

‘We’re in this too..’ exploring the lived experience of young people in Essex during the COVID-19 pandemic

Summary

During the summer of 2020 Researchers from Essex County Council (ECC) collaborated with colleagues from the University of Essex (UoE) on a groundbreaking and innovative research project focused on exploring the lived experience of young people during the pandemic. We conducted depth interviews with young people (aged 13-16) across Essex exploring various topics including mental health and wellbeing, relationships, and education. Amongst young people there was a real anxiousness about returning to School following 6 months of lockdown. We wanted to capture this transition back to education and so we recruited four young people and their families to film their lives over a two-week period (1 week prior/after returning to school).

We screened the resulting documentary, and facilitated workshops with senior leaders at ECC, Children and family professionals, and secondary Schools across Essex.

Conducting ethnographic research during the pandemic has been challenging forcing researchers to think creatively about how best to deliver and communicate powerful research. By using a self-shot documentary and allowing the young people to tell their own unique and authentic story, we successfully captured the attention of both professionals and young people across Essex, inspiring others to share their experiences and use the insight to shape and inform future policies and decision making.

Synopsis

Telling the story of young people across Essex

To ensure the needs and experiences of young people were powerfully and memorably conveyed we needed to think creatively about how best we could communicate our findings to a diverse range of audiences – primarily those working with and for young people across Essex. We decided that A self-shot documentary was the best way to document key findings of the research, share inspiring authentic stories and become a ‘call to action’ for the recommendations.

Our objectives were to provide deep ethnographic insights into a small sample, which although not necessarily generalisable would:

- Be an innovative tool to spark conversation and dialogue with professionals across Essex for service provision and future planning.
- Serve as stimulus material for additional research phases, including showcasing the film to Secondary Schools across Essex, and facilitating follow up workshops.

We have so far completed a number of documentary screenings, followed by workshop sessions with Essex County Council’s senior leadership teams, Children & Family professionals, Mental health professionals, youth services and Secondary Schools across Essex. The documentary has had a profound effect and has helped colleagues from across the system to better understand the lived experience of young people throughout the pandemic, and been a useful research tool to enable further discussions around key topics and issues raised within the film.

More specifically the documentary has become a ‘call to action’ and the insight from the research and resulting workshops have been used to shape and inform several programmes of work

including, ECC's post-Covid 19 recovery plans, the development of the new Mental health strategy for children and young people, the new Early years strategy and young people's personal development programmes across Essex Secondary Schools.

Young people are encouraged and empowered to speak out, discuss difficult topics and seek support if needed.

One of the most powerful things to have come out of this work is the impact this documentary has had on other young people across Essex. Most young people have stated that actually watching other young people their age speak about difficult issues like mental health, relationships and be open and honest about their feelings has empowered them to speak out, share their feelings and even seek support where they wouldn't have considered before.

"Watching someone my age be brave enough to talk about how they feel to the camera, cry and laugh it makes you not so scared to talk about how you're feeling. It made me realise I'm not the only one feeling like this, there are other people going through similar situations, so it's ok to talk about it." Young person aged 14

Collaborative working the key to creativity

This research project would not have been possible, if weren't for the strong partnership links between ECC and the UoE, enabling us to successfully tackle a challenge that cuts across disciplinary boundaries. This particular combination of team members, ranging from local Government, film studies, sociology, Psychology, economics, and linguistics, allowed us to think beyond the original research scope and design research outputs that were powerful and engaging to a wide range of audiences.

What should LARIA members learn from your award entry?

Putting young people at the core of the research

Too often research around young people fails to really engage these audiences directly, that's why we wanted to ensure their voices were central to the narrative and research deliverables. Because of the pandemic we had to think creatively about how we could tell a powerful and authentic story without being able to film face to face.

The biggest learning from this project is that by empowering and enabling your participants to become active agents in your research projects, you can achieve powerful, emotive, and authentic insight. That you wouldn't necessarily get from traditional qualitative research methods.

What the young people managed to capture is beyond astonishing and the success of the documentary has demonstrated the power that co-design and co-delivery involving young people can have, and both our leader and chief executive have made a commitment for us to co-design and deliver a series of future research projects with young people to support our ongoing work with families and young people during the pandemic.

Link to documentary

[WITT \(2.3.21\) \(vimeo.com\)](#)

