The conditions required for sustainable changes in the education system have been considered in education literature and were broadly in place from the onset of the pandemic. Some long-sought resourcing improvements were secured, and the challenge in the post-pandemic period is to embed these as essential features of system supports.

The Covid-19 Pandemic and Education System Change

Reflections on education change and the pandemic's influence on it

Introduction

This article considers how the school system adapted to meet the unprecedented challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the likely extent to which changes made will endure. I assess recent events over a longer time frame, having worked in education since the mid-1970s, including my final 19 years of employment with the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). This analysis is focussed mainly on the primary education sector, based on my personal and professional experience.

Change through a longer lens

When I began teaching in July 1976, the 'new' primary curriculum of 1971 was still fresh and schools were adopting more active learning approaches. The layout of newer schools was changing to accommodate greater variety in teaching practice, for example in the 'shared areas' where two teachers cooperated in working with their classes.

But in many respects, older approaches prevailed. Class sizes were huge, pay scales favoured married men, and corporal punishment remained in place. School management was dominated by religious interests in denominational schools.

Over the 45 years since, all of these aspects and more have changed utterly, generally for the better. Class sizes remain too big but are much reduced, active learning approaches are well embedded, inclusion of children with special needs is progressing, and there is greater school diversity. The INTO has played a significant role in each of these developments.

System change – necessary conditions

Before the pandemic, the education system was under pressure for different reasons. The severe economic recession in the decade from 2008 was enormously challenging. A number of recession-related cuts were 'emergency' measures whose

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longevity and impact are not yet fully clear. So where does one look for guidance on how more embedded changes come about?

In 1999, I jointly edited a book reflecting on the likely development of education in the 21st century (Ward & Dooney (eds.), 1999). A number of contributors raised questions about the system's capacity to change. Among these, Taoiseach Micheál Martin (then Minister for Education) focussed on how to foster a learning society. He concluded that only by working 'collaboratively and systematically' would Ireland harness the technological revolution's potential to build a learning society for all (ibid., p. 230).

The importance of receptiveness to change and of collective endeavour was highlighted by some of our most distinguished educationalists, who in 2017 identified 'necessary advances' in the system (Coolahan et al., 2017). The conditions required to bring about their recommended reforms included high-quality policy development, good communication, a sense of ownership among practitioners, and supports including resourcing (ibid., p. 183). These are useful benchmarks against which to consider pandemic-related changes.

Separately, John Coolahan argued that the extent and quality of Ireland's education reforms, including the collaborative process around these, have been underestimated (Coolahan, 2017). Recurring themes in discussions about necessary conditions to bring about enduring change in education include preparedness and goodwill, collaboration, communication, and supports.

Pandemic-related changes reviewed

How does one assess the impact and sustainability of system changes prompted by the pandemic from March 2020?

Considerations of preparedness and goodwill were overtaken by necessity. Historian John Dorney has described the key period of constitutional change in Ireland – 1912 to 1923 – as 'a speeding up of history' (Dorney, 2014, p. 10). Similarly, the pandemic period accelerated and necessitated some long-sought reforms, not unlike the nature of the sudden, if overdue, announcement in 1966 of free post-primary education (Walsh, 2009, pp. 185–190).

Pandemic-period collaboration and communication, while not always ideal, were clear features. An early stumble occurred when the Department of Education issued remote-learning guidance without consultation. But unilateral actions were the exception. From personal experience, I know that INTO General Secretary John Boyle was in contact practically daily (and sometimes hourly) with Department officials as the situation developed, and that he and some other partners secured more formal weekly meetings (usually online), which later included public health experts as required.

From late March to August 2020, for example, there were 24 formal INTO meetings with the Department, and several documents on return-to-school supports were agreed. And the INTO's elected executive committee was on call throughout.

Assessing the adequacy of supports will bring us into more contested territory. The education system, including each of its constituent parts, had no road map to navigate a pandemic. School closures, unprecedented in their duration, were required from early March 2020 for the remainder of the 2019–20 school year, and again from the Christmas holiday 2020 until March 2021.

Pandemic First Wave

The challenge, from March 2020, of supporting home learning was a huge one for teachers and schools. Whether longer-term lessons may be learned here – in areas such as IT hardware availability and support, broadband capacity, professional readiness, and parental/guardians' capacity to assist – is a question for further debate. More broadly, and of daily relevance, the resourcing challenges highlighted by Covid-19 suggest that certain changes need to be enduring.

The first Covid-19 'wave' covered the initial period of school closures, up to the end of August 2020. The conditions for schools' reopening at the start of the 2020–21 academic year were negotiated throughout that time. Funding, class size, supports for school principals, accommodations for medically vulnerable staff, and cover for absences were among the issues that came into sharp focus. It was immediately clear that a funding package was required: for additional school cleaning, health and safety equipment, and facilities for handwashing and sanitising.

On class size it was striking that, uniquely among our EU neighbours, there was a necessity in Ireland to plan for distancing and pupil pods in classrooms with more than 30 children. Teachers and other education staff in the 'very high risk' category were exempted from attendance at school, and the INTO secured a review mechanism to reassess risk categorisation for the 2020–21 school year.

For school principals with full teaching responsibilities, it became clear that the longstanding demand for one day per week to carry out leadership and management duties had to be granted.

Teacher absences could no longer result in the division of children among other classes in the school, given the risk of virus transmission. As a result, several leave categories were reclassified as requiring substitute cover, and 115 substitute teacher supply panels were established. Similarly, but separately, over 200 clusters, serving 1,075 schools with teaching principals, were established with fixed-term teachers to provide class teaching on the additional leadership and management days.

From an INTO standpoint, every issue which had been prioritised for attention had at the least been progressed prior to schools' reopening in autumn 2020. Of course, not everything in the garden was rosy. Fast-tracked testing and tracing was not in place, a helpline for schools was needed, and a public information campaign to support schools in minimising risk was seen as inadequate.

Pandemic Second Wave

Notwithstanding ongoing concerns, schools reopened and face-to-face teaching resumed in the more restricted and challenging context of the second Covid-19 wave in autumn 2020. Pressure exerted during this period resulted in further developments, including school support teams in HSE areas, weekly reports on testing and tracing in schools, and a dedicated phone line for principals in all HSE areas.

Pandemic Third Wave

The third wave, and the most severe – from late November 2020 to March 2021 – gave rise to particular public health concerns which inexorably impacted education.

The period before the scheduled reopening of schools in January 2021 was one of great anxiety among staff, reflecting significant growth in Covid-19 infections nationally. This fraught time saw confrontation alongside collaboration as education workers' representatives argued with the State authorities about the safety of reopening as case numbers spiked upwards.

Moving its position on school reopening dates a number of times, the Department abandoned a published plan to reopen on 21 January. Ultimately, all primary and special schools were open no later than 15 March 2021. With enhanced supports, including flexible arrangements for vulnerable staff and additional risk mitigation measures, the schools stayed open for the remainder of the school year.

Pandemic Fourth Wave

At the time of writing (September 2021), the Delta variant of Covid-19 predominates, but the well-advanced vaccination programme is mitigating the severity of the wave. With education facilities at all levels open from the start of the 2021–22 academic year, the HSE's response to school outbreaks and the operation of 'close contact' protocols have come into focus.

Lessons to learn

What can we learn from the pandemic experience about the capacity of the system to change, the characteristics of that change, and the degree of collaboration that facilitated the agility of adaptation?

The focus here is on education-related measures; assessing health-related changes is a separate matter. It was clear that under-resourcing had left the primary and special schools struggling with financial, IT, and staffing challenges. Only after protracted engagement with teacher representatives and other stakeholders was a workable accommodation put in place, with flexibility to recognise particular concerns. The question remains whether reform measures are seen by the Department as temporary, 'crisis' responses.

We learned from the pandemic that schools, teachers, and the education system are more adaptable than might have been envisaged. Covid-19 also

brought the inequalities in our society – as reflected in schools' capacity to engage with students from challenging backgrounds – into sharp focus.

There are bedrock conditions for a good education system which have been highlighted, established, or restored since March 2020 but which must now be embedded. These include recognising the entitlement of each child to have a qualified teacher every day, that additional supports are critical where significant disadvantage is a factor, that teacher supply must be better organised, that class size really matters, and that the job of teaching principal is impossible without sufficient non-teaching time.

As the system and its staff adapted, some unfortunate interventions threatened the pillars supporting change. There were the brief but remarkable days in January 2021 when, as schools' reopening was delayed, both Ministers Foley and Madigan reached for blame among staff negotiators. Trust could have been lost and change blocked, but cooler heads prevailed.

And then there was the nature of much social media commentary. In Susan McKay's important new book, a former Unionist MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) remarks that there would never have been a Good Friday Agreement had social media existed at the time (McKay, 2021, p. 159). In light of some education-related online discourse during the pandemic, a more defined boundary is surely needed between fair commentary and cavalier negativity.

A pandemic dividend for education?

It is not appropriate to end on a negative note given the heroic response of schools and their staffs and management to the pandemic challenges. Perhaps more than ever before, education – and specifically attendance at school – was recognised as an essential service. And a level of resourcing to more closely match this recognition was secured.

There were some changes whose future trajectory will be guided by public health advice. As regards resourcing of education, the task ahead in the much-desired post-Covid-19 society is to retain necessary supports which the pandemic heralded but which its demise cannot be allowed to see stripped away.

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