

The Well-Being of School Communities

Reopening schools after Covid-19 closures: A psychosocial response

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This article discusses the rationale for the approach taken to supporting the well-being of school communities as they reopened following Covid-19 school closures. It reflects on some of what was learned from the experience.

Introduction

Covid-19 has had a major impact on our daily lives, and we have all had to adjust and adapt in the face of significant challenges during 2020. The scale of the continuing pandemic and the duration of recent school closures are unprecedented, both in Ireland and internationally (Doyle, 2020). School closures provided a unique challenge to our education system, and there was a fundamental change in how school communities functioned to support students' education, with emerging evidence of inequitable impact on certain cohorts in their learning and well-being (Darmody, Smyth, & Russell, 2020).

The need to reopen schools and return all students to the support provided by schools became a national imperative. It was recognised that the well-being of school communities needed to be an important element of the Department of Education and Skills' (DES) overall plan to ensure a successful return to school.

Supporting well-being and resilience

The concept of resilience acknowledges that life can require adaptation to change, loss, and sometimes trauma. Resilient individuals can make a positive, adaptive response to adversity. Ireland's *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018–2023)* (DES, 2018) acknowledges that factors related to a person's skills and competencies, their affectional ties with family, and the existence of supportive relationships, safe communities, and support systems, including school systems, provide positive contexts and multiple opportunities to support the development of well-being and enhance the capacity to cope in the face of adversity. The document has adapted the WHO definition of mental health to define well-being:

Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of 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. (DES, 2018, p. 10)

The policy statement recognises that well-being does not necessarily mean the absence of stress or negative emotions, and that people's experience of well-being may vary; everyone experiences vulnerability at some stages in their journey through life.

The Covid-19 pandemic, in bringing a real risk to the physical health of our citizens, led to an understandable increase in worry and anxiety across society (Darmody et al., 2020) – a normal and healthy response to a real threat (Hobfoll et al., 2007). Kelly (2020) identified three key challenges for all citizens in managing their mental health during this crisis:

- learning to keep our anxiety proportionate to the risk
- learning how to live with a certain amount of worry
- navigating the uncertainty that the Covid-19 virus has brought to our broader lives.

For many, this may have been made more manageable and tolerable as these feelings became normalised and supported by the collective national experience and the societal recognition and response to the situation – including, for example, through the government's *In This Together* campaign. Some children and families, however, have struggled more than others and have experienced loss and grief due to bereavement, or ongoing worry due to personal or family illness and concerns about the health of vulnerable family members. In this respect, the families of some healthcare workers may have experienced a heightened perception of risk and fear of loss (Brooks, 2020).

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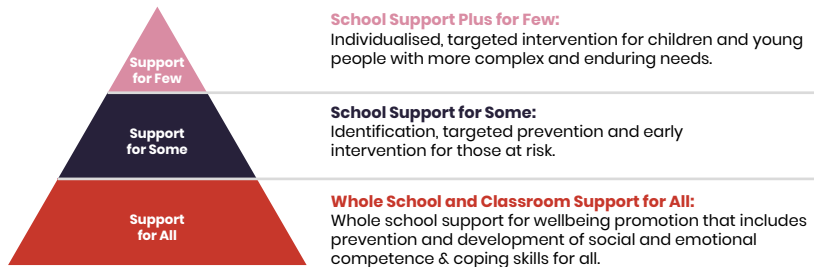
The public health measures that were put in place in Ireland as a response to the pandemic, including the closure of all schools and the requirement for everyone to physically distance and largely stay at home in the earlier stages, have resulted in additional challenges for people's well-being and mental health, for some more than others.

School closure, for some students, removed from their lives some of the key protective factors essential for their well-being, especially the supportive structures and routines of school, which include the experience of belonging, connectedness, and safety, and access to support, resources, and physical activity. School closure also meant, for some students, increased exposure to key risks to their well-being that may have included stressful family situations, likely heightened by Covid-19-related issues such as home-schooling or unemployment, restricted access to friendships, increased social isolation, and lack of access to services. Research suggests that the mental health and well-being of those with pre-existing mental health difficulties and special educational needs were likely to require particular consideration (Lee, 2020).

Developing a model to support the return to school

It was realistic to predict that all students, school staff, and parents would experience a broad range of stress responses as part of the return to school and that supporting the well-being of those school communities needed to be a key element of the DES's plan.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) proposed the provision of a psychosocial response to meeting the well-being needs of school communities as schools reopened, as recommended by the Health Service Executive for the aftermath of a crisis (HSE, 2016). This would require the provision of a 'stepped model of care,' with strong emphasis on providing practical, pragmatic, and compassionate support for all, recognising that some may need additional or more targeted supports to recover.



DES/NEPS Continuum of Support framework

The approach used the existing structure of the Continuum of Support Framework (see figure) to support a whole-school, universal approach to planning for the return to school, while recognising that some students would require more targeted intervention and planning to help reconnect with their school community and re-engage with learning.

The nature of the support proposed was underpinned by five key principles, known as the 'Hobfoll Principles' (2007), which are widely accepted and explicitly recommended as protective factors to support optimal returning to normalcy and well-being in the aftermath of an emergency. The principles underpinning the approach to supporting well-being as schools reopened include the promotion of:

- a sense of safety (feeling both physically and psychologically safe at school)
- a sense of calm (feeling relaxed, composed, and grounded (regulated))
- a sense of belonging and connectedness (experiencing meaningful relationships with others who understand you and support you in your school community)
- a sense of self-efficacy and school-community efficacy (feeling that you and your school community can manage this)
- a sense of hope (feeling that things will work out well).

Implementing the Hobfoll Principles at the universal, whole-school level, *Support for All*, required, as a basic and essential response, implementing strong physical-safety measures, with clear and calming communication and awareness-raising across all members of the school community. A settling-in period was also advised, to enable school communities to adapt

and adjust to being back in the school environment, and to prepare for re-engagement with teaching and learning.

Focusing on well-being, 'slowing down to catch up' on friendships, and school belonging and connectedness were supported with the provision of a range of guidance and resources developed by the DES's Support Services,¹ working with NEPS in a coherent and aligned way; these were communicated via a single platform on the [gov.ie/backtoschool](https://www.gov.ie/backtoschool) webpage. Re-establishing routines, normalising feelings and stress responses, and emphasising school belonging and connectedness as well as self- and community efficacy were incorporated into this element of the response. At this level, emphasis was also placed on the need to promote school staff well-being, partnerships with parents and carers, and student voice and agency as integral and essential elements of a successful return to school.

Implementing the Hobfoll Principles at the targeted and more individualised levels of the Continuum of Support (*Support for Some/Few*), on the return to school, recognised that some students and their families may need support additional to the universal support provided, in order to successfully return to school. Schools were asked to notice and plan for those students who continued to struggle, including those whose needs may have emerged during the pandemic, and those previously identified as having special educational or additional needs, including mental health needs.

Further supports were made available to school communities to support students who were reluctant to attend school, were absent due to illness, had experienced loss, were at risk of becoming disengaged, or whose behaviour seemed different or out of character. This included guidance and support provided by NEPS, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), and the Health Service Executive and HSE-funded services.

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Looking forward

Supporting a successful sustained transition back to school requires that school communities feel safe, calm, and hopeful, feel that they can manage this challenge, and have a sense of belonging and connectedness in their school community. The ongoing nature of the pandemic, as it surges and wanes in the absence of a vaccine, is likely to lead to fluctuating well-being and mental health, and to a continued need for responsive, flexible systems of support, a trend that is emerging in the literature (Darmody et al., 2020).

Positive learning has emerged from these extraordinary times. The challenges we have faced in the school system have highlighted the centrality and contribution of schools in our society and their crucial role in the development of our children's and young people's lives. The role that schools play in providing supportive and protective relationships, and in fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness, has come to the fore. Our current circumstances have highlighted not only how necessary these key school-based protective factors are for the well-being and resilience of our students, but also how well-being may be considered an essential and integral element of successful teaching and learning.

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ENDNOTES

1. The Department's Support Services/Agencies include the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), Centre for School Leadership (CSL), National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT), National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Support Service, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), and National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

Role of Trade Unions in the workplace

"Covid-19 has underlined the vital necessity of trade unions in the workplace. This has been a year of unprecedented turmoil in education, including the Leaving Cert 2020 and the re-opening of schools in August. ASTI representatives at every level – school stewards, local branches, national committees, ASTI Standing Committee and our elected Officer Board – have continued to engage extensively with the wider membership throughout this time, using online platforms. Information and opinions have been shared and we have continued to use our democratic structures to ensure that the collective voice of teachers is heard."

- Kieran Christie, ASTI General Secretary

