Insight Report

CROSSING BORDERS

"Our teenage years are being taken away just because the adults can't handle the pandemic" - The impact of COVID-19 through the eyes of young people living in Denmark.

At the beginning of 2020, the world was hit with a new kind of uncertainty brought by a previously unknown virus, the varying levels of restrictions imposed across different countries, and lockdowns with undetermined end dates. These lockdowns stretched on and on, and as they did many milestones disappeared in their midst. For young people, many of whom had been waiting their entire lives for these milestones, this was a particularly cutting loss. Whether it was their first school days, their high-school parties, graduations, or their first steps into adulthood, they all went by under the cloak of restrictions. Youth, largely less affected by the COVID-19 disease than the older members of society, still played their part in enduring covid restrictions, while suffering huge losses to their sense of self, their social lives, and their personal growth.

Despite their struggles, youth have largely been denied a seat at the table during policy and decision-making processes, which is echoed by the following quote from one of our storytellers "As teenagers we're supposed to be going out there and doing stuff and having fun and experiencing all those amazing teenage things that people talk about all the time, but I feel like our teenage years are being taken away just because the adults can't handle the pandemic." This is why, through the CONTINUE project, we want to bring youth perspectives into the conversations we are having about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their voices deserve to be heard, especially when considering the important milestones they have missed out on over the past two years. The stories we have gathered are from the perspective of youth between the ages of 14-17 living in Denmark, many of whom have suffered from a lack of motivation, boredom, strenuous family relationships, and the unpredictable education that the pandemic brought.

"It was very easy to disappear from online class, just by one click of a button" - Lack of motivation in school

The introduction of online classes came with big setbacks to education for many of the storytellers who shared their experiences with us. In the beginning, the casual, disorganised education seemed positive to them, it gave them a break from the structure of education in a physical space, with one storyteller sharing that *"at first it seemed like a vacation from school",* and another explaining their happiness that *"it was easier to do online school in the beginning when the teachers were not too adjusted with the technologies"*. Teenagers felt that they were benefitting from their teachers inability to monitor their learning in the same way they had previously, but this happiness at the ease of online school at the beginning was quickly replaced by a lack of motivation. Out of the 17 young people who shared their stories with us, 15 of them mentioned the difficulties of online school, and 9 of them

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touched on themes of lack of motivation. One particularly impactful quote was from a storyteller who described school as being *"difficult to follow up on"* due to it being *"very easy to disappear from online class, just by one click of a button"* this same storyteller went on to say that they *"skipped almost an entire year of classes"* and when pressed by teachers, they simply stopped answering their calls, following that that they lost their motivation to do their homework entirely. Another storyteller said that they *"ended up uploading all the assignments late due to [their] lack of motivation"*, which resulted in a difficult, year-long process of catching up when they returned to physical schooling. This statement was echoed by another student, who spoke about how difficult it was to remain engaged with online schooling, saying: *"I would just do the bare minimum and it was so hard for me".* Through being able to get away with not listening to online classes, and through an overall lack of structure, many students found it hard to reach even the basic effort they had previously been capable of. Many of the youth felt the effects of online classes even after returning to their normal educational environments, with one storyteller saying that *"the year after I had to build myself back up because I forgot a lot of things during lockdown".*

Overall, despite the lack of structured education seeming like a break at the beginning of the pandemic, the easiness of *"accessing the meetings online, muting them, and scrolling through social media"* evolved into a lack of motivation, which many are still finding their way back from. These struggles can be hugely impactful on youth during important years of learning, in which many young people find their passions and personal areas of interest through what they are taught in classes. The impact of young people losing their capacity to focus during these integral years of development could see an increased number of young adults who haven't had the opportunity to evolve their own interests.

"I didn't want to be social with my family" - Family matters

One important perspective gained from the youth who engaged in storytelling was the increased amount of time they spent with their families. For some, it was a positive experience, with one storyteller sharing how the pandemic gave them the opportunity to spend quality time with their family, watching movies together every evening, but for others the impact that covid had on their families was difficult. One of the storytellers shared details about their family dynamic that became more uncomfortable with their increased proximity to each other, they shared that their relationship with their family during the pandemic *"was not that good, me and my family are not that close"*. They felt a particular strain with their relationship with their mother, who they lived with during the pandemic, together with their stepfather and half-siblings *"me and my step-father are decently close, but me and my mother just don't fit well together"* the strain was intensified by the fact that they were expected to help with taking care of their younger siblings, which was not fun for them. Another storyteller shared that, despite being around their family more, they *"wouldn't*

say they got closer, they got farther apart" due to *"a lot of falling outs, because they were with each other for too long"* this resulted in them choosing to spend time in their room because they *"just didn't want to see my family sometimes",* the proximity was overwhelming and they often felt that despite having their family there, they *"just needed someone else to talk to*". One of the young people spoke about their longing to see their grandmother who lived in a different country during the pandemic, saying "*I couldn't go over to her place when I couldn't handle my family".* Alluding to the exclusion of youth from outlets that they once relied on for respite and comfort. It seems that many of the youth who took part dealt with struggles due to the close proximity to their family, which brought difficult interpersonal issues on top of an already stressful personal environment. Additionally, the constant presence of family left little room for the kind of independence youth usually find through social activities, school and activities outside of the family home, leaving youth without space of their own outside of their own bedrooms.

"I was in a state of oblivion where I would just lay in bed all day" - Mental health

Many of the youth who told their stories shared their perspectives on mental health. For some their struggles manifested in terms of lack of motivation, for others it was boredom, and many saw their mental health fall drastically during lockdown. One person shared their experiences of lack of motivation, and how that left them in *"a state of oblivion where I would just lay in bed all day"*. The same topic of lying in bed and mindlessly scrolling on social media was echoed by other storytellers, with one adding that life became *"boring and monotone."* These struggles were also felt by other youth, with one saying *"my mental health was terrible, it definitely took a downwards spiral. I was not happy at all,"* due to the lack of social interaction and the outlets for self-expression that were denied during the pandemic. Another reason for a negative impact on youth's mental health due to the pandemic was not having friends to talk to. A storyteller shared that *"I would say that being home all the time affected my mental health because I didn't have my friends to talk to",* despite having their family around they *"needed people other than my family to talk to"* affirming the importance of youth having their own independence and autonomy outside of their family home. While this was an extremely challenging struggle for some, there were, on the other hand, youth who used the extra time during the pandemic to work on their mental health, with one sharing *"I was very depressed before the pandemic"* but that they were able to take time for themselves, to *"be able to relax and rest for a period of time*" and another person who said that they *"had more time to work on [their] mental health".* The pandemic also provided time for other storytellers to pursue activities that they enjoyed, one storyteller said *"I started going for walks that lasted hours and reading books"* and others talked about the positive experience of how they enjoyed playing video games and getting better at them.

Overall, the pandemic impacted a majority of the young storytellers in terms of their general sense of boredom, and their motivation for doing things they did pre-covid dropped, for others their mental health was positively impacted by the extra time to focus on themselves and to do what made them happy without the pressures of normal life. The differences in these two scenarios are to be expected, as mental health is a spectrum that can be influenced by a variety of factors. In this case, factors such as allowing youth to have more time to focus on their own mental health, and ensuring that youth have their needs met in terms of motivation, engagement, and protecting them from the impact of isolation are all extremely important.

Conclusion

Overall, it seems that the unstructured nature of online learning caused difficulties for youth with motivating themselves, an understandable consequence of going from a system in which accountability is integrated through physical presence to one in which the mute button exists, which results in the unfortunate consequence of many high-school level teenagers losing interest in and falling behind in classes. When it comes to social lives, many young people felt a distance from their friends that was not fulfilled, and in many cases was made worse, by the proximity of their family members, when constantly being around each other resulted in strained relationships and a lack of independence. In many cases, the lockdown had considerable impacts on the mental health of the younger generation, where social isolation and a lack of motivation to do anything besides lying in bed and scrolling on social media resulted in a state of "oblivion". For others, lockdowns provided much-needed room for self-reflection and time to pursue their own interests. These experiences show that, once society is back up and running, the experiences of youth need to be taken into account. The benefits of engagement in education, independence and autonomy from the family home, time to focus on their own interests outside of school, and a vibrant social life in which they are allowed to experience normal teenage milestones cannot be understated and should be taken into account.

About CONTINUE

CONTINUE supports young people experiencing social exclusion to tackle the specific challenges of post-COVID times in terms of staying connected and integrated into European communities. The project is being delivered by a consortium of 8 NGOs from different European countries who are experienced in youth education and community-based activities. The work involves storytelling, social action projects, policy development, knowledge exchanges, an outreach campaign and the creation of an online platform.

As part of this project, Community Reporting activities are being delivered with young people across Europe to explore their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and what can support them as part of the COVID-19 recovery period. This learning will be used in the CONTINUE project to kick-start social actions led by the young people in their communities. Community Reporting is a digital storytelling movement founded by People's Voice Media and supports people to tell their own stories, in their own ways in order to catalyse change within processes, policy and practice. You can find out more here: https://peoplesvoicemedia.co.uk

This insight report has been produced by CROSSING BORDERS and is based on 17 young people living in DENMARK. All of the stories from young people that have been gathered on the project can be listened to here: https://communityreporter.net/continue