"I CAN'T VISIT OR MEET MY FRIENDS OR FAMILY ANYMORE, IT'S KIND OF HARD WITHOUT THEM"

The effects of COVID-19 on students' mental health

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Abstract

The purpose of the thesis was to promote students' mental health, and to find out the effects COVID-19 has had so far on well-being and mental health of the youth in Cork City Learning Support Services (CCLSS). One goal of the thesis was also to find out the safety measures taken in CCLSS these days and how the staff in the school has been supporting its pupils.

First in the theoretical part the focus was on youth mental health in general, as well as in UK and Ireland. The theory part also covers the situation regarding COVID-19 in Ireland. In the thesis the process and measures that the Irish government has been taking since the start of the pandemic till the year 2021 are gone through thoroughly.

The data was analysed by using a thematic analysis. After this the material was gathered into themes and sub-themes, which focused on mental health and school/employment.

According to the results, it was clear that the pandemic has had a big toll on students' mental health, and they have had to adapt into completely new ways of learning for them. Students felt that loneliness, isolation, and concern for loved ones caused depression. Motivation was one of the key points that came up in the survey answers. It was important for the students to stay motivated during the hard times and they also have been pleased with the support they have been getting from CCLSS.

Tiivistelmä

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Laitila, Jasmin	Opinnäytetyö, AMK	Kevät 2021
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"I can't visit or meet my friends or family anymore, it's kind of hard without them" The effects of COVID-19 on students' mental health

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Tiivistelmä
Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoitus oli edistää opiskelijoiden mielenterveyttä ja selvittää COVID-19 pandemian tähänastisia vaikutuksia Cork City Learning Support Services (CCLSS) koulun nuorten hyvinvointiin ja mielenterveyteen. Tarkoituksena oli myös selvittää CCLSS:n turvatoimet näinä aikoina, sekä miten koulun henkilökunta on tukenut oppilaitaan. Teoria osuus keskittyy yleisesti nuorten mielenterveyteen, sekä mielenterveysongelmiin Englannissa ja Irlannissa. Tämän jälkeen opinnäytetyössä on tarkasteltu syvemmin COVID-19 tilannetta Irlannissa. Opinnäytetyössä käytiin läpi prosessia ja toimia joita Irlannin hallitus on ottanut käyttöön pandemian alkamisesta vuoteen 2021 saakka. Tulokset analysoitiin käyttämällä teema-analysointia. Materiaali kerättiin teemoihin ja alateemoihin, jotka keskittyivät mielenterveyteen ja kouluun/työllistymiseen. Oli selvää, että pandemia on vaikuttanut suuresti oppilaiden mielenterveyteen ja he olivat joutuneet sopeutumaan täysin uudenlaiseen opiskelutapaan. Opiskelijat kokivat yksinäisyyden, eristäytymisen, sekä huolen läheisistä aiheuttavan masennusta. Motivaatio nousi yhdeksi tärkeäksi elementiksi kyselyn vastauksissa. Oppilaille oli tärkeää pysyä motivoituneena vaikeina aikoina, ja he olivat olleet tyytyväisiä saamaansa tukeen CCLSS:ltä.

Asiasanat
mielenterveys, COVID-19, motivaatio, CCLSS, sulkutila

CONTENT

1   INTRODUCTION

During 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone's lives worldwide. Governments in many countries have had to make difficult decisions to delay the spreading of COVID-19. In Ireland the government has taken measures such as closing bars, restaurants, schools, colleges, childcare facilities, and state-run cultural institutions. (Citizens Information 2020.)

COVID-10 has also impacted people's mental health. Data collected by WHO shows that the demand for mental health services is increasing, but the access to mental health services is getting more difficult due to the impact of COVID-19. (WHO 2020c.)

Media in Finland has also published a lot of information and raised concerns about students' mental health and distance learning. According to a study made by the city of Helsinki, approximately 70 percent of high school and vocational education students felt that distance learning has made it difficult for them to progress in their studies. Also 56 precent of high school students said that they have experienced hopelessness and melancholy almost every day or most days. (STT 2021.)

This report addresses the effects of COVID-19 on student's mental health. The topic was chosen because of our interest in mental health issues. The original plan of the thesis was to do a qualitative face-to-face interview, but because of the continuance of the COVID-19 situation, a qualitative survey in Webropol was used instead. The goal was to get at least seven answers for the survey, which we got in January, during the time Ireland had to go into a third lockdown.

Target organization for the research was Cork City Learning Support Services in Ireland, were we did an internship during summer 2019. CCLSS is a school that gives students a chance to learn in a different kind of environment and with a more flexible schedule. CCLSS has a holistic approach on education and it provides education for individual needs. (Crockett 2020.)

To this day, due to the pandemic CCLSS unfortunately has had to close their doors twice. First time in the Spring of 2020 when the country went into lockdown CCLSS had to quickly take on online classes, which they had not been using before the lockdown. This obviously acquired some adjusting and luckily the situation with COVID-19 was a little better in the Fall of 2020. Despite government given restrictions students were able to get back to school, with various safety measures. After the Christmas break in the beginning of the year 2021 the government ordered schools back to distance education.

2 YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

2.1 Mental health and development

Development during childhood and adolescence is individual, but there are features, that are associated with different age stages and these stages affect mental health (THL 2019b). Adolescence is typically divided into three stages of development, that all have their own characteristics (THL 2019c).

The three stages of adolescence are early adolescence, middle adolescence, and late adolescence. Young adolescence occurs between the ages of 12-14. Because of fast physical changes the young people go through this stage of their lives, young adolescence is the time of fluctuating moods, behavior, and relationships. (THL 2019c.)

Middle adolescence is the time when emotional turmoil calms down and young people are more able to control their impulses and plan their actions. This stage occurs between the ages of 15-17. (THL 2019c.) During this stage the meaning of friends and social relationships is highlighted (Marttunen etc. 2013).

Late adolescence occurs between the ages of 18-22. In this stage behavior and traits begin to settle and young people take more interest in the surrounding society. (THL 2019c.) Young people also form their own values and goals and make many choices about the future (Marttunen etc. 2013).

Large number of mental health disorders appear during the middle - and late adolescence. Before the age of 18 years, more than half of adult mental disorders have their onset. (Das etc. 2016.) According to extensive study made in Finland, approximately three thirds of adults' mental health disorders have started already before the age of 24 (THL 2019c). The statistical database of Finnish Centre for Pensions shows that the number of young people on disability pension due to mental health reasons is also increasing. In 2018, 6185 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 were on a disability pension for mental health reasons. Which is almost twice more than 18 years ago. (Mieli 2021.)

2.2 Good mental health

Mental health is a part of overall health and it is an important resource. Good mental health is necessary for functional capacity and wellbeing. (THL 2019a.) Mental health is psychological capital. It also enables you to enjoy life and makes you feel like a valued member of the community. (Mieli 2020.)

Positive mental health consists of self-esteem, optimism, meaningful activities, sense of control over your life, capability to form satisfactory social relationships and ability to face adversities (THL 2019a). Social and economic inequality have a strong effect on mental health and survival. Uncertainty in life, for example poverty and financial concerns are a strain to mental health, which is why during uncertain times people need more support and help. (Mieli 2020.)

2.3 Mental health in the UK and Ireland

Young Minds is a charity group in the UK which is fighting for children and young people's mental health. According to their survey which was done by 2011 young people with already existing mental health problems in the Autumn of 2020, shortly after schools reopened, 69% told that their mental health was as poor as it was before going back to schools. Another question regarding to mental health was if they think return to school has had a positive effect on their mental health and only 27% said it was positive. 61% felt returning to school has had a negative impact on their mental health. (Youngs minds 2020.)

According to studies done in 2016, Ireland had the third highest mental health illness rates in Europe. About 18,5% of the Irish population was recorded as having a mental health disorder. Ireland was also well above the European average on depression, both men and women. Although the suicide rates in Ireland are below average. (Cullen 2018.)

3   COVID-19 PANDEMIC

3.1   COVID-19

COVID-19 comes from the words, corona, virus, and disease. COVID-19 is caused by recently found coronavirus. Coronavirus is a very infectious disease, and It causes a sudden respiratory illness. COVID-19 spreads through discharge from the nose and droplets of saliva. (WHO 2020a.)

Most people will experience mild to moderate symptoms, such as fever, cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, muscle pain, fatigue, runny nose, nausea, and diarrhoea (Finnish institute for health and welfare 2020). However, people with underlining medical conditions, for example diabetes, cardiovascular disease, lung disease or cancer are more likely to develop severe illness (WHO 2020a).

On January 9th, 2020 WHO reported that the new coronavirus has caused an outbreak in China. First confirmed cases in European region were found from France on the January 24th and already on the March 13th Europe was declared the epicentre of the pandemic. (WHO 2020b.)

Due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19, countries have been forced to take measures against spreading of the virus. Common measures taken have been recommended or compulsory wearing of masks, remote work, regulations on international travelling, restrictions between regions, closing of schools, closing or restricting opening times and customer spaces on restaurants and bars and limitations on public gatherings. (International monetary fund 2020.)

3.2   Situation and measures taken in Ireland

Ireland reported their first confirmed COVID-19 case on March 1st, 2020 (International monetary fund 2020). The government took measures such as closing schools, colleges, childcare facilities, and state-run cultural institutions on March 12th to delay the spreading of COVID-19. Further measures were taken two days later. Measures taken concerned restaurants, bars, and events among others. Measures were extended until May 5th and most of the measures were further extended until May 18th. (Citizens Information 2020.)

Ireland started the measures for reopening the society and businesses on 18th of May. On September 15th "Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19" was published. (Citizens Information 2020.) In the plan the government has taken into use a five-level alert system, shown in figure 1. The government received advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team and based on the advice decided on moving between levels. (Carswell 2020.)

THE IRISH TIMES	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Visitors	**10** from 3 households	**6** from 2 or 3 households	**1** other household	**No** visitors permitted	**No** visitors permitted
Gatherings	**50** outside your home or garden	**6** indoor **15** outdoor	**No** social or family gatherings	**No** indoor gatherings	**No** Except funerals or weddings
Weddings	**100** people can attend	**50** people can attend	**25** people can attend	**6** people can attend	**6** people can attend
Indoor events	**100** Up to 100 can attend indoor gatherings	**50** But up to 100 in larger venues	**No** indoor gatherings	**No** indoor gatherings	**No** indoor gatherings
Sports fixtures	**100** indoor **200** outdoor	**50** indoor **100** outdoor	**No** matches or events (except elite sport)	**No** matches or events (except elite sport)	**No** matches or events
Bars, cafes & restaurants	**Open** with protective measures in place	**Open** 6 people from up to 3 households	**Open.** Take away or delivery. Outdoor dining only. Max 15 patrons	**Open.** Take away or delivery. Outdoor dining only. Max 15 patrons	**Open.** Take away food or delivery only.
Wet pubs	**Open**	**Open** Groups of six from 3 households	**Open** Additional restrictions	**Open** outdoor only limited to a max of 15	**Only** offer takeaway or delivery service
Domestic travel	**No** restrictions	**No** restrictions	**Stay** in your county/region apart from work/education/essential purposes	**Stay** in your county/region apart from work/education/essential purposes	**Stay** at home except to exercise within 5km from home
Public transport	**Travel** off-peak hours or walk/cycle, if possible	**Peak hours** essential workers/purposes only; 50% capacity	**All hours** essential workers/purposes only; 50% capacity	**Avoid** public transport; essential workers/purposes only; 25% capacity	**Avoid** public transport; essential workers/purposes only; 25% capacity

Graphic: Paul Scott/IRISH TIMES GRAPHICS

Figure 1. Five-level alert system (Scott 2020)

On September 15th, when the 5-level plan was published, level 2 applied to all counties. Level 3 came into effect first in Dublin, then in Donegal and on October 6th in all the other counties. Every county in Ireland moved to level 5 on October 21st. (Citizens Information 2020.)

Figure 2 below shows the spreading of coronavirus in Ireland during eight-month period, from February 15th to October 15th, 2020. On October 24th Ireland had 55 261 COVID-19 cases, 1 878 coronavirus related deaths and 23 364 had recovered from the virus. (Worldometer 2020.)

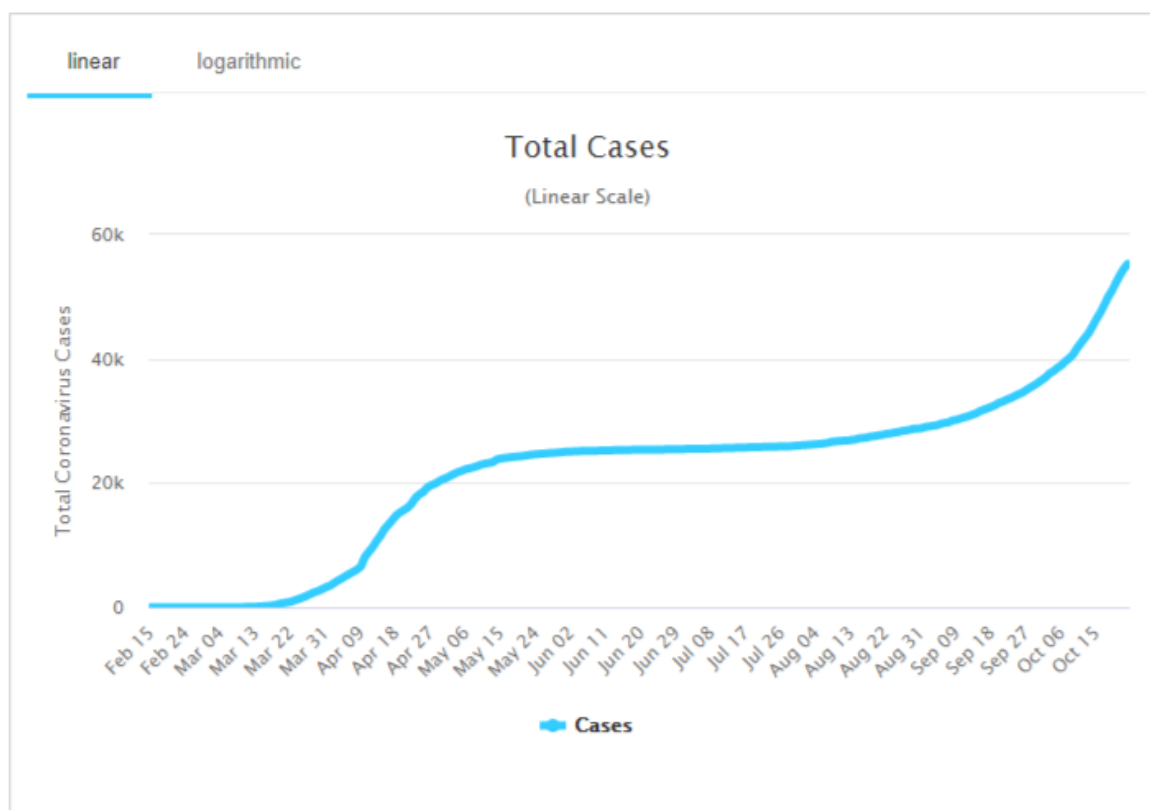## Total Coronavirus Cases in Ireland

Figure 2. COVID-19 cases in Ireland (Worldometer 2020)

On February 23rd, 2021 the government presented a revised plan to manage COVID-19. This plan was called "COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead". At this time level 5 applied to all counties until the 5th of April 2021. (Citizens Information, 2021.)

Level 5 meant that the citizens needed to stay at home except for work, education, or other essential reasons. Exercising was allowed within five kilometres from home. Schools were mainly closed, with few exceptions made for special schools and classes. Childcare was also closed except for vulnerable children and the children of essential workers. However according to the "COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead" -plan schools and childcare were going to start to open on a phased basis during March. (Citizens Information, 2021.)

3.2   COVID-19 and mental health

The pandemic has challenged mental health and wellbeing in several ways. According to WHO´s survey while the demand for mental health services is increasing, the critical mental services have disrupted or been put on pause in 93% of countries worldwide. Data collected with the survey conducted in 130 countries shows the horrible impact that COVID-19 has had on access to mental health services. (WHO 2020c.)

According to WHO, fear, grief, isolation, and loss of income are triggering mental health conditions or aggravating existing ones. People with pre-existing mental, neurological or substance use disorders may also have a higher risk of having severe outcomes and even death, due to COVID-19 infection. (WHO 2020c.)

COVID-19 has a huge effect on people's social relationships, work life, school-life, and family relationships. This can cause enormous mental health problems. Even though COVID-19 might not be as dangerous for a healthy young person physically, it can have serious long-lasting impact on a young person's mental health. (Cannon etc. 2020, 30.)

In Ireland the first wave of the Irish COVID-19 Psychological Survey was released on March 31st. It was a multi-wave study that was planned to run throughout the COVID-19 outbreak. Research was conducted by Maynooth University and the Centre for Global Health and Trinity College Dublin from Ireland, Ulster University from Northern Ireland, Edinburgh Napier University from Scotland, and University of Sheffield from England. (Maynooth University 2020.)

1000 adult citizens of Ireland participated in the survey. According to the initial results 41% reported feeling lonely, 23% reported clinically meaningful levels of depression, 20% reported clinically meaningful levels of anxiety, and 18% reported clinically meaningful levels of post-traumatic stress. (Maynooth University 2020.) Figure 3 represents the levels of clinically meaningful health problems in the Irish population.
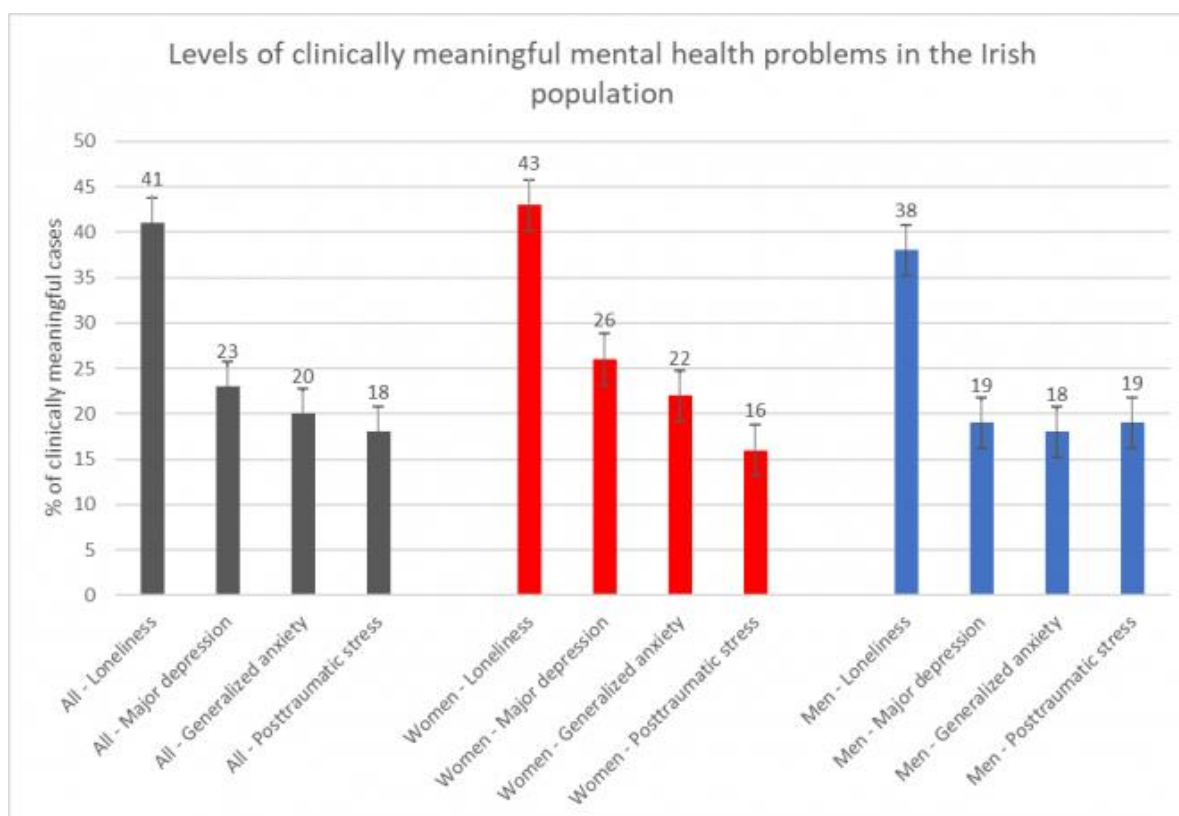

Figure 3. Mental health problems in Ireland (Maynooth University 2020)

4   TARGET ORGANIZATION

4.1   Cork City Learning Support Services (CCLSS)

Cork City Learning Support Services is a centre of education for young people between the ages of 12 and 21. These young people left school because they felt that they had previously been failed by the education system. CCLSS gives them an opportunity to return to education that is delivered in an informal and inclusive environment. (Crockett 2020.)

People referred to the centre receive a standard of education system comparable to the one received by their peers in mainstream education. The centre offers young people a holistic programme that encourages participation while supporting and empowering them. Differences in equality between privileged and the disadvantaged mean that vulnerable groups such as minority ethnic groups often lack information and understanding about their rights and fail to take action. In CCLSS, there is a strong focus on informing these individuals about their rights and supporting them to take action when required, since the privileged and well educated are more likely to seek justice regarding discrimination than the poor and marginalised. (Crockett 2020.)

Cork City Learning Support Services support large number of local young people who come from socially and economically deprived backgrounds. There are also minority groups such as refugees, asylum seekers and young people from travelling community. These young people are offered a holistic programme that supports and empowers the participants in a safe and caring environment. The aim of the centre is to help the participants in their personal and social development and to increase their self-esteem. (Crockett 2020.)

This holistic programme includes promoting independence, personal autonomy and active citizenship. It also provides integration into further training and education, as well as opportunities in the labour market. Individual learning plans will identify the individual needs of the young person through induction and ongoing assessment. (Crockett 2020.)

All of the courses in CCLSS are supported by mentoring and advocacy services, full time counsellor, whole centre literacy and numeracy programme, sport, Gaisce awards and drama and film making. Cork City learning Support Services works under the jurisdiction of the Cork Education and Training Board and in close cooperation with the Capuchin Order in the Holy Trinity Church. (Crockett 2020.)

4.2   COVID-19 measures taken in CCLSS

In Cork City Learning Support Services during the fall 2020 there were 78 pupils, 14 full time staff members, two part time staff members and on supervision student. Supervision student was given to CCLSS since COVID-19 started. Normally CCLSS would have close to 100 students, however because of the COVID-19 and social distancing, the students must be spaced one or two meters apart. (Crockett 2020.)

During the pandemic, CCLSS has been allowed to be open only for short times between the lockdowns. However, during those times they have taken extensive safety measures for the school to be open safely. CCLSS is based in an old two-story building, where one-way system was implemented through all of it. There was one "one-way" entry point and two exit points. There was also one staircase used to go up to the second floor of the building and another one to go down. (Crockett 2020.)

Everyone in the building was required to wear a mask at all times. Students stayed in one classroom the whole day, where they were assigned a desk. Teachers changed rooms instead. Cold meals were also served in classrooms since the canteen was not allowed to be open. Chairs and desks were sanitised when arriving and leaving. Students also received a personal sanitising packs that included wipes, masks, visor, and hand sanitiser. Sanitisers were also located throughout the building. (Crockett 2020.)

The students were required to fill out a Pre-return 10 learning questionnaire COVID-19. The questionnaire had to be filled out and returned at least 3 days before returning to the school. In this questionnaire the students also needed to sign that to their best knowledge they have not had any symptoms of COVID-19, they are not self-isolating, awaiting results of a COVID-19 test or have been advised to restrict their movements. These questionnaires were collected securely by Cork Education and Training Board. The questionnaire also contained a list of COVID-19 guidelines for students. (Crockett 2020.)

Computers were not a regular part of teaching in CCLSS before the COVID-19, but during the lockdown's students received laptops to work with. Both teachers and students have been practicing new teaching and learning methods by using the internet and laptops. First online classes were held during the spring 2020 lockdown. (Crockett 2020.)

Our contact person Micheál Crockett, vice principal from CCLSS sees that the school is very different since the COVID-19 pandemic started. Lack of interaction is causing problems for students and staff as they are losing the great atmosphere that they used to have in CCLSS. Between the lockdowns, when the school was allowed to be open there was a lot of anxiety within the students regarding safety matters.

5 PURPOSE OF THE THESIS, AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of our thesis is to promote students' mental health. With our theses we are aiming to find out and increase information about the effects of COVID-19 on mental health of the students, by conducting a qualitative online survey.

With our survey we are looking for answers to our research questions, which are:

- How does the COVID-19 affect students' mental health?

- How can CCLSS help students to cope with the mental health issues brought by COVID-19?

6   RESEARCH

6.1   Qualitative research

The purpose of qualitative research is to find a meaning of a phenomenon through description (NCBI, 2008). Qualitative research does not describe an event, give a theoretically meaningful interpretation of a phenomenon, nor statistical generalizations. The purpose of the data is to help researchers build a conceptual understanding of the phenomenon that is being studied. The size of the gathered data has no direct effect or significance on the study's success. (Eskola etc. 1998, 61–62.)

Qualitative research was chosen because of the need to learn how to understand better the effects of COVID-19 on individuals. This approach, when the data is based on quality, not on the amount, demonstrates the students' experiences in more diverse ways.

In purposive sampling the participants are chosen by consideration. The selection is not based on statistics. Sampling is not used to generalize, but to get ideas about a phenomenon. (Mäntyneva etc. 2008, 44-45.) Cork City Learning Support Services staff chose the participants for our research, for us to be able to get some variation. Participants were different age, sex, and background.

6.2   Plan and Execution

To conduct the research in Ireland, research permit was not needed. However, a cooperation agreement was made with LAB University of Applied Sciences and Cork City Learning Support Services. CCLSS also had parental permission to conduct research with the teenagers who were under 18 years old.

The data for our research was collected through a qualitative online survey in Webropol with open-end questions. The research group was narrowed down to seven participants who were between 16-22 years old and studied in Cork City Learning Support Services. The staff in CCLSS chose the participants, to have some diversity between them. For example, different sex, background, and life situation. We do not know the identity of the participants; we only received the answers online.

Themes for the survey need to be carefully chosen, considering the research question and the theoretical framework. During web-based survey, it is not possible to ask refining questions. (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2018, 88.) The survey consisted of two background questions to find out the age and sex of the participants and twelve open-end questions on following themes: school, life generally, social relationships, mental health and the support given by CCLSS during COVID-19 pandemic.

When making the questions, we made sure that they were clear and easy to be understood. The questions were thoughtfully chosen, for us to be able to achieve the aim and purpose of the thesis. The staff of CCLSS were consulted while making these questions. The participants who were chosen for the research received the link to the survey from their teacher in CCLSS and they had four weeks to complete the survey.

Compared to an interview, a web-based survey is more flexible way for the participants to answer, since it is possible to answer whenever. Also, the researchers do not get to know the identity of the participants. The fact that the participants do not need to face the researcher, makes it easier for the participants to answer difficult questions. (Andres 2012, 47.)

6.3   Adversities

The research got delayed few weeks due to the COVID-19 situation in Ireland. The government agreed for level 5 to start to apply nationally from 30th of December 2020 (Gov.ie 2020). This meant, that the education in Cork City Learning Support Services moved online again.

Many of the students in CCLSS were not used to using computers and were maybe not so motivated to study in an online environment. It was also a challenge for the teachers in CCLSS to get the students to fill the online questionnaire from home, since they could not help the students to fill it in the classroom.

In the beginning, we had planned to conduct the study with students who were over 18 years old. However, during the research, the research group needed to be extended from over 18-years old students to also those who were under 18 years old. Otherwise, we would not have been able to get enough answers on Webropol to complete the research. Luckily CCLSS had the parents' permission to fill out questionnaires.

Level 5 was supposed to be in place until 31st of January 2021, but on the 26th of January the government agreed that the current public health restrictions were to remain in place until the 5th of March (Gov.ie 2021). After which the schools were going to start to open on a phased basis (Citizens Information, 2021).

7   RESEARCH RESULTS

7.1   Analysis

Content analysis is a common analysis method used to analyze qualitative data. A precondition for a content analysis is that the information is simplified into descriptive concepts by creating categories. (Elo etc. 2016, 1.) The data was analyzed by using thematic analysis. Instead of being focused on the number of answers, it focuses on the content of the themes that aim to answer a research question. In thematic analysis is used to search key topics, that are both material-based and theory-based, by dividing and categorizing them. (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2018, 116-118.)

Under each main theme, sections of the material where the topic is discussed are searched. Underneath the themes, reduced sub-themes are formed. Sub-themes can be illustrated by using direct quotations from the participants. Themes can consist of connecting or distinguishing elements, which also allows the comparison of topics in the material. (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2018, 116-118.)

After the research had been conducted, the collected material was read through several times, for us to be able to get acquainted with its content in detail. Next, we looked for the points where certain theme was talked about, categorizing them under appropriate themes and at the same time dividing the material. After the material was broken down and categorized under themes, sub-themes were formed. The sub-themes were illustrated by using topics that emerged from the material and direct sentences from the participants.

7.2   Results

One of the main themes that surfaced from the research material was mental health and the second main theme was school and employment.
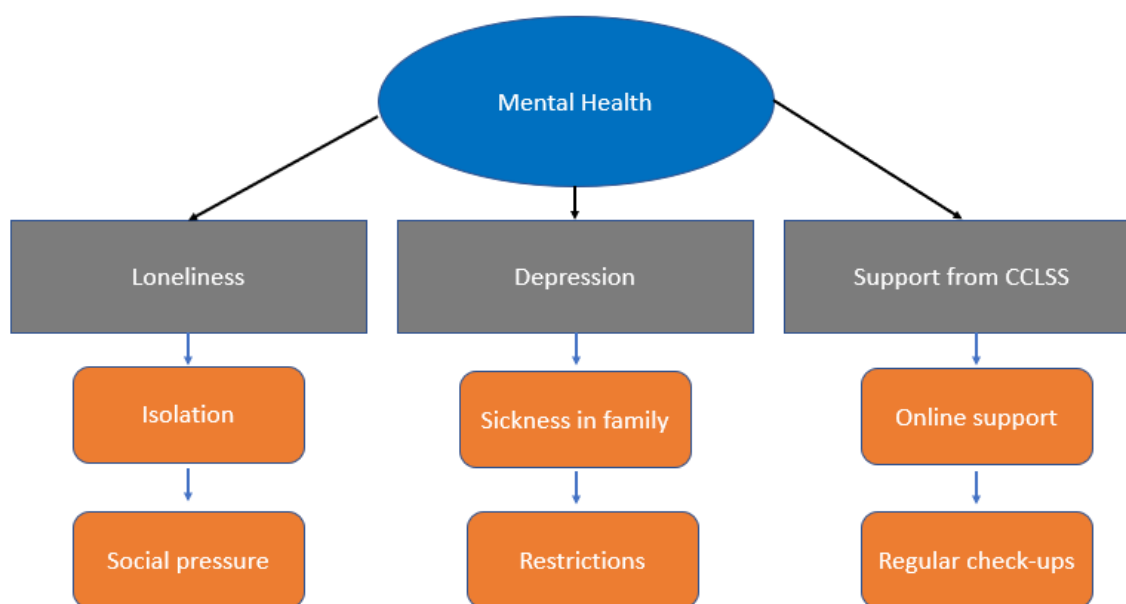

Figure 4. Effects on students' mental health

It was natural to take mental health as one of the main themes. The themes that rose from the answers were isolation, depression and we also asked how the youth felt about the support they got from their school. The main- and sub-themes, as well as the topics that emerged from the material are illustrated in the figure 4.

All the answers were unanimous on how much their everyday life has changed since the beginning of the pandemic. The youth felt like the feelings of loneliness came from having to be isolated from their friends and family, and hobbies. Lack of social life is challenging and because of that some felt like they have drifted apart from their friends.

Social pressure was also something that came up in the answers. Worries of COVID-19 and willingness to stay healthy has caused some social pressure be-cause some of the youth has refused to see their friends which causes agitation.

> *It has changed hugely – I no longer see family members who I used to see extremely regularly. I no longer see friends.*

> *Yes, haven't seen many of my old friends so we drifted apart.*

> *--I`m very worried about going out and meeting people so I feel they`re getting annoyed that I wouldn`t go out and meet up with them I'm just really worried I'll get it.*

Depression came from feelings of loneliness and concern for loved ones. What has also increased the feelings of depression is having to isolate from everyone, but many have found technology to be very useful to keep in touch with friends and family. The strict restrictions are very difficult for everyone and many have realised now due to the pandemic how sociable they are. Because currently Ireland is going through its third lock down, despite the frustration that comes with it, many have found different ways of coping and a new rhythm to everyday life.

> *Sometime ago I was very depressed but now I do a lot of small exercise to stay positive as I can.*

> *I can't visit or meet my friends and family anymore. It's kind of hard without them.*

> *The restrictions as a result of covid can cause a bit of a stress in relationship at times but overall I am managing well.*

The pandemic obviously brings huge challenges for CCLSS. Well-being of the students is very important for the school but having to look after the youth online the same level they used to do is very difficult. Despite of this, regarding to the answers we received the students were happy with the support they have been given and were very understanding of the situation. They understood that the school cannot impact on the government given restrictions or to the lockdown. Students were hoping that the school continues with positive and interesting online classes, motivation from the teachers and regular check-ups.

> *Constant communication and interesting classes.*

> *-- it's very well organised right now with everyone being lovely. I like the structure of having school in my day.*
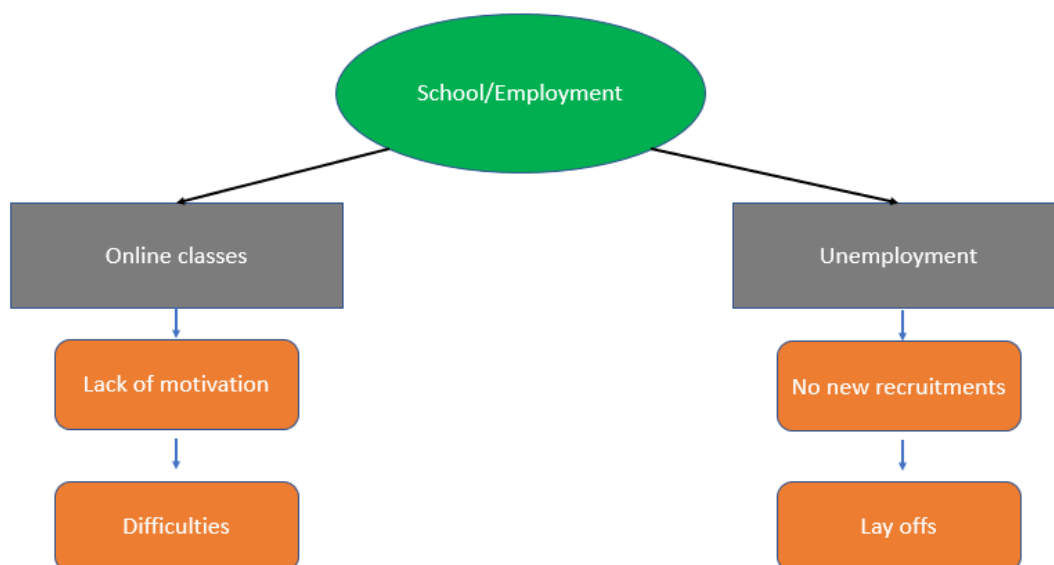
Figure 5. Effects on school and employment

As is shown in the figure 5, under the main theme school and employment, two sub-themes rose from the survey. Those were online classes and unemployment. Students said that the school life has not been the same, since the COVID-19. Face to face learning was much preferred to online learning.

While talking about online learning, the themes that came up a lot were lack of motivation and difficulties with the online learning. Students felt online learning harder than being in school since they were not interacting with people and had to sit at the desk at home many hours a day. Some students also felt a lot of pressure due to the online classes.

> I find that I am really unmotivated, I find myself working really hard for a week or two, then burning myself out and not really doing anything at all for up to a week at a time.

> We are doing online classes from home now. I find it harder as we are not getting the same interactions with people.

> My school life hasn't been the same since the covid 19 cause, we were forced to do online classes, which I am not used to and there is too much pressure.

Regarding the future of their studies, some students were scared of the colleges not opening and the effects of online learning to their graduation.

The second sub-theme that surfaced from the material was unemployment. According to our survey, the students in CCLSS were worried about their future employment, due to the situation with COVID-19.

Many of the students were scared about companies not hiring new workers and the lay offs that were happening in many professions.

> *Trying to get a job will be hard because most places won't employ new people due to Corona.*

> *I'm afraid I won't get the job I want as a lot of people on all professions are being let go.*

8   ETHICAL ASPECTS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

8.1   Validity

The validity and reliability of the research means, the research's ability to find out what it is meant to find out. In the reliability assessment of qualitative research, what is being evaluated is not so much the method of the process, as the overall picture, or the new theory or model that is the result of the research. The main importance of reliability is that the output and report of the thesis communicate with the reader. The research always creates meanings and participates in some theoretical or practical discussion, in which case the primary criterion for its evaluation is the effectiveness of the project and its reporting. (Vuori 2020.)

According to Schreier, it is important that the analysis and conclusions are easy to follow, since for the validity of the research, it's important to know how the results were produced. For qualitative studies, many other evaluation criteria have been suggested, but the common feature in all these criteria is that the content analysis process needs to be reported correctly to support the trustworthiness. (Elo etc. 2016, 2.)

Our research was done carefully, with accuracy and in accordance with good scientific practice. All the decisions have been made in cooperation with Cork City Learning support services and the supervising teacher. In the thesis, we have also used previous researches on the topic. In the evaluation of our research, we have compared our research with previously made research. Seven participants were enough for similar themes and thoughts to emerge from the collected material and to have some diversity in the results. Students quotes and thoughts added to the research results increased the validity of the research.

8.2 Ethicality

As researchers we have both ethical and moral obligations towards the partici-
pants in our research, the professional field and society (ARENE 2020). Finnish
National Board on Research Integrity has made guidelines and recommendations,
that the universities of applied sciences have committed to follow. We have famil-
iarized ourselves with the student's checklist and made sure, that we have taken
everything needed into account while conducting our research. Student's checklist
consists of thirteen sections that need to be considered, see figure 6.

Student's checklist

1. I have ascertained my possible conflicts of interest
2. I have acquainted myself with the topic of my thesis
3. I have, together with my supervisor, ascertained the resources required by my work
4. I have acquainted myself with the guidelines of research ethics
5. I have acquainted myself with the principles linked with the handling of personal information and data protection and the instructions from my university of applied sciences.
6. I have ascertained together with my supervisor whether my thesis requires an preliminary ethical review and/or research permit, and if needed, I have taken care of these
7. I have signed the required agreements together with my supervisor and my collaborative partners
8. The authorship of my thesis and possible other publications connected with my thesis has been agreed upon
9. Storage, ownership and usage rights of the materials for my thesis have been agreed upon in a manner accepted by all parties
10. I have reported on the funding and other significant linkages connected with my thesis
11. I am aware that my thesis will be examined in a plagiarism identification system
12. I understand that my thesis is a public document
13. I have a right to a high-quality thesis process

Figure 6. Student's checklist (Kettunen etc. 2020)

According to Professor Reynolds, an essential part of protecting the participants is
to safeguard their rights and well-being. The information gathered during the study
will not be passed on to outsiders. And the information will only be used for the
promised purpose. The anonymity of the participants is guaranteed. The re-
searcher must follow the agreements they have made, so the integrity of the re-
search is not compromised. (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2009,116.)

Before we started our research, we made a cooperation agreement with LAB university of Applied Sciences and Cork City Learning Support Services. In every phase of the research, we have taken into account the ethical and moral obligations we have towards the participants. The material collected was handled in a way, that the anonymity of the participants was not compromised.

During our research, we did not have to handle personal data, since the teachers in CCLSS chose the participants for our research. The teachers did not get to see the students' answers and we received anonymous surveys filled in Webropol. This way we guaranteed no one knows what which participant has answered. After the research was completed, the material collected was disposed properly.

9   REFLECTION

9.1   Conclusion

Topic of the thesis is substantial and very timely, because the mental health problems are increasing among the youth and we can certainly say that the COVID-19 has also had a huge impact on that. The research was successful. We received plenty of material through our survey and our research answered to the research questions, which were: How does the COVID-19 affect students' mental health and how can CCLSS help students to cope with the mental health issues brought by COVID-19.

COVID-19 affects the youth's everyday lives majorly. Closing of schools and isolation affects their mental well-being by making them feel lonelier and more depressed. The participants from Cork City Learning Support Services also felt lack of motivation with online teaching and some uncertainty towards their future employment. The participants also felt like CCLSS was helping them by having interesting online classes. The students thought as well that motivation and regular check-ups that they receive from the teachers were very important.

Our research corresponds to previous findings from the Irish COVID-19 Psychological Survey conducted by Maynooth University and the Centre for Global Health and Trinity College Dublin from Ireland, Ulster University from Northern Ireland, Edinburgh Napier University from Scotland, and University of Sheffield from England. According to the Irish COVID-19 Psychological Survey COVID-19 has had an impact on people's mental health. 41% of the participants reported feeling lonely and 23% reported clinically meaningful levels of depression. (Maynooth University 2020.)

There can also be found similarities between our research made in Ireland and a new study made by the city of Helsinki in Finland. The study made in Finland showed that 70 percent of high school and vocational education students have found it hard to progress in their studies due to online education. Also, 56 percent of the high school students that participated in the study said they have experienced hopelessness and melancholy on most days. (STT 2021.) Participants in our study also found online learning harder and they felt more pressure because of it. They also felt depressed, mostly due to feeling lonely and concerned for loved ones.

The statistical database of Finnish Centre for Pensions reported that disability pensions due to mental health reasons within young people have been increasing at least until the year 2018, when these statistics were published. (Mieli 2021.) We can only imagine, how the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic will affect on these already increasing numbers.

The purpose of our thesis was to promote students' mental health. We think that the output of our thesis communicates well with the readers and the results will raise awareness within people as well as increase information about the effects of COVID-19 on mental health, which is the aim.

Lastly, we would like to share a part of an article that Yle News has written. In the article there are listed seven ways to help an lonely adolescent:

1. Do not belittle loneliness.

2. Broach the sensitive subject.

3. Highlight the fact that loneliness is not the fault of an adolescent.

4. Encourage the adolescent to see their good qualities.

5. Tell them, that the situation is going to change.

6. Maintain the sense of community in teaching.

7. Tell them it is important to meet people, within the restrictions.

(Yle Uutiset 2021.)

9.2   Further Research

The director of Cork City Learning Support Services Des Cullinane showed our Webropol questionnaire to his supervisor who was very impressed by our research. They would like to know how other students are coping with COVID-19 and if the measures they take to help are enough. We have agreed to give a copy of our questionnaire to their use, and they are planning to give the questionnaires to students in all the schools that are under the jurisdiction of Cork Education and Training Board, so the students can fill them out.

About other further research that we could possibly do in the future, it could be interesting to find out, after the COVID-19 situation has been solved, do people's lives go back to the way they were before? Or do people still carry the effects of COVID-19 with them?

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Appendix 1: Webropol survey

COVID-19 and mental well-being

1. Age *

2. Sex *

○ Male
○ Female
○ Prefer not to answer

3. How has the Covid-19 affected your everyday school life? *

4. Has the Covid-19 pushed the date of your graduation further? *

5. Are you worried about your situation in the future, regarding your studies or employment? What is it that concerns you? *

6. How has your life changed since Covid-19? *

7. Has Covid-19 affected your social relationships? If so, how? *

8. During this time have you felt isolated and lonelier? If so, how has that made you feel? *

9. Have you felt depressed due to the effects of Covid-19? Which effects of Covid-19 have impacted your mental well-being and how? *

10. What kind of support have you gotten from CCLSS for your mental

health? *

11. How could CCLSS further support your mental well-being? *

12. In your opinion, what are the practices that have improved in CCLSS during COVID-19? *

13. What are the practices that you don't prefer? *

14. During the two lockdowns, did you prefer face-to-face learning or online learning? *