



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

The impact of the Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS)

Perspectives of children and
young people, parents,
principals and teachers

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Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a small-scale evaluation project conducted by the Department of Education Inspectorate in eighteen schools (ten primary and eight post-primary) in September 2022. The evaluation involved holding three focus group meetings in each school; one with children and young people, one with parents and a third with the school principal and a number of teachers. The aim of the meetings was to gather the perspectives of children and young people, their parents and school principals and teachers on the impact of the Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS).

The publication of this paper is intended to inform the Department of Education and the Government about the impact of a scheme in which significant resources were invested. Its contents may be of interest to the children and young people who participated in the CLASS, their parents and the principals and teachers who planned for and delivered the scheme in schools.

The Covid Learning and Support Scheme

- The Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS) was launched by the Department of Education in October 2021.
- The CLASS was designed as a child-centred, strengths-based approach to identifying and meeting the educational and well-being needs of children and young people who had been most impacted by the disruption to education in 2020 and 2021.
- The scheme provided additional resources to schools to allow them to meet the identified needs of these children and young people. In identifying children and young people for participation in CLASS, schools were encouraged to consider the needs of all children and young people in the school; not just those who had received support previously from the school. It also allowed schools to be flexible in how they provided the support and in the nature of the support they provided.
- [Circular 0045/2021](#) and related [Guidance Documents](#) provided direction to schools on how to use the additional resources. The circular and guidance required schools to:
 - put a robust process in place to identify and prioritise children and young people most in need of additional supports
 - consider the needs of the children and young people who were already on the schools' priority register for support as well as the needs of children and young people who were not receiving support prior to the pandemic
 - use the additional hours to provide targeted support in relation to the educational and wellbeing needs of children and young people.

Impact of CLASS – The perspectives of children and young people

SAMPLE

On average ten children and young people participated in the focus group meeting in each school. The inspector contacted the school principal via phone a number of days before the focus group meeting to request his/her cooperation in selecting the children and young people. The principal was asked to provide a letter of invitation together with consent and assent forms to between twelve and fifteen children and young people who participated in the CLASS. The principal was requested to draw the sample from a range of classes and to include children and young people with a range of identified needs in the sample. If the school had a special class, the principal was encouraged to include children and young people from that class in the sample.

FINDINGS

The children and young people were generally very positive about the impact of the additional supports they received through CLASS. They offered many insights on the extra assistance they received across a range of areas. They were particularly positive about the impact of the CLASS on how they felt about themselves and their relationship with their teachers.

- A common theme was how the additional teaching supports had impacted positively on their wellbeing. For example, children and young people were of the view that working in small groups allowed them to get to know their teachers and peers well. They thought that positive relationships with their teachers were important in motivating them to attend school and also helped them feel good about themselves.
- Many children and young people who received the additional teaching supports considered that they were doing better with their school work, that they were more comfortable asking questions and that they were more confident about their learning. Many stated that they felt better because they were now experiencing success in their learning.
- Many children and young people spoke about how they were very anxious when returning to school but that the teachers had really emphasised that that they could talk to them and to their fellow pupils about how they were feeling. This, they considered, helped them a lot.
- Children and young people stated that their opinions on their learning were listened to more as a result of their participation in the CLASS. They gave examples of how they were actively involved in identifying what their learning needs were and in choosing between various learning activities. The feeling of being listened to and of being involved in planning for their learning, as well as a more flexible approach to teaching,

were among the main aspects of the CLASS that children and young people found most valuable.

Impact of CLASS – The perspectives of parents

SAMPLE

On average eight parents participated in the focus group meeting in each school. The inspector requested the principal's cooperation in selecting the parents at the same time as the arrangements for the sample of children and young people were discussed. The principal was asked to provide a letter of invitation to a cross-section of parents of children and young people who participated in the CLASS. The principal was requested to invite parents of children in a range of classes and to include parents of children with a range of identified needs. If the school had a special class, the principal was encouraged to include parents of children in that class in the sample.

FINDINGS

Feedback from parents was also positive. There was general agreement that their child had enjoyed and benefited from the additional support. Many parents identified achievements for their children in relation to attendance, engagement, wellbeing and learning.

- Most parents were of the view that their child's relationship with teachers had improved as a result of the CLASS and that the good relationship that their child enjoyed with their teacher was a really positive outcome of the additional activities and experiences provided.
- Many parents felt their children caught up on aspects of their learning that they had fallen behind in when schools were closed. Some parents of primary children commented that their child's participation in the CLASS built on some of the positive features of the Summer Provision Scheme¹ that the children had been involved in before returning to school.
- Several parents also reported that the learning activities their children engaged in as part of the CLASS were in line with their children's needs and their interests.
- While many parents spoke very positively about their involvement in planning for additional support for their child, not all parents experienced this. Some parents stated that they would have welcomed more involvement in identifying targets and planning interventions for their child. They also felt that they should have been invited to participate in a mid-scheme review.

¹ School-based summer programme for children with special educational needs in special classes, special schools and mainstream schools. All primary and post-primary schools including DEIS schools had the opportunity to provide a summer programme for mainstream pupils with complex needs and those at greatest risk of educational disadvantage.

- A significant number of parents were not satisfied with the information they received from the school about the CLASS. In a few instances, parents stated that the only information they had received had been relayed to them by their child.

Impact of CLASS – The perspective of principals and teachers

SAMPLE

In all schools the inspector met with the principal; in most schools the teacher involved in co-ordinating the CLASS in the school, who was typically the school's special education co-ordinator attended the meeting. In some schools another teacher, who was involved in providing additional supports under the CLASS also attended.

FINDINGS

Principals and teachers provided a range of views on the operation of CLASS, the Department guidance, the challenges in schools in delivering the additional resources and on their perception of the impact of the scheme.

- The majority of principals and teachers reported how the CLASS allowed them to focus more on the wellbeing of the children and young people. This finding reflects similar feedback from the children and young people and their parents, and indicates that increased opportunities for schools to focus on the promotion of wellbeing was an important impact of the CLASS.
- The majority of principals and teachers described how they used various forms of data to identify learning needs and how they worked with children and young people to agree how these needs would be met.
- Many principals and teachers indicated that the school staff worked together to identify those children and young people most in need of support and to plan appropriate activities for them. Some principals and teachers suggested that parents were not always fully involved in this planning process.
- Principals and teachers provided information on how the resources were used by schools. While the ways individual schools used them varied, the most common methods were small-group teaching, one-to-one teaching in a withdrawal context, team teaching and additional in-class support.
- Overall, principals and teachers welcomed the flexibility that the CLASS gave schools in providing for the children and young people in need of additional support. They were of the view that this flexibility also presented challenges, particularly for schools who experienced difficulty recruiting additional staff for the CLASS. For example, while providing certain supports in small-group situations may have been the school's preference; the lack of available staff meant that this support was provided in whole-class groups.
- The majority of principals and teachers reported effective communication with parents. In some schools, principals and teachers reported that they had not distinguished between CLASS hours and regular special education teaching hours in their

communications with parents. In these instances, principals and teachers reported that parents were not aware that the CLASS hours represented an additional allocation.

- In some schools, principals and teachers reported that children and young people were involved in identifying the areas they found difficult and in selecting learning activities that suited them best. In these schools, principals and teachers felt that listening to children and young people was a really important factor in the success of the scheme. In contrast, a small number of principals and teachers acknowledged that involving children and young people in designing and implementing the interventions had not been a priority for them.

SCHOOL LEVEL PERSPECTIVES

In their engagements with inspectors, school principals highlighted a number of school-level perspectives on the CLASS:

- A number of principals highlighted the continuing impact of the pandemic on children and young people attending school, and reported that attendance levels had been a challenge impacting on their delivery of the CLASS.
- Some schools had a very good system to track children and young people's progress before and after intervention took place. This provided important data in relation to the impact of the interventions. However, not all schools had a systematic approach in place for tracking the outcomes for the children and young people.
- In a few instances, principals reported that their planning for the scheme had been somewhat rushed and that a greater lead-in time would have facilitated more effective implementation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

CONCLUSIONS

- This small-scale evaluation project highlights many positive impacts of the CLASS and some areas for improvement.
- One of the main positive impacts of the CLASS, as reported through the focus group meetings, was on the wellbeing of the participant children and young people. Children and young people spoke about how they got to know their teachers and peers better, how they were more at ease in school and felt better about themselves. They felt this was important for them as many reported feeling anxious returning to school in September 2021. Parents also reported that their children's relationships with their teachers had been further enriched through the CLASS. Principals and teachers welcomed the opportunities that the CLASS provided to build relationships with children and to focus on wellbeing strategies.
- Involving children and young people in identifying their needs and giving them some choice in their learning activities was another reported benefit of the CLASS. Many children and young people felt that the CLASS gave them the experience of being listened to and being involved in planning for their learning. Parents noted that their children's learning activities were very much in line with their needs and interests. While many principals and teachers reported that listening to children and young people was a positive feature of the CLASS, some indicated that they did not involve children and young people in the process of identifying their individual needs or in the planning of interventions.
- The CLASS guidelines advised schools that it was 'essential' to involve parents in the planning of extra supports. While many parents were involved, some were not satisfied with their involvement. Other parents also felt they should have received more information on the CLASS from the school. Providing information to parents on the scheme and ensuring that all parents are meaningfully involved in planning for supports for their child is an area for further development.
- Many principals and teachers reported that the CLASS gave them valuable opportunities to work with other teachers in planning learning activities and to use a broad range of teaching approaches such as one-to-one engagement and group work. These were identified as positive aspects of participation in the CLASS.
- The guidelines state that 'regular monitoring, recording and reviewing' of children's progress is an important aspect of the CLASS, as it allows teachers to judge the impact that the supports are having on children's learning. While some schools had effective systems in place to monitor progress, this was not the case in all schools.
- Some schools reported that they experienced challenges in hiring staff to provide supports under the CLASS and that this difficulty impacted on their ability to be flexible in the way in which supports were provided.

- The CLASS was announced in September 2021 and supports were available to schools from October 2021. Some schools felt that this did not give them enough time to prepare adequately for the scheme.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Future supports for schools should build on the reported strengths of the CLASS by:
 - ensuring that children and young people and their parents are centrally involved in planning interventions to meet their priority learning needs
 - emphasising that priority needs include those drawn from the wellbeing and learning domains
 - facilitating a flexible, strengths-based and pupil/student-centred approach to providing supports
- The CLASS scheme, if implemented in the future, could be strengthened by:
 - further enhancing teachers' capacity to engage successfully with the National Educational Psychological Service *Continuum of Support* framework and the *Student Support File* process. This will strengthen schools' ability to gather and analyse data, as well as to plan and review the progress of individual children and young people.
 - ensuring all parents receive information on the scheme and that all parents are meaningfully involved in planning for supports for their child
 - considering the availability of appropriately-qualified personnel to provide additional supports and the avenues available to schools to access personnel.