

Social inequality in education is an enduring feature of the Irish landscape, but the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted like never before the complex interplay between educational institutions and wider social structures which shapes unequal educational experiences and outcomes for Irish children and young people. This article explores educational inequality through this lens, and considers what can be done to build a better system as we return to normality.

The Covid-19 crisis has been a protracted series of ruptures that have laid bare the fault lines underneath our education system, even as they have made visible the resilience embedded in our school communities. These fault lines have primarily been exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic, rather than created by it (a notable exception is the case of unequal access to broadband along geographic lines).

The move to remote learning and the general disruption of the last two years has had a particularly negative impact on students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and students with special educational needs – two groups that, it must be noted, overlap significantly. Of course, these cohorts already included the students most at risk of early school leaving and least likely to progress to third-level education. By considering the efforts made to tackle educational disadvantage over recent decades in light of this shock to the system, we can see where they have succeeded and where they have fallen short.

Reflecting strong school-context effects, policy to address educational disadvantage has largely centred on targeting additional resources and supports towards schools serving the most disadvantaged populations. However, the gap in school completion rates between DEIS and non-DEIS school has remained stubbornly persistent and has in fact increased in recent years (DES, 2020).

Recent evidence from the Educational Research Centre also highlights a persistence of impacts of socio-economic disadvantage – largely reflected through student absenteeism and poor attention (Nelis et al., 2021). The analysis compared home and school learning environments, wellbeing, attitudes, and aspirations of 15-year-olds in schools, drawing on the OECD's 2018 PISA study (Programme for International Student Assessment). Students in schools in areas of socio-economic disadvantage

All in This Together?

New and enduring forms of inequality post-pandemic



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are more likely to lose out on learning because of using alcohol and drugs, missing school without authorisation, and not being attentive in class. They also have fewer educational resources in their homes and are less likely to aspire to go to higher education.

When the one relative constant across all students' experiences, the classroom, was removed, it quickly became apparent that families possess different resources – economic, social, and cultural – with which to respond, cope, and support their children in a massively disrupted learning context (Mohan et al., 2021). Students' home learning environments were more likely than the school learning environment to reproduce social inequalities. Several reasons underpinned this, such as the immediate cost implications of providing additional home learning supports, and problems that could not be solved in the short term like the need for space conducive to learning in the home and the quality of broadband connection.

Overall, the barriers to engagement intersected to make it more cumbersome and less rewarding to engage for vulnerable students. As well as these students being more likely to disengage, an equal level of disengagement is likely to have had a more detrimental impact on them than on more socio-economically advantaged students.

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School-based stakeholders are acutely aware that this divergence may prove difficult or impossible to overcome, a fear supported by research on academic slippage over school holidays and unplanned interruptions to regular schooling. Acute and chronic stresses facing families clearly impacted on student engagement, with school leaders from DEIS schools particularly highlighting financial and personal difficulties encountered by parents or guardians, which reduced families' capacity to support students. The long-term benefits of remaining engaged became even more intangible for those struggling from day to day (Mohan et al., 2021).

A *Growing Up in Ireland* special report on participants' experiences during lockdown reinforces these findings, showing that students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to have inadequate space in which to work, more likely to be in a stressed house, and less likely to have parents present to motivate them (Murray et al., 2021).

It should come as no surprise that schools could not offer the same quality of teaching and learning or fulfil many of their other key functions as effectively through remote learning. Classrooms and school buildings are highly refined and continuously evolving spaces designed for these purposes. Some of the most important features of these spaces, like the interpersonal relationships therein or the effective individual feedback provided by teachers to students, are particularly difficult to recreate over Zoom or Google Classrooms.

Almost all students will suffer some delay or loss of learning as a result, but the level and impact of this delay or loss will generally be higher among those experiencing difficulties. As well as greater challenges in comprehending material without properly differentiated instruction, the

lack of the non-academic features of the classroom impacts more on those struggling with the academic material.

What the closure of school buildings has highlighted is the responsibility placed on schools in combatting both educational disadvantage and wider social inequality. Students' engagement with education and their eventual academic outcomes are systemic phenomena, sitting at the intersection of their family background and home life, school environment, personal capacities and characteristics, and wider cultural milieu. The school environment, even given the significant variation across schools in terms of cohort demographics, school ethos, and other factors, is the closest thing to a constant for all students.

Giving all students an equal learning environment while the rest of their lives remains profoundly unequal, however, will inevitably recreate these inequalities generationally. Extra resources and targeted efforts for those most at risk of educational disadvantage are needed to ensure that the education system is actively combatting inequality rather than simply maintaining it. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic makes clear the level of inequality that students bring to the classroom by showing what happens to them without it. But the persistence (with slight fluctuations) of significant educational achievement gaps in the decades leading up to the pandemic shows that the education system has consistently fallen short on this front under 'normal conditions'.

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What schools can do to compensate for the Covid-19 education interruption is an important question at this juncture. The evidence suggests that targeted supports in the classroom environment and efforts to make school a place where students want to be are vital in reducing the impact of educational disadvantage. Continuing and expanding these efforts should be central in school planning, in the form of both intensive short-term responses and more sustainable long-term developments.

Initiatives to promote staff and students' mental health and flourishing will be particularly important. Positive education approaches can be an important resource to promote resilience and flourishing in students, focusing on developing young people's strengths and skills for happiness and their psychological, social, and emotional health in the educational context (Arslan & Burke, 2021). Wellbeing programmes at junior cycle will be key in supporting these needs, but senior cycle students need to be similarly supported.

Moving beyond the pandemic's impacts, evidence has increasingly pointed to high levels of deprivation and greater complexity of need in DEIS urban band 1 primary schools and the most disadvantaged second-level schools. Budget 2022 included a further one-point improvement in the staffing schedule for DEIS urban band 1 schools, alongside a new DEIS identification model.

These steps are welcome, especially for schools that have been dealing with DEIS-level complexity of needs without DEIS-level support, but will they

meaningfully address the entrenched gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools? As a society, we must ask ourselves whether this is the level of funding we are willing to commit to tackling educational disadvantage in schools and, by extension, whether this is the level of inequality we are willing to tolerate.

Finally, the difficulties of the Covid-19 period have shown that educational inequality cannot be solved by the education system alone. Schools, especially DEIS schools, are on the front line in dealing with students' issues in physical and mental health, housing, and poverty, but these issues obviously cannot be solved by teachers or school leaders. Initiatives like the DEIS scheme and the School Inclusion Model (currently being piloted) recognise and attempt to address this through providing key multidisciplinary supports in the school.

For students who are waiting months or years to receive needed support from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), or who are at risk of malnutrition or hunger or living in temporary or unsuitable accommodation, what happens in the classroom is unlikely to overcome what happens outside it. Disruption to these other services during the pandemic, from TUSLA social work to school-provided meals, was highlighted as directly and indirectly impacting on vulnerable students' ability to engage with school.

Much like the education system more generally, and society as a whole, these vital services pulled through as best they could in extremely difficult circumstances during the pandemic. As we return to 'business as usual', it is vital that we repair the damage done by two years of unprecedented disruption. Yet we cannot simply accept the restoration of pre-pandemic levels of inequality either. Educational inequality is a systemic phenomenon and must be addressed structurally and not just in the classroom, be it physical or virtual.

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