Growing-up under Covid-19

Summary report from the second cycle of participatory action research – UK

June 2021

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Introduction

This summary report covers activities undertaken on the Growing-Up Under Covid-19 project during the period December 2020 to June 2021, with a focus on the country panels for the UK.

Background context – UK

This report provides a summary of the key themes raised and discussed by the young people across all four UK panels (with representation from the home nations). The findings are drawn on the views and opinions of young people reporting on their experiences of the pandemic from November 2020 until May 2021.

During this period of the pandemic, people in the UK have been subject to a series of national and local lockdowns. These lockdowns have been in response to increasing rates of infection, exposure to new variants and deaths. Policies and rules around lockdown differed across the four nations. During this time, young people's education was affected as schools and colleges re-opened and closed in accordance with the national guidelines within England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Since December 2020, the UK has seen the rollout of a large-scale vaccination programme with those who are clinically vulnerable prioritised, followed by adults in decreasing age ranges.

Figure 1: Embroidery representing memories of a family trip denied because of Covid-19

Research activities informing this report

Young people in each of the four panels from the UK have been reporting on their experiences of this phase of the pandemic by engaging with their co-researchers and adult researchers via a series of regular online meetings and by posting regular updates on the online platform. They also compiled outputs both individually and collectively through various formats (such as writing, arts, and poetry) to communicate their key messages. Young people have met with key officials and others locally to discuss the ongoing findings from the project and engaged in activities to voice their ideas and concerns about the topics that are important to them and listed below.

Reflections and feelings about the future

Young people appeared to have mixed views on the future. Some stated that they were generally feeling hopeful and positive with reference made to the continuing vaccination programme and easing of restrictions. They described how they found the government's roadmap, outlining a return to 'normal', reassuring and providing a sense of certainty:

"I'm definitely hopeful, I feel like this summer is going to be a really good summer, we'll be able to go out and things..." (Female, 17, UK)

Young people stated how they were feeling excited and were making plans to see friends and reclaim their social lives and activities. They spoke about going to the cinema, camping, having weekends away with friends and undertaking a language exchange and a gap year, should overseas travel be allowed.

While young people reported that they had got used to the pandemic to some extent and there was a sense of positivity and future planning, there was still some anxiety about a potential third wave. In particular, young people were aware that the spread of the virus is still a significant cause for concern in other parts of the world:

"I think I'm more settled, August last year I thought I knew what was going on, but I really didn't. Now I feel like I know what's going, I know what I'm doing...I feel like things are returning to normal but at the same time there's that slight niggling feeling especially when you look at countries like or India and France which have had these outbreaks." (Female, 15, UK)

Figure 2: Drawings representing the surreal environment of the beginning of the pandemic, '...*when familiar places became empty and strange'*, and subsequent frustration when realising restrictions were still on a year later, and '*this virus still wasn't going away'*

Young people described how they remained apprehensive and questioned whether the attempt to a return to 'normal' was too soon. They described living in a state of flux, where there felt they were awaiting the latest announcement resulting in a constant *"moving the goalposts"*. The young people reflected on the lack of prompt decision making by politicians throughout the pandemic, but now there appears to be a keen drive to moving forward with their roadmap, regardless of the emerging new variants: *"There is a sense that they will move forward with the roadmap, whatever".*

Aside from immediate concerns about the future (related to the new variants), the young people were concerned that key learning would be lost and the importance of key societal issues that the pandemic had thrown into the spotlight

would be forgotten, in the quest to quickly return to *"go back to a life again"*. Such issues included: the impact of limited travel on climate change, how the education system had changed and adapted to online learning and assessment (with a move away from exams to continual assessment) and the equitable distribution of the vaccine and social inequalities.

Education

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic had a significant impact on the young people's education. They described that repeated school closures, the move to online learning, and changes to their assessments had impacted their education and learning, as well as their mental health and wellbeing. The young people described how they felt their educational experience had not been well managed and that there was constant change and lack of clarity. Young people described how they felt that the online virtual environment had detrimentally impacted on their learning experience as it was disorganised and fell short of meeting their educational needs.

Across the panels, it was evident that the young people had different learning experiences in terms of the frequency and methods used. For example, one person said that they had received just one taught lesson per week, with other tasks shared through email. One young person described the virtual learning environment as a *"shambles"* as teachers had used several platforms and they had found it hard to keep up. Another young person compared their own experience of online learning to other students in their local area who appeared to have had more engaging and interactive classes.

Young people discussed how the pandemic has continued to exacerbate inequalities across the education system with any notion of 'standardisation' across the sector had further reduced during the pandemic. They expressed concerns that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds had fallen further behind their peers and that the Government expected students to be on a level playing field when they returned to school, when everyone's experience had been very different within and between schools.

Reflecting on their own experiences, young people described how their return to school made life feel *"almost normal"* again as they were able to see friends and re-engage with their activities. Young people felt that schools were coping with the pandemic better compared to last year and that there was more structure to delivery of their education, with decisions appearing to be made earlier and in a less chaotic manner.

> *"Schools knew what they were doing during the second lockdown to a far greater extent, and they roughly know what they are doing now, exams are sort of sorted."* (Male, 16, UK)

Whilst returning to school was viewed positively and a return to some form of normality, several young people described the return difficult and felt they needed more time to settle back into a busy learning environment: *"I feel like maybe the throwing us back in the deep end was sending us all back to school so quickly"*. One young person reported that it was tiring – and that the combination of schoolwork and the pressure of assignments had zapped his energy and made him feel *"quite weary"* (Male, 16, UK).

It was evident that the young people remained concerned and nervous about how their fragmented learning over the past year would impact on their upcoming assessments and contribute to their final grades and ultimately their future education and employment opportunities. In addition, some young people described how the pandemic had made them reconsider their future plans and consider new options:

"Before the pandemic I was very secure in what I wanted to do, but the pandemic has made me think about it a bit more, so what do I want to do with my life?" (Female, 15, UK)

There was a discussion around those young people who were considering university during the pandemic. Co-researchers suggested that many students were left to fend for themselves when compiling their university applications as they had limited access to support and advice from their teachers. Young people reflected on the difficulties of trying to choose a university during this period as they were unable to physically visit and attend open days and campus visits, as one person questioned: *"how can they make up their mind?"* Several co-researchers were either at university or knew of young people at university during the period of their research.

Mental health and wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing were identified as a key issue for young people across the panels. Many stated that the cumulative impacts of multiple lockdowns, school closures, changes to exams and assessments, lack of socialisation with friends and family and lack of professional support had negatively impacted upon their mental health and feelings of wellbeing. As one young person stated:

"Mental health was already an issue, but the pandemic just made it sky-rocket"

"All of my existing problems were just exacerbated – in normal circumstances, with my friends around me, I'd be able to cope, but in total isolation, I've had no support bubble, and everything has been so much worse" (Student interviewed by young researcher)

Young people living in university accommodation emerged as particularly vulnerable to suffering mental health issues. One young researcher's reflections on their own experience and interviews with fellow students indicated that living in university accommodation brought conflicting pressures to socialise and make new friends whilst also placing responsibilities to isolate on students who are often living on their own for the first time.

Several of the young people talked about the importance of using coping mechanisms to distract themselves from the *"very realness"* of the pandemic and to help "*keep them sane*", and that over time these mechanisms had also helped them to become more resilient. Coping mechanisms included: art, poetry, exercise, painting, reading, writing, humour, joining online groups and engaging in meetings, forums and debates. Young people also outlined the importance of talking to friends and learning to express their emotions and voice in different ways, such as virtual communication and creative mediums. It was evident that a return to school – seeing their friends and a return to some form of structure and routine had helped their mental health and well-being.

Figure 3: Drawing of a young person who started using art as a way to express his feelings during the pandemic and communicate with his friends spread across London

Young people talked about the limitations of the mental health support available during the pandemic. Whilst some of the young people reported that services had adapted with varying speed and success to remote deliver, there was a general feeling that there had been a lack of mental health support available to young people can they did not know where to seek help.

Young people agreed that the importance of maintaining positive mental health and wellbeing was a key topic that should be embedded throughout the education system, from primary school. One young person stated that they had to learn how manage and improve their own mental health during lockdown and there was a call from the young people to ensure that schools wider their offer around mental health provision and coping mechanisms and that young people are consulted as part of this process.

Identity and personal development

The young people felt that they had changed over the past year and that in the *"year no one expected to have"* they had engaged in far more activity than they suspected they would have done otherwise. One young person described how the lockdowns had enabled her to grow in confidence and experience with different activities without the pressure of other people's opinions:

"I've changed as a person...before I was much more shy, I would get involved with things, but not to my full abilities...looking back, I don't think I had anywhere near as much confidence as I do now" (Female, 15, UK)

The young people stated how the pandemic had provided both the time and the opportunity to experience and hear, see, and learn new things, ideas, and perspectives:

"It gave me a chance to explore some things, I took up essay writing, which I wouldn't have done otherwise. That was good in itself. The experience of it as a novel experience in itself was interesting, I've tried to apply myself to Student Voice and youth politics." (Male, 16, UK)

Figure 4: These 'super-hero' drawings series were produced by a young person resorting to art to react to the pandemic. They express '*the hope for a better tomorrow […] and will-power to accept the knockdowns but always finding a way to get back up evolving every time.*'
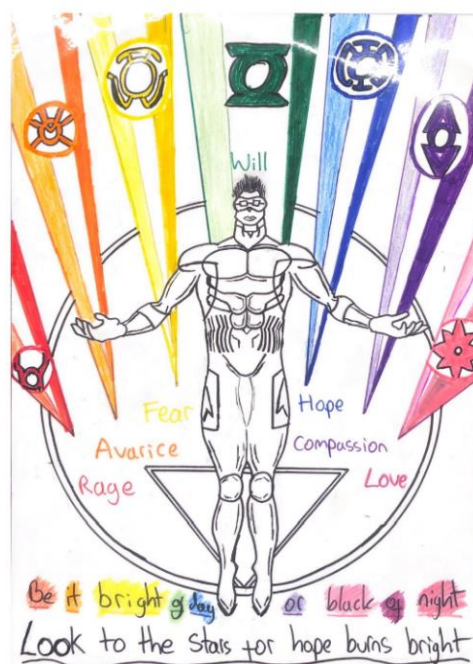
One young person outlined how the pandemic had opened their mind and allowed them to meet more people, than they normally would have done. Living in a remote rural area, this young person stated that the pandemic and move to online webinars allowed her to meet new people from across the country and around the world and access new materials. Another young person felt that a lack of physical face-to-face contact and engagement had restricted his personal development and suspected that he would have been able to grow and develop more if he had been able to experience his different activities in person:

> *"I feel like I would have changed quite differently and more so had I been able to meet with people physically. It's hard to tell what would have been."* (Male, 16, UK)

The importance of young people being able to socialise was a key point for discussion during the panel meetings. One participant stated that this was acknowledged in a recent meeting with a Minister in their country, which was facilitated through their involvement in a national youth forum. Seeing friends and undertaking activities was viewed as an important part of their socialisation. The young people stated that they felt the impact of preventing young people socialising with peers had been forgotten about by adults during the pandemic. One young person stated that they are now seeing their friends more than they did before the pandemic and they are more appreciative of the time they now spend together.

One young person stated how they felt they had *"lost hope"* in the world during the pandemic. They reflected on seeing how the Government had failed to lead the country and how the world was responding. She stated that this was a significant moment in her life, and one she was sure to have found out about later in life but had this realisation sooner due to the pandemic. Another felt that the pandemic and seeing first-hand, via her mother a nurse on a COVID ward, had *"opened their eyes to how things can change so quickly"*.

The importance of young people being involved in decision making

There was a consensus that young people had not being adequately involved in meaningful decision making throughout the pandemic, and that key decisions about education, health and public life were being skewed by adults making decisions for everyone. There was also a call for adults to carefully consider the impact their decisions may have on young people. As one young person said: *"we are the future, and we were brushed aside during lockdown and the pandemic"*. Another stated: *"we have had the minimal about of involvement. We have been considered the least amount as possible"*. It is important to ensure that young people are represented on relevant boards and panels.

Whilst the young people felt that some opportunities already existed for them to establish influence over decision-making, such as opportunities to get involved in projects with a national audience, these opportunities were not well communicated to them. There was a concern that often, it appears to be the same young people who are given the opportunities each time. There was also a call to ensure that more young people from a wide range of diverse backgrounds are approached, engaged and that their views sought: *"also, it's often the same sort of people again and again that attend things and have their voice and this needs to be worked on...It's the same people that have the similar views, but we want all youth voice"*. One participant from Northern Ireland described how they have been involved in setting up a Youth Assembly and that the processes have been designed to try and address these issues as far as possible. Applications are randomised, people apply for their constituency, and they have tried to promote this far and wide and in the promotion so that it is 'open to all'. They wanted to see similar steps being taken by government to widen participation in other areas of political and democratic life.

An interesting discussion emerged around the terminology used to engage young people and to do this in a real and meaningful manner. The term 'participation' was seen as being a tick box exercise and a term that should be avoided: *"participation is one step, but you can go so much further"*. Young people wanted to see forms of participation that were genuinely 'youth-led', or 'youth orientated' at the very least. There was also an example from Northern Ireland where in one of the young people's panels, their school had set up and led a Student Union in June which sought to campaign for change – an example of a student-led initiative.

Civic and social participation

Many of the young people in the panels had been recruited to the project via Youth Parliament or local youth councils, and thus were already politically engaged. However, some felt that the pandemic had compelled them to become more creative in the ways they choose to participate in civic and social activities. One girl in the group felt that the pandemic had enabled her to think more creatively about her involvement with her local council, and she had started a podcast during the lockdown and was running online sessions for other people in the youth council:

> *"Before I was trying to get involved with as much youth activism as possible and work that I was doing with my youth council. Now, as time has progressed, I've found new ways to get involved. Before it was quite structured in the way I was involved, but now it's developed. I've developed new ways to interact online."* (Female, 15, UK)

Figure 5: Embroidery was used by a young person from the UK as a way to react to the environmental degradation caused by single use masks

While young people continued to be politically engaged and some even found that the pandemic had facilitated more creative forms of civic participation, the group felt that politicians are still not listening to young people's views and that young people continue to be excluded from decision-making processes. One girl lived in the constituency of one of the members of the current government Cabinet, and despite sending several letters setting out her views on young people's needs and priorities during the pandemic, she did not receive a response.

The impact on the LGBTIQ+ Community

The impact of the pandemic on the LGBTIQ+ youth community was a key concern for the young people in the first phase of the research and continues to be so. It was highlighted through research carried out by young people on the project, and through wider sources, that many LGBTIQ+ young people who have been in lockdown contexts with their families may not be supported in the home, and it is therefore important that their voices are heard. The young people also highlighted that a positive arising from the pandemic is that some young people had the opportunity to explore their sexuality during lockdown.

Challenging media narratives

Young researchers acknowledged that the media is a useful and widely drawn-upon source of information regarding the pandemic but found the sheer volume of negative information published by the media to be distressing. A consensus was reached not only to redress negative imbalances in the portrayal of young people specifically, but also to redress negative imbalances in the overall coverage of the pandemic. There was a concern about the language being used to describe the different variants of the virus. One young person stated the importance of moving away from referring to the *Indian* variant and compared this to when Donald Trump referred to the virus as the *"Chinese virus".*

The young people discussed how the media had played a large role in the notion that they were responsible for the spread of the virus. They made specific reference to their portrayal of young people when they returned to school and how university students were dealt with when in halls of residence. Young people were quite apathetic about their inclusion in decision-making processes and felt that they have been unfairly characterised by the media:

"There was Gavin Williamson's report saying kids aren't disciplined enough, there are just these constant comments saying we are not doing the right thing, we're constantly getting scapegoated and blamed." (F, 15)

Recommendations

Drawing together the points raised by young people across the four UK panels during this period of the project, the main recommendations were as follows:

1. Decision makers and politicians should consult with young people rather than assume they understand the issues affecting young people. They should discourage the media from presenting young people as cavalier or reckless and instead recognise the enormous contribution and sacrifice young people have made during the pandemic to safeguard the elderly and vulnerable.
2. Exclusion of young people from political processes is a systemic issue. Young people need to be included in public consultations about education and other issues that primarily affect them.
3. The young people felt that a standardised platform for remote learning should be implemented across schools which would be simple for teachers to use, engaging for students, and effective for teaching the required content.
4. Young people should be involved in the decision-making around their education, to ensure their needs are met.
5. LGBTIQ+ young people should be enabled to express their youth voice and be heard.
6. Support from government and training to improve young people services and training should be provided to young people to support their peers by facilitating discussions around mental health, signposting to support services, and sharing coping mechanisms.
7. School counsellors should be proactive in advertising their services to students to reduce the stigma around mental health and creating an environment in which young people feel comfortable to share their experiences and feelings.
8. Mental health support should be offered through face-to-face and virtual modes of delivery.
9. More creative therapies and coping techniques to be used to support people.
10. Young people should be involved in rebuilding the mental health services that serve them.

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