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1. Introduction

In February 2021, during the period of provision for remote teaching and learning, inspectors from the Department of Education Inspectorate held a number of focus groups with parents of children attending primary and post-primary schools, and parents of children with special educational needs who were attending special schools and parents who had children in special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools. At the time that the focus groups were held, primary schools, special schools and post-primary schools had been providing for teaching and learning in a remote environment since 11 January 2021.

The parents who participated in the focus groups volunteered to do so following an invitation which issued from the Department of Education through the National Parents Council Primary and the National Parents Council Post-Primary. Fourteen focus groups were held with a total of sixty-three parents participating. An average of three to six parents participated in each focus group and two inspectors facilitated each meeting.

The purpose of the focus groups was to seek the views of parents on their children’s educational experience in the period of remote teaching and learning. The main themes explored were teaching, learning and wellbeing.

This report examines the key findings from the focus groups. It is one of a number of reports provided as part of the Inspectorate’s research activity in schools during the 2020/21 school year.
2. Inspectorate’s focus groups with parents: Research project overview

2.1 Project background

The purpose of convening the focus groups in February 2021 was to listen to and understand parents’ perspectives on their children’s experiences of remote teaching and learning.

2.2 Parents who participated in the focus groups

Fourteen focus groups were held with a total of sixty-three parents participating.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Parents of children attending primary schools</th>
<th>Parents of children attending post-primary schools</th>
<th>Parents of children attending special schools or special classes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of focus groups</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of school types</td>
<td>Gaelscoileanna, Mainstream primary schools, private schools</td>
<td>Voluntary secondary, Community Schools, Schools under Education and Training Boards (ETBs), Gaelcholáistí, fee-charging secondary schools</td>
<td>Special schools (12 parents had children attending these schools) and special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools (5 parents had children attending these classes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of classes</td>
<td>All class groups from junior to sixth class</td>
<td>First, second, third, fifth and sixth year</td>
<td>Age range from 4 to 17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


2.3 Conducting the focus group

- Two inspectors facilitated each meeting and the meetings generally lasted about one hour
- The inspectors maintained written notes for the research purpose of this work
- Participant anonymity was assured
- The meetings were conducted remotely on an online platform
- The focus groups were held over a two-week period in February 2021.

2.4 Focus group discussion topics

Each focus group was carried out using the same key discussion topics supported by a small number of guiding questions. The time allocated to specific areas and the details of the questions addressed differed between groups depending on the interaction with the participants. The full question set used in the focus group can be found in Appendix A.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience of remote teaching and learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What does teaching and learning look like for your child?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How is the school supporting your child’s learning?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How is the school supporting you as parents at this time?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Progress in learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Are you happy with how your child is progressing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How does your child receive feedback?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Is this feedback beneficial?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supporting wellbeing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Does your child have contact with other pupils/students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is your child encouraged to be active?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What has worked well or what could be done better in supporting your child’s wellbeing during this period?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.5 Focus group participants

More parents of children attending primary schools or special schools volunteered to participate in the focus groups than parents of children attending post-primary schools. In fact, not all parents of children attending primary school who volunteered could be accommodated in a focus group, and provision was made for thirty-two primary parents to
attend. Those parents of primary pupils had children in all class groups and in a wide range of school types.

Fourteen parents of children attending post-primary schools volunteered to participate in the focus groups. As this was a smaller group it was not as representative a sample of parents. While the parents had children in first, second, third, fifth and sixth year, they did not have children in Transition Year or Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). However, a small number of parents attending the special schools’ and special classes’ focus group meetings also discussed their other children’s experience of remote learning in a mainstream school, including in LCA. In addition, it was apparent that only a few parents of children attending schools participating in DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, the action plan of the Department of Education for educational inclusion) were aware that their child’s school was a DEIS school.
3. What the parents said

The focus group participants engaged fully with the main discussion topics which considered their experiences of the current period of provision for remote teaching and learning. Their observations and reflections emerged through this process and are discussed below.

The final discussion topic looked at the question “Is there anything else you would like to add to what we have already discussed?” In general, most items noted in this area were aligned within one or other of the main discussion areas. That said, all participants used the opportunity to reflect on what they had already shared during the meeting.

The following descriptors are used throughout this report to describe quantitative terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Language used</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than 90%</td>
<td>Almost all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75% - 90%</td>
<td>Most</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51% - 74%</td>
<td>Majority/more than half</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Half</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25% - 49%</td>
<td>Less than half/a significant minority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16% - 24%</td>
<td>A small number/less than a quarter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 15%</td>
<td>A few</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Experiences of remote teaching and learning: Key messages from parents of children attending primary schools

The Department of Education Guidance on Remote Learning in a COVID Context for primary and special schools highlights how “teacher-pupil engagement should involve both direct teaching by the teacher and the assignment of independent learning tasks for completion by the pupils. Teachers should ensure, as far as practicable, that direct instruction is provided for aspects of learning that require it, using a variety of approaches including pre-recorded video, audio, presentation software and written instructions. Regular engagement with pupils when they are out of school will also help them to reintegrate when they return to school.”

Progress in learning

- Almost all parents equated good quality teaching and learning with either live or pre-recorded lessons being delivered, and almost all parents reported that their child was not experiencing live online lessons. Instead, they reported that their children were being provided with a list of activities on an online platform.

- A small number of parents were happy with the quality of teaching and learning being provided and with the progress their child was making. In these small number of instances, parents reported regular scheduled live or pre-recorded online classes during the day.

- Where there were pre-recorded lessons, they were seen as working very well by most parents as they allowed the children or parents to pause and rewind the teacher instructions. Pre-recorded lessons were also useful as they allowed parents to access the lessons at a time that was convenient. This was especially useful for working parents or parents who had a number of children in the household who required the use of the devices and the internet at the same time.

- Regardless of the mode of provision, almost all parents believed that their child was not making any progress in their learning. This was because lessons were mainly focused on content previously covered and, from the parents’ perspectives, there was little or no new learning taking place.

- Parents reported that teachers were assigning tasks on a daily basis and teachers were correcting this work daily. The majority of parents of primary children were generally happy with the amount of feedback being provided by teachers on children’s work and stated that their teachers gave feedback regularly. However, formative support was a problem and, according to the parents, progression in learning was not being adequately enabled.
Most parents agreed that constructive and formative feedback from teachers, rather than acknowledging completion of the work, would enhance pupils’ motivation and provide parents with useful information in relation to their child’s progress. A few parents reported that their children were receiving very good feedback and that the teachers were available for additional support and feedback when required. Examples given included situations where a student of the week was selected and instances where teachers sent postcards to children acknowledging their good work.

Parent
It would be great if there were more classes online. All schools should be on the same wavelength, I don’t understand why.

Parent
My daughter is doing work on Seesaw and mini lessons from sixth-class teacher; this is interactive. My son is in resource and gets half-an-hour…my son needs someone to be with him … very stressful.

Parent
They get a call every day for a half-an-hour — they can write little messages on it … everybody is emotional … the fact that they are seeing each other is good.

Parent
I don’t feel he is learning in live lessons as the teacher is not teaching.

Parent
The feedback has been tremendous. I upload work every day, the teacher goes through it and provides consistent feedback, areas for improvement and correction.

Parent
… school has a structure for him, classroom is normal, there is interaction, … home environment is very different for him who has not got the self-regulation … he finds it very hard to focus … my husband gave up his work to help him … the Google classroom for a half-hour is good, interacting through that … he focuses on Maths … the books are open for three hours, but there is only one hour productive work each day … it is very challenging, but my husband is there to help him.
Younger children

- Parents of children who were in the junior classes all agreed that it was challenging for younger children to participate successfully in live lessons or pre-recorded lessons. Parents indicated that it was difficult for younger children to engage through ‘a screen’ and it had a negative effect on their motivation to learn. The majority of parents who had children in the junior classes highlighted the difficulty of consolidating the learning of phonics at home and the absence of learning experiences associated with normal classroom routines. Parents described how they had to give a lot of attention to the younger children to complete tasks.

Parent
My child is in senior infants and he has been doing phonics up until Christmas and he has never opened a book to read; my older son would have been reading at this stage.

Parent
It is very stressful, not that much fun especially when you are working … anything she can do that is self-directed she is doing … we have never been busier and it’s not a good learning experience … really feel for her both from educational standpoint and social standpoint.

Parent
… bit more interaction from the teachers … even phonics how to sound them out … how to teach fractions in teacher language … I have to get my eight-year-old to teach him. I’m finding pressure and I’m at home all the time, I took a whole week off as I just had enough.

Parent
My junior infant child is being given phonics, but there is nothing live and a lot of parents are trying to figure out what to do.
Use of technology

- A few parents were happy that their children were not using devices during the school day, preferring that their children were being provided with work to occupy them.

- All parents noted that their children are easily distracted when online and unable to concentrate for periods of time; a few noted that the older the child, the more frequently they moved to other online platforms e.g. YouTube as a distraction.

- A few parents noted issues with technology and connectivity which impeded communication.

- Access to devices was, in some cases, an issue for those parents who had more than one child attending school. Most schools offered to provide devices, however.

Support for parents

- Almost all parents agreed that their children could not complete the assigned work without parental support.

- Most parents highlighted that they did not know how to teach the new concepts and stated that they were not getting enough support from the school. A few parents acknowledged the difficulty their children were having with learning Irish and the challenges in relation to the teaching of new concepts in Irish.

- Almost all parents said their children did not have a daily routine created by the school, and it was left up to parents to create some kind of a routine. Parents who did not work outside the home believed they were more able to keep their children on task, but those who worked outside the home found this very challenging.

- A few parents reported that their child received more support from the school when parents intervened or contacted the school.
Almost all parents stated that there was good communication from the school. Parents knew who to contact in the school if they felt they needed to communicate with someone.

Socialisation and wellbeing

Almost all parents of primary children were unhappy with the level of provision for Wellbeing in their child’s school. There was, however, a focus on Physical Education (PE) activities in most schools and almost all parents said that their children were encouraged to be active. A few parents reported that their children were energised by quizzes or other activities such as online dance lessons, online yoga classes and school assemblies.

Almost all parents would have liked to have had more social interaction organised for the class group. Most parents felt that their child did not have sufficient contact with other pupils. Most agreed that contact with other pupils through online school activities would increase their child’s social interaction and overall connectedness with the school. Many parents wanted their child to be afforded the opportunity to talk to their teacher to help with motivation and communication of the lesson.

A small number of parents indicated that their children’s confidence in expressing themselves and in engaging in discussion had regressed. Parents reported that their children did not want to socialise as much as they did before and they were disinterested in engaging in day-to-day social experiences.

Parent
I am juggling my work with my children’s work; it is very stressful.

Parent
While emails are coming, I have to do the teaching.

Parent
I am juggling my work with my children’s work; it is very stressful.

Parent
While emails are coming, I have to do the teaching.

Parent
No, we don’t have any contact which I think is very poor. I have contacted the principal, but it has fallen on deaf ears – not happy at all about it.

Parent
My child will not do anything on her own. I have seen a massive change in her and there is only so much we can do.

Parent
My son cries every evening … he is missing his friends … my daughter was fine at the beginning but now she bursts into tears … it has a massive impact on them and also on family life … it’s appalling.
5. Experiences of remote teaching and learning: Key messages from parents of children attending special schools or special classes

The parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) who attended the focus group meeting had children ranging from four to seventeen years of age. Twelve of the parents had children attending special schools, and the remaining five had one or more children assigned to a special class in either a primary or post-primary school; a small number of these children attended an early intervention pre-school class for children with autism.

Progress in learning

- All parents of children attending special schools indicated that they were dissatisfied with their child’s remote teaching and learning experiences. While almost all parents reported that their child was provided with online tasks and activities from their teacher, this approach was deemed by parents to be unsuccessful. In their view, there was rarely any new learning taking place and, in any event, their children could not engage in an effective or consistent way.

- Most parents of children attending special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools described the experience of remote learning somewhat more positively as the children generally had some daily routine and were able to engage in elements of online learning, particularly at post-primary level.

- The very complex nature of their children’s needs was highlighted by the parents of children attending special schools. They were very clear that remote teaching and learning was not appropriate for their children.

- The majority of parents of children attending special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools shared similar concerns, although there was higher satisfaction with some elements of provision at post-primary level including:
  - Where the school provided special needs assistant (SNA) support for students to engage with lessons or assignments by phone or online including through breakout rooms
  - Where stimulating resources were sent to the home to support curricular learning
  - Where the students assigned to a special class were given opportunities to meet together online to interact as a group, outside of mainstream lessons.
Almost all parents acknowledged that the schools had provided resources, tasks and activities to be completed; however, most parents expressed the view that these resources, tasks and activities were either not suitably matched to their child’s developmental needs or that their child could not engage in a meaningful developmental way with what was provided.

In a few cases, parents stated that the school had settled on a particular application as the only vehicle for communication, learning and feedback, despite both the parent and school agreeing that the child would likely not be able to engage with learning through the application.

Several examples were given where teachers and SNAs tried various strategies to support the parents by, for example, providing resource packs, or by calling the child on the phone. A few parents mentioned having to research and source appropriate programmes to support their child’s learning in mathematics and language and communication. Where schools attempted to support learners in the special school through face-to-face online engagement or through telephone calls, generally speaking, parents agreed that further distress and confusion was caused to the child.

The majority of parents felt that where activities were provided via the school’s digital platform or application, they were not differentiated according to the individual needs of the children, and whilst some other learners in the class may have been able to access learning through the activities, their children could not. Some parents were of the view that schools and teachers provided the same learning opportunities for all students even though they were aware that students could not engage.

Others held the view that their child’s teacher did not understand the learning needs of the child and consequently provision was not appropriately tailored to individual needs. A few parents held the view that some teachers had inadequate knowledge and training in the areas of teaching children with complex needs and autistic spectrum disorders (ASD).

All parents of children attending special schools stated that their children had made minimal if any progress; the majority of parents of children attending special classes agreed. There was a high level of upset and concern about their children’s regression and loss of skills. Parents of children attending special schools were of the view that their children were receiving no feedback, mainly due to the fact that their children were not able to engage in the provision available. The majority of parents of learners attending special classes similarly agreed.

In every case, parents of children attending special schools stated that remote learning did not work for their children; the majority of parents with a child attending a special class agreed. These parents were aggrieved that their children did not continue to attend school.
Remote teaching and learning: Report on focus groups with parents, February 2021

**Parent**
The school have been very good, they have worked with every child. My son is achieving partially.

**Parent**
My daughter has moderate intellectual disability; she finds understanding difficult, she was disturbed by seeing people on her screen … she only has a few words … she finds it difficult to participate in lessons … there has been no education … If you can’t sign, write or speak, it’s very hard.

**Parent**
The school’s policy says that no direct instruction is to be provided … we get some art activities and no education.

**Parent**
I politely declined online learning as it wouldn’t work.

**Parent**
No phone calls or Zoom. We got Seesaw - 170 tasks on the list and [a] list of work not fit for my child. We have received nothing else. Teacher did drop down a box with crayons, paints and playdough.

**Parent**
There is never any feedback … no guidance even when asked … he might just get a ‘well done’ comment but nothing else … when I asked for help to complete some language materials. No example was given in how to complete the language materials … they (teachers) said … don’t worry … keep them happy until they (the children) get back … a year later, I want more than “Just keep him happy” … a year later I want more than just being happy.

**Home is not a suitable learning environment**

- All parents of children with ASD attending special schools, and the majority of parents of children attending special classes, agreed that their child could not readily engage with remote learning as they could not readily adjust to the idea that learning which normally happens in school had to happen in their home. Similarly, parents of children without ASD, but with complex learning needs attending special schools, also faced difficulties arising from home being the learning environment. The majority noted the significant behavioural impact where parents endeavoured to support their children to engage in learning activities; these included reported increases in physical and self-injurious behaviour.
Several parents indicated that the In-person Supplementary Programme, which allows for children with complex needs to be provided with additional educational and care support in the home by teachers or SNAs, would not be appropriate for the reason that it would be delivered at home rather than in school.

Additionally, most parents highlighted the significant level of support required from teachers and SNAs by their children in school in order to complete tasks and remain focussed and motivated. The majority were aware of the prevalence of techniques such as hand-over-hand support and physical prompting for the completion of learning tasks. They described the lack of independent learning skills as a major barrier to remote learning.

Most parents, particularly the parents of children with ASD, spoke of the negative impact on their child of seeing their teacher virtually in their home rather than face-to-face in school.

Parent
My daughter can’t understand the teacher in our home and, as a result, does not engage.

Parent
…it’s been a most challenging year, my son was medicated twice. It hasn’t worked for us. He needs school and can’t work remotely.

Parent
Has the concept of regression been discussed: my child had to go on anti-psychotic medication … an unfortunate outcome for her … this was a regression for her that her behaviour has deteriorated since she has been out of routine … these kids have regressed, hard earned life skills have been lost, it’s everybody’s responsibility to get those losses back.

Parent
How can I be expected to home school my daughter and my other children when normally at school an SNA sits either side of her to get the work done?

Parent
When the screen is in front of her with the teacher’s face, it is slapped away and she can’t engage – it is too much for her.
Difficulties with mediating learning through technology at home

- The difficulty of mediating learning through technology at home was identified by most parents of children attending special schools and special classes. Most of the children who used technology at home used it for relaxation and leisure purposes. In all instances, where special schools used an online platform, parents reported that their children were not able to engage and were not able to sit at a computer for any period of time for structured learning activities.

- Parents found that when they tried to engage their child in assigned learning activities on screen they faced resistance and often extreme behavioural reactions. Many spoke of getting to a point early in the initial remote learning phase where they abandoned e-learning to minimise distress for the child and the wider family. Most parents, particularly the parents with children with ASD, spoke of the negative impact of seeing their teacher on a screen in their home or on the telephone; this again indicates the difficulty this group of learners has with transferring school activities to home.

- Parents were appreciative of attempts made by the schools to engage with learners remotely and also with phone calls. A small number of parents also mentioned difficulties with pre-recorded lessons, where the teacher and/or SNAs recorded lessons or messages, but the child could not interact. In general, parents felt this caused more distress because the children missed their teachers and SNAs, wanted to go to school and could not understand the remote learning context.

- The majority of parents felt that where activities were provided via the school’s digital platform or application, they were generic and whilst others in the class may have been able to access learning through the activities, their children could not.

Parent

Behaviour is off the charts, my daughter has a 30-second attention span … I am a mother of four, I have to sit with her and can’t get to others. To bring her to an iPad takes me fifteen minutes.

He will not take any calls, not engaged with technology. He needs one-to-one sensory input and adult attention all the time.
Parent
… teacher sent ‘stuff’ on Seesaw, we tried, it didn’t work, teacher did circle time and we sang songs from school at home but my child got upset.

Parent
My child would get upset looking at pre-recorded lessons. I could see the behaviour escalating.

Parent
My daughter just can’t cope with seeing her teacher in her home.

Parent
He has very challenging behaviour unless he has face-to-face … self-harming, biting … intellectually he is two years of age.

Socialisation and wellbeing

- Almost all parents of children with SEN attending special schools and special classes stated that the lack of routine for their children was having a significant, negative impact on the lives of children.

- Parents of children attending special schools and special classes were of the opinion that school support for their child’s wellbeing was insufficient. The loss of opportunities for interaction, socialisation and life-skills development were mentioned.

- Parents of the children attending special schools and special classes reported that their children were missing life skills activities such as going to shops, gardening and cooking. A few parents of children with ASD described the negative impact of school closures on children’s social and communication skills.

- A significant minority of parents of children attending special classes spoke of the traumatising effect of school closures on their own mental health and that of their child. The theme of medication featured strongly for this group of parents, a significant minority of whom described their child requiring medication for the first time or the need for increases in medication in order to address anxiety and aggressive and self-injurious behaviours that had arisen during the period of remote learning.
Remote teaching and learning: Report on focus groups with parents, February 2021

**Parent**
The socialisation is a huge part … my son recently said to me, “I have forgotten how to talk to other people”.

**Parent**
Routine is key. My child has hurt himself as a result of lack of routine. He is going backwards every day. Fifty-fifty [return to school] is not going to work and to do a few days before mid-term is terrible. School is what they need. It keeps them regulated.

**Parent**
My child is screaming the house down, day and night, he needs school.

**Parent**
Medication - it would not have been necessary if my child was in school.

**Parent**
The Seesaw activities are not at the level for my child. Not suitable. Teacher did drop a box this lockdown with crayons, paints and playdough. He had “meltdown”, when teacher arrived. It doesn’t work for my son. He has regressed. His basic skills have been lost such as waiting skills for example.

**Parent**
My son is on anti-psychotic medication … a real regression. Who is making the decisions in relation to those who are dealing with SEN pupils? … it has never been explained where the 50% came from … very poor treatment of special needs children … stop trying to make something work that will never work … all the behaviours that she is displaying, I am heartbroken, I’m begging to get my child back in the school.

**Parent**
… there have been serious episodes of head-banging, thumping and screaming … it has been very stressful … almost daily since last January.
Support for parents

- A few parents noted that they had to rearrange their working days to support their children’s particular support needs, and the majority of parents highlighted the detrimental impact of school closures on their child’s wellbeing, on family life and on the learning of their other children.

- Parents indicated that special schools should be kept open as an essential service in the event of future level 5 restrictions. The fact that at the time the focus groups were taking place it was announced that special schools were opening on a fifty per cent basis whereas special classes in mainstream schools were opening fully was the source of much concern among parents. In addition, opening special schools for two days and then closing them again for mid-term break was a source of frustration for parents.

- The majority of parents of children with SEN believed that their children’s schools were doing the best they could do in a remote learning environment, and most parents believed that it is not possible to support their children to learn remotely in the first instance. Schools were perceived to be generally supportive in their correspondence with parents.

- A few parents of children attending special schools reported that they were receiving good multi-disciplinary support during this time. This contrasted with the experience of the parents of children in special classes who perceived a decline in clinical supports available to their child, citing the reassignment of some clinicians to Health Service Executive work as partly responsible for this.

**Parent**

My child benefitted in one way ... I have been forced to sit with my child ... he had been written off ... I realise that he has not been allowed to realise his capabilities ... to realise that he has not been getting anything out of school ... he has benefitted from us giving him time that we haven't had to do to date ... we are worn out ... it is a very indirect consequence that we had to go through this to find out that he wasn't being taught.

**Parent**

It is an embarrassment, Northern Ireland and England didn’t close schools ... Frontline workers offered to do harder

**Parent**

What is an essential service ... it is not right that these schools should not be closed again ... remember the voices of
jobs to face this pandemic, I am a public servant. The minister should have asked teachers to go back. A year on asking about remote teaching and learning is a joke.

Parent
Nothing can substitute for in-house schooling. Special schools should be essential – they can’t close again, the fall out is far too strong.

these children … they have to be advocated for … we had a service from Disability Care and Enable Ireland and they kept going, why can’t the Department keep going?

Parent
Generally, in our case the school have done their best, they are very good at responding to our requests, but we aren’t getting a full education.
6. Experiences of remote teaching and learning: Key messages from parents of children attending post-primary schools

The Department of Education Guidance on Remote Learning in a COVID-19 context for post-primary schools and centres for education advises: “Teacher student engagement should involve both direct teaching by the teacher and the assignment of independent learning tasks for completion by the students. Teachers should ensure, as far as practicable, that direct instruction is provided for aspects of learning that require it, using a variety of approaches, for example video, audio, presentation software and written instructions. Regular engagement with students when they are out of school will also help them to reintegrate when they return to school.”

Progress in learning

- Parents of post-primary students were more positive than their primary counterparts about this period of remote teaching and learning. Live teaching and learning were happening in most cases during the day and the students’ experiences of school were reported by parents to be better than during the first lockdown.

- In almost all cases lessons were arranged to follow the school timetable and students were following a timetable which mainly consisted of live lessons and presentations. A few parents indicated that their child’s school reviewed the timetable schedule weekly or bi-weekly.

- Generally, parents perceived that their children were engaging well with the routines, although the perceptions of parents of boys tended to be slightly less positive with regard to how effective the routines supported their sons.

- In all cases, teachers were assigning work to students.

- Parents consistently reported that contact was made by teachers with students on a daily basis, although the quality of their child’s learning varied and very much depended on the support of each individual teacher.

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**Parent**
There’s a solid routine throughout the day, it’s been a good experience really …

**Parent**
My son in Leaving Certificate … the pressure is mounting for him. I’m trying to keep his head clear, with routines, normal food etc. the school is aware of the strain and exhaustion …
Remote teaching and learning: Report on focus groups with parents, February 2021

Parent
He’s extremely lonely, and he’s lacking motivation and that wasn’t a problem before. It’s difficult to sustain motivation, he hasn’t finished coursework, he’s there in body, not in spirit.

Parent
… the routine this time around is far more structured. The school is sticking to its timetable. It’s intense, but has worked better…

Use of technology

- On the whole, parents were appreciative of the advances that have been made in remote learning since the first lockdown and indicated that issues with technology were not as significant as in the first phase of remote learning.

- Most teachers were using a school platform to provide learning opportunities across all areas of the curriculum, although a small number of parents had concerns about the arrangements for some practical subjects.

- Almost all parents noted exhaustion and screen fatigue as areas for concern and described their children’s daily experience of learning remotely as lengthy.

Parent
Many aspects of the learning not the same especially practical subjects, including music – all theory now. PE is just not the same remotely.

Parent
For my son, it’s a very long day at the computer, I put lunch down in front of him to eat. He has no time for study.

Parent
School surveyed parents and students and it was agreed to have one day per week without screens … Students are very tired. School very proactive at reaching out. Much smoother operation this time …
Support for parents

- All parents knew who to contact in the school if they needed to; some schools were reportedly making very good efforts to keep lines of communication open.
- A few parents noted that online parent-teacher meetings worked very well.

Socialisation and wellbeing

- Opportunities for students' social engagement and interaction were a concern for parents and, in almost all cases, parents of post-primary students were of the view that their children would prefer to be attending school. Most parents were of the view that lessons consisted mainly of information-giving with little opportunities for students to interact with each other. Parents generally felt there was a need for greater opportunities for students to interact in lessons; a few parents stated that they would like to see schools encouraging students to ask more questions related to their learning in online lessons.
- Parents initially did not appear overly focused on wellbeing issues during the focus groups although they did note that there was a lack of PE activities, little Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), and some parents reported that there was limited provision of career guidance.
- The chat function on the online platform used by schools was reported by a few parents to be enabling bullying to take place via insidious bullying comments.
Parent
There’s a sinister side … we force them to spend all day online … kids are acting out, not visible to teacher … we force them into a forum where private messaging is possible through the online platform and this allows bullies to flourish.

Parent
He really misses his friends. No Zoom the first lockdown, much better now but they’re teaching very fast to cover the curriculum. They stick strictly to the school’s timetable. But no RE or PE, boys not interested in PE theory. They’re (the school) trying to meet everyone’s needs.
7. Conclusion: Key issues for the education system

The purpose of the focus groups was to seek the views of parents on their children’s educational experience in the period of remote teaching and learning. The main themes explored were remote teaching, learning and wellbeing. This report of the focus groups presents the views and experiences of parents of children attending primary schools, special schools and special classes in mainstream schools and post-primary schools.

The views expressed by parents were diverse and often related to the particular circumstances of the family including working arrangements. However, some key themes and definite messages emerged.

Parents compared their experience of remote teaching and learning in this lockdown with their experience of the first lockdown when schools were closed. In a general sense, parents of children attending primary, post-primary and special schools noted that there had been developments in remote provision since the first period of school closures. The difference between provision during the first and current lockdown was most notable at post-primary level.

The focus groups indicate that the experience of online teaching and learning of parents of post-primary children was generally a better one than that of the experience of parents with children in primary schools and of parents of children with SEN. Most parents of children at primary and post-primary level equated good quality teaching and learning with access to interactive lessons rather than the provision of tasks and assignments; their priority was access to more interaction between their children and their teacher and their children and their peers.

A significant minority of parents of children at primary and most parents of children at post-primary level were particularly positive about the methods adopted by schools to engage with their children and parents to provide a positive learning experience. In the special education context, while parents were appreciative of the efforts made by schools and teachers, it was widely recognised that online teaching was just not appropriate to meet their children’s needs.

There were few issues cited regarding access to devices for parents or for children and it was noted that the schools offered to provide devices where there might be a need.

The main issue for parents of children at primary level was that there was little progression in learning; the main focus of most lessons was uploading tasks and assignments on applications with apparently little support given to parents in terms of how to teach.
Parents of younger children at primary level and parents of children with more complex needs were particularly challenged in supporting their children because of the high level of support that their children required given that these children were unable to learn independently. These parents did not know how to teach their children and identified the need for the sharing of approaches; this was not forthcoming from many schools, according to the parents.

The experience of parents with children attending special classes appeared to be marginally better than the experience of the parents with children who attended special schools; the greater the level of complexity of needs, the less satisfaction with remote teaching and learning was expressed.

There were some indications from some of the contributions of parents of post-primary students that boys found it more difficult than girls to cope with online remote learning and to work independently without social interaction.

Parents of children attending primary schools were more able than parents of children attending post-primary schools to discuss the quality of feedback to their children. It was more difficult for parents of children attending post-primary schools to discuss the quality of feedback as their children were older and more able to work independently. It was apparent that children’s work was being corrected and acknowledged, but that there was little developmental feedback provided. Therefore, children were not given an indication of where or how to improve their work. Parents would have liked for their children to receive more direction on where they needed to improve. The importance of feedback that acknowledged hard work and engagement was highlighted by parents at both primary and post-primary level; this was seen as particularly important, given the current lockdown, for motivating children to learn and keep going. The majority of parents of children attending special schools and special classes were of the view that there was no feedback given as their children were unable to engage with the work provided.

Schools encouraged and promoted activities at home that supported wellbeing such as physical activity. Where children had a good experience of remote teaching and learning, parents were of the view that such activities had a positive effect on their children’s wellbeing. The parents of children attending special schools and special classes reported not having a good experience of remote teaching and learning. Therefore, they were particularly concerned about the wellbeing of their children; their wellbeing was particularly affected with significant and extreme consequences in many instances for these children including withdrawal, challenging behaviour and increased medication requirements. The impact of this was wide ranging and included, in some cases, a negative impact on parents and siblings.

Where there was good remote and online engagement with children by the school this generally had a positive effect, although for parents of children in special schools, most forms of remote engagement did not work. In general, parents highlighted the lack of
opportunities for social activities and social interaction for children. It was apparent that as this period of remote learning continued, children were disengaging from their peers and from physical activity and there was a fear that children would also disengage from learning.

Parents of children attending special classes and special schools were of the view that special schools are essential services and, that in the event of another lockdown, the schools must remain open.
Appendix A: Focus group questions

To start can you tell me what class/year your child is in and what type of school your child attends?

- Is it a /Gaelscoil/Gaeltacht/Educate Together/Special School/Special Class/ETB/DEIS in a Mainstream school?

Can you tell me what teaching and learning looks like for your child at the moment?

- How well are they applying themselves in their learning?
- Does your child have a daily routine for learning?

We now want to explore in greater detail the different aspects of your child’s experience of remote learning. How well is your child being supported by the school during this period of remote teaching and learning?

- How often are pupils/students being contacted in relation to their work?
- How are the lessons being presented – are prerecorded/emails/live lessons?
- Is your child able to do the work without too much intervention/support by you?
- Is your child following a timetable? (PP)
- Does your child have access to a device for his/her schoolwork and is it suitable for his/her needs?
- What is working well?
- What could work better?

As parents, how well are you being supported by the school during this period of remote teaching and learning?

- Do you know how to contact your daughter/son’s teacher/year head if you need to?
  Has the school provided a copy or access to a copy of the remote teaching and learning plan?
- Are you happy with how your child is progressing? How do you know?

Teachers provide feedback in many ways to children on their work, we would like you to think about the ways teachers give feedback to your child. How does your child receive feedback and is this feedback beneficial?

- How often does your child receive feedback on his/her work?
- Does the feedback provided identify what is working well and possible aspects to focus on for improvement?
- Does it impact your child’s motivation?
What has worked well or what could be done better in supporting your child’s wellbeing during this period?

- Does your child have contact with other pupils in the class?
- Is your child encouraged to be active?
- Is your child managing well with remote learning, is engagement easy or does he/she require a lot of support from you to engage with teaching and learning?

Is there anything else you would like to add to what we have already discussed?