

Meeting the Needs of Children Most Affected by the Pandemic

A principal's perspective on how the pandemic has affected the education and wellbeing of children in a DEIS band 1 school



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All children have been affected by the pandemic, particularly children with special needs and from disadvantaged backgrounds. I believe that the government response to these greater needs has not been enough. The pandemic has shone a light on the most vulnerable in our society, highlighting issues already present. This article gives a glimpse at how our DEIS band 1 school navigated through the pandemic, learning and thriving, and illustrates the challenges left to face.

Introduction

Our school is located in the foothills of the Dublin Mountains, a beautiful location for our community. Unfortunately it is one of the most disadvantaged communities in Dublin, if not the country. Unemployment, antisocial behaviour, violence, mental illness, aggression, substance misuse, poverty, and low expectations have long been features of this area.

Many of our children have suffered trauma and witnessed tragedy in their young lives. School is a sanctuary for them, giving focus and structure to their daily life. Our school is not just about education – it is about relationships and security, routine and wellbeing; it is at the centre of the community. For many children, it is the only place where they will read, write, and learn, where their minds are challenged and stretched.

The first lockdown

School ended abruptly on 12 March 2020, launching us into a world of uncertainty, fear, and isolation, a world dominated by the word 'Covid'. Our staff immediately sprang into action and began to explore how we could support the children and parents remotely, knowing that the school closure would hit them hard. Our immediate priority was to offer reassurance and guidance to parents. We knew that many of them would be unable to support their children's learning at home, that education would be low on their list of priorities. We were conscious of their limitations; our priority was connection.

Our home school liaison teacher and School Completion project workers connected with the most vulnerable. Many of our special needs assistants (SNAs) live locally. As the weeks progressed, they made garden calls: friendly, familiar faces connecting with those who wanted and needed support. Most of the children they support struggle to learn in a school environment,

even with an SNA and extra teaching support. Remote learning does not and cannot work for these children; they need human interaction with teachers and SNAs.

Challenges and resilience

We are lucky enough to be in the position to provide school-based counselling to those who need it most. Our school counsellor telephoned the parents of the children she was supporting and continued to engage remotely with the majority during the closure. The first children to re-enter the school in June 2020 were her clients, children who craved the support, play therapy, and reassurance that she provides.

The digital divide quickly became apparent. Many families engaging with us were using phones and had no laptops or tablets. We offered devices, but the uptake was small. Many of the laptops we lent were never even opened. In many homes the motivation to engage was not present, even when the intentions were good.

It was not just the lack of devices that blocked remote learning. In my opinion, many parents simply did not have the resources to manage their children's learning in the home. As the weeks went by, engagement levels dropped drastically. We were concerned about how the children would settle back in to learning after such a long closure. September was always a demanding month – what would September 2020 hold?

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Remarkably, many of my worries and fears did not come to fruition. Although I was exhausted during the summer from the preparations and anxiety about reopening, the reopening itself was successful. I was blown away by the resilience of our children, who quickly adapted to the many restrictions and changes in the school. Fully 95% returned to school on the first day back. They were so happy to be back in school with their friends and teachers, in a new normal where, despite restrictions, they thrived.

Of course, a number of children struggled with the return to school. More children were presenting with anxiety and attention difficulties. This was an issue before Covid-19, but the virus certainly contributed to an increase in anxiety and school refusal.

Children's wellbeing

The staggered, gentle start in the morning, the smaller numbers on yard, and the reduction of homework were transformational. As I supervised calm and uncongested yards, I marvelled at how we ever thought it was acceptable to have double the number of children there. With fewer children and more supervision, behavioural issues on the yard decreased significantly. Although staff now have double the amount of supervision, they say they would never go back to the way things were. The children's joy and their appreciation of school got us all through the other difficulties we faced that term.

Our priority now, more than ever, is the wellbeing of the children. We want to ensure that they feel safe, secure, and happy to be in school, and then comes the learning. When we assessed the children in September 2020, we found a massive drop in their reading levels. This was especially apparent in the younger classes: 47% of our new third class were not even reading at second class level. The proficient readers in fifth and sixth classes did make progress, which was heartening. But it was obvious that most children had engaged in little if any reading or literacy activity since 12 March 2020.

The second lockdown

Then the second lockdown came, taking us by surprise. Little did anyone think we would be plunged into the world of lockdown again – and my goodness, what a bleaker, colder, darker reality it was. As a school, we were prepared and ready to go. The children were all set up on Seesaw and Zoom. Books, work packs, laptops, and resources were quickly distributed. Arrangements were put in place for children who could not or would not access online learning.

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We now had access to our school building, which made it much easier to organise the learning. All we needed was for the children to engage. Many did, but it was sporadic. We realised they would fall behind even further and that we were limited in what we could do.

I believe that our children lost out so much during both closures. Their education and wellbeing suffered. As a parent of three primary school children, I struggled to support their learning during the school closure, despite all the advantages and resources I have. As frustration with Seesaw set in over our kitchen table, I thought of the chaotic homes that so many of our school children come from, and I wondered how they could possibly learn. The gap between DEIS schools and non-DEIS schools was widening even more.

Resources needed

I welcome the Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS), which is being put in place by the Department of Education to help schools mitigate the adverse impacts of Covid-19. In my opinion, though, it is not enough. Our school will receive 19 hours more teaching than a non-DEIS school. This is disproportionate to the needs of our school. Only 56% of our children engaged weekly in remote learning. An extra full-time resource teacher is needed for the foreseeable future.

The pupil-teacher ratio needs to be reduced. The ratio in DEIS band 1 schools is too high. Many other DEIS band 1 principals, in similar areas to ours, have been advocating for a lower ratio for many years. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation supports this, but little progress has been made. The pupil-teacher ratio is 23:1 in my school and 24:1 in a non-DEIS senior school.

Given the complex issues our children face, this is grossly unfair. Now, because of Covid-19, the gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has

widened further. The pandemic has highlighted the need for smaller classes. Many of our children have complex needs, and it is not possible to meet these needs in classes of 23 and more.

Conclusion

Our school, like many others around Ireland, is in a community that has experienced historic, unprecedented, and persistent levels of poverty and disadvantage. The pandemic has exacerbated these difficulties, bringing children into our schools with even more complex needs than before.

Investment needs to be made in schools like ours, DEIS band 1 schools that serve the poorest populations of our country. The core resource of schools serving highly disadvantaged communities is staff. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of human relationships and connection, of community, and of school. We need more teachers in our schools, in order to address the inequalities in education which the pandemic has highlighted.



Carmel Madigan of the Loophead Summer Hedge School has published 'An Ocean of Stories - An Anthology of Children's Ocean Stories', by children from County Clare and County Limerick. It includes over 50 stories, artwork and poems that were inspired by children's ocean experiences and highlights the major role the ocean has in our everyday life.

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