Growing up under COVID-19: Insights into Impacts and Young People's Responses to Changing Socio-Ecological Contexts as a Result of the Pandemic

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Abstract

Many studies about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people have focused on them as victims or villains in the crisis and with a predominant emphasis on their schooling. This paper draws on participatory action research (PAR) with young people in the UK, Italy, Singapore and Lebanon to provide insights into the impacts of the pandemic and the changes it brought into young people's everyday personal, familial and social worlds. Using Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework, the paper provides a more balanced view of the impact of the pandemic on young people, including examples of how it brought about new opportunities for young people's personal development, social actorship and political agency, in spite of the pandemic's detrimental impacts. We apply the concept of "affordances" to understand how young people have creatively, critically and reflexively responded to changes to the socio-ecological contexts that frame their lives. These are manifest through new social roles, identity development and a heightened sense of communitarianism, political awareness and active citizenship. The paper raises

questions about what young people need in terms of nurturing environments to grow up in and highlights key considerations in safeguarding young people's rights in future public health crises and post-COVID rebuilding.

Keywords: COVID-19, young people, socio-ecological contexts, affordances, family, political, personal development, participatory action research

Introduction

COVID-19 has had significant impacts on young people across the world (Gupta & Jawanda, 2020; Lundy et al., 2021). There is now a considerable evidence base documenting the effects of the pandemic on different areas of their lives. Academic and news media reports have placed considerable emphasis on the far-reaching disruptions to young people's education (Vuorikari et al., 2020; Di Pietro et al., 2020; OECD, 2021; Engzell et al. 2021; Blaskó & Schnepf, 2021). While young people across the world have had their education disrupted as a result of the pandemic, Blaskó and Schnepf (2021) highlight the extent to which COVID-19 compounded inequalities in educational experience and outcomes, giving rise to what Van Lancker and Parolin (2020) refer to as a social crisis in the making. Breaking down these differential impacts on young people's education, Rotas and Cahapay (2020) document how, for example, many young people have struggled with remote learning; similarly, Vuorikari (2020) highlighted the differential ability of families to support education at home.

In parallel with concern about impacts of the pandemic on young people's education, an increasing number of studies underline the impact on young people's mental wellbeing (Ford et al., 2021; Loades et al., 2020; Duan et al., 2020 Gadermann et al., 2021; Young Minds, 2021) highlighting in particular the impact of loneliness and isolation on children and youths' mental wellbeing (Loades et al., 2021). Echoing trends in the socially differential impacts of the pandemic on young people's education, inequalities in impacts on their mental health have been similarly reinforced and exacerbated. Global examples include Gadermann et al.'s (2021) study examining the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on family mental health in Canada, Young Mind's 2021 study in the UK, and Duan et al.'s (2021) work highlighting the unequal impacts on vulnerable groups in China. Impacts on young people's mental health in turn affect other areas of their lives including education, for instance due to "Zoom fatigue" resulting from spending considerable time online (Bailenson, 2021).

Evidence suggests that impacts of the pandemic on children and youth are not simply the result of causal influences, but instead are mediated by the contextual circumstances that shape young people's lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological model is now well known and involves a series of socio-ecological dimensions that shape (young) people's lives: the immediate *microsystem* of the family, peers, and school; the *mesosystem* which links these together through community relationships and interactions; the *exosystem* of wider social factors and socio-structural position; and the *macrosystem* of national culture, political economy, and virtual worlds. This model is useful for understanding the way in which social events such as the pandemic affect young people's lives.

A key microsystem that has impacted young people during the pandemic is family life (Biroli et al., 2020; Branquinho et al., 2020; Lebow, 2020; Cluver et al., 2020). While some studies have reasserted the significance of social inequalities in understanding the worsening plight of some families and young people during the pandemic (Blaskó & Schnepf, 2021; OECD, 2021; Bambra et al., 2021), including

those in specific situations such as temporary accommodation (Rosenthal et al., 2020), others have highlighted how the pandemic can place strain on family life even in middle- and high income families (Carroll et al., 2020) and parenting (Cluver et al., 2020) with consequential impacts for young people's wellbeing. There is also stark evidence that it is often young people with pre-existing vulnerabilities, including those in families experiencing poverty or violence and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, who have most felt the effects of the crisis (Crawley et al., 2020; Gupta & Jawanda, 2020; Imran et al., 2020; Rosenthal et al., 2020; Thorisdottir et al., 2021), with studies by Hawke et al. (2021) and Paceley et al. (2021) highlighting the mental health impacts on particularly vulnerable groups such as young people from the LGBTQI+ communities.

Faced with these multiple impacts a number of scholars underline the importance of hearing the voices of young people on their own terms in order to understand the unique ways they have been impacted and to safeguard their human rights (Cuevas-Parra & Stephano, 2020; Lundy et al., 2021; Branquinho et al., 2020).

However, young people are not solely passive victims of the negative impacts of COVID-19 on their education, health, and wellbeing. While young people have undoubtedly been impacted by the pandemic, sociological studies of childhood and youth assert the extent to which young people are competent social actors able to demonstrate a degree of resilience in navigating social change. Young people readily demonstrate resilience in managing as well as positively navigating difficult situations (see for example Berridge, 2017; Ray, 2010), including the pandemic (see for example Paceley et al., 2021, with respect to LGBTQ young people).

Although there is growing literature on how COVID-19 has affected young people, little attention has been paid to its more nuanced psychosocial impacts on young people in terms of their changing sense of self, coping strategies, personal development, agency and contribution as citizens. This paper fills this gap by revealing the extent to which many young people responded creatively, critically, and reflexively in diverse ways to the pandemic, through, for example, new social roles, personal and identity development, and a heightened sense of communitarianism, political awareness, and active citizenship. While these types of changes also occurred in pre-pandemic contexts, this research illuminates that young people recognize that these are significant outcomes from the pandemic.

Scholarly work concerning children's environments commonly draws on Gibson's idea of "place affordances" (Gibson, 1979), referring to the opportunities young people can derive from different contexts. In a similar way, we applied the concept of "affordances" to our analysis of young people's experiences to understand how, despite the pandemic's detrimental impacts, it also brought about new possibilities for young people. By understanding the complex ways in which the pandemic changed the socio-ecological contexts in which young people lived and their responses to this, we can gain valuable insights into young people's views of the world in which they are growing up.

The overall aim of the research on which this paper draws was to understand how young people are experiencing and responding to the COVID-19 crisis, and to make suggestions for how to promote young people's wellbeing and rights during and after the pandemic. To achieve this aim, the researchers worked with young people as co-researchers to understand:

1) How is the COVID-19 crisis affecting young people's everyday lives and those around them, and how are they responding to the situation?
2) What are young people's perspectives about how the COVID-19 crisis is being managed, how it is talked about in the media, and the measures that are put in place?
3) To what extent are young people's needs and circumstances being considered, and what is the actual and potential contribution of young people as active citizens?
4) What do young people think about the attitudes, values, and behaviors of others, and the positive and negative consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for society?
5) What do young people perceive as the priorities for the recovery, for rebuilding society and young people's roles in the recovery process?
6) What messages do young people have for decision makers about managing future crises, and safeguarding young people's rights in the future?

In this paper, we draw on qualitative evidence gathered by young people, including outcomes from their own research, observations, interviews and diary extracts to elaborate a more nuanced understanding of young people's experiences and responses to the pandemic. In so doing, we reflect on what young people's experiences, values and actions signal for policymakers and practitioners in developing more nurturing environments for children and youth to grow up in in the future.

This paper is framed by sociological studies of childhood and youth (James & Prout, 1997) and children's rights that acknowledge childhood and youth as periods in the lifecourse in their own right rather than perceiving them in developmental terms as "human becomings" (Uprichard, 2008). We also argue that personal and social development and change are equally characteristic in other phases in the lifecourse and as such should not be used solely to define adolescence. In this context we respect the integrity of young people's diverse everyday life experiences shaped by variable and changing socio-cultural contexts and influences over time (James & Prout, 1997) and echo authors elsewhere who argue for the importance of hearing the voices of children and youth and their experiences of the pandemic (Lundy et al., 2021; Cuevas-Parra & Stephano, 2020). Accordingly, the value of the evidence in this paper is important for understanding the influence of this major public health crisis on changes in young people's lives according to their own terms of reference and in ways that may not have happened otherwise.

Understanding Young People's Lives during the Pandemic: Methodological Approach

The Nuffield Foundation funded research[1] on which this paper is based adopted a longitudinal ethnographic action research approach supporting 70 young people (ages 14-18) in seven countries (Italy, Lebanon, Singapore, England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales) in documenting and making sense of their own experiences and views on political decisions for managing responses to the pandemic. Young people worked in seven research panels, including four mixed-UK groups of young people from the four home nations, each supported by an adult researcher.

The approach drew on principles of participatory action research (PAR), involving young people in exploring and reflecting on the pandemic from their own perspective, generating questions to explore in dialogue with others, engaging in collaborative sense-making, generating key messages for decision-makers and identifying possibilities for their own social action in response to their learning. This approach is not about systematically comparing young people's responses to adult questions or assessing prevalence. Instead, PAR is a participatory alternative for enabling young people to research their own lives according to their own research questions and priorities (Reason, 1988) and valuing the integrity of those experiences in their own right rather than solely giving them value through scientific abstraction. This approach to post-positivist research is not subject to the same notions of rigor as conventional scientific research, but instead is given value by the meaning and value ascribed to the findings in context by those involved (Gibbons et al., 1994). Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 162) hence articulate action research as "simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve… their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out." Young people in this study decided how and with whom they documented the COVID-19 crisis. This allowed the possibility for both formal research methods such as semi-structured interviews, surveys, and media discourse analysis, as well as informal diary and arts-based methods.

Recruitment was via social media, NGOs, public authorities, and organizations representing specific groups, including Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) young people, LGBTQI+ young people, and young carers[2], and participant selection was guided by the need to ensure sufficient maturity and independence to carry out an action research project online over time. The researchers selected participants with an emphasis on diversity, and to include representation from those who faced specific forms of adversity during the COVID-19 crisis, such as health issues, family issues, or socio-economic challenges.

The adult research team trained and supported the young people as co-researchers to undertake their own research according to their own interests and situations,

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[1] Grant reference WEL/FR-000022571
[2] Young carers are young people who take on responsibilities of providing care for their siblings and or parents

alongside keeping journals of their own observations about the pandemic. The training took place online and included discussing different methods the youth participants might consider using including interviews, diaries, group work, surveys, etc. and discussing how they might use these to investigate issues further and find out more information. The adult researchers designed a research guide and a research toolkit specifically for the project. Research training included talking through the aims, research questions and the socio-ecological framework developed for the research as a way of helping young people think about the varying spheres of influence on different areas of their lives. During the training sessions, adult and youth researchers discussed different areas of young people's lives as possible foci for their research including family, friends/peers, work/income, access to services, education, health and wellbeing, identity, communication, and civic and social participation (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Key themes (1): Implications of COVID-19 for young people's lives

1. Family • family roles and relationships • family routines and traditions • emotional support and caregiving • privacy and personal space	**2. Friends and peer relationships** • leisure activities • friendship groups and personal and social networks • intimate relationships
3. Work and income • work, remuneration and family responsibilities • financial or material support • poverty and hardship	**4. Access to services** • access to food, medicines, sanitation and other essentials • access to professional support • access to information
5. Education • schooling and educational resources • formal and non-formal learning (incl. validation of learning under lockdown) • parental engagement in education • effects of missed education/ transition to school or work	**6. Health and wellbeing** • physical health and exercise • social and emotional wellbeing • health-related vulnerabilities and their impact • personal safety
7. Identity and freedom of expression • outlets for personal or creative expression (culture, music, art) • observation of religious or cultural practices • political expression during the crisis (e.g., blogs/vlogs, social commentary)	**8. Civic and social participation** • Getting out • informal support within the local neighborhood • participation in organized activities (e.g., youth councils, NGO affiliation, or fund-raising activities) • Helping others
9. Crosscutting themes • Mobility and freedom of movement • Spaces and environments (e.g., learning, social or digital environments) • Gender dimensions • Vulnerability and disadvantage	

Young people were invited to think critically about social and political responses to the pandemic, impacts on themselves as a generational group, and what they think needs to happen to ensure that young people's rights are safeguarded during and after the pandemic (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Key themes (2): Young people's social commentary and recommendations

1) **Young people's perspectives of emergency measures taken** – perceived sufficiency of the speed and type of actions by government and other public authorities: school closures, social distancing, restrictions placed on mobility and privacy (e.g., contact tracing, monitoring of citizens' movements, forfeiting of rights and freedoms).

2) **Views on impacts for young people as a group within society** – perceived social justice and fairness (e.g., trade-offs between young people's education and public health); intended or unintended consequences for young people of emergency legislation; concerns about groups who are vulnerable within society or overlooked.

3) **Commentary on societal values, attitudes and behaviors** – perceptions of media coverage of the pandemic and how young people are portrayed; reliability of information; unexpected positive consequences of the crisis (e.g., reduced travel and carbon emissions, community support, collective responsibility and acts of kindness).

4) **Future proofing** – learning from the COVID-19 crisis for safeguarding child rights in future emergency situations: actions needed at municipal, national or global scales; views on spending priorities for recovery after the crisis—economic, public health, welfare and social justice; and mechanisms to ensure that young people have a voice.

In keeping with the philosophy and ethos of PAR, the specific focus of young people's own research was left for them to decide according to their own situations, interests and realities. Hence, some chose to focus on their own or their family's experiences, while others, for example, used video diaries to provide ongoing commentaries on political decisions being made at a national level. Young people also chose different methods: some conducted interviews and surveys with friends and families, and others focused on documenting their experiences using diaries (written and video) or other creative forms of expression such as art and creating artefacts, both as a medium for inquiry and a mode for findings. Most supplemented their research with their own investigative online searches and interviews to find out more about the pandemic and decisions made. Some young people also engaged in social action such as community support, writing letters to politicians or organizing meetings with local leaders such as the town mayor as part of the project; while constituting actions in their own right, these activities also provided opportunities for further learning.

Panels met approximately every two weeks to share, reflect on and discuss their research findings, using a closed online platform (Yammer) that enabled young people to post and respond to thoughts, findings and questions. In addition, panels were brought together periodically in cross-panel sessions across countries to widen

the scope of dialogue and inquiry across groups and countries. Young people largely worked autonomously within a robust ethical and safeguarding framework in partnership with the adult researcher overseeing their panel. Ethical clearance was provided by the lead organization as well as reviewed on an ongoing basis as the project emerged, for example, for the purposes of involving young people in external webinars and in co-writing publications and reports. The study began in May 2020 and finished in October 2021[3].

Young people shared the learning and outputs from their research on the Yammer platform with their peers, which in turn provided a focus for discussion. Some young people also posted their research outputs on the project website. Adult research panel leads supported young people in discussing and making sense of their research findings in relation to different areas of their lives; these discussions were recorded and captured on the Yammer platform as a learning history as well as stimulating further discussion. In addition, the adult researchers interviewed the young people at the end of the first phase of research to enable those who were less forthcoming in groups to have an opportunity to articulate their perspectives on issues arising in the research. All research "data" was uploaded to NVIVO to enable cross-project analysis and sense-making according to the different thematic areas of the study.

Impacts and Changes in Young People's Lives as a Result of the Pandemic

This paper uses the idea of socio-ecological contexts flexibly, to understand how the global pandemic was experienced by different young people in this study depending on changing personal, familial, social, and political influences. We argue that the impact of COVID-19 was mediated by the dynamic relationships between these different socio-ecological contexts. At the same time, COVID-19 initiated changes in the way young people as social actors can affect these wider social domains through the realization of their own agency and development of their sense of citizenship.

Personal Impacts and Responses

The significant impacts of the pandemic on young people's education, health and wellbeing, sense of identity and future plans have been well documented (Bourne et al., 2021; Thorisdottir et al., 2021). Our focus here is to discuss some of the more nuanced psychosocial impacts on young people in terms of their changing sense of self, coping strategies and personal development.

When the pandemic first hit, and as a response to COVID-19 restrictions forcing them to stay at home, young people often made a conscious choice to use the time that otherwise would be filled with schooling as productively as possible. Keeping busy with tasks and a structured routine for many helped prevent boredom and frustration and provided them with some sense of control over their lives (as also found by Mariani et al. 2020). While some pursued new leisure activities, others

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[3] For further detail about the methodological approach see Monchuk et al. (2020) and www.guc19.com

reconnected with existing commitments such as civic responsibilities, for example by "kicking my student voice work back into gear again." Others found fulfilment in community volunteering, as in Singapore where they supported local migrant workers who were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

While some young people looked outwards, others turned their focus inwards to creative expression such as visual arts, music, or writing, as art allowed them "to escape the grim reality COVID dumped on their shoulders." Art provided important means for processing their thoughts and feelings about the crisis—like discomfort with empty public spaces and a sense of helplessness after a year of restrictions, as represented in the artwork below (Figure 1)—and reassure themselves about their ability to cope. Some young people used art or poetry to communicate with friends they could not see.

> *I started writing more poems during this period. I think that was one way that I managed to cope with my down-ness, I guess, because I feel that writing poetry, it allows me to express myself. It tells a story that I would not be able to tell anybody face-to-face.* (M17, Singapore)

Figure 1. One young person's artistic depiction of experiences during lockdown

> *I drew this during a time I felt really powerless against our whole situation. My frustration wasn't directed at the restrictions themselves—we had to lock down [as] our cases were surging—but… a year on it felt like nothing had changed and this virus still wasn't going away.* (F18 UK)

Faith was a central part of how some young people coped during this phase, with some rediscovering their lost faith, which provided comfort and reassurance:

> *For me as a Muslim, I sort of focused more on the prayer aspect of things… If I do have another life, this is going to be something quite small… I kept telling myself that, and that helped me cope through it and realize that it's not that much of a bigger deal.* (F17, England)

> *I've always been a spiritual person. I've always had a connection with the higher power, but I never felt close.… It's when COVID, when there was a lockdown… I felt like I should start getting close to my spiritual beliefs.* (F18, England)

As a result of lockdown, young people recognized how they had neglected their wellbeing due to academic responsibilities, social life, and extra-curricular activities. As a result, and with encouragement from parents and carers, young people spoke of feeling that they had become better at caring for themselves, adopting beneficial routines, thought patterns and behaviors that could be applied long-term, beyond coping with the pandemic.

> *I think if there is one good thing to come out of COVID-19, it's more of how not to distract myself, but how to self-care… even before the pandemic, it's something that a lot of my peers and I struggled with… I just honestly decided to pay more attention to the smaller things… I stopped feeling so hopeless.* (F15, Singapore)

For others, lockdown brought a more critical appraisal of life goals. A common theme was to reassess the importance of academic achievement relative to other aspects of their lives, such as family, leisure interests and personal development. Young people spoke about the need for respite from grade competition with peers and from the anxiety induced by exams and results; others spent time on the development of their own sense of self. A central theme was that young people often felt they were no longer the same person as before the COVID-19 crisis.

> *I've changed as a person… before I was much shyer, 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.* (F15, UK)

> *2020 in general was a challenge for me and I learned a lot of things. I thought 2020 would be the year I get everything I want. Now I know 2020 is the year I appreciate everything I have… I learned when you change your priorities you change your life.* (F17, Lebanon)

These are quite fundamental shifts in young people's personal development that occurred as a result of changes to the context of their everyday lives. Young people spoke of becoming more mature and self-aware. They regretted losing the opportunity to experience key milestone events such as in-person post-exam celebrations, graduation ceremonies and school trips. However, they simultaneously recognized the value of learning to cope with a crisis of this magnitude, the psychological strength they gained from it, and a sense of perspective about what they felt was important. Above all, young people rejected the narrative that they

were victims of the pandemic, with many proving able to pragmatically adapt to changing circumstances.

> *I've changed a lot, both for the best and the worst on different aspects. I have become more mature, I have changed my opinion on many things, because I had more time to reflect about them and discuss with others. This pandemic has changed my identity and beliefs very much.* (M14, Italy)

Changing Family Roles

For some participating young people, COVID-19 prompted changes in relation to the family and their role within it. School closures and working from home meant that many of the young people spent much longer periods of time with family members within the home, which resulted in changes in relationships for better and for worse. Some felt that the experience of lockdown had resulted in a greater level of emotional closeness, as well as appreciating the value of time spent with family members. Concerns about the health of parents who were frontline workers or about financial hardships posed a strain on young people and their family members' mental wellbeing. In some cases, young people reacted by taking on new roles and responsibilities within the family, by helping with house chores and siblings' home schooling.

> *With my immediate family, my brother, my mum and my dad, it's just been us four, and normally, we don't really spend this much time together…. It's really helped us to strengthen our bonds... I think we've grown a lot closer to each other than… before.* (F16, England)

Lockdown also exposed similarities and differences in values and beliefs within the family. For some, this involved getting to know a side of family members or siblings that they may not have had an opportunity to observe before. Young people sometimes found that they appreciated parents or siblings to a greater extent following lockdown, because they had the chance to learn more about their views and interests as well as how much their parents did on a daily basis to take care of the family. Many young people gained a newfound respect towards their family members as a result of that:

> *My mum helped me a lot. She's always optimistic... I think over those three months, she started to grow on me… her way of thinking.* (F16, England)

This echoes findings elsewhere (Liu & Doan, 2020; Prime et al., 2020) that positive experiences of family life during the pandemic were contingent upon a degree of compatibility of values between family members, and related to greater emotional closeness to family members (Moore et al., 2020), a slower pace of life (Hawke et al., 2020), and realizing new abilities (Chawla et al., 2020).

Elsewhere, clashes and conflicts provided opportunities for young people to develop their own values and identities in relation to family members. Indeed, young people noted that the added time spent with family because of the pandemic made them

more comfortable and willing to engage adult family members in discussion when these views came into conflict.

> *I spent some time with my dad, he has a lot of very far-right beliefs, and I do not share any of those, so I think I've become more opinionated and vocal…and standing up to him.* (F17, Scotland)

> *I got to know my dad better, especially in terms of his political views, which turned out to be different than what I thought. I heard him comment on the news sometimes, and I would stare at him thinking, 'What are you saying?'* (F17, Italy)

These experiences highlight that while COVID-19 will leave lasting effects (OECD, 2020), the young people in this study have demonstrated creativity and resilience in managing to grow through adversity.

Changing Patterns of Social Activities
Contrary to the popular view that young people choose to spend time predominantly on social media (Common Sense & Hopelab, 2021), our research revealed young people missed face to face "genuine" human interaction with friends during the pandemic, as also reported elsewhere (Butler & Bannock, 2021). However, the pandemic also highlighted how young people developed new possibilities for socializing with each other, including exercising remotely together, playing online games or starting a blog to share experiences with close friends.

> *Recently, there was this very popular game 'Among Us' that many of us played. After a tiring day of studying, my class would Skype each other and play this game together, allowing us to have fun and interact with one another despite the physical distance.* (F17, Singapore)

In many cases, the lockdown led young people to realign their friendships, developing stronger bonds with close friends while putting distance between themselves and others they had not felt supported or understood by. Others developed new friendships as a result of new interests and activities online and mutual support groups. For example, in Italy the strengthening of class groups providing solidarity and mutual support partially compensated for lack of real-time interaction:

> *You have no idea how much it helped me, making me feel so relieved because we would take study breaks and have some fun.* (M15, Italy)

> *We as a class have bonded, out of solidarity, we have all felt the lack of school in the true sense of the word.* (F18, Italy)

However, despite these self-help initiatives, young people also became aware of the extent to which many of their friends were struggling to cope, especially those disadvantaged by digital exclusion, highlighting how the context for experience is structurally variable.

Schools and Learning
Repeated school closures, the move to online learning, and changes to assessment procedures all had significant impacts on young people's lives. Home-based learning was experienced both positively and negatively. On the positive side, home-schooling meant less time spent travelling to and from school and more time for rest, doing other things and interacting with family, as well as learning how to study and manage one's own time independently. Some felt that chat functions enabled them to interact with teachers more easily than through face-to-face teaching.

Contrary to narratives that this was a "lost year," young people argued that, despite difficulties of online learning, there were opportunities and benefits in terms of modernizing teaching, making classes more engaging through PowerPoint presentations, students becoming autonomous learners, and students and teachers learning digital skills that are important for future careers.

> *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.* (F17, Italy)

On the negative side, home-based learning brought about problems related to too much time spent in front of a screen, limited opportunities to engage in informal chats with classmates and teachers, limited wider social interactions, technical difficulties with learning online, (especially when teachers were not properly trained), and disrupted learning due to having to care for younger siblings.

Across countries, the experience of home-schooling during the pandemic made some young people realize the social significance of school but also how little they were involved in school decision-making processes, how their needs were often just assumed, rather than discussed and understood by school staff and decision-makers. When some young people had tried to voice their experiences with remote learning, they did not feel their concerns were taken seriously.

> *Our teachers did this… mass survey to… 'tell us how it felt and rank us on a scale of 1 to 10.' But then they were like 'oh most of the people enjoyed online learning.' I was like, that is a lie… So I think the schools were overplaying too much how well online learning went and how much young people were actually engaging with it… all of us are like 'we hated it.'* (M17, England)

The Political Domain
Many young people reported that their needs were not sufficiently accounted for during the pandemic, with decisions seemingly based on what was best for the country and economy as a whole, often at the expense of young people. For example, in Italy young people appreciated the strict measures adopted during the first wave of the pandemic, but grew disappointed with the government's

management during the second wave, as they realized how little their concerns and priorities were reflected in post-pandemic recovery plans.

> *The superficiality with which the school is treated is the revelation of the lockdown, and its most catastrophic part.* (M14, Italy)

These feelings of being marginalized in the political process echoed across other countries. In Lebanon, young people's experiences of the pandemic were exacerbated by wider issues such as the collapsing economy, sectarianism, structural inequalities (refugees, urban/rural divide), a general lack of government accountability, and poor investment in infrastructure, including schools, broadband, and public services—for example, having electricity for only three hours a day. These triggered a strong feeling of frustration among young people, as well as calls for politicization and youth social action mirroring trends in Egypt where youth disenfranchisement has fueled the creation of youth-led civic action (Abdou & Skalli, 2017).

Even in Singapore, where young people had a more positive view of political leaders, uncovering of poor conditions affecting migrant workers gave rise to young people having concerns about such inequalities existing in their country.

> *The coronavirus exposed a lot more about our society that we were perhaps not ready or open or even willing to know existed in our communities. Some of the truths really shocked me to my core because I didn't believe that, as progress[ive] as Singapore was, that we could… make these mistakes.* (F16, Singapore)

Young people were in turn similarly spurred to engage in community outreach activities to support marginalized groups in need within their local community.

Digital Civic Engagement
Cutting across personal, social, and political dimensions is the affordance of the digital environment and young people's use of digital media to make their voices heard and spur collective action to respond to issues highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research echoed evidence (Cho et al., 2020; Pelter, 2020; Wike & Castillo, 2018) concerning the potential role of social media and digital platforms as alternative spheres for young people's political engagement to "develop their civic identities and express political stances in creative ways, claiming agency that may not be afforded to them in traditional civic spaces" (p. 3), and facilitate participation in individual or collective actions to improve the well-being of their communities or societies (Pelter, 2020). Young people readily discussed the value of digital tools and platforms such as online surveys, Instagram, and Twitter as effective, accessible ways to share information. The changing relationship between young people and the broader civic sphere is reflected in a growing proportion of young people looking for news online and discussing political problems online. For example, young people in Lebanon utilized social media to organize and mobilize for their campaigns and protests, and in Singapore for volunteering.

To some extent, young people's use of social media was encouraged through the PAR approach in this project, which was conducted entirely online, including young people communicating findings with practitioners and decision-makers via online workshops, presentations, webinars, and video commentaries. Regular discussions with young people about the pandemic led to wider reflections about social issues, political decisions, and opportunities for civic action. This aligns with research (Cho et al., 2020; Kahne et al., 2013; Ito et al., 2019) that found that a vibrant digital exchange between peers around seemingly non-political issues can be conducive to higher political engagement, online and off, and higher participation in civic life more generally. This is illustrated, for example, with Singaporean young people's concern over data privacy implications and surveillance resulting from contact tracing:

> *There are real threats that this information and technology may one day be repurposed for surveillance purposes and may in turn result in the people's privacy and security being heavily compromised.* (M18, Singapore)

Lessons for Providing Nurturing Environments for Young People to Live, Learn and Grow

i) On Becoming a Person
For most young people in advanced economic societies, their lives are programmed around education and assumptions that growing up involves doing well in school and acquiring qualifications. Yet, the findings from this article underscore the importance of a more holistic perspective on young people's development including having time to play, socialize, gain new experiences, establish their own identity, and develop their capacity as citizens (Kroger, 1996; Lister, 2008; Wulff, 1995). In this paper we have highlighted the way in which personal development and change happens, albeit sometimes out of adversity, when young people have free, unprogrammed space and time for new ways of being, learning, reflecting, and acting (OECD, 2020). It is in this respect that young people bemoan the narrow focus of governments solely on education to the detriment of wider determinants and factors affecting young people's development. To that extent, we argue that in the context of young people's rights and inclusion as citizens, having the opportunity to advance their own sense of self, develop resilience and evolve their capabilities as autonomous social actors is fundamental to being able to take control of their lives and adapt to change. This more holistic and nuanced perspective on youth-focused policy should therefore be central to post-pandemic planning.

ii) Life Learning "Beyond the Classroom"
Young people realized the significance and availability of learning opportunities beyond the narrow confines of subject-based curricula and formulaic learning cultures of the classroom. Many participants saw the pandemic as an opportunity for developing a more holistic education for life and active citizenship (Bentley, 1998), by gaining a greater awareness of social issues such as racism (e.g., Black Lives Matter), inequalities (Bambra et al., 2021), vulnerability of particular groups

(e.g., migrant workers in Singapore), and climate change, as well as reflecting on social values in society at large.

Many young people realized a sense of their own agency and identity, dedicating more time to self-reflection and reassessing their relationships and priorities. Young people talked about the value of having the opportunity to discuss with others about their individual experiences and what was happening around them, for example through the meetings organized as part of our projects, as they believed school did not provide them with space for reflective dialogue. Indeed, many complained about the missed opportunity of using school to discuss the pandemic, as this would have increased young people's understanding of what was happening around them and their ability to cope with that, offering further opportunities for self-growth and helping to contrast some of the mental health issues that young people experienced.

> *This year, COVID was a taboo. We heard how it affected the school, but no teacher asked us: 'How are you? How are you experiencing it?' The mood of the young would have been better, if these questions had been asked. You couldn't talk about COVID with your family, at school you couldn't talk about it… Once again, it was like school was that thing out of this world that doesn't help you in life.* (M15, Italy)

iii) Political Accountability, Rights, and Participation as Active Citizens
As a result of young people becoming more aware of social issues around them and, in turn, the way in which professionals and decision-makers responded to those issues, there has been a significant development in young people's political agency. This mirrors rising trends in social movements and new forms of social action, in part a product of the affordances that social media provides. This activation or politicization of young people is characterized by Freire's (1970) idea of conscientization, in which young people develop a heightened sense of their own political agency through critical reflection on their social environment. In this project this resulted in young people seeking opportunities to speak out and communicate their experiences with political decision-makers, for example through writing letters to elected officials or through engagement in dialogue at events with political leaders. Despite the popular press and politicians scorning young people's involvement in these types of activities, they are nonetheless key to young people realizing their rights to participation as active citizens. In some cases, as a result of perceived limitations in opportunities for democratic engagement, some young people developed their own forms of self-initiated social action, through for example social media, community volunteering and support groups for peers.

Conclusion
This study has highlighted how young people are not solely passive victims of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, COVID initiated a more complex set of responses from young people at personal, familial, social and political levels. On a personal level, young people were able to respond to the pandemic through critical self-reflection, art, and faith, investing in their own wellbeing or channeling their energies into civic action. While prosocial behaviors and family support contributed

to mediating some of the pandemic's negative effects and opened new possibilities for young people, many reported a feeling of stagnation and disappointment with the personal and social experiences they were missing out on, and disillusionment with government responses and prevailing social attitudes. Young people in our study underwent long spells of emotional and psychological instability, which tested even the most motivated ones. This demonstrates the non-linear growth path they experienced during the pandemic, which they believed generated long-lasting learning in terms of their approach to life, priorities, and life goals.

Unpacking young people's engagement, growth and change through the pandemic, our findings have highlighted that there is no fixed "normal." Rather, life is constantly unfolding and changing, with young people's wellbeing dependent on their ability to engage with, negotiate and reflexively deal with changes and ups and downs. Our findings have also revealed the importance for young people's wellbeing, of being afforded a space to discuss and debate these changes with their peers and adults. On the one hand, this could have at least partially compensated for the lack of mental health support with which many young people struggled during the pandemic. On the other, this stresses the importance of formal civic education in schools as "an important step in creating awareness of children's rights as citizens and of the possibilities for action in the civic space" (Cho et al., 2020, p. 15). Strengthening the teaching of civic education in schools would turn these spaces into sources of young people's increased awareness of their rights as citizens, and of the possibilities for action in the civic space. This might go some way in redressing the inequalities and disadvantage that many young people experience. Taken together, evidence concerning how the young people in this study responded to the unintended opportunities afforded by the pandemic has provided a renewed perspective on what young people need in terms of nurturing environments in which to grow up.

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