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Participation and everyday comparisons in the time of Brexit: Young people's perspectives in England

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Abstract

In taking a context and culture-sensitive comparative research approach on a single-country study, this paper tries to understand young people's ideas and perspectives on growing up in England in the time of Brexit. In this study, 17 focus groups were conducted with young people aged 15 to 17 in spring 2019. In these focus groups, participants conducted cross-country and regional comparisons to position themselves and underline their ideas. These comparisons give insights into young people's experiences with Brexit and beyond. Additionally, the findings allow an understanding of the array of contextual conditions that are meaningful for youth citizenship participation.

1. Introduction

The EU referendum debate has divided opinions in the United Kingdom (UK) between those who wanted to remain and those who wanted to leave the European Union (EU) (Fox & Pearce, 2018; Goodwin & Ford, 2017; Jennings & Lodge, 2019). Although a majority voted in favor of leaving the EU, the decision was narrow and the opinions differ, e.g. between different regions and different age groups (Lord Ashcroft, 2016; The Electoral Commission, 2018). Young people under 18 were not eligible to vote at the EU referendum and are growing up to be adult citizens in a time of political insecurity and tension, which includes increased hostility between so-called 'leavers' and 'remainers' as well as a surge of racist incidents (Pitcher, 2019; Virdee & McGeever, 2017). These tensions ranged from the governmental level to everyday encounters as the Brexit debate continued (Coban, 2018; Spirit, 2019; Spratt, 2018).

This paper focusses on an explorative element of a single-country study that was interested in youth, citizenship and sense of belonging in the time of Brexit. Seventeen focus groups were conducted with young people (aged 15 to 17) discussing Brexit. Brexit was understood as partly shaping the political contexts in which young people were becoming adults but had little to no co-determination about it.

Whereas Brexit impacted many participants indirectly, it did not necessarily directly impact on how participants encountered their everyday lives. Participants explained their experiences by conducting cross-country or cross-regional comparisons allowing a more holistic perspective on how they felt. These comparisons described as ‘everyday comparisons’ will be explored in this paper inspired by the special issue.

Analytical frameworks to better understand the function of these everyday comparisons will be applied such as *wild comparisons*, *reference societies* and *social locations* (e.g., Amelang & Beck, 2010; Waldow, 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Furthermore, the paper will discuss the context and culture sensitivity of the study in the methodological part of the paper.

In the following sections, youth citizenship, participation and Brexit are discussed, and then the methodology of everyday comparisons and context and culture sensitivity is elaborated. Afterwards, the research design of this study is described, then the findings are outlined, ending with a discussion on the matter.

2. Youth citizenship, participation and Brexit

Young people between 15- and 17-years-old are in the transitional phase from being youth citizens to becoming adult citizens who have not yet received full adult citizenship rights (France, Meredith & Sandu, 2007; James, 2011; Lister, 2007; Wood, 2017). Citizenship theory is helpful to understand the possibilities and limitation of participation of members in, e.g., a country or a supra-national community. Frequently, T.H. Marshall (1950) is referred to by citizenship scholars emphasizing the interplay between citizens and the state. This interplay focuses strongly on social (e.g., welfare) but also political (e.g., voting) and civil (e.g., freedom of expression, the rule of law) rights and responsibilities (Isin & Turner, 2002). The rights and responsibilities describe how areas of participation are interlinked, e.g., how the right to education as an element of welfare is understood to enable participation in the public sphere as in labor or politics.

However, this conception has been deemed as a limited view on citizenship, describing a passive citizenry, while not taking different intersections and legal statuses into account as well as viewing children and youth as ‘citizens in the making’ rather than full citizen members of society (Isin & Turner, 2002; Lister, 2007; Turner,

2009). It should be noted that citizenship rights and obligations are not universal and distinguish between those who have the rights and those who do not (Isin & Turner, 2002). Hence, not all members of a country will have the same citizenship rights as it depends on their legal status, but also citizenship will not function for everybody in the same way (e.g., Banks, 2017; Isin, 2009; Janoski & Gran, 2002; Roche, 2002; Turner, 2009). In this sense, a person may have the right to health care, education, and work but not the right to vote.

In the context of Brexit, citizenship theory is helpful to understand how young people experience the situation of not being enfranchised for the EU referendum and how their current and future participation may be affected. Depending on the way Brexit is negotiated, it can have an impact on youth's citizenship rights which is experienced more directly in the form of freedom of movement and definitely in the right to vote for the European Parliament or the access to everyday resources in case of a no-deal Brexit¹. Nevertheless, these impacts do not necessarily affect participation on a day to day basis.

3. Methodology: Everyday comparisons and context and culture sensitivity

The qualitative focus group study this paper is based on was conducted within a fellowship project titled 'Youth, Citizenship and Sense of Belonging in a (Post-)Brexit England' funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft – DFG) from 2019 to 2021. To develop a context and culture-sensitive mindset for the UK, I moved to England to be embedded in the research context and to familiarise myself with the context and the prevailing discourses.

Even though the study was a single-country study, context and culture sensitivity was a relevant issue. In developing this research objective for this study, it was taken into account that countries are not 'independent' or 'isolated' (Amelang & Beck, 2010, p. 155; Scheunflug, 2003) but are connected to global and historical developments, structured and embedded within a global context (Dale, 2015). England was identified as a relevant country context for the study because the EU referendum was recognized as a contextual condition symbolic for struggles and changes in the EU, but also the global political arena and could be related to youth citizenship considering young people's co-determination in politics (Feld, 2021). The referendum vote seemed incredibly divisive in England compared to the other three countries of the UK (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which is not to neglect that the result of the EU referendum has created political tension in all of them). It has also been argued that English nationalism fed into the EU referendum vote (Salter & Menon, 2016; Virdee & McGeever, 2017).

In reviewing the focus group, it was noticeable that the participants themselves were making cross-country or regional comparisons to describe their living situation in the UK. The descriptions referred to the stability, the benefits of welfare measures and security within the UK compared to other countries. Motivated by the special issue topic, I wanted to make meaning of these comparisons inspired by concepts discussing comparisons and their functions.

Comparisons can function as a form of positioning in an everyday situation, and even in cases where comparisons are more systematic and seemingly objective, cultural preconceptions can frame them. *Wild comparisons* describe comparisons made by participants in the context of research. Amelang and Beck (2010) explain how participants in their research (focus groups and individual interviews) made comparisons to other localities to position themselves and embed their arguments:

Specifically, they frequently used references to various national, cultural or social ‘others’ to specify individual positions, subjective views, and culturally held convictions. (Amelang & Beck, 2010, p. 159)

In their study, these comparisons were not conducted systematically, but at times, participants tried to support their arguments by employing statistical evidence. Rather than distance themselves from the comparative element, participants tried to explain their position by cross-country and regional comparisons. The comparisons allowed comprehending how the participants understood other contexts and how they positioned themselves towards them, thereby elucidated information about the participants’ context.

In this positioning, wild comparisons are not necessarily judgmental. For comparisons leading to positive or negative references, it is a different case. Embedded in cross-country comparisons that evaluate country indicators, positive or negative references claim to be systematic. When taking a closer look, a notion of ‘wildness’ can be identified in these forms of referencing. Waldow (2016) explains that in the course of the coverage of ILSA (international large-scale assessments) in Germany as in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), achievement results of participating countries were either framed positively or negatively by researchers, journalists, politicians as well as educational stakeholders despite them having similar (high) achievement rates in the tested areas. The referencing of countries seemed to be at times shaped by cultural preconceptions.

Similarly, Alarcón (2015) explains that references are not necessarily rational but selective. In establishing a reference, there can be a whole history of references made to a specific element of the country (e.g., education system), in a way that is not necessarily uninformed but based on a range of preconceptions towards the country (Waldow, 2010). In contrast to the wild comparisons as an everyday comparison, however, these comparisons feed into policy, e.g., educational transfer (Waldow,

2010, 2016). Even though the notion of reference societies as referenced here has been applied in making sense of comparisons conducted by professionals such as researchers, it helps us understand why participants conducting everyday comparisons may compare themselves in a specific way.

Expanding the idea of wild comparisons and the tendency to identify positive or negative reference societies, *social locations* can feed into our understanding of how the own positioning those comparing is framed within and beyond context. Yuval-Davis (2006) explains how social positions are framed by social locations formed by intersectional experiences such as ethnicity, race, gender, and class but also the place of abode. The concept of social locations is helpful to understand from which perspective positioning through comparisons are conducted. Hence, it explains why one participant will compare the one way and the other another way. In the same way, wild comparisons give insights into the participants' context; the conception of social locations explains how this context may be perceived differently from intersectional positions.

4. Research Design

The overall question of the study this paper based on was how young people in the transitional phase of being and becoming citizens felt impacted by Brexit. Focus groups were conducted with young people (aged 15 to 17) in spring/summer 2019 in England. The focus groups were planned for shortly after the original date of when the UK had planned to leave the EU on 29th March 2019. Due to the postponement of this date, the focus groups took place in the middle of the Conservative Party leadership election, and the interview phase ended with Boris Johnson becoming the party leader and simultaneously the British Prime Minister. The overarching Brexit debate in different media outlets also shaped the context. However, this change of plans allowed a discussion about the perception of Brexit in the phase of negotiation but not about the consequences of everyday lives and future participants after the UK had left the EU.

Regional EU referendum results and social mobility indicators served as sampling indicators to identify different areas in England to access schools for the focus groups interviews (Social Mobility Commission, 2017; The Electoral Commission, 2018). This was due to receive multiple perspectives of young people embedded in different regional contexts, as suggested as a context and culture-sensitive approach by Lange and Parreira do Amaral (2018). However, sampling was dependent on whether access to schools was granted, hence, it was not exhaustive and targeted as planned. Due to the responses from school contacts, the study focused mainly on sixth-form students² pursuing their A-levels and following a more academic pathway at the time.

Seventeen focus groups were conducted in different areas in England, with 83 students participating in total. The schools the focus groups were conducted varied in terms of indicators such as percentage of students receiving free school meals (FSM) in a school,³ ethnic background, geographical area and result of the EU referendum (see Table 1). The ethnic background of the focus groups was derived from students self-reports in the background questionnaire. The focus groups were allocated into binary gendered groups to moderate certain forms of gender-related group dynamics (Hollander, 2004). However, this study did not consider young people who did not want to classify themselves in binaries and may have felt excluded by how the groups were sampled. For the focus of this paper, the background descriptors are rather informative and are only weakly integrated into the interpretation of the data.

Table 1: Description of the focus groups

Group number	Area	Ethnic background	FSMs* (%)	EU referendum	Gender
1	London	Black, Asian, Arab, White	22–30	remain	female
2	London	Black, Asian, White	22–30	remain	male
3	London	Black, Asian, White	22–30	remain	female
4	London	White and Black	22–30	remain	female
5	London	White	22–30	remain	male
6	London	Asian and White	14–17	remain	female
7	London	Black, Asian and White	14–17	remain	male
8	city/town	White and Asian	14–17	remain	female
9	city/town	White and Asian	14–17	remain	male
10	city/town	White	14–17	leave	female
11	city/town	White	14–17	leave	male
12	city/town	White	14–17	leave	mixed
13	city/town	White	14–17	leave	female
14	city/town	White	2–3	leave	female
15	city/town	Black and White	2-3	leave	female
16	city/town	White and Asian	2-3	leave	male
17	city/town	White and Asian	2-3	leave	male

Note: The order in the column 'ethnic backgrounds' is explained by the number of participants in the respective focus group. The background with the highest number of participants is listed first. Others follow in decreasing order.

* Free school meals in school.

Participation was voluntary, and participants signed a consent form when they agreed to participate (additional parental consent was given for participants under 16). The study received institutional ethical approval. Due to the General Data Protection Rules (GDPR) and to protect students' anonymity, broader descriptions of the

regional context of the focus groups were obviated or only conducted on an abstract level.

The focus groups allowed the participants to “bounce ideas off each other” (Chaderton, 2012, p. 365) and position themselves individually within the group and express shared understandings (Amelang & Beck, 2010, p. 158). The interview schedule that structured the focus groups involved discussing school affairs, political topics at school, or thoughts on pressing political issues and Brexit. In the process of this study, a broad question complemented the interview schedule. It asked how it was currently like to live or how it felt to grow up in the UK. This question intended to see whether the topic of Brexit would come up without stimulating it directly. However, depending on the course of the focus group, the question was in some cases modified. Hence, asking how it was like growing up in the time of Brexit or the question was asked after a discussion about Brexit. Handling the interview schedule flexibly allowed an uninterrupted flow of the conversation. These questions and other elements of the focus groups led to participants making cross-country and regional comparisons.

The data analysis was based on ‘*empirical grounded type construction*’ (Kelle & Kluge, 2010). Theoretical considerations allowed developing categories *a priori* as well as categories *ad hoc* during the analysis. In the case of this paper, the analysis was inspired *ad hoc* in the study process. Hence, trying to make sense of the comparisons conducted by the participants. For this, concepts as wild comparisons, positive and negative reference societies and social locations were deemed useful. Methodically it meant contrasting different statements made by the participants and finding similarities or differences in them. However, based on the explorative nature, the analysis was more descriptive than providing a clear typology. Coding was conducted in NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2010). The objective of this study was not to develop generalizations about young people but to uncover insights in multiple perspectives of young people about their societal participation and perspectives shortly before transitioning into legal adulthood in the time of Brexit.

The methodical approach has limitations because it was a solo research project; hence, the data were not analyzed in intersubjective manner for this paper. In a context and culture-sensitive research approach, having in-depth conversations about the data could broaden the perspectives on the study (Lange & Parreira do Amaral, 2018). In preparation for this paper, parts were selected in which the participants conducted cross-country and regional comparisons. The findings are preliminary and illustrative rather than comprehensive, which follow up on note-worthy patterns in the focus groups and are inspired by the topic of this special issue.

5. Findings

The findings of this paper start with general discussions on how young people experienced the impact of Brexit in their everyday lives. Further, elaborating on contextual conditions beyond Brexit impacting the participant's everyday lives. In the following sections, different cross-country comparisons will be discussed that the participants made to exemplify how they felt living in the UK. It will allow to better understand how young people position themselves to other contexts and which function these positions have.

5.1 Brexit and other contextual conditions

In talking about the impact of the EU referendum, some participants described the insecurity they felt due to Brexit constantly being discussed in the news and not being resolved, not knowing which implications this would have for their future. Other impacts were not having the right of co-determination, having to live with the consequences, being confronted by an increased hostility between those in favour of remaining and leaving the EU and anti-migrant discourses. A few participants felt concerned by the scenario of a 'no-deal Brexit', as one participant explains.

I'd say living in the UK right now is kind of scary compared to what it was like five or 10 years ago. Mainly because of Brexit. Like I was worried about food prices because they were saying, you can't stockpile fresh foods so that would mean there would be a shortage if there was a no-deal, which there wasn't in March, so then that would mean they go up and just stuff like that. (city/town)

In this statement, the participant described the consequences of the transfer of goods on their everyday life in not having secure access to resources such as food in the case of a no-deal Brexit. Nevertheless, only for a limited number, Brexit was anticipated as having tangible consequences beyond the experienced limitation of having a say in Brexit. These were that studying abroad as well as working for international firms in the UK was assumed to be more difficult after Brexit. For others, there was the realization that in future, Brexit might have a consequence for them mediated through the economy; however, these consequences were unknown at the time when focus groups took place. Others argued that they did not feel impacted in their everyday lives through Brexit beyond it being frequently discussed in the media (see Feld, 2021). Hence, one participant argued that the debate about Brexit in their friendship group had died down and was not really impacting them. As a standalone opinion, one participant argued that they did not experience a difference at all:

Not really. Like I can't see how my life has actually changed from like five years ago to now because I've just been doing my own thing and until, I don't know, like school starts

shutting down over it, then maybe I'll be a bit concerned but at the moment my life hasn't really been affected ... (city/town)

This statement shows that Brexit as a contextual factor was experienced with a different relevance in the participants' lives. However, those experiencing an impact referred strongly to the discursive level of impact, missing co-determination and insecurity about the outcome being the main issue, emphasizing their missing citizenship rights. The positions are understandable due to the consequences of Brexit being unknown and not experienced then. Due to the composition of the sample, experiences of hostility due to Brexit directed at them were not mentioned. This stood in contrast to cases of hostility against Polish citizens living in the UK (Virdee & McGeever, 2017) as well as young people born in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) describing insecurity because of their right to reside being in limbo since EU referendum (Tyrrell, Sime, Kelly, & McMellon, 2019).

Contextual conditions described by participant impacting their everyday lives tangibly were strongly focused on education: decrease of school funding, strong STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) focus in school education, a reduced arts and humanity focus in schools, trajectories to VET (vocational education and training) and universities, academization⁴ of schools, university fees and pressure caused by educational testing in schools. School played a central role for the students, which was experienced as a central context impacting their everyday lives. Other non-school related issues were the increase of knife crime and youth centers closing due to funding reduction.

In this sense, the context that impacted everyday life and schooling can be explained by austerity measures introduced in 2010 and a neoliberal shift to more competition, employability and entrepreneurship (Hoskins, Kerr, & Liu, 2016). This is possible to relate to citizenship in that the modification of the welfare state impacted young people in their everyday experience of education and social infrastructure. In this sense, shifts in education have impacted educational trajectories, how much time students have outside school to be involved in civil societal activities. However, tangible impacts of the implementation of a Brexit deal of any kind were not known at the time of the focus groups, hence, not experienced in the same way as other contextual conditions.

5.2 The UK as a safe country: Comparing living in the UK to living in a war-torn country

In the light of the concept of wild comparisons, in some focus groups either in addition to referring to Brexit or not mentioning Brexit at all, participants made cross-country comparisons to illustrate how they felt better off in the UK than if they would

be living in other places. One example of cross-country comparisons was that participants in some focus groups felt safe living in the UK. Sudan was referenced in two focus groups as a country of comparison, which in spring/summer 2019 was reported on widely in the news and shared on social media due to the events happening in the South Sudanese civil war at the time. Participants were reflecting on current affairs to argue their position, their feeling of being safe and living an uninterrupted life in the UK:

Yeah, so I just think there's obviously a lot of conflict going on around in other places like Sudan obviously recently, so I feel like I've never really experienced that, and I've always been like just going out anywhere. I sort of feel comfortable, so I can't really imagine what it would be like for anyone else. (city/town)

At that time, no references were made to Yemen's civil war, Syria's civil war, Mali's civil war or any other war, which can be explained by how the media coverage on a specific country led to these comparisons. Remarkably, some participants referred to a widely reported war to exemplify how they felt safe living in the UK and that they had not experienced any major disturbances as a civil war would entail. Simultaneously, this does also put the topic of Brexit in a global context, where the consequences are expected economically, on citizenship rights and insecurity and increased hostility has been experienced, but is understandably not perceived as having devastating impacts as a civil war on everyday interactions and life trajectories.

5.3 Better places and welfare: Comparing yourself to EU member states

In other focus groups, the comparisons were made discussing differences between the UK and EU member states. In two focus groups, young people made references to Eastern European countries, arguing how they felt better off living in the UK. In one focus group, the participants could understand that either Bulgarians or Hungarians would rather refer to themselves as European than them, who would describe themselves as British if they were travelling. In another group, the following was stated:

P1: I mean, I'm not really looking at myself living here but like if you were moving from another country, say you've immigrated from Poland or whatever, you know, this is a way better place to live.

P1: I'd agree it's much better than lots of places. (city/town)

The first participant explains 'constant political unrest' and 'a big right wing' uprising in Poland. In the discussion, the participants reflect that this happening 'all over the world, isn't it.' In these comparisons the participants describe a global dimension of political unrest, where in contrast, the 'UK is pretty nice and neutral'; however, they also argue that Poland has a worse infrastructure than the UK due to its Soviet

history and World War II. These reflections are interesting in the context of the UK compared to Eastern European countries, as there has been much debate on Eastern European migration to the UK due to EU expansion in 2005, which was a topic that was stirred up in the Brexit debate (Nowicka, 2018; Tyrrell et al., 2019; Virdee & McGeever, 2017).

Western Europe was referred to as a positive place to live in one focus group compared to other places. A participant who was planning to study in Germany argued that the welfare system (especially the pension system) in Germany was attractive compared to other countries. These examples illustrate the different perceived positions of countries due to contextual factors playing a role in cross-country everyday comparisons. The indicators that were applied relate to welfare, political stability and status different countries provided and how participants described these as a more or less attractive place of abode. Similarly, positioning was not conducted with a direct comparison, but it was argued that welfare in the UK was an indicator of feeling well off in the UK. The National Health System (NHS) was praised for being free, which understood as genuine to the UK. This opinion was, however, put into perspective by the perception that it was underfunded and the service entailed long waiting times.⁵

In one focus group, participants also saw themselves confronted with the other side of ‘wild comparisons’ as their relatives living outside Europe imagined living in the UK and Europe in a manner very contrary to the experience the participants described themselves, which portrayed ‘everything to be like the perfect dream’ (London). Confronted with these ideas, the participants had to argue that this comparison did not reflect their everyday experiences and explained that living in the UK was nothing like their relatives imagined.

5.4 Regional differences: London compared to rural areas

In the focus groups, it was noticeable that at times those living in London were describing differences to those living outside of London or in more rural areas. Some London-based participants argued how Londoners were more accepting of diversity and welcoming than more rural areas in England. However, this regional comparison was not made vice versa by those living outside London or in more rural areas. In focus groups living away from London, they thought that accepting diversity was a general to Britain and, in some cases, genuine to being British. This example illustrates how a wild comparison functions more as positionality rather than giving insights to the compared place’s perceived experience. It also illustrates that comparisons are dependent on the indicator of comparison, which can function positively or negatively, as shown in the following example.

Talking about growing up in the UK stimulated in some focus groups to differentiate between how it was to grow up in London compared to other areas in the UK in one focus group: ‘There’s like a really big difference with that because people from outside of London and like in more rural areas tend to stay kids for longer, if that makes sense’ (London). Growing up in London was described as more troubling compared to living in the countryside due to worries and threats that parents saw their children face in London:

Yeah, like things along that line like knife crime and danger and like rape and things like that. In London because parents are more worried, because I have a friend who lives in [other region] and she is allowed to go out with her friends late and like being able to just chill with her friends. It’s more laid back and danger is not constantly on your mind and you’re more free to go around but in London, it’s more you have to be home by this time because, I guess it has to do with parents themselves but it’s also has to do with the danger of things out on the streets. (London)

The participant discussed threats when navigating through the city. It illustrates how locations within a country or even within a city influences everyday life and feeling safe. In the study, this is the only focus group in the sample discussing these kinds of threats. This London experience can be contrasted to the experience of one participant living in a small market town answering how it was like to grow up in Britain at the time loving to live in the countryside:

I love it ... Because I specifically love this part of like the world, like the country because we’re surrounded by fields and I love that and the cows and animals, I just love it. (city/town)

In this focus group, the most pressing issue young people were confronted with was that young people were viewed as anti-social by some adults due to hanging out and listening to loud music, which led to young people campaigning against these perceptions.

Amelang and Beck (2010) argue how wild comparisons exemplify implicit theories which the participants apply. To understand these theories, we can refer to the concept of positive and negative reference societies (Waldow, 2016) in the way young people try to position themselves towards other countries based on the criteria that suit the situation and different social locations (Yuval-Davis, 2006). These comparisons, however, allow putting their perceptions in a global context and give an additional understanding of young people’s everyday lives.

The countries the participants chose to compare their situation to are noteworthy as they were in some cases directly related to current affairs or indirectly embedded around the discussion of Brexit. However, these comparisons can be described as fuzzy and very much related to the questions that have been probed. Hence, they are not necessarily something that participants would discuss in an everyday conversation but are stimulated by the context and the structure in which the focus groups

took place (Amelang & Beck, 2010). In conducting regional and cross-country comparisons, the participants tried to explain “their personal, social and cultural selves” (Amelang & Beck, 2010, p. 160) rather than claiming a kind of objectivity. Hence, the participants were not producing knowledge that would be reproduced or embedded in common sense as it may be the case of the positive and negative references made in news reports or research studies.

6. Discussion

Using Brexit as a contextual dimension allows us to reflect on youth citizenship and participation and its interconnection to global developments. However, as the general described experiences with Brexit in this paper underline, the direct impacts of Brexit are more subtle and by no means experienced as something relevant for everyday life in a consistent manner for most of the participants. Since the focus groups were conducted, a dramatic global contextual shift as the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted young people’s lives and perceived future trajectories unprecedentedly. COVID-19 in 2020 led schools to close, home-schooling emerge, and young people were forced to rearrange their lives dramatically. In a scenario where this study would have been conducted in 2020, the perceived impact of Brexit for young people would have been overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings of this paper give insights into the relevance Brexit has on the participants’ everyday lives. Even though lack of co-determination and insecurity are experienced through the Brexit debate, other elements of the participants’ context, such as austerity measures as cuts in school funding, the experienced testing regime seems to be more tangible. Furthermore, the findings answer the question of the function of the everyday comparisons conducted by the participants. The findings underline how cross-country and regional comparisons allow participants to position and explain themselves in the context of focus groups. These comparisons can be related to the (political, temporal and cultural) contexts the participants are embedded in and give an idea about their preconceptions of some countries or regions and how participants perceive their context. At the same time, it shows that the participants did not see their context disentangled to other context but positioned themselves to explain themselves. With this positioning, participants emphasized what was important to them and what they valued about their context. Whereas some participants valued the safety, stability or welfare compared to other contexts, others argued that they longed other contextual conditions such as moving more freely in their everyday life or in which the welfare system was functioning better. In these comparisons, there was always an emphasis on a better or a worse element considering a specific contextual condition to which the participants compared themselves.

In contrast, to think about context and culture sensitivity in comparative research, everyday comparisons have a narrower function as they do not try to compare something with a mutual emphasis. Even though a context and culture-sensitive mind-set may be something to aspire to in research and everyday life, it is not necessarily something to apply in everyday comparisons. However, on the contrary, an everyday comparative mind-set may not be something to aspire to when conducting comparative research.

Due to the conception of a single-country study, the wild comparisons made by the participants cannot be expanded by the view of participants within a cross-country comparison, which would help to establish a deeper explanation of the comparisons made. Further, as it is a cross-sectional study, changes and developments in these comparisons over time based on discourses evolving from current affairs were not captured. A more holistic research design, e.g., considering horizontal, vertical and transversal axes of comparison (Bartlett, 2014; Bartlett & Vavrus, 2019), would have captured context and culture-sensitive elements to a more considerable extent. This, however, would have required a higher amount of resources (e.g., time, people and finances) to implement such a project.

The ideas and thoughts in this paper were inspired by thinking about culture and context sensitivity in this special issue and evolved from the focus group data. This paper and study makes use of comparative methods but cannot be assigned to international comparative education in the strict sense. Nevertheless, it provides insights into areas that allow the development of future studies on young people's citizenship and participation in a comparative sense.

Notes

1. No-deal Brexit in 2019 meant that the UK would leave the EU institutions without an agreement. This was thought to be prohibited setting out the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement between the UK and the EU in October 2019: 'The Withdrawal Agreement settled issues of citizens' rights, determined the UK's financial settlement and put in place long-term arrangements to avoid the re-emergence of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, by introducing a regulatory and customs border in the Irish Sea' (UKICE, 2020, p. 4). However, a more detailed relationship between the UK and the EU was due to be negotiated within the transition period of 2020. This included regulations trade, transport links, fishing, security and judicial cooperation. Due to the complicated negotiation process between the UK and the EU, a no-deal Brexit scenario after the transition period end of 2020 was back on the table again (UKICE, 2020). By the end of 2020, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) was agreed on and put provisionally in force on 1st January 2021. Nevertheless, the implications of Brexit in 2021 were still not clear at the time (e.g., trade deals with other countries, conflicts about the Irish Sea border).
2. Educational phase for advanced school-level qualification after receiving GCSEs (General Certificate of General Education).

3. In 2019, 14.1% of students of the total secondary student population in England received free school meals (FSM) (Department for Education, 2019). Free school meals function as an indicator of economic deprivation in England.
4. Academies are state schools with increased autonomy and run by an academic trust (GOV.UK., 2020; Hatcher, 2011). The conversion into an academy is based on school assessment results by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) in cases where schools are rated as 'inadequate' and are obliged to be academised. At the same time, schools themselves can decide to convert to an academy voluntarily.
5. It should be noted that the funding of the NHS was debated leading up to the EU referendum vote, which was fostered by the Vote Leave campaign arguing that if the UK left the EU, the UK would save money that it could invest in the NHS.

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