including school closures, and the emotional and psychological toll of the pandemic have, to varying degrees, had deleterious impacts on children (Bessell, 2021a; Jones et al., 2020).

This article uses a child-centred approach, drawing on the Material, Opportunity and Relational (MOR) Framework (Bessell, 2021b), to analyse the way in which children have been represented in policy narratives around COVID-19 and the extent to which policy responses have been child-inclusive or child-centred. The research on which the MOR Framework is based was undertaken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic with children aged between 7 and 13 years and provides insights into the forms of deprivation that are particularly problematic from a child standpoint (Bessell, 2017, 2021b; Bessell & Mason, 2014). Based on that research and the resulting framework, we assess the ways in which COVID-19 policy responses have impacted child deprivation and well-being. At the outset, it is important to recognise that prior to COVID-19 Australia lagged behind comparable countries on a range of child well-being indicators. UNICEF ranked Australia 32 out of 38 OECD and EU countries on children's mental well-being, physical health and academic and social skills (Gromada et al., 2020: 10–11). Australia also did poorly in regards to policies supporting children and families, ranking 28 on social policies, 32 on education policies and 18 on health policies (Gromada et al., 2020: 54).

The article begins with an overview of the literature on the importance of investing in children and the ways in which social studies of childhood have highlighted children's interests, needs and human rights in the present. We then introduce the MOR Framework, which is the result of participatory research with children and provides an analytic lens for assessing the extent to which policies are child-inclusive or child-centred. We use the MOR Framework to examine key COVID-19 policy responses and how children have been positioned within them.

Our analysis focuses primarily on policies and associated narratives at the national level. Australia's federal system results in both the federal and state/territory governments having responsibility for children's issues. While issues of education, child protection and health care are largely the responsibility of states and territories, the Federal Government has a critical role in leadership and national standard setting, and budget allocation. Social security policies, a key determinant of child poverty, fall within the jurisdiction of the Federal Government. In selecting policies for inclusion in this analysis, we considered both those introduced to suppress the virus and those introduced to mitigate the effect of virus suppression responses. Using the MOR Framework as a guide, we conducted a literature review and searched through policy documents, government agency websites, media releases and press statements to determine the key policies that impacted on children in the Material, Opportunity and Relational dimensions. Significantly, although many policies had an impact on children, very few explicitly considered children and their distinctive needs. In the interests of providing a broad overview of the positioning of children within policy responses, we analyse here only the 'headline' policies—the adoption and removal of the coronavirus supplement payment; lockdowns and restrictions on movement; and school closures. We note that there are numerous other pandemic responses at the national and state/territory level, which would benefit from a child-centred analysis and child rights impact assessment, but are beyond the scope of this paper.

While the issues discussed here are relevant to children broadly, our particular focus is on middle childhood (approximately eight to 13 years). This is a cohort described by Redmond et al. (2016: 1) as having 'received relatively little attention from policymakers other than in the space of academic achievement', particularly when compared with early childhood and adolescence.

We argue that children have been marginalised from narratives around COVID-19 and national policy responses have been neither child-inclusive nor child-centred. When children have been mentioned in policy discourse, it has been in terms of the impacts on adults, and particularly adult productivity.

2 | INVESTING IN CHILDREN AND CHILD-CENTRED APPROACHES

There is a substantial body of evidence demonstrating the benefits of investing in children for both individual and societal outcomes (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Heckman et al., 2013). Heckman (2000: 8) has argued that for ‘the same level of investment at each age, the return is higher in human capital...when spent on the young...’. Esping-Andersen (2002: 35) has argued that a strong welfare state that is child-focussed is essential in fostering health among young children and reducing income poverty while creating supportive conditions for parents, child-care and school to foster children's cognitive and social development (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 28).

In the Australian context, there is strong evidence of the social determinants of children's health and well-being, and the long-term individual and social implications of ill-health and ill-being among young children (Moore et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2016). Woolfenden et al. (2013: E365) highlight the ways in which the Longitudinal Study of Australia's Children has demonstrated the long-term, deleterious impacts of social and economic disadvantage on children's health and development outcomes. A failure to invest in children results in immediate inequities in child development indicators, social exclusion and long-term impacts on human capital and productivity (Van Lancker, 2013).

While the strength of the evidence for investing in children has resulted in a call for ‘child-centred’ policy (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Van Lancker, 2013), ‘child-centred’ is often used without definitional clarity—and often focuses on benefits to society or to children in their adult lives, rather than on children's needs and rights in the present. For example, Esping-Andersen's motivation for a child focus is driven by a concern for human capital development, in the context of ageing populations and smaller working-age cohorts. While the immediate needs of children are not dismissed, they are given less attention than the benefits of a child-focussed approach to the maintenance of the welfare state. Esping-Andersen's analysis also highlights the impact of child poverty and disadvantage on adult attainment. The arguments made for investment in children are often instrumental, justified as a means of delivering broader benefits. While such analyses are well supported by the evidence, as discussed above, they are arguably not child-centred; focussing instead on the future society that children, collectively, will one day constitute and the future adults they will become.

Social studies of childhood have refocussed the lens, not by discarding the *future* value of an investment in children, but by bringing to the fore children's lives in the present. Hennem (2014: 441) argues that child-centredness positions children not only ‘as target groups for social measures as citizens of the future... also as social actors in their own right, especially with the right to make their presence known, voice their opinions and judgments and be heard and listened to.’ Fegter et al. (2010) have highlighted a resulting shift in thinking about children and social policy, whereby the traditional future orientation has been supplemented by ‘a present-time focus on the well-being of the child’ (Fegter et al., 2010: 8).

Alongside social studies of childhood, children's rights discourses and the global influence of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) have repositioned children from solely citizens of the future to human beings who carry ‘inviolable worth as an individual’ today (Kjorholt, 2013: 248). Both rights-based approaches and social studies of childhood place children's experiences, perspectives and priorities at the centre of efforts to promote their well-being (see Ben-Arieh, 2006; Qvortrup, 1991). This has represented a shift not only away from future-oriented discourses but also from adult-dominated determinations of what matters to children. In an example of such a shift, the WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission's ‘Children in All Policies 2030’ argues that the COVID-19 crisis offers an opportunity to put children at the centre of policy-making. This radical change includes ‘redesigning

neighbourhoods to give children spaces to play, valuing care work and ensuring families have time and resources to raise children, ensuring sustainable food systems to nourish growing bodies, and passing on a healthy planet for children to inherit' (WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commissioners, 2020: 299). While progress in reshaping policy is slow, there is evidence of the increasing influence of the social studies of childhood and children's rights discourse, for example through the adoption of child budgets (Kumra, 2016) and child impact assessments (Mason & Hanna, 2009).

Here, we distinguish between child-centred approaches and child-inclusive approaches. Child-centred social policies are those that place children's needs, rights and interests as *the* primary focus, as exemplified by the approach of the WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission. Child-inclusive social policies may not always position children as the primary focus but ensure that children's needs, rights and interests are recognised as *a* primary focus (among others), and children are identified as key stakeholders in policy processes and outcomes. In each approach, partnership with children is essential and children's diverse views and experiences are not subordinated to those of adult power-holders (see Bessell & Gal, 2009).

In this article, our starting point is the substantial body of evidence that highlights the ways in which investment in children produces both individual and societal benefits in the future. Yet, our position is embedded in the social studies of childhood, whereby children are positioned as social actors in the present, with a legitimate claim to their well-being and to social policies that support them. We also adopt a rights-based approach, whereby children have an entitlement to express their views on matters affecting them and to have those views taken seriously; to an adequate standard of living; and to full development.

3 | COVID-19 POLICY RESPONSES AND CHILDREN

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a global pandemic. Both the Australian Government and states and territories adopted a number of policy measures in response, which reshaped children's lives. To understand how child-inclusive or child-centred these measures were, and how children were positioned within policies, we use the three-dimensional MOR Framework (Bessell, 2021b; Bessell et al., 2021). The Framework has several strengths. Most significantly, it is grounded in research with children using rights-based, participatory methods in Australia and Indonesia (see Bessell, 2021b).¹ As such, it is designed to highlight the elements of poverty and deprivation that children identified as impacting most deleteriously on their lives. More positively, drawing on strengths- and asset-based approaches, it identifies the aspects of life that the children considered important in creating a 'good' life and uncovers when those things are absent. While applicable across childhood (defined as under 18 years, in line with the UNCRC) the MOR Framework focuses on middle childhood, between eight and 13 years. As Redmond et al. (2016) note, it is this age cohort that is very often missing in policy and public discourse, and it is the age group that is the focus of this paper. The MOR Framework provides a child-centred means of assessing the extent to which COVID-19 policy responses in Australia were child-centred or child-inclusive.

In our policy analysis, we follow Bacchi (2009) in asking what the problem is represented as being and examine the place of children in the narrative frames that emerged (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). As the storytelling embedding COVID-19 policy responses was woven, we ask if and how children appeared within the plot (Czarniawska, 1998). As noted, our focus is on the 'missing middle'. This is a cohort wedged between early childhood, where critical work on the importance of the first thousand days (Heckman et al., 2013) has triggered close policy attention, and adolescence, where educational outcomes and job readiness emerge as policy priorities (te Riele & Crump, 2002). In examining the impact of COVID-19

responses on children aged (approximately) eight to 13 years, we pay particular attention to child poverty and the impacts of the adoption and removal of the Coronavirus Supplement; school closures; and the impact on relationships, which children in this age group identify as essential (Bessell, 2019).

4 | COVID-19 RESPONSES AND MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

The first dimension of the MOR Framework is material deprivation, defined as insufficient money and material resources to meet basic needs. Prior to COVID-19, child poverty in Australia was high with one in six children living in families with an income 50 per cent below the median. The participatory research on which the MOR Framework is based illustrated the impacts of income poverty and material deprivation on children's lives. In that research, children shared their experiences of housing insecurity, hunger and the coping strategies they and their families use (Bessell, 2019). Many children who participated in our research spoke of the pressure material deprivation places on them and their parents, and the trade-offs that must be made when the essentials of life cannot be met.

Among the first responses to the pandemic on the part of the Australian Government were measures to limit the spread of the virus, including physical distancing requirements and restrictions on nonessential services—announced on 18 March 2020. Casual workers experienced immediate job losses, while businesses reported a 66 per cent decrease in turnover and a 64 per cent reduction in demand (ABS, 2021). By April 2020, 1.8 million Australians had reduced or no working hours and underemployment reached almost 14 per cent (ABS, 2021). Between mid-March and mid-August 2020, paid jobs decreased by 4.2 per cent and total wages decreased by 5.2 per cent (ABS, 2020).

The immediate impacts were to plunge families that had not previously experienced poverty into severe financial hardship. The Federal Government acted immediately, announcing on 12 March a \$750 stimulus payment to households, and support to employers to boost cash flow and maintain employment. Ten days later, the 'Coronavirus Supplement' was introduced, to be paid at a rate of \$550 per fortnight to existing and new recipients of working-age allowances. For existing recipients, their benefits were doubled, lifting them out of poverty.

Australia's initial public health response has been described as 'exemplary' (Johnston, 2020: 440), with decisive action taken early on the basis of medical advice. The quick adoption of the Coronavirus Supplement also won widespread praise. In assessing social protection programmes in high-income countries during the early stages of the pandemic, UNICEF highlighted Australia as a 'world leader in providing support packages specifically designed for families and children' (UNICEF, 2020). The Australian Government's response to the economic impacts was swift and effective. Modelling suggested that the payments prevented around 2.2 million Australians from falling into poverty (Phillips et al., 2020) but can Australia be considered a world leader in support packages *specifically designed* for families and children?

In announcing the first supports on 12 March 2020, then Prime Minister Morrison represented the problem to be addressed primarily as one of maintaining jobs and stimulating the economy. Then, Treasurer Frydenberg described the package as 'designed to support confidence, to encourage investment and to keep Australians in a job' (Morrison & Frydenberg, 2020a). Neither the Prime Minister nor the Treasurer referred to children in announcing COVID-19 responses (Morrison & Frydenberg, 2020a). The announcement of the second stage of supports was described as an 'economic plan to cushion the economic impact of the coronavirus and help build a bridge to recovery.' (Morrison & Frydenberg, 2020b). The problem confronting Australia continued to be presented in economic terms, with economic stimulus the solution, with almost no consideration of its social dimensions. Children remained invisible.

4.1 | The impacts of the coronavirus supplement on children

In introducing the Coronavirus Supplement, the Prime Minister and Treasurer emphasised it was time-bound and targeted, initially to be implemented for only 6 months, but ultimately some additional level of support was kept in place until March 2021. While the Supplement was not framed as a means of supporting children, it did have a remarkable effect on children's lives by increasing incomes and reducing pressures on many low-income families. To understand those impacts, it is necessary to understand the situation that existed prior to the adoption of the Supplement.

It has long been recognised that working-age benefits in Australia are very low—set below 50 per cent of median income. Prior to the introduction of the Coronavirus Supplement, there has been no real increase in the rate of working-age benefits since 1994 (SCARC, 2020). The problem that working-age benefits have been represented as addressing is exclusively one of the adults failing to fulfil their obligations to society through paid employment. To address the problem as represented, strict levels of conditionality characterise social security in Australia. The resulting 'hostile conditions' have been well-documented and criticised as a conscious policy decision to deter individuals and families from seeking support (Brady, 2011; Klein et al., 2021; Mills & Klein, 2021). Parenting support is means-tested by both assets and income, and is only available to partnered parents until a child turns 6 years of age and to single parents until the youngest child turns eight. Parents who are not deemed to have a sufficient record of employment prior to the birth of their child are obliged to take part in ParentsNext, which requires a participation plan mandating specified activities. The aim of ParentsNext is to require parents of young children to 'plan and prepare for future study and employment' (Services Australia, 2021). The problem represented by policies around parenting payments and ParentsNext is that of parents of young children failing to contribute to the economy through study or paid employment. Care for children is not represented as a valuable contribution to society within the framing of the schemes, and children themselves are implicitly represented as burdens who limit their parents' economic participation.

In research, undertaken prior to the pandemic, children overwhelmingly identified time with parents as the resource they valued most, but the one that was in the shortest supply—often due to parents paid work, financial pressures and/or welfare conditions (Bessell, 2017). Children spoke of the pressures their parents faced in both living on welfare benefits and complying with conditions. Some primary school-aged children described looking after younger siblings while their parents—usually mothers—either sought employment or worked in jobs that did not offer family-friendly hours. Children also spoke of their families struggling to meet basic needs even with one or both parents employed. They described parents juggling multiple jobs and being exhausted and 'grumpy' as a result (Bessell & Mason, 2014). The experiences children described reflect stagnant wage growth in Australia and the severe pressures that families experience as a result (Stanford, 2018).

The Coronavirus Supplement and the suspension of mutual obligations, despite rendering children invisible within the narrative of jobs, recovery and economic stimulus, relieved both the time and financial pressures that many children and their families experienced. Our research with children prior to the pandemic highlighted how poverty plays out in their lives. For example, an 11-year-old girl explained that after paying bills and expenses there was no money left (Bessell, 2019: 62). She did not participate in out-of-school activities and never asked to play school-based sports because she knew the costs were too high and did not want to add to her mother's stress. She worried constantly about the pressures her mother was under. At 11 years of age, she continually calculated what was affordable and what was not. Her story was similar to that of many others. An 8-year-old boy described 'good neighbours' as those who provided his family with food when they could not afford it and were hungry. Stories children shared with us are supported by a 2018 study by Foodbank, which found that 22 per cent of children

lived in food insecure households. The study also found that ‘children tend to go without food less frequently than their overall household. This means parents are likely to be bearing the brunt of household food insecurity so that their children can eat.’ (Foodbank, 2018: 6). Our research (Bessell & Mason, 2014, 2019) also found that parents were likely to go without food so their children could eat; strikingly this was reported not by parents, but by children who observed their parents limiting their food intake and worried about it. Prior to the onset of the pandemic, hunger and food insecurity confronted many Australian children on a daily basis; particularly the one in six children living in income poverty (Davidson et al., 2020). Children living in families dependent on government benefits were especially vulnerable. The Coronavirus Supplement was transformative for these children and their families, effectively doubling the JobSeeker rate and lifting people above 50 per cent of median income (Bradbury & Hill, 2021).

In 2020, the Australia Institute reported that 65,000 children from birth to 14 years had been lifted out of poverty due to the Coronavirus Supplement (Grundoff, 2020); other estimates put the number of children affected far higher (Anti-Poverty Week, 2021). A survey (Klein et al., 2021) of how people used the additional income provided by the Supplement, and the additional time gained by not having to fulfil mutual obligations, found it was used for essential items, such as food, medicine and housing, and improved health, well-being and ability to participate in a range of activities. Respondents reported being able to better provide for their children (Klein et al., 2021). Despite the positive impacts of the Coronavirus Supplement, children and their families were hit hard by COVID-19 responses. Kleve et al. (2021) reported food insecurity, which impacted children in some households, as the amount and range of foods were reduced. An Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute study found that while some lower income earners were able to use the Coronavirus Supplement to move out of substandard rental accommodation, the pandemic revealed the vulnerabilities of the housing system in Australia, including inflated prices, overcrowding and precarious tenures (Buckle et al., 2020). The report highlighted the challenges parents with dependent children face in seeking to secure informal share housing (Buckle et al., 2020).

Overall, the Coronavirus Supplement advanced the basic needs of children living in low-income families, including improving food security. The Supplement also buffered children living in households where livelihoods were significantly disrupted by COVID-19 responses, including through lockdowns, job losses and reductions in working hours. Yet these positive outcomes were incidental. The design and implementation of the Supplement did not take into account children's needs, rights or best interests. Had they done so, they may have been even more effective in supporting children. Even more significantly, a child-centred approach would have required the removal of the Supplement to be subjected to an assessment of the potentially negative impacts on children.

4.2 | The removal of the coronavirus supplement and child poverty

In July 2019, the very low level of welfare benefits in Australia led to a Senate inquiry into the adequacy of income support. In the early weeks of the pandemic, the Community Affairs References Committee released its report, recommending that ‘once the Coronavirus Supplement is phased out, the Australian Government increase the JobSeeker Payment, Youth Allowance and Parenting Payment rates to ensure that all eligible recipients do not live in poverty’ (SCARC, 2020). The 27 recommendations were largely silent regarding children, except for a recommendation that Parenting Payment (Single) and Family Tax Benefit—Part B be sufficient to support single parents in meeting the costs of raising a child. The report recognises the negative impacts of poverty on children's development (SCARC, 2020: 47; 61) and the ways in which the income support system entrenches intergenerational disadvantage

(SCARC, 2020: 45). The Senate Committee expressed concern about the rate of child poverty, but the report is far from child-centred. It missed an opportunity to not only identify the ways in which Australia's income support system can be redesigned to ensure children do not live in poverty but also to reframe the poverty narrative to highlight children's human rights—and basic needs—to an adequate standard of living. Nevertheless, it clearly signalled that working-age benefits in Australia are too low.

The Coronavirus Supplement was extended as COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions continued but incrementally reduced during the second half of 2020. The Australia Institute estimated that approximately 200,000 children fell into poverty between March and December 2020 as a result (Grundoff, 2021). In March 2021, the Supplement was removed entirely and a permanent increase to working-age benefits of \$50 per fortnight was introduced. This increase was not sufficient to lift recipients out of poverty—and the removal of \$500 of the Coronavirus Supplement plunged children and families back below 50 per cent of median income.

In announcing the removal of the Coronavirus Supplement, and a very small permanent increase in benefits, then Prime Minister Morrison stated 'Welfare is a safety net, not a wage supplement. We want to get the balance right between providing support for people and incentives to work' (Morrison et al., 2021). The idea that has long prevailed among successive Australian Governments, that the only valuable work is paid employment, is clearly evidenced in Morrison's comments. The ongoing stigmatising narrative around those who are seeking work continued with then Minister for Employment, Skills and Small and Family Business, Michaelia Cash, referring to people 'actively trying to game the system', and announcing people unemployed for more than 6 months would be required to undertake training courses or 'work for the dole' (Morrison et al., 2021). While critics of the removal of the Coronavirus Supplement highlighted the impacts on child poverty (Grundoff, 2021; Karp, 2021), children were invisible in the government's representation of its decision-making and priorities. The overwhelming evidence demonstrating the importance of investing in children did not feature in the representation of the problem presented by COVID-19 responses and associated lockdowns and job losses. Nor did the idea of children having an entitlement to be considered in, and supported by, public policy feature in the Australian Government's representation. The focus on jobs, economic stimulus and 'bouncing back' wrote children out of the script, even as the material needs of many thousands went unmet.

5 | COVID-19 RESPONSES AND OPPORTUNITIES TO ACCESS SERVICES AND ACTIVITIES

The second dimension of the MOR Framework focuses on 'opportunity' deprivation, defined as barriers to quality services and meaningful activities that contribute to participation and (ongoing) development. COVID-19—both the virus itself and responses to it—created very significant barriers to children's ability to access services and activities. The following section focuses on three themes within the dimension of opportunities: mental health services, school closures and participation or having a voice.

5.1 | Mental health services

As children's access to school- and community-based activities decreased as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, mental health difficulties emerged. Consultations undertaken by UNICEF's Young Ambassadors indicated that being isolated from friends and missing out on school has especially deleterious impacts on children and young people's health and well-being (Attenborough et al., 2021: 20). One in four children and young people said

their thoughts about the future had been negatively impacted by COVID-19 (Attenborough et al., 2021). From January to April 2020, Kids Helpline experienced a 12 per cent increase in calls from children, with concern about COVID-19 as the main reason for children seeking help (Nicolson et al., 2020). Goldfeld et al. (2022) reported a substantial increase in children presenting to emergency departments of hospitals as a result of mental health concerns associated with COVID-19. They found even greater mental health issues for children who experienced a second lockdown. Olive et al. (2022) found children experiencing COVID-related declines in physical activity and increased recreational screen time were experiencing greater sleep disruption, elevated anxiety and irritability symptoms. The mental health of parents and carers, particularly those experiencing socioeconomic adversity, also declined (see Price et al., 2022). In this context, mental health services that are equipped to respond to children are essential. What opportunity did children have to access such services during the pandemic?

There was increased government funding for mental health services for children and young people as they struggled to deal with the impacts of COVID-19. However, UNICEF's consultations with children and young people found that the system is not child-centred, and 'young people have consistently raised concerns about the suitability of Australia's child and youth mental health framework' (Attenborough et al., 2021: 24). Children and young people reported insufficient communication and a medicalised approach to treatment as preventing them from seeking help or feel supported within the system. Children and young people also identified the ongoing stigma around seeking mental health support as a major barrier (Attenborough et al., 2021).

Important surveys were adopted or adapted during 2020 to assess children's mental health and well-being (Price et al., 2022; Westrupp et al., 2020) and to better understand the impacts of the pandemic on mental health. Significantly, however, survey respondents were parents and carers, rather than children. While critical information has resulted from such surveys, adults' views and experiences cannot be assumed to be accurate proxies for those of children. Child-centred policies must be based on research and evidence that includes children's lived experiences, priorities and concerns.

5.2 | School closures

Among the earliest impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions was the closure of schools and the shift to online learning across Australia. While the length of school closures varied considerably across states and territories, most children experienced some online learning, with those in Victoria most impacted. From the outset, there was a lack of consistency or coherence around school closures. While education policy—and decisions around school closures—are the responsibility of state and territory governments, then Prime Minister Morrison took a strong position on the issue. In a televised press conference in March 2020, Morrison insisted that schools should remain open as restrictions commenced across the country. The Prime Minister highlighted the responsibility of parents stating:

Parents who make the decision for their children to remain at home must take responsibility for those children. Those children are staying at home. It's not an excuse for them to go down the shopping centre or to go and congregate somewhere else or potentially put themselves in contact with the vulnerable and elderly population. If you choose to keep your child at home, you are responsible for the conduct and behaviour of your children.

(Morrison, 2020)

Throughout April 2020, as the first COVID-19 lockdowns came into effect, state and territory governments closed schools, with exemptions for the children of essential workers. The Prime Minister then appealed directly to teachers in another televised address on 15 April 2020, placing responsibility on them for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged children and ensuring schools remained open to avoid thousands of jobs being lost and livelihoods forsaken (ABC News, 2020). While the Prime Minister's speech told teachers that children needed them, a stronger, underlying message was the economic fall-out that would come with school closures (Grattan, 2020). Throughout 2020 and 2021, school closures became highly political—reflecting the partisan politics between federal, state and territory governments. In the resulting debates, children's needs, interests and rights played a little part—except to make a political point.

Prior to COVID-19, Australia's education system was characterised by inequity, with advantages and disadvantages concentrated within schools according to the socioeconomic status of families (Bonnor et al., 2021). According to UNICEF, Australia ranked a low 30 out of 38 comparable countries in terms of equity in education (Chzhen et al., 2018). High levels of inequity impact both educational outcomes and children's sense of well-being. OECD data indicate that students from families with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to feel a sense of belonging at school. Disturbingly, over time in Australia, the gap between students' sense of belonging has widened among higher and lower socioeconomic groups (OECD, 2018: 35).

The closure of schools reinforced these existing inequities. As schooling moved online, disparities in digital inclusion quickly emerged, with warnings that online learning would not be possible or suitable for all students (Baxter et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2020). Goldfeld et al. (2022: 3) estimate that the already significant gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children will increase three-fold during online learning. Teachers have estimated that during lockdowns children's learning occurred at half- to three-quarters of the usual pace, with students experiencing disadvantage slipping even further behind (Sonnemann & Goss, 2020: 6).

Children's opportunity to access quality services, particularly school, and to participate in activities was drastically curtailed as a result of COVID-19. Increases in youth mental health services indicated consideration of children's needs, but consultations with children and young people indicated that many services are not child-centred (Attenborough et al., 2021). In regard to education, neither the political narrative nor policy responses to COVID-19 were child-centred. Rather, children were often presented as the barrier to the economy continuing to re-open, particularly by the Federal Government. The 2021–22 Budget Statement of the Australian Government's Education, Skills and Employment Portfolio continued the established narrative of an education system that provides quality and equity, yet the performance criteria do not position children as stakeholders and are centred on indicators that are unable to reveal children's experiences, the impacts of COVID-19 on learning or trends around inequity and exclusion (DESE, 2021). COVID-19 clearly revealed the inequities that pre-existed the pandemic, and the failure of COVID-19 responses to be either child-inclusive or child-centred has served only to exacerbate those inequities.

5.3 | The right to participation or having a voice

The opportunity dimension of the MOR Framework also recognises the importance of children's participation. Under the UNCRC, ratified by Australia in 1990, children have the right to express their views on matters affecting them and to have those views taken seriously (Article 12). Children also have the right to receive and impart information (Article 13). Gal (2017) has demonstrated that participation in decision-making is both a human right to which children are entitled and a factor in enhancing well-being. Research with secondary school students prior to the pandemic identified the relationship between participation in decision-making around education and student well-being (Graham et al., 2022).

Despite the importance of children's participation, there was no space in highly politicised debates for children to engage or share their own views. This was especially apparent in regard to debates around school closures. State and territory governments that advocated school closures emphasised the dangers of schools becoming super-spreaders, while the Australian Government and those advocating that schools remained open emphasised the economic cost of closure. The Prime Minister argued that children's education should not be sacrificed as a result of the coronavirus, and reiterated that message to children during an appearance on *Behind the News*, a current affairs television programme for children (ABC *Behind the News*, 2020). While rare, these messages were important in signalling concern for children. Yet, they cannot be assessed as child-centred and did not create spaces for children to share their experiences and concerns. Children's own views were nowhere to be heard.

Strategies used in other countries to provide children with both information and reassurance, such as press conferences for children, were not used in Australia (Bessell, 2021a). Overwhelmingly, the debate was around adult concerns—particularly the impact on parents' employment if schools closed (Morrison, 2020). Children were caught in the middle of these polarised positions but scripted out of debates.

In January 2022, as Australia emerged from almost 2 years of rolling lockdowns and restrictions across the country, the debate continued as to whether schools should open in the face of the Omicron variant. At that time, the Australian Government's representation of the problem presented by school closures was clearly apparent. Prime Minister Morrison stated.

...moving back to schools, [is] one of the most important ways of ensuring that our workforce is not depleted...If schools don't open, then that can add additional five per cent to the absenteeism in the workforce. So it is absolutely essential for schools to go back safely and to remain safely open if we are not to see any further exacerbation of the workforce challenges we're currently facing.

(Morrison, 2022)

This clearly messaged to children that their health and well-being were not among the issues being prioritised by the Government, nor were their views and experiences of the previous 2 years valued.

6 | COVID-19 RESPONSES AND RELATIONSHIPS

The third dimension of the MOR Framework focuses on 'relational' deprivation, defined as the existence of structural factors that undermine strong and supportive relationships. Relationships with family and same-age friends, and intergenerational and broader community relationships, are central to children's lives and were emphasised by children in our research as being of utmost importance (Bessell, 2019).

A complex picture emerges in relation to this dimension. School closures had highly deleterious impacts on children's relationships with friends, leading to social isolation and anxiety for many (Nicolson et al., 2020). As discussed above, the political debates around school closures paid very little attention to these issues.

The COVID-19 pandemic, associated restrictions and online schooling placed enormous pressure on families, particularly when parents struggled with unemployment, financial insecurity and uncertainty about the future. Both parents and children have experienced higher levels of stress and anxiety during the pandemic (Evans et al., 2020; Westrupp et al., 2021). Yet, there are also indications of families coping and communities supporting one another. Lockdowns also enabled children and parents to have more time together (Brown et al., 2020), while Coronavirus Supplements removed some of the financial barriers and welfare compliance

measures that had prevented families from spending time with one another. As discussed, time with parents is highly valued by children. While the financial and emotional toll of COVID-19 responses must not be understated, Evans et al. (2020) found that some parents, particularly fathers, valued the additional time spent with children. Here Evans and colleagues note the unequal burden for care that has fallen on women during the pandemic, preventing them from enjoying additional time with children.

In this dimension of the MOR Framework, however, we are particularly interested in the structural and systemic drivers that undermine relationships. As discussed, the Coronavirus Supplement, together with the loosening of conditionality around welfare benefits, was important in removing some of those key drivers. The removal of the Supplement and the ramping up of conditionality reintroduced family pressures that children describe as so detrimental. As other studies have highlighted, pressures on families are exacerbated by financial hardship, socioeconomic disadvantage and housing stress (Buckle et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2020).

As discussed, Australia's housing system is at a crisis point. While some families were able to temporarily afford better quality or more secure housing because of the Coronavirus Supplement, the fractures in the housing system were revealed by COVID-19. The impact of housing insecurity on children has received relatively little attention in Australia, despite widespread recognition of the housing crisis (Nicholls, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016). During our research prior to the pandemic, children described their families having to move to seek more affordable housing—and for some children moving houses was a frequent occurrence, as was staying with family and friends 'in between' having a house. Notably, children spoke of how moving houses frequently impacted negatively on their ability to maintain friendships with other children and with adults in their communities. It also impacted negatively on their relationships and sense of belonging at school.

Overall, the systemic and structural drivers of disadvantage for children were in place prior to the onset of COVID-19 and have been exacerbated by the pandemic and responses to it. The implementation of the Coronavirus Supplement demonstrated that it is possible to lift families out of poverty and negate financial pressures in ways that ease pressures on familial relationships—even during a time of the pandemic. Less positively, the failure to adopt a child-centred, or even a child-inclusive, approach during the pandemic has meant that the opportunity to foster strong and supportive relationships for children has been missed.

7 | WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

In many ways, Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is a lesson in rendering children invisible and marginalising their concerns and experiences. Where children have appeared in narratives, they have been positioned as instruments for achieving other policy outcomes. For example, in debates around school closures, the impacts on children themselves were secondary to the impacts on adult workforce participation and economic indicators. The removal of the Coronavirus Supplement in the face of evidence of the positive impacts for children in low-income and welfare-receiving families highlights the marginality of children within decision-making. A survey commissioned by UNICEF Australia in April 2020 found that 51 per cent of the 1007 children and young people who participated thought that insufficient effort 'had been put into communicating effectively with children in an inclusive manner' (Marlay et al., 2020a: 10). One quarter of children and young people felt they were 'not considered to be equal stakeholders to other cohorts in society in the national pandemic and response' (Marlay et al., 2020a: 12). While a survey undertaken by UNICEF Australia 3 months later (in July and August 2020), found that a higher proportion of young people felt they were treated as equal stakeholders, three quarters believed that discussions that impacted on children (such as school closures) were being framed as being primarily about the impacts on parents and

carers (Marlay et al., 2020b). Moreover, in 2020, 64 per cent of children involved in UNICEF consultations said they were 'rarely or never consulted nor given opportunities to participate in important government-related issues that affect them.' (Attenborough et al., 2021: 39).

Children's lack of representation in decision-making processes also became apparent. At the federal level, during the height of pandemic responses, Australia did not have a cabinet minister with responsibility for children and there is no youth parliament (a development that has occurred in several countries). While there were existing national plans, such as the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, the National Plan to Protect Women and their Children and various national frameworks around education, policies regarding children have been split across several ministers and departments, resulting in a lack of coherence. While there has been growing interest globally in child-focussed public expenditure measurement, designed to identify and routinely report government investment in children (Cummins, 2016), Australia has not moved in this direction. The UNCRC, ratified by Australia in 1990, is reflected or referenced in a number of important policy documents, particularly relating to education (Graham et al., 2022) and out-of-home care (see Bessell, 2011) but has not been incorporated into domestic law. Overall, prior to the pandemic, there was little evidence of child-centred or child-inclusive policies, particularly at the federal level, in Australia. Children were not a priority within policy narratives and were often visible only in the discussion of how parents' productivity could be increased. It is then not surprising that at a time of national crisis children were positioned very low on the list of policy priorities.

8 | CONCLUSION

The MOR Framework provides a child-centred lens to illuminate how children are represented in policy narratives and analyse the extent to which policies respond to children. Our analysis indicates that the Australian Government's COVID-19 responses failed to be inclusive of children across all three dimensions of the Framework, neglecting to position children as stakeholders or to take account of their interests. Policy responses were far from being child-centred, and rather than prioritising children within COVID-19 responses, children were largely rendered invisible. When children were considered at all, they were positioned as creating barriers to parents' engagement in the workforce within narratives that privileged a narrow interpretation of economic recovery.

As Australia moves out of COVID-related lockdowns and restrictions there is an opportunity to learn from the failings of COVID-19 responses, and to seriously consider how policies can be transformed from failing children to being child-inclusive or child-centred. Without such consideration, narratives of 'bouncing back' will serve only to return to high rates of child poverty, deeply inequitable education systems, and the relegation of children to the margins where they are again failed by policies and by political leaders.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conception or design of the work: Sharon Bessell. Data collection: Literature review and policy analysis: Celia Vuckovic and Sharon Bessell. Data analysis and interpretation: Sharon Bessell and Celia Vuckovic. Drafting the article: Sharon Bessell and Celia Vuckovic. Critical revision of the article: Sharon Bessell. Final approval of the version to be published: Sharon Bessell and Celia Vuckovic.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTE

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