

Bouncing Back Post COVID-19: Responding to Needs Arising From the Closure of Educational Settings Within the Irish Primary and Early Years' Education Sector

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Abstract

In March 2020, primary schools and preschools in Ireland were closed until the end of the school year, and again from January to March in 2021, to minimise the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This decision altered the lives of teachers, students, and families throughout the country and led to a lengthy period where learners had to remain at home and continue their education online. Teaching online, described as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), remained in place for many months until schools officially reopened. Drawing on recent literature and research, this paper identifies and discusses issues arising from the impact of this decision on primary schools and early years' facilities, and on teachers, students, and parents associated with these settings. The authors examine the effects of the closures on mental health, the lack of an infrastructure needed to support ERT, and lost learning time, with special reference to disadvantaged learners. Also considered are the post-pandemic challenges involved in reopening educational settings and in minimising the impact of the closures on students and teachers. Finally, actions are recommended for policymakers, for schools and preschool settings, and for teachers and parents, as the education sector moves to a new normality.

Keywords: COVID-19 impact, education in pandemic, educational change, school closures, educational needs

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and related periods of lockdowns affected people from all walks of life (Prime et al., 2020) in ways that are not limited to fear of catching the virus. The actions and inactions of governments worldwide in response to the crisis also brought about considerable levels of frustration and anxiety. Exposure to a consistent stream of information from various outlets heightened a sense of uncertainty around the future. This ambiguity accentuated confusion, social isolation, and societal discontent, and was seen to exert a substantial impact on parents' apprehension regarding their children's education, while, over time, children became worried about health, friendships, and their prospects of a prompt return to school (Wagner, 2020). Given that an estimated 99% of children worldwide live in one of 186 countries that implemented COVID-19 restrictions, and 60% of children live in countries which imposed full (7%) or partial (53%) lockdown (Fore, 2020), the potentially adverse impact of the crisis upon the mental health of children cannot be overlooked. Evidence suggests that increased levels of childhood depression, loneliness, and anxiety had already been identified before the pandemic (Warne & Sellers, 2019). COVID-19 had a negative effect on the mental health of thousands of children worldwide (World Health Organisation, [WHO], 2020) and lockdowns served to exacerbate this. Health and wellbeing are central preconditions for learning (Gunawardena et al., 2020) and schools provide social and emotional support that is especially important for disadvantaged and vulnerable students (Sanfilippo et al., 2012).

The events of the past two years touched all sectors of Irish society, and differences have been noted in how people - both adults and children - respond to stress and crises (Zacher & Rudolph, 2020). Some navigate setbacks easily because of a more naturally optimistic and resilient disposition, remaining hopeful even in the toughest circumstances (MacIntyre et al., 2021). Others show signs of stress as the situation begins to take its toll. A review of previous pandemic scenarios has not provided a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the impact that COVID-19 might have on global society and the nuanced effects that periods of enforced lockdowns could exert upon the educational system, especially on learners' mental health (Raballo et al., 2021). Utilising the current situation as a means to monitor, prepare, and plan for future pandemics is therefore essential (Salvador-Carulla et al., 2020).

This paper discusses issues relating to the deleterious impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young students attending preschool and primary-school education, and on their teachers and parents. The paper also provides practical, evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, teachers, and parents impacted by the pandemic to mitigate negative outcomes and to prepare for possible future instances of disruption to education.

Implications of the Pandemic for Teachers, Parents, and Students

School Closures and Remote Teaching

Perhaps the most challenging issue during the pandemic was the closure of schools and early childhood facilities, which, in Ireland, occurred in March 2020 until the end of the school year and again in January 2021 until March of that year. These actions signalled unforeseen changes in the lives of many people, and posed significant challenges for teachers, parents, and learners. The move to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) altered both teaching and learning. Despite having little preparation time (Daniel, 2020), and no training in online teaching, educators were required to undertake an overhaul of their delivery of the curriculum (Yandell, 2020). Some expressed concerns about their ability to present high-quality education online (McDonald, 2021). Others felt angry and unprepared, having no experience, training, or equipment to do the job (Burke & Dempsey, 2020). Similarly unsuspecting and underprepared, children were isolated from their friends, and shorn of valuable routines and in-person supports, as a key cornerstone of their lives dissolved overnight.

A new Role for Parents

Significant too, were the changes imposed on parents as they had to combine their efforts to raise families, provide for their everyday needs, and continue with jobs, whilst contributing to the home-based teaching of their children. Some parents faced potential furloughing, job loss, and subsequent financial hardship. Others working from home were ill-equipped to offer the substantial amounts of time and levels of educational support that their children required (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021), with the unfeasible and unrealistic nature of simultaneous full-time work and home schooling being captured in a study by Flynn et al. (2021). Such instances of economic insecurity and worries about future financial hardship have a trickle-down effect within families, exhibiting the potential to exert a substantial negative impact upon children's mental health and wellbeing (Cohut, 2021). In some jurisdictions, 50 to 60% of parents reported feeling unable to provide suitable home learning (Andrew et al., 2020). In Ireland, parents who had a child or children with additional needs experienced exceptional levels of stress (Flynn et al., 2021), having to take on new roles and acquire a host of unfamiliar skills for which they may have possessed little aptitude. Inevitably, these changes affected family dynamics, resulting in a deterioration in family relationships (Darmody et al., 2020) and a sense of frustration and anxiety that may have been difficult to manage (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021).

Impact on Children

Reports reveal surges in child abuse during lockdown, with a huge increase in calls to helplines (Darmody et al., 2020; One in Four, 2020). Reports highlighted elevated levels of abuse faced by children spending more time in volatile home environments (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020). Stay-at-home orders forced many victims into isolation with their abusers. The subsequent rise in domestic violence shows that home is not always a haven for children (Kofman & Garfin, 2020). In times of crisis, children look for guidance from adults (Mutch, 2020). However, with schools and childcare facilities closed, many at-risk children were isolated from help, having lost an important anchor in their lives (Lee, 2020), and hidden from trusted adults who would normally provide support (Barnardos, 2020a).

Children with mental health issues are more likely to be in financially insecure families, the reality of which matters more when schools are closed. In Ireland, principals and teachers in schools designated as disadvantaged under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme reported low levels of student engagement in ERT during closures (Devitt et al., 2020), highlighting the disparity in the impact that such enforced closures have exerted across the social divide. This may arise due to low-income families lacking access to secure internet connections and adequate study space, thereby rendering home schooling extremely challenging and marginalising children from such backgrounds from their better-off peers (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2021). Thus, it is evident that school closures have high academic and social costs, particularly for disadvantaged and vulnerable learners.

Parental Concerns

In Ireland, many parents expressed concerns about the impact school closures would have on their children (Doyle, 2020). Parents reported that lockdowns brought about significant alterations in their children's behaviour and schedules, including disturbances in eating and sleeping. Physical activity suffered a notable decline, whilst the average amount of screen time increased (Clarke et al., 2020). Parents in Ireland, 71% of whom were working from home, disclosed anxiety about the impact of lockdown on social and emotional development and about their feelings of guilt as they tried to balance work with stimulating childcare (Egan et al., 2021).

Parents reported that children spent more time completing schoolwork if they had a computer or a laptop (Egan & Beatty, 2021). However, internet usage amongst young children increased significantly in recent years (Hooft Graafland, 2018), and there have been worries throughout the pandemic that lockdowns accentuated this tendency for children worldwide (Milosevic et al., 2021). In 2019, 52% of three to four-year olds in the UK were reported as having an online presence, mainly in the form of accessing video-sharing platforms such as YouTube (Ofcom, 2019). By 2020/21, this figure had risen to 82% (Ofcom, 2021).

Consultations with 1,728 parents in the UK (Dodd et al., 2020) revealed that extended periods of screen time, and the nature and quality of the content being observed by their children, are among the foremost issues contributing to parental anxiety. The parents indicated that over half (51%) of their children did not communicate with others outside the home via phone, video-call or messaging (Dodd et al., 2020). As Dodd and associates also point out, isolation and solitude can hinder children reaching developmental milestones and parents are keen to meet their children's social, emotional, educational, and behavioural demands coming out of isolation. Given such parental concerns, it is imperative that schools prioritise these areas of connection and social development, in an effort to atone for lost time, and provide children with opportunities for expression and interpersonal growth. Attention to these aspects of socio-emotional development is critical in preparing for starting school and in establishing a solid foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.

Return to School, 'Social Bubbles', and High Absence Rates

Following months of tension and challenges, schools in Ireland reopened in August 2020, albeit under the caveats of a range of restrictions aimed at minimising the spread of COVID-19. School students were organised into class-based 'bubbles', denoting groups of people with whom individuals could have close/physical contact (Trotter, 2021). Within each 'bubble', students were separated into smaller groups called 'pods' (White et al., 2021). One positive COVID-19 case in a 'bubble' often meant that the entire student group had to be sent home to isolate. Parents and teachers expressed concerns that the stringent nature of the restrictions led to a considerable loss of school time that impacted not only on students but also on parents ("Covid in classrooms", 2021; Hogan, 2022). Though the return to some level of in-person teaching was widely appreciated, the turbulent stop-start nature of the approach and the exclusion of students on a regular basis could lead to significant gaps in their learning, which, in turn, has the potential to produce adverse consequences on socio-emotional development (Idoiaga et al., 2020).

An additional concern that hampered a smooth return to school relates to high absence rates. Almost two years into the pandemic, and following a successful vaccination campaign in January 2022, primary schools reported an average of 30% of students and almost 20% of teachers absent for COVID-related reasons (O'Brien, 2022), resulting in increased difficulty in making amends for lost time, especially for students requiring urgent response and support (Tsolou et al., 2021).

Mitigating Lost Learning Time

Teachers may be under considerable pressure to mitigate the effects of lost learning time as students return to in-person education. In 2020, an attempt to address this pressure was made through the Department of Education publication titled *Returning to school: Curriculum guidance for primary school leaders and teachers*, which was designed to support school leaders and teachers in preparing for learning to recommence following COVID-19 closures. Subsequently, the COVID Learning and Supports Scheme (CLASS) was announced in 2021 (Department of Education, 2020; 2021). Amongst other objectives, the scheme aimed to fund additional teaching hours in every school to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 disruption to education. The purpose of this provision was to allow educators to identify students most at risk of learning loss and to implement appropriate teaching supports to meet these students' needs.

The approaches to mitigate lost learning time in other jurisdictions included a proposal, also considered by the Irish Department of Education, to lengthen the school day. Implementation of the proposal, however, would have risked imposing another level of pressure on teachers and assumed that children have the concentration, motivation, and capacity to handle additional hours of school. Research findings on the effectiveness of lengthening the school day are mixed – with costs, use of time, and the wellbeing of all involved being critical factors (Chartered College of Teaching, 2021). A survey of 164 countries that identified strategies used for mitigating the impact of lost learning time showed that 70% favoured three approaches (adjusting the school calendar, remediation, and adjusting content), while only 25% mentioned increasing class time (UNICEF et al., 2020). Ultimately, the Department of Education in Ireland chose not to extend the school day.

Despite these findings, and in contrast to the approach in Ireland, in the 2022 spring term, Wales began to trial longer school days in 14 primary and secondary schools in a scheme to boost the catch-up process. Supported by £2 million, the 10-week pilot scheme provided 5 additional hours weekly, focusing on learners from poorer backgrounds and schools most affected by the pandemic (Marsh, 2021). The outcomes of the scheme, yet unknown, should provide the UK and Irish education authorities with useful information against which to consider similar proposals. Of note, too, is the approach adopted in New Zealand when schools reopened following the disastrous earthquakes of 2011. At the time, teachers decided to focus on what had to be learned rather than on getting through the curriculum. Interestingly, student results in final exams improved when compared to pre-catastrophe results (Hattie, 2020). According to Hattie (2020, p.1), "It is not time in class but what we do with the time we have that matters".

Teachers' Mental Health

When making decisions regarding a return to in-person education, teachers' wellbeing must be considered. As previously discussed, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health of individuals across society, including teachers. With this in mind, it is critical that teachers attend to their own wellbeing so that they are in a position to attend to that of their students.

Teachers play a pivotal role in helping students to unpack their experiences of the pandemic and minimise its negative impact. Schooling is more than learning. Teachers are known to place a focus upon cultivating students' socio-emotional needs (Moss et al., 2020), while schools may play a vital role in caring for children as well as helping them to learn (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). Positive relationships with students are key to teachers remaining in the profession (O'Connor, 2008) and crucial to building and maintaining teachers' self-esteem (Spilt et al., 2011). Teachers set the emotional tone for the learning environment and have a responsibility to ensure that returning to school is a positive experience for their students.

In past years, teachers in Ireland reported stress and anxiety as contributing to absenteeism and retirement (Fitzgerald, 2008). Before the onset of COVID-19, teachers in various national settings regularly reported experiencing poor mental health, with specific issues relating to role conflict, high job demand, poor working conditions, lack of autonomy, and burnout, particularly amongst newly qualified teachers (e.g., Harmsen et al., 2018). During the period of ERT, teachers reported increased levels of stress and anxiety. Major stressors included lack of connections, enforced migration to online teaching without sufficient training (Baker et al., 2021), the uncertainties of lockdown, and fears for vulnerable students (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Elevated educator stress can bring about a range of detrimental outcomes, including reductions in the effectiveness of teaching and enhanced risk of burnout (Kumawat, 2020). In a study of primary and post-primary teachers in Ireland (n=245) carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, 82% of the respondents displayed moderate to high levels of burnout. This was coupled with deteriorations in eating (34%) and sleeping (70%), and with increased alcohol use (33%) (Minihan et al., 2021). Just over half (58%) of the same sample intimated considering leaving the profession in a 6 to 12-month period during the pandemic. Thus, it is important that the impact of the pandemic on teachers is remembered as post-pandemic teaching and learning are resumed, and that teachers are supported in the aftermath of this crisis (Mutch, 2020).

A return to high-quality education is paramount but the "catch up" must be achieved in ways that are conducive to the wellbeing of both students and teachers. Considerable thought is required to develop feasible long-term plans without pushing either students or teachers to breaking point (Singh et al., 2020). Furthermore, teachers must look for indicators of their own stress becoming overwhelming, and seek help. Equally, teachers must be encouraged to dedicate time towards replenishing their own physical and emotional reserves.

The Diverse Characteristics and Needs of Returning Students

Some students experienced problems at home throughout the lockdown. They were expected to continue learning, sometimes with little or no technology or internet access and minimal parental involvement (Defeyter et al., 2020). It follows that the resumption of in-person teaching has represented a reprieve from stressful environments within which they made limited academic progress. Inadequate technological infrastructure and a shortfall in digital access affected disadvantaged children more than their peers (Tsolou et al. 2021). Thus, the period of ERT served to widen the gap in academic opportunity, which had existed between the social classes prior to the pandemic. On return to school, teachers had to address the effects of interrupted learning on students' achievement and behaviour. Social issues had to be managed, as students re-established themselves among their peers. The impact of interrupted curriculum and potential learning loss (Engzell et al., 2021) also required attention. Along with a focus on making up for lost learning time, there was an increased awareness of the impact of poverty on learning.

However, the return of in-person teaching has not brought about a major upturn in the fortunes of many within these marginalised groups. Problems surface to varying degrees, in terms of learning, behaviour, and social and emotional expression (Flynn et al., 2022; Leitão et al., 2022), depending on the levels of support afforded to each learner. Educators may be called on to be patient and show understanding that learners may respond differently to their experiences over the past two years. There are known variations in children's coping skills and resilience, owing to diverse life circumstances and the nature of the primary influences in their lives.

Decisions have had to be made regarding where to resume academically, a task that was made more challenging by the stop-start nature of the return to school, punctuated by repeatedly enforced absences due to COVID-19 exposure. The extent to which learning has been disrupted will emerge over time and, for some, may cause distress regarding future academic aspirations. Reports from the UK indicate that those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds spent up to 30% more time engaged in home learning than their disadvantaged peers (Andrew et al., 2020). Disadvantaged students and those with disabilities faced the most significant challenges while learning remotely (UNICEF, 2021). For some students, however, being at home was a positive experience, with time and space to reflect, learn, and grow. They have become more self-reliant and independent learners. Adapting to ERT has advanced their technological skills and the capacity to work collaboratively in online learning groups (Bubb & Jones, 2020).

Students With Additional Needs

Some students with additional needs also experienced benefits from working at home. They were not singled out by having to leave the main classroom for additional academic support and had freedom to work at their own pace. Some students reported getting more attention from teachers during ERT (Bubb & Jones, 2020), although this does not reflect the experience of all learners with additional needs. Some experienced significant feelings of anxiety and stress during the past two years. Those learners needing additional curriculum support depended almost entirely upon family members for help with their studies (Petretto et al., 2020). The shift in parent-child relationships and the additional weight of ensuring schoolwork is completed to an adequate standard has, no doubt, brought about an elevation of stress to the entire family unit (Asbury et al., 2021).

Though returning to school has offered some return to routine for students with additional learning needs, the extent to which the learning environment has altered to ensure that it is COVID-compliant should not be ignored. A significant number of such students are uncomfortable with managing change and often experience challenges in adapting to new environments (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2014). Enforced changes that may have been particularly challenging include being confined to bubbles, staff wearing masks, problems with non-verbal communication due to masks, noise interference due to open windows and air purifiers, and minimal socialising. It will take time and dedication to re-establish the sense of comfort and safety that was lost. Students with additional needs may also have medical conditions that leave them vulnerable, should they contract COVID-19. It is important to ensure that they remain linked to their classmates using appropriate technology, in scenarios where in-person contact is limited.

Early Childhood Education and Preschool Settings

The Impact of the Pandemic on Preschoolers

Young children who had only just commenced their formal schooling have also been adversely impacted by the pandemic. They engaged in considerable preparation before making one of the most significant transitions of their lives to date. Before they could adapt to their new surroundings, however, they had to return home. Young children faced many challenges during lockdown that affected them in different ways including isolation, disruptions to new friendships, lack of routine, and the absence of valued predictability offered by educational settings (Egan et al., 2021). Those who were initially apprehensive about starting school may have had to cope with additional reservations the second time around. Attentive listening to their concerns and the provision of adequate reassurance are important in alleviating some of these

understandable concerns, and in promoting healthy and successful transitions (Miller, 2020).

The interruption to education also impacted children who had not yet begun “formal” school but who had been attending nurseries or other early childhood settings. In most cases, these facilities were also closed. As a result, many preschoolers were confined to their homes with limited social contact and opportunities for social engagement, learning, and play and could not access interactive and stimulating activities that build the foundations for starting school and for lifelong learning. Play is a core aspect of early years’ programmes (UNICEF, 2018), and a key pillar in the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009). It helps children make sense of their world (Neale, 2020), and is an important pedagogical tool in supporting young children’s development and transition to school (O’Keeffe & McNally, 2021). Children’s development is highly influenced by their environment and the people who surround them. Confined to home and isolated from their peers, preschoolers missed many key learning opportunities that arise in early childcare settings. Their experiences varied considerably — enriching and enjoyable for some, abusive and neglectful for others (Egan et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about major changes in the manner in which preschool children spent some of their most formative developmental stages. According to parents, language development amongst younger children was notably affected by limitations in social interactions (Montacute & Holt-White, 2021). These early learners need extensive and immediate support to ensure that they can begin to self-regulate, learn, and develop in an autonomous fashion beyond the lifespan of the societal lockdowns (UNICEF, 2020a). The social interaction and language development that take place in early childhood settings are critical to children’s preparation for school. In a home-schooling setting, it is likely that some of the potential learning opportunities that would otherwise have arisen in classrooms or childcare settings have been missed. Accordingly, it can be anticipated that some resulting gaps in knowledge and competencies will be seen in the current crop of learners, particularly amongst vulnerable students (Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

In relation to “bouncing back”, it is noted that the closures not only suspended children’s access to early learning, but also affected parents and staff, and jeopardised programmes. Some facilities closed temporarily; however, a reduced demand for placements and the cost of maintaining COVID-safe environments contributed to some permanent closures (UNICEF, 2021). Confusion in relation to re-opening guidelines and a lack of clarity about ongoing financial support created anxiety in the sector (Early Childhood Ireland, 2020). Some staff, faced with insecure jobs and salaries, took on alternative employment and did not return to the sector (Barnardos, 2020b). In other jurisdictions, post-pandemic

uncertainties around the uptake of places and subsequent staffing concerns have led to instability in the sector (Education Policy Institute, 2020), and calls for additional funding packages to support important early years' programmes (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Facilitating Social and Educational Bounce-Back

Transitions to School

It is crucial that educators and families of children beginning or returning to school are equipped with the skills and knowledge of how best to: make up for lost learning time; address the gaps in learning that occurred during periods of lockdown; and prepare for possible future disruptions to education. Starting school can be an anxious time as children may be overly reliant on parents for comfort, giving rise to attachment problems. Issues such as school refusal, absenteeism, and prolonged and turbulent adaptation periods have to be tackled to help students engage with the educational system and become more independent with age. Parents can support uncertain or reluctant students by engaging in a range of behaviours to prepare a child for the upcoming changes, thereby alleviating some of the stress and negativity that can threaten to derail a successful transition. These include giving children advance warning of significant dates, ensuring that they have plenty of time to prepare, listening to their worries, rehearsing daily routines such as arrival, lunchtime, and departure, arranging school visits to meet staff, and engaging with virtual tours of the school. The entry process can be staggered and parents and teaching staff can devise helpful check-in strategies (e.g., a mid-day video call to assuage uncertainty in the early stages) to scaffold the separation of parent and child, and encourage readiness for school (Callanan et al., 2017). Such measures will be more important than ever in helping to guide students within their new surroundings to acclimatise to what will now be an unfamiliar environment.

Teaching to Gaps in Knowledge

Since schools reopened, teachers have been required to assess gaps in knowledge that may have emerged during ERT, and they have had to teach to these gaps. In order to do this, teachers must acknowledge that some students made suitable progress, while others, such as those who suffered from limited access to technology and home-based supports, may have struggled to keep pace with their peers (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). The following proactive strategies can be adopted to help disadvantaged learners catch up on what may have been missed during the pandemic and ensure that any such crises in the future do not serve to further widen the chasm between those from different family backgrounds:

- Government should help to ensure that all children have online access;
- Efforts should be made to support disadvantaged students in accessing one-to-one tutoring;
- Teachers should be provided with comprehensive, high-quality training in how to deliver inclusive and engaging learning materials using online media;
- Catch-up classes in the summer should be provided for disadvantaged learners (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020).

Furthermore, an acknowledgement of the experiences of individual students will be required to ensure that unsuitable and reductive “one size fits all” approaches are avoided. Additional input and extra class time, similar to current provision in the aforementioned Welsh pilot scheme, if successful, may be required to support students whose learning has suffered significantly. Finding the balance between engaging in appropriate catch-up work, while avoiding what some may regard as excessive overload for teachers and students, is a challenge that may persist well beyond the reopening of schools.

Trauma-Sensitive Education

To offer the levels of support required to ensure that all learners are given the opportunity to process and express their perceptions of their personal experiences, educators must provide spaces and opportunities to:

- Express emotions in a safe, supportive environment;
- Successfully navigate age-appropriate challenges;
- Overcome setbacks;
- Build meaningful relationships in which students are heard and valued;
- Experience models of desirable behavioural responses (Campbell et al., 2014).

Lack of opportunities such as these can lead to difficulty with memory and inhibit capacity to control impulses and regulate emotions (Vogel & Schwabe, 2016). Schools must assist students in processing how they have been affected by the changes brought by the pandemic, by providing a safe forum where they can grow and mitigate the risks of long-term trauma. The strategies children develop to deal with trauma in their lives may be detrimental to thriving in a healthy environment such as school. For instance, the brain state, which is necessary for a child to remain in survival mode within a threatening context, may impair engagement with novel concepts and retention of new information, thereby impairing learning potential (Van der Kolk, 2015). Thus, teachers should strive to establish trauma-sensitive learning environments that create a sense of safety within learners by:

- promoting predictability and consistency (Minahan, 2019);
- listening to students about what impacts their lives (Murray, 2019);
- recognising that students may have lost ground academically (Defeyter et al., 2020);
- confronting learning loss (Engzell et al., 2021).

Teachers can help to provide the security, hope, and optimism that create a post-COVID-19 learning environment, wherein students can continue to grow and develop towards realising their potential and avoid being shaped by missed opportunities incurred during the pandemic.

Conclusion and Recommendations

For extended periods in 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, primary schools and early childhood facilities were closed in Ireland. As in many European countries, teachers had to work remotely, students had to remain at home and learn online, and parents had to support their children's schoolwork. Now, over two years later, there is a substantial understanding of the negative effects this decision may have had on teachers, parents, and, most importantly, students. This paper identifies and discusses issues arising from these events and the subsequent reopening of schools.

The first emerging issue related to the fact that there was no system-wide plan designed to deal with unexpected school closures (which previously, in Ireland, had largely been limited to short-term extreme weather events). Second, the move to ERT exposed one of the major inequalities in the education system: the lack of a digital infrastructure, especially as it affects learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities. Third, the mental health of teachers (who had many concerns including those relating to providing high-quality online teaching without adequate experience or training) and of students and parents was found to be negatively affected. On a positive note, however, the crisis highlighted the resilience of teachers, who, in spite of their concerns, rallied to support students and parents, subsequently striving to ensure that students continued to receive high-quality education.

Post pandemic, lessons must be learned to ensure that schools can support all parties and be able to react swiftly and efficiently to future crises. Based on the above discussion, the following actions are recommended for policymakers at system level, for staff in the early years' education sector, and for schools, teachers, and parents:

Policymakers

- make a long-term commitment to increased core funding for the early years' education sector (Montacute & Holt-White, 2021);

- develop funding packages that take into account the diversity in the sector (Early Childhood Ireland, 2020);
- provide opportunities for training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for all staff in the sector (Barnardos, 2020a);
- develop a detailed system-wide crisis response plan that includes clear and flexible procedures addressing school closures and the wellbeing of teachers and students (Petretto et al., 2020);
- create a digital infrastructure throughout the system that maintains a high standard of provision for all learners, when learning remotely or in school (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020).

Staff in the Early Years' Education Sector

- build awareness of the role the sector plays in society (Barnardos, 2020a);
- ensure strategies are in place to facilitate smooth entry into preschool and transition into formal education.

School Leaders

- adapt the effectiveness of catch-up procedures in relation to the needs of students (Keffenberger, 2021);
- ensure that all students have access to appropriate technology;
- review the school-parent communication network to ensure that parents get accurate and current information, and are supported when taking on the role of home educator (Ribeiro et al., 2021);
- provide opportunities for mental health training for teachers (Harmey & Moss, 2021).

Teachers

- undertake ongoing professional development in information and communication technologies (ICT) to build capacity for technology use in the classroom (Irish Computer Society, 2022);
- communicate regularly with parents and provide age-appropriate activities to support their child at home (Gayatri, 2020);
- undertake mental health and wellbeing professional development provided by the school or outside agencies.

Parents

- liaise with teachers regularly (Callanan et al., 2017);
- access technology to support learning;
- support learning with appropriate activities at home;
- be active in the school community.

Schools have now reopened across Europe but continue to deal with many challenges arising from the impact of COVID-19 on students, teachers, and parents. It is worth noting that research evaluating the effectiveness of measures to diminish the impact of lost and disrupted learning is available and could inform responses to future crises involving school closures (Harmey & Moss, 2021). For this cohort of young people, however, it is important that COVID-19 is not allowed to become the foremost influencing factor in their lives. It is hoped that the issues identified in this paper will help schools to reflect on and respond to the aftermath of the pandemic. Although this generation of learners has had to endure some incomparably dark moments within their educational journey, it is essential that all educators and educational policymakers ensure that their future is bright and promising.

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