

Literacy Learning during and after Lockdown

Insights from teachers in PIRLS 2021

In autumn 2021, following disruption caused by Covid-19, thousands of Fifth Class pupils in Ireland participated in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Questionnaires completed by their teachers offer insights into the experiences of literacy instruction during lockdown and the subsequent return to in-person education. This article summarises the questionnaire findings and draws conclusions on the pandemic's impact on literacy learning.

Introduction

In autumn 2021, following a year and a half of Covid-19-related disruption, 4,663 Fifth Class pupils in 148 schools in Ireland participated in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Delaney et al., 2023). As part of PIRLS, pupils' Fifth Class teachers and their Fourth Class teachers from the preceding school year completed questionnaires, providing insights into their experiences of delivering literacy instruction during remote teaching and learning (January–March 2021) and the return to in-person teaching.

It is crucial to understand what transpired during this period, both to provide context for current issues in education and to inform future contingency plans. Here, we summarise key findings from our recently released PIRLS 2021 contextual report (Pitsia et al., 2024)¹.

Early 2021: Remote teaching and Learning

Teachers who taught the PIRLS pupils in Fourth Class (2020/21) were asked what proportion of their class had engaged regularly – at least 2–3 times per week – with remote learning in literacy during the 2021 closure period. Relatively high levels of engagement were



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reported: most pupils (82%) were in classes in which either *all or almost all* or *about three quarters* of pupils engaged regularly.

According to teachers, some resources needed by pupils were more widely available than others. Just over three in five pupils were in classes in which *all or almost all* had access to a digital device (63%), with a slightly lower proportion in classes where *all or almost all* had access to an internet connection (58%). By contrast, relatively few pupils were in classes in which teachers considered that *all or almost all* had access to a workspace (28%) or support for literacy development from someone in their home (17%).

Teachers were generally positive about their own access to tangible digital resources. Large majorities of pupils had teachers who *always or almost always* had access to a digital device (96%), apps (e.g., for video conferencing) (86%), and internet connection (81%). However, teachers were more circumspect about their access to intangible resources. Fewer pupils had teachers who considered themselves *always or almost always* to have sufficient knowledge of how to use digital technology (59%) or sufficient guidance on approaches to remote learning (45%).

Recorded lessons were the most popular mode for remote instruction in 2021, with 69% of pupils having teachers who used these *every day or almost every day*. Live lessons for the whole class or smaller groups were less frequently used.

Most pupils (94%) were assigned activities via digital means *every day or almost every day* during school closures. There was more variation in the extent to which pupils were assigned activities in paper-based format (e.g., via packs of worksheets sent to homes), likely reflecting differing school policies on the transit of hard-copy materials during that time.

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Spring to autumn 2021: Returning to the classroom

Fourth and Fifth Class teachers were asked how much Covid-19 measures affected pupils' literacy learning after returning to the classroom. Fourth Class teachers were asked to recall March–June 2021, while Fifth Class teachers were asked to reflect on autumn 2021. Fifth Class teachers viewed the impact of some restrictions, like social distancing, less negatively than did Fourth Class teachers, suggesting possible relaxation of distancing rules or better adaptation to protocols between spring and autumn 2021. However, Fifth Class teachers reported a greater impact from pupil absences, likely due to rising Covid-19 cases in autumn 2021.

Both Fourth and Fifth Class teachers were asked to estimate the proportion of pupils in their class for whom literacy development was negatively affected by

the pandemic. Fifth Class teachers were more optimistic about this than Fourth Class teachers. For instance, 42% of pupils had Fourth Class teachers who thought the literacy development of either *about three quarters* or *all or almost all* of their class had been negatively affected, while a lower 33% had Fifth Class teachers who thought this. Given that the same pupils were considered by both sets of teachers, this difference suggests that at least some pupils who were perceived in spring 2021 as negatively impacted were perceived in autumn 2021 as having been able to ‘catch up’.

Conclusions

Overall, teachers’ accounts of literacy learning during the second lockdown were relatively positive, despite concerns about pupils’ access to resources and teachers’ access to relevant knowledge and guidance. This aligns with other research; for instance, an Inspectorate-led survey of parents and guardians in early 2021 showed that primary schools had substantially improved their capacity to deliver remote instruction since the first lockdown (Department of Education, 2021a).

While it is unclear how PIRLS pupils fared during the first lockdown, many experienced continual literacy learning in the second lockdown, likely contributing to high average reading achievement in PIRLS 2021, both internationally and compared to previous Irish cohorts.

When asked to consider the pandemic’s global impact on literacy learning for this group of pupils, the more positive views of Fifth Class teachers (2021/22) compared to Fourth Class teachers (2020/21) suggest some swift ‘catching up’ in literacy learning, potentially reflected in Ireland’s overall PIRLS reading achievement and potentially linked with the prioritisation of literacy in guidance provided to schools on managing the return to in-person education (Department of Education, 2021b).

Importantly, the analyses described here do not include subgroup breakdowns. Future research could usefully examine the experiences of pupils and teachers in DEIS versus non-DEIS schools, as literacy learning may have been differently impacted in these contexts.

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ENDNOTES

¹Readers are referred in particular to Chapter 8 of the report. Note that, for comparability, only those pupils who progressed from Fourth to Fifth Class without reconstitution of class groups (82% of participating PIRLS pupils) are included in these analyses.