



Learning from the Experiences of Principals and Teachers in Special Schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland during Covid-19

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SCoTENS

THE STANDING CONFERENCE ON
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SCOTENS

The island of Ireland has 32 counties divided across four provinces: Leinster, Munster, Connacht, and Ulster. The province of Ulster is Northern Ireland, while the other three provinces make up Southern Ireland. The island of Ireland is historically politically complex, with a long history of ‘Troubles’ (unrest) since 1921 when Leinster, Munster and Connacht via the Anglo-Irish treaty formed the Republic of Ireland, becoming independent of British rule. In 1998 a peace treaty, ‘The Good Friday Agreement’, heralded a break in violence and a commitment to peace and prosperity for the future. ‘SCoTENS (the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South) is a product of collaboration and commitment to peace building across teacher education sectors in both jurisdictions. Now (2023) in its 20th year, SCoTENS is a unique network of teacher educators from north and south of the border’ of the island of Ireland (Clarke et al. 2020, p.1). This professional network promotes research collaboration, knowledge exchange and shared professional learning journeys.

WHO IS THIS REPORT FOR?

This report is for all persons concerned and involved with the teaching and education of children and young adults with moderate or severe to profound additional needs, autism and other neuro-developmental differences receiving education within a special education setting across the island of Ireland.

THE BIG MESSAGE FROM THIS RESEARCH PROJECT

The evidence from special schools demonstrates that the professionals in these setting went above and beyond their roles as educators during the Covid 19 pandemic. In a time when life in general was under threat, they propelled themselves into action to ensure that their students could continue to, as best as possible, experience and engage in education. While there was enormous uncertainty about work and life, these educators made choices and



took risks to remain present, on task and to get resources to their students. Their commitment to their students and parents/guardians was emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, morally, and physically challenging. They acted as leaders and innovators, embracing challenges and opportunities equally with personal and professional confidence and determination.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This all-Ireland small scale research project explored the reflective perspectives of teachers and principals in special school settings on their professional experiences and their pupil's learning experiences during and post Covid 19 restrictions.

The research utilised a mixed methods approach. The quantitative component of the research project entailed an online survey, which captured the voices of fifteen professionals from special school settings in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Seven professionals volunteered for the qualitative component: semi-structured interviews (3 principals, 1 deputy principal and 3 teachers).

This report is significant as it outlines the role of the special school setting in Ireland and highlights the unique purpose that special schools have in providing education and supports to children and families with significant and specific physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and psychological challenges.

An important consideration from this project is that pupils in special school settings need to be physically in school and there is a requirement to future-proof policy that respects the uniqueness of the role of the special school setting and keep these schools open in any future pandemic.

Findings

Findings are presented in the following themes as they related to the research question:

- Experiences of Teaching and Learning During Covid 19
- Changing roles and Professional Impact of Covid 19 and 'Lock-down'
- Changes in Teaching and Learning, Relationships with Parents During Covid 19
- Parent Engagement with Home Learning, Reactions of Parents During Covid 19
- Parent-School Communications
- Student Learning Experiences During Covid 19
- Special Schools During Covid 19
- Additional Challenges during Covid 19.

A special section at the end of the findings called 'What Can Be Learned' provides insights into themes such as: The use of On-line Resources, Practical Changes in the School, The Curriculum, Transport, Special Schools Should Remain Open and They [DES] Know Less About Us.

A unified call is expressed for a deeper understanding of the role of the special school in Ireland and the necessity to keep these schools open and functioning as they are critical to the needs of the children and families they serve.



INTRODUCTION

STANDING TOGETHER FOR AUTISM AND NEURODEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCE (STAND)

STAND is a special interest research group (SIG) based within the Inclusion in Education and Society Research Group (IES), in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. It promotes research generation, dissemination and publication related to autism and the lived experiences of people with intellectual disability, autism and/or neurodevelopmental/neuro-diverse needs (across the lifespan), their families and their communities and the educational community.

The aim and objective of this SIG is to raise awareness and lead dialogue across the community. This SIG offers researchers opportunities for a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach to research and the dissemination of research between practitioners, the autistic community, and parents/guardians/families of neuro-diverse people. In particular, the SIG offers a safe platform for the discussion of best practice experiences and outcomes and seeks to generate national and international research projects in this space.

This SIG welcomes members from all sectors of education and support provision with a vision for thinking, planning, and acting inclusively in society.

THE STAND PROJECT

The STAND Project 1 is a North/South collaborative project on the island of Ireland which has received funding of £4,500 from SCoTENS (the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South <https://scotens.org/>). The collaborative for this project is made up of nine



academics from across five institutions: Hibernia College, Ulster University, St. Mary's University College, Trinity College Dublin, and Dublin City University.

Stand Project is concerned with principal, teacher, and educator perspectives of teaching and learning for children in special schools across the island of Ireland during, and immediately, after Covid 19. **The overall aim of this project was to investigate how special schools and teachers can better support families with children who have autism and neurodevelopmental differences (NND) during pandemics/crises.** The key objectives underpinning the project have been to better understand the experiences of educators within the special school sector during the Covid-19 pandemic in Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (RoI); to identify both challenges and examples of good practice; and to explore how special schools could better prepare should similar circumstances arise in the future.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

What can educators, policy makers and other partners learn from the experiences of principals and teachers regarding teaching and learning in special schools on the island of Ireland for children and young people with autism and neurodevelopmental differences during and immediately after 'lock-down' and the global Covid-19 pandemic?

CONTEXT FOR THIS PROJECT

Special schools occupy a unique and distinctive position within the education system, providing specialist support for a continuum of complex, severe, and profound special education need, and disability (SEN/D). The provision of education alongside specific



therapies and support typically not available in the mainstream school environment is indicative of the combined educational and allied health expertise that some children require on a regular, if not daily, basis. The closure of schools worldwide to manage the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic was without historical precedent (UN Policy Brief, 2020) (see also

<https://webarchive.unesco.org/web/20220625033513/https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse#schoolclosureshttps://webarchive.unesco.org/web/20220625033513/https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse#schoolclosures>

for visual evolution over time). Schools in RoI closed on 12th March 2020 and in NI on 23rd March 2020 although many special schools in NI opted to close a week earlier to safeguard the health and safety of vulnerable children. Figure One below presents a timeline of Covid 19 school restrictions in the year 2020 in the RoI. Figure Two below represents a timeline of Covid 19 school restrictions in the year 2020/2021 in NI.

As distance learning became the new norm across schools and age ranges, children with SEN/D were specifically identified as '*least likely to benefit*' from this option (UN Policy Brief, 2020, p. 12). To date, emergent evidence nationally and internationally has indicated that the loss of the regular school routine was disproportionately detrimental to the social and emotional well-being of pupils with SEN/D, leading to feelings of anxiety, frustration, and loss (Ashbury et al., 2021; Banerjee et al., 2021; Lindner et al., 2021).

Teachers within the special school sector faced a range of challenges, which according to research by Aarnos et al. (2021) included changes to daily work life and work routines; difficulties relating to remote teaching, learning and communication; increased stress; and other challenges relating to structural and organisational issues associated with special needs education.

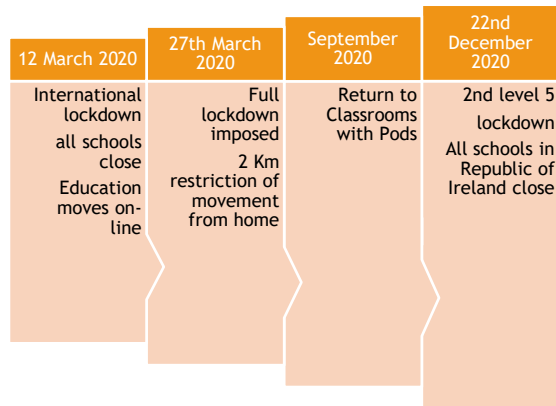


Figure 1 Timeline of Covid 19 school restrictions in the year 2020 in the Republic of Ireland.

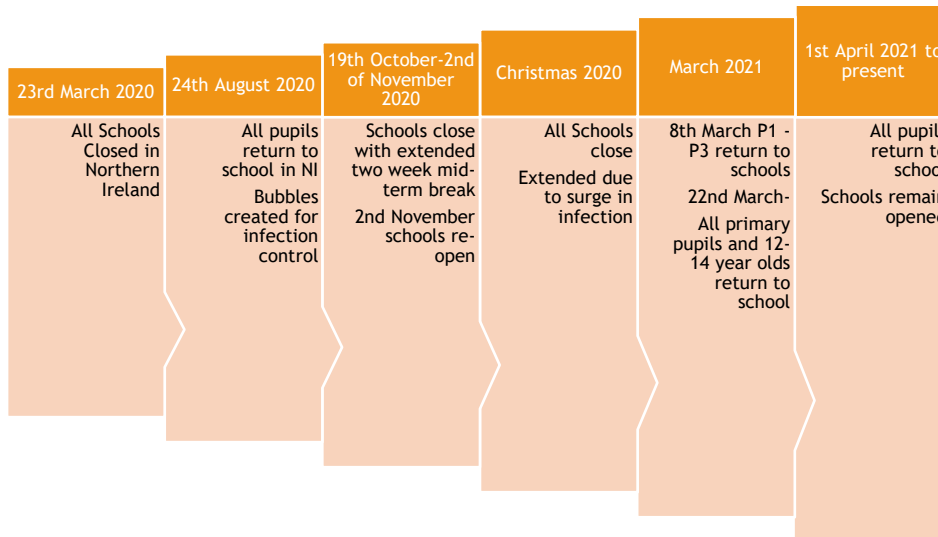


Figure 2 Timeline of Covid 19 school restrictions in the year 2020/2021 in Northern Ireland. (Information sourced from <https://cypsp.hscni.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/NAOG-School-Disruption-Report-July-2022.pdf>)

RESEARCH APPROACH

It was initially intended that this project would reach beyond principals and teachers in special school settings and include the voices of parents and pupils. It was also a desire within the project team to utilise an arts-based approach with opportunities for participants to engage with an artist to reflect their textual contributions. Considering the funds available, the



research team made the decision to focus on a small-scale two staged mixed methods approach involving a purposive sample of participants. Stage one involved an online questionnaire (which incorporated both closed and open-ended questions) for principals and teachers in special schools in both NI and ROI. In stage two online semi-structured interviews were undertaken with principals and teachers in special schools in the two jurisdictions.

Ethical approval for the ROI research was granted by Hibernia College (as the Project Lead was employed there at that time). Ethical approval for the NI research was granted by Ulster University. All potential participants in this project were provided with detailed information about the project and the data collection only proceeded once their full informed consent had been provided, and all participation was voluntary.

On receipt of ethical approval, the research team invited principals and teachers to participate in the on-line survey. Four schools in NI were invited to participate and two schools responded positively. In the ROI ten schools were initially invited and only one school responded. A second set of ten and then a third set of ten invitations were issued (in all 30 schools were contacted), and the responses yielded six schools in total. This low response rate was discussed, and the research team decided to accept this response given the un-folding post-Covid 19 issues of staffing experienced nationally within the education sector.

The survey was administered between March-June 2022 (ROI) and April-May 2022 (NI). The semi-structured interviews took place in May-June 2022 (NI) and July, December, and January 2022 (ROI). Informed consent was attained from each participant at each stage of data generation. The ROI research involved 11 participants, from six special schools at the survey stage, and semi-structured interviews with three individuals from three special schools (one principal, one deputy principal and one teacher). In NI four individuals participated in both the survey and a follow up online interview. There were two principals and two teachers/learning support coordinators working in the special school sector in NI.

Microsoft Forms™ was used as the online tool for the survey, which was designed to capture demographic data and overall experiences of teaching and supporting pupils with SEN/D during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The same survey questions were administered to



participants in both jurisdictions. The survey opened with questions about the participant's professional background and role, including the qualifications they had and length of time in role. The questions then moved on to focus on experiences of teaching and supporting pupils during the Covid-19 pandemic. Quantitative data from the online survey was analysed using basic descriptive statistics, and thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data from open-ended questions.

The follow-up online semi-structured interviews, which enabled a more detailed discussion of the research topic, were conducted through MS Teams™ or Zoom™ depending on what best suited the interviewees and audio-recorded to enable transcription and analysis. Data from the semi-structured interviews was analysed thematically, using the approach to thematic analysis set out by Braun and Clarke (2017, 2022). Thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2017)

can be used to identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices; 'experiential' research which seeks to understand what participants' think, feel, and do. (2017, p.297)

In essence we sought, from a cycle of exploration of the textual data from the semi-structured on-line interview data sets and the qualitative data from the on-line survey instrument, to extrapolate meaning. Not for the purpose of making them simple to understand but to present the richness of the experiences related by participants within the context of the research question. Initially the research team explored the interview materials generated to locate latent codes across the data and to explore these codes repeatedly for relevance and emerging themes ('A code is latent if it captures ideas and concepts that are implicit – that is, sit behind or underneath, the obvious, surface-level meanings in the data.' Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.58). An example of this relates to the code 'profile'. 'Profile' had several subcodes as further reading and analysis continued. 'School profile' presented the school setting, the facilities, and resources. 'Professional profile' presented the participant's professional descriptions. 'Pupil profile' indicated when participants presented their perceptions of the pupils in their setting; how these pupils demonstrated to them their experiences of learning during and post Covid

19. 'Challenges' related to another code across the data sets, this code was also evidenced as a cross code with the code 'profile' and as coding evolved in further analysis (to ensure rigour) central organising concepts/themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.77) emerged such as 'Changing Roles and Professional Impact of Covid 19 and 'lockdown'' and 'Relationships with Parents During Covid 19' etc.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the report presents findings using a clear text narrative supported where necessary by tables or graphs. The participants in this study are presented in context. The findings from the on-line survey and semi-structured interviews are discussed and presented in the following themes; experiences of teaching and learning during covid 19, changing roles and professional impact of covid 19 and 'lock-down', changes in teaching and learning, relationships with parents during covid 19, parent engagement with home learning, reactions of parents during covid 19, parent-school communications, student learning experiences during covid 19, special schools during covid 19, additional challenges during covid 19. A significant section presented in addition to these themes are forward looking findings based on two qualitative questions:

- What do you think we can learn from Covid 19 in terms of education provision for pupils in special schools?
- If we could make one change to how we teach/learn what would that be?

The findings from these questions are presented in the section 'What Can Be Learned' and the presentation of these findings are set out in themes as follows: The use of On-line Resources, Practical Changes in the School, The Curriculum, Transport, Special Schools Should Remain Open and They [DES] Know Less About Us.

PARTICIPANTS

Across both jurisdiction participants were asked to provide some information relating to their professional backgrounds, experiences, and qualifications.



Participants identified themselves as; 10 primary teachers, 3 post-primary teachers, 1 Montessori teacher and 1 as ‘other’ (trained outside Europe and UK).

In relation to length of service in special school settings; 8 had service of more than 15 year, 3 had service of more than 10 years, 2 had service more than 5 years and 2 had less than 5-year service.

In relation to experience/service in mainstream education; 4 had never taught in mainstream, 3 had more than 10-year experience, while the remaining 8 had less the 10-year experience.

A NOTE ON CODING

Throughout this report principals and teachers are identified via codes. This is important as it sets out the role, context, and contributions from the participants from both jurisdictions.

This table provides an example of the codes used.

Code	Meaning
S1PNI	School (S) 1 Principal (P) Northern Ireland (NI)
S2TNI	School 2 Teacher Northern Ireland
RISP15	Republic of Ireland S pecial P rimary (School 15)
RISPP25(a)	Republic of Ireland S pecial P ost- P rimary (Schools 25) Teacher (a)
RISPSMR	Republic of Ireland S pecial Primary and Post Primary S enior M anagement R ole

EXPERIENCES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING COVID 19

In the online questionnaire the participants were asked to rank their experiences of different aspects of teaching and learning during the Covid 19 pandemic on a Likert Scale. This category included making reflective judgements on their experiences of, teaching on-site during Covid 19, teaching fully on-line during Covid 19, teaching in a blended format (online and on-site) and their teaching partnerships with parents. Figure 1 (below) presents the responses to these questions.

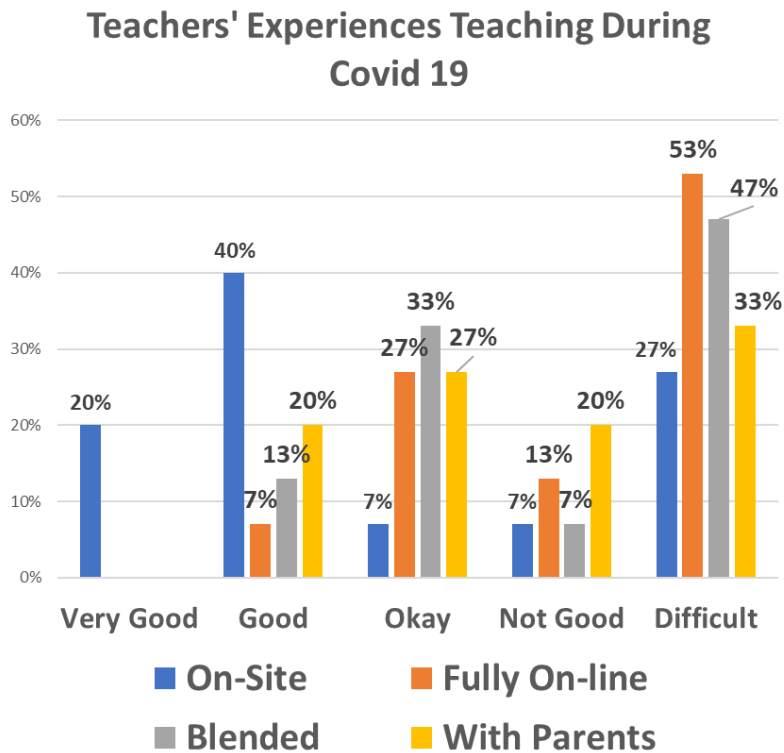


Figure 1: Numerical responses to experiences of teaching and learning during Covid 19

As can be seen in Figure 1, there were mixed responses to the question of experiences of teaching fully online and the results from the quantitative data show that two thirds of teachers indicated negatively (N=2 'not good' and N=8 'difficult'), while one third reflected that it was 'only ok' (N=4) and 1 ranked it a 'good'. In conclusion most participants to the questionnaire were negative about the fully on-line experience. All the quotations that follow in this section are highlighting this.

Participants were also provided with an opportunity to voice their reflections in short paragraphs if they wanted to expand on topics for clarity. The overarching response to teaching and learning during Covid 19 was mixed with emotional reflections. The impact of a global pandemic that threatened lives alongside the professional vocation to provide and support learning for children with additional needs and their families created a new stress and uncertainty across the participants. The uniqueness of the special school setting also emerged as an important expression from all participants and Covid 19 brought changing

roles, greater pupil mental health needs and heightened demands from family systems challenges.

In open qualitative responses teachers and principals reflected as follows:

A principal teacher from RoI (RISP14) recalled her experience when learning that all schools were being closed:

We had to do an awful lot of work...an awful lot of work. And I suppose that's why it's taken so much out of me. I had to let on that absolutely everything was perfect, and I found that very difficult. Though I suppose that for me, was probably the biggest stress. Everybody was looking for reassurance staff, and you had to give us that has actually nearly put me into the ground... The workload that was placed on me as principal has had a lasting effect, hard to know how much longer I will last...there was such a sense of fear and such a panic among everybody. The staff, the students, the parents . . . I visited every classroom. I told teachers to send home enough work for two weeks, enough written work for two weeks, and that we would then reassess the situation . . . So, I suppose my end, I tried to keep as calm as possible and tried to reassure everybody that it was okay . . . it was a huge worry, would we actually see everybody again. RSIP14

Two principals from NI reported upon the impact of moving online:

The Covid 19 pandemic had a very detrimental impact on teaching and learning within special schools. Teaching in a SEN environment is all about relationships and understanding.' S3PNI

During the first lock down our school moved to fully on-line teaching. This was a difficult time; it was very hard to engage pupils online due to lack of support/resources at home. This meant there were long periods of time that we had very little contact with some pupils. S4PNI



Similarly, teachers in RoI reported upon their experiences and challenges of moving suddenly to on-line teaching. Several participants in the RoI described their experiences during the early phase of the pandemic as:

It was difficult to meet the needs of all students RISP15

At the beginning it was very haphazard and disjointed as nobody knew what to expect and no planning had gone into it. Online learning is very difficult for the majority of our students before you even take into account the ability of parents/students to access and use technology. RISP3

It was very difficult to get parents to engage in the learning. I found the pressure to constantly perform and stay in touch with parents and children was immense. RISPP25 (a)

I hated it. We were under so much stress to ensure that we were doing it. I live in a Wi-Fi blackspot, so it was very difficult. I had to drive to an open area and hot spot on my phone to upload things. RISPP25 (e)

One deputy principal (RISPSMR) recounted how they supported the move to on-line with supplemented materials posted home each week:

Trying to engage my class of young people with Moderate GLD online proved a challenge. I stuck with aspects of our school day that they particularly enjoyed such as Circle Time and then our afternoon curriculum of the day - Art, PE, Science, cooking; demonstrating activities that could easily be done at home. I then would email the parents links to songs, academic online games, videos of our activity of the day. All of these were archived on a Padlet that parents had access to. Every week I snuck into school (within my 2 km) and printed, laminated, prepared resources individual to each pupil and sent them home. None of this felt enough and I am not sure how much learning actually went on. RISPSMR

Thus, from these reports, it is evident that the suddenness of the requirement to move to on-line learning presented specific challenges such as the appropriateness of on-line learning as education provision for the pupils and community that the school serves.

CHANGING ROLES AND PROFESSIONAL IMPACT OF COVID 19 AND 'LOCKDOWN'

As part of the survey, participants were asked to expand on their reflections of teaching/facilitating teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how they considered their roles had changed during Covid 19.

Three of the fifteen participants, all school principals, referred to how Covid 19 had made the role of teachers in special schools more challenging. One of these participants, a school principal from NI (S1PNI) described how Covid 19 caused many further complications to a role which was already difficult:

Teaching is a difficult job under normal circumstances. The COVID pandemic caused many further complications, vulnerable colleagues had to be facilitated to work from home, we had to secure sub cover [i.e., substitute teacher appointment(s)] in some classes, not always at adequate standard to meet the pupils' needs. It was damaging to the well-being of colleagues who had to teach in school . . . staff felt undervalued . . . school leaders had to work with unclear and confused guidance. S1PNI

One of the other principals from NI (S2PNI) explained how Covid 19 had a detrimental effect on teaching and learning due to school closures:

The role of a teacher in a SEN/D school requires a deep understanding of each and every individual in the classroom. This, in my opinion, is only possible to achieve when teachers and children can interact in person . . . During the initial lockdown period when spaces for children were limited in school, teaching and learning was very difficult to manage and adapt to each individual child. S2PNI

In their online survey a principal from RoI (RISP14) provided an in-depth reflection of 'out and out panic' and fear. The suddenness of the lockdown generated greater panic as teachers tried to pack learning resources for all students to take home with them. She reflected on how this transferred to the children and the impact of this on her role as professional lead. Also noted as a stressor and acknowledged by other principals within the study was the requirement to bring learning online. Principal from RoI (RISP14) explained:

We had nothing set up, absolutely nothing set up online, because our children aren't taught online, they're taught face-to-face, and it's never been a case where we have ever used IT to teach. We've certainly used IT to enhance our learning. And there are different programmes on the iPad and Reading Eggs [a digital based reading programme] and all of that stuff, but never to actually teach the children in any shape or form... We were starting at zero, absolute zero. RISP14

This principal acknowledged her own distress throughout the interview and how she had to manage staff, parents, and children's anxiety. All of which arose from the complete lockdown of all activities including school and community social learning experiences such as swimming and hip-hop. She explained how she had to keep re-assuring the school community that "everything was perfect" and that this continued for the prolonged period of Covid 19. This she describes as "probably the biggest stress. Everybody looking for reassurance...that has actually nearly put me in the ground." (RISP14)

Another principal teacher in NI reflected "we [herself and the vice principal] were sacrificing our own mental health in order to try to maintain the wellbeing of other staff." (S1PNI)

This was also commented on by one class teacher from RoI (RISPP25 (b)) who reflected that the suddenness of lockdown put pressure on teachers to give 24-hour access via mobile phone and personal email communications to parents and this left no personal space for teachers and their own personal lives. He stated that parents were very anxious and needed a lot of support which broke the rules of professional distances for objective discussion and decision making. One other teacher from RoI (RISPP25 (c)) mentioned the expectation "to call and speak to parents every Friday which was difficult for me personally as I was home schooling my own two children."

A deputy principal from RoI (RISPSMR) expressed the professional impact the lockdown had on her professional identity.

I really struggled with the attitude toward teachers and SNAs as the lockdowns went on. There seemed to be a general feeling that we were all on an extended holiday when in fact many of us had never worked harder or worried more about the adequacy of their teaching. RISPSMR

One teacher from NI (S1TNI) referred to it as a difficult time, but also a time when staff came together and worked together well:

I do think was very difficult for us and probably like a lot of schools, the staff were in for them couple of days when there was uncertainty...we did come together as a group to try and you know, come up with the best means possible for our children...that was a kind of a collaboration of all teachers...we came together... S1TNI

Two principals further expanded on their role changing to become more focused on managing staff. One principal from NI (S1PNI) described researching and finding out information for staff, as well as attempting to provide for staff needs to prevent absences. They explained that they felt a need to prioritise staff, to ensure that the pupils would be supported:

it almost became that my priority [was a bit moved], I suppose, from the pupils to the staff...I was very aware of the fact that if I didn't keep my staff in mind and consider their needs, first and foremost, that I could end up being in a very, very difficult position in school where maybe I would have staff absent and unable to cater for the children in a way that we need to. So, I think that that actually was quite a considerable change, in terms of that my focus became, it actually went on to the staff, rather than to the pupils. S1PNI



Similarly, the deputy principal from RoI (RISPSMR) also described feeling a sense of responsibility for the staff in their school in terms of their well-being and morale:

as deputy principal, I felt huge responsibility for the morale of our staff, both during the lockdown and then coming back in September of 2020 with huge anxiety around COVID. You know, this was pre-vaccine and working with children who don't and weren't expected to wear masks, who don't social distance, who engage in behaviours that involve all kinds of bodily fluids. So, there was that whole piece around morale, both during lockdown and coming back to the school. RISPSMR

Although there were difficulties initially one teacher from NI mentioned how staff came together successfully, “This has been a daunting and stressful time for teachers, but I feel our staff have adapted brilliantly” (S2TNI).

A principal from NI (S1PNI) described the effect the changing restrictions had on them personally in their role as principal:

A huge stress, a huge pressure on me and the vice principal, who actually flagged you know... that our responsibility is the dealing with staff absences and getting sub cover. And many, many, many hours have been spent trying to source that cover but also then, even after you've spent those many, many hours trying to source the cover, then you're facing staff who are saying this is ridiculous, that we don't have cover...I suppose in a way we, in the top leadership level, we were sacrificing our own mental health in order to try to maintain the wellbeing of other staff. That's the pressure that we were under because we needed to keep running our schools. S1PNI

CHANGES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

While the first section focused just on on-line learning (triangulated against statistical findings), this section highlights other experiences of change throughout the pandemic.

Participants described the changes they experienced in relation to teaching and learning in their schools. Responses focused primarily on the shift to online and home learning and the advantages and challenges associated with this. As presented previously in Figure 1, in the statistical data participants were split about their experiences in the blended model of teaching during the pandemic. The requirement on being technologically savvy was elaborated on within the qualitative responses of participants. Participants from RoI mentioned Seesaw™ (interactive learning online platform) as a positive discovery for several different uses, communication being the most notable.

It was clear from the beginning that teaching pupils with severe and profound moderate and pupils with ASD who attend our school was the most challenging task. From putting postal packs together as well as using additional communication platforms seesaw™, what's app™, emails. Not one communication platform worked. From editing videos making resources, communicating with other teachers for ideas and resources then all depending on great internet connection. RISPP25 (c)

Seesaw™ was our saving grace. We could record lessons; we could put up worksheets. RISP14

I'm not an ICT tech at all. I'm quite ignorant with a lot of things about it. But when I looked into Seesaw™ there's quite a lot of facilities on it where I liked that you could actually develop your own online folders... RISPP25 (b)

One teacher from RoI described how the move to online learning during lockdown led to greater online communication with parents:

We used to traditionally always have notebooks where you would write home to parents and give them kind of information about how the day went. But since lockdown, we were just introduced to new forms of online kind of communications such as Seesaw and I think that that has become a more prominent part now of our role and that's something that we were expected to carry on after COVID and we still are at the moment. RISPP25 (c)

However, the deputy principal from RoI (RISPSMR) referred to difficulties with online learning, particularly in relation to engaging children in learning in an online environment:

We weren't able to engage our children for as long in online lessons, now, I did class every day and most of the children would attend, but it was very, very difficult to think of ways of keeping them engaged in a meaningful way and keeping it fun or you'd lose them. RISPSMR

Another teacher from NI (S1TNI) referred to a logistical problem with introducing the new online approach. Some teachers had pupils attending face-to-face in the classroom and other pupils participating online:

We suddenly had to get up-to-speed with being able to use the online platforms with parents. We would use Seesaw extensively, but at that stage it wouldn't have been used throughout the whole school. So, there was a big rush then to try and get everybody signed up and to get everybody sort of access . . . And then the other problem that we would have found would have been that you had staff in school, who had some children in school, had some other class at home, and they were trying to supply work and support children in sort of two environments. S1TNI

Participants discussed online learning and how they felt this impacted on pupil experiences during Covid 19. A principal from NI (S2PNI) referred to what they considered to be a lack of

success with online and blended learning, and referred to pupils not having the same type of access to the school building:

Online/blended learning was not very successful. Engagement from pupils and their families was very low and of mixed success. After initial staff apprehension when returning to the workplace, most learning experiences were successful and progression, along with motivation, of pupils returned to pre- pandemic levels. Older pupils who previously attended specialist subjects within school were negatively affected as pupil movement around the school building was limited. S2PNI

One RoI principal (RISP14) discussed how the lack of school and staff preparedness was a major challenge when it came to implementing online learning:

We weren't trained in zoom. There's very little training in Zoom™. But when your staff have never done that before, on top of them being worried...we were expected to launch online learning overnight, which I couldn't do..... if my staff didn't know how to go on and follow a Zoom™ link and some of them don't have up to date phones, some of them are an older staff, some of them actually didn't know how to download the Zoom app™ onto their phone. So that's where we were starting at. We didn't have G Suite [suite of collaborative productivity applications provided by Google] set up, we didn't have emails for teachers set up. There was just an email for me and for the secretary. So, we are starting at zero, absolute zero and that brought so many problems for me. RISP14

The deputy principal from RoI (RISPSMR) described the difficulties with teaching online:

Do you know that academic learning is very difficult to do online? Even if I was doing one- to- one sessions, which I occasionally did, you're still putting a lot on the parents to sit down and follow through on. And what the kids needed was to stay in touch, was to still feel that sense of community with their class and with the school, and to have some sense of fun at a time that was scary for them. RISPSMR

It is important to note that participants also contributed positively to teaching on-line and in a blended format. As can be seen here from a RoI teacher (RISPP25(b)) who described how they felt the move to more online activity had a positive effect for the longer term:

I think the positive thing with the online is that we can now have photos and videos of the children sent to various parents and work they do as well. I think that's kind of cut down a lot on the writing in the diary in the evening time as well, because that's saying a picture tells a thousand words. So, it's nice for parents to kind of see what the children are engaging in on a daily basis. RISPP25(b)

One NI principal (S1PNI) referred to how significant the switch to home learning was, in terms of the complexities associated with supporting pupils for children with a wide range of needs, and acknowledging that this was more easily implemented with some families than others:

We were all doing home learning. So that was a big, big change, obviously, for our pupils and our staff. I, it was a big concern for us because, you know, a lot of our kids obviously have difficulty learning and have communication needs and a lot of our children have anxieties as well. So, we were in a very, very difficult position where we were having to actually look to how we could cater for the different needs of our different children with their wide range of special needs - but in the home setting and I suppose the main thing was that we really had to have a lot of flexibility around what we were offering, because some children would have been able to sit down and do paperwork or to have more pen and paper activities, and others just would not have been capable of that. And then some children would have been very capable of transferring their learning skills into the home setting, and others just absolutely could not do that. S1PNI

Participants from RoI offered some positive and negative feedback relating to the second lockdown:

I feel that during the second lockdown in 2021 the uptake and experience was greatly improved as schools had planned for such a scenario and were properly prepared. RISP3

In many ways, the second lockdown in January 2021 was more difficult. Parents and teachers at this stage were COVID weary. While online teaching had been a novelty in March 2020, the novelty had now worn off. Added to this was dreary winter weather making getting out far more difficult for families. We were acutely aware that many parents at this stage were really struggling. RISPSMR

To say that it was horrendous is putting it mildly, parents wanted pupils at school whether sick or not, staff were not protected and were very angry, no subs were available, I was expected to steer this and effectively encourage and deliver teaching and learning. 22 buses to add to the insult with no cover for bus drivers or escorts, on any given day we could have had 15 staff missing between teachers, SNAs, and escorts. To be expected to manage this, lead teaching and learning, support staff, support parents, support pupils, and then throw in the famous 'wellbeing' was actually unbelievable. RISP14

RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS DURING COVID 19

Regarding participants' reflection on their experience of teaching in partnership with parents during Covid 19, the findings demonstrated that only one fifth of participants (N=3) describe their experiences as 'good' while the remaining stated that experiences were 'only ok' (N=4), 'not good' (N=3) and 'difficult' (N=5).

Participants were asked how they perceived parents' experiences of the parent role as educators during Covid 19. Twelve of the fifteen participants ranked parent experiences as

‘difficult’, two participants rated as ‘not good’, and one participant rated as ‘only ok’ (see figure 2 below).

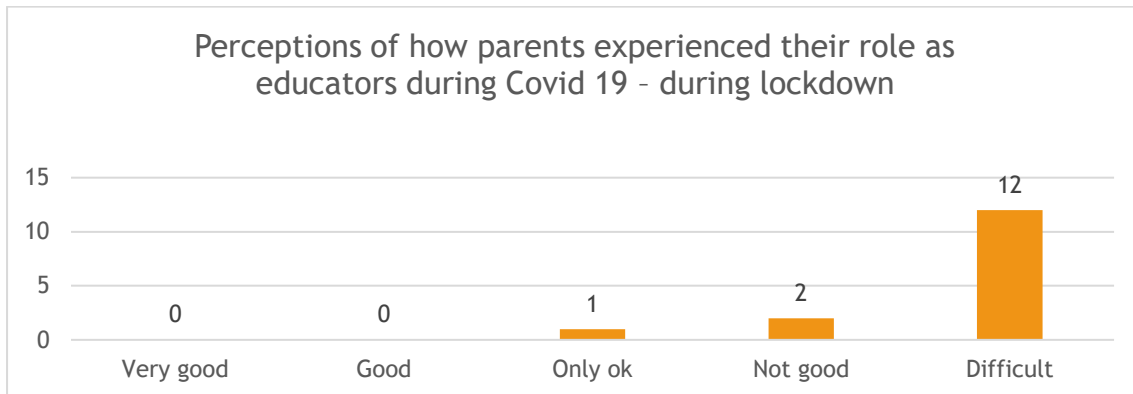


Figure 2: Perceptions of parent experiences as educators during Covid 19

The survey also asked how participants thought these experiences changed over time for parents as restrictions were on-going. The participants related perceptions that a small improvement in parent experiences was evident, as set out in figure 3 below.

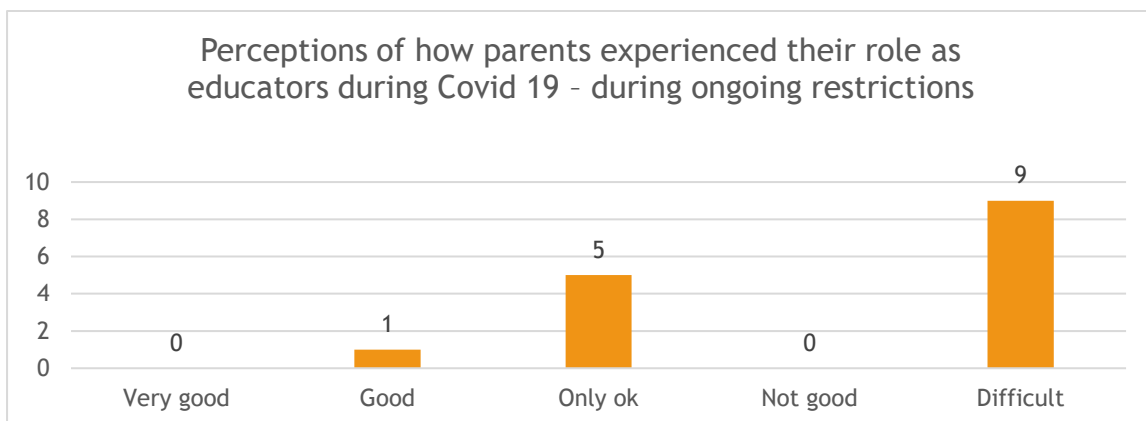


Figure 3: Perceived changes to parent experiences in their role as educators during continued Covid restrictions

PARENT ENGAGEMENT WITH HOME LEARNING

Across both jurisdictions parents were encouraged to take on a ‘home schooling’ approach to the education of their children and as evidenced teachers prepared some activities and sent them home for children to engage with. Some of the participants described their views on parent engagement with home learning and how this came through in their communication with parents at this time. In their survey response, a teacher from NI (S1TNI) stated that they

felt some parents struggled to access online learning and that a number had reported an inability to engage their children in lessons every day and said that active learning activities supplied were least likely to be completed by parents. Another teacher from NI (S2TNI) echoed this in their response, stating:

From speaking to parents during Covid 19 and also post restrictions I know they found it very difficult to take on this role. They found it difficult to try to get pupils to take part in any kind of learning at home...they found it very hard to engage the pupils in anything at home that was school related. A lot of our pupils struggled with the fact that it was schoolwork at home. And that barrier, you know, when they're in the school building and that's where they do their schoolwork, it was that barrier of trying to understand, no, it's okay to do it at home and trying to you know, develop that routine. The parents also, like we tried to phone like once or once every two weeks or once every week just to touch base...I do think it was difficult, definitely. I don't think we were really prepared for what maybe was required at that time. S2TN1

Participant teachers mentioned the impact of the new role of primary educator alongside the impact of fulltime care of a child with significant needs and the parents changing work commitments and situations. The following is a snapshot from the survey questionnaires:

This unprecedented situation was undoubtedly challenging for all parents. I know from parental accounts that working parents in particular reported the challenges they experienced as they found it difficult to be involved in supporting all aspects of the curriculum. RISPP26

Parents were honest in that some had to abandon the lessons at times, and that often the home schooling led to additional stress. Often parents looked for support and discussion re difficulties rather than specific lessons during link in phone calls. RISPP25(d)

The parents were dealing with challenging children at home, so it was an added stress to do what we were asking them to do. RISPP25(e)

They found it difficult to get the children to engage with activities and attend to tasks. RISPP25(f)

In contrast, another teacher from RoI described experiencing the active involvement of parents in their child's learning:

I think I was quite lucky with the class I actually had because I had parents who were quite actively, in a very positive way, actually involved with their children's learning. They were extremely interested in what we actually put up and I thought that was quite nice as well...I think the parents appreciated a lot of what we actually did, and I think they found it quite good to work through. I think one of the complaints we got was that sometimes it's just too much going up and they just found it difficult to kind of work through everything we're actually doing. RISPP25(e)

Teacher participant from NI (S2TNI) referred to how the disruption to pupil's routines and the effect this had on behaviour came through in communication with parents:

I think parents didn't even really know how to approach it, I think even trying to get that routine at home, like a lot of parents would have said to me, they're just at home, how do I get them to do it? So I was trying to say them, you don't have to be sitting down in a nine to three day, it's not school so I definitely think that it was a lot of pressure on parents, but in communicating with them and making them understand that it was okay, it wasn't nine to three, for them to try and relax into it a wee bit more to help them, you know, relax and understand that it was okay when we're not sitting down at books here all day, there's a lot more things to try and support these pupils and look after them. But I also think that parents maybe struggled with behaviour, the child at home who's used to their routine, used to the bus picking them up and then that was all gone and trying to explain that to their child is very difficult so I do think at the start, as well parents expressed, like concern and worry over the behaviour, and how were they going to manage it. S2TN1

An observation relevant to special schools was communicated during the interview process regarding parents with learning disabilities themselves. This presents an interesting insight into the important role of the special school in supporting these parents on a consistent and continuous basis. This principal from RoI described the complexity and impact of Covid 19 on these families and the frustration the school experienced in not being able to help:

A section of our school would also have parents who have a learning difficulty, so that was coming from home as well and there was nothing that we could do about that. RISP14

REACTIONS OF PARENTS DURING COVID 19

The participants provided further insight into various aspects of relationships with parents in both the survey responses and during their interviews.

One principal from RoI described how relationships were strained at the beginning of Covid 19 due to parents' expectations of the provision of home learning:

That initial period was very, very stressful. Parents were not happy. And it's not that they weren't happy with us, they knew that we were doing the best that we could, but they wanted their children in school, and they wanted online learning from nine until 2:30 every day. And they weren't happy that we couldn't provide that. And even if we had to be set up and had to have the resources, we still couldn't have provided online learning from nine until half two...There's no way that we could have provided a full school day's teaching even if we had to have the resources. RISP14

This principal then described how relationships with both parents and staff became strained when special schools re-opened, due to the confusion surrounding the situation:

That was a time of real pressure for us as a special school because first of all, the school had concerns over the fact that that children were being asked to remain at home to stay safe and yet special school children were being told, go ahead, and go to school. So there was a lot of issues and anxieties around that...for the staff, they were expected to go to their place of work, where all of their colleagues were being asked, were being told that they should stay at home in order to stay safe...the message really going right to our staff really was very confusing, in that how come we're being asked to put ourselves at risk when other colleagues are not, and the same for the children...parents who had that sense of, well I'm not sending my child to school because what the government are saying is keep the children home from school in order to keep them safe...So there was lots of different interpretations I suppose, on that direction being given, and we again, had to just take a really, really flexible approach. In the end, we decided that we would go to the part time provision.' RISP14



A deputy principal from RoI described parents being ‘appreciative’ generally but frustrations continued when schools reopened:

The parents I had, in general, they were quite appreciative of everything we tried to do. At the same time, they were frustrated. And there were times that that came out in conversations with us both during that time of lockdown and as they came back to school. And I don't think it was intended, but we were the people on the front line dealing with those day-to-day pressures that they were feeling. And it took a lot to kind of swallow it and just say, these guys are feeling exceptionally stressed...I'm the person that they see on the screen every day, or who can be called at the end of a phone and I'm going to get it. In general, a lot of us did, and there were apologies in some situations, but I think that because we were the face on the front line, there was a certain loss of that sense that we didn't lock the schools down. We aren't making these decisions. We're doing the best we can. So, it was quite a rocky road, quite a sort of roller coaster of being appreciated and then also being on the receiving end of frustrations. RISPSMR

Principal from RoI (RISP14) also recounted a reflection on voices from media during Covid 19 and its implications for relationships with parents:

We got an awful lot of bad press and special ed schools got an awful lot of bad press, and none of that helped with our parents. There was a few parents that were very annoyed and distraught and wanting the schools back up and running. RISP14

In NI one principal noted that although most parents were extremely supportive to the school throughout Covid 19, they felt that they were “definitely getting fed up” with the ongoing and constant class closures due to staff shortages as things continued (S1PNI).

Some of the participants referred to how they communicated with parents during Covid 19. One principal from NI (S1PNI) referred to how they were conscious of maintaining open communication and the relationships with both parents and the staff in their school:

that would have been something that we were all very, I suppose, conscious of - that we didn't want to lose the communication and probably there would have been much more communication going on, you know, online communication and the telephone calls etc. between parents and staff...there was a lot of communication even among the staff team...we had a whole staff team communication just going on daily, and trying to support each other...just to keep the morale up and keeping the communication going on, certainly in that very first period of lockdown. You know, that was really, that was quite abundant, I would say, the communication. S1PNI

One teacher participant from ROI described developing relationships with parents using technology. This participant (RISPP25(b)) felt that a more effective way of communicating with parents was now in place because of a switch to online communication during Covid 19:

the vast majority of them [parents] are quite comfortable to message you on for example, the Seesaw platform...I think that has made a more efficient way of keeping in touch with parents. And parents find that easier to access rather than even phone calls to the school... RISPP25(b)

However, this teacher also referred to relationships becoming difficult with parents due to what they felt was a lack of boundaries, this was echoed by participants across the research:

I think it actually crossed the line, really...because I would always be very professional in school I think and I've got to be very frank about this as well compared to when I taught in mainstream school, I think with parents whose children with special education, there's kind of a neediness there with them to a certain extent where I think they don't have it as easy as parents who have children who are of normal ability, normal functioning. And I think before lockdown, before all this happened, they would be looking for quite a lot of reassurance from you about their child. Are they making their goals, what's going to happen within the future...I think with lockdown then as well, I think what happened was that suddenly by giving out our telephone numbers, by giving out her personal email access and stuff as well, they actually had a greater pathway to us...So I think that was quite a negative point of view from a professional standpoint. I think kind of then as well, from our management in school as well, we were expected quite a lot to be in contact with parents and I found personally, there's only so much you could say on a daily basis to them...it was difficult because there was no actual boundaries set by the school about what we were to do...I think we're kind of pushed a lot to make sure we were making contact and we were checked quite a lot like that. RISPP25(b)

This participant teacher felt that there has been a continuing effect from this, that parents would be expecting this kind of contact with and access to teachers for some time to come:

I still think though there's just going to be the aftermath of it for a couple of years to come. While you had parents, who had the Covid kind of thing in the school, I think they're going to find it quite difficult to go back to suddenly not having that personal contact with the teacher on a daily basis. RISPP25(b)

Another RoI teacher participant (RISPP25(f)) also referred to this issue with boundaries when it came to contact with parents, they reflected: "Difficult to draw a line between teaching hours and parents, some were messaging on the evening and on holidays."

Another teacher participant from Rol (RISPP25) described feeling under pressure to remain in contact with parents: “It was very difficult to get parents to engage in the learning...I found the pressure to constantly perform and stay in touch with parents and children was immense.”

As mentioned earlier another teacher participant also referred to the expectation to maintain contact with parents beyond schoolwork times: “We were expected to call and speak to parents every Friday which was difficult for me personally as I was home schooling my own two children.”

Some participants highlighted how they gained further insight into pupils’ family life because of Covid 19. A deputy principal from Rol explained that the experience of Covid 19 had given them more of an insight into pupils’ family life and how difficult this could be:

I'm going to say in terms of families, I do think it gave us, not that we didn't have it before, but a far greater understanding of just how difficult home life can be and that did and still feeds into my understanding...So in some ways that was quite a good thing, giving us that extra level of understanding of just how challenging, as much as our parents obviously love their children, just how challenging life at home can be on another level. RISPSMR

This deputy principal also recounted a genuine concern for the mental health and wellbeing of parents as Covid 19 restrictions continued:

So at least in my experience, the bigger fear wasn't the illness, it was the impact that that lockdown had on parental mental health and family life and family relationships. RISPSMR

STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCES DURING COVID 19

In the online survey participants were asked to rank how they felt their pupils experienced learning during Covid 19. As set out in figure 5 below the majority believed their pupils had “Good” learning experiences over the course of Covid 19. In relation to learning fully online or learning with parental support, in their opinion, their pupils found this to be “Difficult”.

“Difficult” and “Only OK” were the most common responses in relation to learning in a blended format.

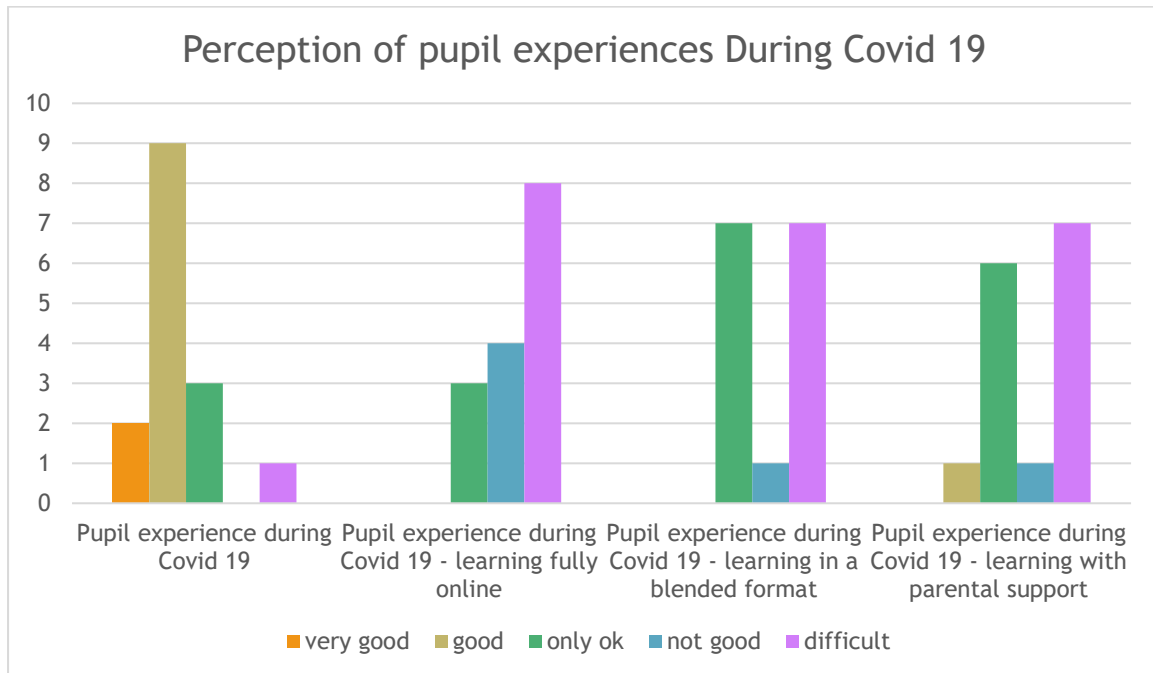


Figure 5: Perceptions of Pupil experiences during Covid 19

These issues were also explored with the participants in open survey questions and interviews. One teacher from NI (S1TNI) felt that pupils experienced difficulties for numerous reasons, including access to devices and resources, varying levels of engagement with lessons, different learning styles, and anxiety surrounding coming to school during Covid 19:

A number of students found it difficult to participate in online learning due to problems with access to devices. Engagement with lessons varied throughout the school. Whilst some parents successfully accessed materials supplied via the Seesaw app., many requested “hard” copies to be posted home. Learning progression suffered due to the limitations placed on meeting pupils’ learning styles through online learning. Zoom was used successfully for some pupils working from home to link in with their peers in school. We experienced pupils who were very anxious about coming into school and others who missed being at school, when it was closed to all but pupils of key workers. S1TNI

In NI one principal (S1PNI) referred to the change in pupils’ routine - how some pupils experienced changes in teachers and a loss of access to specific classrooms, and being unable to interact with peers:

Some pupils really benefitted from being in a class bubble, but others suffered the loss of only being with one set of staff and not interacting with other friends. Pupils did not get their usual specialist subject teachers and had no access to the specialist classrooms. S1PNI

A principal in RoI (RISP14) also commented on the impact that routine changes had on pupils, and she expanded further as she referred to the impact on social and emotional experiences and the consequences and outcomes due to Covid 19 restrictions:

I think it was quite difficult really, because they did rely an awful lot in coming into school. They loved the integration with children in their class. T, they loved integration with the SNAS [Special Needs Assistants] and with the teacher, and we did a high portion of very hands- on activitiesour whole school came back to not being able to mix with anybody else. And that was horrendous for everybody, particularly the senior children. They didn't understand it ...And that caused huge problems and caused huge anxiety among the children ...behaviours rose and then we didn't have enough staff to sort out those behaviours. So, there were a few children suspended because there was no other way. After an awful hard battle and everything done for them, and it wasn't their fault - but we actually didn't have the resources for them. It was a reaction to what the situation was.
RISP14

These reflections are shared across the participants and a common reflection is the impact of the loss of “safe, secure, predictable environment where they could go and could learn” (S1TNI). A teacher in RoI (RISPP25 (e)) provided a reflection on the lasting negative impact on pupils:

I think Covid 19 did a lot of damage to children as well. I think talking from a very personal point of view when I was in the class I was in at the time. I had a child who had selective mutism and she was just starting to talk in the classroom...then suddenly then lockdown happened and that's really set her back. Even now we're talking two years later. She's now in a new class and she's just not talking at all, and I do feel lock down did do that to them as well. RISPP25 (e)

A principal from NI (S1PNI) noted that some pupils in their school surprised the staff in terms of how well they coped, especially in relation to their flexibility with adapting to home



learning: “I would say the children coped far better than the adults coped with it ...I think the children coped remarkably well.” They also recounted that they felt that perhaps some children benefitted from being in a home setting:

There are children that that we feel very strongly are actually not ready for school and are coming to school every day because it's a statutory right that they come to school. But there are a number of cases when we'd be saying, in actual fact, this child needs more home support, and they need to the home setting, and they need their parents and their families to help nurture their development rather than being sent to school every day. So, for some that was a really big bonus actually. S1PNI

A deputy principal from RoI (RISPSMR) noted similarly:

Children are pretty resilient. And when we reopened in September, mostly, they were just so happy to be back in school and delighted to see us as a staffIn general, I think they were just happy to be back in school. They didn't express too much fear. And maybe there was that level of not really understanding why this whole thing had happened anyway. RISPSMR

A NI principal (S1PNI) also noted that there was an improvement in behaviour (generally) in the school because of changes to learning:

in the bubble situation that we were being directed to accommodate in our schools, we found that with our children definitely, there was improvements in behaviour, general behaviour in school, because the children were not transitioning from one classroom to another. They were working with the same staff constantly, every day, there was no you know, they weren't having to go up to the dining hall, for example, for their lunch, they weren't going out to a noisy classroom environment where they were having to cope with big crowds of other children. S1PNI

A NI teacher (S1TNI) reported that they felt that Covid 19 had more of an impact on pupils than they could have appreciated: "There's lots of different ways that you now see that impact. Obviously, where classes were in school and they were in bubbles, children did miss being together and they missed seeing their friends and other classes." They also referred to the nature of the needs of the pupils in their school and how things impacted on them, especially in comparison to pupils in a mainstream school:

I think the nature of the pupils we have; we are a moderate learning difficulty school, but we are not, in essence, anymore. We have a school for children with significant and complex needs. So, those sorts of children need a lot of support anyway, and whenever you take away the security of the predictability of the days ...I think has impacted on them. And they are less resilient in that sort of environment because they don't actually cope terribly well - generally - with change. But, whenever you can't really prepare them for change or it's inevitable that something will happen that we have no control over, I think our children, because of the nature of their needs, and their challenges, do struggle more than - and I'm not saying mainstream children haven't ...but I do think in the day-to-day life, our children live at a higher stress level anyway and that means it's very difficult for them to cope with this sort of uncertainty. S1TNI

A RoI principal (RISP14) discussed the differences between pupils attending special schools and pupils attending mainstream schools during their interview:

I suppose the special needs children are just a completely different, they're a completely different box and you definitely can't put them, you can't even compare them with a mainstream school. There are so many other elements to them and so many other elements that people wouldn't see, and people don't know about because they're not working in the area. And the first thing is they need to be happy, secure, and safe. And they didn't feel that when they came back in September. So, we needed to work hard on that . . . the teachers worked very hard, and we did get them back on- track. And there were behavioural difficulties that definitely arose from Covid 19. But 90% of them, we got back, and we got them back on- track and we made life, and I suppose this is why I'm burnt out as well, we made life as happy as possible for them while they were in school. RISP14

A teacher from NI (S2TNI) referred to the difficulties in assessing pupil progress due to a lack of pupil engagement at this time:

School provided a large amount of learning material using different types of media. However, it was difficult to engage pupils in this way. As a teacher, it was extremely difficult to assess any progression or provide motivation to those who chose to not engage in material and teaching provided. S2TNI

The same teacher reported that without parent support and prompting it was difficult for pupils to engage and connect online.

I do feel it was very hard to connect with our pupils because we didn't know what they're doing unless the parent was maybe telling you. Sometimes they might have been in the background, and they might have said hello, you know, but I found the engagement with the pupils was obviously a lot less and that was difficult, but the parent engagement was much better. S2TNI

A RoI principal (RISP14) explained that whilst Covid 19 had an impact on pupils' social skills and confidence, as well as their learning, they believed the pupils have regained these:

They lost all their learning, they really did. And they lost their social skills. They lost how to manage. We would do an awful lot of work, obviously, on self-esteem and confidence and trying to hold their own and independence for them. And we do that first because when the children are happy and content, then they can start with their learning and then their academics. But they had lost those basic skills and they had lost how to interact with each other and how to manage from one part of the day to the next. They were very worried as well, some of them . . . Anything that we had learned, it was nearly as if somebody went into their brain and picked it out. They had lost it. Now, they regained it. They have. (RISP14)

SPECIAL SCHOOLS DURING COVID 19

In this section it is important to note the contextual differences between the special education system in the North of Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In Northern Ireland schools are guided by the Department of Education and the Education Authority who are responsible for the provision of education across age and abilities. In the Republic of Ireland schools are guided by legislation and policy from the Department of Education. Also, important to note is the guiding advice provided by the health authorities in both jurisdictions; Public Health Agency (PHA) in Northern Ireland and the Health Service Executive (HSE) in the Republic of Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland, the HSE was responsible for the advice and direction of



restrictions for all schools regarding Covid 19. Also, important to understand is that admission to a special school in the Republic of Ireland is dependent on an Assessment of Need (AoN) which is undertaken through services from the HSE.

The participants described the impact they felt Covid 19 has had on special schools.

In NI a principal (S2PNI) described contrasting experiences in the support received from the Department of Education and the Education Authority:

The good thing was the Department of Education were excellent. I would say the Education Authority became a bit distant. We didn't really get a lot of support from them until later on in Covid 19. But the Department of Education was very good, and they sort of gave the guidance on you know, it was the phrase of 'where possible' that became a key phrase for us you know, 'where possible' we're trying our best to support the children and support the staff you know. S2PNI

Also from NI, principal (S1PNI) also discussed the Department of Education and the Education Authority:

I think that there was an acknowledgment that special schools did need a different level of support I suppose in the end, but it took a lot of special school principals doing a lot of shouting and a lot of repeating of the issues that were being raised and the problems that we were having before that went, before that was put in place really. S1PNI

In the RoI a principal (RISP14) responded to the question regarding adequate support and advice with the following statement:

No. No, no. No. Absolutely not. No. Without a shadow of a doubt. No, absolutely not. None from the HSE. And God love them, I mean, I don't know how they managed. How do you manage, like, with 12,000 cases coming in a day? That's unmanageable for anybody. But no, the HSE, the risk assessment, there was no structure to it. Every single time I had a risk assessment, I had to start at the beginning, and it was like they were talking to a new person. Like, when you log your details once with HSE, they should be there. You shouldn't have to go through details like my phone number, my email address, all of them things should be there. And I ended up having to do all the work anyway. They SEN/Dt out a spreadsheet and I had to do everything for them. So, no, there was definitely no support there. But I did feel sorry for them. They were understaffed too.

And as for the department [Department of Education], absolutely not. No, in any shape or form. They threw money at us left, right and centre. And that was great to have money for cleaning and to have money for what you needed it for. But I needed staff. I didn't need five extra cleaners, I needed staff and I didn't have them. Sorry. Now, that's very sharp. RISP14

This was also confirmed by RoI deputy principal (RISPSMR) as she stated “There was no direction coming from the department at all. At least I didn't feel there was anything coming...” She continued further into the interview with the following observation:

I felt huge pressure to do as much as possible to support the kids and support the parents under the circumstances, including the initial lack of guidance from the department [Department of Education/DES]. I don't know, was there anything I could have changed personally when I do think they [DES] should have looked at safe ways of reopening the schools and the department in doing that? I think... in terms of staff in special schools and special classes in other countries needed to recognise that teachers were on the front line and that dogged insistence that schools were safe, and teachers were safe was a bunch of nonsense, and it was okay, just say 'it's not safe, but we need you guys to do this. You're on the front line. Get in there and we'll give you all the supports we can. RISPSMR

Some of the participants referred to the effects of the restrictions being different for special school staff. A teacher in NI (S1TNI) described feeling that as staff in a special school, there was an expectation for them to do more than those in mainstream schools and that this was a cause of stress:

We were expected to stay open when other schools were closed. And I think there was a slight emotional blackmail almost...so you have to stay open to provide for those pupils because they have special needs... And while that's possibly true, it was to the detriment of staff who are expected to come in to school and were not really well supported...So I do think there was more expectation on special school staff and I think to the extent where people felt very, very stressed at times, because I said before, they were dealing with a mixture of requirements in school, but also then trying to manage their own children at home. And while lots of people had to do that, obviously, who were working, I think the nature of our school meant that it was a very stressful environment for staff. S1TNI

A principal in Rol (RISP14) also described issues with the staff in their school not wanting to come back to school before mainstream schools re-opened:

And I had awful trouble, and I mean awful trouble with my staff. Awful trouble. It was absolutely horrendous. They did not want to come back to school, and that was right across the board. They were scared. They were afraid. They all, again, had people that they were worried about. They did not want to come back to school, and they were very annoyed that they had to come back to school, and that mainstream didn't. RISP14

This principal continued to describe anxiety amongst staff in returning to school with restrictions still in situ. In this instance where differences in approach to junior and senior class management arose. In senior classes, where pupils were vaccinated, classes could mix outside of their classroom 'bubbles'. The following quote demonstrates how Principals as leaders of schools had to make difficult decisions as restrictions changed and, in some cases, how they had to carry out duties themselves and accept the consequences of certain decisions:

Staff were extremely anxious and some [special needs assistants] SNAs...didn't want to mix outside of their bubble. So that caused huge stress...And there was nothing that I could do about things like that other than go in and do it myself.

So, it meant that I was running the school and doing care needs of children and it meant that I was mixing in all of the classrooms, which brought a huge amount of stress with me...

There was one of the days I went into school, and I was 15 staff down. No Help. And you're trying to keep a school open with that. How do you do that? So, what I did, I phoned our inspector and the word from the inspector was we could mix the senior children because they were vaccinated.... So, I did that.

Staff were irate and very disgruntled with me for mixing bubbles, so much so one of them reported me to the INTO [Irish National Teacher's Organisation: teaching union] ... And I suppose at my own detriment, I've paid for that since that's what has been very hard. Sure, you try to do the right thing, you try to look after everybody, it's just not the right thing.'

RISP14

This principal continued to reflect on the impact on staff well-being and relationships:

I think it has impacted massively negatively on staff in the school setting...I absolutely think that there's people who have suffered with mental health issues that you that probably would never have expected to suffer. I think that staff relationships ultimately have been damaged. While we were...in communication online for that initial period...without being able to have face to face meeting was awful, very, very damaging. I would say it's something that I have identified in terms of school improvement, that needs to be a high priority in terms of school improvement over the next few years, the re-establishing of ethos across the school, it's been massively damaged. RISP14

Staff shortages due to infections or staff absenteeism due to caring for their own children with Covid 19 infections was mentioned across participants as impacting special school provision, routines, and structures. Principal RISP14 further elaborated:

Where we were having staff that were absent, we were having to ask support staff, for example, to go into other classroom environments, that was a cause of... the cause of great distress. And anger, I would say, on behalf of staff, who just felt that that wasn't the right thing to be doing. But we had to, we were still expected to run our schools.' RISP14

A principal from NI (S2PNI) also discussed the challenge of staff shortages:

it was just juggling staff; we have 200 staff here. And I remember the day, inputting on a survey from the Department of Education with, like it was 11 teachers and 26 classroom assistants off sick and you're wondering how are we still functioning, but we got through and probably with staff help, you know, and we got through it, but it wasn't an easy time, but it wasn't an easy time for anybody. S2PNI

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES DURING COVID 19

In addition to challenges mentioned above, participants also described what they considered to be the biggest challenges of Covid 19. A principal from NI (S1PNI) recounted that the biggest challenges for them were managing staff, parents managing their children at home and the “inconsistencies and the constant changing and not getting into routines” was the biggest challenge for pupils.

A principal from NI (S2PNI) referred to the difficulty of trying to cater for everyone in terms of the pupils' needs and abilities:

So it was very stressful at the start, and then we found our feet and then we started into the online learning...deep down, you knew that provision wasn't great, we were trying our best, we didn't have the right platform set up to begin, we were trying to do it by sending packs home, and we were trying to do it by uploading materials that could sort of cater for a lot of needs for it is really in a special school, every child is an individual, so you knew it wasn't catering to each individual. And then you were looking after your own children at home, and you knew the staff have their own children at home. So, what could you ask them to do and what was appropriate and what wasn't appropriate? And that was the biggest challenge....to try and hit all our ability levels was extremely difficult, so what we done was, we tried to get it into like three levels and in a special school that is extremely difficult, but we did try to span it in that way. And then Form Teachers were in regular contact with pupils at home and that meant that we were trying to signpost parents to the level that we thought would be suitable for their child.' S2PNI

A NI teacher (S1TNI) described the feeling of isolation as the biggest challenge for them personally:

I think one of the biggest challenges for me was when I was in school, not having contact with other staff. There was certainly a feeling of isolation. When you went in, you were in your class and you didn't see other people, there was no socialising. You didn't see people in staff room, you didn't see people for after school meetings, they were all via zoom. So, I suppose at the height of it all, it would have been that sense of being on your own because our school is such a supportive staff and we work so closely together, that you notice that when all of a sudden, you're on your own. S1TNI

In referencing a challenge related to the ongoing limitations of curricular and overall educational provision for senior pupils in special schools, a principal from Rol (RISP14) extended their assessment to initial teacher education and training colleges:

There's no programme for the leaving certs [Leaving Certificate students]. They've [National Council for Curriculum and Assessment - NCCA] only recently introduced a programme for the junior certs [Junior Certificate students]. You're told to teach 4–18-year-olds. And there you go now, best of luck with all of that. No training for staff in the teacher training colleges.... I think the problem goes right back to the teacher training colleges.... I think we have an awful long way to come in Ireland as regards special ed and how we treat these children who grow into adults and what's actually out there for them. RISP14

A deputy principal from RoI (RISPSMR) also referred to the lack of relevant training in initial teacher education for special education school provision in the Republic of Ireland:

I'd be very aware... that very often young teachers are just kind of thrown in there, there you go. With no training. And it's such a different way of teaching. RISPSMR

Mentioned previously and again by this deputy principal was the lack of understanding of and respect for the role of the teacher to be a challenge. Further the highlighted loss of talent in the sector as a direct result of Covid 19 restrictions and additional workloads:

Professionally, I was astounded at the lack of respect for teachers from the general public and I found that exceptionally hard, that we were really trying our best...that lack of understanding of what our jobs entail and how hard we were trying to do our best in difficult circumstances, initially, with very little guidance, I was absolutely just shocked by it. And I don't know, is there an ardent or current always of disrespect for teachers or was it just people giving out or I don't know. I found that quite challenging and I think it affected a lot of teachers and a lot of principals and deputy principals.

I know a fair few principals left the job within the year or two, coming back after COVID. Between that combination of that added pressure and then preparing schools for coming back after COVID, all that element of extra work which wasn't being truly appreciated either in the public eye or in some way by the department, I don't think. RISPSMR

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM COVID 19

Apart from the data presented above and the evidence of the impact on well-being and professionalism, the participants reflected on what they thought they had learned from their experiences during Covid 19. These learnings are presented in themes as follows: The use of on-line resources, practical changes in the special school, the curriculum, transport (for pupils with additional needs), Special Schools should remain open (in the event of any future pandemics), and They [DES] know less about us than we realised.

THE USE OF ONLINE RESOURCES

All the participants referred to the increase in the use of technology, and the Seesaw App™. All participants mentioned the introduction and continued use of the Seesaw App™ during lockdown. In NI a principal and a teacher (S1PNI and S2TNI) noted that their schools are still using this as a form of communication with parents and this is representative of most schools in the study:

It has replaced our school diaries and things like that so we use it as a method of communication and also it is there now moving forward, that will be our platform, if something was to ever happen again. ST2NI

Seesaw™ was also mentioned as an on-going post-pandemic useful tool for the teacher to upload examples of pupils' work so that the pupils themselves and their families could access to continue working on or to share together. It was also mentioned as a useful way of maintaining a track record of work and engagement.

Teachers also acknowledged their need to learn more about the use of appropriate technology for teaching in an on-line context for their pupils in special education settings. All participants agreed that online learning does not suit these pupils or their individual learning styles or needs.

PRACTICAL CHANGES IN THE SCHOOL

Participants referred to practical changes that were implemented in the school and that the school has maintained as a positive learning experience. As mentioned above Seesaw™ has several relevant uses and one of these is the collection of learning samples from pupils. These are now used to support pupil profile development and to communicate across support staff in relation to skills development. Another principal mentioned that the schools who could afford Seesaw™ yearly licence reaped the benefits. They also pointed to a need for Government funding for the continued use of Seesaw™ and especially for schools who did not have the funds in the first place to take up Seesaw.

At the time of the study a principal from NI (S1PNI) explained that in their school, primary school aged children were still having their lunch in their classrooms and waiting for their buses there rather than in the dining hall and that this was helping with behaviour: "very often the crowded dining hall was far, far too noisy for many of our children, so they cope far better."

THE CURRICULUM

Apart from the findings presented above regarding the continued frustration in the lack of identified curriculum or curriculum frameworks for senior classes in post-primary special education in Republic of Ireland, other reflections were made. Two of the participants referred to the curriculum in their responses to issues post pandemic. One principal felt the complexity of children's needs as well as the prescribed nature of the curriculum was something that could be highlighted by the experiences of Covid 19:

I think the overarching thing is that it's all getting so complicated, in terms of the complex needs of the children and the additional needs of the children, and the comorbidity of children and, you know, the increasing pressures on capacity within our special schools...And I think that the pace at which the complexities are increasing, you know, the support is not increasing at that same pace...just with regards to the curriculum that there just needs to be a lot more flexibility in the curriculum, you know, so, the mental health and wellbeing of the child is what they really need to be addressing and I just think that there needs to be, you know, a turnaround in terms of what the expectations are from ETI [Education Training Inspectorate].
S1PNI

One of the teachers from NI (S1TNI) referred to how they felt they implemented an entirely different form of curriculum during Covid 19:

It was very much a recovery curriculum and dealing with the needs of the pupils, in terms of having them feel secure, dealing with whatever emotional struggles they were going through, first and foremost...the whole idea that, you know, unless they feel safe and secure, they're not going to be able to access learning any way. So, following very much a recovery curriculum was the definite emphasis. S1TNI

TRANSPORT

In learning from Covid 19 and in consideration of what needs to change if another pandemic was to happen, transport emerged as a finding. Two principals (one from each jurisdiction) referred to issues surrounding transport, how pupils still were sharing transport despite being in different 'bubbles' at school:

Transport is a big issue...you have to think about the practicalities of bubbles...children were being transported on say 30 to 40 mini buses and 30 to 40 taxis all mixed within bubbles travelling into school, obviously sharing the same space for that whatever it was, they were all close contacts and then they were all coming into school and going out into lovely isolated, well maintained risk assessed bubbles. But really, I knew myself that it doesn't matter how much measures you puts in place, you know, when the children arrive in school, if they've been sitting on a bus with someone else who is COVID for an hour, the likelihood is that it's going to spread through special schools, you know, so I think we need to be smart about that transport. S2PNI

We did share our transport with another special school...and in the height of all of this, we were still sharing buses with another special school...So the children would come in from being on a bus with children that had gone to another special school and were mixing in different bubbles. So, all of the procedures that we had put in place...absolute nonsense. They have recently separated us, but not in the height of Covid 19...So when a covid case would come up, not just in our school, but a covid case would come up on the bus and this is the bit that mainstreams never had to worry about, like when I had a covid case, I had to worry about the class, and then I had to worry about the children on the bus because they were from different bubbles, and then I had to worry about (the other schools' children). A phone call had to be made there and then a risk assessment had to be done between the two schools. And I never experienced stress like it, ever, horrendous. RISPP14

SPECIAL SCHOOLS SHOULD REMAIN OPEN

Five of the participants explained that they felt special schools needed to remain open if anything like this was ever to happen again. A teacher from Rol drew attention to 'a blanket approach' (RISPP25 (e)) that is taken to all children and families regardless of special educational needs. They argue for a more holistic approach to pupils and families in special education provision. This relates particularly to the expectation that parents have the skills and abilities to take up the education of their children. For example:

one teacher in my school that they actually learned that a child was going home to parents who couldn't read or write. So even when they were sending home things, online learning or even in the post and stuff as well, they were wondering why nothing was actually coming back. So, then they found out then that the parents couldn't read or write. RISPP25 (e)



This teacher (RISPP25 (e)) continued: “I’d prefer to keep going. If another pandemic happened tomorrow, I’d want in person teaching.”

A principal (S2PNI) and teacher (S2TNI) from NI contributed to this argument:

I think we've been we've definitely learned a lot and if it ever happened again, surely there would be better processes in place to support schools and schools would know what to expect to have to do...no matter how hard a decision that it, that special schools shouldn't close for long, long periods. S2PNI

I think our pupils are better in school. S2TNI

A principal and deputy principal from ROI also argue for the uniqueness of teaching and learning for pupils in special education schools in Ireland:

Our kids need school. Another pandemic, I'd be bringing our kids back into school. I don't think it worked, leaving them at home. I know that we were in that initial stage, and we could do nothing until we got the vaccines...It didn't work for our children to be off. It did them huge harm. It did us huge harm when we got them back...I definitely think our children need school. Our special ed children need school, no matter what...I think they need their routine, they need their structure, they need school. And if I had to be given more staff, everything would have been fine. What could have made us run the whole way through Covid 19? Staff. RISP14

I think to have kept the schools open, the engaging online...I do feel personally, I did the very best I could in the circumstances we were in and really tried to do as much as possible. I felt huge pressure to do as much as possible to support the kids and support the parents under the circumstances, including the initial lack of guidance from the department...I do think they should have looked at safe ways of reopening the schools... RISPSMR

THEY [DES] KNOW LESS ABOUT US

One finding is the level of stress and frustration experienced by teachers and principals based on the function of special schools in the Republic of Ireland, closing of schools and the expectations the DES had in relation to maintaining learning in a 'lock down' environment.

A principal (RISP14) reflected:

They don't realise the struggles that we have. They don't. And you could have a SENO [Special Educational Needs Organisers] who has actually never visited your school and doesn't know your children and doesn't know the lay of the land and doesn't know the difficulties in trying to juggle. Like the bundle everybody together in special schools and they said, there you go, no you're a primary school. RISP14

This theme was also explored by a deputy principal (RISPSMR) in relation to the media and the DES:

What about the children making progress? What about the work that special educators do with such a lack of OT, language, psychology, in special school with our patron body being a patron body that has therapists, our kids are on waiting list of up to three and a half years for those kinds of clinical inputs. So, the teachers are trying their best to do all of those things... this goes back to comments that were made during COVID and this is through no fault, and I really don't want to be sounding like I'm criticising either the minister or the junior minister for disabilities, but I really don't think they had any concept of what really goes on in special schools. You know, for example, commenting, these children need to get back in January of what was that? January of 2021? Because they need other clinical supports, but we're not getting, we don't have them. I sat, laughing at the telly, like, really, maybe you should come visit and spend a day visiting some of our classrooms and see the hard work that's going on before comments like that are made. And I don't think they're disingenuous. I just think it's lack of knowledge about what's happening.
RISPSMR

DISCUSSION

The data obtained from the online survey and the interviews with these staff members provides insight to their experiences during the Covid 19 pandemic and the wide range of challenges they encountered, particularly in relation to their roles and how they changed, the difficulties they experienced during the shift to online and home learning, how relationships with colleagues, pupils and parents evolved throughout Covid 19, how they managed staff and attempted to cater for a variety of complex learning needs and the return to learning in schools.

An important finding for consideration by Government, policymakers, school leaders and school communities in future crises or pandemics must be in recognising the unique care and attachment role of the special educators to these children and the families they serve. The responses of these professionals demonstrate the vocational commitment and



responsibility they feel towards their pupils/student and their parents/guardians and family. The trauma of this pandemic requires that we put in place future supports for appropriate mental health and well-being during and in their return to pre-crises/pre-pandemic routines and structures.

In terms of how roles changed, as a result of Covid 19, three of the principal participants in the study described the role of the teacher in a special education setting becoming more difficult, with two of these principals referring specifically to feeling they had to shift their focus to staff well-being and morale in an attempt to prevent staff absences. When asked about changes in teaching and learning, the participants described the shift to online and home learning and the various issues associated with this including the lack of school and staff preparedness, difficulties in creating and distributing resources for use at home, problems with accessing these and engaging both pupils and parents in home learning and catering for a range of needs. Positives were identified, mainly the sense of improved, more effective communication with parents. Nevertheless, strained relationships with parents were reported, as was a mixed sense of feeling appreciated and underappreciated, and the conflict that came with this. One teacher described feeling a break down in standards of formal communication and feeling too accessible to parents.

When it came to student learning experiences, while the negative impact of Covid 19 on pupils' education, behaviour and social needs were described in detail, two of the principal participants noted that they felt the children were resilient and coped well with the disruption. Problems with online learning were identified, in relation to the delivery, assessments and connecting with pupils. Various challenges were identified by the participants, including managing staff, staff shortages, isolation, attempts at maintaining communication, trying to cater for a wide range of learning needs and wider issues with initial teacher education in the South of Ireland and a perceived lack of respect for teachers.

In terms of what can be taken away from Covid 19 in terms of learning, the participants referred to the use of online learning and apps such as Seesaw™, the implementation of



practical changes in the school building, adaptations to the curriculum, a re-evaluation of transport arrangements and finally, the need to keep schools open should anything like this occur in future.

Finally, the leadership challenges faced by principal teachers during the pandemic is well described in these finding. This was a very challenging time for principals and their leadership skills were tested to the limits. The long-term impact of stress and ‘burn-out’ is yet to be understood in the special school community.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

As outlined in recent publications on the impact and outcomes of Covid 19 on school systems, teachers, parents, and pupil experiences this research project adds to and supports the call to recognise and value the expertise of teachers and leaders in education (Murphy and Devine, 2023; Billet, Turner, and Li, 2021). Further and most significantly the finding of this study acknowledges the unique role of the special school setting and its significance in actively supporting appropriate inclusive education in a continuum of education provision for learners with special educational needs and disabilities. It also highlights the value holistic supports offered by special schools not just to students but also to families, and parents/guardians (Merrigan and SEN/Dior, 2023; Bones, Bates, Finlay, and Campbell, 2022).

In advance of any other crises or pandemic it would be advantageous to provide additional professional leadership training and support to principals, deputy principals, teachers, and school leaders. Especially in relation to cross functional team management, collaboration, managing change collectively and communication.

The ‘lock down’ and the impact of restrictions from Covid 19 on parents was also expressed as an unprecedented stress on the special school professionals. The expectation on parents to engage in home learning is recorded as challenging for all parent groups but this research provided evidence that parents of children with moderate, profound, and diverse learning needs experienced significant additional challenges to their already stressful domestic situations. School closure increased these parent stressors as they began to realise their



limitations and then negatively communicating this to teachers and principals thus building emotions of helplessness and guilt among the teachers and principals. This provides evidence of the importance of the educational partnership role of special schools and the need to acknowledge the inclusive relational partnerships created in special school settings.

An overarching expression from all participants in this study provides evidence that children in special school setting need to be physically present in these settings to benefit from education and services. On-line learning, while it has its benefits in certain aspects of education provision, does not facilitate effective learning strategies utilised in special schools to meet the unique and individual needs of pupils with moderate, profound, and diverse learning needs.

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