Critical Education

'Left Adrift and Wondering What the Future Holds'

Learning from Students whose Futures are Drastically Altered by the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the experiences of students whose education was disrupted by school closures during the COVID-19 global pandemic. With a focus on mental health concerns, the article presents the reflections, thoughts and feelings of students whose public examinations were cancelled and who experienced both the abrupt termination of a phase of their formal education and the loss of traditional ways of marking that ending. Findings show that feelings of loss and illegitimacy augment the stress and anxiety surrounding high-stakes tests and their cancellation. There are several implications for policy and practice, if student mental health is to be foregrounded and taken seriously. Communication, dialogue, and possibilities for taking back agency and critical hope may all go some way towards mitigating these mental health concerns. The validity of using re-purposed components to allocate grades is called into question, as are the role and place of high-stakes testing per se.

Learning from Students whose Futures are Drastically Altered by the Cancellation of Public Examinations under the COVID-19 Pandemic

Motivation and Context

In response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the British government announced on 18th March 2020 that, as of two days hence, schools would close their doors to all students except those deemed vulnerable and the children of key-workers. This mandated school closure *en masse* - echoed across many parts of the globe - is exceptional. The lived experiences of this educational shift and its impact on student well-being need monitoring and recording from the perspective of school students (Holmes et al*., 2020).

This article focuses on one specific aspect of this educational change worthy of detailed attention, namely the abrupt end to schooling and associated cancellation of high-stakes tests for the cohorts of students who were preparing to sit public examinations in the summer of 2020. For these students, their experience of school closures is wrapped up with dealing with the end of a phase of compulsory schooling – the curtailment of an educational chapter – as well as the unforeseen cancellation of high-stakes tests. Furthermore, this is all against the backdrop of stress and fear provoked by the global pandemic; thus implications for student well-being deserve exploration. We present the findings of a qualitative study that uses UK students' reflections to shed light on their lived experiences, thoughts, feelings and emotions. With the global nature of the pandemic, these students' experiences will undoubtedly parallel those of their peers in other countries where similar enforced school closures occurred and necessarily impacted public examinations, whether obliquely, through disrupting established preparations, or more directly, through their metamorphosis, postponement or cancellation. Thus, the role and form of public examinations are (once again) called into question in these unusual times, with implications arguably worthy of consideration across all education systems, but with inferences of particular note for neo-liberal education systems, where high-stakes testing is ubiquitous (Au, 2010).

Learning from these experiences as they occur now will better inform and prepare the education sector to react, intervene, and respond effectively to imminent (and future) mental health concerns exacerbated or indeed brought on by the pandemic. It is crucial that the impacts on student well-being are noted promptly, so that measures can be enacted to mitigate the potential longer-term, sustained impacts before they are deeply embedded for individuals - and indeed cohorts of students. Equally, this research can be used to inform future policy and practice surrounding assessment, whether to evolve a system which is better able to support student well-being, or one which is better placed to respond to similar school closures and associated measures, in response to later waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, or to subsequent public health threats, localised or global.

Concerns Surrounding Adolescents' Mental Health

Well before the onset of the pandemic, there was already 'a crisis affecting children and young people's mental health in England, with three children in every classroom experiencing a clinically diagnosable condition' (Thorley, 2016, p1). Thorley (2016) notes high rates of mental health issues amongst adolescents, with anxiety and depression in particular on the rise for secondary school students. He also bemoans the inconsistency of provision of school-based early interventions for mental health matters. Whilst the British government pledged greater support for

mental health in schools (Marshall, Wishart, Dunatchik, & Smith, 2017), researchers repeatedly critique the insubstantial, nominal nature of provision, with diminishing budgets blamed for exacerbating the problem (McGorry, Bates & Birchwood, 2013; Webb & Bywaters, 2018). A recent report from Barnardo's, a British charity which cares for vulnerable children, states: 'the facts are stark. One in eight children have a mental health condition' (Smith, 2019, p. 3). Moreover, 69% of young people surveyed by Barnardo's believe that they will be less happy and have worse mental health than their parents' generation. This, the report argues, is one aspect of a wider dearth of hope about the future: 'While many young people are hopeful and ambitious for their own futures, too often they reflect a wider "poverty of hope" about the future of their generation. They voiced concern about a mental health crisis, with significant waiting lists for specialist services' (Smith, 2019, p4).

With the onset of the pandemic, potential stress and anxiety abound. With concern for the physical health of loved ones, possibilities of financial hardship, social distancing measures and various forms of lockdown, there is widespread acknowledgment that the crisis is having a serious negative impact on mental health (Holmes et al., 2020). Researchers and charities identify concerns for the impact on the mental health of children and adolescents, as well as a lack of knowledge about the longer-term mental health consequences of public health crises on these younger age groups (Lee, 2020; Young Minds, 2020). Research into the many and varied implications for mental health is urgently needed, particularly to ascertain how any detrimental effects can be mitigated (Holmes et al., 2020).

A report by the charity Young Minds (2020) helpfully paints a broad picture of the mental health impact of COVID-19 in the UK, drawn from a survey of UK adolescents already seeking support for their mental health. Amongst the diverse, wide-ranging implications reported, some short responses hint at the particular well-being implications from the end of schooling and cancellation of public examinations. Here, this research aims to flesh out and probe more deeply into these precise aspects, honing in on student reflections on well-being and education, and providing much-needed detail to inform both mental health interventions and education policy and practice, should similar events recur.

Concerns Surrounding High Stakes Testing

Against a neoliberal backdrop and increased marketization of education, evident in the current English education system among many others, performativity and the standards agenda have taken hold (Ball, 2017). High-stakes, external examinations are commonplace, and the substantial build-up, pressure and expectations surrounding these (West, 2010) add to anxiety levels for students and teachers alike (Russell, Madaus & Higgins, 2009; Wenham, 2019). Researchers report on the many and pervasive negative impacts of such high-stakes testing, including the ways in which tests reward teaching core subjects – and a narrow range of test-oriented content within those subjects – at the expense of a rich, broad and balanced curriculum. Higher-order thinking skills, creativity and balance suffer, as indeed do social and emotional development and mental health. These concerns are echoed across the age range (Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Berliner, 2011; Lee, 2019; Wenham, 2019). Researchers also make a convincing case that high-stakes testing regimes rest upon flawed logic and thus may actually entrench inequalities (Au, 2017).

This backdrop of high-pressure, high-stakes testing only compounds concerns surrounding adolescents' mental health. This year, with such pivotal testing cancelled, it is crucial that impacts on mental health and inequality are explored further.

The Research Study and Methodology

The research is concerned with the fallout from the educational changes sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic and aims to investigate impacts on student mental health by listening to Year 11 and Year 13 students voice their concerns, hopes and fears. In England, these two cohorts of student were due to sit public examinations in the summer of 2020; a typical 16-year-old in Year 11 would be preparing for eight to ten General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations, whilst an 18-year-old Year 13 student would typically be preparing for three or four Advanced Level (A-Level) public examinations.[1] Year 11 and Year 13 are important transition points for students in England, and GCSE and A-level examinations play a large part in those transitions. After Year 11, many students choose to continue in full-time education, often moving to a different school or college to undertake the more specialised final two years of secondary education. GCSE grades play a large part in their decision-making about further study. After Year 13, students continuing with further formal study (as opposed to progressing to employment) proceed to higher education. A-level grades are key to the university they are able to attend and the subjects they will study. It is these students' reflections that are sought here, in light of their experience of the distorted termination of an educational phase, as well as the unexpected elimination of their anticipated, high-stakes examinations.

In seeking to explore the particular experiences, thoughts and perspectives of these students, and to shed light on possible well-being concerns, as well as perhaps to illuminate ways to mitigate such concerns, a qualitative approach is employed, gathering data through open-ended questions in a 'reflections' survey[2] (Strauss, 1987; Cohen et al., 2013). Open-ended questions allow space for participants to elaborate or digress and, crucially, to raise matters of their own. Thus, unforeseen issues may arise, yet the written reflections remain largely focused on the research interests (Cohen et al., 2013; Oppenheim, 2000). Of the four open-ended questions, two acted as prompts, asking the students for 'a few notes' about their experience of the end of their schooling and about what they perceived as happening in relation to the cancellation of public examinations. The other questions invited reflections on how the students feel about these. Lastly there is an opportunity for the students to add additional reflections or points they considered should be heeded.

The data gathered is analysed using qualitative techniques of coding and categorizing, to draw out emergent themes from within and across students' reflections (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Strauss, 1987). These emergent themes are presented here, drawing from 36 student participants from across 12 different schools. Some participants were found via a community

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[1] GCSE's and A-Level qualifications constitute the 'academic' route and some students sit equivalent level 'vocational' qualifications, or a mixture of the two.

[2] Semi-structured interviews would arguably have been the preferred approach, with the additional potential for follow up questions able to delve deeper into issued arising, however lockdown prevented this being done face-to-face and it was decided that the on-line interviewing environment would not be conducive to establishing rapport and openness when discussing such an emotive topic (Kvale 2008).

WhatsApp group set-up for local support during the pandemic, as well as snowball sampling from there, whilst others were contacted via schools[3].

Students' voluntary individual reflections on their experiences, their thoughts and feelings, are not inconsiderable in length, with a total response of just over 9000 words of reflections[4]. There was an average contribution of 253 words per student, so with a written page of A4 commonly considered as running at around 250 words, these sizeable contributions are indicative of the strength of feeling, the disappointment, frustration, anxiety and concern, which permeates so much of their reflections. Year 13's are marginally more verbose than the younger Year 11's, with an average word count per student of 344 as against 212. Similarly, the longest single contribution from a Year 13 is 649 words, while that from a Year 11 is 497 words. It is also noteworthy that the responses obtained via the community network, where a tight chain of personal connections underpins the snowball sampling, are on average also more extensive in comparison to those via schools (an average word count per student of 370 as against 186). Despite two secondary schools sending out individual mailshots to their relevant cohorts of students and another including the request in a newsletter, responses via this route totalled only 23, a tiny proportion of those invited. In asking for reflections on such an emotive experience, the response rate was higher where direct appeals were made through stronger established social connections. It is also noteworthy that respondents came from a wide range of socio-economic, religious and ethnic backgrounds, including several first or second-generation immigrants. While the majority were from poorer families and attended inner-city comprehensive schools, a small number attended fee-paying, private schools. Nonetheless, our findings demonstrate broad agreement across the reflections of this diverse group of participants.

The following findings section presents six key emergent themes from the student reflections, namely: (i) the shock of the news; (ii) how information is communicated - by whom, and in what stages - matters for student mental health; (iii) receiving 'unearned' grades; (iv) feeling the loss - missing out on a rite of passage and the loss of an imagined future; (v) no legitimate space to feel their loss against a backdrop of greater suffering; and (vi) taking back agency and critical hope. The communication of these findings is punctuated with a generous dose of pertinent data extracts, chosen to scaffold and illuminate the argument, as well as to keep student voice firmly to the fore. Lastly some implications for policy and practice moving forward are discussed.

Findings

'Still Thought that Exams Would Go Ahead': The Shock of the New(s)

> *With the virus spreading so rapidly and schools closing across Europe, I was expecting schools in the UK to close as well, but was not prepared for it to end when it did. We were given very little notice and little time as students to prepare for the closure.*

The surprise, dismay and shock of such an unexpected, abrupt end is a dominant theme, evident in some way in every student response. While many of the students had anticipated that schools would close to all bar the year groups with public examinations approaching, it had not

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[3] In Year 11 there are 25 student participants across 9 different schools, 10 of which came via the community group and 15 of which came via schools; In Year 13 there are 11 student participants across 4 different schools, 3 of which came via the community group and 8 of which came via schools.

[4] 9095 words to be precise.

even entered into their considerations that the examinations might not proceed at all. This is the first indication of the way students perceive their examinations to be central, momentous and inevitable. This underpins so many of the emergent feelings.

> *At the beginning of the final week most of us were aware that schools would close for all years apart from y13 and y11, but most of us, including myself still thought that exams would go ahead. We were all still working really hard up until the announcement of exam cancellations and this made us realise that we only had two days of school remaining.*

> *It was just abrupt. At first we thought it'd be fine, and then we were speculating when schools would close. We never guessed there'd be a lockdown 3 days after that.*

Arguably, this turn of events was largely unavoidable, with the shock an accompanying feature. This abruptness and disbelief is, however, accompanied by emotional difficulties and implications for well-being.

> *It has been really difficult to just deal with my emotions surrounding leaving school because we have not had any time to process what has happened.*

In terms of gaining insight into issues of well-being then, is there anything enlightening to be gained from listening to the different ways this news was imparted to the students: in what manner, detail or sequence and by whom?

How Information is Communicated - By Whom, and in What Stages - Matters for Student Mental Health

'Told in the news': Communication surrounding school closures and the cancellation of examinations. The students found out about schools closing in a number of different ways. Some families had already taken the decision to remove their child from school in light of the building pandemic: *'my parents asked me not to go to school on the week of lockdown, before it was even announced, so I was at home when I heard about the lock down.'* Similarly, for others, dwindling attendance perhaps hinted at what was to come: *'fewer and fewer students started coming in. And then one day we were told school is going to be closed and all of us students prepared to study at home.'* Both these extracts convey the students' sense of being passive recipients of this information: they *'heard',* or *'were told'* about events that would drastically impact their future.

This lack of agency, or sense of being a passive recipient, was particularly common among those students who first heard about the closures from sources at a remove from them, such as the news or the government daily briefing. The matter-of-fact nature of the declaration was stark for these students; they were '*just told in the news that schools are closing and exams are cancelled.'*

> *We heard that A-Level exams were cancelled, and schools would be closed from the following Monday on the government daily briefing on a Wednesday evening.*

Following the news announcements, unsurprisingly the word spread amongst peers, who *'heard from friends that it got announced on the news.'*

Other students heard first from their school. Their accounts of how the news was relayed hint at deliberate attempts to soften the blow; although it could simply be that, at that stage, teachers and Head Teachers were themselves uncertain whether schools might re-open to some year groups or whether examinations were definitively cancelled.

I was informed that due to the Coronavirus school is having to close down for the time being. We were given letters from the head teacher. I was given work to do at home and told to complete them and submit them through online.

The allusion to this being a temporary measure and the focus on continuing to study at home and how this would be achieved, arguably blur out and smooth the otherwise jarring, abrupt end, emphasising continuity, as well as leaving open the possibility of return. In hearing from teachers and Head Teachers, with whom students have established relationships, there is perhaps some sense of initial cushioning here. Importantly, the emphasis on continuing to study offers an on-going active role to the students, and the ability to shape at least some part of their future learning.

There are further indications, in the students' elaborations of what actually happened in their particular school or college, of their teachers' efforts to alleviate worry and perhaps maintain elements of the status quo, through providing a sense of continuity, encouraging further study at home and holding out the possibilities of later examinations. Having heard the news the night before, one student recounts:

The next day in school we discussed the situation with our teachers who tried to put our minds at rest concerning grading etc. We had an assembly where my Head of Year told us her understanding of the situation and the plan of action going forward, at this point teachers knew little more than us.

Here dialogue, openness and some sense of the student as a subject with agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) persist. In another school, students recount having '*a long assembly*' for teachers to '*answer any questions.*' Appreciation of teachers' communication and input abounds: '*all lessons had discussions with teachers,*' '*our teachers supported us*', '*they help us out to the best level possible.*'

'Honestly it's all confusing': Communication surrounding grade allocation. By the time the schools closed, the students were already aware that no public examinations would take place in the summer; however how grade allocation might occur was yet to be determined, or at least remained to be disclosed to schools and students alike (DfE, 2020; Ofqual, 2020). Announcing the cancellation of examinations without a simultaneous accompanying plan as to how grades were to be allotted created a window for uncertainly as well as for additional worry. Students described feeling '*nervous,*' '*stressed and anxious as we were not told what will happen with our grades.*'

At first I was really happy and smiling, then, I thought about how they will grade us. At that time I felt stressed and anxious thinking about what will happen, eventually I cried.

Hearsay and uncertainly permeate student comments surrounding grades, in particular amongst the early responses: 'it was quite chaotic with all the unknowns.' Some students thought initially that they would simply be given their previously allocated predicted grades. Some accounts seem relatively certain, 'I was told… we are going to get given our predicted grades', whilst others are more murky, 'it is my understanding that… teachers are putting forward a predicted grade for students, which is then somehow moderated by the exam board.'

In grasping for an understanding when the procedure was yet to be fleshed out, these students sought comfort from best guesses, yet this relief could be at most temporary, as once details were published, they would have to be disabused of previous oversimplifications or

misunderstandings. This is another slant on the period of greater anxiety, which stems directly from the mismatch between timings of announcing the cancellation of exaninations and announcing how grades were to be allocated. This also suggests ad-hoc policymaking rather than the adoption of well-prepared contingency plans.

Others believed - more correctly as it turned out - that a range of measures would be used, drawing on past performance in examinations, on classwork and on teacher judgements, to arrive at '*some sort of calculated grade,*' albeit in some unclear, blurry manner. Exams are '*being marked based on mocks, class work and teacher's opinions on what you would've gotten.*'

> *We will be graded based on our previous work and our teacher's judgements.*

> *They are using all the info they have to determine our grades so we need to accept it.*

Passivity, acceptance, being the docile recipient without agency, appears again then. Whilst agency is diminished, apprehension and opinion remain plentiful. The students express concern with the use of several of these factors within any grade allocation process. They also question the soundness of using predicted grades at all to determine grade allocation. This is neatly encompassed within an astute observation about the impact of testing in practice – and thus about policy enactment – from one student who notes that '*some teachers have the tendency to keep the predicted grades quite low for some students, just so they will revise more for actual exams - so wouldn't this negatively effect the students, especially those who would surpass their predicted grades?*' Students also expressed unease surrounding the inclusion of in-class testing into the mix, since '*tests in classes are not always under exam conditions and people often cheat.*'

As the details of the planned government procedures came to light (Ofqual, 2020), the role and processes of teacher assessment and the inclusion of a ranking system began to raise concerns for many students. Some worried about individual teacher bias, fearing that particular teachers preferred some students to others. One student felt strongly that whilst her other teachers may be fair, there is one teacher who '*hates*' her, thus '*the fact that she is going to decide my grade is not fair.*' There was a recurring sense that '*not all teachers will give us the grade we all have been working for.*' The choice of language from one student, more widely concerned with the role of all teacher assessment, is revealing. She notes '*even*' teacher assessment may play a role in determining her future grade, hinting at incredulity. She then elaborates why she sees any teacher judgement about imagined, future, hypothetical examination scores as unfair:

> *Honestly it's all confusing. We are told that we will be given grades based on factors such as coursework or mocks and even teacher assessments. Well the truth is no one could have determined the exact grades a student would have gotten. I think it doesn't do justice to the student. I think some students would have not taken it seriously back then, and it's not their fault we've always been told they're just mocks.*

This recurring concern with the role of teacher assessment and teacher ranking is fundamentally entangled with the students' views of examinations, and moreover with the very different perceptions of practice, or mock tests and the final public examinations. Certainly the significance of these final examinations, their '*meaning everything*' and their pivotal role within the education system, are clear to these students:

> *It still feels very strange because our exams were something you always assume is inevitable since they are so important.*

> *I can't believe this is all happening and for the first time exams are actually cancelled.*

It is clear from their accounts, however, that not all students felt such palpable anticipation for their practice set of examinations: '*no one takes mocks that seriously*.' Most of the students who were ill prepared for the practice examinations were nonetheless planning for a final push: '*loads of people absolutely go for it at the end because that's when you know it counts.*' This is in line with teacher and school emphasis within a high-stakes testing regime, where the final performance is all.

> *For most of us it's a hard time since, after our January mock exams, we all worked so hard to get better grades, but now the situation that has cropped up has destroyed most of our hopes.*

With the removal of examinations the sense of hope and the sense of agency - in terms of actively studying as well as focus and effort on the day - also evaporated. All that remains is '*a lot of time to think and stress about grades you can't control.*'

> '*My main anxiety at the moment is how I am going to be graded in my subjects. I feel very helpless because my grade is now out of my control. Had I been doing exams, all that anxiety would be thrown into revision so that I would be doing something to improve my chances of getting a good grade. It's weird to suddenly feel so out of control.*'

There is of course a very real and imminent reason for students to worry about their grades. Advancing to the next chapter of their lives, whether work or the next phase of their education, is likely to be dependent on these grades - grades which, until recently, they were still working towards improving, but are now powerless to change. One Year 11 reflects '*this was my time to boost my grades to what I wanted, such as I needed 8 in maths to do further maths but I improved to a 7 and was getting my revision method in place and actually did get an 8 in one of my tests. But I suspect I will get a grade 7 and will be unable to take my desired subjects.*' Similar concerns are echoed in Year 13:

> *I'm not 100% sure on what is happening with my exams and grades. The government have released statements but it is still unclear what they intend to do regarding marks, which makes the whole situation… even more stressful. I understand predicted grades may be used, but I am unsure if they reflect what I may have gotten in the real exams.*

The students are not simply confused about their grades, then. They express increased anxiety, stress and worry about the allocation of grades over which they have suddenly lost all control - all agency, and unease about the fairness of any proxy for their own performance, as well as the new role teacher assessment and ranking might play.

> *Our exams determine our futures and now we don't even sit them. All of us would have worked so much harder for our exams, yet we are being judged on the work we have done previously. It's just unfair.*

'*I Cannot Show my Actual Capabilities Through Exams': Receiving 'Unearned' Grades*

> *I feel kind of useless, I have spent the last year and a half preparing for these exams for them to be cancelled. Even though they caused me anxiety and stress I am sad that I cannot sit my final exams and see that my work has paid off.*

Many students, at least in part, deeply regret that their examinations are cancelled, since they viewed these as a chance to prove themselves, to show what they are capable of and to earn

their place in their next chapter. While some students are glad that the stress of examinations has been removed, there is recognition that this gives rise to a complex assortment of feelings, of feeling simultaneously *'relieved'* since there is *'no more pressure of exams'* and *'very upset'* at not being able '*to show my actual capabilities through exams.'* With the elimination of examinations comes the removal of a sense of having earned your grade, *'the thing that annoyed me most is that I was getting ready to prove myself in all my subjects.'*

Any associated sense of achievement is also lacking, '*we will never get that feeling of accomplishment.*' The sense of fulfilment and gratification associated with results day has simultaneously been taken away, *'I don't think any Year 11 will feel the satisfaction or the feeling that a normal Year 11 would get on results day.'* There is even perhaps a hint that examinations must be endured in order to earn the right to celebrate, to '*the reward at the end.'*

> *When you work hard for an exam, it goes all smoothly and when you know you've done your best is a really great feeling that we don't have the opportunity for now unfortunately.*

Arguably the loss of examinations undermines and taints the awarding of grades, which no longer feel earned or deserved. 'Mostly, I wanted to prove to myself that I could come out with good grades and get into my first-choice university. It was weird suddenly having such a huge part of my life taken away.'

In being allocated grades without sitting the examinations, there is a sense of fraudulence or illegitimacy.

> *At first I felt happy about being stress-free, however, this feeling was overtaken by emptiness. It didn't feel right to get predicted grades without fully completing the course. The examination is after all part of the course and how well you understand everything, you learnt everything.*

Without the chance to prove their worth through examinations, these students are denied the opportunity of increasing their sense of self-competence and self-esteem. This will likely impact their confidence as they embark on their next steps – steps that they may now feel unjustified in taking: *'I will never really know what grades I could have achieved.'* For some students the concern extends beyond whether they themselves feel their grades are unearned, to how their qualifications will be perceived by others, including perhaps future employers.

> *It's also really sad to know that for the rest of our lives people are going to say we're the year that got off easy and that didn't really work for our grades, we just got handed them, whereas we know that it was actually really difficult both literally, emotionally and mentally.*

'It Feels Like Something Has Been Taken Away': Feeling the Loss - Missing Out on a Rite of Passage and the Loss of an Imagined Future

> *All Year 11 students were left traumatised as suddenly both their exams had been cancelled and school had abruptly been closed. They were blown away by the fact that after 5 years in the school, they had to finish off quickly without having enough time to enjoy the feeling of finishing off their final year. All their hard work towards the examinations had been in vain. There were many things this years Year 11's didn't experience, which I think will remain to be one of our biggest regrets.*

For these two cohorts of students, there is an array of traditional, typical events, which will now no longer occur. The most prominent of these may be public examinations, but a wealth of accompanying and long-anticipated traditions mark the end of this chapter of their formal schooling: celebrations, such as the *'dreamed'* for prom, and farewells, the *'best last day hugging all of my friends and taking pictures with them and saying goodbye to all my teachers and getting gifts for them.'* Moreover, longer-term aspects of their imagined future may also be thrown into question by this change of circumstances. Their progression to further study, apprenticeship or work may also seem far more precarious than they had anticipated. This loss sparks emotions:

> *Overall this end to our formal education is something that we will all regret.*

While emotion permeates reflections on the curtailing of the formal end of their schooling, it is the pervasiveness of purely negative emotions that stands out. The most commonly-repeated words used by students to express their feelings are *upset* and *sad*, with others describing feeling *empty, overwhelmed* or *gutted*. There is also an accompanying sense of injustice with expressions such as *wrong*, *unfair* and the all-pervading sense of the abruptness, with language like *shocked*, *surprised*.

> *It's a bit gutting almost, like there's been no proper closure.*

An overarching feature of these emotional accounts, is the loss of an imagined future, the expected, usual end they had long been anticipating. Student recount being '*sad to leave school like this,*' '*upset as it's not the traditional end,*' or simply note *'it is quite sad because we didn't get to have a proper final day,'* and emphasise feeling deprived of these experiences, the complex array of events and ceremonies *'we felt we should've had, like all the Year 13's before.'* Even though this chapter of their education was due to come to an end anyway, an acute sense of loss pervades the students' accounts: *'I had mentally prepared myself for this being my final school year, but was not ready for it to end early.'* The deletion of this episode of their imagined future is significant: *'it's quite overwhelming, suddenly stopping school activities.'* These students have been denied experiences which, year upon year, they have watched preceding cohorts go through, awaiting their turn which never came, *'our year will not have the experience we should have had.'*

> *My time at school has ended; it feels unfinished. It feels like something has been taken away. We've been in compulsory education for the last 15 years, and it was cut so fast.*

> *It is also sad to say goodbye to teachers prematurely who meant so much to me and had a big impact on my interests and future ambitions.*

In fact, this is evident in each and every account, albeit on occasion less overtly. There had been an expectation of last lessons with teachers, assemblies, proms and other opportunities which provide time and space for acknowledging the end of years of formal education, of shared experiences, or working relationships with peers and teachers. The chance to recognise the end of one phase of life and the beginning of another, to mark this rite of passage (Andrews, 1999; Hensley, 2019) and to say a '*proper goodbye*', all largely evaporated.

> *I'm really upset that the 7 years I spent in my school came to an ending like this. I had no time to thank my teachers or get to say goodbye to my friends or enjoy my last moments in the school building, where I learned, made friends, memories and my last place of education.*

Just as teachers had tried to reassure students on hearing about school closure and the cancellation of examinations, similarly they tried to provide some elements of the traditional end of school celebration:

> *On our last day, the Friday, the majority of our year came to school in our prom dresses/suits seeing as it is cancelled. We spent our break-times and free periods trying to celebrate the end of school with each other. We went to our last lessons, said goodbye to our teachers and had a final assembly and awards ceremony.*

There is some sense here that the student is grateful for these attempts, yet expressions like *'trying to celebrate'* reveal the underlying futility of these efforts. Another student recounts feeling disorientated and bemused at the absence of any planned, extended celebrations, or after-school parties to head to: *'On our last day, we were all in bewilderment. We had a leaver's assembly and then were clapped by teachers as we left school. There wasn't anywhere to celebrate, because we weren't allowed, so we just went home after a while.'* In short, '*it was all very sudden and it felt very incomplete in terms of a proper end of the year.'*

'It's Selfish to Think That Way When People are Dying': No Legitimate Space to Feel their Loss Against a Backdrop of Greater Suffering

> *I am also very worried as to what will happen to my results as a result of the early closure. I do feel quite selfish though as I know that people are suffering and are in much worse situations than I am and I am getting upset over this.*

Entangled with the abundance of negative emotions, the missing out on rites of passage and the loss of an imagined future, is a recurring sense that these students are unjustified in feeling this loss, since this is set against the backdrop of the global pandemic. The students '*understand the importance of why'* these measures are necessary, recognise that '*it was in our best interests due to the pandemic,'* for the health of the community, and furthermore, acknowledge that many others are worse off, ill or grieving for loved ones. While some only mention these concerns briefly, for others they are more thoroughly considered and articulated:

> *As much as I feel like my life has been disrupted by A-levels being cancelled and school ending abruptly, there is also a sense that I am actually very lucky. I've been able to put things into perspective and realise that people are dying from Covid-19 and the closing of schools is a necessary measure to save lives, therefore, there is a sense that it is all for the "greater good" and that a lot of people have it worse than me.*

> *I don't know how to feel. Of course I feel frustrated and I feel it's unfair. But it's selfish to think that way when people are dying and in pain while I sit here and complain about not getting a fair grade. I'm frustrated yes, but I understand the situation and the crises the world is facing.*

There are arguably echoes here of accounts from young people in other challenging contexts which fuel mental health concerns, perhaps refugee children (Fazel & Stein, 2002), or those reflecting on injustice in post-conflict societies (Bellino, 2017). This points to the complexity of their unique experiences. Whilst many of our student participants' experiences may be less grave or extreme than those suffered by young people who have been exposed to war or exile, it is important to acknowledge that their feelings and reflections similarly cannot be disentangled

from the wider context. Therefore, mitigating any longer-term impact will require a holistic appreciation of the mental health implications from the pandemic backdrop also.

'I Think Students' Spirits Have Deflated:' Taking Back Agency and Critical Hope

Many students are evidently anxious, dispirited and low. Some students, however, also express a sense of trying to look beyond the present difficulties, perhaps even of embracing the change, to find a way forward: *'now we all have to learn to adjust and find new motivation to keep learning.'* Similarly, others focus on aspects of their situation over which they may, possibly, retain a degree of control: the chance to contest allocated grades, or sit later examinations. This suggests a desire to be able to impact their future themselves and not just wait passively for their future to be determined - perhaps unfairly - by allocated grades. *'If we massively disagree with our given grade, we will have the option to take the exam next year.'* This alternative uncertain future at least reinstates an active role and some agency for the student (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

> *Our calculated grades will be given to us… and we can then appeal if we feel like the grade unfairly represents our work. We can then take an exam in Autumn if we are unhappy with our grade, although, no clarity has been given as to exactly when this will be, how long we'll have to revise and whether we'll still be able to start university in September if we opt to do these exams.*

Finding her previously-imagined future no longer available - a pathway of revision at school and of public examinations, leading to the next planned chapter - this student is seeking out an alternative pathway to obtain her goals. She wants a way out of the situation currently imposed on her, of being a passive subject waiting to receive allocated grades, grades over which she now has no control and which she fears may not allow her to progress as desired. There are signs of agency and perhaps of re-emerging hope, arguably then of critical hope (Freire, 2014; Webb, 2007). Critical hope in this sense is hope born out of hardship, a means of coping with the present negative situation (Lazarus, 1991). Such critical hope foregrounds agency and fuels action, to seek a different route to a better possible, preferable future (Freire, 2014). In education, pedagogies of hope, pedagogies of the heart, love or happiness (Freire, 2014; Freire and Freire, 2007; Rossatto, Rodriguez and Rodriguez, 2020) awaken this move to action through raising critical consciousness. This critical awareness of the state you are in, seeing things as they are, in particular seeing elements of oppression and realising that things could be otherwise, is thus a crucial step on the path to action, and thereby to a more hopeful future. In just such an awakening of critical consciousness, one student reflects anew on the inherent harm of the established high-stakes testing system: *'It has shown me that the school system is damaging because all of us are somewhat thankful for a virus that cancelled our exams. Showing how mentally damaging the stress really is.'*

Through critical reflection on her changed circumstances, this student gained insight into a system she had hitherto not perceived in this light. This student raises fundamental questions about the mental health implications of high-stakes testing regimes. Another student, similarly, reflecting anew from their atypical experiences and unusual perspectives, comes to a different yet complimentary, fresh realisation:

> *After having the last few weeks in lockdown to think about what has happened, I have realised that the important bit about A-Levels never should have been about the final exams but about the actual process of learning the content and developing an interest for*

the subject. I've accepted that although my school career has not ended as it should, the experiences and knowledge I've gained cannot be taken away from me.

This student raises fundamental questions about the over-emphasis and venerating of the final examination within high-stakes testing regimes. Here this is not about stress and mental health concerns *per se*, rather about the overshadowing of what they now perceive should have been the primary focus, namely the process of learning, developing, gaining experience and knowledge. Within high-stakes testing systems, these on-going processes of learning are devalued, sidelined and overwhelmed by the revering of the examination itself. In coming to this critical realisation herself, this student is seeking to read the world differently (Freire 2014). In so doing she refuses the tranche of negative emotions she had previously felt with the elimination of high-stakes tests, to reveal a more hopeful perspective.

These glimmers of critical hope deserve to be taken seriously, when considering what can be learnt from these cohorts of students to improve policy and practice.

Discussion and Implications for Policy and Practice

The study that underpins this paper is a small-scale qualitative project, thus the usual caveats and warnings apply in trying to extrapolate deeply personal experiences beyond the setting, moment and individuals involved. It is nonetheless important to consider its general implications for policy and practice, and the measures that could be put in place to address the issues raised by the students themselves. Thus, we will explore some *'fuzzy propositions and generalizations'* (Bassey, 1999, p11), mindful of all the vagueness this entails.

We present first some clear-cut, modest implications for policy, should school closures be necessary again, followed by several more nuanced, complex and far-reaching tentative possibilities worthy of serious consideration, both in terms of addressing mental health concerns and concerning rethinking the role and form of assessment.

Several of the more straightforward measures pertain to communication. Announcements concerning school closures are best delivered by those with whom students have established relationships of trust – schools and teachers, rather than government edicts or news broadcasts. This also allows greater possibility for discussion, as opposed to decree, which may additionally alleviate stress and anxiety for some students. Furthermore, if examinations are to be cancelled, such information should be released only when accompanying procedures are in place and can be shared simultaneously. Together, these measures limit room for uncertainly and associated worry, as well as keeping open the possibility for a more active role for students, through questioning and dialogue. These simple procedural measures would positively impact mental health, should similar events recur. This of course requires advance contingency planning rather than ad-hoc responses to situations that arise

The particulars of grade allocation also require attention. It is important to stress that the elements used (Ofqual, 2020) are each being re-purposed. None was originally designed to play the role to which it has now been designated. This brings with it fundamental concerns from the students, who are all too aware of how each element functions in practice. They express anxiety surrounding the use of predicted grades which may be deliberate under-estimates, intended to spur students into greater revision, or slight over-estimates, to facilitate obtaining offers of further study. Equally, they also express concern with any role for class tests, all too often invigilated somewhat lackadaisically by staff. Mocks grades are also considered inaccurate, since students

view these examinations with less gravity, many holding out for a final burst of revision, which comes later. The role of teacher assessment and teacher ranking are viewed with the gravest concern. Whilst some student anxiety relates to the possible risk of teacher bias, the most commonly articulated troubling aspect pertains to the difficulty of accurately predicating future, imagined performance in hypothetical high-stakes tests which will no longer take place. It is worth emphasising that within the current high-stakes testing regime, there is no existing place for the teachers' on-going evaluation of a student's current learning, only a range of teacher speculations, messily and intrinsically entangled with theoretical attainment in forthcoming tests.

There is an urgent implication here for policy and practice, in the event that a similar grade allocation process is rolled out to replace any subsequent sets of public examinations. Our research provides evidence of the importance of announcing and enacting policies with sufficient notice to allow students a degree of certainty and control. If staff and students know that many aspects of performance over the upcoming year are to be re-purposed for allocating grades, their expectations, oversight, preparation and revision will adapt accordingly, diminishing or eliminating many of the concerns from this year. However, the longer such a decision is delayed, the greater the chance of replicating the worries, stress and indeed inaccuracies of the current cycle. Foresight and openness are key.

It is important to emphasise that it is the retrospective re-purposing of teacher assessments, classwork, various tests and gradings which is the root cause of controversy, anxiety and complaint. A system in which, for example, on-going teacher assessment is embedded from the outset, would not trigger most, if any, of these concerns and worries. Indeed, moving to a system in which high-stakes testing plays a diminished role - or is perhaps ideally removed - and where there is instead, a greater space for forms of continuous assessment, project work and on-going teacher monitoring of learning, would reduce examination-stress for students, irrespective of school closures. Should school closures be necessary once again, any such shift away from high-stakes testing would already have pre-emptively reduced the focus on final test performance, making cancellations of examinations less of a worry or loss. Equally, this could remove much of the mentally damaging elements of stress entrenched in high-stakes testing regimes. Moving away from high-stakes testing, to seek alternative assessment procedures, is certainly implied by listening to the students here, who articulate their mental health concerns associated with the high-stakes testing system (Au, 2017). Moreover, eliminating all forms of standardized assessments, where success is similarly all too often narrowly defined, is similarly worth contemplating (Parker, 2019).

Putting aside whatever changes may be possible in the future, there needs to be clear recognition of the many ways in which the premature ending of a phase of their education - over and above implications from high-stakes tests and their cancellation - has further generated tangible, palpable and deeply-felt mental health concerns for these cohorts of students. They express concerns surrounding grades being unearned and illegitimate and an overarching sense of loss, of missing out on traditions, rites of passage, and imagined futures. Compounding these anxieties is a sense that allowing themselves to feel this loss is selfish and unjustified, given the backdrop of greater suffering from the pandemic. This downplaying of their loss, when set against a wider context of hardship, is evocative of stories from other groups of young people in adversity, those in post-conflict societies or refugees (Bellino, 2017; Fazel and Stein, 2002). In attempting to glean what we can from research into refugee education, it is worth heeding a note of caution raised by such research: that even when the stated aims of support and education for these groups

of vulnerable children optimistically articulate possible futures, in reality many barriers remain which must be overcome in order for such futures to be realised (Dryden-Peterson, Adelman, Bellino and Chopra, 2019). Some of these barriers are relevant to the current pandemic-related educational situation: access to suitable mental health support and to suitable education in which students feel recognition for their plight and a sense of belonging. Thus, space to feel their loss, acknowledgement of and respect for students' particular experiences must form part of their support in moving forward, as must adequate mental health provision. Just as in the contexts of refugee education or schooling in post-conflict societies, where there is recognition that schools are in a position to offer crucial mental health support (Bellino, 2017; Fazel & Stein, 2002; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012), here also it seems clear that schools may be best placed to intervene to mitigate longer-term effects for students returning to study beyond Year 11. Likewise, there is an onus on Higher Education Institutions to acknowledge these special circumstances and to ensure they provide sufficient, tailored mental health support for the unique cohort of new students. For those students not returning to formal education, whether progressing to apprenticeships or employment, there is a wider societal responsibility to support these young people with moving forward, most readily through ensuring adequate funding for provision of and access to appropriate mental health support. Given the existing concerns surrounding the paucity of funding in these areas, whether in schools or beyond, this ought to be an immediate policy priority (McGorry, Bates & Birchwood, 2013; Thorley, 2016; Webb & Bywaters, 2018).

Central to mitigating the mental health concerns experienced by these cohorts of students, our research suggests, are communication and dialogue, and possibilities for taking back agency and critical hope. That these elements go together is no coincidence. Critical pedagogies of hope foreground the dialogic, action and agency, on the route to a more liberatory, hopeful future (Freire, 2014; Freire & Freire, 2007).

Interestingly, in demonstrating such aspects of critical hope, in particular in terms of using the present fears about a negative future to springboard the search for a pathway to a more hopeful, alternative future, there are echoes of research into education for sustainable development (Ojala, 2017). It is perhaps not surprising that the emotions and actions of young people contemplating adapting to a future against a backdrop of a global pandemic may in some sense reflect elements of young people's approaches when contemplating the future against a backdrop of concerns surrounding the climate crisis and sustainable futures. Indeed the uncertainty surrounding imagined futures resonates throughout each crisis, as does its inescapably global nature. Embracing critical hope thus serves a wider purpose than simply supporting these cohorts of students. Moreover, the positive emotions associated with hope could bring some relief from current stress and anxiety, making the present more tolerable, as well as making the future more optimistic (Folkman, 2010).

Taking this moment to once again consider what education is for, what it ought to be for, and to contemplate what a school system may look like if it were to foreground promoting student mental health (Amsler & Facer, 2017; Selwyn, 2020), what is needed is '*a wider culture within schools that values mental health and well-being*' (Thorley, 2016, p2). We argue that reversing inroads made by high-stakes testing and embracing critical pedagogies of hope would necessarily be features of such a wider culture. Indeed, the place of high-stakes testing ought to be urgently reconsidered, whilst wholeheartedly embracing and embedding critical pedagogies of hope into the curriculum.

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