**“WAITING OUT THE DAY, NOT LIVING, NOT FUN”: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL CLOSURES DUE TO COVID-19**

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**Abstract**

Early school leaving (ESL) is considered a significant societal issue globally due to the negative effect on young people's health, affect, and quality of life. Continued absenteeism is a risk factor for ESL. This study aimed to explore Irish children's health and wellbeing experiences during school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These children were all considered at risk of ESL by their schools. Semi-structured interviews, adopting a “write, draw or tell” method, were conducted with ten children ages 9 to 13 years old. The study used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology. The loss of routine, social ties, and sense of success and belonging experienced in schools had a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of the children. They experienced adverse mental health effects, including anxiety, depression, anger, and loneliness. Their physical health and wellbeing were impacted by changes to sleep behaviour, physical activity levels, boredom, and gaming usage. Children remain very vulnerable to the impact of school closures, contact restrictions and living with the pandemic. Recommendations include improving online resources for young people and developing in-school programs to improve sleep hygiene.

## **Keywords**

Children; COVID-19; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; Qualitative; School closures

## **Introduction**

COVID-19 has severely affected life across the globe. Practices essential for protecting public health, such as self-isolation, contact restrictions, and the shut down of non-essential activities and businesses, have caused far-reaching changes in affected countries' psychosocial environments (Fegert et al., 2020). The effects of COVID-19 has also placed a burden on young people's health due to a lack of peer contact, loneliness, disrupted routines, family challenges (e.g., economic pressure), and reduced opportunities for stress regulation (Darmody et al., 2020; Fergert et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020; McCluskey, 2021; Tambling et al., 2021).

School closures were implemented globally in March 2020, to suppress viral transmission and its effect on the larger community. Nearly 70% of young people were affected (Mayurasakorn et al., 2020). Recent research (YoungMinds, 2020; O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Viner et al., 2021) has recognized complex links between school closures, public health restrictions and wellbeing among young people. Studies have found that young people experienced adverse mental health effects, such as depression, anxiety, low mood and loneliness, during the pandemic (BelongTo, 2020; O'Sullivan and colleagues, 2021). Other research has shown that rises in mental health distress among young people had occurred in conjunction with decreased attendance of services to support these young people due to the pandemic (Viner et al., 2021). School often acts as a protective safeguarding mechanism. The literature has raised cautionary concerns regarding child protection arising from the impact of school closures due to COVID-19 (Teo et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2021). Stressful events/disasters on young people can have lasting effects, including greater susceptibility to anxiety later in life (Hoven et al., 2003; Jackson et al., 2021; Makwana, 2019).

In addition to providing opportunities for child protection mechanisms, and pastoral and therapeutic support, schools often help support young people's physical health. During school holidays and the weekends, young people engage in less physical activity, have extended screen time, irregular sleep routines, and eat more processed food. This can lead to decreases in cardiorespiratory fitness and weight gain (Brazendale et al., 2017). These adverse health outcomes are further pronounced in young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Brazendale et al., 2017). Research has proposed that public health measures to suppress the spread of COVID-19, such as the closure of schools and leisure/sports clubs, have had a detrimental effect on the health of young people due to a reduction in physical activity, increases in sedentary behaviour and increase in sleeping difficulties (Dunton et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2021). School closures can also result in the undernourishment of young people of families with financial restraints who rely on school breakfast and lunch provisions (Mayurasakorn et al., 2020).

  Retention in education has a positive effect on physical and mental health (Conti et al., 2010; Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development: OECD, 2013; United Nations Education Scientific Cultural Organisation, 2014). Young people who drop out of school early struggle to access high-quality employment and pay, experience a lower quality of life (Darmody et al., 2020), and have a higher risk of facing social exclusion (Byrne et al., 2010). Considerable research has been undertaken on the potential causes of early school leaving (ESL). The research postulates that ESL is due to an accumulation of factors, leading to aggregative disengagement from education over time (Downes, 2013; Dowrick et al., 2006, Finn et al., 1997). These factors can include negative academic self-image (Heeran-Flynn, 2017), lack of motivation (Markussen, 2008; Rumberger et al., 2008), lower reading and math levels, and learning difficulties (Heeran-Flynn, 2017). Young people who feel disinclined to cope with schoolwork and struggle to engage with homework (Byrne et al., 2010) are also considered susceptible to ESL. Children from families of low socioeconomic status are five times more at risk of ESL when parental education is low than those whose parents have attained a second-level education (Hansen et al., 2010; OECD, 2013) and ten times more at risk than those with a third level education (Lavrijsen et al., 2013). High rates of absenteeism (Rumberger et al., 2008), truancy and suspension from school (Eivers et al., 2000), and peers who leave school early (Lavrijisen et al., 2013; Saiz et al., 2005) are also linked to ESL. Difficult transitional times such as periods of poverty, grief, parental unemployment (Stokes, 2003), mental distress experiences, and transitions from primary to secondary school (Downes, 2013) often exacerbate the risk of ESL. School structure and practices, including governance, curricula, and educational methods, influence the completion of education and student experiences of success (Beekholen et al., 2005).

Given the implications of sustained periods of school closures on young people in general and heightened risks on young people already considered at risk of ESL, it is vital to address gaps in knowledge and understand potential impacts on young people's health and wellbeing. There is a shortage of in-depth qualitative research which explores the health and wellbeing experiences of young people, particularly those at risk of ESL, during school closures. Giving children a voice enables us to gain a richer, nuanced understanding of their experiences (Willig, 2013) and what they perceive as having impacted their health and wellbeing. This study aimed to hear the children’s voice, through the research question: 'What have been the daily life experiences, health and wellbeing of Irish children who have been identified as at risk of ESL during school closures due to COVID-19'.

**Method**

### ***Design***

The study was exploratory and qualitative; semi-structured interviews were used, adopting a 'write, draw or tell' approach. This approach involves inviting the participants to decide how they would like to share their experiences: verbally, in writing or through drawing or speaking (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). We adopted a critical realist (Bhaskar, 1978) position rooted in the belief that reality is stable and enduring (Fade, 2004), and there are three different layers of knowledge: the 'real' refers to context and social structures/influences (Covid-19 pandemic, Irish government's response); the 'actual' including events/phenomena that occur that are not always observable (effects of school closures), and the 'empirical', denoting human perspectives and experiences (Irish children's daily life, health and wellbeing experiences).

### ***Sampling***

Children were recruited from a School Completion Programme's 'Readiness for School Summer Programme'. The School Completion Programme (SCP) has been in operation since 2002 in Ireland. Currently, 82 SCPs are operating across the country, encompassing 299 primary schools and 112 post-primary schools supporting young people aged between four and 18 at risk of ESL. SCP projects target resources to these children to enable their retention in school until their Leaving Certificate. All children attending the SCP ‘Readiness for School’ summer programs of three schools in an urban city in Ireland were invited to participate in the research via a letter and an information sheet. The participants of these summer programs were identified by the SCP Coordinator and each of their headteachers. They were chosen as they were considered to be at high risk of ESL in the future and that they would benefit from support to help transition back to school after a prolonged absence. Thirty-six children attended the summer program all aged between nine and 13. Eleven provided written consent to be interviewed. Unfortunately, one child decided not to participate on the interview day, resulting in 10 participants in total (see Table One). All the children participating in the research were from schools in disadvantaged areas.

### ***Procedure and interview***

Ethical approval was granted by [name removed for the review process] University Ethics Committee. Written parental consent was obtained. The semi-structured interviews took place face-to-face in a quiet, private room in each of the three schools. The interviews were recorded and conducted following the rules and regulations on social distancing that were in place at the time. The first author took notes during the interviews to record pertinent non-verbal communication. The children were facilitated to express themselves by incorporating a write, draw, or tell technique into the semi-structured interviews. All participants opted to answer the semi-structured questions and activities verbally (i.e., the 'tell' part of the methodology).

Power differences are apparent in all types of research. However, they are more pronounced between child-adult research processes due to age differences, social differences, and the duty and care that adults must have to ensure children are safe and protected (Horgan, 2017). In order to acknowledge the power difference, the interviewer explained the nature of the relationship between herself and each child at the start of the interviews. She explained that as an adult, she lacked the knowledge about these children's experiences, and she wanted to learn from their expertise. They would be equal but not the same in this process and learn from each other. It was also explained the research data could influence future policies and practices within their schools.

The interview schedule and the write, draw or tell methodology were piloted with two children. Their data are included within the results section as no changes to the schedule or procedure were made after the pilot interviews. The schedule started with general items concerning what the children knew about Coronavirus. Then turned to questions specific to their broad experiences (e.g., How has your life changed since the Coronavirus?) and more specific (e.g., Write, draw or tell me about the most challenging day since school has closed). The length of the recorded interviews varied from between 19 to 46 minutes. All participants were provided with a debrief letter on completion of the interviews. All identifying references were removed from the transcriptions, and each interviewee chose their pseudonym.

At the time of the interviews, August 2020, people in Ireland were only permitted to leave the house to buy food or exercise within 2 km of their house. Public and private gatherings were banned, including visits to hospitals or prisons, with some exceptions for compassionate grounds. People over the age of 70 and vulnerable groups were asked to 'cocoon' (i.e., stay at home and reduce face-to-face contact with other people as much as possible). All schools had been closed since March 2020, and people were asked to work from home as much as possible. In the case of the participants included in this study, weekly worksheets and books were posted to the homes of the students. There was no online classroom support.

## **Analysis**

The interview data were analysed using the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 2009). Small sample sizes are typical of IPA studies and consistent with its emphasis on the in-depth investigation of a shared feature of lived experience. Given that our research sought to explore the experiences of a group of children who share a common life phenomenon; school closures due to Covid-19, IPA was deemed a suitable choice. The analysis encompassed two phases. Each transcript was read several times to ensure familiarity with the data. For each transcript, preliminary comments and interpretations were recorded by the first author. Next, coding for meaning, similarities, differences and contradictions were completed. Superordinate themes and subthemes were created through abstraction, polarisation, numeration, and function (Smith, 2009), which led to the construction of a coding sheet that referenced the original transcript under each theme. This process was idiographic (Smith, 2009). The first transcript was reviewed and analysed in detail before moving on to the subsequent interviews. A comprehensive list of superordinate themes was created from the interpretation of convergences and divergences within and between each coding sheet. These superordinate themes were mapped, clustered and defined by the first author.

The first author (interviewer) maintained a reflective journal throughout the process to ensure her meaning-making interpretations of the interview and interviewees' responses were detailed and reflected on how her experiences and social context could affect the subjectivities of the analysis (Roulston, 2010). Three years before the interviews were

undertaken, the first author had worked for SCP. She is a therapist and a health psychologist in training. We acknowledge that her therapeutic training and experience may have impacted the data collected and the analysis; hence these factors were considered when interpreting the findings.

In phase two, each superordinate theme/subtheme was discussed between the first two authors as a further check to ensure that any interpretation was not shaped by preconceived assumptions or bias. This discussion ensured the data interpretation and final thematic structure were credible and consistent with suggested quality guidelines (Willig, 2013; Yardley, 2000). Sensitivity to context was demonstrated by emphasising multiple dimensions of the children's experience and engaging with the data. Both authors iteratively reflected on their experiences, interpretations, and subjectivities on the analysis (Roulston, 2010). An audit trail of each superordinate/subtheme and its development was undertaken to demonstrate transparency and coherence. This process resulted in five conceptually coherent superordinate themes, which captured the daily life experiences, health and wellbeing of Irish children identified as at risk of ESL during school closures due to Covid-19. These superordinate themes are: Personal Sense-making; Navigating their World; Anxiety; Changing Relationships; and Disrupted Routines.

## **Results**

The relationships between the five superordinate themes are represented in the model (see Figure 1). The model describes five superordinate themes:

1. “Personal sense-making” describes how the children tried to comprehend and make sense of COVID-19.
2. “Navigating their world” denotes their feelings about and the impact of the changes on their daily lives.
3. “Anxiety” encapsulates the children’s perceptions and concerns about not feeling safe.
4. “Changing relationships” describes shifts in friendship and family dynamics and how the children tried to ensure they still had a social network.
5. “Disrupted routines” captures the impact of changes to routines on the children.

The model represents how the superordinate/subthemes may relate to each other in impacting the health and wellbeing experiences of these young people. The five superordinate themes and their subthemes are summarised below and are accompanied by illustrative quotes from the interviews.

### ***Theme One: Personal Sense-Making***

This superordinate theme describes how the children tried to comprehend and make sense of COVID-19.

**1 (a) Sources of Information**. The children used the news, cartoons, and social media platforms (e.g. TikTok) to develop an understanding of the Coronavirus. Lexie watched the news daily. She was frightened by what she heard and perhaps was trying to desensitise herself from the impact of what she was watching, as illustrated by her use of “blah, blah, blah” when referring to the death toll.

“… the news coming on, and there are blah blah blah was a lot of deaths and cases….and that is really scary”.

Lexie spent a lot of time trying to fathom the governments' Covid-19 responses in Ireland and the rest of the world. Her use of the words “only” and “should” and the phrase “wouldn't be in this place now” indicate the blame she placed on the government. It was unclear from the interview whether this response was representative of how her parents felt or the shock she was experiencing as a nine-year-old discovering that adults did not always have the answers.

“And I wasn't understanding why they only brought out the rule where you have to wear face masks right now… or else you'll get a fine. And at the start of it, that didn't matter. They only brought it out. They knew nothing about the virus, but we should have had masks on, and 'cause we wouldn't be in this place now…. like this we would have been able to go back to school and wouldn't even be able to close down school…. At least it would've been a bit better than it was”.

The representation of different responses in other countries on the news caused her confusion.

“Well, I believe some countries have just gave up cause, okay, some countries wore masks when they heard it, and they don't have Covid now, and some countries won't try cause they don't have Covid in it. Why are all the countries so different?”

Watching the news about the United Kingdom government's Covid-19 response parallel with the Irish government's response also caused anxiety within her family.

“We'd put on the news, but it'd be the English news, and this was at the start of it, and it said they were only going into Lockdown, and my nanny started getting really panicky. And I said, "nanny, that's just the English one". We still are in Lockdown. We are safe. Scary, scary lots of different things going on”.

TikTok was another information source for two of the children. Carly found this an accessible way of learning what she needed to do to stay healthy and well. Bella also watched videos on TikTok and likened Coronavirus and the need to isolate to the Rapunzel fairy tale.

“… It's similar to Rapunzel 'cause Rapunzel was isolated for 16 years.… and her kingdom is called Corona…..Yeah, cause we saw it on TikTok….it actually does make sense……Cause Mother Gothel kept Rapunzel isolated from the world cause she was locked up into a tower”

Potentially this resonated with Bella as she felt detached from the rest of the world, like Rapunzel. She often spent time in her bedroom, separated from her family, keenly trying to overhear what adults were hiding from her about Covid-19. Lexie also likened her personal experiences to those of cartoon characters, using them as a knowledge base to understand her reality. For example, she described watching a cartoon about children who turned into mermaids when the water hit them. These children had to go into quarantine and spend time protecting each other by disinfecting their environment.

**1(b) The Pull of Information Seeking Versus the Impact of Knowing**. The desire to seek information about Coronavirus and the detrimental impact of knowing was discussed among some of the young people. Lexie clearly illustrates her awareness of the adverse effects of watching the news versus her desire to stay informed.

“…Well, I wouldn't be able to go full day without hearing how many deaths. Maybe it's bad…or not. Because I…. [long pause]. It's just I'm very nosy. So you know I want to know. I'd be like, "mam, how many deaths?" and she'd be like say ", there's 50 deaths", and I'd be like [mimes shocked/scared face]. I'd be like, "you shouldn't have told me that". But then again, I wanted her to tell me”.

When questioned further by the interviewer, she revealed when the cases and death toll were low; she was glad she asked. If they were not, she experienced regret and distress. However, she had no intention of stopping asking. Watching the news also upset Billy. He explained he felt “sad and thinking about what would happen next. …And worrying is it going to come closer to us”. Kevin and his family managed the impact of the news by switching the television channel as soon as Coronavirus was mentioned. Bella described her hypervigilance, listening for mentions of Coronavirus from her bedroom when adult relations were conversing. She emphasised how unusual this was, as she often pretends she cannot hear adults talking to avoid being told to do chores. Her keenness at hearing any Covid-19 related updates also had a negative impact on her anxiety levels.

“I was like, "What if I did have Coronavirus?" And then I heard everything 'cause I have very good hearing...unless I don't want to hear and then I don't.. can't hear at all. Like, when mam calls me to do the dishwasher--I can't hear that. When-when I'm kinda trying to listen to…hear if anyone's saying anything about Coronavirus and… I was really sure, like, what if I had what if I had it already…so that’s hard…so that was really scary”.

***Theme Two: Navigating their World***

This superordinate theme denotes the young people's feelings about and impact of the changes on their daily lives.

**2(a) Life feels surreal.** There was a general sense that life felt surreal to the children as they began navigating the changes in their world. For example, throughout her interview, Lexie referred to life feeling like a “dream”, indicating perhaps her desire for her situation to change overnight and wake up with her life reverted to what it was before Coronavirus had impacted her.

“It's just when you'd go out when you would go out you'd see the army on the street which is give you the shivers….? It's like scary. You felt like, oh my god, it's real. It's not just a dream”.

Bella describes how unsettled she felt when her mother removed her suddenly from school in the middle of the day due to her mother becoming concerned about Covid-19.

“A little bit scary. 'Cause I was like, "Why did she take me out?" She always-- She never takes me out for no reason”.

Jake was keen to emphasise through his use of repetition how surreal his experiences were but struggled to articulate how.

“Weird it's, like, I don't know the words. Like- I don't know, just different, way different…It was like-- It was like-- I felt like proper proper weird and all. Like very, very different”.

The word “weird” was repeated in several interviews to highlight how differently the young people were experiencing their lives. For example, Carly used it to describe the impact of being away from friends and how the experience of school closures had altered her relationships negatively. Waffle also refers to how abnormal and “weird” it was for him to spend so much time indoors in only adult company.

**2(b) Their world has shrunk**. Another subtheme that arose was the children feeling that their world had shrunk. Schools, clubs, and extracurricular activities closed, creating a sense of loss. For instance, Lexie spoke about missing her dance class and not wanting to dance at home alone.

 “I like to have at least five people around me to like dance, properly…. It's just another thing gone…No school, no dancing. No high fives”.

Kevin found it challenging not being able to train with the Gaelic Athletic Association. He missed the fun he experienced as part of a team. Ben also missed his kickboxing classes and participating in his football club. The resulting decreases in physical activity and increase in weight led to struggles with his self-image.

“It was really tough putting on the weight…I didn't like the weight. It wasn't good”.

He struggled academically in school and spoke about the sense of success and joy he experienced playing football. Equally, Blake, who described himself as a skilled footballer, was disappointed by his loss of physical stamina.

“Just not going out and just kicking a ball 'cause, it's just staying in and…not doing anything for a while with my legs…and then just kick the ball for the first time. But it was like, I don't know- I didn't know how to play really, and it's…I normally play for a team with football”.

Billy found staying indoors very difficult, which had a detrimental effect on his mood and activity levels, and negative emotions within the family reverberated through the household.

“Staying in, getting annoyed, stress, just sitting playing your play station, doing the same things. No one was active, no one was well, when anyone got sick they thought they had it”.

Kevin also lamented how small his world had become.

“Sad that I couldn’t go out. Couldn’t go back to school… Uh, I didn’t really like Lockdown… Couldn’t go out anywhere….And then everywhere was closed. It was a lot of staying at home”.

Waffle’s interview mirrored this sense of loneliness, abnormality, and feeling at a loss about what to do.

“I felt like—I felt just not right ‘cause I’m normally never in the house… I’m normally always just out….I was just thinking, “What do I do? “… ‘Cause I didn’t know what to do…what to do indoors…Like, I don’t know what to do with meself when I'm just sitting around doing nothing…..”

Referring to the older population's need to cocoon, he emphasised we should not just be worried as a society about older people. It was also unnatural for children to spend so much time alone, “Yea, it's not just old people. My age. My age are alone too long too”. Feeling trapped and contained was apparent in Billy's description of his experiences. He missed the freedom of exploring his neighbourhood with friends. Having to stay indoors led him to become very frustrated and lash out.

“Everybody and anyone who got in my way was getting it…I was just like getting stressed at them, going back digging the walls….Just going boom boom and punching the walls”.

Goldbridge also commented on his emotional response to the restrictions. The word “hurt” illustrates the damage he felt was being inflicted on him due to the Lockdown.

“You can hurt your mindset and then it can make you almost become depressed because you're inside too long….”.

The sense of belonging Lexie felt in school could not be replicated while staying at home. She mimed walking, waving and pointing at friends. Her nonverbal communication emphasised how much her social world had altered.

'Just like not seeing everybody in school and all, you know X and X? Well, like I see them, but it wouldn't be the same as being in school, walking down the hall like… being able to be like hi hi hi hi' [mimed walking, waving and pointing at friends].

**2(c) Uncertain about Navigating Socially.** Due to the significant changes to their lives, some young people also felt uncertain about navigating socially. Specifically, they worried about how to interact with peers and physically navigate around their community. Waffle talks about a loss of social skills due to school closures and lack of contact with peers, leading him to restrict his interactions even more due to fearing he will not know how to engage with friends.

“And it- it's like that you won't- you won't know what to say. You don't- you won't know what to do, and you'd end up just staying in. Not going out at all”.

Wanting to fit in with friends is common among ten to twelve-year-olds (Lashbrook, 2000). The desire to act like her peers versus her desire to follow the rules caused Carly some anxiety when travelling on public transport. Her peers' comments suggest Carly's response, which tracks public health guidance, was unusual, which caused her to feel uncertain about how to fit in with her social world with friends and this new world with different rules.

“We went on a train… there are things where we can't sit? (Referring to measures taken by the railway company to ensure passengers engaged in social distancing) ... I didn't sit on them,'cause like most people are now…And I didn't want to because I-I don't-- I just wanna be cautious, and my friends said, "Okay, that's all right if you don't wanna."

Carly loudly emphasised the word “you” to indicate how different her friends’ comments made her feel. Apart from public transport etiquette, Carly also highlighted finding the new systems in shops challenging to navigate. She was unsure where to stand or what to do. This feeling was mirrored very visually by Lexie, who crouched into a small ball during the interview and acted out the anxiety she felt attempting to walk around her local shopping centre, fearful of touching off others or knocking into food displays.

***Theme Three: Anxiety***

This superordinate theme encapsulates the children’s perceptions and concerns about not feeling safe.

**3(a) Feeling unsafe.** The young people felt unsafe, which led to some ruminating before bed, disrupting their sleep or waking up anxious. Lexie worried about future lockdowns before bed. The worry caused her sleepless nights. She also described physiological stress responses (i.e., stomach pains and loss of appetite). She attempted to soothe herself to sleep using Irish public health messaging regarding staying safe and looking after each other.

“I'd just hear little voices. Like you're not gonna go back into Lockdown, maybe you will, maybe you won't. You have to stay safe, be kind, and if you do go back into Lockdown, it's only for the best”.

Kevin spoke about waking up each morning anxious and emphasised the cognitive load his worrying had on him.

“I was just w-w-worrying every morning. My head was full…If I caught it-- I wa-I was worrying if I got it…I was just-was worrying if-when it was gone-when, it will go….So, when will this end? How long will it last..why…um…Uh, how it came?'

The magnitude of the situation and their feeling of unsafety was illustrated by many young people focusing on the death toll. For example, Billy emphasises the impact of this on him using repetition (i.e., the word “dying”).

“It's just a bad thing around the world….People have been dying, places have been closed, and school has been closed….Mostly people dying dying dying”.

Poignantly, Bella believed the world was being destroyed.

“Coronavirus has killed billions, trillions, quadrillions, more, like more than a thousand…infinity, people. All over the world… and Corona,…have been destroying the countries because… they're taking people out…people's family are dying every day. But, but, but the Coronavirus is actually wreckin' the world….”

The knowledge that many deaths were occurring reminded Kevin of his personal bereavements. The focus on death was prevalent throughout this interview. He describes his mood worsening every day as he heard about increasing case numbers and deaths. The number of cases also made him anxious about catching Coronavirus himself and having fatal consequences. He was not the only young person who was personally worried about catching Coronavirus. As described above in section 1(b), there was a clear relationship between acquiring up-to-date information about Covid-19 and the knowledge that this could negatively affect the young people's emotions by heightening anxiety or lowering their mood. They also thought about how Lockdown is affecting other people's mental health.

Waffle: “Because the world's gonna end and we're all gonna end up going crazy….So having to go through all of this again. So everyone thought it was all over..and then snap [shouts this word for emphasis] back inside and the world is going to go crazy”.

Safety behaviours were a crucial part of Carly and her family's new routine. This helped them manage their anxiety about the pandemic. She spoke about only walking in the evening when fewer people were out, practising social distancing, hand sanitising every 20 minutes, and wearing masks. Carly saw engaging in play as a tool to feel emotionally well. When playing outdoors with friends, Carly ensured the toys were sanitised, and they remained at a distance.

“We're playing like with the ball…gloves on obviously, and… she stays in her garden I stay in mine, and we just throw the ball over... I also sanitised it before using it”.

She was equally as thoughtful about remaining safe when playing individually. She chose to only climb the most difficult trees in the park. Believing others were less likely to climb them.

“I like-Sometimes cl-climb trees. That's kind of hard now…'cause of COVID. Like I don't like to get like-to get anything…other people could have climbed on it…. But…I am like trying to climb the hardest trees…because nobody else'd be able to get on them, and it's very easy for me to climb on that”.

**3(b) Anxiety about the loss of learning.** The thoughts of returning to school concerned some young people because of their loss of learning. Goldbridge was very concerned about the gap in his education. He described being in a “bad class”. He had four different teachers in the last year as he contends that his class was tough to teach due to bad behaviour. Before his school closed, the headteacher took over teaching his class. He had begun to feel successful again and had finally begun to grasp his studies. School closures put an end to this feeling.

 “We were getting to the end of mastering it and then…it just all shut down…I can't even remember how to do it now”.

He is now really concerned about starting secondary school as he has forgotten what he learnt. He also believes that his class is even more disadvantaged than other students. They have missed substantially more learning due to multiple teacher changes.

“I'm nervous cause I just feel like I won't know the stuff I-I need to know…So, like like we we probably like a few months without learning, and we are probably like eight-eight, nine months slow of what we should be now”.

Bella's anxiety about her return to school was palpable during the interview. She noted she had missed half of third class yet was starting fourth class and anticipated “hard maths” being impossible for her to succeed. Bella often struggled in class before school closures. She tried to hide this from her teacher and her classmates in the past. Nevertheless, as illustrated in the extract below, she was fearful this strategy might no longer work due to the breadth of lost learning.

“if I- if I didn't know something, I would say, "Yeah, I know that. That's great." And try to figure it out myself. But I think you need to make sure your class knows”.

Blake was also worried about maths. He did not complete any of the assigned home learning activities, spending every day playing videogames for hours. Most of the students could not do their assigned work without a teacher to support them. Waffle complained about the procedures for home learning. The school posted him books and worksheets. He said he would have preferred to have an ‘online school’. He found it impossible to do any of his work, as he could not concentrate, and his parents were unable to support his learning.

“So, they gave us everything we had, like Irish, English… how do they expect us to do Irish without a teacher…No, so we couldn't understand the Irish…so if we got stuck on somethin’…they [my parents] couldn’t help”.

For Ben, he had often gotten in trouble in school for misbehaviour. However, like Goldbridge, he had started feeling successful for the first time in school just before they closed. Ben felt proud to have turned his behaviour around. He wanted to return to education to re-experience this sense of success.

“Everyone was saying that I was doing real good, and I got…you know that thing that you get when-when you're student of the month?... I only got it once because…in all the other classes. I was always getting into fights and all….But this year, I changed. I changed it around, and I got it….Tell them I'd need a bit of help (referring to teachers), and I want to feel good again in school and be that student”.

Ben emphasised the phrase “that student” through hand gestures and facial expressions showing the pride he felt when he was voted student of the month.

 Ben, Blake, Jake and Goldridge gave some insight into why none of these young people chose to write their answers during the interviews. Ben was initially eager to write his answers to the interview questions but quickly changed his mind.

 “Me handwriting needs to get better….Me reading…Well, me handwriting's not so good that's why I wanted to write, and then I didn't today (referring to write, draw or tell activity) and me reading. …..Uh, when school's closed, like, you don't read much now, so when you go back, it's real hard'.

Goldridge queried if his writing ability would ever improve.

“I'm a slow writer, and I'm slow when I was writing down…That’s… 'cause I haven't even written in probably around five months or something. And that will come back, won't it?'

Carly refused to write or draw as it would make her feel “not good about meself”. Bella and Lexie did not refer to any concerns about writing or drawing. When asked about their choice of expressing themselves, they both highlighted the value of talking.

Lexie: “Some people might want that, but for me, it was important to talk to someone outside of my house”.

Kevin also found the interview somewhat therapeutic, explaining “No-I need the talking” when the write, draw or tell methodology was explained. At the end of the interview, he also reiterated this sentiment.

“Because it helped me talk about all my family 'cause I was sad”.

***Theme Four: Changing Relationships***

This superordinate theme describes shifts in friendship and family dynamics and how the young people tried to ensure they still had a social network.

**4(a) Improved Relationships with Family Members.** Ben had been active in local football and kickboxing clubs in the past. However, due to the closures of clubs, these activities had ceased. He described feeling unhappy seeing a photo of himself, noticing his changed weight. This motivated him to engage in exercise with the help of his mother. Ben lost the weight he wanted to, but also got to spend time alone with his mother training together, and as a result increasing their bond. This was something they had not done before the pandemic.

“It's me and me, mom….Fun. We went down to jog every morning….This was all new for me, and me ma... I'm spending lots of time on my own with my ma, and it's good”.

Both Lexie and Carly were pleasantly surprised by improved relationships with their older sisters, whom they frequently fought with in the past. Lexie highlighted how unusual it was for her and her sister to get along through repetition and facial expressions.

“I have seen my sister way, way, way, way too much [rolls eyes, very exasperated face]…when we were in school, we were always fighting. I mean, now we are not really fighting, but we fight at the odd time over stupid things like…. We are getting on better because of coronavirus and lockdown cause we have to'.

Carly described a similar dynamic.

“… I was like worried that like my sister and me like X, we just spend the time we keep on fighting… like it got us closer like, and now we're like unseparable….Like she's 16, and I'm like 11, and we have barely anything in common, but like, yeah, it's kind of fun…”.

It is clear from both these quotes that school closures and restrictions on leisure activities and clubs led to an opportunity for family cohesion in both Bella's and Carly's households. Older and younger siblings had to spend time together rather than with peers from outside the home. Waffle also spoke about his improved relationship with his siblings. He spent time with half-brothers he rarely saw and enjoyed these interactions as it helped with the loneliness he experienced during school closures.

“like they're someone I can have the bond with. 'Cause, there's actually people my age in the house”.

However, their increased contact also proved somewhat tricky due to Waffle noticing disparities in how they were all treated by his parents.

“Like the middle child always disappoints without trying. It's just normal. Like it's-it's what happens…. 'Cause you do the simplest things, and you get a roared at or shouted at, and if the youngest did it, they'd be like, "Ah, don't do it again"…So I've been noticing we all get treated different, and I'm the one who gets the shouting at.

**4(b) Their Social Network.** During the school closures, many of the children keenly felt the loss of interaction with peers. A consistent desire of all the participants was a need to experience a regular, vibrant social life. Kevin spoke about usually seeing 19 classmates every day and how the loss of school made him lonely. Carly and Goldbridge also highlighted how their friendship dynamics changed dramatically due to school closures.

Goldbridge: “Like we stopped talking over the Lockdown, and now like I just- I just--I didn't know what to do with them now. Like they just doesn't talk to me anymore”.

Carly commented on how difficult it was to manage disputes with a friend and planned to post or buy her a token in a video game to reconcile the argument.

“…me and my friend weren't like really friends anymore…..No, I couldn't go to her house and say sorry to her but I knew… if I like gave her something…like post it to her or like give it to her in a game'.

Waffle concerned about his isolation and lack of contact with young people.

“Like there'll be no young contact like no one would be there. You'll end up going crazy just sitting in your room all day”.

Most participants solved this lack of contact by utilising technology and games to communicate. Jake texted friends regularly. Carly favoured social media and game platforms such as TikTok, Roblox and Snapchat to stay in touch with her aunties and cousins. Goldbridge, Blake and Billy found the PlayStation a valuable means of staying connected. Unfortunately, for Goldbridge, the PlayStation was not always a solution to the boredom.

“I'd wake up in a bad mood… there'd be some days it be raining so you couldn't even go out somewhere. So you'd just be sitting in the house all day it's very-very boring. Even-even on the PlayStation, sometimes there'd be no people online to play with”.

He quite poignantly described his experience of school closures and Lockdown as “waiting out the day, not living, not fun”.

***Theme Five: Disrupted Routines***

This superordinate theme captures the impact of changed routines on the young people. **5(a) Sleep.** All the young people mentioned difficulties with sleep. These sleep disturbances ranged from an inability to sleep to significant shifts in sleep schedules, leading to a loss of daytime life and the emotional and physical toll of not sleeping.

Blake: “I'm just pretty much just staying up all night for some reason. I try go to sleep, and I just don't. I'm staying up till like from like 12:00 (am) till about 8:00 (am) and then going to sleep and waking up at about 6:00 (pm)…”.

There was a clear link between feeling unsafe, rumination, and disturbed sleep for some participants. For example, Lexie recounts going to bed feeling upset after watching the news and experiencing a physiological stress response in addition to rumination.

“Okay, when I heard the announcements coming on that night, I wasn't able to sleep. I just start worrying in case we'd go back into Lockdown, and I get pains in my tummy… It'd be like feel like really two hours but really only five minutes, but I can't fall asleep…And then kinda getting upset and stuff like that…. It's just like things were flying round and round through my head”.

Waffle, Bella and Carly also mentioned changes to their sleep schedules: staying up late and sleeping late into the afternoon. Waffle believed that his “sleep schedule has gone out the window” due to watching YouTube videos or gaming on his phone until 5 am most mornings. He saw this disruption to his sleep as due to boredom and being at a loss for something to do. Technology was also impacting Ben and Blake's sleep patterns and energy levels.

Blake: “Tired like---I was tired every morning, just getting up and playing and then just like, just getting tired from just playing it pretty much… It kind of messed up my sleep schedule, uh, just sitting on the game all day and then and just eating…”

Blake believed his gaming was excessive and began to impact his relationship with his family.

“I was just-I wasn't really talking to them cause of being on the game too much of the time'.

For Ben, his sleep schedule disruption led to a loss of daytime life.

“Because then when I got to like 11:00, 12:00, you check out the window and it was mad dark you knew it was like night and you'd slept for the whole day and saw and did nothing…..Missed all the shopping. The grub would be gone. I never got myself to do anythings”.

Not only did he miss out on food and activities, but it also impacted his motivation levels.

“I felt lazy. Didn't want to do, I feel like, ah, didn't want to do anything at all'.

Ben also became confused about whether it was day or night when he woke, which negatively impacted his emotional wellbeing.

“At the start, it looked so bad. I used to like go to sleep at 7(am) and then when I woke up I was very confused because at nine o'clock it's a bit dark. I wasn't sure was it morning or night because I was so confused…”.

**5(b) Conquering the boredom.** Goldbridge described his experience of the Lockdown as “Waiting out the day, not living, not fun”, distilling in a few words feelings that ran through most of the young people's accounts. When interviewing the young people, feeling contained, sitting, imprisoned in their homes emerged.

Goldbridge: “I'm just sitting on the chair all day. Yea -so just bored sitting there in this chair. It was boring”.

Time appeared slower, and the participants perceived the days as endless.

Lexie: “I'd wake up really, real early like because I didn't know what to do because then the days would just feel longer when we're in Lockdown. Feel like the days would feel endless, but once we got out of Lockdown, it just went back to a normal day, a normal routine.”

There was an array of activities the young people utilised to conquer the boredom and create new routines in their lives. Lexie began to feel safe going outdoors with her dog for company. She also noted that once she began to play outside again, she noticed a marked improvement in her mood. Lexie likened this to the need to have a lunch break in school, as it is good for your health after working hard. It was apparent that being home was hard work for Lexie. She described feeling “snappy” and spending time “staring at the wall”. Playing with her dog also helped Carly's loneliness when she was estranged from friends during the Lockdown. Apart from playing with her pet, Carly also conquered her boredom innovatively. She hung out on her back wall while her neighbour bounced on a trampoline so they could talk.

“But like what I used to do was climb my wall, like in my back garden wall...and I sometimes just like put my arms like that [raises arms], and then my friends on a trampoline and then she like puts it beside the wall. And like...so we…We usually like listen to music and talk… but like she doesn't do on the side that I'm on--and she doesn't go my side”.

Like Lexie, Carly was adamant that being outside and getting exercise was helpful to her, enabling her to have “a perfect day”. However, through her use of repetition, it was clear that she could not always motivate herself to do this.

“Very, very, very, very rare for me to do that”.

She identified her barriers to getting outdoors as the “phone, chocolate, and TV, and sitting down all day”. Another innovative way of conquering the boredom was Bella and her family creating a Tiki Bar. She described this as “a Hawaiian bar with…some straw…we made it out of an old table”. This bar was in their back garden, where the family danced, socialised, and watched movies on a projector. The Tiki Bar was a huge source of excitement for Bella and appeared to mitigate the loneliness experienced by most of the other young people.

## **Discussion**

### ***Main Findings***

The thematic model (see Figure 1) summarises the answer to our research question “What have been the experiences of daily life, health and wellbeing of young people at risk of ESL, during school closures due to Covid-19”. The model describes five superordinate themes that encapsulate these experiences: (1) Personal sense-making, which describes how young people tried to comprehend and make sense of COVID-19; (2) Navigating their world, which denotes their feelings about and impact of the changes on their daily lives; (3) Anxiety encapsulates their perceptions and concerns about of not feeling safe; (4) Changing relationships which describe the shifts in friendship and family dynamics and how the young people tried to ensure they still had a social network; (5) Disrupted routines which captures the impact of changes on the young people’s routines. The model represents how the superordinate/subthemes may relate to each other in impacting the health and wellbeing experiences of these young people.

By providing a phenomenological account, the findings provide a clear sense of how these young people tried to understand changes in their daily life through their attempts to find meaning for COVID-19 in cartoons and social media. Young people can use television and cartoons as a shared knowledge base to understand reality (Livingstone, 2013), and media (news, internet, mobile phone) serves to inform their behaviours, attitudes, and world views (Kolucki et al., 2011). However, cartoons and social media platforms such as TikTok were more manageable for the children. They preferred these media to digest and reframe their new world. Most of the young people and their families experienced distress when learning about the pandemic via news channels. This supports findings from recent research (Tambling et al., 2021) regarding the negative impact of exposure to pandemic news coverage on children without parents' attempting to contextualise and interpret the information. For example, within this study, there was confusion and fear caused when different COVID-19 responses in the United Kingdom were reported on the Irish news. Some children reviewed the number of cases and death toll daily, heightening the anxiety experienced. They felt unsafe, which led to rumination and physiological stress responses, causing sleep disturbances (see Figure 1).

Feelings of loss, loneliness, and an absence of the sense of success and belonging that young people often experience at school were prevalent through the interviews as the participants described the changes in their daily life. In this study, life felt surreal for the young people. They were frightened and cautious within their community, shops and public transport (see Figure 1). The disruption and changes to the participants' routines were compounded by fears of them or their families becoming ill which caused much anxiety for the young people in this study, supporting findings from previous research (O'Sullivan et al., 2021, Viner et al., 2021). Some participants felt adrift from their peers and were stuck within an adult world. Friendships fell apart without the continuity of schools, and disputes were harder to manage. Given the salience and value of the role of friendship during childhood (Tambling et al., 2021), this understandably impacted the participants' wellbeing. Within school, a sense of belonging gives young people a feeling of security, identity, social ties, connections with non-familial supportive adults, and supports academic, emotional, and social development (OECD, 2013).

The write, draw or tell method was used to ensure this research was undertaken in a youth-friendly, respectful and inclusive manner. It is perceived as supporting young people to openly speak about their world in a non-threatening manner (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). The drawing and writing options are considered to make young people feel comfortable. These remind them of activities in their daily school lives (Søndergaard et al., 2019) and are suitable for young people with a range of literacy levels. This methodology unexpectedly revealed underlying academic anxiety felt by the majority of the participants. Although this was planned to give young people opportunities to express their views differently, all participants chose to speak rather than write or draw their answers.Interestingly even the two young people who initially chose to write quickly reverted to talking. When questioned at the end of the interview about the methodology, most participants described a fear of not being competent in writing or drawing due to not engaging in these activities or any home learning for over five months. Their feared loss of learning and its impact on their education was palpable among many participants. This response is concerning as low academic self-esteem and a perception of an inability to cope with schoolwork (Byrne et al., 2010; Heeran-Flynn, 2017) are considered risk factors for ESL. Parents play a significant role in their children's education, but it would generally be complementary support to that of schools. Prolonged learning at home can be challenging for some families (O'Sullivan, 2020), especially given the extent to which they have time or adequate resources or the skills to do so (Darmody et al., 2020; Reimer et al., 2021). Some young people experiencing academic anxiety indicated that their parents could not assist with the assigned homework due to their own competence levels, specifically in Irish and math.

Some young people praised the benefits of going outdoors or finding safe ways to adapt their play. For instance, one interviewee used a trampoline to play catch with a friend from a different garden. As indicated in this study and other research (Jackson et al., 2021, Samuelsson et al., 2020) participation in outdoor activities can bolster young people's resilience and reduce stress (Corraliza et al., 2012; Roe et al., 2013). In addition, the relationship with their pet dogs was also a vital coping tool for some of the young people. Improvements within familial relationships, specifically with older siblings, also helped young people cope better with their circumstances supporting research by Mantovani and colleagues (2021).

The young people in this study describe a sense of feeling contained, sitting, imprisoned in their homes, with little to do, “waiting the day”. They noted concerns about their disrupted routine, irregular sleep patterns, open-ended, unsupervised screen usage, and weight gain (see Figure 1). Most of the young men in this study described more autonomous, unhealthy routines than when they were in school. These disrupted routines led them to have feelings of boredom and low mood (Brazandale et al., 2017; Suchert et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2013), and our study supports research findings on the effects of school closures due to COVID-19 on physical activity levels (Dunton et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2021). The boys keenly felt the impact of sedentary behaviours, such as excessive gaming. How they described their subjective wellbeing was much lower than the young people playing outdoors. Within our model (see Figure 1), the young men also described the impact of disrupted sleep patterns and a feeling of “waiting out the day”. They described how "not really living" or experiencing fun affected their mood, leading them to feel down, cut off from family, and unsure whether it was day or night when they awoke. Most concerning, the behavioural patterns set down in childhood can enhance or detract from long term physical (Rasheed, 2016) and mental health, and subjective wellbeing (García-Hermoso et al., 2020; Masten, 2018). One notable exception was Ben. During his interview, the change in his mood when he spoke about his journey to fitness with his mother was evident. He described increases in positive self-image and greater satisfaction with his life. Engaging in a daily exercise regime with his mother enhanced their family bond, and his psychological needs were met. He was provided with a structure and routine lacking in some of the other young people's interview data.

Interestingly, within this study, technology (e.g., play station, Snapchat, TikTok, Roblox) was not always harmful. On the contrary, it enabled the participants to connect and feel less lonely and isolated. Technology can often provide essential opportunities for socialisation with peers, play, and entertainment (OECD, 2021).

***Recommendations***

**Theme One: Personal Sense-making.** In this study, watching the news often affected the young people and caused anxiety, sleepless nights, and confusion due to them learning about different COVID-19 responses globally. Therefore, we recommend that teachers and parents receive training on how to contextualise and talk to young people about what they see or hear on the news or through other media concerning global pandemics (or indeed other international or national crises) . It would also be helpful to signpost students to support they can access if they feel overwhelmed (e.g., free support phone lines, websites). This resource could be posted to all students’ homes and made available on school websites.

**Theme Two: Navigating Their World.** Young people in this study felt their world had shrunk significantly, and they mourned the loss of their extra-curricular clubs and school. They felt lonely and isolated and described missing feeling successful in relation to sports and schooling. If schools were to close for prolonged periods again, it would be essential to provide online physical education classes and other non-sporting opportunities for young people to feel successful and improve their sense of belonging. The evidence strongly indicates that a sense of belonging to school increases engagement, motivation and student attainment. To ensure this is inclusive and accessible, grant schemes for students who experience digital poverty must be in place.

### **Theme Three: Anxiety.** It was apparent that home learning was not viable for the participants in this study as none of the young people completed the worksheets that were sent home. One of the participants highlighted that access to a teacher would be preferable to only receiving posted resources. When planning for prolonged school closures, it is crucial that procedures and school policies include access to online 'live' classes where students can seek advice and guidance from teachers. It is also necessary for teachers to consider the significant gap in learning these students experienced during school closures and appraise all students on their return to education. Providing revision and rehearsal opportunities for students impacted academically by school closures will ensure that further education attainment gaps do not develop. This would also mitigate the anxiety the young people are experiencing due to their loss of learning. In the case of future school closures, we would also recommend using online interactive social breaks and class hangout zones. These online activities could help young people connect with classmates, perhaps mitigating the loneliness and inhibiting the development of social anxiety some of the young people in this study alluded to. Again, it would be important to have grant schemes for students who experience digital poverty to enable them to take part.

**Theme Four: Changing Relationships.** All the children within this study used some form of social media for essential socialisation with peers and to stay connected with extended family members. Digital citizenship and online safety must be incorporated into schools' national curricula for all age groups. Not all children have the knowledge or resources to stay safe online. This puts them at risk of exploitation and online abuse and could lead to worrying mental health effects. As the digital sphere is ever-evolving, the teaching of this topic must be regularly revised and updated**.** As some participants described unsupervised lengthy access to gaming equipment, providing workshops for parents regarding the difficulties and dangers associated with the online world is also warranted.

### **Theme Five: Disrupted Routines.** The children in this study were susceptible to economic and environmental factors, such as less income to purchase online exercise classes and lack of or limited outdoor space. These factors could be a barrier to the success of parent-led home intervention programs. More increased access and opportunity for structured programs delivered by organisations within the community would be beneficial to improve cardiovascular fitness and increase physical activity levels. We also recommend the delivery of targeted interventions for the young people experiencing sleep disturbances to improve sleep hygiene techniques and reduce negative sleep behaviours. This could take the form of classroom-based learning regarding regulating sleep when routines are disrupted, or tailored intervention programs for students with severe sleep disturbances.

### ***Study limitations and further research***

Study limitations and future research are considered in parallel. Strengths include specifically targeting children interviewed within this study that came from an urban community in Ireland identified as disadvantaged. However, the study only included the voices of young people who attended the summer program and chose to become involved in the process. SCP operates across Ireland, and it would be valuable to explore the experiences of these young people further on a larger scale. In addition, in this study we only interviewed nine - to 13-year-olds. It would be interesting to conduct research with younger and older age groups also supported by SCP to identify if they experienced similar or different impacts of COVID-19. Additionally, future research should include parents and other siblings to triangulate the responses. This research is also only reflective of the challenges and experiences of these young people at a particular time frame within the Irish government's COVID-19 response. Exploring the long-term impact of school closures and COVID-19 on young people is warranted.

## **Conclusions**

This research highlights that school closures were significantly felt by children considered at risk of ESL. The young people's physical health was negatively affected by disrupted routines, loss of clubs, irregular sleep patterns, and open-ended, unsupervised screen usage. In addition, the loss of social ties, sense of success and belonging usually experienced in schools had a detrimental effect on the young people's wellbeing, leading to anxiety, anger, low mood, loneliness, loss, and academic concerns. It is clear from the children's voices in this study that a strategic collaboration among policymakers, psychologists, educators, families, young people and communities focused on mitigating the negative emotional, psychological and health impacts on young people is essential. These include developing programs to improve children’s sleep hygiene, digital safety and improving support for online learning. Ensuring that interventions, support and resources meet the contextual needs of young people are imperative. Therefore, we recommend including young people's voices throughout the design and implementation of these supports to ensure authenticity, comprehension and impact.

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