Using Creative Approaches and Facilitating Remote Online Focus Groups With Children and Young People: Reflections, Recommendations and Practical Guidance

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Abstract

The importance of engaging and involving children and young people (CYP) in research is widely recognised, especially for educational research exploring CYP's perceptions and experiences of school processes. Historically, working with CYP to collect qualitative data has involved face-to-face interactions, however the social distancing requirement during the COVID-19 pandemic meant there was a need to move 'online' and work 'remotely'. In this paper we share our experiences of undertaking remote online synchronous focus groups with CYP and discuss how we overcame the challenges associated with conducting qualitative research with CYP 'from a distance'. We used remote online synchronous focus groups to explore CYP's perspectives on how education settings can support social, emotional, and mental wellbeing. We reflect on approaches used to uphold rigour and quality, and work ethically and sensitively. We have organised this into five topics reflecting distinct parts of the planning, design and practice: 1) working with CYP as research advisors to shape the design, feasibility and suitability of the methods and approach; 2) developing creative approaches within the online focus groups to increase engagement and inclusion; 3) considering logistical and technical practice; 4) considering ethical practice underpinning online group data collection with CYP; and 5) valuing participation and disseminate findings when working from a distance with participants. We present reflections and guidance for other researchers considering the use of remote online synchronous focus groups with CYP, as a feasible and valuable means for collecting data in both a time- and cost-effective manner.

Keywords

schools, mental health, wellbeing, children and young people, focus groups, qualitative methodology, online research methods, videoconferencing

Social distancing measures associated with strategies to curb the spread of SARS-COV-2 meant the necessary use of online and remote data collection during 2020 and 2021, and researchers had to re-think many established methods of face-to-face qualitative data collection to continue research activities, while keeping research participants and staff safe (Saberi, 2020). The need to move 'online' and work 'from a distance' led to an increased use of online and remote data collection. This shift to online methods posed a range of practical and ethical considerations for collecting high quality qualitative data, and even more so when working with children and young people (CYP). While an ever-growing number of international studies are offering guidance and recommendations for collecting remote qualitative data, and have provided essential

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commentary on working remotely with participants, practically and ethically, and offered considerations for using different technology to support the process (e.g., Archibald et al., 2019; Greenspan et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2021; Oliffe et al., 2021), such guidance has tended to focus on collecting data remotely with adult populations. While there has been published studies collecting data with CYP remotely, this has tended to be one-on-one online interviews (e.g., Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Thompson et al., 2021) and theoretical pieces, rather than offering methodological guidance on practical, ethical and design issues. In this paper we will share our experiences of facilitating remote online focus groups with a diverse range of CYP in a project exploring their perspectives on how education settings can support social, emotional and mental wellbeing in schools. We offer our reflections for undertaking such an approach in a robust, responsible, and ethical manner, and offer recommendations for future research practice.

An Imperative to Include the Voices of CYP in Education Research

The social, emotional and mental wellbeing of CYP is increasingly recognised as a vital part of education world-wide, and education settings are recognised as inclusive environments ideally placed to offer support for and to promote the wellbeing of CYP (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021; WHO, 2022). Students who are happier, healthier, and feel safer at schools are better able to engage academically, and thus wellbeing is associated with both short-and long-term outcomes across academic achievement, health, and future success (Early Intervention Foundation, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2019; WHO, 2022). Findings using the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) international survey, from 45 countries across Europe and North America, only further stresses the importance for wellbeing provision for adaptive outcomes in young people (Nagata, 2020).

Key to understanding and supporting children's wellbeing at school is directly engaging with CYP themselves and providing them with a voice to inform the policies and practice which directly affects them. Eliciting the voice of CYP is key to children's rights, and Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states it is the right of every child to have a voice, to be involved decisions that affect them, and should be actively involved in research exploring and understanding their views on matters related to them (United Nations, 1989). There is a growing priority for inclusive research involving CYP (Department of Health and NHS England, 2015; Inchley et al., 2020; United Nations, 1989; Urbina-Garcia et al., 2022), and as wellbeing provision is becoming a central feature of educational practice, exploring and understanding the perspectives of CYP is crucial in order to understand how best to meet their needs (Urbina-Garcia et al., 2022).

Further, it is recognised that there are often 'seldom heard' groups in educational and health research, and individuals from such groups may have different needs and ideas about what provision should offer (Barnes & Harrison, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017; Tangen, 2008). For instance, individuals with special educational needs and disabilities are often less represented in research with CYP (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; Cuevas-Parra, 2021) and often have distinct needs within the school environment and wellbeing provision (Barnes & Harrison, 2017). Consequently research aiming to capture the voices of diverse groups of CYP does need to be conducted in a manner that is inclusive, engaging and appropriate for CYP, thus reflecting on combining creative approaches with remote and online data collection is timely and essential practice.

Project Background and Context

In the UK in 2019, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) was asked by the Department of Health and Social Care in England to update public health guidance on social, emotional, and mental wellbeing in primary and secondary education. The guidance aimed to cover how educational and other professionals can implement a supportive whole school environment, universal education, targeted interventions, and support transition, to promote wellbeing in CYP in primary and secondary education[1]. The guidance had input from academic and topic experts, health professionals, but required the input of CYP themselves (United Nations, 1989).

In Spring 2020, NICE commissioned a qualitative research project to recruit and facilitate focus groups so that the perspectives of CYP aged 5–18 years could inform the guidance into wellbeing (Hennessey et al., 2022b). However, as the spread of SARS-COV-2 reached pandemic status, this call was subsequently put on hold and later retendered in late 2020, with the added requirement that data collection was to maintain social distancing and work in line with public health guidance. To compound matters, UK schools closed for *most* pupils for a subsequent time in January 2021, bringing a range of unprecedented issues for schools and CYP at practical and political levels, and created subsequent disruption and uncertainty when they did re-open. These ongoing school disruptions created wider challenges for school-based research, necessitating that research design, recruitment, and data collection to be flexible and sensitive to the needs of education settings operating within a pandemic. There was also concern that the rights of CYP to participate in research and decision-making would be reduced at this time, due to limited access to spaces (Cuevas-Parra, 2021), and we were keen to not to let the pandemic restrict CYP's access to research participation during this time.

Aims

This paper aims to provide a critical reflection of the use of remote online qualitative data collection with CYP, prompted by a gap in the literature to help guide and inform research practice. While there are best practice guidelines for conducting focus group with CYP, these are quite dated and do not recognise some of the digital and online tools available now (e.g., Fox et al., 2007; Gibson, 2007; Stewart & Williams, 2005). Despite there being a flurry of research methods papers offering guidance on using remote online technology and considerations for best practice (e.g., Archibald et al., 2019; Lobe et al., 2020; Oliffe et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2021), these have tended to focus on working with adult populations. Working remotely and online with CYP brings additional considerations and creates additional challenges, and in the following sections we share our lessons learned, reflections, and experiences gained from this research project. We highlight key areas to consider when conducting remote online focus groups with CYP, and suggest recommendations and practical guidance when capturing the perspectives of CYP 'from a distance' in this way. We have organised this into five topics reflecting distinct parts of the planning, design and practice: 1) working with CYP as research advisors to shape the design, feasibility and suitability of the approach; 2) developing creative approaches within the online focus groups to increase engagement and inclusion; 3) considering logistical and technical practice; 4) considering ethical practice underpinning online data collection with CYP; and 5) valuing participation and disseminate findings when working from a distance with participants.

Consultation with CYP as Research Advisors

We aimed to work remotely with CYP to develop the study, as we were keen not to let the pandemic curtail our usual research practices to involve CYP from the beginning in shaping research work (Cuevas-Parra, 2021). We engaged with a consultation group of CYP as advisors to inform our research design (separate from our participants), in line with recommendations to help ensure that approaches can best meet the needs of CYP (National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), 2021a; Staniszewska et al., 2017). Two consultation groups with a total of 10 CYP were conducted across two school settings, with one group of seven children representing primary school ages (7–8 years) and one group of three young people representing secondary age ranges (a variety of secondary school ages in an alternative provision setting). We met with these CYP in their setting over video conferencing software, with a school staff member providing support. This mirrored our approach for engaging with CYP in the actual focus group stage, and so an added benefit of the consultation groups was that it gave us a better sense of how this might work in practice and allowed us to identify *with the CYP* some of the potential challenges we may face (e.g., considering

sound quality and ensuring we could see all CYP). We explained the project to the CYP, and raised several areas for discussion including how we could best talk with CYP about school-based wellbeing provision, what questions we should be asking, how we could facilitate an engaging approach to the remote group session, and considerations around a school adult needing to be present throughout. The insights shared by the CYP directly informed our approach to undertaking the remote online focus group and led to the development of specific methods, both logistically and creatively, which will be described and reflected on in the following sections. It was these CYP advisors who were key in supporting the development of the focus group materials.

In practice the consultation with the CYP was incredibly beneficial to shaping the data collection approach and the acceptability of using videoconferencing software to do this. At the technical level we did experience some initial Internet issues and it confirmed we must be the ones to set up and control the session, rather than the school. Although we could hear very clearly it was not always as easy to see who was speaking. We also found the older CYP were a little preoccupied with how they appeared on the camera and it is worth noting that although the CYP were generally comfortable with using video conferencing software, some acknowledged they would prefer to take part 'in-person' due to some reluctance to appear on camera.

In terms of focus group approach and materials the CYP made a strong recommendation for using 'exciting' activities that were not 'boring' and helped develop the hypothetical school 'story' approach used to collect data in the focus groups. They felt this approach was useful as it did not ask for personal experience or individual details. Younger children suggested that engagement could be aided by having something, like paper to draw on or things they could hold to aid discussion and encourage less confident children too. They did note that talking to someone they don't know (i.e., the researcher) could be a bit 'scary' and having a teacher or 'trusted adult' present, as someone they felt comfortable with, would help this. This led to the recognition of the need for an introductory and welcome to introduce the researchers and the project to the CYP, we created a short accessible video to work remotely.

We recommend working with groups of CYP as research advisors to ensure the approaches, research design, and data collection tools are appropriate, engaging and ethical for remote online data collection. We also recommend to use this opportunity as a process of trouble shooting using videoconferencing tools with schools, and devise suitable set-ups for schools, CYP, and the research team. We would however, have liked to engage more in this process and co-produced materials with CYP themselves as is advocated by WHO. So rather than consulting with the CYP to inform the approaches, we would have ideally liked to have worked in more depth, based on the CYP preferences to develop materials, but time limitations and the need to minimise burden and further

disruption to education for CYP caused by pandemic meant this was no possible, but is recommended for future practice.

Designing the Remote Online Focus Group - Developing Creative Approaches

Focus groups, a form of group interview that aims to facilitate discussion between research participants in order to generate collective group data, encourages participants to talk to each other, ask questions, exchange and comment on each other's experiences and opinions, and fundamentally explore why participants hold the views they do (Adler et al., 2019). Indeed, the main advantage of a focus group is the promotion of group interaction integral to the method and, therefore, the type and quality of data that can be produced. A further advantage is the focus on the theme and topic of discussion, rather than on the individual. The focus group approach appealed in this study as it allows participants to draw on their experiences and opinions to contribute to a wider discussion of key themes, rather than details of their own personal experience, and this can be of particular use for discussing sensitive topics through an ability to establish rapport, make participants feel comfortable, and monitor engagement (Heath et al., 2018). However, conducting a focus group remotely and online generates additional consideration and challenges for planning and management, which we discuss below.

Synchronous Versus Asynchronous Focus Groups. There are multiple approaches in which a focus group can be conducted, and one such way considers the temporal nature of the focus group communication, for example whether the focus group approach is *synchronous* or *asynchronous* (Lobe et al., 2020; Richard et al., 2021). A typical in-person focus groups occur with synchronous 'real-time' discussion and offer many of the advantages described above we wished to take advantage of. Whereas asynchronous focus groups can occur online but participants respond at different times when convenient for them, such as where CYP engage in an online conversation that spans a wider timeframe, such as in discussion forums (e.g., Fox et al., 2007; Lobe et al., 2020). We felt an asynchronous approach could exclude some CYP who are not as confident using online chat forum functions and could limit the ability of a focus group moderator to support and maintain focus in the discussion. The synchronous aspects of the focus group were beneficial for exploring the perspectives of a diverse range of CYP on social emotional and mental well-being practices in schools, and there was consensus for this from the CYP consultation groups too.

Being able to moderate the focus group in 'real time' provided an atmosphere for active discussion and interaction and allowed the research team to actively prompt discussion and follow-up ideas, and aided promoting the inclusion of more vulnerable CYP (Teti et al., 2020). It also allowed active

member checking, as we were able to check meaning 'along the way' to avoid misinterpretation. Practically and ethically, this allowed the focus group moderators to ensure all voices were heard, and allowed clearer management of group dynamics, which are particularly important in focus groups (Lobe et al., 2020; Stewart & Williams, 2005).

Overall, we found the remote online synchronous approach to work well, the responses from the CYP were thoughtful and candid and provided us with rich, in-depth and detailed data to analyse, and just as others have found synchronous online focus groups are able to achieve similar detail in data as when conducted in-person (Richard et al., 2021). In fact, the quality and amount of data leant itself to further latent coding analysis beyond initial remit of project, only demonstrating this further. It also supported making sure all CYP contributed, although in reality some voices were louder than others, the moderator could create the opportunity and space for 'quieter' children to contribute. The synchronous approach also worked with our group based within a special school, although we did implement some additional elements such as working with a smaller group of only five children, delivering information in smaller chunks and allowing more time to process questions and respond.

A Storybook Approach

While focus groups are historically noted as a valuable means for collecting data with CYP (Morgan et al., 2002), typical question-answer formats may not be most appropriate for engaging with and eliciting the voices of all CYP (Wilkinson et al., 2021), and may not lend itself to remote working in the same way as in-person. Research with CYP should be drawing on more child-led approaches (Urbina-Garcia et al., 2022) and creative methodologies, such as drawing, writing, working on activities, games etc. can be successfully embedded within focus groups with CYP to help organise discussion and maintain concentration and interest (Bray et al., 2022; Wilkinson et al., 2021). Crucially, it can also aid meaningful inclusion of CYP with varying needs and preferences by offering flexibility regarding differences in cognitive, linguistic, social, and psychological competencies, and promote the voices of those who may be less confident within a focus group setting by engaging them in activities (Wilkinson et al., 2021). This was critical here given our emphasis on hearing from a range of voices, including those often seldom heard in research. We incorporated Recognising the different needs of CYP communicating online is crucial, recommendations outlined in FLARE's (2021) top tips for professionals when using online communication with CYP are incorporated into our approach, alongside input from our consultation group of CYP.

We designed storybooks including vignettes, supported by the consultation process, to facilitate and structure the remote online focus group. Using vignettes depicting short

scenarios or stories relevant to the participants, helped present a context and an open platform to discuss and comment on, and this sort of approach has been recommended as a means to facilitate engagement (Barter & Renold, 2000; Palaiologou, 2017). Indeed this sort of child-centred and activity-based line of questioning has been successfully employed before (e.g., McIntosh & Stephens, 2012; Stafford, 2017) and promotes CYP as active agents allowing them to have a 'voice' that can be communicated through various ways. Our storybooks asked CYP to imagine they were headteachers in an imaginary school, and presented them with a range of scenarios to explore different aspects of provision within this imaginary setting. This hypothetical and imaginary scenario was of particular help to some children, for example, a girl at the special school responded very well to imagining she was a headteacher, she chose a name which the focus group moderator referred to her as throughout, she used this to get into character and it appeared to give her confidence in responding.

The storybook was designed so that each participant could have their own paper copy (as suggested in the consultation with CYP to aid ownership) sent to the setting in advance and provided to each individual at the start of the focus group. The storybook included cartoon images, visual prompts such as images of schools and people, and stories/vignettes, with a bright and engaging design. We developed a primary school-aged version and a secondary school-aged version, adapting the language and images to meet developmental needs for different groups. For both age groups the storybook focused on a discussion of their fictional school through themed sections presenting example scenarios and questions on different approaches schools could use to support student wellbeing. We used this emphasis on an imaginary school to take the focus away from CYPs' own specific school and personal experiences, increase engagement with the task, and add ownership. Furthermore, given that our focus was on exploring their insights to ultimately inform guidance for practice, this seemed a valuable way to encourage our participants to engage in higher-level thinking about what best-practice could look like. Additional physical resources were used with the primary age groups to facilitate discussion. For example, children made use of their own 'lightbulb' lollipop to hold up when they had an idea, and this worked well to indicate who wished to talk and encouraged turn-taking and the children enjoyed using these, albeit sometimes somewhat enthusiastically, which could be slightly disruptive at times. These creative approaches were recommended by our consultation groups, as the CYP felt that the 'imaginary school' activity and having a storybook to engage with would help facilitate discussion, especially for younger children.

The focus group began with a warm up activity in which CYP were asked to think about their imaginary school. The CYP at primary-aged settings were asked to work together to name and think about their imaginary school, and had a large sheet of paper with a school on it that they could draw on, label, and add their school name. The secondary school aged children were also asked to imagine they were the headteachers of a fictional school or college, and were asked to make decisions on the school, staff and students. This task offered an introductory activity to establish rapport, and enabled the groups to 'settle into' the task and start to work together to develop and refine their ideas. Four sections in the storybook then proceeded to cover each of the themes of NICE's evidence reviews and recommendations, moving from considering the whole school environment and school values, to supporting whole classes, before targeting approaches for specific children experiencing difficulties, and finally considering how we can support CYP in period of transition. The research team moderating the focus group used a detailed focus group schedule to discuss the various vignettes presented in the storybook. See Table 1 for an overview of the storybook, and for detailed description of the method and a copy of the two storybooks, and additional some of our resources supporting the focus groups, please refer see (Hennessey et al., 2022a https://osf.io/r6nvw/?view_only=3e3a81460f1945e88cc615c91316aaa0).

In practice this storybook approach worked well to guide remote online discussion. Our focus group moderators were aware of relevant concepts and where to further explore and prompt, but not lead responses from the CYP. Crucially, these creative elements aided meaningful discussion for all and promoted the inclusion of 'seldom heard' CYP voices and those who may be less confident within a focus group setting. For example, the storybook overall aided engagement and interest, while the structured nature of the book helped keep CYP on task and follow the discussion topics, while the lightbulb lollipops aided turn-taking and discussion so certain voices did not dominate and others go unheard.

This more open line of enquiry in the focus group supported an inductive nature of qualitative inquiry at stage of analysis (Patton, 2015), allowing an openness to new ideas and themes, thus allowing us to elicit the perspectives of CYP while also managing the complexity of focus group discussion in a manner that clearly maps against the areas of interest for the NICE committee. We felt that our use of creative methods and asking CYP to engage with an 'imaginary school' in this way facilitated them to think creatively at a higher level about decisions happening in education and how they affect CYP. In this sense, the findings we produced offered both an aspirational 'ideal world' account of best practice, while still being well-grounded by participants' critical reflections on how these things work in the *real* world.

We would encourage researchers to consider how creative methods used within online group sessions can support CYP to share their views. We recommend to move away from adult-led activities and consider the use child-centred and child-led approaches, such as activity-based line of questioning and consider use of stories, vignettes, drawing, props and images

Table 1. Storybook Themes and Sections.

Theme	Storybook Section
Whole school approach - which provide supportive, caring and nurturing environments via the culture, ethos and climate of the school.	CYP asked to think about "school values", where everyone at the school agrees on what is important and how they should behave, and that schools take steps to help use these values and make sure everyone in the school understands and can use them. CYP were asked what they thought about having values like this in their fictional school.
Universal approaches - which offer taught curriculum content and classroom-based interventions.	CYP were told the teachers in their fictional have decided that some classes are going to be taught some lessons and activities to help them, and that these will be taught to each class in lesson times, and everyone will be taught the same ideas and skills. CYP were asked what they thought of this idea.
Targeted provision - via interventions that are tailored to meet the needs of individual or small groups of CYP identified as needing extra support in developing social and emotional skills or at increased risk of mental ill health.	CYP were presented with three scenarios of CYP experiencing difficulties and in need some extra support and were asked what could be done to help.
Transition support, by supporting CYP during periods of transition, which can include, for example, developmental transitions such as puberty, life transitions such as family break-ups or bereavement, and educational transitions such as moving from primary to secondary school.	CYP were told change and transitions in education is common, and this could include starting at a new school, whether this be a secondary school, college or sixth form, or moving to a different school, and were asked how their fictional school could help new students arriving.

to facilitate the process by increasing engagement with the task, and adding ownership. A consultation process with CYP is a useful means to explore how this can be done.

The Logistics of Organising and Running Remote Online Focus Groups

Planning and preparation was key to the success of the remote online focus groups. Below we outline approaches to support this as well as some of the challenges we faced and how these can be managed.

Sample Selection and Focus Group Dynamics

In recruiting CYP to the online focus groups there needed to be a careful consideration of group size and dynamics, while also ensuring the diversity of the sample – all of this was achieved through clear and careful discussion with staff in each education setting. While this is a consideration with in-person focus groups, it was even more crucial when managing the focus group remotely as it impacts on the ability of focus group moderators to attend to and manage all participants simultaneously within a single computer screen.

As the intended sample was to include CYP with a variety of different experiences and backgrounds, in depth discussions were held with staff within the education setting focussed on how to best identify the CYP to join in. An important consideration was the focus group dynamic. We were conscious to select CYP who would engage well together in this focus group format and provide a conducive environment for discussion, as well as feel comfortable and safe disclosing their thoughts and opinions together. We asked the setting staff to be open and appreciative of the need for a diverse group of CYP to be involved in the project. Indeed, a reason frequently cited by staff in these discussions for signing up to get involved in the project had been the opportunity for their particular school or class demographics to be involved in research informing education practice and policy, as many recognised the lack of voice from some groups.

We planned to keep focus group sizes between five to eight participants, as this is typically recommended for focus groups with CYP in person (e.g., Krol et al., 2013). The focus groups carried out in the mainstream primary and secondary school settings included eight participants, while the two alternative provision settings advised a smaller group of five participants, to ensure we could best meet these participants' individual needs and provide plenty of space and time for each of their contributions. While managing up to eight CYP present was achievable and provided a rich discussion, our reflections here mirror those of Lobe et al. (2020) who suggests manageability of online focus group participation is more feasible with slightly smaller numbers. Five to eight CYP as focus group members is probably an optimal number to ensure the balance between a flowing discussion and individual members being able to share their views as part of online remote focus groups, but smaller numbers meant visibility on camera was easier to manage, especially when social distancing measures were in place. We feel if we were to do this again, smaller sized focus groups would be more manageable online. Yet, sample characteristics and context must be considered in decision-making on remote online focus group size.

Focus Group Preparation

We conducted an initial phone meeting with the education setting staff in advance of each focus group to explain the aims and expectations and address any queries the staff may have had. To communicate the project to CYP before we *remotely* visited the school, we used short informative introduction videos for the CYP that were engaging, accessible and child-friendly to introduce the team members and explain the project. These videos supported the written materials and aimed to help manage informed assent, as previous research highlights that CYP may not always fully engage with lengthy written information sheets (Demkowicz et al., 2020a). Ideally, we would have liked to have included 'meet and greet' with the CYP to take part in the focus group to introduce the researchers running the focus group, establish rapport and familiarity, and allow the CYP to ask any questions and ease any concerns over taking part. However, as the research was being conducted during the pandemic and shortly after school closures and disruptions we did not wish to put additional burden on schools and further time out of class for CYP. But this would be something we would recommend for other researchers to consider were able. However, a short pre-prepared video introduction and 'hello' enabled the CYP to see the researchers before the focus group was a fitting alternative at the time.

Prior to the start of the focus group we established ground rules for the discussion, such as respecting and listening to others and turn-taking, and that there were no right or wrong answers, that CYP could be honest, and we allowed further opportunity for questions, as is recommended (FLARE, 2021; Gibson, 2007). While establishing focus group ground rules is recommended common practice (Breen, 2006), this is paramount for remote online focus groups in which focus group moderators are not present in the room to manage behaviour and engagement (Newman et al., 2021). We found this level of preparation was key for the general smooth running of each of the focus groups.

Practical and Technical Considerations for Conducting Online Remote Focus Groups

We used video conferencing software to connect with the education settings remotely. Zoom and Microsoft Teams were used as platforms of choice for the settings and allowed the use of university professional accounts, consistent with ethics guidance and ensuring data security. Five of the seven settings opted to conduct the focus group over Zoom, and two over Teams. Decisions here were in line with the settings' preferences and familiarity, and offering a choice here was deemed important as it demonstrated the flexibility of the research team and awareness of varying school IT and online security policies, as well as reducing burden for the school staff supporting the session. The viability of both of these tools was confirmed and overall we experienced minimal technical

issues and a general familiarity and ease of use by all. But we must admit technical knowledge, experience and set-up did vary across settings and building in extra time to accommodate this was needed. To ensure security, all online focus groups were set-up with unique Zoom/Team links, with a password requirement to enter.

A flexible approach was required to comply with individual settings IT facilities, staffing, and space, and to jointly set up the logistics of how focus group participants engage i.e., to comply with policies on student 'bubbles' and social distancing. We were also able to identify possible practical challenges and various strategies/solutions based on our experiences engaging with the consultation groups of CYP, such as making sure the room was quiet and that participants would not be disturbed and that CYP were near enough to the device to be seen and heard. Our initial CYP consultation process was vital to aid the technical and practical running of the focus group, and is a strong recommendation we would make.

Overall, the remote online approach worked very well, as the CYP sat in their groups around the computer screen, they could see and hear the research team, and we could generally see and hear them. But seating arrangements did vary, and we found the best set-up to have CYP sit in a u-shape around a table with the computer/laptop at the head. This configuration meant the CYP taking part could see each other, which was important to encouraging discussion between the group, and the CYP could see the focus group moderators onscreen and we could see them. We would make this sort of seating recommendation in the future. However, we did encounter some challenges related to social distancing requirements and safety protocols e.g., the requirement to keep windows open to ensure ventilation increased background noise and affected audibility in certain focus groups. We found that, particularly with secondary-aged CYP, despite increased online interaction over the pandemic, some participants were still distracted by being on camera and the strangeness of seeing themselves online, and this has been noted in other studies including those with adults (Oliffe et al., 2021). To combat these challenges, we would recommend an additional 10 minutes prior to the focus group starting is useful to overcome any technical complications, to build a rapport with the CYP and familiarise them to the set-up.

'Dialling' into Class. To maintain social distancing, our focus groups were conducted with researchers dialling in via video conferencing software (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams) to remotely join the CYP within their school setting (with school staff facilitating). The online focus groups could have been conducted with all participants dialling in individually (i.e., each at their own device), but for various theoretical reasons and practical advantages, we opted to use the approach of keeping all CYP in a setting together and joining via one device. First, CYP themselves all being together in a physical shared discussion space allowed for a closer replication of a traditional focus group to maintain the advantages that this

approach offers (Lobe et al., 2020). After all, it was *our* team members that were not able to attend physically given the pandemic, as at this time the CYP taking part were all already in school together and separating them from one another was not a necessity. Indeed, some of our participants were quite young and/or had additional needs, and it seemed inconsistent with their needs to create a scenario in which they needed to sit independently at a device to engage in discussion for an hour. This approach also kept the flow of discussion within the focus group more fluid and natural, for example we did not have to manage delay in audio or instances of cross-talk, which has been noted as a challenge in other work when individuals access individually (Oliffe et al., 2021). While this initially felt odd and disconnected to the CYP, this feeling eased quite quickly with familiarity.

Remotely 'dialling in' had its advantages for the alternative provision setting. Being remote meant the school did not have to manage 'adult strangers' on site which can be distracting and demanding. The remote option also allowed the setting to have two separate groups of CYP 'dial in' to support with group dynamics, as they felt one larger group together in one room could be disruptive. We also felt this approach supported working with CYP with behaviours that 'challenge' and felt the school allowed us access to some CYP they may not have done if data collection had taken place in-person.

To facilitate each remote online focus group we had a team of two research assistants dialling in, each with distinct roles (authors Pert and Mason). One research assistant (Pert) led the focus group discussion and interacted with the CYP, to facilitate the synchronous discussion. The second research assistant (Mason) could therefore focus on technical aspects including the recording of the focus group, monitoring on-screen behaviour and discussion, and taking notes. This dual approach was critical to the success of managing the focus groups, for example there was one case were there were sound issues for our focus group moderator asking the questions (Pert), and this meant the second moderator (Mason) could support and take notes, and in fact dialling in remotely meant it was less distracting to have a moderator take field notes during discussion. This joint approach with distinct roles is also reported to have worked well elsewhere with online focus groups with adults (e.g., Greenspan et al., 2021).

Adult Supervision 'Being there on Site'

A further consideration was the need for an on-site adult supervising the CYP during the focus group. As the focus groups took place in education settings, this was mandatory, as supervision of students falls within a school's typical duty of care. More widely, we needed a staff member who could facilitate the set-up and monitoring of the focus group on site. This was essential to provide hands-on support for technical aspects, and direct and maintain engagement, as well as being there to deal with any potential emotional impact of participation for the CYP. To support the staff 'on site' and offer

clarity on their role, we generated comprehensive instructions and expectations for supporting staff (Demkowicz, Ritchie, et al., 2020). Support staff were also asked to sign a confidentiality form agreeing their role and that they would not discuss any of the information disclosed during the focus groups with others (except for in circumstances giving rise to safeguarding concerns). Having an adult present raised critical data quality and ethical questions for us. We were very conscious that CYP may not feel comfortable disclosing their views on school-based wellbeing provision, and may feel pressured to providing answers they perceived to be more desired by school staff. We addressed this, guided by our consultation group of research advisors, by using the imaginary school approach, meaning CYP were never asked to discuss their own personal experiences, their own school or teachers while still allowing us to engage in an in-depth exploration of their views on what ought to constitute good practice in wellbeing provision, and they also agreed that if we were not asking about personal experiences then they saw no issue with a school adult being present. Although they were keen to stress this needed to be a 'trusted adult' they knew and felt comfortable with. We discussed with each setting who would be the most suitable school adult to be present, and often this was not a teacher and tended to be someone with a pastoral role.

In practice, we felt for most occasions that this approach contributed to engagement. Indeed, CYP were often quite direct and at times critical in explaining why they felt a particular area of practice needed to be done in a particular way. While we cannot know for sure the extent to which staff presence influenced this process, we feel that we took the best steps that we could in this situation to ensure these conversations could take place in a way that felt safe. Conversely, of course, it could even be argued that having a familiar adult in the room could have created a safe environment for participants, when typically the researchers leading an in-person focus group is a completely unknown person, which could be intimidating. While we conducted conversations and planning with the individual staff members to be present, the enacted role of the support teacher was variable across the settings, with some teachers playing a very valuable role in facilitating participation based on their in depth knowledge of individual CYP to some tending to lead and provide examples for the CYP

Planning and preparation for the focus groups was key, and we make a number of recommendations for practice with regard to this. Group size and dynamics are important, and we would recommend five CYP in each group, with discussions with school staff to best identify the CYP to participate to meet the aims of the research and within this recognise the voices of a diverse range of CYP. Adult supervision is required to facilitate the technical set-up and monitor and support the CYP on site, and an initial meeting with the setting staff in advance is helpful to explain the aims, expectations and agree confidentiality. Prior to the focus group establish ground rules with

the CYP to establish a positive context. Use have a team of two research assistants to run the remote online focus group, each with distinct roles e.g., one research assistant to lead the focus group and facilitate discussion, and a second to manage the technical aspects including recording and monitoring behaviour.

Ethical Considerations

Working ethically, responsibly, and safely underpinned decision-making throughout the entire design and online data collection process. This project and the team needed to be responsive to the social, political, and health climate as the pandemic evolved. The use of creative methodologies provided a clear focus for discussion during focus groups, which aimed to remove the personal pressure for CYP to share specific personal experiences that may be upsetting.

Informed consent is always a priority and integral to working ethically with CYP (BPS, 2021), but with both working remotely and amid a pandemic, ensuring clear communication and information transparency as part of the recruitment process was more important than ever (Newman et al., 2021). We made sure that both CYP and their parents/carers were clearly informed at all stages. An information pack was sent home to CYP and their parents/carers at least 2 weeks prior to data collection, including a clear, detailed parent/carer information sheet (outlining the nature of participation and contact details for a member of the research team if they wished to reach out with queries), and a CYP-appropriate information sheet (using text and graphics to present this information). Written informed consent was required from parents/carers. Establishing assent with CYP prior to data collection was also vital to ensure they understood key information and had the opportunity to ask questions before taking part in the focus group. Approximately 1 week before the focus group took place, CYP were shown a short project information video in school designed to reiterate information in an accessible, engaging and age-appropriate manner. This included an introduction from the researchers due to lead the focus groups, to aid familiarity, and then an overview of key information voiced by these researchers, with animation and wording also shown on the screen. This approach of using 'talking heads' videos of researchers allowed the CYP to 'see' who they would be taking to, in order to build a degree of familiarity. This familiarity can be helpful in in-person engagement with CYP, but we would particularly emphasise the importance of this in online engagement, where there is a slightly removed nature of engagement between researcher and participant contributing to feeling less connected. We know from previous work that CYP may not fully understand information presented in written format, (Demkowicz et al., 2020a), thus, we used this video approach to ensure that information was communicated in various modes, to aid familiarity with researchers, and to clearly convey that participation was indeed optional.

Although we were not asking about personal or sensitive experiences, we recognised a potential risk that some CYP may find discussing some of these topics upsetting and made sure to have safeguarding protocols in place if such an incident did occur. Ensuring that two moderators were present during the focus group allowed ongoing observation to monitor and look for any cues that there was any discomfort in the discussion. We developed a distress protocol with clear avenues of action, as we have done in previous projects, and agreed in advance with the member of staff supporting the group the steps to be taken if they or our researchers noticed any signs of distress. We provided a clear signposting sheet at the end of the focus group, in the instance that CYP may want to further discuss any of the points raised, reminding participants of available adults they could speak to as well as providing information about national services.

Working at distance requires additional steps and considerations to ensure practice is ethical. Clear communication and information transparency as part of the recruitment and information giving is important. We recommend using a variety of methods to communicate with CYP e.g., use text and graphics to present this information, as well as child-friendly short videos and animations to introduce project and research staff to aid familiarity. Ensure and discuss with settings safeguarding protocols in case any disclosures should occur. Develop a distress protocol with clear avenues of action, and share and agree in advance with the member of staff supporting the focus group. Signpost support at the end of the focus group, in the instance that CYP may want to further discuss any of the points raised.

Thanking and Sharing Findings

It is important that researchers value the time and participation of the CYP and their settings, and clearly communicate this value to participants. Again this is recognised good practice (NIHR, 2021b) but became more pertinent in the midst of a pandemic and following the school closures, when we were conscious that CYP were not having a typical experience of life and school. This project could not have happened without CYP; it was their contribution as research advisors that shaped the focus group design and their participation in the focus groups that led to our findings. To recognise this, we provided all CYP who contributed, either as a research advisor or participant, with a £10 voucher as a thank you for taking part, and as a means of acknowledging CYP contributions to the research (Cooper Robbins et al., 2012; Seymour, 2012). We also issued an 'Active Citizenship' certificate to recognise the skills and accomplishments involved in participation e.g., being part of a team, communicating with others, thinking and evaluating, solving problems, and being creative. Primary and secondary school-aged versions were developed, adapting language and imagery as appropriate. Valuing participation in this way was appreciated by the schools, with comments such as the CYP felt proud to be included, and to know the voices of

Table 2. Summary of Recommendations for Practice when Using Remote Online Focus Groups with CYP.

Theme	Recommendations for Practice
1) Working with children and young people as research advisors	Working with CYP as research advisors to: • Help inform the research design and methods used. • Generate interesting and engaging data collection tools and resources. • Devise suitable and practical arrangements and technology set-up for schools, CYP, and the research team. • Help inform working ethically and responsibly.
2) Developing creative approaches within the online focus groups	Move away from adult-led structured activities and consider the use child-centred and child-led approaches, such as activity-based activities to facilitate engagement with the task and add ownership. Examples could include: • Stories, vignettes, and images/pictures. • Drawing activities. • Props and physical resources.
3) Considering for logistical and technical practice	Planning and preparation is key. • Consideration of group size - we recommend five CYP (and no more than eight CYP) per online group • Consideration of group dynamics - hold discussions with school staff to best identify the CYP who will 'work well together' and ensure the voices of a diverse range of CYP are included. • Adult supervision is required to facilitate the technical set-up and monitor and support the CYP on site. It is important to meet with the setting staff in advance to explain the aims, expectations and agree confidentiality. • Prior to the focus group establish rapport with the CYP the ground rules for the discussion to establish acceptable behaviour and respect for one another. • Have a team of two research assistants running the remote online focus group, each with distinct roles e.g., one research assistant to lead the focus group and facilitate discussion, and a second to manage the technical aspects including recording and monitoring behaviour.
4) Developing ethical practice underpinning online group data collection with CYP	Ensure clear communication and information transparency as part of the recruitment and information giving process and consider a variety of ways to achieve this. • Use CYP-appropriate information sheet e.g., use text and graphics to present this information, as well as child-friendly short videos and animations to introduce the CYP to key information about the project and short 'hellos' from the research staff to aid familiarity. • Ensure and discuss with setting staff the local safeguarding protocols in case any disclosures should occur. • Develop a distress protocol with clear avenues of action, and share and agree in advance with the member of staff supporting the focus group. • Signpost support at the end of the focus group, in the instance that CYP may want to further discuss any of the points raised.
5) Valuing participation and disseminate findings when working from a distance	Do value the time and participation of the CYP and their settings, and clearly communicate this value to participants. For example: • Suitable monetary voucher as a thank you. • Issue a certificate to recognise the skills and accomplishments involved in participation (e.g., "Active Citizenship"). • Sharing findings back to participants in an accessible and engaging way e.g., colourful poster and video alongside a guidance document for setting staff and parents/carers to help support and explain.

their CYP had been heard and considered. We were told by staff that this was an especially meaningful experience for CYP in the alternative provision settings, since they are often unheard voices in this type of research. We also presented schools with a letter of acknowledgment signed by ourselves and on behalf of the funder (the Chair of NICE Public Health Advisory Committee that produced the guidance on social, emotional, and mental wellbeing provision in schools in England) thanking the schools for participating and for their commitment to the voices and the wellbeing of CYP.

Sharing findings back to participants is important, and with CYP it is critical to do so in an accessible and suitable manner (NIHR, 2021b). We know that often, CYP feed into projects without ever really knowing what researchers have done with the things they have said, or how the findings have influenced practice. To inform our dissemination approach we sought

input from our CYP research advisors which led to the development of an A4 two-sided poster which was colourful/eye-catching, engaging and also a short video (accessed through a QR code). The research advisors guided the team to make sure the materials incorporated both text and colourful graphic elements to make them accessible and engaging for CYP (Egli et al., 2019; Vindrola-Padros et al., 2016). We drafted a poster and video to share with a group of research advisors who applauded researcher Pert for her creation of the video, but suggested using even brighter colours in the poster. Using both written and video forms can help share key project information and can be useful in facilitating understanding and engagement among CYP, but is particularly useful in promoting accessibility and understanding for seldom heard and vulnerable participants (Vindrola-Padros et al., 2016). To further support accessibility a short written overview and guidance document for school staff and parents/carers was also created to explain the context and provide clear guidance and prompts for how adults could review the poster and video with their children.

It is of increasing importance when working at a distance from your participants to actively value their time and participation, and clearly communicate this to participants. For example, offer a suitable monetary voucher as a thank you, issue a certificate to recognise the skills and accomplishments involved in participation (e.g., "Active Citizenship"). Do share findings back to participants in an accessible and engaging way e.g., colourful poster and video alongside a guidance document for setting staff and parents/carers to help support and explain.

Conclusions

This paper offers our reflections of conducting remote online synchronous focus groups with a diverse set of CYP, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We aimed to share our experiences of facilitating remote online focus groups with a diverse range of CYP and offer our reflections and recommendations for future practice throughout the paper. We summarise our recommendations for practice, and while we acknowledge this list may not be exhaustive it presents one of the first papers to make suggestions for using remote online focus groups with CYP across a number for themes for working practically and ethically, and for collecting robust and meaningful data with CYP. See Table 2 for a summary of our recommendations for practice.

It must be acknowledged the overall success of project was largely down to the support and keenness of the schools. The overwhelming positivity and success was due to a bias in schools recruited, their investment and interest in wellbeing research, and knowing it had the power to inform, as the participating schools were very keen on knowing their students' voices were contributing to national guidance on school wellbeing provision.

The logistics of organising and running remote online focus groups did cause initial anxiety and stress for the research team, and prior to the pandemic this would not

have been our chosen approach. It did require much greater work and planning, pre-empting and problem solving. The lack of control caused by working from a distance added pressure and caused the researchers to 'step outside their comfort zone'. Being able to work flexibly and make adaptations to suit the different settings and groups of CYP, while remaining faithful to the project task required experienced and knowledgeable research team as well as sensitive focus group moderators, which was fundamental to success. But upon reflection, we found that remote online synchronous focus groups with CYP are feasible and a meaningful way to collect data from CYP, and offered several advantages. We did find that an important advantage was that remote engagement allowed a much wider geographic net to be cast. Indeed we had settings participating representing all corners of England, and this therefore increased the diversity of our sample without the associated travel time and costs (Fox et al., 2007; Zwaanswijk & van Dulmen, 2014), meaning this approach was both cost-effective and time-effective (Archibald et al., 2019). Indeed, remote approaches lend themselves well to projects with smaller budgets, those wishing to work with international populations, remote communities, those harder to access physically and those in restricted or secure environments e.g., juvenile centres etc. We suggest remote online approaches are considered as realistic options rather than poor alternatives. However, we acknowledge that the choice of in-person or remote data collection will depend on the context of the project and suitability for each setting. For us, discussing wellbeing in this hypothetical story-book approach was an ideal option, but this may not be the case for more personal sensitive topics.

Though online working and 'dialling in' may not have been our chosen approach *prior* to the pandemic, through using it we have all come to recognise the value that it can bring. Indeed, many of us have brought aspects of these methods into other research projects we are currently undertaking, even *after* we have been able again to engage face-to-face with CYP. However, there are additional considerations that need to be recognised, managed, and planned for as maintaining meaningful engagement and attention during a focus group over video conferencing software can be difficult. Yet, with a combination of creative methodologies, planning and communication, and a trained team of skilled research assistants moderating the focus groups, this approach to remote data collection is not only achievable but a successful way to collect meaningful data with CYP with quality and rigour.

focus group design through consultation discussions, and their participation in the focus groups, that led to our findings. Second, we would like to thank Professor Pamela Qualter for her advice in regards to considering protocols to collect data remotely with schools and children and young people, and for support in preparing our ethics application. Third, we would like to thank Professor Jessica Deighton, for her expert oversight and guidance which supported the project design and management.

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Note

1. This guidance is now published and available online, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2022). Social, emotional and mental wellbeing in primary and secondary education. Available from https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng223.

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