

“Vite a Colori”. Children’s and young people’s experiences and perceptions of Covid-19 and responses to it in Italy

Francesca Viola, MSc, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, fviola@unicef.org

Maria Rosaria Centrone, MA, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, mcentrone@unicef.org

Gwyther Rees, PhD, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, grees@unicef.org

The COVID-19 pandemic, and governments’ responses to it, have huge, short- and long-term implications for adolescents’ physical and mental well-being. “Life in Colours” is a research study in Italy exploring children’s and young people’s experiences and perceptions of the COVID-19 crisis. It is part of an international network of studies being undertaken in 7 diverse countries. By directly engaging with young people through qualitative techniques, this project offers important insights into the psychosocial wellbeing of children and young people whose lives have been affected by COVID-19. The key research questions were:

- How do children and young people experience and perceive the COVID-19 situation? How is it affecting them? What are the key issues from their perspective?
- What are their ideas and proposals about (a) responses to the current situation, and (b) how situations like this could be handled better in the future?

The open, participatory approach provided a platform to understand the issues and challenges, as well as opportunities and positive changes, from the perspective of the research participants.

The study involved a purposive sample of 114 young people aged 10-19 years (including children and young people living with disadvantaged socio-economic conditions, LGBTQIA+ and migrant adolescents) in 16 regions of Italy, contacted through schools and third-sector organizations. The research involved focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and other voluntary individual contributions by email. Data collection was carried out online, using a secure platform, between February and June 2021, a year after the first national lockdown in Italy. The project was supported by an advisory board of 20 young people aged 12-21, who were engaged to discuss study design, findings, and dissemination strategies, as well as to play an active role in communicating the results to the wider public. Data collected were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a thematic grounded theory approach.

“Life in Colours” presents the results through a *surfing* metaphor used to describe the experiences and perceptions of adolescents affected by the *freak waves* of COVID-19. The results are organized around five key thematic areas: renegotiation of daily life during the pandemic; reorientation in a new (online-offline) space and social context; self-awareness, personal growth, and improvement as a response to the trauma(s); fears, hopes and challenges for the future; defining oneself and being defined as a generation that has grown up with new sets of rituals.

The research identifies five broad messages relevant to policy makers, practitioners, parents and adolescents themselves: (1) the need to provide support for children and young people that balances educational progress and mental health; (2) acknowledgement of the contributions and sacrifices that they have made, and the skills and learning they have gained; (3) the importance of empowering them to be involved in constructing the post-pandemic future; (4) a recognition of the diverse and unequal ways that the pandemic has affected children and young people in different situations; (5) the need to

continue to monitor and understand how the pandemic is continuing to affect children and young people.