



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
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**“COVID CAME IN AND COMPLETELY
CHANGED EVERYTHING.”**

CONNECTING EUROPEAN YOUTH THROUGH
STORYTELLING

PAN-EUROPEAN INSIGHT REPORT

Introduction

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, 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. These organisations are:

- People's Voice Media, United Kingdom;
- Comparative Research Network (CRN), Germany;
- Active Youth, Lithuania;
- Artemisszió Intercultural Foundation, Hungary;
- Crossing Borders, Denmark;
- Federação Das Associações Juvenis Do Distrito Do Porto (FADJP), Portugal;
- Per Esemplio, Italy (Sicily);
- Youth Europe Service (YES), Italy.

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 have been 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. All of the stories from young people that have been gathered on the project can be listened to [here](#).

The findings from these stories were shared in a series of local insight reports which were used in the planning of eight local Conversation of Change events in each of the partner countries. At these events, young people, local stakeholders

and decision makers got together to share insights into the stories and begin to think about actions they might take going forward to support young people in a post-pandemic Europe (details of the attendees at each Conversation of Change event can be viewed in Table 1). The findings from these events were then synthesised and shared in a pan-European Conversation of Change event in which key stakeholders, decision makers and young people from across the continent listened to some of the stories gathered and shared their own insights, culminating in an exchange of actions that could be taken immediately to support Europe's youth.

Facilitating Organisation	Attendee Information
People's Voice Media (UK)	Young people from Gorse Hill Studios, Stretford, and local stakeholders including local government members and youth workers.
Per Esempio (Italy)	Young people from a local high school who had not previously taken part in the project, and stakeholders including student representatives and teachers.
Crossing Borders (Denmark)	Held online, a mix of young people and stakeholders including youth workers, educators, a social worker and a psychologist.
FAJDP (Portugal)	Young people from a local all-girls high school and stakeholders including local government, teachers and youth workers/representatives.
CRN (Germany)	Only young people (aged between 20 and 27) who had already taken part in the project were able to attend this event due to COVID restrictions in place in Berlin at the time. However, the stories have been shared with external stakeholders since.
Active Youth (Lithuania)	Young people and stakeholders including student representatives, psychologists, and teachers.
Artemisszió (Hungary)	Young people from migrant backgrounds and stakeholders including youth workers.
YES (Italy)	Young people (students) who had not taken part in the project previously.

Table 1: Local Conversation of Change event attendees

This insight report synthesises the findings from the stories, eight local events and the pan-European Conversation of Change event to share the key insights, and suggested actions. As you will see, the key insights broadly sit around three main thematic areas of mental health and wellbeing, education and careers, and social issues and inequalities.

“My mental health took a downward spiral.” – The effect of the pandemic on the health and wellbeing of young people

One of the big themes to emerge from the stories gathered was the impact that the pandemic had on the mental health of young people. “My mental health took a downward spiral,” shared one of the young people from Denmark who goes on to describe their mental health as “absolutely terrible”. The person – a student – talks about how this impacted their studies: “I definitely was way undermotivated when it came to school life. ... I would just do the bare minimum.” This was picked up on by the participants in the pan-European event who described this as being reflective of the situation of young people they had worked with and spoke to in their respective countries.

Notions of worry and sadness come up again and again. Worry about “how it's going to affect my life,” (Denmark) and sadness “because I can't be with my family that lives away from me,” (Portugal) are just two examples of comments from across the continent and were found highly relatable by participants in the Conversation of Change events who talk about “loneliness,” “anxiety,” and feeling hopeless. A storyteller from Portugal also discusses the negative impact on their mental health, and the longer term implications of this: “COVID affected the psychology of people and the way they are.” They go on to add that the pandemic affected “the way we are with people,” suggesting that these impacts on mental health will have knock-on effects on social behaviours and socialisation, something they clarify by stating that they have recently started to interact with people “normally” but “more carefully”. However, one young person in Hungary who was living in the UK during lockdown hints that this social impact is not permanent when discussing being able to see people again as restrictions lifted: “You felt sort of nervous and anxious about, like, going to meet your friends,” although after a while you get over that.”

In fact, this resilience comes up time and time again in the stories, with small positives being found. One young person in Denmark says, “In the beginning it was nice because I didn't have to be around people and it gave me a break from the world.” A Hungarian storyteller says, “After a while I got used to the situation that nothing is for sure,” going on to add how the restrictions allowed them to “focus on myself more” and gave them “an opportunity to add to me something.” In another

story, a young person in Italy declares that “it [the pandemic] gave me the courage to go through life differently. ... We've been too hurt and so maybe it is better to live in a more playful and enjoyable way.” While young people’s mental health and wellbeing has been hit hard by the pandemic, some at least have been able to draw positives from the situation in order to live their lives in what they see as a more positive way. Although this has raised questions in the Conversation of Change events about what this says about the pressures on young people across Europe, if a global pandemic offered them a break from the pressures on them.

The consensus from the young people’s stories and the Conversation of Change events is that while the pandemic had its positives initially (in terms of a break from social, educational and professional pressures) these eventually evaporated for many as loneliness, fear, and monotony set in, having a detrimental impact on mental health and wellbeing. For some, this has had a lasting negative effect, whereas for others it has changed their outlook on life for the positive. Two things are apparent though:

Support needs to be in place for young people experiencing lasting negative effects on their mental health (and for those who may find their trauma triggered in the future).

Care needs to be taken that returning to ‘normal’ for Europe does not mean a return to pre-pandemic pressures on young people and young people need a place at the table to co-create what this ‘new normal’ should look like for them.

“It’s so easy just to leave an online lesson with just a click of a button.” – The effect of the pandemic on young people’s education and careers

As one might imagine, education and careers were heavily at the forefront across all of the different countries taking part, with most young people talking to differing extents about the impact on their schooling and/or work. These stories are almost entirely negative, although a small number of storytellers had positive experiences during this time. One of the German storytellers, for instance, spoke how the pandemic “was not a big problem for me.” They go on to describe how they were lucky to have a job that they could continue with and that they actually found working from home good because they “have concentrated more than before.” However, this view is certainly not universal, even within Germany. Another person in the country described the isolation of being entirely at home – especially as a single person – as “super challenging”. While they also described themselves as “lucky” to be able to continue with their job throughout the pandemic, they also say that “I like peer-to-peer interaction and I can’t focus that good enough.”

This lack of focus is echoed by the young people discussing their education throughout the pandemic. All of them were studying online from home with extracurricular activities stopping in their tracks. “I was sat in front of my computer from the morning to the evening, even in the night and because of that I now have glasses,” tells an Italian university student. This state of continuous screentime was the norm for all of the young people sharing their stories, and it had an impact on engagement with lessons. “It’s so easy just to leave an online lesson with just a click of a button,” a young person from Denmark intimated, adding “I skipped almost a whole year, I think. ... Sometimes I would actually be in the class, in the lecture, but I wouldn’t do any of the homework or listen because I would just be on my phone.” Another person speaking from Denmark elaborates:

“When lockdown was about to happen I was really excited because we got to miss school and we got to stay in bed all the time. ... And then I got bored and, yeah, didn’t really like it. ... I didn’t do much work in lockdown because I just didn’t have the motivation to do it. And then when I got back to school, I just forgot a lot of things”

A Lithuanian storyteller shared that "I was missing communicating with people and I felt lonely. ... I could not focus while studying and did not have a lot of motivation for study." Although they found that it got easier as time went on, "it was still hard because it was boring and tiring for me." The young people across all of the participating countries are all in agreement that trying to stay motivated when learning remotely all day was a difficult task and that the temptation to disengage was far too strong when combined with the ease with which they could disconnect. This was reflected on in the pan-European Conversation of Change event, in which youth workers from different countries described current problems with young people returning to school settings only to discover that they have fallen behind in their education and now need to "catch up" to where they are expected to be academically as this could have further impacts on formal qualifications (a storyteller in the UK talked about how she was "really worried" during lockdown that she had not been able to sit her exams), university admissions, and future careers.

The stories and comments made during the Conversation of Change events have flagged that there needs to be:

Support and training for schools and educators to spot gaps in education for young people affected by the pandemic and listen to their needs.

Support for young people who have fallen behind to catch up without putting them under heavy pressure.

“I understood we’re in this mess together and that it will change our lives. And it did.” – Social issues and inequalities facing young people during the pandemic

It would be disingenuous to suggest that we lived in an equitable society before the pandemic. In fact, social inequalities were rife across Europe. However, the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and issues, making them stand out more starkly. “COVID came in and completely changed everything,” one Hungarian storyteller points out, while a young person in Lithuania states that, “I understood, well, we’re in this mess together and that it will change our lives. And it did.” It’s clear from the stories shared by the young people that their lives absolutely did change during the pandemic, but whether this was for better or for worse seems to largely depend on their own background, experience and resources.

The storyteller in Lithuania describes how the pandemic has changed our perspective of travelling and working remotely “and more people can do it from anywhere in the world and be based somewhere else because work from home is easier when everyone adapts to it.” He adds that he hopes remote working will stay “because, well, it’s enjoyable and it increases your effectivity.” Working remotely has allowed this particular person to travel while continuing to work and so has broadened their horizons. However, a young person in Hungary describes the opposite effect: “I moved back with my parents and was studying online. ... Everything became very insular and inward focused because you weren’t going out and connecting with people as much.” Clearly, for this person remote studies were less a means to freedom but rather a cage. They add, “I was very lucky that I got along with my family,” which, of course, is the linchpin for the lockdown experience of many – something apparent from discussions in Conversation of Change events too. If you didn’t get on with family then being kept indoors with them day in day out could be a source of upset for young people and, as we have unfortunately seen in the news, as has been discussed by several stakeholders, and flagged by one of the Italian storytellers, domestic abuse spiralled in European lockdowns because it was easier for abusers to commit their abuse undetected. If young people are in an abusive household then the pandemic pushed them into a dangerous and traumatic situation with no safety net of school or friends.

A young person in the UK highlights how important friendship groups are for his peers with his story of what lockdown restrictions took away from him in terms of

freedom and mobility:

"Any 17-year-old will tell you they're never in the house hanging out with their parent or carer, you know what I mean? They're always out with friends. So, when I couldn't see friends, it kind of affected me a bit. ... I used to just go on a bus and travel around Manchester and come back home. I used to like to be out."

This is supported by a storyteller in Italy who says, "I saw my freedom blocked. For me, freedom is to go outside – going and coming back." Stakeholders discussed how the restriction of movement was traumatic in itself for many young people, forcing them into a sedentary lifestyle that they were not used to and impacting on emotional wellbeing, something that several of the countries participating are beginning to see the effects of.

Life's milestones were also affected. Young people in the UK talked about how transitioning from primary school to secondary school was difficult as they had none of the orientation activities they would usually get at their new school as well as none of the celebrations they would usually have upon leaving their primary school. One British young person transitioning from foster care to living on her own talked about how COVID dampened this momentous milestone for her. She moved into her own place during lockdown restrictions: "I wanted to celebrate moving into my own place but no one could come round." Transitions such as this one can be difficult at the best of times as young people leave their foster families to fend for themselves, but without the usual celebrations, what should be a liberating experience might, instead, become an isolating one. And this isolation, in turn can have negative consequences for mental health – something mentioned by an Italian storyteller who goes on to add, "Having good mental health is not something that should be a privilege, it should be a basic right." This, of course, highlights the issue that inequitable resources pre-pandemic have led to inequitable problems during and after the pandemic. Some people simply can't afford the 'privilege' of good mental health in the same way they may not be able to afford the digital technologies required for remote study and connection with friends and family, or how some people might not have had easy access to gardens, parks and nature so that they could get outdoors more – both issues flagged by stakeholders at the Conversation of Change events.

Based on the stories and conversations, there needs to be:

Better support for young people (financial and otherwise) in order to make societies around Europe more equitable.

Training and support for people working with and for young people so they can better understand the social issues facing them.

Immediate actions and long-term goals

At the end of the local and pan-European Conversation of Change events, facilitators asked participants to share actions they could start doing right away to improve things for themselves and the young people around them, inspired by the stories they had heard and the discussions they had held. Although there are too many to list here, some examples from the local events include:

UK

- "Talk to them [young people], not for them."
- "Create a youth advisory board to hear their views."
- "Make connections with other attendees of this event to bring more help to Stretford youth."

Hungary

- "Do some research about social initiatives that already exist in my area and internationally."
- "Join online groups or create one that deals with the above questions."
- "Pay more attention to my personal relationships, call my friend."

Portugal

- "Use my voice to make people feel better about themselves."
- "Share positive content in social media."
- "Help others to feel more integrated in school and other social spaces and/or events."

Denmark

- "When interacting with teenagers and youth, tell them it's okay if to discuss their issues."
- "Make social media posts with lists of resources and referrals for youth mental health services."
- "Normalise that it is okay to experience distress and seek help in everyday life."

Lithuania

- "Look up how the emotional health system for young people works."
- "Be more empathetic. Listen, pay attention to a person's body language and state of mind."
- "Laugh."

Italy (Sicily)

- "Having more moments dedicated to open dialogue and listening which can lead to more personal reflection."
- "Commit to listening to others more."
- "Be more aware of what is going on around them and proactively engage with their surroundings."

Italy

- "Creative activities, working with hands."
- "Interaction."
- "Outdoor activities."

Germany

- "Helping with school work and learning."
- "Fixing small things in the house for people."
- "Grocery shopping for those who can't do it themselves."

At the pan-European event, suggestions for small, immediate actions included:

"In the long term new tools need to be developed, ... but in the short term patience and understanding can go a long way."

"Create a support network of young people for young people, who better to help than a person you can identify with."

"Share within the organisation [the outcomes of the event] and see how we can support young people accessing our services easier e.g., mental health support."

"Listen to young people's experiences and value their contributions."

"Keep in mind when working with people that everyone, especially the youth cope with things differently and comes from different background and privileges, therefore have different needs."

These suggestions for immediate actions show that although there is much to do in terms of policy and larger social actions – things which the CONTINUE project will tackle in its next stages – smaller, more immediate actions have the capacity to make change at individual and organisational levels in the short-term. These actions can be as simple as actively listening and showing empathy, but even small changes such as these can help young people feel more seen, heard and valued, and allow them to begin working against the issues that affect them post-pandemic.

The next stages of the CONTINUE project will see the young people in each country come together to create localised social actions, while another strand of the project will increase present and discuss findings with stakeholders, decision-makers and policy-makers so that knowledge exchanges can be held and local and European levels in order to create policy recommendations in order to affect longer-term change to support a youth so disproportionately hit by the consequences of the pandemic.

C O N T I N U E



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COMPARATIVE
RESEARCH
NETWORK:



Crossing Borders

