Tackling the Legacy of Covid-19

Taking stock and moving forward

This article looks at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on primary and post-primary schools, drawing on information gathered by the Department of Education Inspectorate in its advisory and evaluative work with school communities, as well as a range of national and international studies and research papers.

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Introduction

This article looks at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on primary and post-primary schools from September 2020 to June 2022. It considers a range of issues, including the impact of the pandemic on children and young people from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It explores how the pandemic has accelerated innovation and change in our education system, particularly in the areas of digital technologies and pupil and student participation, and it offers suggestions on how we can build on this learning for the future.

The article draws on information gathered by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education in its advisory and evaluative work with school communities. This work included Inspectorate surveys; focus groups with pupils, students, and parents; incidental (unannounced) inspections; and curriculum evaluations. The article is also informed by a range of national and international studies and research papers.

Varied use of digital technologies

The abrupt closure of schools in March 2020 resulted in an immediate redesign of teaching and learning, necessitating a new level of digital competency for teachers, pupils, and students. A range of issues, at both system and school level, impacted on schools' capacity and ability to adapt to teaching and learning in a remote environment (Inspectorate, 2020; Mohan et al., 2020).

The pandemic also highlighted the potential of digital technologies to transform teaching and learning. Many schools maintained or developed their capability in this area. Findings from Inspectorate research (Inspectorate, 2022b) show that enhanced capacity in schools to engage with digital technologies to support teaching and learning was evident across primary and post-primary schools.

In many cases, learning platforms were used very effectively by teachers to share content with pupils and students, and for pupils and students to submit samples of their learning for review. In general,

there was a notable increase in the capacity of teachers and school leaders to engage with digital technologies as part of their daily practice.

It is essential that schools be adequately supported to build on this enhanced level of digital capability, and to continue to expand their use of digital technologies as a valuable support for pupils and students in their learning.

Vulnerable pupils and students were most affected

Covid-19 presented particular challenges for certain cohorts of pupils and students. While it will take time to establish the full impact on our school communities, early reviews of the first wave of lockdowns and school closures suggested significant learning loss, particularly for children and young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs (Darmody et al., 2020). More recent international analyses, documented since the beginning of school closures in March 2020 and March 2022, provide even more evidence of learning loss (Patrinos et al., 2022).

These national and international findings are supported by the Inspectorate's own research, which showed that while schools were closed, there were significant challenges in engaging pupils and students who were most at risk of educational disadvantage (Inspectorate, 2020, 2021h). Subsequent research showed that while certain cohorts continued to experience more significant learning losses than others, the impact of this was alleviated by the range of interventions and supports facilitated by the Department and implemented by schools (Inspectorate, 2022b).

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Impact of the pandemic on participation in school life

Since 2015, the Inspectorate has been committed to developing its practice regarding how it takes account of the perspectives and insights of children and young people, and how it engages and works with them. The learning from this period informed the Inspectorate's work with focus groups of pupils and students throughout autumn 2020, when schools reopened following the first lockdown.

Findings from this work echoed those arising from international research which showed that the pandemic reduced the opportunities for many children and young people to have their voice heard and to acquire the necessary skills and competencies to assert their rights (Hoskins and Donbavand, 2021).

The overall purpose of the Inspectorate's focus groups with pupils and students was to listen to, learn about, and understand their experiences

following their return to school in September 2020. A key message was that being in school, irrespective of Covid-related restrictions, was very important for their wellbeing, socialisation, and learning. Pupils and students articulated a new-found appreciation for the work of their school and teachers.

This research also identified several areas for schools to consider generally and to develop further. It highlighted the importance for pupils and students of getting feedback on their work, and the value they placed on collaborative and practical activity. It emphasised the need for them to be involved in decisions affecting them. At post-primary level, students in Senior Cycle asked for greater autonomy to manage their work (Inspectorate, 2021c).

Targeted supports to mitigate the impact of Covid-related learning loss

September 2021 saw the launch of the Covid Learning and Supports Scheme (CLASS) for measures to mitigate learning loss and provide targeted additional teaching support for pupils and students following the period of Covid-related closures and restrictions. This scheme enabled schools to identify pupils and students most at risk of learning loss, and to put in place specific targeted teaching supports to meet their needs.

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Enhanced allocations were provided for special schools and schools in the Department's Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme. The CLASS programme also provided for shared learning opportunities between schools to ensure that good practice in meeting pupils' and students' needs and mitigating learning loss was shared and replicated. This scheme complemented a range of additional targeted supports for pupils and students most impacted, including a supplementary programme at Easter and a greatly enhanced summer programme.

Looking forward

The Inspectorate has continued to research the impact on pupils and students and their achievement across a range of areas arising from their disrupted experiences of learning over two school years. A composite report on the findings of a series of incidental inspections and curriculum evaluations in the 2021/2022 school year is currently in development.

Preliminary findings for both sectors indicate the need to develop and embed whole-school assessment practices and for schools to continue to develop their approaches to home-school communication. Findings at primary level suggest a need for schools to place additional emphasis on developing pupils' literacy skills. The findings from this report and from other Inspectorate research will support the development of educational policy and resourcing in this area over the medium to longer term.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a considerable impact on the learning of children and young people in Irish schools. It has also impacted on the practices of teachers and has presented both challenges and opportunities. In general, primary and post-primary schools reported that the vast majority of pupils and students had successfully adjusted to in-school teaching and learning post-pandemic, and that challenges relating to their learning and wellbeing were being addressed. However, losses in social, emotional, and cognitive domains were significant and disproportionately impactful for learners with the highest level of need.

Evaluations conducted post-Covid and during the Inspectorate's previous interactions with schools during periods of school closure confirmed that there exists a clear link between high-calibre leadership and positive learning outcomes. Where in-school leadership was effective, inspectors referenced the high quality of whole-school approaches to teaching and learning, both during in-person interactions and in the online environment.

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It will be important for schools and for the wider education community to learn from the experience of Covid-19, to build on the successes while addressing the challenges that remain. In particular, pupils and students who have been disproportionately impacted by school closures should be monitored closely and should be supported in whatever ways are necessary from the perspective of both wellbeing and learning.

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Preliminary findings from Inspectorate research indicates the need to develop and embed whole-school assessment practices and for schools to continue to develop their approaches to home-school communication. Findings also suggest a need for schools to place additional emphasis on developing pupils' literacy skills.