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'CRISIS COPING'

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

THE COPING OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE SCHOOL REOPENING PHASE OF COVID-19

The impacts of the pandemic on young people's wellbeing and mental health vary depending on their individual circumstances (Peek et al., 2018). However, we know that young people from marginalised communities may be more vulnerable due to pre-existing challenges (Mills et al., 2016).

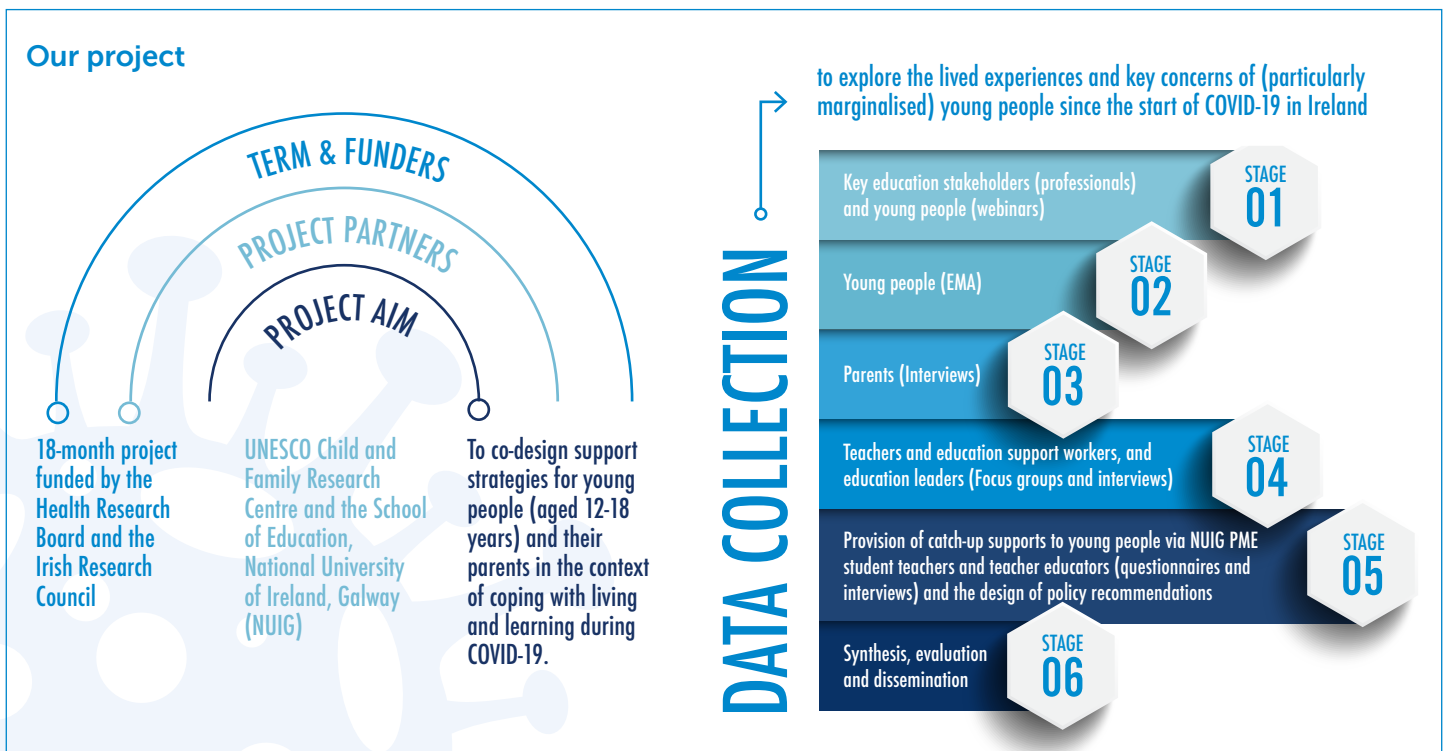
Schools will play a unique and vital role in helping young people recover from the crisis because they provide opportunities for social connection and support. School also helps to restore daily routines (Zeng & Silverstein, 2011), which is important for emotional and psychological recovery (Le Brocque et al., 2017). However, students from marginalised groups are less likely to return to school, because they tended to have lower engagement in online schooling, and also because they are more likely to have experienced negative economic and health impacts as a result of the pandemic (UNESCO, 2021).

experiences over the previous year (see Brief No 1), the second stage looked at how young people were coping with the physical return to school. We wanted to understand what coping strategies and supports were helpful for them during this period in order to design interventions to support young people who are struggling with the return to school.

We collected real-time data from young people using a research method called 'ecological momentary assessment' (EMA). This method uses mini surveys sent to participants' mobile phones to find out how they are feeling and how they are dealing with the events of the day. The surveys are sent at random times during the day so that the young people reflect on their feelings there and then instead of thinking back over them later. This is because people look at things differently with hindsight.

What we did in Stage 2 of our project

Following on from the first project stage which explored the views of young people and professionals on life and learning



Ninety-six young people from both marginalised and non-marginalised backgrounds took part in the EMA, and we asked them and their parent/guardian to fill out a questionnaire at the start of the study. This gave us a 'baseline' or a sense of their general wellbeing and mental health before our EMA. Surveys were then sent four times a day for a week. We used a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions that examined the daily mood of young people, how they were coping with stressful events, what support they were receiving, and how they felt about re-engaging in school.

What we found in Stage 2 of our project

Overall, the young people were relatively positive about their wellbeing. They described more positive than negative moods and events during the week of the EMA study. Young people were more likely to describe their mood as positive if they had more family support and if they had a higher level of wellbeing in the baseline questionnaire.

Many of the positive moods stemmed from events that involved social interaction, for example seeing friends, taking part in sports and activities, time with family, and being at school. There was a strong theme of the young people welcoming the return to 'normality' and the routines and environments they had missed during lockdown.

In coping with stressful events, young people were more likely to try distracting themselves from the problem or avoiding thinking about it instead of looking for help or ways to solve it. This was especially true for young people who had identified mental health problems and those who were receiving mental health support at the time of the EMA.

We also looked at young people's perceptions of coping over the week of the EMA. In general, young people with higher levels of family support felt that they had coped better with any problems that came up during the week. Young people receiving mental health support at the time of the study and students in the final two years of secondary school however saw themselves as having lower levels of coping during the study week.

At the end of the EMA, we asked the young people what they felt they needed to help them adapt to being back in school. The most common request was an increased emphasis on wellbeing and mental health in school. Young people wanted positive relationships with their teachers, and they felt that teachers needed to be more aware of students' stress levels. They wanted more opportunities for social interaction to help them feel connected with their classmates and peers. They also suggested that academic catch-up would be helpful and that there should be less pressure around exams and assessments.

The young people viewed wellbeing as a critical aspect of school, saying that this was necessary to help them engage in education. They felt there needed to be changes at the individual and systemic levels to better support their wellbeing. Specifically, teachers and school leaders need to develop greater awareness of student stress. They should try to reduce stress through a reduced or more balanced academic workload and regular mental health-focused classes and check-ins.

A final recommendation was for professionally informed mental health support organised and delivered by mental health professionals such as counsellors/psychologists who would ideally be situated within the school.

Our call for action to policymakers and educators

Student wellbeing should be seen as an essential ingredient in academic engagement. Resources should be made available to schools for interventions aimed at supporting student wellbeing at a whole-school level. Schools should have autonomy in deciding how to prioritise these resources based on the immediate needs of students.

There is a need for targeted individual support for young people experiencing mental health challenges or experiencing high levels of stress around final examinations in school. Schools are ideally placed to identify students in need of this support. Links should be made more readily accessible between schools and professionals who can offer this support. Where possible, mental health professionals should be assigned to individual schools or across a number of schools in a region.

At a systemic level, the high level of stress caused by current assessment structures needs to be addressed. Policymakers should gather students' views on reforms to assessment and should take into account the impact of high-stakes summative assessment on student wellbeing.

For more information on the project contact

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



What we recommend

Students who were receiving mental health support at the time of the study or who were in the final years of secondary school reported lower levels of coping. This suggests that these cohorts of students may need to be considered for additional targeted support.

Perceived support had a positive impact on coping. This is in line with the large body of research that shows how feeling supported helps to protect people's mental health and wellbeing. Interventions aimed at increasing young people's wellbeing should help them to learn how to recognise and access sources of support both from their informal networks (e.g. family, friends) and formal networks (e.g. school, community and youth groups).

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