'KEEPING WHAT WORKED BEST':
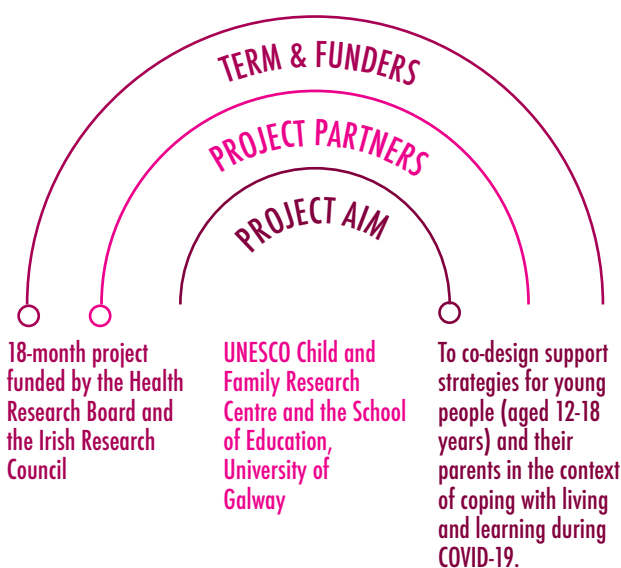# LIVING AND LEARNING BEYOND COVID-19

Summary of Key Findings and Associated Actions from the Crisis Coping Project

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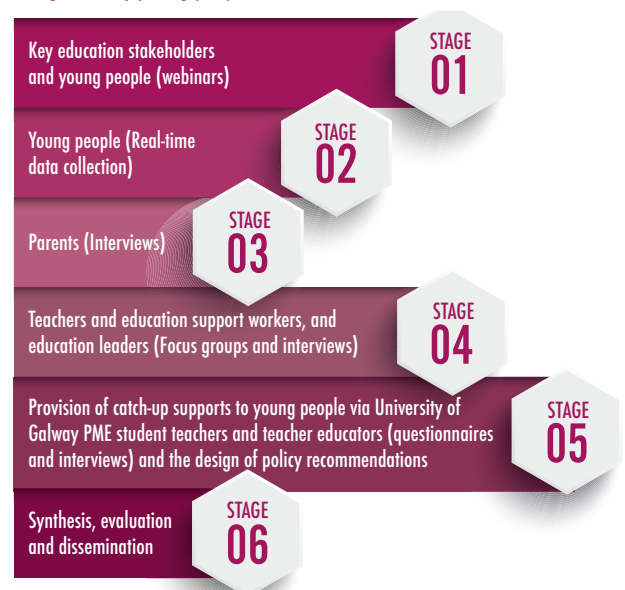September 2022

What the Project Involved

The aim of this research was to explore how post-primary school students coped with the schooling-at-home and return-to-school phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. We used a range of different methods to listen deeply to young people across the country, and to the people who support them at home, at school and in the community. We then used student insights to develop catch-up supports that were delivered in a number of second-level schools to help students re-engage with education during the return to physical school. The graphic below illustrates the various stages involved in the *Crisis Coping: Living and Learning through COVID-19 project*.

Our project

TERM & FUNDERS

PROJECT PARTNERS

PROJECT AIM

18-month project funded by the Health Research Board and the Irish Research Council

UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and the School of Education, University of Galway

To co-design support strategies for young people (aged 12-18 years) and their parents in the context of coping with living and learning during COVID-19.

DATA COLLECTION

to explore the lived experiences and key concerns of (particularly marginalised) young people since the start of COVID-19 in Ireland

Key education stakeholders and young people (webinars) — STAGE 01

Young people (Real-time data collection) — STAGE 02

Parents (Interviews) — STAGE 03

Teachers and education support workers, and education leaders (Focus groups and interviews) — STAGE 04

Provision of catch-up supports to young people via University of Galway PME student teachers and teacher educators (questionnaires and interviews) and the design of policy recommendations — STAGE 05

Synthesis, evaluation and dissemination — STAGE 06

A Summary of Key Findings and Calls to Action

This document summarises the key findings from the project and outlines the calls to action that arose from our research. These findings are grouped into questions that we believe are relevant to students, educators and policy-makers both now and as we start to move beyond the pandemic.

We know that you will have lots of ideas of your own, and this is why we have included some space for jotting down notes and suggestions after you have reflected on our findings. We look forward to discussing these with you.

1. What can be done to support the mental health and wellbeing of students?

Quotes		Your Ideas
"Emotional support should be provided because mental health is more important than schoolwork. If we are struggling mentally, we are less likely to do as well in school" (Alex, young person). "I think that if a student is to thrive in school they must be provided with teachers who genuinely care about their education and them as a person" (Dara, young person). "I think, anything that can happen at lunchtime, anything that can happen after school, that would give students a safe space to be, or a place where they can interact or where they can socialise, or the one good adult bit" (Martina, educator).	**Findings:** • The young people in our research struggled with the disruptions and losses of the pandemic but also showed resilience and positive growth. Whilst the return to in-person schooling was initially challenging, most readjusted successfully. • However, some students struggled more than others, particularly students with pre-existing mental health difficulties and students in exam years. They found the transition back to physical school challenging. For example, compared to other students, some of these students showed higher levels of negative mood, felt like they had lower levels of coping and social support, and displayed lower levels of academic interest. • Young people's levels of educational engagement and school belonging before the pandemic also influenced how they readjusted during the transition period. • The young people in our research viewed mental health and wellbeing as a critical aspect of school. • Feeling connected to peers was a core element of the young people's lives. When schools were closed, they struggled with feeling socially isolated and worried that their friendships would suffer. Conflict with peers was a significant stressor in the daily lives of the young people in our real-time data collection study. • Stress and anxiety connected to exams (both State and in-school) were key concerns for the young people. • They called for an increased emphasis on mental health and wellbeing in schools, more positive relationships with teachers, and greater teacher awareness of their stress levels and of the impacts of stress on their engagement with learning. They suggested that educators should make more deliberate efforts to prevent student stress through a reduced or more balanced workload, and more meaningful and regularly-scheduled mental health-focused classes and check-ins. **Calls to action:** • Students' views on the potential reform of assessment structures and on the provision for mental health support in schools should be gathered. • Policy-makers should take the impact of high-stakes exams on student wellbeing into account in any future reform of assessments. • Teachers and schools should build rapport with their students and regularly 'check in' to ensure they are feeling safe, connected, and settled in their school environments. • More meaningful social opportunities in school should be facilitated (e.g., through more collaborative learning in class, opportunities for involvement in social action projects, and organised clubs during breaktimes). • Students may benefit from more discussion of and/or support with peer conflict resolution in their wellbeing classes. • Resourcing of mental health supports at community-level and access at school-level should be prioritised.	

2. How can student engagement in learning be further supported and strengthened?

Quotes		Your Ideas
"More interactive classes. I have some classes where I'm just sitting in the room listening to the teacher talk for 120 minutes with only a short 5 minute break in between. I often find it very hard to concentrate in classes like these" (Naoise, young person). "I think teachers should be more involved with their students and not just throw work at them because it's on a course" (Jordan, young person). "Covid came at a good time for our digital technology journey … skills came on massively by students and teachers. What they learned in a few weeks was absolutely amazing" (Dylan, educator).	**Findings:** • Factors supporting student engagement in general during the closure period included: providing basic ICT training to students; using varied teaching and learning approaches based on student need and preferences; and ensuring regular supportive interaction and communication between teachers and students. • Planned and consistent monitoring and communication was important for supporting the engagement of marginalised[1] students whilst school buildings were closed. **Calls to action:** • Varied teaching and learning approaches should be used to increase student interest (e.g., more collaborative learning). • Technology that worked well to support student learning during the pandemic should continue to be used. • Learning resources could be housed on virtual learning platforms to facilitate self-paced, independent learning for students. • Training should be provided to increase the digital literacy of students and school staff. • Positive student-teacher relationships and communication need to be prioritised.	

3. How can the teacher collaboration of the school closure period be built upon?

Quotes		Your Ideas
"I really enjoyed the fact that I didn't have to travel to do my CPD. I could do it from my house. …CPD has been fantastic online. And having these groups, where you'd meet at the PDST … where people would share ideas, I suppose, a community of practice really" (Rachael, educator). "I think as a staff people became much more aware of others and their personal circumstances, and their needs, and the need to look out for one another. We also had an online teaching and learning group of teachers, so you could post up if you had an issue … There was that sense of exposing our vulnerabilities around it, but there not being any shame around doing that, and being encouraged by each other. So that was really nice" (Martina, educator).	**Findings:** • In many schools, the closure period was marked by teachers being more willing to share expertise and resources, and more open about their challenges and difficulties, than during pre-COVID times. • Buddy systems and informal mentoring were very effective for the development of digital literacy and skills. • Reciprocal relationships emerged between newly qualified teachers and more experienced teachers, where teachers with stronger digital skills and those with more pedagogical expertise shared their knowledge. • Teachers appreciated having access to pedagogical support and other CPD through informal and formal online networks and events. **Calls to action:** • Schools should make time to deeply reflect on what worked well during the school closure period to ensure that new school capacity and educator skills are not lost. • Digital champion clusters could be established for schools to develop and model best practice in technology for learning. • The development of online communities of practice could ensure that the positive legacy of collaboration and support is retained and built upon.	

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1   In relation to the term 'marginalised', from the inception of the project, the project team recognised its problematic nature, and it and related terminology were the subject of many discussions. Whilst recognising the term's imperfect and problematic nature, by 'marginalised', we mean, *inter alia*, young people from lower socio-economic groups, young people from minority ethnic backgrounds (both those of immigrant 'origin' and the Traveller community), LGBTQI+ young people, young people with additional educational needs, young people with mental health needs, young people attending 'alternative' education provision, homeless young people, young people living in emergency accommodation or in Direct Provision, and young people living in care, for example.

4. How can meaningful connections be fostered between schools and communities?

Quotes		Your Ideas
"I think the whole communication process behind it went well and I think by being committed to communicating with people then they were able to. They knew that we were interested and they kept their children on board" (Luke, educator). "Between our outreach worker, our year heads and our management here, like, the phone would always be ringing, and you'd be talking to families … We'd often get our school liaison officer - she was very good - she'd go as far as the door and give a wave and a chat and a link in and see just how bad things were" (Stephanie, educator).	**Findings:** • The pandemic highlighted how schools perform many vital functions beyond academics (e.g., safety; food security; social connectedness through peer relationships). Despite a continually evolving situation, many schools found creative ways of continuing these functions during the school closure period, especially for marginalised families. • Support for students and their families does not just require practical and material support but also emotional support based on positive relationships and communication. **Calls to action:** • Schools can act as a focal point for formal and informal support networks for young people and their families, especially those from marginalised groups. Pastoral care teams may be particularly important here. • Immediate and continuing targeted supports are needed for young people who have been most affected by the disruptions to education. These supports should be needs-based, and organised and delivered locally by school staff who know the students well. • Open communication channels are needed among school leaders, teachers, parents, community and government agencies. • Planning for the continuation of formal support services in crisis contexts should be prioritised.	

5. How can catch-up resources be used optimally?

Quotes		Your Ideas
"The biggest struggle I see, we have the hours, [but] I think the personnel will be an awful issue. I can't see where we're going to get teachers in the subjects we want for targeting these students who are behind after lockdown" (Dylan, educator). "The worries I have about it [CLASS] is it's only for one year and that gap isn't going to be addressed in one year" (Conor, educator). "We wouldn't have a huge amount of students from marginalised backgrounds but I think because of the pandemic a lot of students did find themselves marginalised … and particularly their experience of learning over that period" (Aoibhe, educator).	**Findings:** • CLASS [2] funding was welcomed but was viewed as being too short-term and restrictive because it facilitated targeted support only rather than both targeted and universal support. • Schools experienced serious difficulties with teacher recruitment for the implementation of CLASS supports in addition to basic teacher cover (for COVID-related absences). **Calls to action:** • CLASS funding should be continued to resource multi-pronged, medium- to long-term supports for students most affected by educational disruptions - not just traditionally marginalised students. • Schools should have the autonomy to decide when, where and how the additional funding should be used. They should have the scope to adopt a needs-based model that is not limited by traditional definitions of marginalisation or disadvantage. • Issues of teacher supply in Ireland need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.	

2   The CLASS scheme (COVID Learning and Support Scheme) was put in place by the Department of Education to help schools mitigate the adverse impacts of COVID-19 school closures on student learning loss and wellbeing in the 2021-2022 academic year.