Growing up Under COVID-19

'How the Covid-19 crisis is affecting your everyday lives and those of the people around you, and how you are responding to the situation'

For my research, I chose to focus on the impact of COVID-19 on young people's experiences of the education system. As an incoming university student, leaving high school and starting a new chapter in my academic life, my experience of education this year has been turbulent and unexpected. After seven years of being at my school, I left without knowing that it'd be my last time in the classroom. My final A-Level exams were cancelled, my summer job was cancelled, and I was pushed into an unemployed abyss. For the first time ever in the last few months, I haven't had either a job or school, hanging over my head. I realised quickly that I didn't want to study the subject I'd applied for at university, and went through the gruelling process of trans-ferring and writing new application documents for Politics to try and desperately convince the department to let me in this year. As much as I know it doesn't sound like it, my experience of COVID-19 and how it's affected my education has been a positive one: it's allowed me time to consider what I actually wanted out of my academic life, and allowed this to happen early enough to adjust my plans to this. I am very aware, however, that this has by no means been the same experience for everybody in regards to their education: while the crisis has struck my year group at the end of our time at school, year 10s and year 12s were facing the anxiety of having to sit exams without having had formal lessons for 5 months, as well as, in the latter year group, how this crisis would affect their entry to university in the wake of an influx of inter-national students and students deferring entry, as well as potentially receiving lower grades than they otherwise would have done. As somebody leaving school with 2 A-Levels due to a mental health crisis, my plan had initially been to join the year 12 group to sit my final subject and receive the qualifications I needed: with everything that has happened, and understanding their situation, I am taking up an unconditional offer and risking making applications for grad jobs in a potential recession more difficult by having fewer qualifications than other applicants to avoid this. I am putting myself and my future at a potential risk to avoid joining the year 12 group and the struggle and anxiety that will embody the next year of their lives.

It was with these thoughts towards those still in the education system that I decided to interview a primary school teacher. By understanding how COVID-19 was affecting children at the beginning of their education, forming the foundations of their academic knowledge and ability, I hoped to get a better picture of how the crisis was affecting the everyday lives, and the future, of young people around me.

Speaking about how year 6s, those at the end of their time at primary school, had handled the situation, the teacher said that 'on the whole [they] have been incredibly resilient and adaptable', although they were experiencing a lot of frustration regarding the transition to high school, feeling that their final year at primary school had been taken away from them. This resilience, however, seems to transcend anxiety about the transition, with the local feeder high

schools communicating regularly with virtual tours and mini-biographies of teachers to make such a big move, especially in such uncertain times, seem more approachable and manageable. The teacher said that in her view, it has been 'more the adults that have been concerned...than the children'.

The teacher described a similar situation when talking about the younger children at her school, saying that 'when it comes to Key Stage 1 children, they depend on their parents and their take on the situation'; that when parents spoke to the children about the news and what was happening factually, with clear instructions and updates on the situation, there was notably more understanding about social distancing within the school and less anxiety. Children and families who are more anxious about what was happening, and especially those with prior behavioural and mental health issues managed by the school, needed the lines of communication kept going to ensure that the return to school wasn't made significantly harder for them.

When discussing the return to school in September, the teacher said that it was expected to be quite 'hesitant, not totally because of COVID, but because of how much things will be different'. The teacher doesn't think it will affect how they work academically next year: 'having picked up classes that were significantly below where they should be before, a good teacher will take a class at that point and push them to where they need to be'. 'That's not to say that if they hadn't missed out on that learning that they wouldn't be that much further ahead', the teacher said, 'but that we can still get them to where they need to be'. The teacher cited the influx of media coverage belittling teachers' knowledge and professionalism, saying that 'we know where those children need to get to, and we'll make sure that they get there'.

To get a full picture of how education had been affected by the crisis, I interviewed two students, one in year 10 going into year 11, and one in year 12 going into year 13. I aimed to understand how the preparation for GCSEs and A-Levels had been affected, how this had affected the students' mental health and wellbeing, and what they were concerned about and expected for their future from this point.

The students, although living in the same area, had experienced vastly different levels of diligence and care from their schools: the year 10 student said that their school 'said to do a little revision over the holidays, but that's it', while the year 12 student has had regular online interaction and classes with their teachers, saying they had been 'very supportive' during this time. Both students, however, said that studying at home had led to a drop in their motivation. The year 10 student said that 'there are no consequences or forced support when we don't complete our work, so lots of my friends have been doing nothing'; the student worries that missing so much formal teaching of the GCSE content will negatively affect their grades, and whether they can get into the college courses they would like to. The year 12 student, similarly, said that it is 'difficult to drag yourself out of bed and do what you would be doing normally'; that sometimes it helps to see how you are doing in comparison to your classmates to keep yourself on the right track. As somebody preparing to go through the UCAS process, the

student worries about how COVID-19 will affect their future, saying that 'it constantly feels like [she is] sabotaging [herself] and jeopardising [her] future'.

For both students, the anxiety surrounding both the next year of their lives and their future is destabilising and almost debilitating: both have reached out to their school regarding their mental health, receiving vastly different responses. The year 10 student's concerns were brushed aside, with her teachers saying that 'everybody's in the same boat', while the year 12 student's teachers were able to organise virtual appointments with the school's wellbeing officers. The provisions that the latter was able to access, however, were still inadequate when compared to what they would be normally, and considering how students' mental health, on the whole, has been negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis. The year 12 student said that the support 'still isn't enough because it's reliant on taking that first step and reaching out, which young people, especially now, may not do as they think it isn't a serious enough issue'. The year 10 student cites a similar experience, saying that their school 'says that mental health is their top priority, but gives no mental health support'. When considering their experience preparing to apply for Oxbridge and other top universities, the year 12 student says that their experiences of the crisis have been exacerbated by making these applications as a state school student, because 'the support wasn't there anyway, it was already so difficult to be aiming for this level'. It is clear that state school applicants to top universities will face an almost unmanageable battle: to break through into a space populated by people who have been receiving top-quality, well-funded education over the pandemic, and who already have insurmountable access to help and experience of making similar applications. Students that would have otherwise been able to access outreach schemes such as the UNIQ programme at the University of Oxford, and study days for applicants like themselves, are being left making a high-level application in the dark, with no support in place whatsoever. The year 12 student expands on this experience to draw upon their experiences of the mental health system for students like themselves, saying that 'there's an expectation that high-achievers don't need help'. The idea of picking a university when you haven't seen it, they add 'feels like we're going in blindfolded, and like we're ticking a box without fully knowing what it means'. The student worries about how they, and others like them, will be able to manage to achieve their ambitions going forwards.

When considering the proposed options concerning how to mitigate how grades and exams will be calculated in students who have missed so much of their formal education, the students agree that they do not think that postponing exams will help. They cite the knock-on effects of this: less time to work to fund university, or to get through sixth form or college, less time out from studying to replenish mental health, and that having missed several months of education, postponing exams by a month will not have a substantial enough impact to be able to sit exams with normal grade boundaries and full content. Both students agree that if exams cannot be cancelled for their year groups, lowering grade boundaries would be the most realistic option. They both hold concerns, however, that these grades will be considered as less valuable than those from previous and upcoming years. What is clear from discussions with both students, however, is that a decision about their future must be made soon: 'not having a

definite answer is a huge source of anxiety', the year 12 student said, 'because it means the pressure is still overhanging and very imminent, it means I can never properly relax'.

The three interviews made it very clear to me that my more favourable experience of the education system in times of COVID-19 is an anomaly in the wider experiences of young people. Although they are proving to be 'resilient', there was a very clear feeling that young people could not survive and keep going for much longer with the uncertainty they are feeling; that clear decisions must be made quickly to prevent a mental health crisis and the unfulfilled future of a whole generation.