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Building Back Better – Using an Ecological Lens to Argue for Strengthening Mesosystemic Connections for Young People in a Post Pandemic World

Connie O'Regan [a], Bernadine Brady [a] and Cornelia Connolly [b]

[a]UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland Galway, Galway, Ireland; [b]School of Education, National University of Ireland Galway, Galway, Ireland

ABSTRACT

It is a truism to state that across the world the COVID-19 pandemic brought about and continues to cause disruption on a scale not seen before. As the pandemic is still very much ongoing, its lasting impact will take time to fully unfold. This article uses ecological theory to map the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people and their wellbeing, based on some initial published studies. It reviews how their micro system contexts, especially access to school and youth services were further disrupted adding to the pressure and isolation experienced by many. Continuing the ecological framework the paper explores the policy spaces within the exosystem where stakeholders are engaged in promoting youth wellbeing and support. It is this policy "space" that this article argues has the potential to scaffold positive youth development and supports in the aftermath of the pandemic. It will argue in particular for the need to extend and enhance mesosystem connections, especially for those without strong natural support networks

KEYWORDS

Ecology; young people; mesosystem; impact of COVID-19

Introduction

As the impact of the COVID -19 pandemic continues to unfold, there is a sense that the impact of this extraordinary time will have lingering and long-lasting effects. It is also acknowledged that the ramifications of the various disruptions were unevenly spread across individuals with the very real likelihood that those most at risk are mostly likely to be the most impacted (United Nations, 2020). While the crisis unfolded in Ireland, the impact on young people, the disruption to their education, transition to third level, connection to informal supports and communities has been a cause for concern (Mohan et al., 2020; Shonfeld et al., 2020). Reports have highlighted increased concerns about the mental health impact on this group (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2020; Planet Youth, 2021). In addition, where supports were provided, it was apparent that some individuals were unable to access these either through lack of resources, guidance, or even physical spaces within their homes (Mohan et al., 2020).

CONTACT Connie O'Regan connie.oregan@nuigalway.ie UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland Galway, Galway, Ireland

This article will use Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development to explore how macro-level disruption of COVID-19 impacted on young people's lives. The paper considers at micro system level how both schools and youth services were disrupted. It explores the potential within the policy exosystem for stakeholders in both formal education and non-formal education to jointly support and scaffold youth development. Finally the connections between contexts in the mesosystem, where there is considerable potential to strengthen links between stakeholders as a protective scaffolding of youth development, are presented.

Theoretical framework

The ecological model of human development proposed by Bronfenbrenner in 1979 posits that human development is best understood as an interaction between the individual and a multi-layered set of contexts which have both direct and indirect impacts. In his own words, the development of a child or young person occurs as a result of the "progressive mutual accommodation between an active growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives as this process is affected by relations between these settings and by the larger contexts in which these settings are embedded" (p.21). Newman and Newman (2020) describe the contexts as (1) Macrosystem: this layer of influence is at legal and state level, the furthest layer from the young person but yet often impacting them none the less; (2) Exosystem: is constituted by the wider policy and practice that the young person is not actively involved in but which influences actors in their microsystem and ultimately the young person themselves; (3) Microsystem: the immediate environment surrounding the young people in which they engage directly, their family, school, community, youth group, sports club; and (4) Mesosystem: the overlap or interactions between the micro-system contexts and how they work together (or not) to promote the young person's development.

Lundberg and Wuermli (2012) used this model as a framework to understand the impact of the 2007 financial crisis on young people and to demonstrate how such a significant event not only affects young people directly but also indirectly through the myriad of contexts that impact on their development. They state "a central question in scientific research on how ecologies influence development is how macrosystem contexts and events (for example, aggregate economic shocks) influence intermediate (exo- and mesosystem) contexts, which in turn influence the settings or contexts within the developing person's microsystem, settings within which the person has face-to-face interactions or proximal processes. Aggregate economic shocks are thought to affect the ecology of human development by hitting the macrosystem" (p.49). Based on Lundberg and Wuermli (2012)'s model, Figure 1 uses the ecological model of human development as a framework for considering both the direct and indirect impact of COVID-19 on young people.

The precarity of the situation and the scale of the disruption which the COVID-19 pandemic was to unleash, was not widely apparent when it was first notified to the World Health Organisation in December 2019. Even when Irish schools were first closed in a landmark national shutdown announced in March 2020, the extent of the disruptions which were to come and the intrusion of restrictions into the personal, familial

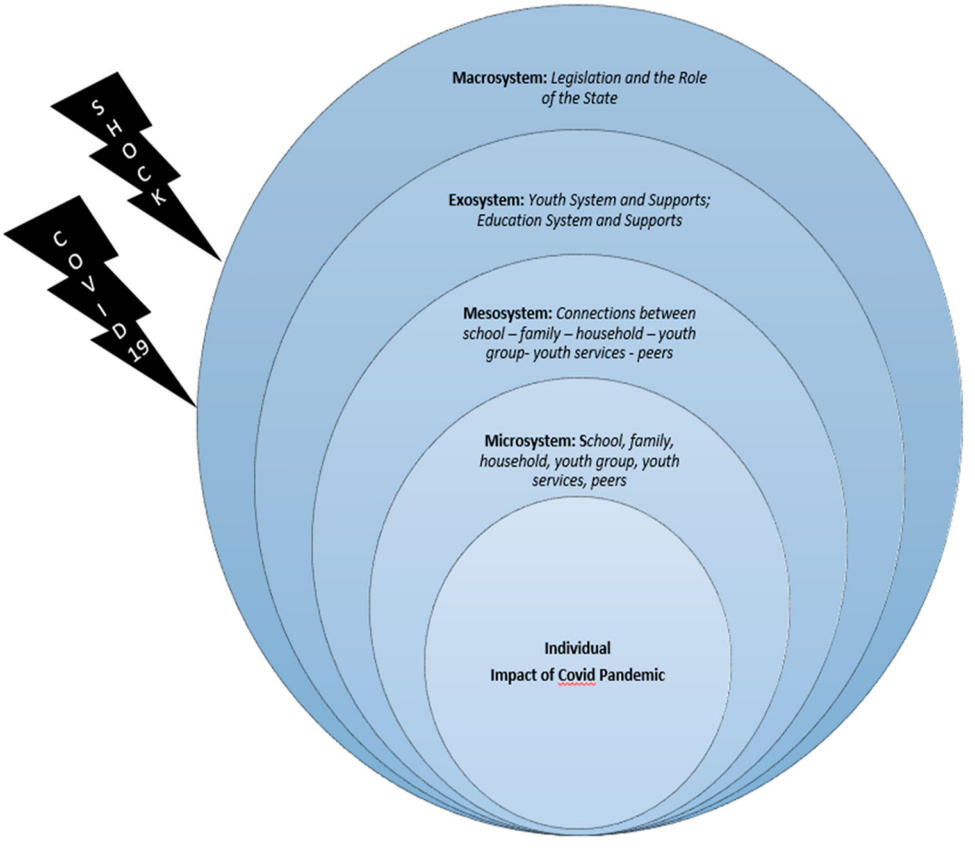

Figure 1. COVID Impact through an Ecological Lens; (Adapted from Lundberg & Wuermli, 2012).

and community spaces was not foreseen. This article sets out to provide an exploration the application of ecological theory to understand the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's development and focus in particular on the mesosystem as a site for potential development. This ecological review of the impact of COVID-19 begins with the emerging research on the impact on the Individual.

Impact on the individual

A study on the impact of COVID-19 on Irish young people by Darmody et al. (2020) used pre-pandemic data to consider emerging trends and predict how the impacts of the pandemic are likely to exacerbate inequalities among young people. Specifically, they found that the negative impacts on wellbeing and mental health were likely to be greater for those at risk of disadvantage. In terms of school closures, they argue that children and young people with access to digital devices and with parents on hand to provide support fared much better than children and young people without these advantages. As a result, young people at risk of disadvantage were more likely to experience learning loss and it was feared that some would not re-engage with education after the disruption. The authors of that report go on to state that there is a strong argument for providing supports to at risk groups after the pandemic and that the costs of this could be

set alongside the potential long-term costs of disadvantage and early school leaving. They argue particularly for an increased focus on initiatives that promote wellbeing in schools, enhanced supports for teachers in this area and an increase role for community, youth groups, sports clubs and specialists supports given the scale of need that will become apparent especially for young people at risk of disadvantage (Darmody et al., 2020). To date, the evidence base on the impact of COVID-19 on young people is developing and similar findings regarding its negative impact on young people continue to be reported (Eurofound, 2021; Murray et al., 2021; Timonen et al., 2021)

The OECD published an analysis of policy actions to support the needs of young people post pandemic, especially those at risk of marginalisation (OECD, 2020). They particularly recommend adopting a holistic approach to education and implementing initiatives to improve learning, social and emotional need of students with a focus on vulnerable groups and the involvement of "all relevant stakeholders (formal and non-formal) … in policy design and implementation" (p.33). Having considered the impact of COVID-19 on the individual, the impact on the micro system arenas of school and youth work are described below.

Microsystem

The impact of the complete disruption of school and youth work services as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic was experienced most acutely within the micro system. Some studies have described the impact of emergency provision in Irish secondary schools. Mohan et al. (2020) published a detailed analysis on the views of principals regarding the impact of the first lockdown on Irish students where they surveyed all secondary school principals in Ireland with a return rate of 33%. The researchers also conducted follow-up interviews to explore the survey findings with key stakeholders. They reported on the initial complete disruption of education provision, followed by an immediate move to establish online provision. The survey returns provided evidence of an impact on learning, wellbeing and motivation especially on groups inclined to disengage from education and concerns about the potential for learning regression, while learners with more intrinsic motivation tended to fare better than those with extrinsic motivation in the move to online learning. Mohan et al. (2020) conclude that students will need support with social and emotional wellbeing in the post-pandemic phase.

Bray et al. (2020) also studied the impact of Covid-19 on over 1000 Dublin students, attending 15 secondary schools in the Dublin area. They found negative impacts of the school closures on student wellbeing, on their engagement with learning and on their relationships with teachers. Where students reported lower levels of wellbeing, they were also more likely to report less positive relationships with their teachers. Where parents were actively involved in supporting young people, this appeared to mitigate some of the negative impacts of school closures. The researchers were able to compare their findings to previous research from 2019 and could evidence the direct impact of Covid-19 on the lower wellbeing scores reported (Bray & Byrne, 2019). Furthermore, four out of five students reported a perceived increase in their school workload and that this was a specific source of additional stress. The authors recommended, similar to Mohan et al. (2020), an increased focus on wellbeing support and active engagement by schools with parents and home/school support.

During the pandemic, the efforts teachers and schools went to in order to provide educational supports must also be acknowledged. Teachers and young people together had to pivot online, reframe and learn new skills in the process. The scale of the challenge was significant but notwithstanding this, there is no doubt that there were many examples of successful and innovative practice (Bray et al., 2021; Flynn et al., 2021; Mohan et al., 2020). Additional government funding was also made available to improve ICT access (Department of Education and Skills, 2020).

Services and supports within the youth work sector were also significantly disrupted by the pandemic. A survey of 256 youth work organisations published by the National Youth Council of Ireland (2020) reported that 68% of services found it difficult to engage young people in online activities and 67% were concerned that those most at risk were most difficult to contact. Only 22% of the organisations represented in this survey were able to continue to provide a full service to young people, with 64% reporting a reduced service and 14% of organisations unable to provide any supports. Despite these challenges, the report noted that there was increased use of digital service provision and enhanced staff competencies in this regard. A follow-up report published by the same research team found that 59% of projects had to reduce the number of young people they engaged with (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2021).

Lavizzari et al. (2020) presented similar findings in a meta-analysis of European published studies on the impact of Covid-19 on youth work service provision. They noted that in particular the rapid move online of youth work supports and the evidence of a digital divide affecting some young people, preventing them from engaging fully with this move. Notwithstanding these challenges, the authors also highlighted the levels of innovative practice and collaborative working that was demonstrated by the youth work sector in continuing to support young people through this time.

McArdle and McConville (2021) in their survey of youth workers in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland who had continued to provide services throughout the pandemic concluded that the focus of youth work remained the same, noting that the central value of reflective practice within the sector served it well in its efforts to maintain services and support. The research also presented finding that youth workers made a significant difference during the pandemic as an essential service. Finally, they concluded that undoubtedly online supports have a role to play in the future, however, further exploration is needed to ensure the right blend of online and face-to-face approaches to maintain that core connection with young people which is at the heart of youth work.

This article has been setting out the pressures and strains on services in the microsystem as they tried to respond to the extraordinary challenges of COVID-19. Some providers found they had to move from traditional roles, adapting additional and innovative supports. Shaw et al. (2022) reported how during the pandemic, Foróige, Ireland's largest youth work service provider had to expand its focus to engage directly with families to provide needed access to digital devices, credit and other practical supports. Batsleer et al. (2020) reported on similar findings from UK youth workers who recorded their challenges and innovative responses using a contemporaneous diary methodology. Finally, O'Regan et al. (2021) undertook a formative evaluation of a cross sectoral approach linking both teachers and youth workers together in a community of practice development to share expertise, training and resources. This is an example of the type of meso-systemic supports that may serve as an effective response strategy to the legacy of

COVID-19. However, prior to focusing on the meso-systemic links, it is important to review the degree of support for such an approach with the systemic components of both education and youth services in the exosystem.

Exosystem

The primary legislation underpinning youth work in Ireland is the Youth Work Act 2001. Within this legislation, Youth work is defined as "a planned programme of education for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young people through their voluntary involvement and which is complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations" (Youth Work Act - Part 1: Section 3, Government of Ireland, 2021).

A review of the provision of youth work in Ireland found that an estimated 382, 615 young people take part in organised youth services. This represents 43.3% of the total youth population aged between 10 and 24 years, while 53.3% of those participating may be experiencing economic or social disadvantage (Indecon, 2012). The report found that there are over 40 separate organisations providing youth supports in Ireland with an annual budget of €79 million. Non-formal education is defined by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015a, p.42) as "an organised educational process that is complementary to mainstream activities of education and training and does not typically lead to certification." In addition, the strategy defines Non-formal learning as

> a targeted learning process that supports the development of a person, his or her transformation potential, creativity, talents, initiative and social responsibility, and the development of associated knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. It encompasses learning outside institutional contexts (e.g. out of school), but can also take place in such contexts. Non-formal learning in youth work is often structured, based on learning objectives, learning time and specific learning support, is intentional and participation is voluntary. Non-formal learning is underpinned by a set of educational values.
>
> (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015a, p.42).

For Coyne and Donohoe (2013), youth work involves the provision of "planned non-formal education" (p.106). According to Chaskin et al. (2018) programmes offered by Irish youth services "include an emphasis on supporting youth autonomy, fostering active citizenship, and strengthening youth voices through political, social, and civic engagement" (p.12). The National Youth strategy specifically sets out a requirement that agencies work collaboratively across sectors to provide more effective supports for young people.

Recent educational statistics indicate that at present, there are 371,450 students enrolled in 23 secondary schools. The secondary school sector employs 30,623 teachers and has an annual education budget for the sector is €10.8 billion. In 2019, there were 48,268 students taking part in the transition year programme (Department of Education, 2021). In Ireland, the role of the Department is to provide funding and strategy support with local schools having a high degree of autonomy and control (OECD, 2020). Educational Disadvantage is defined in the Education Act (1998) as "the impediments to

education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevents students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools" (Government of Ireland, 2021, p.32). The national programme for supporting individuals at risk of educational disadvantage, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) was established in 2006 and provides additional annual funding to qualifying primary and post primary schools. Recent data indicate that 26% (198) of all secondary schools qualify for this programme which includes additional supports for numeracy and literacy, home school liaison and reduced class sizes (Department of Education and Skills, 2019).

Two key policy documents describe how education stakeholders need to work with community stakeholders in order to promote positive youth development. First, CUMASÚ Empowering through learning (Department of Education Skills, 2019) sets out goals that focus on ensuring a responsive education and training system; progress for learners at risk of educational disadvantage and learners with special educational need; ensuring education and training providers have the skills and support needed; developing the relationship between education and the wider community, society and economy and providing strategic direction and support systems in partnership with stakeholders. Secondly, the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice is a policy initiative from 2018 by the Department of Education and Skills. Each school is required to develop actions to implement this policy as part of their Self Evaluation process. "Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life" (Government of Ireland, 2018, p. 10). With the policy documents identified in the exosystem, there is a clear space provided for both formal and non-formal educational providers to work together to provide a protective space to scaffold youth development.

Discussion

Having worked through this ecological review of the impact of COVID at the individual, micro and exosystems, it is important to consider what role strengthening mesosystem connections can play in promoting resilience and recovery post pandemic.

Why the mesosystem?

Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines the mesosystem as "the interactions among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates" (p.25) and states that there are positive impacts on the developing young person where the roles and activities across settings are mutually positive and reinforcing. This approach is also embedded in the national wellbeing strategy which states: "Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development supports this view and offers a comprehensive systems-based understanding of wellbeing. It acknowledges the importance of the individual and his/her immediate relationships in their social context and in their wider community. This model demonstrates that to be human is to be relational and that wellbeing is always realised in a community" (Government of Ireland, 2018, p. 10).

Wellbeing can be impacted especially negatively for those who without strong networks of support. These individuals "face challenges and discrimination that may isolate them from their peers and communities, and impact greatly on their lives. Issues may be related to personal identity, gender, social class, family homelessness, parental addiction, mental health difficulties or imprisonment" (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014, p. 99). Early studies into the impact of the pandemic on young people are indicating that these individuals were particularly negatively impacted and their needs should be considered especially in responding its legacy (Darmody et al., 2020; Mohan et al., 2020; OECD, 2020; Shonfeld et al., 2020). As stated by Duerden and Witt (2010, p. 114) "youth move through a variety of influential contexts each day, including home, school, work, youth programs, and other free time and peer settings that make up their mesosystem. The relationships between these settings impact youths' developmental trajectories". Therefore policies and practices that seek to enhance mesosystemic connections across developmental settings post pandemic are especially warranted.

Newman and Newman (2020) argue that social networks within an individual's mesosystem can impact each other by activating instrumental and social support across settings. In addition, the knowledge individuals learn about how to act in various settings can positively influence individual's sense of self and their understanding of their place in the world. For Downes (2014), the strength of this approach is its focus on an individual's potential for growth rather than deficits. He also highlights the positive impact of settings working together to support an individual through transitions and in sustaining positive influences over time. Other researchers have also argued for the positive impact on developing young people when there is mutually reinforcing and supportive engagement across mesosystem connections (Duerden & Witt, 2010; Durlak et al., 2007; Eriksson et al., 2018).

Leonard (2011) used this ecological approach to track a school and community group partnership in the US over 60 years. He noted that while this engagement requires coordination and communication, it does provide effective engagement especially for those with less supportive micro-systems and a less connected mesosystem. He described the positive impact on individuals' lives where there was a supported engagement between the school and community partners. He states that "partnering is a relationship of growth on both ends and not simply the transfer of goods, services and knowledge from one institution to the other" (p.1005). In an Irish context, Flynn (2020) set out the importance of mesosystem connections between community, home and school to foster child education and connections, noting that ecological theory provides a "socially just and ecologically sensitive understanding of educational disadvantage". (p.45).

It is clearly evident that scaffolding of the mesosystem is required in ensuring young people's development is not further compounded by the impact of the pandemic. With respect to suggestions and implications for practice we propose that in order to "build back" we must be cognisant and mindful to build back through partnerships, innovative practice and working with young people.

Build back through partnerships

According to its report on the impact of COVID-19 on marginalised learners, OECD (2020, p.19) state that post pandemic we need to develop a rounded approach to education addressing individual's academic, social and emotional needs working "though

partnerships with grass-root associations and, more broadly, recognising the legitimacy of non-formal education providers is also a crucial component as much during school closures as for school re-opening strategies. These actors are close to the field, might have tight relationships with vulnerable communities and can support local authorities in providing both educational services and extra support to vulnerable families and communities". Therefore, it is important to ensure that initiatives and models are developed using existing policy frameworks where stakeholders and actors can come together to support and strengthen youth development. As stated by Carroll and McCoy (2021) "schools, especially DEIS schools, are on the front line in dealing with students' issues in physical and mental health, housing, and poverty, but these issues obviously cannot be solved by teachers or school leaders" (p.179). Clearly additional funding and service enhancement across a range of critical services will be required, including educational, health, housing and counselling supports. In the height of the pandemic, the Department of Education and Skills provided additional funding to schools to supply laptops and equipment to young people working at home (Department of Education and Skills, 2020). In their new digital strategy, further funding and cross sectoral working is seen as central to continue to advance access to digital skills for all (Department of Education and Skills, 2022).

Build back through innovative practice

In its strategy for 2021–2023, the Department of Education and Skills recognise the contribution of innovative practice across all educational sectors in maintaining services and support during COVID-19. It is important to ensure where innovative and creative solutions where found that these are developed and incorporated into development plans with the aim of rebuilding and enhancing stakeholder engagement and communication. Key stakeholders include schools, youth groups, parents, state agencies and young people themselves. Erwin and Thompson (2020) provide examples of a range of innovative practices within the youth work sector ranging from Shakespeare on Tiktok, youth-led community arts projects and cross generational pen pal projects. These green shoots of bottom up and community-led practices can play a key role in support of young people.

Build back with young people

Within the ecological model, young people are active participants in the contexts and individual situations they find themselves. They have lived through momentous times and while many have struggled with imposed restrictions and loss, they have also learned new skills and coping mechanisms, not least in navigating a new online and digital world. In line with the Irish government policy commitment to child and youth participation (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015b) is important to recognise young people's agency and engage with it actively as we support them in integrating this experience and moving beyond COVID-19. Within national policy, there are clear frameworks that can be followed to facilitate child and youth voice on key issues that impact them. Specifically, "Lundy's Voice Model Checklist" for participation as described in the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, 2015-2020, can be used to ensure that as initiatives are developed to respond to post-covid needs, so that young people's agency is full respected and engaged (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015b, p.22). Furthermore, as

the pandemic impacted their everyday lives, the direct experiences of young people was captured (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2020). Consideration should be given to repeating this survey and exploring young people's priorities for where and how to start rebuilding.

Conclusion

According to Global Child Forum (n.d., para. 1) "Of all the heart-breaking effects of COVID-19, its impact on young people could prove to be one of its most damaging legacies". This article has used an ecological model to consider the multi-level impacts on young people during this crisis and to uncover some of the damage. It has considered the disruption to their schooling, access to community, contact with their networks of support. It has made the point that the impact of this disruption is likely to be unevenly spread with those with least resources and likely to be most impacted. In an Irish context, we have a strong formal and non-formal education provider network across schools and youth sectors where both sectors have stated aims and policy directives to promote positive outcomes for young people and their wellbeing. Now is the time for these actors to mobilise strongly and to engage together across sectors, working together to enhance mesosystemic connections. Furthermore in so doing, we can create a corrective and protective response to the legacy of COVD-19 and promote the resilience and recovery of young people.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Connie O'Regan, is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre. Following a career working in a range of direct support, research and project development roles, Connie is experienced in the design and implementation of research studies both within an academic setting and in an applied work setting.

Bernadine Brady is a Lecturer in the School of Political Science & Sociology and Associate Director of the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at NUI, Galway. Bernadine has published widely on themes related to young people, including youth work, mentoring, participation, empathy and civic engagement.

Cornelia Connolly is a Lecturer and Director of Research at the School of Education at the National University of Ireland, Galway. Elected Fellow of the International Society for Design and Development in Education (ISDDE), Cornelia's research has three interweaving threads in educational design, educational technology and computer science education.

ORCID

Connie O'Regan http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8994-9487
Bernadine Brady http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6139-1824
Cornelia Connolly http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9778-5569

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