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# 'CRISIS COPING'

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

### THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUNG PEOPLE

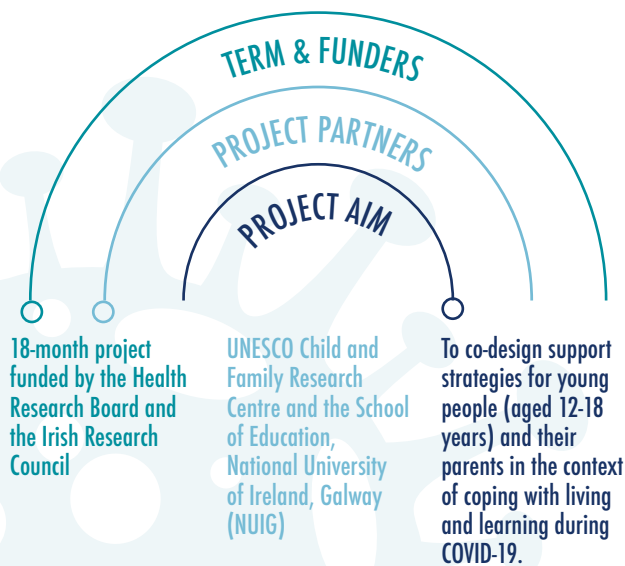
Since March 2020, young people internationally have experienced unprecedented disruption to their education, with the closure of school buildings and the overnight move to online learning to stem the spread of COVID-19. The emerging research internationally points to the significant impact academically, socially, developmentally, and in relation to mental health, for children and young people.

Research on previous school closures in response to epidemics highlights the social and educational costs (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013), with the severity and longevity of the negative effects increasing for students who were already experiencing marginalisation or disengagement (Cullinane, 2020). In terms of COVID-19, in line with the international governmental response to move to remote learning (Dreesen et al., 2020) during periods of closures, research internationally suggests that young people's experiences of 'schooling at home' (Flynn et al., 2020) differed depending on their socio-demographic positioning. Research has pointed to significant 'learning loss' for marginalised groups (Engzell et al., 2021; Flynn et al., 2021), socio-emotional and developmental impacts of isolation (Symonds et al., 2020), as well as the loss of food security (Darmody et al., 2020) and a safe space, which schools provide for many children (Barnardos, 2020).

### What we did in Stage 1 of our project

The first project stage explored young people's life and learning experiences over the first year of the pandemic. Five focus group webinars were conducted with a total of 13 young people (the majority of whom were from backgrounds considered 'marginalised', including minority ethnic students, recruited through schools, alternative educational providers, and Foróige, a youth organisation) and 15 professionals (including school principals, youth, social and welfare services, educational psychologists, guidance counsellors, and alternative education providers) in Spring 2021. The webinars were recorded and transcribed verbatim. A number of constructivist grounded theory coding procedures were employed during analysis, including line-by-line and focused coding, and categorising.

### Our project



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



## What we found in our first project stage

The young people reported that life had been boring and lonely over the past year, and they were greatly missing friends and extended family. They emphasised having missed out on so many normal school and life activities and expressed great uncertainty about the future. They were aware of the 'blaming young people' discourse, and while they felt that this view was justified to an extent as many were not adhering to restrictions, they nonetheless felt that not all young people should be blamed. Positives included more time with family, less pressure about having to be 'constantly productive' and having time to 'check in' on oneself.

The young people really disliked online schooling. While the 'live' classes which characterised the second period of school buildings' closures were seen as preferable to being sent work to complete, they emphasised that staying motivated was very difficult compared to being in school. They highlighted being easily distracted at home, self-conscious on camera, and socially isolated with no opportunities to connect with their peers informally. While some criticised schools not checking in on how they were, the professionals' group emphasised being 'in survival mode', with staff working frantically behind the scenes delivering food parcels, devices, and learning materials, and phoning students to try to keep them engaged.

While the young people expressed delight at being back to in-person school from September-December 2020, they struggled to adjust to social distancing requirements which meant that they remained restricted socially. They emphasised being behind academically and yet noted the teaching pace had sped up upon return to ensure course coverage. The young people and professionals were stressed by the ongoing uncertainty and lack of communication from the Department of Education (DE) about state examinations. The professionals perceived a significant lack of support and leadership from the DE, feeling that schools had been left to their own devices. They also believed that the pandemic had a) forced a conversation about the functions of schools in society, with recognition of their 'much more than academic' role, and b) exposed longstanding problems of under-resourcing re. staff, buildings and mental health supports.

the emerging international and national research about the experiences of young people during the pandemic and their needs into the future.

Time, staffing and financial resources need to be provided to schools to make available a) space and time to engage in 'deep listening' with young people, b) adequate mental health counselling, and c) appropriately tailored academic 'catch-up' supports.

The 'Crisis Coping' ongoing stages of data collection with young people and other stakeholders will inform our understanding about how best to apply these recommendations.

## For more information on the project contact

crisiscoping@nuigalway.ie  
or visit [www.nuigalway.ie/cfrc/projects/currentprojects/crisiscopinglivingandlearningthroughcovid-19/](http://www.nuigalway.ie/cfrc/projects/currentprojects/crisiscopinglivingandlearningthroughcovid-19/)



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## What we recommend

The extent to which the young people reported feeling isolated, lonely and negatively affected on a mental health level, as well as being behind academically, is concerning. Both the young people and professionals emphasised the need for targeted immediate and long-term supports for young people.

Broadly, however, there was a sense from participants that a 'slowing down' and 'checking in' approach in schools was necessary before necessary targeted academic 'catch-up' supports could be effectively provided. In this regard, policymakers, researchers and educationalists need to engage in some 'deep listening' to young people, educators and related professionals about their experiences over the last year (and into the future) and to co-design meaningful academic and other supports. As a priority, both groups called for access for all young people to mental health counselling in schools.

Policymakers also need to take the opportunity afforded by the pandemic to engage in radical education reform to change longstanding problematic aspects of educational provision, particularly in relation to supporting young people from marginalised communities.

## Our call for action to policymakers and educators

Education policymakers need to engage with and act upon

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