

Before Covid (BC) and Altered Direction (AD)

Primary education reacts to a changed world



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Primary education in Ireland has undergone sudden and radical change since March 2020. This article looks at how the issues and concerns for primary schools and the education partners supporting them changed dramatically with the closure and subsequent reopening of schools due to Covid-19.

The visual learners among us find 'before and after' photographs especially informative, particularly after a cataclysmic natural disaster or an unexpected explosion, such as that which changed the face of the beautiful port city of Beirut in August. Usually, the pre-event photo gives context to the extent of change represented in the post-event photo. It helps us to make sense of how lives are affected and of the work that faces those charged with restoring physical and psychological normality in its wake.

12 March 2020 was the date when such seismic changes came about in Irish education. While the full picture is yet to emerge, what is clear at the time of writing, autumn 2020, is that primary school as we knew it before March has changed utterly.

BC (Before Covid)

In the weeks and months leading up to 12 March, which we can call 'Before Covid', or BC, the primary school sector was most concerned with the imminent introduction of the frontloading model for the allocation of SNAs. Many school leaders feared that this was a system insufficiently trialled and thus highly likely to see schools short of the necessary supports in September 2020, despite assurances from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) that an appeals system would be in place for exceptional cases.

Concern also persisted among school leaders following the NCSE's Croke Park conference, which explored the 'full inclusion' model of special needs support – known as the New Brunswick model after the first area to adopt it. Many in the education sector expressed grave concern as to how such a system would be rolled out in Ireland, and several articles and contributions from those in the small Canadian state, critical of the system's shortcomings, were in circulation. In Europe, only Portugal has so far adopted full inclusion as their approach to teaching children with special needs.

While attending the European School Heads Association (ESHA) conference in Lisbon in February, Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) Deputy CEO Pat Goff and I spent a day in a fully inclusive primary school in the suburb of Estoril. It was a very pleasant experience, and we had a chance to talk to several people in the school about how full inclusion works in reality. We concluded that, while the school we visited was excellent in every way, the supports available in terms of resources, funding, staff training, school meals, appropriate buildings, and access to professional support would require enormous investment from the Irish government – to the extent that it is impossible to envisage full inclusion being realistically implemented here. For example, the school, with approximately 250 children on roll, had a full-time psychologist and an occupational therapist shared with one other school.

It is also questionable whether such a model would be more successful than those employed throughout our special schools, which, in spite of insufficient funding and staffing, provide a very high-quality education and school experience for our most vulnerable children.

Reacting to Covid-19

The arrival of Covid-19 in Ireland led to drastic and unprecedented actions as the country fought to limit the spread of the dreaded virus. The closure of schools with immediate effect was one of several measures introduced to keep people apart and limit human contact. The country embraced the new limitations on liberty well, and the aim of 'flattening the curve' was introduced to help achieve it.

The closure of schools was so sudden that many schools didn't even have a chance to allow children to bring home their schoolbooks. Initially it was felt that the schools would close for two weeks only, but as the virus spread, schools' return date was pushed back until it naturally aligned with the summer holidays. From March to the end of June, schools played their part in the national effort by taking on new ways of supporting children's learning remotely, and by communicating by phone, email, and text and video messages to emotionally reassure children and their parents.

Schools preparing children for sacraments saw their dates pushed back, and ceremonies normally associated with the March–June period are now taking place in September–October. For confirmation candidates, this has provided one final formal link with their primary school, as candidates have all begun their second-level education since the end of August. Schools came up with memorable ways of staging graduation ceremonies in June for those at the end of their primary school journey.

All education partners worked with the Department throughout the summer holidays towards reopening schools in late August. To meet the social-distancing requirements set out in the HSE's pathway to reopening schools, there was huge restructuring in the layout of school buildings, provision of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), movement and storage of school furniture, and the appointment of extra cleaning

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staff. This meant that many principals and deputy principals worked 50–60 hours a week during their annual leave to have their schools ready.

The Department provided the necessary information piece-by-piece in July and August, eventually announcing a €375 million package to cover the costs of extra cleaning materials, PPE and building adjustment costs, and the preparation of isolation rooms, as well as a plan to create substitute panels to cover the expected vacancies as school staff self-isolate or visit Covid-19 test centres.

Thanks to the extraordinary work of school staff, particularly the school leaders, schools reopened successfully. Children embraced the new reality in schools with relief that at last they could meet their friends again, albeit in a more controlled environment. At the time of writing, however, four weeks into the new term, huge concerns remain. Schools reporting cases of Covid-19 to the HSE are finding it difficult to secure timely engagement with them to establish who they see as close contacts, to allow the process of contact tracing to begin. School leaders' difficulties around what to communicate, and with whom, are exacerbated by the speed at which news circulates through social media.

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While the incidence of Covid-19 being transferred through school contacts is extremely low so far, most schools have situations where some staff members, students, or their parents or siblings have been tested. Where a positive case occurs, schools are aware of the protocols and have left the HSE to the job of contact tracing. In some cases, however, schools have had to ask 'pods' or 'bubbles' to isolate while awaiting confirmation from the HSE that this needs to happen.

Primary Education Forum

The Primary Education Forum (PEF) was established in 2018 to facilitate the exchange of information between the Department, agencies, teachers, school leaders, and managers. Because of Covid-19 restrictions, from 12 March onwards the Forum has met online only. Its aim is to support the planning and sequencing of change in schools and to look for opportunities for schools to streamline implementation and address workload issues. It follows feedback on the experience of implementing the Action Plan for Education, the DES's high-level work programme. The work of the Forum is consistent with the sort of approach proposed by Dr Karen Edge at IPPN's Annual Principals' Conference in January 2020.

Participation in the PEF is essential for partners seeking to influence the direction and pace of proposed changes. For example, as a result of the PEF, changes were made to two planned reforms around the Primary Maths Curriculum and implementation of certain provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018. A similar partnership approach has been adopted to examine the issue of small schools through collaboration with the Forum. The work now under way seeks to build on this in a sustainable way by continuing to engage with key partners and the Department's Small Schools Steering Group to develop proposals to support and sustain small schools.

NCCA

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has been busy too. In February it published its Draft Primary Curriculum Framework, setting out the changes it had identified as necessary through widespread consultations with stakeholders, work carried out through schools, and other research. The draft document builds on the strengths and successes of the 1999 curriculum, while responding to challenges, changing needs, and new priorities. It gives schools more agency and flexibility on curriculum implementation, with blocks of time to be used at schools' discretion. The perception of curriculum overload is addressed by moving from eleven subjects to five broader curriculum areas.

It is foreseen that the New Curriculum, scheduled for implementation from September 2024, will bring a leaner and more integrated approach to children's learning. Seven key competencies will be embedded from junior infants to sixth class. After four years in the system, children will move towards a more subject-based approach from third class onwards, to reflect children's growing awareness of subjects as a way of organising learning.

The draft framework gives more time and prominence to well-being, introduces foreign languages from third class, broadens the area of Arts education, and increases the focus on technology. It also emphasises the importance of inclusive practice, inquiry-based learning, and play-based pedagogy, with assessment a central part of teachers' daily practice.

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CSL

Supporting school leaders through the pandemic quickly became one of the main strategic priorities for the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) in the latter part of the 2019/20 school year. CSL mentors were a huge support to newly appointed school leaders, who faced unprecedented challenges this year. The CSL team undertook a review of the mentoring programme to improve its effectiveness and developed an online mentoring module for mentees to achieve a real understanding of the mentoring process. CSL's one-to-one mentoring, group mentoring support from IPPN and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), CSL's one-to-one and team coaching supports, and the Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership (PDSL) are now, more than ever, an integral part of leadership in the Irish educational landscape.

Covid-19 challenged the system into new ways of working, and CSL, through engagement with stakeholders, offered insights into researched best practice and provided regular updates to school leaders on leadership in challenging times. CSL produced the 'Learning to Be a School Leader in Ireland' graphic, grounded in national and international research, which looks at leadership for each stage on the continuum and the elements of professional learning considered integral to leadership professional learning. The research undertaken on the elements of professional learning was used as a benchmark for the endorsement of professional learning provided by stakeholders in the system.

CSL opened two calls for providers to submit provision for endorsement, which has led to several leadership learning provisions being endorsed. This will support the Irish education system to provide the highest-quality professional learning for school leaders. The Centre further developed its work in the area of leadership professional learning by its collaboration with stakeholders in developing a one-stop calendar for school leaders, where they can access all leadership professional learning at the various stages on the continuum.

In keeping with the Department's vision of encouraging innovation and promoting excellence in leadership, CSL leads the 'Excellence through Collaborative Leadership and Management' initiative in conjunction with the DES, the Inspectorate, NAPD, IPPN, Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI), and third-level and business representatives. Clusters of schools participated in a demonstration model designed to support projects that involve innovative approaches to school leadership and management. CSL continued to learn and collaborate with leadership centres in other jurisdictions to further inform the work of Irish school leaders.

PDST

The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) continued its wide-ranging provision of support for school leaders and teachers throughout school closures. On the evening of 12 March, it launched its Distance Learning portal with timely and targeted supports for leadership, well-being, curriculum, and digital technologies, which all included tools to help schools navigate the new space, both online and offline. Online platforms allowed the team to maintain its connection with school leaders through its national programmes (Misneach, Forbairt, Meitheal) and to respond to the bespoke needs of school leaders through individual school support interactions.

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School leadership permeates the work of all PDST teams, with specific supports for leaders a particular priority for the PDST Digital Technologies, Health/Wellbeing, and Literacy /Numeracy teams, who work hand in hand with the PDST Leadership Team. During this time, the PDST website www.pdst.ie was populated with a wealth of new resources to help teachers and school leaders continue with the teaching, learning, and assessment of students. Each PDST team also developed a host of 'Learning Paths' on www.scoilnet.ie to help with planning and preparation of remote instruction.

The PDST's customised school support was in high demand at this time, reaching 8,800 school leaders and teachers during the closure period. The PDST were extremely pleased with the response to their Learning for All series of webinars, hosted in partnership with the Teaching Council, which explored current issues facing schools and harnessed some great learning from the magnificent efforts made by schools to adapt to these unprecedented circumstances.

For 2020/21, the PDST has a full schedule of offerings to support school leaders and teachers in all areas of leadership, teaching, and learning.

The Leadership Team has already engaged with over 140 newly appointed principals through Misneach and 200 newly appointed deputies as part of the new year-long Tánaiste programme. Both programmes will be reshaped and reimagined in the light of new challenges for school leaders, with the development of online professional communities being an additional component of each.

PDST's Comhar programme for middle leaders, which supported over 360 APIs and AP2s last year, will be expanded along with the PDST Meitheal, providing a facilitated professional learning community for experienced school leaders. PDST's Forbairt for leadership teams (Principal, Deputy, and another school leader) is already filling up.

PDST's Digital Technology team has produced a brand-new suite of supports for blended learning: www.pdst.ie/blendedlearning. It is also worth visiting the team's YouTube channel to view the catalogue of digital tool tutorials (search for 'PDST Digital Technologies'). PDST STEM and Languages teams have webinars ready to go, exploring the Primary Language Curriculum, Maths, and Science with innovative approaches for play and inquiry-based learning in the changed classroom and school environment. See: <https://pdst.ie/primary/literacy/webinars> and <https://pdst.ie/PrimarySTEM>. The PDST's Reading Recovery and Maths Recovery programmes also continue for hundreds of schools. Finally, PDST's contextualised and bespoke support for all school leaders and teachers is now taking applications on <https://pdst.ie/schoolsupport>.

Special education

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has been conducting a review of special school and special class education. The extent of new classes being opened in recent years comes in the wake of high demand for places. Schools' willingness to open special classes in mainstream schools has been tempered with concerns over whether they will be adequately supported once established.

While significant challenges remain, much progress has been made, with 167 new special classes opening for the 2019/20 school year. The DES prefers that schools engage voluntarily with this challenge of opening special classes to support the children in their community, although the Minister does have powers to address situations where there is a lack of places available.

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Digital strategy for schools

The Department's current policy for the effective use of digital technologies in teaching and learning is set out in the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015–2020, which is currently being implemented. The Strategy promotes the embedding of digital technologies in all classroom and school activity so that its use becomes a seamless part of the education experience, including all aspects of teacher education and continuous professional development.

After 12 March, when schools, almost without warning, were closed and wouldn't reopen until September, learning through digital technology

dramatically became not just essential but in many ways the only means of accessing education. Schools which up to then had differing levels of experience with remote learning now had to engage with it as the only way they could interact with pupils.

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Most used the Seesaw platform, through which they could set and correct work remotely as pupils and staff alike adjusted to an entirely new way of teaching and learning. Classes, staff meetings, and board meetings were held using Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or other apps that allowed people to interact, share files, and break into subgroups. The Education Centre network played a huge role in providing online courses for teachers to help them deal with digital learning methods, challenges, and opportunities.

Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill

The Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019 was published in September. While it had completed consideration by Seanad Éireann in December, further progress has been delayed due to the change of government and the subsequent pandemic. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) and Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA) on behalf of the management bodies and IPPN shared serious concerns about the bill, which all felt didn't acknowledge the responsibilities of all parties equally.

If we have ever before described a school year as 'strange', the criteria for making such judgements have now moved. A famous Irish politician once used the phrase 'grotesque, unbelievable, bizarre, and unprecedented' in describing a series of odd events and the knock-on effects. Another politician abbreviated it to 'GUBU'. Neither of those articulate people lived to see the effects of Covid-19, but they would surely have saved their best expletives to describe its effect on the world. Hopefully, 2021 will be less GUBU than 2020.

“ The greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. He is the one who gets people to do the greatest things.”

– Ronald Reagan,
40th president of the United States