



'CRISIS COPING'

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



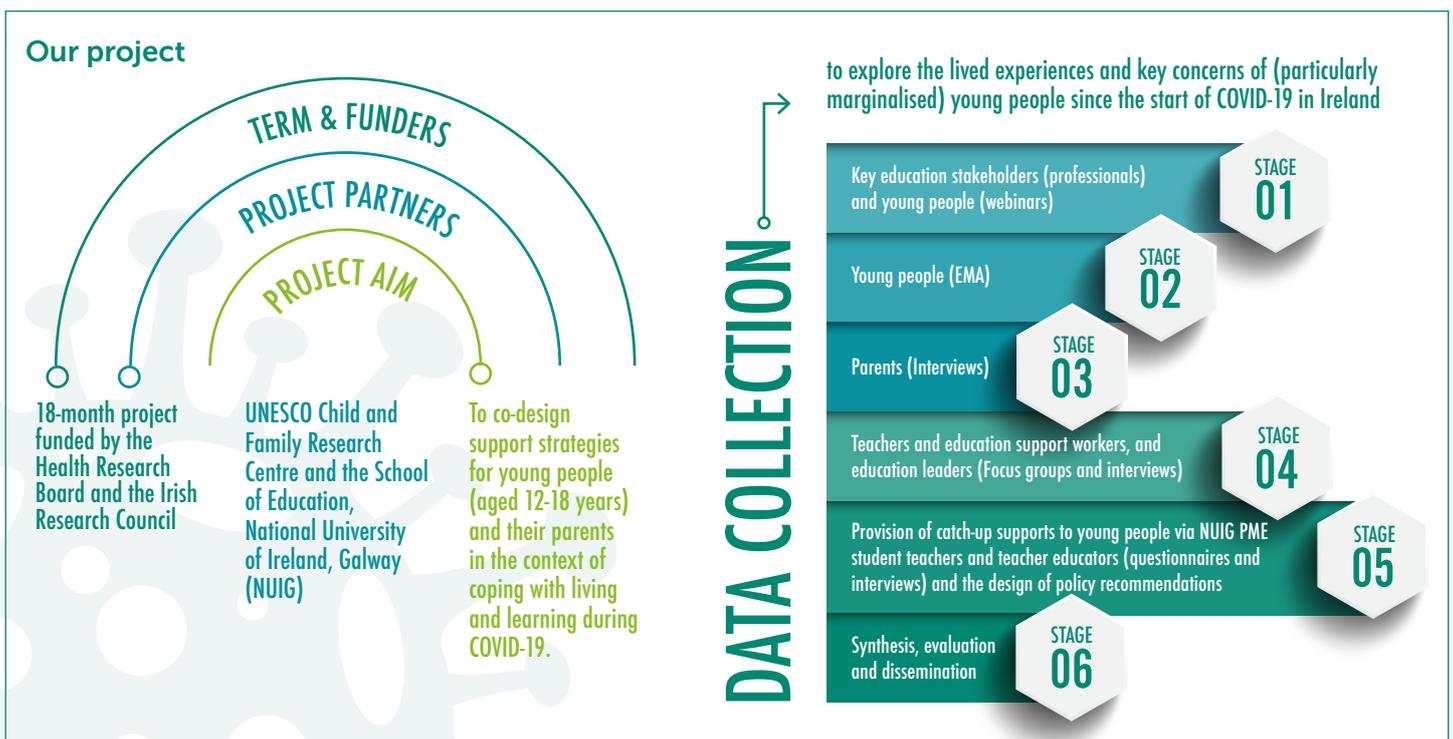
PROVIDING SUPPORTS TO YOUNG PEOPLE AS THEY TRANSITION BACK TO IN-PERSON EDUCATION

With the COVID-19-related disruptions to education in 2020-2021, all young people encountered myriad learning and social challenges, but students from marginalised communities were particularly impacted (Sahlberg, 2021). It is unsurprising then, that the reopening of school buildings, recognised as sites of safety and support in addition to learning, was universally welcomed. However, the implicit assumption that students would transition easily back to in-person schooling, despite the preceding disruption and unfamiliarity with social distancing requirements in schools (Schwartz et al., 2021), did not receive much research attention, and there is a need to examine necessary supports.

What we did in stage 5 of our project

Stage 5 followed on from an exploration of the experiences of young people during the acute phases of the pandemic (see Project Briefs 1, 3 and 4), and of the daily coping of young people during the initial transition back to in-person schooling (see Project Brief 2). This project stage also involved

the investigation, design, implementation and evaluation of school-based interventions aiming to support (particularly marginalised) students during the 2021-2022 academic year. The development of interventions was guided by the support preferences of students in each school context (N = 12), ascertained through online student surveys (N = 269), and School Principal interviews (N = 12). Over a period of six months,



160 students from geographically dispersed schools in the Republic of Ireland participated in the interventions. Broadly, the interventions aimed to increase social connectedness among, or provide academic catch-up support to, the participating students. The school-based research and interventions were facilitated and evaluated by a team of student teachers, under the supervision of the Crisis Coping research team.

What we found in Stage 5 of our project

Most of the young people reported that they had strongly disliked online schooling, and many (43%) were either unsure or unhappy about their academic progress, in spite of the intense work that had taken place in schools, with schools moving from “scrambling in the dark” to delivering effective online pedagogy by the second lockdown. The Principals described how supporting (especially marginalised) students, through the development of effective home-school contact systems, had been a particular priority, but concerns remained about certain students being “lost in the system”. Upon the return to in-person schooling, schools had focused on creating a safe and happy environment for all students as a prerequisite to academic re-engagement. In general, the young people reported that they were “relieved” and “happy” to be back because they found in-person schooling easier, and could interact socially with their peers again. While most were now coping well, some were continuing to experience concentration and motivation difficulties, social awkwardness, discomfort with wearing masks, workload concerns, and feelings of disconnection from school.

Regarding supports, the young people requested time and opportunities for social interaction, recaps of content covered during online schooling, and to a lesser extent, mental health support. The Principals emphasised the need for multi-pronged supports, particularly mental health supports, for all students into the future. Welcoming the funding support from the Department of Education under the COVID-19 Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS), they felt it was too short-term and that serious challenges recruiting teachers presented difficulties in providing student support. They also emphasised the importance of “not losing what we’ve gained”; that is, retaining innovative teaching and learning practices developed during the pandemic.

In terms of the interventions, the response of participating students was ‘mixed positive’. Certain students enjoyed certain aspects, particularly socialising with peers, and some found aspects beneficial. However, it was difficult to draw conclusions as to the interventions’ effectiveness because participant response rates were very low. An important insight was that school-based interventions are optimally facilitated by individuals who are embedded within, and possess high status, in the particular educational context.

What we recommend

Despite students being back in in-person school for over a year, ongoing attention to the psychosocial and academic catch-up needs of all (but particularly marginalised) students is necessary.

Schools may wish to consider how to embed social opportunities to facilitate the strengthening of student peer relationships, an important protective factor for resilience and wellbeing.

Whole-school efforts to support students in rebuilding a sense of belonging in school is needed.

Students would also benefit from academic catch-up supports, most especially in subjects such as English, Irish and Mathematics.

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

Schools should reflect on what worked well during COVID closures to ensure that both increased systemic capacity and new educator skills are not lost.

Long-term funding is needed for the provision of school-based psychosocial and academic catch-up supports, particularly for students with histories of academic disengagement.

Issues of teacher supply in Ireland urgently need to be considered to allow for the delivery of supports.

Finally, targeted support would be beneficial for the subgroup of students who are most at risk of long-term psychological impairment.

For more information on the project contact

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or visit www.nuigalway.ie/cfrc/projects/currentprojects/crisiscopinglivingandlearningthroughcovid-19/



References

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Any citation of this brief should use the following reference: Flynn, N., Keane, E., Furey, E., Kealy, C., Dolan, P., Flynn, P., Forkan, C., MacRuairc, G., Murray, C. (2022). Providing catch-up supports to young people as they transition back to in-person

education (Policy Brief 5). *Crisis Coping: Marginalised Young People’s Living and Learning Experiences during COVID-19 in Ireland Project Brief Series*. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and School of Education, NUI Galway.

ISBN: 978-1-905861-99-6

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