Post-Primary Pedagogy in a Pandemic

Second-level education during Covid-19 building closures

The school closures period from March to June 2020 was a unique experience in the history of Irish second-level education, forcing new, remote methods of pedagogical delivery. This article explores some key areas of impact – principally changes to teaching and learning approaches and decreases in student engagement and well-being. The continued circulation and virulence of Covid-19 means that disruptions to education remain a strong possibility, requiring robust contingency planning and flexibility.

Government-mandated closures of school facilities on 12 March 2020, necessitated by the Covid-19 public health emergency, represented a watershed moment for school communities across Ireland. Overnight, the educational setting for 723 second-level schools changed from the classroom to a home-based environment. The suddenness of the transition, the absence of opportunity to prepare, and the uncertainty over student assessment, particularly with the changing decisions on the Leaving Cert exams as the pandemic deepened, were a challenge for all concerned. This extraordinary period undoubtedly presented some of the greatest trials for our educators and students, yet it has also broken new ground in approaches to education, particularly in the use of technology for remote and independent learning.

Overall, teachers were swift to respond to the disruption, rapidly adapting, innovating, and creating distance-learning solutions to bridge the gap between school and home over a three-month period. However, not all teachers and students had equal access to 'new' pedagogical modalities due to differences in broadband connectivity, access to technological devices, and digital literacy. Student engagement and motivation were also impacted. Perhaps of greatest concern has been the profound effect on student (and staff) well-being arising from teaching and learning in an atmosphere of global crisis and the loss of in-person connection facilitated by school premises. These problems have been more acute for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with additional needs. As schools have now reopened, it is important to take stock and identify lessons from this momentous era as we continue to live, operate, and educate alongside Covid-19.

Gretta Mohan
Research Officer,
Economic and Social
Research Institute

Teaching and learning at a distance

In an official statement issued on the day that school buildings were shuttered, the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2020) outlined:

> Schools will be asked to continue to plan lessons and, where possible, provide online resources for students or online lessons. ... Schools are asked to be conscious of students that may not have access to online facilities and to consider this actively in their response.

In rising to the challenge of maintaining a continuity of education for their students, teachers rallied to upskill their digital competencies in a short period, typically working longer hours and engaging in peer-to-peer learning in the early weeks of the closures. The use of virtual learning environments, online education platforms, and tools varied from school to school, with Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, and Zoom being popular choices. Most schools communicated with pupils via email, and provided materials, resources, and assignments to students via online channels. Some schools organised real-time video streaming of lessons in a bid to mimic the usual timetable, though this was more common in private schools (Devitt et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that schools with prior experiences of embedding technology in education, such as 'iPad schools', had a smoother transition to distance learning during the pandemic (Devitt et al., 2020; Mohan et al., 2020).

> **Evidence suggests that schools with prior experiences of embedding technology in education had a smoother transition to distance learning during the pandemic.**

While the use of digital technologies in education, and the value placed on them, soared under the lockdown, online options were not available for all teachers and learners. A digital divide was reported by more than half of second-level school principals in one study (Mohan et al., 2020). This reflected a deficiency of access or of adequacy of broadband connectivity, based on geographical location or economic factors, as well as a lack of digital devices, and hampered the ability of some to engage with schoolwork remotely. Many schools tried to provide digital equipment to those in need, supported by additional DES funding for this purpose. But schools were forced to prioritise some groups, such as exam-year students or students from low-income backgrounds, which meant that universal coverage was typically not achieved. Some teachers deployed 'offline' channels such as telephone and post to communicate with students (and parents); this was more prevalent in DEIS schools.

More broadly, the home environment has been reported as not conducive to learning for some students, particularly those in less privileged circumstances, where they lacked a quiet space or desk to study and were competing with other domestic demands and adversities (Bray et al., 2020). Across the world, concerns have been expressed that school closures may have amplified existing educational inequalities. Teachers themselves also encountered difficulties in meeting the demands of work and home life.

Despite best efforts, for many second-level students, a reduction in instructional contact with their teachers, particularly one-to-one contact, was a consequence of the move from the traditional classroom to remote settings. The negative impact of this is especially pronounced for students with special educational needs. The ability to conduct practical work all

but ceased, while group work or collaboration among students on a remote basis was limited.

Initially, the DES emphasised that distance education efforts should focus on year groups which were due to sit State exams. The cancellation of the Junior Cert, and the subsequent cancellation of the Leaving Cert, replaced by a calculated grades system, reduced the imperative of preparing for national assessments of these groups. For the rest of the school body, assessment outside the classroom varied, but evidence indicates that the use of final presentations was most commonly reported for first and second years, while for third and fifth years open-books exams were often used (Mohan et al., 2020).

Student engagement and motivation

The longer-term impacts of the school closures on learning loss and academic performance are yet to be established, but the more immediate impact on student engagement was palpable. The effects were especially marked among Leaving and Junior Cert students as well as students in DEIS schools. The loss of extrinsic motivation from the cancellation of exams was the primary explanation for student disengagement.

More generally, a number of barriers to student engagement over the period were identified: teachers reported that student attendance and engagement with schooling suffered due to a lack of interest on students' part, limited support from their home (particularly for students of DEIS schools), and technological obstacles (Devitt et al., 2020). The use of assessment with feedback as a mode of teaching delivery was found to be important in maintaining higher levels of student engagement, and instruction via live video also fostered greater participation. On a positive note, teachers reported that some students acquired greater skills in independent learning, improved their digital competencies, and showed greater creativity.

> **" The home environment has been reported as not conducive to learning for some students, particularly those in less privileged circumstances.**

Well-being

The Covid-19 outbreak itself and the loss of the physical school community have taken a toll on the well-being of students. While schools are a learning place, they also provide a vital space for daily social interactions with friends, peers, teachers, and wider staff. The broader life of the school, the structure and purpose of the school day, and non-curricular activities all contribute to the growth and development of children and young people, which were sorely missed over the duration of closures. Principals reported that the pastoral role of schools was the most difficult thing to replicate remotely, though most schools strove to provide guidance counselling and well-being supports, and to maintain the free school meals programme where applicable. Regular extracurricular activities and physical education fell by the wayside for many, though schools tried to maintain some sense of school spirit through initiatives such as online competitions, quizzes, and supportive videos.

In a longitudinal study from schools in socially disadvantaged areas of Dublin, Bray et al. (2020) found a deterioration in student well-being in 2020 relative to 2019. Students reported higher levels of stress, attributing these to a perceived increase in workload, a lack of or reduced feedback from teachers, and less connection with peers.

Going forward

While a full return to school attendance in the traditional classroom setting has broadly been achieved, the changes brought about as part of the new circumstances are daunting for some. Since the Covid-19 health crisis appears far from over, and the potential for disruption of education prevails, resilience of school systems requires flexibility in approaches to teaching, and greater considerations of equity and inclusivity. Schools have a duty of care for all students, and extra provisions, drawing on additional resources, existing networks, and nurturing relationships, are especially needed for those struggling with classwork and well-being.

"One fortuitous upshot may be that of a more future-ready, technology-embracing education system.

The potential for learning gaps to widen between students from more and less privileged backgrounds, and between those with and without access to the required technologies during the shutdown, will need to be examined, and measures to mitigate such inequalities will need to be prioritised.

Somewhat serendipitously, the crisis has led to a newfound appreciation of the potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for education, expanding schools' repertoires of learning approaches. To fully seize the opportunities provided by technology, teachers and students need to be supported in developing their digital skills, which may serve to safeguard education in the event of further closures. Digital exclusion at the home level remains problematic, but schools can play a role in bridging the divide. Like many sectors of society, the full ramifications of the pandemic period for education are yet to be realised, though one fortuitous upshot may be that of a more future-ready, technology-embracing education system.

REFERENCES

Bray, A., Ní Chorcora, E., Maguire Donohue, J., Banks, J., and Devitt, A. (2020) 'Post-primary student perspectives on teaching and learning during Covid-19 school closures: Lessons learned from Irish students from schools in a widening participation programme'. Dublin: Trinity College Dublin.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2020). Guidance on Continuity of Schooling for Primary and Post-Primary Schools. Dublin: DES.

Devitt, A., Bray, A., Banks, J., and Ní Chorcora, E. (2020). 'Teaching and learning during school closures: Lessons learned. Irish second-level teacher perspectives'. Dublin: Trinity College Dublin.

Mohan, G., McCoy, S., Carroll, E., Mihut, G., Lyons, S., and Mac Domhnaill, C. (2020). 'Learning for all? Second-level education in Ireland during COVID-19'. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.