United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNESCO Chair in Children, Youth and Civic Engagement Ireland
CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTRE

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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'CRISIS COPING'

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

PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR CHILDREN'S LIVING AND LEARNING DURING COVID-19

Parents' capacity to support the needs of their adolescent children can vary due to financial pressures, emotional issues, developmental changes in the young person, and behavioural issues (Frydenberg, 2014). In the context of COVID-19, living in lockdown and 'schooling at home' (Flynn et al., 2020) intensified many of these stressors.

Significant concerns were voiced about unequal access to remote learning during the pandemic (Dreesen et al., 2020) due to lack of devices, poor quality broadband, or technological skill levels (Symonds et al., 2020). Families from marginalised communities were far less likely to have adequate access to necessary technology or to be able to provide the necessary level of educational support to their children in terms of direct supports and appropriate study spaces (Barnardos, 2020).

Disaster level events can be traumatic for many adolescents, often resulting in negative psychological impact long after normality resumes (Banks & Weems, 2014). Whereas the importance of social support during a crisis has been well established (Cutrona, 2000), its core function as part of managing daily life beyond the immediate context of a crisis may sometimes be overlooked. For parents caring for adolescent children, the importance of having practical and emotional support will be key to coping with the lasting impact of the pandemic (Dolan et al., 2020).

What we did in Stage 3 of our project

Stage 3 involved individual online interviews with seventeen parents, all of whom had at least one child participating in the second stage of the project (see Project Brief No 2). The interviews were carried out in April and May 2021. Parents described how the past 14/15 months had been for their families and discussed their perceptions of their child(ren)'s experiences during the pandemic, focusing in particular on education. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a collaborative thematic analysis approach. Five themes were developed from the findings of the analysis.

Our project

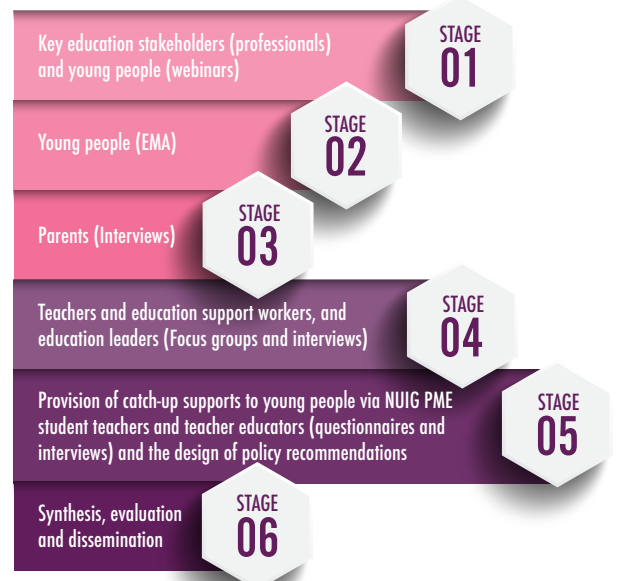TERM & FUNDERS

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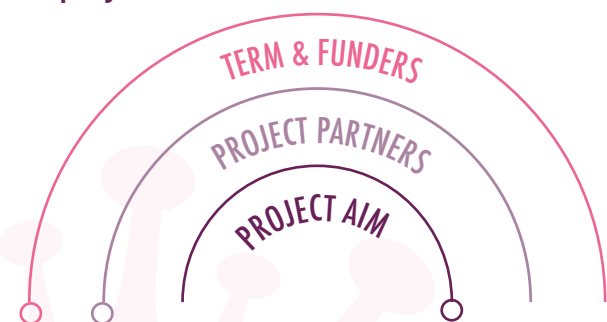
18-month project funded by the Health Research Board and the Irish Research Council

UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and the School of Education, National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG)

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.

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

DATA COLLECTION

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

Young people (EMA) — 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 NUIG PME student teachers and teacher educators (questionnaires and interviews) and the design of policy recommendations — STAGE 05

Synthesis, evaluation and dissemination — STAGE 06

NUI Galway OÉ Gaillimh

Institute for Lifecourse and Society

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What we found in Stage 3 of our project

The first lockdown initially had some positive effects on many of the families, with parents enjoying the 'slowing down' and the chance to spend time together. However, as the novelty of the lockdown wore off, parents became conscious of young people missing life outside the home and losing motivation to engage in online schooling. The availability of support networks influenced how well parents themselves coped with lockdown. Informal support networks of family and friends helped some parents and young people to maintain a positive attitude. However, the absence of informal support networks and the inability to access formal support services due to COVID-19 restrictions fed into the isolation of other families, particularly when they had already been experiencing challenges prior to lockdown.

Experiences of schooling at home during the lockdowns were not uniform, with parents describing examples of provision ranging on a spectrum from excellent to poor, even between teachers within the same school. Many parents expressed concern at learning loss, particularly for children transitioning from primary to secondary school during the pandemic.

Missing the social interaction of school was the primary concern for the young people themselves. Live contact time with teachers and classmates was important for maintaining students' motivation. While some young people found it difficult to engage in online schooling, others adapted relatively easily. Indeed, for young people who had found aspects of face-to-face school challenging, there were benefits to the experience of learning differently and being allowed to demonstrate learning in alternative formats.

A number of parents observed that the role played by technology in facilitating education and social interaction helped them to understand more about how their children used technology. This caused them to re-evaluate family rules and boundaries around screen time, social media, and online gaming. Referring to young people's digital literacy, it was suggested that it was taken for granted that young people had the knowledge and skills to use technology for education, despite this not always being the case.

Parents felt that the lockdowns and the re-opening periods tested their children's reserves of resilience but that, in general, the young people coped well with these challenges. There was a sense that the pandemic was a learning period for parents as well as for young people. Parents gained insights into their children's coping abilities and their children's attitudes to social responsibility, with many expressing pride in how well their children responded to the restrictions of the pandemic.

There was a distinct sense of reluctance in parents' comments on the return to the 'hectic pace' of life outside the home with its multiple commitments. Young people, on the other hand, were eager to experience life outside the home again, to return to all their activities, and to look to the future.

What we recommend

Loss of social interaction was the biggest concern for young people when schools closed. Schools should be cognisant of this in evaluating how much attention is given to the social aspect of learning in school.

There is a need for targeted support for young people for whom the pandemic has been more challenging than others. These include young people with special educational needs, young people who were not able to engage in online schooling, and families who experienced bereavement or serious illness during the pandemic.

The essential role of family support workers and other formal welfare services was highlighted by the experience of some families, particularly in the case of lone parents, parents facing adverse social and economic circumstances, and parents experiencing mental health challenges. Loss of these supports needs to be avoided to prevent challenges being further exacerbated for such families.

Young people's experiences during the pandemic highlighted areas where reform is needed. It should not be assumed that young people's experiences during lockdown were uniformly negative. Their views should be sought on changes to education that they perceived as positive, such as assessment.

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

Resources should be made available to schools for targeted academic catch-up at an individual level and for whole-school interventions aimed at supporting socio-emotional wellbeing. There should be school-level autonomy in deciding how to prioritise these resources based on the immediate needs of students.

Formal support networks are crucial for families in challenging circumstances. Anticipatory planning for the continuation of formal support services in crisis contexts should be prioritised.

At a systemic level, policymakers should engage in a knowledge-gathering exercise on young people's views on education reform, particularly around assessment structures and provision for mental health support in schools.

For more information on the project contact
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or visit www.nuigalway.ie/
cfrc/projects/currentprojects/
crisiscopinglivingandlearningthroughcovid-19/

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