

# 'CRISIS COPING'

## MARGINALISED YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVING & LEARNING EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19 IN IRELAND

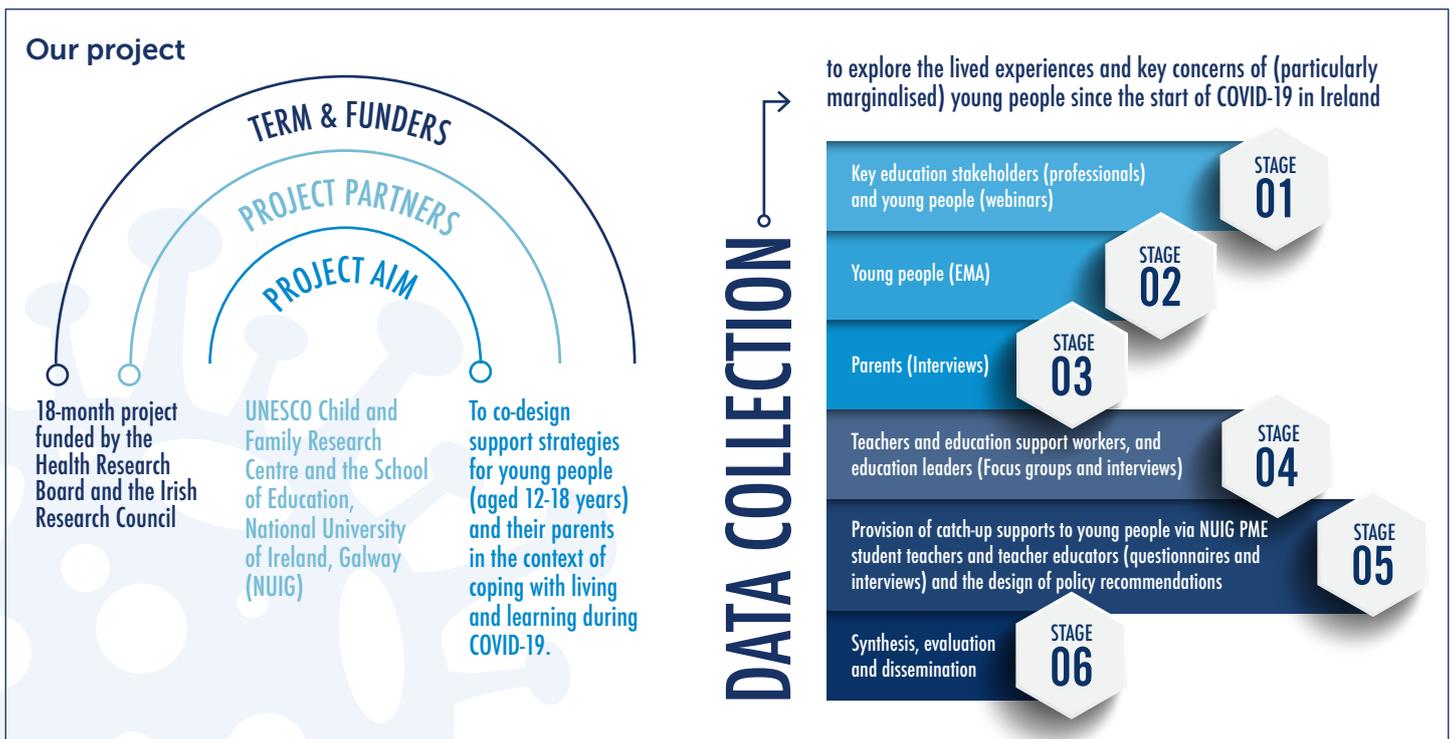
### SCHOOL LEADERS AND TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING COVID-19

While research is still emerging on the levels of 'learning loss' in the context of COVID-19, contributing factors include varying approaches by schools and teachers, difficulty maintaining motivation and engagement amongst students, unequal access to technology and internet, and factors in the home environment. Schools are important for individual and collective social and emotional recovery in post-disaster level events (Mutch, 2015). As such, the disruption to schooling during COVID-19 may have longer-term implications, both in terms of student re-engagement with schooling and also future possibilities including progression options (Darmody et al., 2020).

#### What we did in Stage 4 of our project

Stage 4 involved a mixture of individual interviews and focus groups with seven teachers and thirteen school leaders (or nominees) during the period August – October 2021. The interviews and focus groups were facilitated by research team members and research assistants. Participants reflected on their

experiences as teachers/school leaders during the pandemic; on their school response to the lockdowns and re-opening; challenges encountered; student engagement in online learning; and supports needed by students during re-opening. The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and analysed using a collaborative thematic analysis approach. Four themes were developed from the findings of the analysis.



## What we found in Stage 4 of our project

The initial lockdown was viewed as a novelty at first but, as it continued, teachers and school leaders experienced a steep learning curve and a heavy workload in trying to provide for remote schooling. By the time of the second lockdown, schools drew on experience as well as formal and informal feedback to inform their approaches. Pastoral care teams had clear systems in place to communicate with students in need of individual support. During the second lockdown, the expectations placed on teachers (by themselves and others) were managed more carefully to avoid previously experienced stress and burnout during the first lockdown. Collaboration, collegial support, and good communication were key factors in how well schools coped during the lockdowns and in the re-opening phases.

Regarding technology, broadband access, hardware availability, and digital literacy were the main barriers to student engagement during lockdowns. Schools used their own resources and funds from the Department of Education to provide devices and, where necessary, buy phone credit to enable students to engage. Digital literacy affected how well some students could engage in remote learning, despite their assumed familiarity with technology. Teachers' use of educational technology developed over the course of the pandemic. Buddy systems and informal mentoring among staff members ensured that those with expertise could support colleagues. Schools made use of the autumn 2020 period to provide Continuing Professional Development and develop teaching plans to better prepare for the second lockdown.

For schools, good relationships, resource availability, and the capacity to take practical action were key to addressing lockdown related challenges. While most students found lockdown difficult due to the isolation and loss of social interaction, there were particular groups of students and families who found it more difficult to engage in remote learning. These included students with SEN, students with mental health difficulties, students from the Traveller community, students from migrant backgrounds, and students with challenging home circumstances, such as poverty or domestic violence. Schools drew on prior knowledge of students and their families, on Home School Community Liaison teams, and on links with community-based agencies and services to identify students in need of support. However, non-engaging students did not always come from marginalised or at-risk groups, but sometimes were found in professional families. Non-engagement in these cases was due to parents' work commitments or from a conscious decision to opt out and catch up later.

Schools drew on their own resources and existing relationships with external services to provide more intensive support to students in need. Barriers to support provision included the slow pace of response and poor communication at a systemic level as well as the inflexibility around how schools could use resources and the long waiting lists of some services.

Participants reflected on potential lasting impacts of the pandemic such as academic loss, but also the socio-emotional dimension, with suggestions that the lack of social interaction and loss of extra-curricular activities had negatively impacted students' wellbeing. Students in exam years and those who had transitioned from primary to post-primary school during the pandemic were seen to be at particular risk. The uncertainty around exams combined with perceived poor communication from the State Examinations Commission and the Department of Education were seen to add to the strain for exam cycle students.

Schools encountered issues in deciding where to target support as the concept of marginalisation had become more ambiguous during the pandemic. New forms of marginalisation had

emerged, and schools found that they needed to identify need on an individual case-by-case basis rather than by membership of some group or category.

Some schools' experiences during the pandemic had the potential for a positive legacy. Teachers and school leaders hoped that the enhanced digital skills and literacy would become embedded in practice in a sustainable way. Changes made in response to the pandemic had shown that alternative formats of teaching and learning were possible, as were alternative formats of assessment. Participants expressed hope that these changes could be the catalyst for working towards more lasting reforms in the future. For teachers, experiences of collegiality and resilience during the pandemic and the recognition of the importance of their role could have a positive effect on professional identity.

## What we recommend

Consideration should be given to offering universal supports as well as targeted supports during crisis response in order to ensure support for families/individuals in need who fall outside traditional criteria for marginalisation.

Ongoing curriculum and assessment reforms should be informed by student and teacher voice and should take into account experiences during pandemic.

'Digital champion' school clusters should be developed where schools/subject teams with highly effective practices share knowledge and expertise and act as mentors to schools still developing effective practice.

Communities of practice should be established for education practitioners to consolidate and extend positive practice during pandemic around collegiality and professionalism.

## Our call for action to policy makers, educators and support service providers

Waiting lists for support services (e.g., CAMHS, NEPS) should be addressed as a matter of priority.

Inter-agency links with school as focal point should be further developed and/or formalised to ensure rapid identification of need (particularly intersectional needs) and tailoring of support for students and families in school community.

There should be school-level autonomy and flexibility around how resources and funds are used, with oversight and monitoring retained to inform future resourcing priorities. Panels of qualified personnel should be maintained regionally to enable support posts to be filled rapidly and to reduce admin burden at school-level.

## For more information on the project contact

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## References

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