RETHINKING POVERTY
THE WEBB LEGACY

THE ORWELL FOUNDATION

HOW ARE YOUNG PEOPLE WRITING ABOUT THE CLIMATE CRISIS? TWO YEARS OF THE ORWELL YOUTH PRIZE

About the authors and collaborators

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About The Orwell Youth Prize

The Orwell Youth Prize, which is run by The Orwell Foundation, uses the writing of George Orwell as a starting point to inspire young people to write about their own ideas and experiences, and critically engage with the world around them. The Prize is open to anyone in years 8 -13 (or equivalent) who is at school or college in the United Kingdom, and the Prize is split into two age categories: junior (years 8 – 11) and senior (years 12 – 13).

Each year, entrants are asked to respond to a theme, inspired by Orwell's work, in any form they like. Journalism, essays, short stories, blog posts, poems and plays are all welcome, and a video game design category was introduced in the 2020/21 prize cycle. Whatever form they choose, the word limit is 1,000 words for the junior category and 1,500 words for the senior category. Uniquely, the Orwell Youth Prize offers personalised feedback to each entrant on a draft entry

A team of volunteer readers, from across the fields of publishing, academia, gaming, and the arts, assess each entry and decide whether the entry should be put forward to the longlist. Once they have whittled the entries down to a shortlist of 30 – 40 entries, this shortlist is sent to the judges. These judges are appointed by The Orwell Foundation, but their decisions are made independently. The judges for The Orwell Youth Prize 2020 were Kerry Hudson and Kayo Chingonyi, and the judges for the 2020/21 prize cycle were Adam Cantwell-Corn, Naush Sabah, Jessica Johnson, and Dan Bernardo.

In the 2019/20 prize cycle, entrants were asked to respond to the theme 'The Future You Want', and the theme for the 2020/21 prize cycle was 'A New Direction: Starting Small', where entrants were asked to think about their local environment and creative solutions to problems within this environment. Three to four winners and three to four runners up are chosen from each age category, and you can read the winning entries in 2020 here and 2021 here. This year's theme is 'Coming Up for Air: Writing the Climate Crisis'.

Research Aim

With the generous support of Rethinking Poverty, The Orwell Youth Prize has been able to increase the number of young people entering the prize over the last two prize cycles. The total number of entries in the 2018/19 prize cycle was 269, which rose to 1206 and 667 in 2019/20 and 2020/21 respectively. This significant expansion in the number of entrants has provided The Orwell Foundation with a substantial amount of data on the background and concerns of our entrants, providing a unique sociological vantage point into how young people are critically engaging with political and social issues.

The aim of this research is to provide a more systematic and nuanced insight into how entrants to The Orwell Youth Prize were writing about their chosen topics. The hope is that this insight invites commentary and discussion that seeks to reflect upon the meaning of our findings. The research is therefore a starting point for a dialogue within politics and civil society on the meaning of how young people are writing about political and social issues.

Using these entries over the last two years, The Orwell Foundation produced a set of word clouds consisting of the most common words across our entries in the 2019/20 and 2020/21 prize cycles (**Annex A**). These word clouds provide an indication of the type of issues that young people were concerned about. The key terms that consistently reappear across the 2020/21 entries are 'mental health', 'social media', 'climate change', 'global warming', and 'covid-19'. In the 2019/20 entries, similar words reappear. The most common term is 'climate change', and we also see 'global warming', 'social media', 'mental health', and 'covid-19' appear like they do in 2020/21. However, there is a clear reaction to the news cycle in 2019/20, such as 'George Floyd' being common.

In addition, The Orwell Foundation produced a word cloud for the policy question that we asked entrants to address in our 2020/21 prize cycle. The policy question was: If you could make one positive change to society that would lead to the biggest increase in your happiness, what would it be and why? Once again, the most common terms (two words) across the policy responses were 'mental health' and 'social media', excluding the terms that repeat words in the policy question. Interestingly, once you remove terms in the policy question, one of the most common single words in the policy questions was 'feel'. The most common ways that this word was coupled with other words were 'people feel', 'feel safe', 'feel happy', and 'feel safer', but upon further analysis, this regular use of the word 'feel' was largely a result of the framing of the policy question. Nevertheless, The Orwell Foundation did consider how emotions were used throughout the entries.

After discussing the key words with Rethinking Poverty, The Orwell Foundation decided to primarily focus on how young people wrote about climate change. This theme was prioritised by analysing select entries that included the following key terms:

1. Climate change
2. Global warming
3. Carbon dioxide
4. Carbon emissions

Other common key terms in the word cloud, such as 'social media' and 'mental health', were also considered in our analysis but in relation to climate change. While the words cloud gave important clues, they did not provide meaningful insight into how entrants were writing about the key terms.

To provide this insight, The Orwell Foundation conducted research to provide a more systematic account.

Methodology

The first stage of the thematic analysis was to formulate our research questions and identify sub-thematic codes for our key theme. Once completed, the second stage coded the entries and refined the research questions further. The relevant sections of the chosen entries were then collated into a single location using NVivo software, and these sections could be used to answer our research questions.

Due to the quality of the data, it was decided that a quantitative analysis on the background of the entrants could not be performed adequately. The Orwell Foundation will reflect on the data it collects on its entrants, and how the quality of the data could be improved for an insightful quantitative analysis to be performed.

Thematic Analysis

Stage 1 – Initial Code Scoping and identification of sub-themes

The aim of this stage was to get a clearer idea of potential sub-thematic codes within the key terms listed above and use these codes to formulate a set of clear research questions to be agreed with Rethinking Poverty before proceeding to the next stages.

In 2020/21, 48 out of 677 (7%) entries used key terms relating to climate change, and 224 out of 1206 entries (19%) used key terms relating to climate change in 2019/2020. The Orwell Foundation read across a broad range of the entries, which allowed us to work out our initial qualitative codes (i.e. what kind of sub-themes reoccur). From these entries, nine exemplary entries were then selected from each prize cycle that used key terms relating to climate change. Although this decision meant that a larger percentage of the entries concerning climate change in the 2020/21 prize cycle were analysed than the 2019/20 prize cycle, we wanted to give equal weighting to both years.

Before analysing these entries, we agreed the following research questions with Rethinking Poverty:

- How did young people engage with the evidence for climate change?
- Is there a relationship between feeling that we need 'urgent' action and a sense of pessimism?
- Who do young people think is responsible for the climate crisis?
- What types of solutions do young people offer to solve the climate crisis?
- Do young people identify a relationship between poverty (or social inequality) and the climate crisis?
- What is the role of education in tackling climate change?
- Do young people care about the environment because of its impact on animals, humans, or both?

Stage 2 – Coding the entries and refining the sub-themes

Once a clear set of research questions had been agreed, a select subset of the entries were read and it was possible to start coding them. The subset of entries was chosen for containing certain key terms. These entries were then coded by reading through the relevant entries in NVivo, a piece of qualitative analysis software, and highlighting text that is relevant to the identified sub-theme. Once

the highlighted text was in a single location, the entries could be read together to answer the pre-agreed research questions and provide insight into how young people were writing about climate change.

Results

Thematic analysis

As previously mentioned, a set of research questions was agreed with Rethinking Poverty which would be addressed by collating key passages using NVivo. The Orwell Foundation selected eighteen exemplar pieces entries across 2019/20 and 2020/21 to generate an initial list of themes and used NVivo to code text in each of the entries that was relevant to agreed research questions.

During this analysis, it became clear that, despite its prevalence as a term in the word clouds for both the 2019/20 and 2020/21 prize cycles, the climate crisis and mental health were not being explicitly linked by the selected articles. A connection was invoked when some entries expressed a sense of a lost future, but it was not made explicit.

In addition, despite its similar prevalence in the word clouds, the role of social media was not prevalent in the entries that discussed climate change. This lack of discussion is somewhat surprising, especially given the emphasis on 'ignorance' being a barrier to tackling climate change and the potential for social media to function as an educative tool. Given that very few entries mentioned or alluded to social media, this term will be discussed under the role of education in tackling climate change.

How did young people engage with the evidence for climate change?

The first theme that is apparent from the selected entries is that young people do appeal to scientific organisations and international bodies to lend authority to their claims that climate change is occurring. This was true across the entries:

> According to the NASA website, the Earth's climate has risen by roughly 1.6 degrees celsius since the late nineteenth century, constantly increasing due to human activity.

> Our atmosphere's carbon dioxide levels are at the highest they have been in 650,000 years and 19 of the 20 warmest years on record have occurred since 2001. These are concerning and serious statistics from NASA that highlight the quick changes that are happening.

> It is important to recognise the small role that natural factors such as volcanic eruptions play, however the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has stated that there is an over 95% chance that humans are the main cause.

> The rates are currently continuing to rise globally, and the UN warns that within 11 years the damage may be irreversible. As such there will need to be action, and action comes in two forms: we can continue to innovate technologically in order to live in a world where we don't produce additional CO_2; or we can scale our lives back to preindustrial levels

It is not clear how far young people evaluate the scientific evidence itself. A few entries did cite scientific papers, but the citation was to lend authority to their pieces by quoting from impartial sources. So young people engaged with scientific bodies and used scientific knowledge to make the case for the severity of climate change and to reinforce the necessity for urgent action to tackle it.

Is there a relationship between feeling that we need 'urgent' action and a sense of pessimism?

The analysis from NVivo revealed that all the entries demanded acting urgently. In 2019/20, a few of the entries did communicate a lost future, which would initially suggest a sense of futility:

> How do you envision your future? Do you see a future filled with droughts, air pollution, melting ice caps and extinct species? Do you even see a future at all?

> However if carbon levels in the atmosphere continue to rise as they are, will we even have a future?

> The hottest year on record. Forest fires burn through Australia. Global temperature rising fast. Rising sea levels worse than thought. 630 million people displaced by climate change. Earth soon to be in hothouse state. Carbon footprint. Car pollution. Mass emissions. Coral bleaching. Greed. Extinction. Hoax. Fraud. Fake news. Depressing - that was her summary.

> We must intervene now and put the planet before profits. Otherwise we will be left with a planet where we can no longer live.

However, this sense of a lost future did not translate into a sense of pessimism or futility, and these entries did not relate this climate anxiety to mental health, which was assumed due to its prevalence in the word cloud (Annex A, images 2 & 6). Instead, the entries unanimously expressed that we need to take urgent action now to prevent a climate crisis:

> However, there is one issue so pressing, so fundamentally terrifying, that it is now sitting under the brightest spotlight on the world's stage. The climate crisis must be addressed now. We do not have 10 years to ponder over what to do, the science is no longer tenuous enough to ignore.

> Scientists predict a continued temperature rise in the near future, which will not be reversible past a few degrees. This in turn highlights the importance of taking immediate and powerful action.

> Only we can fix this, we cannot wait for tomorrow. We cannot wait for some miracle or messiah to rid us from the issues we caused.

> If we are going to do something we need to do it now! As of today we have less than 7 years to try and turn things around before they become irreversible.

This sense of urgency did lead young people to offer solutions to the climate crisis. However, before turning to the solutions that they did offer, the NVivo analysis also provided some insight into who the entrants thought was responsible for the climate crisis.

Who do young people think is responsible for the climate crisis?

Although the entries were mixed on whether we are all equally responsible for causing the climate crisis, the entries unanimously communicated how we are all responsible for tackling the climate crisis. Some entries did place the blame more firmly on fossil fuel companies:

> How is this our fault? Studies show that over a third of greenhouse gas emissions are contributed to by just twenty of the hundreds of fossil fuel companies, all to satisfy your needs.

> Multinational corporations also have a large impact on climate change – reports show that 100 energy companies have been responsible for 71% of the industrial emissions since human-driven climate change was recognised, and the top 15 U.S food and beverage companies generate nearly 630 million metric tons of greenhouse gases every year.

> secretive lobbying firms backed by hundreds of thousands of farmers proving to be a huge hindrance in saving the planet through dietary means. Investors with connections to farming are highly unlikely to back environmental charities campaigning for the restriction of meat

There were an equal number of entries which held everyone equally responsible:

> To hell with your excuses! You couldn't care less and you know it! Everyone just goes around acting like one car won't make a difference! But it does!

> On the horizon is a junction. Each path takes us off the track to certain doom and into a better future, although every one of them is different. That is why every person on Earth has been allocated an amount of money.

> We need to change the stance, we as a global society have taken, on what is an acceptable level of human decency in all aspects of our lives

The entries can therefore be divided into two camps. One group of entries believed that everyone was equally responsible for causing the climate crisis, whereas another group put more blame on fossil fuel companies, older generations, and the government. This trend was reflected across both years of the prizes. However, both groups of entries were unified in their view that everyone is responsible for *tackling* climate change – and there was a considerable level of enthusiasm about how this could be achieved.

> To finish, if we are to save our only home, action must be taken with immediate effect. And while big changes must be made, micro alterations are also imperative. We are all in this environmental storm together.

> Only you can secure our future. You are responsible for protecting our world and the beauty that inhabits it. You are responsible for our future and our tomorrow.

 However, the NVivo analysis also revealed how agency was primarily exercised through consumer choice and changing individual consumption patterns rather than through political acts.

What types of solutions do young people offer to solve the climate crisis?

The most interesting insight that was revealed by the NVivo analysis was that young people primarily offered consumer solutions or changes in consumption patterns as a solution to the climate crisis:

> We need to take responsibility as consumers and instead support ethically minded businesses, as only then will companies and governments finally listen and make the necessary changes.

> Each person has a carbon footprint, a number based on the amount of carbon dioxide you release into the atmosphere. To reduce your carbon footprint, there are many simple things you can do.

> The three simple steps that I suggest are small adjustments to your lifestyle that are a brilliant way to start to combat climate change. Firstly, eat all the food that you buy. If you never eat it all, simply buy less to reduce unnecessary waste. Secondly, I would like to put forward the use of a search engine almost identical to google called Ecosia which plants a tree for roughly every 45 searches that you undertake. Thirdly, switch your house supplier to renewable energy. Get online, do it via ecosia!

> It's not only industry that has to scale back, but the lives of everyone with a large carbon footprint. A single person can make a large difference if the changes are echoed with many people across the world.

A few entries did suggest governmental action, but none of the entries indicated how young people could put pressure on government to take action. These were the minority and not reflective of most of the entries:

> Pushing for a democratised, communal energy system across the world is what we can do in the UK. The heat is on. We can forge a new chance by putting our government in the crucible.

> key to positive changes in the future is sustainable development, in which we address both the issues causing climate change and those fuelling poverty and inequality.

> we as a planet should aim for a global plan, such as the 'Green New Deal' and not downplay the emergence of this 'pandemic'.

None of the entries, including the 2020/21 entries who were asked to respond to theme 'A New Direction: Starting Small', indicated how young people could make changes at a local level through local government, joining activist groups or other political means, or how young people could put 'our government in the crucible', suggesting a lack of political literacy in terms of how to act as political agents.

<u>Do young people identify a relationship between poverty (or social inequality) and the climate crisis?</u>

Five of the chosen entries identified a relationship between poverty (or social inequality) and the climate crisis. These entries either acknowledged that changing consumption patterns was not a solution open to all or they outlined how natural disasters exacerbate existing poverty and throw more people into poverty:

> it is important to take a step back and understand another key issue facing our world today – poverty – and why it is irrefutably linked to the fight against climate change.

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Even if there were products out there, nobody is going to replace their house, car, appliances and shopping habits in the short space of time. Worse still, there are 689 million people living in absolute poverty, with a further 854 million living in informal settlements. These people do not have the funds, government support, or even property rights to make these changes.

Quality of life is decreasing around the world. Every day, more and more people are thrown into poverty and those who have been involved in natural disasters are at the threat of malnutrition and homelessness. This needs to be put to an end.

Four of the chosen entries outlined a relationship between non-economic forms of inequality and the climate crisis. In these entries, there was an emphasis on the effect of colonialism and how the climate crisis affects women:

A significant amount of agricultural and manufacturing industries that operate in the Global South rely on the labour of female workers, particularly the garment and textile factories in Bangladesh

Steak or beef is quite often marketed as a particularly masculine or 'strong' meat even though the consumer obtains it the same way: picking it up from the shelf. It is laughable and sexist to give meat a certain gendered quality.

Climate change's impacts will fall on the already- vulnerable countries. The emergence of locust's swarms throughout Africa and Asia having serious implications on many countries that's economies depends on agriculture

Since being liberated from British rule in 1963 Nigeria has played host to dictators, corrupt governments and most importantly rapacious oil companies. Shell is an integral part of the vortex of violence that is teeming in the Niger delta.

The solutions offered to these problems were more political in nature, but they did not express any sense of agency in bringing these changes about:

key to positive changes in the future is sustainable development, in which we address both the issues causing climate change and those fuelling poverty and inequality.

To solve this issue, more highly developed countries (such as the U.K. and USA) could donate some money to help finance this scheme in less developed, poor countries (such as Bangladesh and Kenya).

It is crucial that our environmentalism is inclusive and active in involving marginalised groups. Most importantly, we must act in solidarity with the communities on the frontlines of climate resilience. The groups most vulnerable to climate change are also doing the most to combat it, and they aren't waiting for another global agreement or emissions cap

The solutions were a call for what governments need to do rather than a call for what young people can do to put pressure on the government to enact this change.

What is the role of education in tackling climate change?

Another theme that was apparent across the majority of the entries was a sense of 'wilful ignorance' preventing people from acting on climate change. The causes of this perceived intentional ignorance were vague, but they primarily revolved around people being 'greedy', desiring 'comfort', or being 'self-centred'. One entry did suggest that it was a pursuit of profit that encouraged these traits, but most entries presented these traits as unavoidable facts:

> The difficulty for them to rally is immense, as humans can be wilfully ignorant to this matter because of comfort, greed, and incapability of bringing about change.

> But the type of ignorance that is deadly is the purposeful neglecting of reality

> *This is what I want in the future, an improved awareness of the changes we have to make. The first step on the path to saviour is through the communication to the public.*

> We must turn away from our self-centred mindsets and open our eyes to what is happening around us.

In a few of these entries, education was offered as a potential solution for this ignorance. However, the call for 'improved awareness' or 'education' never addressed why people were wilfully ignoring climate change, and the use of education as a solution to 'ignorance' was vague.

Do young people care about the environment because of its impact on animals, humans, or both?

An unexpected theme that the NVivo analysis brought out was that animals featured in many of the pieces. There was a widespread concern for animals and natural environments:

> Ruining climates, destroying habitats, and in some way killing and endangering the existence of many living organisms. Whether it be the growing number of deadly, wild forest fires, in Australia, that are destroying ecosystems and robbing many animals of their home

> Not only can these rising sea levels affect animals like polar bears and penguins and their habitats, but they can also hugely affect people living in coastal areas. It can also affect countries like Bangladesh and the Maldives

> deforestation destroys animal and plant habitats making them more likely to become endangered or extinct. This is a threat to our food chain, which then creates a chain reaction as the predator's population decreases and the prey's population increases

> The current biodiversity extinction rate is 'faster than dinosaurs', scientists say, and hundreds and thousands of times greater than the natural normal. We are in the midst of a sixth mass extinction

<u>Conclusion – Summary of Findings</u>

To summarise the results, the NVivo analysis revealed that young people used scientific evidence for climate change to communicate the urgency of addressing the climate crisis. Although the entries revealed that young people were divided on whether certain people or organisations were more responsible for causing climate change than others or whether we were all equally responsible for causing climate change, they were all unified in their belief that all of us are responsible for tackling climate change.

The entries did suggest that the reason why people ignore the scientific evidence for climate change and the subsequent need to act urgently is due to a 'wilful ignorance'. When accounting for this intentional ignorance or lack of care, the entries suggested that this widespread response was due to people having character flaws, such as 'greed' and 'self-centred mindsets'. However, the entries presented these characteristics as immutable facts about people and did not elaborate on why people might possess them. One entry did suggest that these characteristics were fostered by an economic system that values profit, but this entry was an anomaly to the rest of the entries.

The solutions that were offered by young people, especially in the 2020/21 prize cycle with its focus on local solutions, primarily revolved around consumer solutions and making changes in consumption patterns. Although a few entries did suggest the need for government action and broader political changes, these entries did not suggest ways that young people could take political action at a local level or put pressure on government to make these changes. Some of the entries did outline a relationship between climate change and social inequality, including poverty, economic inequality, and racial inequality. While these entries were well researched, they also lacked political solutions to these issues and any sense of agency to deal with these interlocking issues.

The main takeaway from the NVivo analysis is the lack of political literacy exhibited by the entrants, especially at a local level, when it came to offering solutions to climate change. The Orwell Youth Prize seeks to address this lack of political literacy by creating more resources around how to engage local government and local businesses, and put pressure on national government, and by encouraging more entries to consider how to enact their agency through political means.

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<u>Annex A – Word clouds</u>

<u>2020</u>

Full text of the entries

*Image 1: Most common single-words across all 2019/20 entries*
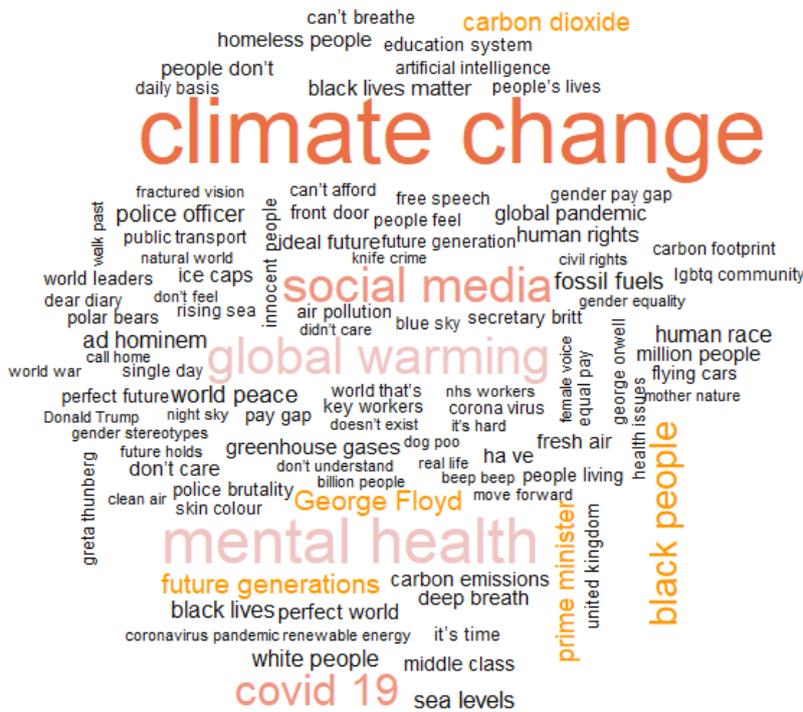
Image 2: Most common terms (two words) across all 2019/20 entries

2021

Policy change question: If you could make one positive change to society that would lead to the biggest increase in your happiness, what would it be and why?
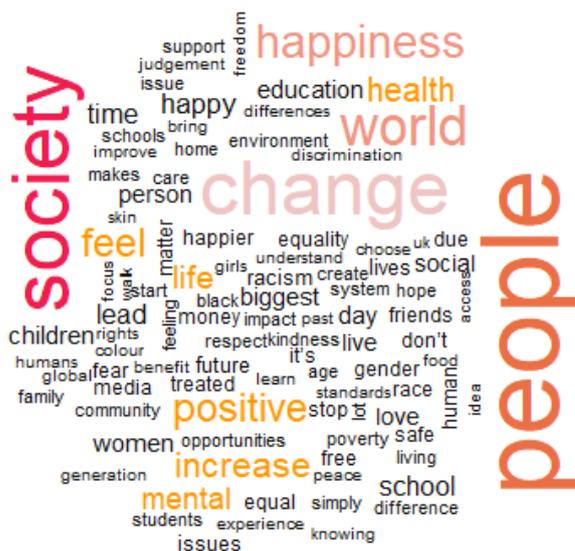
Image 3: Most common single words across the policy question

Image 4: Most common terms (two words) across the policy question

Full text of the entries
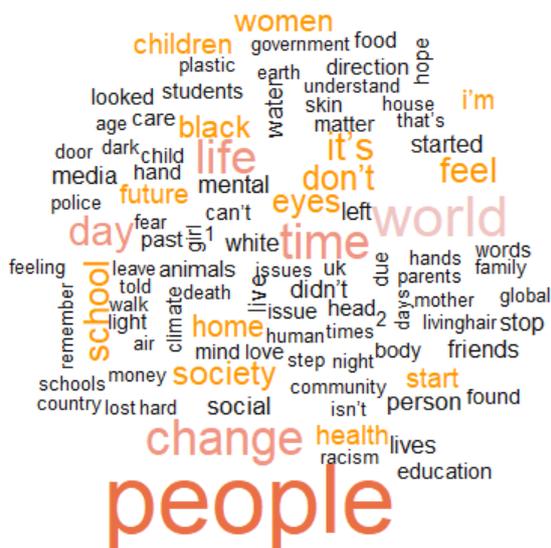
Image 5: Most common single-words across all 2020/21 entries

Image 6: Most common terms across all 2020/21 entries