



18 MONTHS LOST AND FOUND

Reflections from a transnational participatory
action research project exploring young people's
lived experiences of the COVID-19 crisis

Research summary

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Disclaimer:

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STUDY BACKGROUND

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, Growing-up Under COVID-19 was a transnational action research project, which aimed to provide rich insights into young people's experiences of COVID 19 and the impacts of the public health crisis on their lives, and to inform the development of appropriate tools and measures to safeguard children's wellbeing and rights during and beyond the pandemic.

Over 18 months between April 2020 and November 2021, adult researchers from Ecorys and the University of Huddersfield worked collaboratively with 70 young people aged 14–18 living in the UK, Italy, Lebanon and Singapore. The participants were diverse in their backgrounds, identities and circumstances, including LGBTQ+ young people, Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) young people, care leavers, young carers, young people with complex health conditions, and young people experiencing mental health problems. All of them brought rich and unique insights to their lives, and to their agency and decision making at a time of crisis.

The project was based on a participatory action research (PAR) design and was carried out entirely online. Young people communicated through virtual groups (panels) of up to 10 participants using video calls and an online collaboration platform, supported by an adult researcher. This work was organised around three 'cycles' of research, each of which involved a combination of individual action research inquiry, activities in the virtual groups, and cross-cultural exchanges between young people from the seven countries. There was a strong emphasis on continuous learning and sense-making, with findings disseminated throughout.

The final report and full sets of project outputs can be found at: www.guc19.com.

KEY FINDINGS

Rethinking the narrative – multiple COVID-19 voices and stories

The project offers valuable insights to young people's agency and resourcefulness at a time of crisis, unsettling the 'victims and villains' narrative that has dominated public and media discourses during the pandemic. While the impacts on their education and mental health were apparent, the stories of the young researchers and their peers were complex and nuanced. Many experienced positive changes to their lives during the 'pause' of the 2020 lockdowns, having acquired the time and space to re-invest in peer and family relationships, their self-care, and to rediscover leisure or creative activities. The pandemic corresponded with an important part of their adolescence, and this was still a time of growing and learning and being a teenager.

These growth and learning experiences sat somewhat uncomfortably with the tragedies of the unfolding global public health emergency, and the ironies were not lost on the young people. What, for some, was a period of self-reflection and re-connecting, was for others isolating and traumatic. Young people expressed concerns about their peers whom they considered to be at risk of harm while cut off from their support networks, acknowledged the challenges and injustices that poorer families faced, and those experiencing family conflict who were less visible when communicating entirely online.

The period also prompted young people to question what had gone before – the realisation of the need for a break from busy curricula and exam pressures, and the scarcity of opportunities for having a meaningful say in how education, healthcare and other services are planned and delivered. Young people were rarely nostalgic about a return to the status quo, even where they missed other aspects of their personal lives. The focus of their research widened to include social issues that had been reflected in the mirror of the pandemic, as well as critical questioning of political leadership, the handling of the public health emergency, its direct consequences and, more broadly, the nature of democracy and their place in it.

Growing and learning through crisis – active citizens

The project illustrated the ways in which the magnitude of the crisis and its injustices contributed towards a heightened social and political awareness. Many young people were actively engaged in action of different kinds – within their local communities, with faith groups, and online through activities organised on WhatsApp groups with their peers, or through activism on issues such as – Climate Emergency, Black Lives Matter, and other movements that gained momentum during this period. In particular, the pandemic showcased the untapped potential of social media and online platforms in maintaining contact with peers and family, and triangulating news and information about the pandemic and global events.

Representing whom? Addressing intergenerational injustice

Young people expressed deep concerns at the lack of young voices in decisions taken on their behalf by national government, at local and municipal levels, and by school leaders and conveyed their frustration at the lack of meaningful dialogue with adult decision-makers. Fundamentally, they wanted partnership and collaboration, rather than arms-length consultation, or the absence of any visible consultation at all in Italy and Lebanon. By the end of the project, there were signs of more visible engagement – the SAGE committee forum with children and young people in the UK, and the launch of various large-scale surveys and studies. This had not translated into a sustained dialogue, however, and young people's research continued to highlight the challenge of under-representation of less heard groups.

Different traditions and cultures of participation were apparent from the interactions with young people through the project across seven countries. In particular, it was apparent how much young people's expectations were framed by the socio-political backdrop within their national context. In Lebanon, participation often had a more immediate 'everyday' resonance, in access to the internet or basic amenities, and longstanding civil rights issues had informed young people's views on political processes. In Italy, by way of contrast, civic participation was somewhat muted, and young people had generally lacked the opportunities for youth voice that have been mainstreamed within the UK through an active NGO sector and a longstanding tradition of youth participation. This had fuelled the Italian panel of young people to act on multiple fronts, including direct engagement with teachers, the mayor in their hometown, and to partner with a theatre company to communicate the messages from their research to a wide range of audiences.

Access and entitlements in focus

The research particularly highlighted problems that young people encountered with access to services during the pandemic. The pace and scale of the 2020 lockdowns and social distancing measures left many cut-off from professional support, and highlighted strains within the system. This was especially so for clinical mental health services in the UK, which faced increased demand at a time when it was necessary to shift appointments and

treatments online. This was managed with varying degrees of success and was followed by problems relating to a sharp rise in demand for clinical support after services re-opened.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, education was one of the issues where young people were the most politicised and vocal. Irrespective of national education systems, young people understood and valued their right to education and were concerned about decisions that were being taken on their behalf that stood to influence their future. Levels of online access, the availability of teachers, and quality and quantity of education, as well as access to psychological support and counselling all came under close scrutiny in young people's appraisals of the pandemic response. They approached these issues from a strong ethical standpoint within the PAR, and with empathy and a sense of urgency in redressing the inequalities of those who had been left behind by the digital divide and as a consequence of policy decision-making.

In Lebanon, poor technological infrastructure had a significant impact on young people's schooling during lockdown and was perceived to have left low socio-economic status families with minimal access to educational resources post school closure. This was in stark contrast to the situation in Singapore, where the public health and educational responses to an epidemic had been road-tested with SARS, and where young people generally described better preparedness for a switch to teaching online. For young people across the project, experiences of online learning included both positives, such as flexibility and the acquisition of independent study skills; and negatives, deriving from wide variations in the quality of teaching resources, gaps in teacher assessment and feedback, and an overall sense that online teaching was being developed reactively rather than proactively by many schools. While young people were sympathetic during the early stages of the crisis, they did not always remain so where schools appeared to have no longer-term plan.

Restoring 'everyday' accountability for a post-COVID world

While the major policy decisions taken by governments were important to young people, the PAR reflected previous research in showing that it was often 'everyday' situations where participation made the most immediate difference to young people involved with the project.

The research painted a mixed picture of professional accountability at a time of crisis. Young people recalled where teachers, social workers and counsellors were resourceful and adaptive, finding ways to maintain one-to-one engagement even where schools were closed. Too often, however, young people felt that communication was at the discretion of individual professionals, with no obvious recourse if this was reduced significantly under the cover of lockdown. This presented challenges relating to trust and credibility when schools, health and youth services re-opened, and the onus shifted back onto young people to catch-up with missed schooling. In identifying recommendations from the project, young people wanted to find ways to ensure that the quality of their participation is not left to chance in future, strengthening the role of school councils and decision-making bodies, and setting expectations for student-teacher relationships.

Living it! The role and value of Participatory Action Research

There was no question that the Participatory Action Research methodology played a central role in how evidence was generated. It gave an opportunity for young people to document their lived experiences on their own terms and without a presumption of what might be conceived as relevant or important by adults, while also recognising the importance of a collaborative approach with professional researchers. Young people drew on their personal experiences, the situation of their peers and family members, and their wider research, to reach informed conclusions about the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. This work was carried out with curiosity, compassion and with a sense of concern about the social injustices that they found. While young people had often joined the project with specific priorities and causes in mind, the supportive group contexts within the project provided a forum for exchanging and re-presenting these experiences, alongside the findings from the individual research of other young people. This allowed for the co-existence of issue-based individual research with a collective body of work drawn from across the different country panels.

Young people valued having a space to discuss and make sense of what was going on in their lives, and to exercise their citizenship in ways that were not always possible in other everyday contexts or in adult-led research. The social learning aspect of the work meant that the project was entwined with how young people were responding to the crisis, with a strong ethic of mutual care and support. Whereas at the outset, the emphasis was on reaching decision makers, the latter stages of the project shifted towards young people communicating the learning from the project more actively with their peers – sharing advice on maintaining self-care and wellbeing and sending messages of encouragement for others to find their voice. The adult researchers similarly reflected on how these spaces for dialogue with young people provided clarity and perspective during the crisis and learning from the exchanges.

There is certainly an important place for PAR within the field of youth research, during a period of uncertainty and misinformation, to counterbalance the plethora of COVID-19 statistics and surveys. Fundamentally, this project – alongside others – makes a compelling case for the more widespread use of PAR methods within the wider body of social research conducted with and about young people. It is hard to ignore the moral and ethical case for doing so, given the clear advantages not only for eliciting insights to social issues that are only made possible through lived experience, but also with reference to the personal, social and citizenship benefits of PAR, and it's potential to give a voice to young people with diverse needs and circumstances.

Young people's priorities for managing future pandemics

Looking ahead, young people were keen to ensure that the lessons from the pandemic were learned and that mistakes were not repeated. In considering how best to respond in the eventuality of another pandemic; young people proposed a number of concrete actions, which are summarised below.

MEDIA RESPONSIBILITY

- Provide more positive news to balance negativity and sensationalist reporting.
- Find ways to tackle disinformation, especially on the topic of vaccinations.
- Encourage young people to do their own independent research on the virus.
- Have more young people reporting on issues affecting youth, within mainstream media.

CONTINGENCY PLANNING

- Prioritise national guidelines over local schemes so that the message is clear.
- Set plans in place from an early stage to communicate how schooling will be operated, as well as end-of-year examinations.
- Hold regular panels that engage directly with communities and education establishments.
- Support national events to boost morale.

POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY

- Create a youth advisory panel in the government where young people can come together to help inform decision makers.
- Consult the public in decision-making processes surrounding crisis management.
- Tackle cronyism and corruption – politicians should be reminded that their role is to represent and advocate for the public.
- Young people should also act independently through not-for-profits and cooperatives and to use the power of social media to have a voice.

EDUCATION

- Ensure all school children have strong WiFi connections and access to a laptop.
- Produce an 'education roadmap', to show what students can expect. If exams are to be cancelled or altered, students should know.
- Train-up teachers for digital education.
- Ensure that young people and parents are part of the ongoing conversation about education.
- Fund catch-up schemes that balance educational catch-up with young people's social and emotional needs.

EXERCISE AND MENTAL HEALTH

- Schools to check up on students and provide support with their mental health.
- Provide more bereavement support.
- Widen access to advice and counseling for mental health and wellbeing, and let young people design the support they need.
- Open-up more green spaces and outdoor gyms; run public exercise schemes.
- Decrease prices of healthy food.

COMMUNITIES

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- Young people should encourage their peers to take a more active and caring role in society.
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- Promote community initiatives.
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- Make sure elderly people have the necessary medicine.
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- Create places where communities can garden together to tackle loneliness.
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- Provide more resources for homeless people and families in crisis.
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THE ECONOMY

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- Support young people to engage with the jobs market in the transition from lockdown.
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- Subsidize public transport for all under-18s.
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- Provide more funding and grants to businesses.
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- Reduce university fees.
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- Provide stimulus cheques to those over a certain age (most likely 16 or 18) to jumpstart the economy after a lockdown.
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- Provide free school meals to those in need during a period of national or regional lockdown.
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- Issue digital grants for online working, and utility grants for home workers.
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OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

The project concludes with 10 key recommendations. These were developed and refined during the three cycles of the project in consultation between the adult and youth members of the project team. They can be summarised as follows, with additional detail provided within the main report.



FOR YOUNG PEOPLE...

#1

To recognise and value their right to be heard and to achieve meaningful social change, whether individually through volunteering, or collectively through membership of online and offline youth networks and movements, or cooperatives focussed on issues of importance to young people.

FOR GOVERNMENTS AND PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

#2

To ensure the representation of young people on central decision-making forums and committees overseeing the management of the pandemic at a government level, and engaging young people directly in evidence gathering, analysis, dialogue, planning, and formulation of National Recovery Plans.

#3

To review the representation of young people on established national or regional youth democratic participatory structures, to ensure that they actively reflect the diversity of the populations that they aim to serve, and to take action to draw a membership from grassroots organisations and groups, including those that work with vulnerable or marginalised young people.

#4

To establish national minimum standards, setting out and ensuring effective communication of young people's educational entitlements following the COVID-19 pandemic; to establish monitoring mechanisms, and to consider instituting new policies or legislative measures where necessary to ensure that standards are met.

#5

To independently evaluate schools' responses to the COVID-19 crisis, establishing the range of measures taken and their sufficiency; to appraise the relative effectiveness of educational, welfare and safeguarding measures adopted during the crisis, and publish and disseminate the findings.

FOR SCHOOLS, YOUTH ORGANISATIONS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

#6

To review the availability and access to mental health and wellbeing services for young people in a post-COVID context, to include consideration of the role and capacity of school-based counselling and therapeutic services and support and to share good practices regarding online support for mental health and wellbeing.

#7

To make a step change in how digital technologies are used within education, looking beyond the immediate crisis to tackle issues of connectivity, access to tech in schools and households, and to invest in digital skills for teachers and young people, being bold and creative to get the best out of tech for learning, wellbeing and inclusion.

#8

To create a school environment which values 'everyday' opportunities for dialogue between professionals and students about their needs and rights for their education and wellbeing during the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, while ensuring that decisions are taken with young people, and that follow-up actions are transparent.

#9

To facilitate young people to create and oversee peer support and self-help forums with regard to coping and thriving during and beyond the pandemic, including support for study groups, wellbeing, and service-user forums.

FOR BROADCASTERS AND THE MEDIA

#10

To redress imbalances in the portrayal of young people during the pandemic, with more young people in journalistic and reporting roles, greater visibility of young people from diverse ages and backgrounds, and a celebration of young people's civic and social actions during the pandemic.



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