

Growing-up under Covid-19

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



Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank all of the young people who participated in the Italian research panel, whose views, experiences and research provided the basis for this report. They include Andrea Romito, Adriano Coco, Clara Cadelo, Chiara Alestra, Francesca Pomarico, Rania Al Zawaideh, Youssef Taby, Ines Fatnassi, Dody Laid, and Micol Spina.

The panel was supported by Sara Rizzo and Enrica Lorusso (Ecorys) from the adult research team, who worked with the young people to prepare this summary report.

Nuffield Ref:	WEL/FR-000022571
Nuffield grant page:	https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/growing-up-under-COVID-19
Project website:	www.GUC19.com

Disclaimer:

This project is funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.



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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 panel for Italy.

Background context – Italy

Due to a steep surge in COVID-19 cases, Italy introduced a national three-tier system for each region depending on the local rate of infection in November 2020. Regions in the highest tier (*zona rossa*) were effectively placed on lockdown, with home-based learning and closure of all non-essential activities. Regions in the medium tier (*zona arancione*) imposed a curfew (10pm-5am), closure of all non-essential activities, and in-person teaching only for students in grades 1-9. These restrictions applied also to the lowest tier (*zona gialla*), where most regions were placed, but non-essential activities were allowed to reopen.¹

COVID-19 cases, hospitalisations and deaths surged in Southern regions, like Puglia and Sicilia, where the virus had spread very limitedly in the first half of 2020, as well as in Northern regions that had previously been the epicentre of the pandemic, like Lombardia and Piemonte.² After a slow decrease, cases, hospitalisations and deaths began rising again in March 2021, leading to more regions being placed in the highest tier for at least the following month.³ This coincided with the formation of a new government of national unity, with former ECB President Mario Draghi as Prime Minister to oversee the implementation of Covid-19 economic stimulus.⁴ Since April 2021, the spread of the pandemic in Italy has gradually fallen, thanks to the vaccine rollout campaign picking up after a few months of shortages, logistics issues and scepticism about side effects.⁵

Research activities informing this report

Young people in the Italian panel have discussed these events regularly in bi-weekly group meetings, which have consolidated as the best way not only to gather their thoughts but also as an opportunity to listen, seek advice and find comfort. Particularly, the panel decided to invite guest speakers to join the conversation and bring a different perspective about issues affecting them – they interacted with friends, teachers, a child neuropsychiatrist and the deputy mayor of Palermo, the town five of them are from. Throughout all these meetings, topics ranged from education to politics, from future prospects to mental health – on the latter, the panel also collaborated with the local theatre Teatro Biondo in Palermo for an [episode](#) about coping mechanisms.

Additionally, some panel members have continued to contribute individually, by working on their own research, producing visual outputs, or discussing the project within their networks – i.e. writing about it in the school journal, presenting it during class or to youth organisations.

¹ Governo Italiano della Presidenza dei Ministri (2020), DPCM 3 novembre 2020.

² GEDI Visual (2021), COVID-19: La diffusione geografica del virus (infographic), <https://lab.gedidigital.it/gedi-visual/2020/coronavirus-i-contagi-in-italia/>

³ Governo Italiano della Presidenza dei Ministri (2020), DPCM 2 marzo 2021.

⁴ Bresolini, "Il governo Draghi ha giurato", *Il Post* 13 febbraio 2021.

⁵ Lab24 (2021) [Vaccini in tempo reale](#), *Il Sole 24 ore*.



Education and the return to school

With the introduction of the three-tier system of restrictions in Italy, young people experienced a constant fluctuation between online and in-person schooling. As Covid-19 restrictions were relaxed in Italy in May 2021, students have been asked to return to face-to-face teaching. According to the widespread narrative, this responded to students' needs and requests.⁶ Young people from the project were sceptical, however, and some had found it difficult to establish healthy routines during the pandemic with the fluctuation between remote and face-to-face schooling. This was compounded by the overwhelming amount of homework and the constant testing they all experienced, as they were considered by teachers and the wider society to be "at home doing nothing". Young people also felt they had not been consulted about their willingness to go back to school in May, and about the timeline and modalities to do so. They also criticised the media for portraying young people as a homogeneous group, whose needs and desires to go back to school can easily be assumed.


"Did you ask me? Did you conduct a survey asking: 'Do you want to go back to school?' These are all assumptions! I am so enraged." (Female, 16, Italy)

They all agreed that it would have made sense to go back to school in January, with six months left and when students were all asking for it. They believed there was no point in going back to school in May, a month before the end of the school year – especially because the number of Covid cases in Italy was still high in April and May, and the vaccine rollout was lagging behind, where the only progress since January was that most teachers had received two doses. They felt that the real reason for a return to school was to allow teachers time to test the students, as it had not been possible to do so effectively online. They ironically referred to this as *DOD, Didactics On Demand* – as a parody of *DAD*, which is the Italian acronym for home-based learning (*Didattica A Distanza*).

Figure 1: Excerpts from an essay analysing survey results from a Google Form inquiry focused on management of the education sector during the pandemic

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GROWING UP UNDER COVID-19
OCTOBER 2020 – GOOGLE FORM RESULTS ON THE EDUCATION SECTOR



Remote learning: the new way kids and students are trying to cope with this pandemic. Many tech giants have already developed platforms to ensure progress throughout classes all over the world.

Introduction

The following presentation is part of the Research-Action project "Growing under Covid-19", conceived by the Ecorys organisation (UK) in collaboration with the University of Huddersfield (UK).

The aim of the following action-research project is to find out what the views of young people and the population are on the issue in this period of emergency caused by the New Coronavirus. In particular, the project deals with understanding what could be done and what can be done in anticipation of a future emergency, but also what problems have emerged from the management of the last period. This module was developed by one of the young people participating in the project, whose research focuses on the theme of education.



Participants were asked to fill in an online form on the mentioned topic (education). A huge number of people took part in this project, indeed more than 60 people from Italy, France, the U.S., the U.K. and China answered and gave some interesting ideas, thus surpassing the initial expectations. N.B. In order to reach the highest number of people within Education throughout these countries, two forms were created, the first one addressed to an Italian audience, whereas the second form, provided in English, was addressed to an international audience.

Questions

1. How has COVID-19 affected the education sector (both schools and universities) in your country?
2. In the future, do you think that distance learning will support face-to-face teaching or will replace it? What will be the advantages and disadvantages?
3. Many students, in particular those who sat the High School State Exam, have faced uncertainties about the school year/academic year trends and how to sit the exam. What could be done and what can be improved for the start of the new school year/academic year?

ENGLISH VERSION

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General overview on participants' personal information

Age Group	Percentage
16	10%
17	10%
18	10%
19	20%

80% of the participants resulted to be male while the remaining 20% were female.

Most of the participants are currently attending school as both students and teachers, whilst only one person was out of the studied sector, but within the age to understand school dynamics.

Question 1 – Answers

In the first question, participants generally answered in a simple way, explaining their national situations, which were very similar to each other. Indeed, all students had to cope with remote learning during the first wave of the pandemic. On the other hand, there have been some discrepancies among national responses to ensure the right to in-presence education. Therefore, some countries maintained this method throughout the entire academic year, while other countries preferred to open gradually, especially high schools for all those graduating in 2021. However, now the goal has not been achieved due to an uptrend in COVID cases, which led to a partial lockdown in some countries, both in Europe and outside.

The alternation between home schooling and face-to-face education has lasted nearly a month. For instance, in Italy some regions closed schools before the national government did so at the end of October.

Question 2 – Answers

In the second question, participants' answers were very conflicting, especially on whether home schooling was sufficient to overcome the main issue or not. Besides, the common advantage of remote education concerns interest in school subjects and allow pupils expand certain topics within the studied area.

"Students actually are more active to interact with teachers via chat group; communication becomes more timely and immediate, and every message includes more information than face-to-face teaching"

However, it has been highlighted how younger students could encounter some issues, due to the use of internet devices as well as losing attention because of their maturity. In addition, some people could be excluded by general conversations among class members, because of their shyness.

Question 3 – Answers

At this point of the form, interviewees were asked to propose something to enhance the previous school ending along with some recommendations to better start the new academic year.

In general, interviewees showed a high grade of optimism regarding the beginning of the new year, probably because of the possible improvement in the education sector. It includes the study of every

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⁶ Ardone, "Gli studenti e il loro posto nel mondo", *Repubblica* 21 aprile 2021.

Above all, young people in the group believed that insufficient improvements had been made in terms of safety measures in school and especially public transport. They believed the way the school system was managed during the pandemic was proof of the lack of attention to young people's needs in Italy, and reflected years of disinvestment in public services, including schools, digitalisation and transport. This was particularly visible in the Southern regions of the country, which once again put the spotlight on historical inequalities between the North and the South of Italy.

"There was no evolution throughout the year. It was like: 'OK, there is this situation, this is how we do, and that's it. If you like it, fine, if you don't like it, I don't care.'" (Female, 17, Italy)

"The superficiality with which the school is treated is the revelation of the lockdown, and its most catastrophic part." (Male, 14, Italy)

At the same time, young people did not accept the narrative according to which this has been a lost year for their academic preparation.⁷ Whilst recognising the negatives of online schooling, especially in terms of limited interaction and discussions with teachers and peers, and the gap they might have in terms of knowledge, young people pointed towards the benefits of the current situation. This included an incentive for both students and teachers to develop their digital skills, which young people recognised as crucial for their future careers, and a modernisation of teaching. Prior to the pandemic, students were used to teacher-led instruction and producing individual essays; now they have had to learn how to be more autonomous in their studies. They had more discretion to select and elaborate on topics, and some had become more engaged in teamwork and presentations through online tools.

"At school we had never been taught how to use these resources. At school we were always with pen and paper, writing. Now it's different, now if they asked us to do any autonomous work, we would be able to do that." (Female, 17, Italy).

"There is scepticism about what kind of future leaders we'll become - it's an insult to say that we won't pull ourselves back together and that we have not learnt anything. We already know how to work full-time remotely." (Male, 18, Italy)

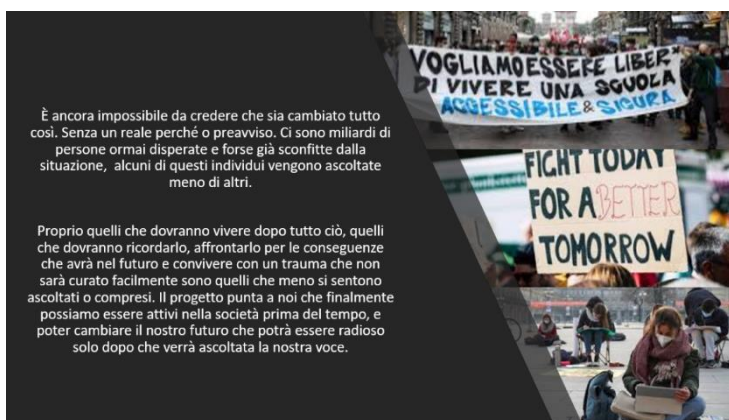
- **Recommendation:** Young people recommended that the government should finish the school year online and invest in better preparing schools for restarting at full capacity in September, with all safety measures and logistics in place. They also identified a need to accommodate the needs of students who would like to use the return to school before the end of the current academic year as an opportunity to catch up with missed learning, and to avoid overburdening them with end-of-term evaluations that would make this more difficult to achieve.

⁷ Maggio, "[Scuola, la scure della pandemia: in un anno perse 30 settimane in presenza. L'Italia la peggiore in Europa](#)", *La Stampa* 23 marzo 2021.

Perspectives about work and the future

Most young people from the Italian panel felt very anxious about work and their future, which they described as a “painful” and “bleak” perspective, to the point that they preferred not to think about it. They agreed that, if youth employment opportunities in Italy were scant before the pandemic, they are even more disheartening now. Young people believed no one can be considered ‘safe’ in terms of future employment prospects, but the situation is worse for those young people who are not thinking about university, as the impact of the pandemic on unskilled jobs has been and is likely to be stronger.

Figure 2: Slide from a presentation expressing anxiety about the future, and hope that things might improve if young people’s voices are heard



“People of our age, an age of decisions you have to take, of changes you have to make, which found themselves projected in a reality of crisis, I think they suffer more from this situation.” (Female, 16, Italy)

The group were worried that promising initiatives such as the Italian Recovery Plan and the Next Generation EU funds would not yield real benefits for the youth, in a country where unpaid, temporary or informal job opportunities are the norm for young people. They believed that political promises made to women and youth are not enough, without concrete measures and investment.

- **Recommendation:** Young people recommended that the government should outline concrete measures to improve prospects for youth employment, beyond casual and informal employment; to make job guarantees and to provide scholarships to young people from low-income families.

Improving the quality of the media and combating disinformation

Young people from the Italian panel were disappointed at the Italian media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic, which they perceived to have been characterised by sensationalism. They defined media outlets as monothematic and tiring, more focused on Covid deaths rather than informing people. They considered that there have been too much apportionment of blame in spreading the virus, especially towards young people, rather than providing accurate information and insights. This approach was unhelpful to the anxiety that already existed around mortality rates, and subsequently about the potential risks or side effects of vaccination, which occupied the news headlines.

“This year has been just panic [...] Why can’t you just provide objective information? Why can’t you also try to calm people down? By creating panic, you create desperate people, and desperation has only led to desperate actions which are not good for anyone.” (Male, 14, Italy)

"It's precisely because of these news and newspapers that fear of vaccinations has been generated. If I had been one of those journalists, I would have asked myself: 'Is a click more important than people's lives?'" (Male, 18, Italy)

- **Recommendation:** Young people recommended that official media channels should exercise more responsibility in reporting on the crisis; avoiding sensationalism and giving more room for stories highlighting the positives in society; taking a disciplined approach towards checking content for factual accuracy and playing a more active role in counteracting myths about the risks of vaccination.

Adoption of coping mechanisms and opportunities for self-growth

During the last year, Italian young people were often frustrated about the persistence of the global health crisis, and especially its monotony, loneliness, and the fear of missing out on crucial moments and experiences of their adolescence. They deeply missed in-person schooling, human contact and the spontaneity of relationships, activities, and life prior to Covid-19 restrictions. Many of them were also highly concerned about their friends and peers, many of whom they described as "dull", unable to react to the situation and just "waiting for it to finish".

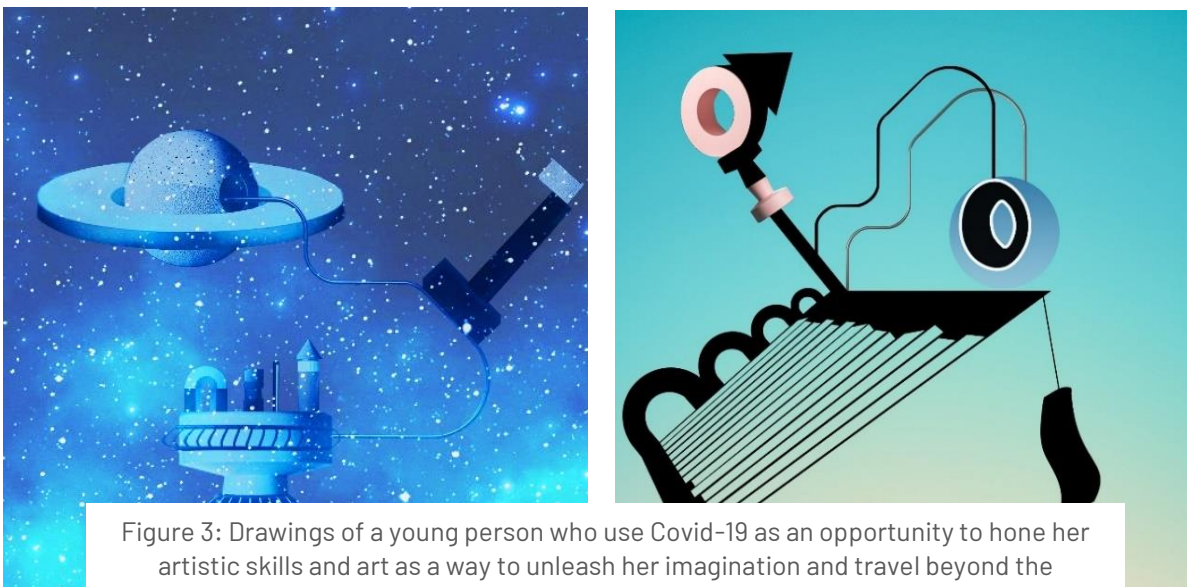


Figure 3: Drawings of a young person who use Covid-19 as an opportunity to hone her artistic skills and art as a way to unleash her imagination and travel beyond the "interruption of normality" caused by Covid

At the same time, young people from the panel did not accept to be just considered as victims of the pandemic, who have "lost a year of their life". This led them to think about and devise, more or less consciously, a number of coping mechanisms that they would adopt themselves or would recommend to their friends and peers. Some started to refrain from constantly reading news/updates about Covid-19, which was making them anxious; others resorted to art and imagination – including finding artistic inspiration in daily objects which characterised their confined lives. Others took the pandemic as an opportunity for self-reflection, learning and personal growth, dedicating time to new and existing hobbies, using their time at home to reassess their priorities, and becoming aware of the mental strength they acquired from learning how to deal with the current situation. Young people often mentioned the importance of

being part of an action research project, and the opportunities it offered to engage with peers who were experiencing similar feelings, struggles and emotions.

“Even with this project, maybe we would have never had a similar opportunity to gain new skills and better awareness, together with our peers, of how the pandemic is influencing us, the incentive to ask ourselves questions [...] Maybe we will be better able to face a difficult moment, compared to someone who has never gone through similar experiences at such a young age.” (Male, 18, Italy)

Nonetheless, young people also recognised that the efficacy of these coping mechanisms diminished over time. They stressed the importance of listening to one’s own need, varying coping mechanisms, and above all thinking about self-care. Sometimes this had to pass through a “justified level of selfishness”, given the situation, focusing on what makes us feel good rather than just trying to please others.

Management of the crisis by the government and the society

Italian young people were more critical of the government management of the crisis during this second phase of the pandemic, compared to August 2020. In contrast to the strict national lockdown adopted by Italy in March 2020, young people thought that the three-tier system introduced in November 2020 was not strong enough in view of rising Covid cases and was only weakly enforced. Young people were also critical of restrictions changing every few weeks, which caused significant uncertainty for their schooling logistics, as well as disrupting their routines and any sense of regularity they could enjoy in their personal time.

Young people were also sceptical about political decisions seemed to prioritise commercial activities over education; a government crisis which led to the formation of a new government in February 2021; and a slow and patchy vaccine rollout, further undermined by media coverage stoking panic. Young people were disappointed at the lack of planning which they felt characterised government action, at the tendency to put politics before science. There was an overwhelming feeling that, once again, government and the wider society did not have young people’s best interests in mind.

Io personalmente sto lavorando sul tema delle **mascherine** in tutte le loro sfaccettature e contesti.

Perché secondo me questo è il vero segno della pandemia. **Scomodo e inusuale, protettivo ma asfissiante**. Tutte caratteristiche che potremo affibbiare sia al lockdown che alle mascherine che hanno influito, come la reclusione a casa, sulla moda, politica e società.



Figure 4: Excerpt from one young person’s research, focused on the use, politics, and social implications of face masks, as a symbol of the pandemic

“My message to politicians and the prime minister: stop thinking about politics when you make choices about the pandemic, stop compromising with parties or getting influenced by some political views or your approval rating. We have tried this already, but citizens do not need this now. [...] You need to listen more to science and less to politics for once.” (Male, 18, Italy)

"Politicians didn't care about us. I felt betrayed during the government crisis, because you can't let a government fall in a moment like this. I felt betrayed by sensationalist news, because they didn't have the empathy to think: 'now we will spread the panic'." (Male, 14, Italy)

- ▶ **Recommendation:** Young people believed that politicians, teachers, media, and the wider public need to be more empathetic when handling the crisis and to think about the consequences of their decisions. They should dedicate more time to understand how different sections of society are experiencing the current situation. They also wanted to see more recognition and encouragement of community and social action and collective responsibility, including within the media.

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