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*Corresponding author: Virpi Timonen, School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin Faculty of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences, IRELAND
E-mail: timonenv@tcd.ie

Reviewing editor:
Ah Choo Koo, Faculty of Creative Multimedia, Multimedia University, Malacca, MALAYSIA

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STUDENT LEARNING, CHILDHOOD & VOICES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Generation covid: Experiences of the coronavirus pandemic among secondary school graduates of 2020 in Ireland

Ayeshah Émon¹, Jo Greene² and Virpi Timonen^{2*}

Abstract: School closures and remote learning resulted in major disruptions for final-year secondary school students who were due to take their examinations in June 2020. Using the Constructivist-Grounded Theory method, we conducted 14 in-depth interviews to gain insight into the impact of the coronavirus restrictions on the lives, education and plans of graduating secondary school students in Ireland. While participant responses to the pandemic were diverse, they can be categorised as those who were shielded against negative implications of the pandemic; those who struggled with worry and uncertainty; and those who became discontent as they awakened to the shortcoming of policymaking. Instead of assuming uniform effects of the pandemic in young populations, we need to be attuned to the diverse pathways whereby some young adults can tap into their resources (including creativity and social networks) while others need extensive support to make up for lost opportunities and isolation that ensued from the pandemic.

Subjects: Education - Social Sciences; Sociology & Social Policy; Secondary Education

Keywords: Education; secondary schools; pandemic; Covid-19; future; uncertainty

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Ayeshah Émon teaches social policy at the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. She holds a PhD in Medical Anthropology, Gender and Women's studies and Science and Technology Studies (STS) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her current research interests pertain to education, mental health, care theory and diaspora studies. Ms Jo Greene holds an MSc in Applied Social Research from Trinity College Dublin. Her MSc dissertation focused on the continued preference for self-managed telemedicine after legalisation of abortion services in Ireland. Her primary research interests relate to women's work and health issues and digital technologies. A Finnish national who earned her doctorate at the University of Oxford, **Professor Virpi Timonen's** work focuses on life course sociology and social policies in ageing societies. Since her PhD was awarded in 2001, Professor Timonen has produced 125+ published research outputs on ageing, care, welfare states, and intergenerational relations.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The coronavirus pandemic has transformed young adults' lives and future trajectories. This article sheds light on how secondary school students graduating during the summer of 2020 in Ireland coped with changes and uncertainty in education and personal relationships. Using insights gleaned from in-depth interviews, we identify differences in young adults' experiences, categorising them into three groups. First, those who were shielded against any major negative effects and indicated that they were coping well. Second, those who disclosed significant levels of worry or concern, or other difficulties such as family conflict. Third, those who externalised their frustrations through critique of policymaking and different forms of self-expression. In contrast to simplistic one-dimensional portrayals of youth in the pandemic era, the article calls for greater attention to the origins and impacts of such different pathways through the pandemic, which are likely to become more consequential as the long-term ramifications of the pandemic unfold.

1. Introduction and background

Educational institutions in the Republic of Ireland were closed at a few hours' notice on the 12 March 2020 in order to control the transmission of Covid-19. Secondary schools moved to online teaching which was implemented in myriad ways, leading to significant differences in the quality of the remote learning experience (Mohan et al., 2020). Schools remained closed until September 2020 when the new school year commenced under strict protocols; by then, between the move to remote learning and the long summer break, educational institutions in Ireland had remained closed for almost half a year. The sudden school closures and attempts to transition quickly to distance learning were a major disruption for final year secondary school students as they were expecting to take their final state examinations—the Leaving Certificate—in June 2020. This article explores the experiences of final year secondary school students in Ireland, offering an insight into how this turbulent period affected their lives, education and plans.

There are three different pathways within the upper secondary schooling system in Ireland, but the majority of students (73% of the cohort in 2020) opt for the established Leaving Certificate programme (DES, 2020). The last two years of second-level education in Ireland are marked—indeed dominated—by the preparation for the Leaving Certificate examinations. Candidates typically take written examinations in six subjects and their grades are converted into an overall “points” score that is used to rank students for admission into third-level education through the Central Applications Office (CAO). Entry to third-level courses for most students is entirely dependent on the results (points) obtained in the Leaving Certificate examination, and hence this examination represents a significant juncture: it is a high-stakes rite of passage. This high-stakes scenario was severely disrupted and spun into disarray due to protracted political decision-making and multiple policy reversals in the months that followed the first lockdown in Ireland (March and April 2020).

Following weeks of debate and outpouring of concerns about the risks associated with conducting examinations for tens of thousands of young people during a pandemic, the Minister for Education announced in April 2020 that the Leaving Certificate examinations were postponed until July and August. In a major reversal of that decision in May, the Leaving Certificate examinations were cancelled and replaced with “calculated” (or “predicted”) grades. Estimated marks and class rankings were compiled by teachers and subsequently adjusted (several times) as part of a national standardisation process. The “calculated” grades were fed into the CAO process to allow students to transition to third-level education. Students responded to the new system with a mix of anxiety (at having to relinquish control of their results to teachers and state agencies) and relief (at not having to prepare for high-stakes examinations).

The cancellation of the Leaving Certificate examinations signified an abrupt end to second-level schooling for the graduating class of 2020. The traditional markers of this occasion such as school graduations and “debs” (prom-style parties) were cancelled. At the start of summer 2020, the population of Ireland was still subject to many restrictions on economic and social life, and most secondary school students had to abandon plans such as travelling or looking for a summer job. In this context, we set out to understand how the lengthy first lockdown (28 March—8 June) and school closure, and the attendant uncertainties and restrictions, had affected secondary school students and how they had coped with the unprecedented challenges that this period presented.

Literature on young adults' experiences of and responses to the coronavirus pandemic is only beginning to emerge and most of what has been published to date is not directly relevant to Ireland or to secondary school students as the focus appears to have been on surveys of easier-to-access populations, such as college students (e.g., Cao et al. 2020; Elmer et al., 2020; Kecojevic et al., 2020). Due to the novelty of the topic and the paucity of qualitative investigations, we used

the Grounded Theory (GT) method, which is ideally suited to exploring poorly understood, emergent topics (Timonen et al., 2018). Among the different GT “schools,” we adopted Kathy Charmaz’s Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014). This methodology allowed us to approach the uniqueness of the situation with an open mind and meant that our investigation was led first and foremost by emergent concepts, inductively derived from the data (Conlon et al., 2020). CGT discourages the super-imposition of existing theoretical frameworks and encourages the use of sensitizing concepts to aid in interpretation of data. Hence, in keeping with CGT, we turned to some selected themes from the broader literature in interpreting our findings—as discussed towards the end of this article—and steered away from using pre-existing theory in a heavy-handed manner.

2. Research methods

We gained ethical approval for the study from the Research Ethics Approval Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, in May 2020. We adhered to all key tenets of ethical research: informed and voluntary consent, non-maleficence, beneficence, confidentiality, and anonymity.

2.1. Participant recruitment

The fieldwork began on 5 August 2020 and continued until the 4 September 2020. During this phase, the government of Ireland implemented less restrictive policies than in the spring and early summer of 2020, but many of the normal activities of particular relevance for young people were still limited or not available (for instance, large gatherings were proscribed, meaning that events such as music festivals could not take place). There was a one-week pause during the fieldwork period to allow for preliminary analysis of emergent concepts, and subsequent theoretical sampling for those concepts in remaining interviews (Foley et al., 2021). All interviews were conducted prior to the release of the Leaving Certificate results on 7th September. We anticipated that once students received their grades, their attention would turn to the next step—which for most involves college admissions—and that there would be less motivation and time to speak with researchers, unless perhaps in the event that the published aggregate results negatively affected the cohort. However, contrary to students’ fears, the Leaving Certificate results of 2020 yielded a record number of high scores and the subsequent creation of some additional college places in popular, high-point courses.

Participants were recruited using two pathways: social media and snowballing from personal contacts. The project Twitter account was used to share relevant news stories and information about the Leaving Certificate which were trending on Twitter. Four participants contacted the study team in response to tweets calling for participants and several other participants stated that they accessed the account to verify the project’s credentials prior to agreeing to take part. Snowballing out from researchers’ personal contacts involved sending WhatsApp and email messages to selected contacts which were then re-shared by recipients to known Leaving Certificate students within their networks. As the project progressed, participants were also asked to recommend the study to other students.

All participants made initial contact via email in accordance with the instructions in the invitation to participate and received the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form by return email. The participants were all fully informed on what their involvement in the study entailed and informed consent was obtained verbally at the start of each interview. To protect confidentiality, all names and identifying characteristics were anonymised. Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym and five did so.

2.2. Interviews

Due to social distancing protocols, advice issued by our university, and in order to facilitate access to participants outside Dublin, we opted for video-call interviews. We used a short semi-structured interview guide that enabled extensive probing into issues raised by the participants. The interviews proceeded from a general framing of the participant’s life (“tell me about yourself”) to an initial (largely chronological) account of the period from 12 March 2020 (school closure) until the

time of the interview. We also asked about the participants' home lives, their plans for near future, and about their views pertaining to the management of the pandemic in Ireland (and any other contexts they were familiar with). In line with theoretical sampling (Conlon et al., 2020; Foley et al., 2021), we were attuned to emergent themes and probed points of interest raised by each interviewee, pursuing emergent concepts in subsequent interviews.

The interviews ranged in duration from 45 to 76 minutes, with average interview duration of 58 minutes. All interviews were conducted and recorded using Microsoft Teams, and a backup recording on a voice recorder was also made of each interview. MS Teams links were sent to interviewees in advance of the agreed interview date and all were able to access the links on their laptop or phone. Two interviews were restarted: the first, due to signal breakup, and the second, so that the participant could reset their computer settings. Four interviews had weak internet connection and the participants intermittently switched off their video camera to prioritise the audio signal. Despite these minor technical issues, all interviews were fully completed and we felt that it was possible to establish rapport and to collect good quality data. Thirteen of the 14 interviews were conducted by two researchers and one was completed by one researcher. When two researchers were present, one led the interview and the other focused on note taking. The resulting memos enabled early and ongoing data analysis in line with the GT method (Timonen et al., 2018). The research team members debriefed and sounded out each other's interpretations of the data frequently. Each memo was read and commented on by all team members. We applied reflexivity at the start of the project and engaged in reflexive practices throughout, for instance, by asking and discussing: how do I deal with the fact that some of the findings run counter to what I expected?

2.3. Sample characteristics

The 14 participants were all aged 18 or 19. Ten attended public (State) schools and four attended private or "grind" schools. In Ireland, public schools are administered and funded by the State; private schools and "grind" schools are part-funded through tuition fees. Nationally, approximately 7% of second-level school students attend fee-paying private schools but this figure increases as some final year students move to intensive fee-paying "grind" schools that seek to maximise students' performance (points) in the Leaving Certificate (Bradfield & Crowley, 2019).

All participants planned to continue to third-level education, with one student indicating she would first take a so-called gap year. While the lack of participants choosing other pathways—such as employment—is acknowledged as a limitation of the study, the sample does reflect the dominant trend for young people in Ireland to progress to tertiary education. Nearly half of all adults (25–64-year-olds) in Ireland have attained a third level qualification—one of the largest shares across the OECD—and this trend is projected to exceed 70% for youngest cohorts (OECD, 2019). The fact that all participants had access to good or reasonable quality internet connection, and the time and space to participate in a research interview, also indicates that they are relatively advantaged. We did not consider it ethical to proactively sample for young adults with major difficulties let alone traumatic experiences, given the already heightened focus on Leaving Certificate students, and our inability to act as a conduit for intervention to people with severe mental health difficulties; we acknowledge this as a limitation of the study.

Nine participants lived in the capital (Dublin), one participant had moved to a European city and the remaining four were dispersed around Irish towns of varying sizes at the time of the interview. Partly reflecting Ireland's low divorce rate (only 2.8% of the adult population are divorced—CSO, 2016), 11 participants lived in the family home with both parents and siblings. The sample comprises 10 women, three men and one person who identifies as non-binary. Table 1 lists the participants' pseudonyms (in the order they were interviewed), their location, type of school (state or private) and household composition at the time of the interview.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Sequence	Pseudonym	Location	School attended	Living with
1	Catriona	Capital	State	Parents and sibling
2	Emily	Capital	State	Parents and siblings
3	Alex	Capital	Private	Parents and siblings
4	Julie	Capital	State	Parents and sibling
5	Lilly	Capital	State	Parents and sibling
6	Brian	Capital	State	Parents, siblings and niece
7	Nicole	Capital	Private	Parents and siblings
8	Derek	Town	State	Parents and siblings
9	Lucy	Capital	State	Parents and sibling
10	May	Capital	Private	Parents and siblings
11	Caroline	Town	State	Parents and sibling
12	Cathy	Abroad	Private	Partner
13	Rosie	Town	State	Mother
14	Evie	Village	State	Mother and sibling

2.4. Data analysis

In line with the CGT method, the notetaker wrote a 2–4-page memo to record initial analysis of emergent findings after each interview. Data analysis proceeded from open and focused coding for concepts, phrased as gerunds that capture the *doing* and *being* of participants (Charmaz, 2014). The “key characteristics and experiences” column in Table 2 illustrates what stood out most prominently in the case of each participant, but they also link in with shared characteristics in each category, identified through constant comparison and focused coding. For instance, different forms and levels of critiquing education and other policies (and specifically the decision-making around the Learning Certificate) feature in the case of each participant in the last group, hence signalling an important shared set of inclinations and experience that constitute the “discontented” category. Theoretical sampling (Foley et al., 2021) for more encompassing concepts and collapsing of concepts into categories (where two or more were interlinked) led to the development of three categories that encapsulated core elements of the participants’ experience and reactions to the pandemic. The three core categories that serve as a loose typology are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2 and our discussion of findings proceed from those who appeared to have been *shielded against* the negative effects or even blasé about the pandemic—for instance, declaring that the pandemic was not going to leave any mark on their lives—to those who disclosed various *worries/uncertainty* arising from the pandemic; and finally those who were vocal in their *discontentment* with how the pandemic had been managed from the perspective of the 2020 Leaving Certificate cohort in Ireland.

The categories in Table 2 are not archetypal—there is variability within them and the people on the “borderline” (last/first in a group) tend to “blend” into the next category. For instance, Rosie is in the “shielded” category as she appeared to have coped well with lockdown and was looking forward to going to college away from home, yet her narrative also features some more uncertain notes. Derek voiced critique of pandemic management, especially in the education sector, but also seemed worried about aspects of starting college and hence he is on the cusp of “the worried” and “the discontented”.

Table 2. Participants by the category of “shielded”, “worried/uncertain”, and “discontented”

	Key characteristics and experiences	Participant	Immediate future plan
The shielded	Supportive family and strong friendships; summer job; journaling	Emily	Teacher training (local university)
	Supportive family; summer job; ambitious but easy-going about college options	Nicole	Human health-related (local university)
	Optimistic interpretation of learning from pandemic	Lilly	Human health-related (local university)
	Focus on social networking and planful attitude to college	May	Applied arts (local college)
	Maintaining a relaxed “wait and see” attitude	Caroline	Commerce with language (university ca. 1–2 hours from parental home)
	Eagerly awaiting the next phase of life	Rosie	Social science degree (university ca. 3 hours from parental home)
The worried/uncertain	Managing mental health and facing future uncertainty with resilience	Cathy	Open (gap year)
	Uncertainty about school performance and future pathway; sickness; moderate level of conflict in family	Brian	No clear preference (one of the local universities)
	Moderate concerns around social interaction and start of university; disclosed anxiety during lockdown but also liked the rules	Catriona	Social science degree (local university)
	Concerns around social interaction and start of university; critiquing own school's delivery of online education	Lucy	Financial/legal (local university)
The discontented	Moderate critique of education and lockdown policy	Derek	Human health-related (university within commuting distance)
	Strong critique of pandemic management; creative (music)	Julie	Science degree (local university)
	Extensive critique of government policies; made a time capsule	Alex	Humanities (university abroad)
	In-depth critique of government policies; elaborate journaling	Evie	Applied maths (university abroad)

In addition to limitations flagged above—the limited time available and the need to conduct all interviews remotely—we acknowledge that the once-off interview puts limits to our ability to understand young persons’ trajectories and implications of the pandemic. For instance, in the absence of knowledge of these young people prior to the pandemic, we are unable to fully understand the extent to which the patterns we discerned represent continuity or disruption. Further, the fact that we interviewed 14 people—albeit in-depth and with the view to theory-building—obviously means that we cannot generalise the findings to the entire population of 2020 secondary school graduates in Ireland. However, we did trace some important processes and differences that are relevant and helpful in trying to understand and support young adults in the aftermath of the pandemic, with sensitivity to their differential needs and resources.

3. Findings

3.1. The “shielded”

With the exception of Rosie who lived with one of her parents, the young women in this group lived in two-parent households that had not experienced any adverse effects from unemployment or significant reductions in family income. Two young people in this group had managed to secure summer jobs with the help of their social connections. Emily was working in a salon where she had been employed previously, and Nicole had found a job in a take-away restaurant through a friend who knew the owner; they had been able to deploy social capital in a manner that was harder to access for most other participants.

At the start of the lockdown, all participants in this group had struggled with setting disciplined study routines—a responsibility they ordinarily preferred to ascribe to their teachers. Parents also played a role in the setting of structure, which was welcomed at times, because otherwise, as Rosie commented, “I would be watching Netflix all day.” However, Rosie also perceived parental reminders to study as “pressure to be productive” to which she responded with an attitude of nonchalance. Parental reminders to study were, therefore, not always heeded. Yet, such instances also revealed close-knit and supportive family ties that this group enjoyed. Having noisy (younger) siblings at home was another source of interference with study routines for some, and at times led to minor conflict, even though all participants had their own rooms or access to a private study room. Phones and social media featured as obstacles to study. May related that she needed her phone for online Zoom classes, but it also gave her access to social media such as Instagram and TikTok which were distracting. She had put a timer app on her phone to track usage which helped her to limit phone use in the evenings. Emily was perhaps the only one in this group who succeeded in building a set routine which included rest, lunch and dinner, and was able to meet her study goals—until the confusion about the possible cancellation of the Leaving Certificate started, and she found it difficult to continue motivating herself.

While these young women experimented with developing a structure around their days post-lockdown, and some struggled with finding the motivation to study in the absence of definite deadlines, they were not overwhelmed by these challenges and resigned themselves to their current situation. As May observed, “Whatever will be will be,” an idea echoed by Emily: “With time I just accepted the fact . . . now I don’t mind.” Rosie admitted that at times it was hard to concentrate and adjust to a different routine, but she accepted that “it was okay in the circumstances.” Nicole exuded a distinct sense of confidence in herself and trusted that things would work out. Caroline disclosed feeling anxious during the period of uncertainty over the Leaving Certificate, but these tensions eased off after the exam was cancelled. With time and distance from the confusion around the Leaving Certificate, Caroline was able to focus on hobbies such as painting.

The young women in this group attested to active and stable social networks with several friends. All shared having daily contact with friends over social media, which included Zoom calls, drinking games, pop quizzes and other activities. Snapchat, Messenger and Facetime were other ways of keeping in touch. As restrictions eased, they were able to meet face-to-face with friends and go for walks and picnics, although they were careful to wear masks and maintain social distancing. Lilly and Caroline experienced

a shrinkage of their “old” friend group since school closure and reflected that this made them feel isolated at times, but they still maintained a smaller circle of close friends. All displayed keenness to start making new friends at third level, even though they felt slightly apprehensive about how this would be possible given the switch to online learning. May approached the challenge of cultivating new connections in an online environment in a strategic and goal-oriented manner. She had formulated a plan that involved asking for the contact numbers of college classmates in order to start a study group. Through initially talking about college, May hoped, she would progress to friendships with her new classmates.

Overall, the attitudes of these young women to their changing circumstances in the face of the pandemic and the lockdown were optimistic, despite the cancellation of their summer plans and holidays abroad. “I think I made the best of it [the lockdown],” reflected Rosie, “I’m not glad it happened, but I learned a lot about myself.” May echoed Rosie’s thoughts; she believed that everything that happened was for a reason, whether it was the pandemic or the likelihood of her falling sick despite taking safety precautions or the results of her Leaving Certificate exam: “If something was going to happen, I guess, I just had to let it happen.” While May’s statement sounds fatalistic, it also shows a relaxed attitude and a readiness to let go of a situation that is out of one’s control, with the expectation that life would ultimately be kind and meaningful. Lilly offered the following remarks that reflect this high level of trust, strong sense of coherence and meaningfulness, and a remarkable ability to project into the future with confidence:

It’s almost nice to have such a unique journey [the pandemic experience]. I think I will look back on it fondly ... there have been such crazy things happening during this time, like it actually has been an eventful year, even though you have to stay at home and not be able to go away or whatever, it’s just like finding new ways to do things was actually more interesting. I think I will definitely look back on it, like, in a good way. Just because it didn’t work out the way you planned, it doesn’t mean that it worked out badly, you can still find other ways to do things ... you just have to take it as it comes to you and try make some good out of it.

The “shielded” participants, therefore, remained largely unaffected by the pandemic in terms of their own and their family’s health, safety and economic security. They maintained strong ties to familial and social networks and had the social capital and motivation to continue shaping their lives in a planful manner. Even though they initially struggled to adapt to change, their optimism and belief that things would turn out well in the end helped them to cope through the uncertainty created by the pandemic. All “shielded” participants were inclined to follow the coronavirus restrictions and expressed varying degrees of disapproval of those who did not do so. However, some also recounted stories of friends or acquaintances who had managed to devise elaborate ways of “having their cake and eating it” for instance, by renting a “quarantine apartment” after a holiday abroad; such stories speak to the relatively affluent circles that most of the young women in this group moved in.

3.2. The worried/uncertain

In this second group and the sample as a whole, Cathy was the most open about her mental health difficulties during the lockdown. She admitted to suffering from anxiety and depression and was very open in her disclosure of these feelings. However, as her mental health history predated the pandemic, she had evidently developed several ways of coping, including relying on close and trusting relationships. During the initial lockdown period, she felt “all over the place” emotionally and was “really freaking out about things” as she was exposed to various rumors and news stories about the pandemic. Not having clarity about the Leaving Certificate, she stated, “was the worst part.” She found it isolating to be separated from her best friends who were geographically distant. She was unable to settle into a study routine and worried about her inability to get schoolwork done as she could not concentrate. Her parents were separated and geographically distant. Cathy was living with her father during the lockdown, but later moved into her partner’s parents’ house. Compared to the other participants living with their parent(s), Cathy was leading a much more

“grown-up” life and enjoyed greater freedom. She received a lot of support, which helped her come to terms with her mental health issues. Her candid disclosure of them was also a signal to destigmatise and normalise discussions about mental health.

Practising gratitude helped Cathy to cope and accept the reality of the changes occurring in her life post-lockdown. She ultimately resigned herself to accepting that nothing could be changed about the Leaving Certificate although she had written a letter to the Minister for Education to gain clarity about the examinations before the decision about predictive grades was announced. At the time of the interview, Cathy had been job-searching for several weeks and was hoping to hear some news about a position she had applied for. While she was the only participant in our sample who was not planning to go on to third-level study in autumn 2020, she appeared comfortable with her decision to opt for a “gap year”. She gave the impression of a young person who had developed considerable resilience over the course of the pre-pandemic period as well as during the pandemic; she acknowledged herself to be at risk but had also been able to take actions that helped her to cope.

In contrast to Cathy’s practised approach to dealing with mental health issues, other participants in this group disclosed feelings of worry and anxiety but lacked established ways of dealing with these emotions. Catriona told us about her bouts of crying during lockdown because she felt “helpless.” She found it hard to deal with uncertainty whether it was the unpredictability of examination results or the uncertainty of her future in the aftermath of the pandemic. At the time of the interview, Catriona had been searching for a job, and was finding the process stressful. In her schoolwork, she preferred structure, supervision and peer support, and found it difficult to pace herself when studying independently as she could not gauge how much studying was enough. She recalled:

I remember being really stressed about school, not knowing what was going to happen and thinking that maybe the teachers would think I wasn’t trying, when I really was, there was so many times when I’d be crying.

Patchy information about the calculated/predicted grades system heightened Catriona’s anxiety, but she admitted that her tendency to worry would leave her unsatisfied with any outcome. Her fears about Covid increased as lockdown restrictions eased: “I’m never really sure what you are allowed to do anymore. In the beginning there were set rules . . . and now . . . it’s kind of confusing because I don’t know if I’m breaking any rules.” Her social activities with friends dwindled overall and she worried she was hearing her own thoughts because she spent extended periods of time by herself. Catriona’s sleep patterns had been disrupted and she felt less productive. Routine and structure were vital to her and she was keen to see some semblance of routine re-imposed in the autumn when she was hoping to start studying at a local university.

In contrast to Cathy and Catriona, Brian did not disclose any external manifestations of anxiety such as crying, but he did tell us about losing contact with friends, aimlessness in his attempts to study and pass time during the lockdown, and uncertainty regarding his future studies which led him to opt for “safety net” college choices rather than courses he might have enjoyed. During lockdown, he had his own study room, but could not settle into a routine and like Catriona, struggled with knowing how much studying was enough. He felt conflicted between his fear of failure and his desire to make the “right” decision about whether or not to invest the time and energy into his studies. He felt unable to take his “foot off the gas” even as he started to suspect that the Leaving Certificate was never going to happen: “It would be a massive mistake [to stop studying for the examinations] that you would regret for years . . . it’s too big a deal to take a chance.”

Brian felt frustrated and disappointed at the cancellation of his graduation and sports awards ceremonies. He had planned to travel abroad in the summer to a music festival and felt it had all been “snatched away.” At home, he experienced some conflict with family members, but stated that arguments were usually resolved quickly. With both parents still working, there were no economic difficulties in his household, but there remained an overwhelming sense of being at sea, left to his own devices.

Similar to Catriona and (to a lesser extent) Cathy, Brian's social connections had diminished and we got little sense of shared activities with friends although he did mention talking to a few school friends on Google classroom. He did not have a summer job as he was recovering from an illness (not related to Covid). He did not take any particular measures for his mental health, but his accounts of waking up in the mornings "feeling nothing good inside," lacking motivation to get up, inability to maintain a routine, to go out for a walk or play the sports he used to enjoy suggest that he might have been struggling with depressive symptoms. To us, he appeared to be at the risk of loneliness.

Unlike the above three participants, Lucy seemed calm, disciplined and methodical in her approach to online learning, and had a clear idea about the subjects she wanted to study in college. Initially, she was motivated to study during lockdown, yet as the arrangements around the Leaving Certificate were thrown into disarray, she too, lost the motivation to study like the other participants: while she was relieved that she would not have to sit exams, she found herself getting bored. She had been hoping to find a part-time summer job and had applied to some local shops without any success. While she maintained close ties with her nuclear family during the lockdown, she voiced concerns about loosening contact with her current friend group, which was relatively small and on the verge of scattering into different directions due to divergent choices. Lucy was compliant with government restrictions, but like Catriona and Brian, felt apprehensive about socialising with friends as the restrictions eased for fear of contracting the virus and passing it on. Even as the restrictions eased, her social life remained limited and she explained that it was difficult to resume friendships:

There was an awkward phase when you haven't seen someone in a while and then you see them and it's, 'Oh, what do we talk about?'

Lucy expressed the desire to socialise and make new friends at college, but she anticipated difficulties in meeting anyone new given the likely move to online learning. While she was personally not affected by the pandemic, the impact of the coronavirus scared her and she felt "nervous about how quickly things can completely change."

3.3. The discontented

Participants in this group were all relatively "high achievers" (e.g., aiming for high-point courses), and more outwardly oriented in their narratives, particularly in the form of critique of various government policies, hence the label "discontented". Two (Alex and Evie) were going to study abroad at renowned universities, further speaking to their strong outward orientation and ambition.

With the exception of Evie who was living in a lone parent household, the participants in this group were living with both parents and siblings. Julie's father's business had initially been affected by Covid (while her mother retained her job), but the other "discontented" participants came from families where parents were largely economically unaffected by the pandemic. While participants disclosed experiencing family conflicts from time to time during the lockdown, these conflicts were typically resolved quickly and overall, participants felt supported by their families who they acknowledged had played a formative role in fostering their confidence and self-expression. Moreover, participants in this group enjoyed strong social relationships ranging from diverse and extensive friendship circles to smaller, close-knit groups of friends with whom they spent time every day, either online or in person (for instance, going cycling or for walks in the park, as many friends lived in close proximity). Friends had great significance for this group, sometimes being as close as family members or, in Julie's words, "another household" in terms of providing comfort and security. Only Evie saw herself as an introvert, and while she had friends, she also enjoyed her independence and solitude.

The experience of waiting for their Leaving Certificate results in lockdown was frustrating for these participants and they felt robbed of plans they had keenly looked forward to. As Julie put it: "the world is going by." They had experienced disquiet and low mood at various times during the lockdown, some of which manifested itself as arguments with friends about social and political

values, beliefs and ideologies. Externalising their thoughts through artistic expression or social media presence was cathartic for this group, yet, at times, also invited disagreements and strong differences of opinion within their social networks which could be upsetting for them. Yet, “the discontented” were also aware of their triggers and sought help when they needed it, advocating a similar approach for others. As Alex observed:

It’s hard for young people to talk about mental health because it is stigmatised by the previous generation who say that it’s better to grin and bear it, but quarantine forced young people to realise that this grin-and-bear-it attitude will not work.

Art, music, reading and meditation became forms of self-care for these participants and helped them to cope with the lockdown. Alex and Evie were actively documenting the pandemic experience. Alex, with a history of participating in the arts, was compiling a “pandemic time capsule”, to be opened years or decades later, as a reminder of the paraphernalia (such as masks) and news items associated with 2020. During her video-call interview, Evie displayed some pages of her beautifully illustrated journal that documented, among other things, some vivid dreams and books that she had read. It seems therefore that, for this group, vocalising critique of the management of the Leaving Certificate went hand-in-hand with creative practices and expressions, and even the desire to record this era for posterity and their own older selves.

Derek had secured a summer job through personal connections which offered him structure and focus as he awaited exam results. Alex was receiving Covid-19 unemployment payments after his part-time job at the start of the pandemic was put on hold, enabling him to continue saving for future expenses. All participants in this group were adept with the use of social media and attuned to the latest news, frequently commentating and expressing their critiques online through Twitter and other social media channels. Interestingly, while all were critical of various government policies regarding health care and education, none specifically offered any critiques or alternatives to prolonged lockdowns as a response to the pandemic, although some were aware of different policy approaches in other countries. The closest they came to critique of pandemic management in Ireland was Alex’s observation that the healthcare system needed to change for patients and health workers alike and that the government needed to “get its act together.” Julie believed that the Irish healthcare system was not fit to provide enough health care in normal times let alone during a pandemic and could have collapsed “if we hadn’t flattened the curve.” Derek and Evie similarly expressed frustration but complied with the restrictions.

The (mis)management of the Leaving Certificate invoked a passionate critical response among the “discontented” participants, especially the way that it had been handled by the government, and the lack of clear communication between the Department of Education and students. They welcomed the possibility that the changes in the State examinations system for 2020 might lead to a re-evaluation of the Leaving Certificate examination and an official acknowledgement of its obsolescence. They had a strong wish to communicate their message that it was necessary for the government to take heed of its young people. In Alex’s words: “Don’t let your young people down because they are the future. They are the ones to be dealing with a crisis like this if it happens again so don’t fail your young people!”

4. Discussion and conclusions

As stated above, our study did not aim to produce a definitive “classification” or “typology” of secondary students’ experiences of the pandemic. Rather, we explored the variety of experiences and pathways through this early stage of the pandemic, which might turn out to be significant in steering the subsequent trajectories of some, but possibly not all, young adults who completed their secondary education in 2020. While we do not claim that our grouping of the participants into “the shielded”, “the worried/uncertain” and “the discontented” is in any sense categorical or definitive, it is indicative of some of the key differences in young adults’ methods and degrees of success in negotiating the pandemic in the spring and summer of 2020. As such, our analysis

stands in contrast to the prevalent polarised narratives of young people as either disobedient and lacking in solidarity towards older age groups, or as uniformly adversely affected by the pandemic. Nonetheless, we want to emphasise that the three broad groups only reflect parts of the lived experiences of the participants, which are complex and evolving.

The lockdown had catapulted all participants into a new lifestyle where they had to learn greater self-reliance by setting their routines and structuring their time for study, leisure and sleep. This was challenging for all, especially those in the “worried” group who found it hard to define their own routines or “take their foot off the gas” as Brian put it. The “shielded” were able to accept the reality of the lockdown more quickly and moved on from it. They and their families were least affected by the virus or the lockdown; it was easier for them to adopt a “whatever will be will be” attitude that was more conducive to balancing study and rest. The “discontented” were resistant to the changes and uncertainty that the Covid-related restrictions imposed and tended to externalise their discontent. The “worried/uncertain” were also resistant to the changes in lifestyle post-lockdown but internalised their responses which manifested as anxiety, worry and low mood. Most participants felt some level of apprehension about meeting people and socialising face-to-face after restrictions were relaxed even though they desired and imagined such connections, especially as they looked forward to their college lives. Despite a gradual acceptance of “the new normal”, there was a shared sense that “life will never be the same again.”

Such awareness of possibly permanent change could be viewed through the lens of ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1990): the realisation that their lives have been profoundly transformed which in turn undermines their sense of trust, confidence, and continuity. While the “shielded” viewed this with a high degree of equanimity and reassurance, the “worried/concerned” had been more negatively affected, and the “discontented” manifested moderate acts of protest and engaged in therapeutic forms of self-expression. The “worried/concerned” struggled most with managing the uncertainty and even the sense of terror that emerged when—in a society where growing life expectancies had largely removed mortality from public and everyday discourses and visibility—vulnerability to and deaths related to Covid suddenly started to dominate media and decision-making. Hence, the ideas behind uncertainty management (Van den Bos et al., 2005) and terror management theory (Becker, 1973; Lupton, 1999) resonate with the experiences of the “worried/concerned” young adults as they manifested heightened levels of uncertainty and worry in response to the threats to their previously secure and mapped-out paths through the final years of secondary schooling and into subsequent education.

Regardless of some commonalities, our findings point to diversity of experiences: the theoretical framework we derived suggests that while some young adults appear to have been largely shielded against any negative personal implications of the pandemic, others have found themselves struggling, or worried and anxious about what the future might bring. We can, therefore, expect to see some members of the young cohorts coping surprisingly well in the post-pandemic world: they will not have been marked, let alone “scarred” by the pandemic, and might even adopt new strategies that will see them becoming particularly successful, for instance, due to their determination to cultivate new social networks and to maintain old friendships. We can also point to some of the background factors and social positions that are more conducive to protective factors versus potential vulnerability, while acknowledging that our study did not aspire to be representative, and was not able to tap into the experiences of the groups of young adults most adversely affected by the pandemic. Among the protective factors against adverse implications are likely to be known sources of advantage among young adults: female gender, higher socioeconomic status, and supportive family (characteristics found among the “shielded” participants). Our theorising leads us to hypothesise that a significant minority of young adults will derive positive “learnings” and assets from the pandemic as they will emerge with a strong sense of coherence and control, and more refined skills in cultivating social networks, despite the challenges that the pandemic presented. One way of framing this is that they successfully managed an episode of major ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1990) by

taking recourse to their own and their families' resources such as material wealth, connections and conduits to summer jobs, and stable and supportive relationships.

“The discontented” young adults might have been awakened—to a greater extent than in the absence of a pandemic—to the significance of politics and policymaking. As they observed the stress and alarm among their peers and experienced it themselves, “the discontented” in our sample became attuned to the importance of carefully considered policy decisions and clear political communication; some of them might turn this awareness into life-long active citizenship practices. Interestingly, this degree of politicization came about as a reaction to the (perceived) ineptitude of the country's educational authorities and decision makers; as such it indicates that, for some young people at least, it is the failure of authorities rather than explicit attempts at conscientization of students (Freire, 1985) that leads to heightened awareness and protest. Further, as we studied the effects of the pandemic within a highly restrictive regime of pandemic management (by 2021, the lockdowns in Ireland had been the longest in duration within Europe), the forms that the protest took were not traditional (e.g., marches); rather, the young adults used social media such as Twitter, emailed key politicians (e.g., the Minister of Education) and discussed the issues within their social networks, again using social media such as WhatsApp.

At the more adverse end of the spectrum of experiences and outcomes, some of the “worried/uncertain” are likely to experience long-term adverse impacts such as loneliness, as their opportunities for socialising have been severely curtailed at a time when it would have been particularly important for them to forge new social networks to replace old ones that were no longer satisfactory or sufficient at this new life stage. Instead of assuming uniform impacts of the pandemic in young populations, policymakers and practitioners such as teachers, counsellors, youth workers and social workers need to be attuned to the diverse pathways whereby some young adults are able to tap into their resources (including creativity and social networks) while others will need extensive supports to make up for lost opportunities and isolation that ensued from the pandemic.

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Author details

Ayeshah Émon¹

E-mail: emona@tcd.ie

Jo Greene²

E-mail: jogreene@tcd.ie

Virpi Timonen²

E-mail: timonenv@tcd.ie

¹ School of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Dublin Trinity College, Ireland.

² School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin Faculty of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences, Ireland.

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