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Testing times? Exploring how pupils reacted to 2020 Covid-19 GCSE and A level exam cancellation

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the reactions of English pupils who were preparing for GCSE and A-Level examinations to the 2020 exam cancellations resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, it addresses a gap in international research related to high stakes testing by presenting pupils' perspectives. It uses a Bourdieusian framework to explore the role that exams played within the everyday educational experiences of four secondary school pupils. I demonstrate that pupils displayed an exam-oriented habitus which both recognised and was critical of exams as part of the wider 'game' of education. The 2020 GCSE and A-Level exam cancellation disrupted this habitus, leading participants to critically question and challenge an exam-focused education system. With the current uncertainty regarding the 2021 GCSE and A-Level exams in England, this paper argues that listening to the voices of young people also has two implications for wider consideration. Young people are uniquely positioned to comment critically on the quality of education systems which focus on high stake assessment. Listening to such criticality realises the potential for equity, engaging with voices which have previously gone unheard.

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Introduction

Despite a significant body of international research concerning the positive and negative impacts of high stakes testing within education (Au, 2007; Madaus et al., 2009; Phelps, 2012) there remains within such literature a limited representation of pupils' perspectives (Elwood et al., 2017). This paper explores how pupils preparing for high stakes assessment in an English secondary school reacted to the 2020 cancellation of their exams as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It seeks to make a contribution to understanding pupils' perspectives on high stakes assessment and make an original contribution to research concerning the Covid-19 pandemic. It considers quality and equity within education in relation to the role played by high stakes testing (Richardson, 2020), drawing on data from four participants who were facing high stakes tests in England. I examine their lived experiences of secondary school and how, at the announcement of the 2020 exam cancellation, they positioned themselves within an exam-focused education system. Using a Bourdieusian framework, I argue that the participants demonstrated

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an exam-oriented habitus which considered exam results as a form of capital and a measurable outcome of the education 'game'. The cancelling of the 2020 exams disrupted this habitus, causing the participants to employ reflexive strategies which questioned and challenged the role of exams. The findings of this paper can be used as a lens through which to view subsequent events which took place in England related to the publication of results (The Guardian, 2020) and the current uncertainty surrounding the 2021 exams (Speck, 2021). In doing so, this paper recognises that the voices of pupils are uniquely positioned to question and test the quality of the current, exam-focused education system in England. This will contribute to the existing literature which has drawn upon pupil voice as a means of exploring learners' experiences of high-stakes testing across the globe (Banks & Smyth, 2015; Elwood et al., 2017; Pan, 2016; Smyth & Banks, 2012). Listening to the voices of pupils goes some way to provide an equitable opportunity for individuals whose futures such systems determine.

Exams in pupils' everyday lives

In order to examine pupils' reactions to exam cancellation, it is first necessary to explore the role that exams play in shaping young people's everyday experience of education. Within England, high stakes testing of secondary school pupils (11–18 years of age) occurs at two points: GCSE during Year 11 (pupils aged 15/16) and A Level during Year 13 (pupils aged 17/18). For the remainder of this paper, reference to 'exams' should be considered as indicating these instances of high stakes testing. The results from exams are collated by the Department for Education ('DfE') and published as part of comparative 'performance tables' (see <https://www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables>). There is a substantial body of literature which examines the consequences of this form of accountability on teachers (e.g. Perryman et al., 2011) leading some to question the quality of an education system whose purpose appears to be dependent on exam outcomes (Pring, 2012). This paper will explore the impact of high stakes testing from a different perspective and examine how consideration of quality plays out in the everyday life of secondary school pupils.

The syllabus of exam subjects shapes much of curricula studied in the years preceding these exams. This is one example of the 'washback effect' of high stakes testing as identified by Alderson and Wall (1993). Au's (2007) meta-synthesis of studies demonstrates that this washback effect frequently results in the narrowing of curriculum to focus on examined subjects and reliance on 'teaching to the test'; a practice Berliner (2011) attributes to pressure of exam result accountability. This seemingly direct link is referred to as the 'hidden curriculum' which has effects on 'pedagogy, on pupil work strategies and on the nature of teacher–pupil interaction itself' (Turner, 2012, p. 195). Several elements of Turner's conceptualisation of the hidden curriculum of exams are evident in other literature. Biesta claims that dominance of educational measurement (in the form of exam results data) results in it directing educational practice (2009, p. 43), which supports Turner's observation of exams as a means of 'teacher control' (2012, p. 196) whereby exams are utilised by teachers to focus pupils' attentions. Gewirtz et al. (2019, pp. 18–19) argue that an implication of such practice leads to 'the construction of students as data units'. Reay and Wiliam (1999) highlight how assessment outcomes can impact on pupils' constructions of individualistic identities which regard competition as

an inevitable element of the assessment process. This competitiveness can foster instrumentalism, where ‘pupils set out to learn . . . only what is needed in order to pass the exam’ (Turner, 2012, p. 197).

This instrumentalist attitude was found within the longitudinal study of Smyth and Banks (2012) in which students facing high stakes assessment spoke positively about the quality of lessons which ‘taught to the test’ through means such as completion of practice questions and past test papers. This alternative perception of what constitutes quality therefore raises an important consideration. Exams shape pupils’ everyday experience of education: overtly through determining curriculum content and covertly through facilitating development of instrumentalist attitudes which mirror practice seen within their classrooms. If quality of teaching is measured by performance outcomes (Roberts-Holmes, 2015) then the quality of pupils’ everyday experience of education will be inextricably bound to exams. If this is the case, then will this bond be broken on an occasion when exams are suddenly removed from the system? To explore how this bond relates to the shaping that exams have over pupils’ everyday experiences of education it is therefore necessary to seek the views and opinions of pupils themselves.

Pupil voice and high stakes testing

In contrast to the abundance of the literature concerning the impact of high-stakes testing on various aspects of teaching practice (see, Au (2007) for a comprehensive review) there is an apparent dearth of research which focuses on pupils’ perspectives (Barrance & Elwood, 2018; Elwood, 2012, 2013; Elwood et al., 2017). Despite Elwood et al.’s claim that ‘emerging positions in the field of assessment research are tending to acknowledge students as authoritative’ (2017, p. 6) it is necessary to distinguish between research which focuses on the consequences of high-stakes assessment (e.g. Hoffman & Nottis, 2008; Murphy et al., 2013) and this paper’s focus on pupils’ everyday experiences within school.

Examining pupils’ perspectives of how exams relate to their everyday, lived experience of education recognises their positionality as being over-affected but under-consulted in relation to education. Cook-Sather (2002, p. 3) commented on this lack of equity, arguing that pupil voice can go some way to correct what is ‘fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve’. However, this has in turn led to consideration of which voices are selected to be listened to and which remain unheard (Fleming, 2013) along with tokenistic attempts at consultation (Bragg, 2007). Cook-Sather (2002, p. 9) recognises the challenge evident in changing ‘who can and should be an authority on educational practice’ but as O’Boyle (2013, p. 135) observes ‘students produce communicative and critical comments on issues which are both crucial to them and those who make decisions in the governance of society.’

This paper recognises that pupils’ reactions to exam cancellation resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic can only be examined with an understanding of the role that the exams themselves play in the everyday lives of pupils. Listening to pupils’ perceptions will illustrate the degree to which exams are ingrained within their lived experience of education. As demonstrated above, previous research which considers how high stakes testing shapes everyday practice within the classroom has not drawn upon pupils’

perspectives. This paper draws on data from four pupils to question the quality of an exam-focused education system and in doing so realises some of the potential for equity that listening to pupils' voices creates. It therefore addresses the following research questions:

- How do exams shape the pupils' lived experiences of education?
- How did the pupils react to Covid-19 exam cancellation?

Exam cancellation 2020: timeframe of events

Before moving to discussion of this paper's methodology, I will at this point provide a brief overview of events which took place in relation to exam cancellation and the subsequent exam results between March and August 2020. This is to provide clarity on a somewhat complex timeframe of events, several of which are referred to throughout the continuation of this paper.

On 18 March 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the closure of schools to the majority of pupils and the cancellation of GCSE and A-Level exams as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic (Johnson, 2020). The timeline of events which followed the 2020 exam cancellation announcement is best illustrated with reference to the series of updates to guidance published by the DfE from 20th March to 27 August 2020 (DfE, 2020b). In brief, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation ('Ofqual') undertook a consultation on exam grading and assessment during April 2020, the results of which were published on 22 May 2020. Following this, schools were required to submit Centre Assessment Grades ('CAGs') for all GCSE and A-Level pupils across all exam subjects and additionally to place these in rank order. This information would then pass through a 'standardisation model' to generate pupils' results (Jadhav, 2020). A-Level results were published on 13 August 2020 and soon after followed a series of claims that Ofqual's standardisation model unfairly affected pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (The Guardian, 2020). This was repeatedly highlighted throughout public protests held by A-Level students over the following days (Skopeliti, 2020). On 17 August 2020, the DfE issued notification that students would be issued their CAGs based on the fact that the standardisation model 'revealed a number of anomalies that had not been anticipated by Ofqual and which severely undermined confidence in the system' (DfE, 2020a).

As stated above, several of these events relate not only to the period of data collection (see Methodology) but are also referenced when considering this paper's findings (see Discussion).

Methodology

The participants were four pupils of a secondary school in south-east England. They had been recruited as part of a larger study, which seeks to examine the lived experiences of pupils who attend non-academically selective schools within an academically selective Local Authority. Institutional ethical approval was granted, and informed consent was obtained from the participants and their parents prior to data collection. Data collection

commenced in early February 2020 and ceased on 20 March 2020 when UK schools were closed to the majority of pupils. The participants were Will and Gaby (Year 11, 15–16 years old) and Boris and Polly (Year 13, 17–18 years old) who selected their own pseudonyms.

The data collection process involved an observation of participants within five lessons across one school day and a series of four semi-structured interviews. The interviews varied in length between 25 and 60 minutes and were recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. The final interviews with Gaby, Will and Boris took place after the announcement of exam cancellation.

Adopting an iterative process acknowledges the reminder from Reay (2004) that Bourdieu's thinking tools are a means of interrogating and working *with* data rather than merely as a concept through which data can be explained. The 'thinking tools' of Pierre Bourdieu offer a means of examining an individual's lived experience by recognising the relational interplay between the individual and their social world. Bourdieu presents his claim that the practice of an individual will result from the individual's dispositions (*habitus*) and their positioning (determined by *capital*) within a particular social space (*field*) through the schematic of '[*(habitus)* (*capital*)] + field = practice' (1986, p. 101). *Habitus*, 'a structured and structuring structure' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 170) operates in 'ontological complicity' (Bourdieu, 1982, p. 47) with the *field*. The *habitus* of an individual will be an internalised understanding which will provide them with 'a feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 63). Bourdieu uses the analogy of a game frequently, but he reminds us that rules are not systematic or constant. Instead, 'a field is a game ... much more fluid and complex than any game one might ever design' (1992, p. 104). An individual's ability to succeed in the game is determined by the capitals they hold.

Somewhat reassuringly, Bourdieu himself suggests that the research process should be iterative and will be 'accomplished little by little through a whole series of rectifications and amendments' (Wacquant, 1989, p. 51) with an epistemological approach that 'begins with a practical context' (Grenfell, 2014, p. 214). The prevalence of comments and observations regarding 'exams', 'results' and 'grades' which were evident from the first interviews with participants immediately recalled Bourdieu's recognition of educational qualifications as an institutionalised form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2008). This provided a starting point for thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013) and coding was carried out using NVivo software. Two subsets of data were initially created, which distinguished between comments related directly to exam cancellation (made by Boris, Will and Gaby during their final interviews) and those relevant to participants' other experiences related to exams. Each subset was considered 'actively, analytically and critically' (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 205) in a continuation of the iterative process undertaken throughout data collection. Using Bourdieu's tools as a means of doing this considered how exams directed both the conscious and unconscious everyday practice of participants as well as their perspectives and understandings of how exams constitute part of their education. This was conceptualised as an exam-oriented *habitus* (see below). This concept was then itself used to interrogate data within the exam cancellation subset to examine participants' reactions which resulted in three themes: delighted, disappointed and disillusioned.

Findings

The research findings are presented in two sections. The first demonstrates the conceptualisation of the participants' exam-oriented habitus. The second draws upon this conceptualisation in analysing participants' reactions to Covid-19 exam cancellations.

The exam-oriented habitus

Using the concept of habitus to interrogate data reveals the inter-relationship between an individual and the social world they occupy (Bourdieu, 1977). The prominence of exams in the social world of the participants was categorised into three themes which illustrate aspects of the exam-oriented habitus: embodiment, agency and reflection.

Embodiment of the exam-oriented habitus

Similar to findings reported by Au (2007) and Berliner (2011) exam-related activities featured in almost every lesson I observed. The most frequently used activity was the completion of 'practice' exam questions, taken from specimen or past exam papers. This was undertaken by all participants across a variety of subjects. In addition, I observed Boris discussing a folder of coursework with his chemistry teacher (which would be externally assessed and constitute a percentage of his final A-Level result) and Will undertaking a mock exam in a maths lesson. Bourdieu tells us that dispositions contribute to the structure of the habitus and defines disposition as 'a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body)' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 214). Across all four observations, participants physically responded to such activities by writing answers, listening to answers provided by teachers and at times by taking further action such as re-writing and amending work. The compliant manner in which the pupils conducted themselves and their apparent willingness to engage with these activities illustrates the degree to which their habitus aligned with the recognition of exams as a form of cultural capital valued within the field. Their habitus was evident in this durable, physical embodiment (Bourdieu, 1990b).

When questioned about what had taken place in lessons, the participants equated such exam-related activities with 'getting marks'. As Boris explains:

That's why I asked Miss "how many marks is it worth?" and she said one for every arrow so as long as you remember where the arrows go, you've got all 5 marks. (Interview 2, Boris)

The participants therefore appeared to recognise and value opportunities which allowed them insight into 'getting marks' and subsequently exam success. I argue that this valuing demonstrates an exam-oriented habitus, which adopted and/or adapted certain behaviours and dispositions. This in turn exemplifies how the participants' habitus were the products of 'the embodiment of the immanent necessity of the field' (Wacquant, 1989, p. 44). Exam results were regarded as an end in themselves, a certified form of capital within the participants' fields:

If I get A Levels then I suppose you can think to yourself "I've succeeded" that little bit . . . it's A Levels, you just wanna get those A Levels.. (Interview 2, Boris)

Agency and the exam-oriented habitus

The exam-oriented habitus of participants manifested itself through attitudinal understandings as well as specific, physical actions. The participants regarded ‘working hard’ as a behaviour which was both controlled by and controlling of them. For example, Gaby justified her teacher’s decision to move her away from her friend in class on the basis that it had caused her grades to drop:

Author: Was it the grades that convinced you it was a good idea?

Gaby: Oh yeah definitely . . . because I saw the effect I knew like . . . and I felt bad about myself. It was like a subject I worked really hard towards and like to lose it all wasn’t worth it. (Interview 3, Gaby)

The sense of responsibility evident in Gaby’s comment ‘I felt bad about myself’ was also mentioned by the other participants. Polly spoke about ‘commitment’ whilst Will gave the specific example of adjusting his revision plans to boost his attainment in English:

You gotta keep going and obviously that comes with putting in time to do work and putting in effort and to be committed to school and things like that. (Interview 3, Polly)

English is like the only subject I haven’t properly passed. Um. and so it’s kinda like the main focus of my studies currently (Interview 2, Will).

Bourdieu explains that ‘the effect of the habitus is that agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances’ (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 77). Within the structured field of education, the participants were aware of how they should behave. The somewhat illusive idea of ‘working hard’ can be regarded as a logic ‘of vagueness, of the more-or-less, which defines one’s ordinary relation to the world’ (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 78) which in some ways manifested itself through the field’s focus on exam results. However, it would be wrong to claim that the participants willingly and unknowingly acquiesced in this. Their exam-oriented habitus also demonstrated awareness and criticism of the educational system in which they participated.

The reflective exam-oriented habitus

The ambivalence with which the participants regarded exam results provides a good starting point for examining the reflection evident in their exam-oriented habitus. They were aware of the results as a form of capital. Poppy explains that she used her exam results to counter negative judgements; ‘my grades said I was smart’ (Interview 1, Poppy). Boris acknowledges this confirmatory role but also raises a concern regarding results ‘on paper’:

On paper I might look smarter than someone else, but they might have skills that can’t be represented on paper (Interview 1, Boris).

This recognition of the inadequacy of results ‘on paper’ was echoed by Will:

I think you need to be able to have the balance between being able to know a person and knowing them on paper. I feel like there can be a very vast difference between the two things. (Interview 1, Will).

This apparent awareness of the role played by results ‘on paper’ can be seen as participants’ internal conversations. As argued by Reay (2004) and Sayer (2005), considering these types of inner dialogue provide an opportunity to ‘grapple analytically with aspects of identity’

(Reay, 2004, p. 438). I argue that in addition to providing an understanding of the ‘rules of the game’ the exam-oriented habitus resulted in conscious and at times exploitative game playing. Echoing the findings of Smyth and Banks (2012), the instrumentalism evident in these three extracts demonstrate that ‘winning’ the game brings rewards:

It is just a massive game of just tryna win to get out of school, to get on to what you want to do. (Interview 2, Will)

Author: For you school, the kind of motivation behind school was I do **this** because it gets me **this** and-

Gaby: Yeah, it gets me places (Interview 4 Gaby)

You learn it, you get your qualification that you need, you move on to do something that you want. (Interview 4, Boris)

Participants’ awareness of how the ‘game’ of education worked was shaped by their lived experience of education. Embedded within this lived experience was the hidden curriculum of exams (Turner, 2012), which was manifest in the instrumentalism of the participants’ behaviours and their dispositional focus on exams as a core purpose of education. The participants’ exam-oriented habitus adapted or adopted certain behaviours and dispositions relative to their value in the field and participants demonstrated a clear understanding of how certain capitals were valued. The depth to which the hidden curriculum of exams was inculcated within the habitus of the participants meant that such behaviours and dispositions appeared as natural and therefore beyond question. The role of the exam-oriented habitus should not be under-estimated. As Bourdieu argues ‘the habitus transformed by the action of the school, itself diversified, is in turn at the basis of all subsequent experiences’ (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 134). Having established the exam-oriented habitus of the participants, I will now consider how this habitus-shaped participants’ reactions to a subsequent experience: the cancellation of 2020 GCSE and A-Level exams.

Covid-19 exam cancellation

I interviewed three of the four participants (Boris, Gaby and Will) after the announcement of exam cancellation. Unsurprisingly, although exam cancellation was not the planned focus of the interviews, it was something the participants were keen to discuss. Thematic analysis of data created at these interviews resulted in the creation of three themes: delight, disappointment and disillusionment.

Delight

Gaby’s delight about exam cancellation appeared to be related to her presumption that exam cancellation would result in teacher-predicted grades being used to generate results. She saw this as something which would work in her favour:

I’m happy because my predicted grades are very good I think and I dunno if I could actually get that good in my actual GCSEs (Interview 4, Gaby)

Gaby's comment indicates the value her exam-oriented habitus places on the result as a form of capital to the extent that it recognises an opportunity for potential exploitation. Gaby also considered using predicted grades as a positive alternative in that it removed the uncertainty of a final outcome measured by an exam:

Cos like GCSEs are like one off tests whereas predicted grades and mock grades are like a mix between the two so ... (Interview 4, Gaby)

Inherent within Gaby's comment is the instrumentalist suggestion that a 'mix' rather than 'one off tests' will lead to a positive conclusion for her. Whilst Boris was not as certain as Gaby concerning the role that predicted grades would play in generating a final result, he could also see the benefit:

If they're gonna go with our predicted grades er ... well, we don't have to revise! (Interview 4, Boris)

Gaby and Boris' delight at being presented with such an opportunity demonstrates their understanding of the 'rules of the game'. The individualism seen in Reay and Wiliam (1999) is evident in these comments which indicate that an exam-oriented habitus allows them to identify opportunities to bend the rules to increase their chances of success, much to their delight.

Disappointment

In contrast to feelings of delight, both Boris and Will expressed feelings of disappointment that exams were not going to take place. Will reflected as follows:

I feel like this last couple of years in terms of my GCSE years, has been like (pause) I don't wanna say a waste but it's been this build up to this "thing" that isn't happening any more ... So it's not a waste it's just like a ... it's like an anti-climax kinda situation ... I kinda feel let down (Interview 4, Will).

The constitution of exams as milestone events in themselves demonstrates the status they held within the field. This is also evident in Boris's equation of exams as a specific end point as well as a means of measurement:

Yeah it's like you've taken away the ... the goal. Like you've ... whenever you start anything you like have a target, aims, goals whatever you wanna call it, you always have that final, that final destination (Interview 4, Boris).

Despite claiming to not feel personally disappointed, Gaby acknowledged how 'people' were feeling that way:

Yeah ... it is a bit weird ... I ... (sigh, pause) I'm not like really disappointed about, I know a lot of people are like "oh my God that's such a waste we've been doing these subjects for so long" and to be honest, yeah, like what was actually the point of doing that? (Interview 4 Gaby).

Gaby's disappointment moves to her questioning the purpose of her actions. A system which had previously placed such emphasis on exams was now operating without them. Not only was this disappointing but it also led Gaby to consider the quality of the system itself. This leads on to the final theme of disillusionment.

Disillusionment

Disillusionment appeared to be caused by participants' recognition of misplaced time and effort. Gaby acknowledged the capital value she had already gained 'I know my predicted grades got me into sixth form' (Interview 4, Gaby) but also appeared to be critical of her exam-oriented habitus now that exams were no longer taking place 'it's so unmotivational like . . . Like I will never really need Pythagoras theorem now' (Interview 4, Gaby). Boris echoed Gaby's criticisms of an exam-oriented habitus 'It's like . . . we've gone in the wrong direction the whole time' (Interview 4, Boris).

In expressing their disillusionment, Gaby and Boris highlight how the cancellation of exams also caused them to further interrogate the value of the exam result. This in turn caused them to reflectively question their exam-oriented habitus. Behaviours and dispositions which had previously been regarded as being of value to the field were no longer considered in the same way. For Boris especially, this appeared to be a fairly bitter pill to swallow:

It's like you've been told everything you've worked for is nothing (Interview 4, Boris).

The participants reacted to exam cancellation with delight, disappointment and disillusionment. Their exam-oriented habitus made them informed and skilled players within the field of education and I have demonstrated the means by which they displayed conscious and sub-conscious awareness of the rules of the game as well as their criticisms of the game itself. Exam cancellation removed a prominent focus of the participants' lived experience of education. This led to a realisation of a potentially mis-placed orientation within their habitus and a resulting mis-alignment between habitus and field. Bourdieu refers to such disjuncture and the subsequent realisation of the individual as socioanalysis (Bourdieu, 1992). McNay (2001, p. 146) observes the focus within Bourdieu's later work on 'moments of disalignment and tension between habitus and field, which may give rise to social change'. In the context of the 2020 exam cancellation, this paper presents young people's perspectives on the role that exams play in shaping their everyday experience of education. The potential these perspectives have for facilitating realisation of social change in terms of quality and equity within education shapes this paper's discussion.

Discussion

The data which this paper draws upon constitutes a snapshot of exam pupils' thoughts and opinions at the onset of 2020 Covid-19 restrictions in England. Whilst subsequent and substantial events concerning GCSE and A-Level exams have occurred in the intervening period, this snapshot data provides an understanding of pupils' perspectives at the time (Hughes & Smail, 2014). These perspectives remain valuable not only in relation to the participants themselves but also because they provide a lens through which subsequent events can be viewed.

The findings of this paper indicate that the 2020 exam cancellation resulted in the mis-alignment between participants' exam-oriented habitus and the field. Prior to the cancellation, the participants were critical of the true value of 'grades on paper' and demonstrated an instrumentalist approach in recognition of a system which was vulnerable to game playing. Whilst this instrumentalism has been acknowledged as indicative of the delight felt by participants at the exam cancellation, the feelings of disappointment evident in the participants' responses reveal the extent of the influence

exams had upon the participants. This disappointment is also reflected in articles published during the lockdown period. Dunn (2020) expresses frustration at a lack of focus and motivation caused by the cancellation of exams whilst Young Minds (2020) raise concerns for teenage mental health as a consequential outcome of cancellation. The findings mirror this wider prominence of exams, going far beyond the four participants of this paper.

The exam-oriented habitus of pupils equipped them with an embodied and reflective understanding of the rules of the exams game. Part of this understanding recognised the limitation of their own agency, leading to what Elwood describes as ‘a sense of disempowerment amongst students . . . in relation to influencing “higher level decisions” in such areas as qualifications and examinations, within the national context’ (Elwood, 2013, p. 108). This resonates with the disillusionment felt by the participants. However, disempowerment and disillusionment can also lead to what Elwood (2012, p. 510) describes as ‘a backlash from students . . . if they see themselves as being disadvantaged’. The 2020 ‘backlash’ of A-Level student protests meant that student voices were listened to. By highlighting the disruption they faced as a result of fluctuating policy, they demonstrated how ‘they ultimately bore the brunt of mistakes and/or system failures’ (Elwood, 2013, p. 106).

This paper raises questions concerning England’s exam focused education system. Exams were a prominent part of the participants’ everyday experience of education to the extent that their cancellation resulted in participants questioning the value and purpose of the education system they participated in. Although criticality of the system’s quality had been evident within participants exam-oriented habitus, exam cancellation acted as a means through which criticality of quality could be voiced. We can detect this criticality in the voices of young people across England who spoke out during the protests following the publication of A-Level results. As observed by Mayes and Holdsworth (2020 p. 100), such activism ‘compels a rethinking’ which in this instance proved to be an opportunity to redress the imbalance of equity in which those most affected by policy decisions were the least listened to.

There is a pressing urgency for this drive to continue, following an announcement by the Prime Minister on 4 January 2021 that 2021 GCSE and A-Level exams will again not take place ‘as normal’ as a result of the ongoing Covid-19 crisis (Johnson, 2021). As correspondence between Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson and Ofqual indicates, teachers will once again be required to provide final assessments of student grades but their decision should ‘a breadth of evidence’ which could involve the use of ‘externally set tasks’ (Williamson, 2021). At the time of writing, the DfE and Ofqual are nearing the end of a two-week joint consultation period concerning 2021 GCSE and A-Level exams (DfE & Ofqual, 2021).

It therefore appears that whilst this consultation has the potential to change how 2021 GCSE and A-Level results are calculated, the opportunity this presents to reform the role of assessment within English education will not be taken (Richardson, 2021). I end this discussion with a comment from Boris which questions the inevitability of exams as an outcome measurement:

Every year they’re gonna say, ok so in 2020 A Levels didn’t happen but yet they’re succeeding. So why do the current year 12s have to do them? (Interview 4, Boris)

The social change Boris suggests arose from his perception of mis-alignment between his habitus and the field. It leads to the questioning of ‘why’ exams are undertaken. Determining such an answer requires an honest reflection on the quality of the current exam-based system of assessment in England. As evident from this paper’s findings, young people are able to offer views and opinions in relation to this question which present a critical awareness of the workings and weaknesses of the current system. Engaging with this critical awareness and putting exams to the test could realise the opportunities for increased equity that listening to the voices of young people brings. Doing so could bring a positive result to the testing times of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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