The Research Team

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Áine Lynch is the CEO of the National Parents Council, an organisation that represents and supports parents of children in early years and primary education. NPC is committed to all children having the opportunity to reach their full potential and strives in all of its work to support parents in their critical role in supporting their child.
Executive Summary
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Families across the world recently found themselves subjected to a so-called ‘new normal’ when schools in over 180 countries closed their doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Ireland, close to 1 million children, enrolled in primary and secondary schools (CSO, 2020) were abruptly transitioned into their new classroom - home. From March to June 2020, parents juggled work (if work was a viable option for them), domestic life and a new role as teacher of their children. This report outlines the main findings of an online survey exploring parents'/guardians' and children's and young people's experiences of ‘schooling at home’ during COVID-19. The survey was developed by researchers in the School of Education at NUI Galway (Dr. Niamh Flynn, Dr. Elaine Keane, Emer Davitt, Dr. Veronica McCauley, Dr. Manuela Heinz and Prof. Gerry MacRuairc), in collaboration with Áine Lynch, CEO National Parents’ Council Primary. We employed the term ‘schooling at home’ - a novel term - in this study, in an attempt both to capture the experiences of parents and their children in navigating the school-at-home experience during the period of the closure of school buildings, and to differentiate from ‘homeschooling’ which is typically understood as “parent-directed learning in the home that substitutes partially or completely for attendance at a regular school” (Dwyer & Peters, 2019, p. 3).

The central objective of the study was to explore parents’, children’s and young people’s perspectives on, and experiences of, a range of pertinent issues, including:

1. Levels and types of engagement with ‘schooling at home’, including any change in engagement over the period of school building closures;

2. Factors influencing engagement with ‘schooling at home’ [including technology-related matters and special educational needs (SEN)];

3. The types and levels of teaching and supports provided by schools and teachers for ‘schooling at home’;

4. Perceived impacts of ‘schooling at home’ on their lives;

5. The new arrangements for second-level ‘exam year’ students; and

6. Transitions back to formal schooling.

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1 Note: ‘Parent(s)’ is employed hereafter and is understood to include parents and guardians.
The ‘Schooling at Home’ in Ireland study is the latest study capturing the perspectives and experiences of children and young people of school-going age in the Republic of Ireland during the period of school buildings closures. This report provides a summary and synthesis of the survey responses of the participating parents and their children.

The online survey, which was housed on a commercial survey website compliant with GDPR requirements, was initiated on 17th June and closed on August 10th 2020. It used an ethical free-choice response format which allowed participants to skip questions that they were uncomfortable answering, resulting in variable response rates across questions. Demographic questions were included in the adult section of the survey only. A cross-sectional research design (i.e. the survey was administered at one point in time) was employed but participants were asked to retrospectively reflect on their experiences of ‘schooling at home’ since the closure of school buildings in March 2020. Each participating parent was asked to report on the experience of their oldest school-aged child only. Along with a range of closed-ended questions, the survey included open-ended items that offered parents, children and young people ample opportunity to describe in their own words their experiences and perspectives. Parent participants were recruited via a number of pathways including: the NPC database of parent affiliates; social media channels targeting parents of school-aged children; the NUI Galway School of Education news webpage and Twitter account; and personal and organisational contacts of the research team. Both English and Irish language versions of the survey were available to prospective participants.

The primary and second-level school-aged participants were accessed solely though their parents; that is, parents provided informed consent for their oldest school-aged child to participate in the online survey, after which, the child provided their own informed assent, and then initiated the relevant section of the survey. The quantitative data from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistics combined with parametric and non-parametric inferential statistics. Data from the open-ended questions of the survey were analysed using content analysis approaches. Since a non-probability sampling method was utilised in this research, the views and experiences of the final sample may not be representative of those of the entire population of Irish parents and school-aged children.

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2 N refers to the total number of participants or responses to a particular question on the survey.
3 Irish Census categories were employed to ascertain participant ethnicity.
The final parent sample ($N^2 = 2733$) was comprised of predominantly ‘White-Irish’ (87.4%) and female (91%) parents who reported that they did not possess a medical card (86.9%), and whose highest level of education was a third-level qualification (78.8%). The majority of the parent sample reported that their oldest school-aged child attended a primary school (74.5%) of non-DEIS status (76.5%). 12.7% of participating parents reported that their oldest school-age child usually received learning support due to a recognised special educational need (SEN). The final primary school-aged sample totalled 896 children, with the vast majority attending mainstream primary schools (98.2%) that were largely English-medium (85.1%) and of non-DEIS status (77.1%). Parent reports indicated that 13.6% of the primary participants received additional learning support at school due to a recognised SEN. The final second-level school-aged sample totalled 293 young people, predominantly from mainstream schools (98.6%) that were English-medium (95.6%) and of non-DEIS status (88.4%). Parent reports indicated that 11.6% of the second-level sample received additional learning support at school due to a recognised SEN.

On average, students reportedly spent between 2.2 hours (primary students) and 3.6 hours (second-level students) per day engaged in ‘schooling at home’ activities. When asked to compare their learning at home and at school, a small majority of primary (52%) and a large majority of second-level students (73%) felt that they had learnt less at home than at school. In addition, a very large majority of parents (82% of parents of a child in primary school and 71% of parents of a child in second-level school) reported that their children’s interest in ‘schooling at home’ had either “decreased a little” or “decreased a lot” over the period of the school buildings closures. This was supported by the reports of the second-level students themselves, with the majority (67%) indicating decreases in interest levels over time.

In relation to their enjoyment of ‘schooling at home’, the most frequent response among primary students was “sometimes did and sometimes did not enjoy [it]” (66.5%). Responses of second-level students were more diverse, with 44% reporting variable enjoyment, and 40% reporting that they “mostly did not enjoy it”. Primary students enjoyed a wide range of curricular areas, and particularly liked engaging in project work, practical work, and activities involving technology. They also reported enjoyment of sports, extracurricular practical indoor and outdoor activities.
(e.g., gardening and baking), and spending extra time with their family members. Second-level students enjoyed the freedom of sleeping later in the morning, following their own schedule, determining how long to spend on particular subjects, and having time for extracurricular activities in a more relaxed home environment. Many primary student participants reported that they did not miss classwork, homework or tests, and second-level students reported that they did not miss early morning starts for commuting to school, demanding/strict daily routines, disruptive students in class, or bullies. The vast majority of primary and second-level students reported that they missed social interactions with friends, and some students also missed interactions with, and support from, their teachers.

Many students and parents reported experiencing increased levels of stress and anxiety. Working parents and/or parents with several children, with no childcare, found juggling multiple learning levels and work-home-children responsibilities exhausting, “impossible” and unsustainable. A small number of parents offered more positive accounts of the ‘schooling at home’ period, noting that their children benefited from the one-to-one support they provided, more family time, and the freedom to develop personal skills (e.g., more independence) and learn new or different things (e.g., expand their IT skills). Both primary and second-level parents felt that their children’s routine had been most negatively affected by ‘schooling at home’, but more negative impacts were reported for second-level students than primary students for all explored aspects of their lives (learning, routine, confidence, independence, behaviour, mental health, social skills).

With regard to access to technology during the ‘schooling at home’ period, it was found that a large majority of parents were satisfied with the number of devices available to their family, and with their internet connection, although students in DEIS second-level schools were significantly more likely to have a ‘poor’ internet connection than students in non-DEIS schools. The majority (approximately 73%) of both primary and second-level parents reported that the child’s mother/female guardian took primary responsibility for supporting ‘schooling at home’. Primary parents reported that they drew upon online resources and/or guidance and resources from their child’s school as sources of support for their involvement in ‘schooling in home’, whereas a substantial number of second-level parents did not make recourse to any supports (49.6%). Over 40% of parents (47% of primary and 40% of second-level parents) whose children attended Irish medium schools reported that their level of Irish impacted the support they could provide for their child.
According to parent reports, the most common supports provided by primary and second-level schools and teachers were emails with instructions for work, use of apps or online platforms, and recommendations for online resources. Live online class teaching was reportedly provided for 19% of the primary and 58% of the second-level participants. 61% of parents of primary school-aged children and 54% of parents of second-level school-aged children reported that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with school supports. However, 24% of primary and 27% of second-level parents reported that they were either “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with this support. Reports about satisfaction with feedback from schools on completed work were very variable, but the most common description was “somewhat useful” (23% of primary parents, and 29% of second-level parents). While some acknowledged and praised schools and teachers for their support, the majority of parents who chose to respond to various open-ended items\(^6\) were highly critical of the perceived lack of school and/or teacher support, highlighting a lack of communication, engagement or support from schools and/or teachers, and emphasising the need for both live daily classes (rather than an email with a list of work for the week), and meaningful feedback on completed work. Many of these parents called for the government to monitor and ensure appropriate and consistent teaching and student support across schools and teachers. 56% of parents of primary children with SEN and 41% of parents of second-level students with SEN were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the received supports. However, 25% of primary and 40% of second-level parents with a child who usually received additional learning support at school were “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with the support received. In terms of the supports provided by DEIS schools, 57% of primary parents and 40% of second-level parents were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with these supports. However, 19% of primary parents and 36% of second-level parents reported that they were “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” in this regard.

In relation to returning to school in September, primary and second-level students expressed largely positive attitudes (with average ratings of 7.71 and 6.43 respectively on a 10-point scale). The three most prominent worries about the transition back to school among primary parents were: children not being allowed back full-time due to physical distancing requirements (reported by 58% of primary parents); children not being able to play normally with their friends (reported by 54%); and children being behind academically (reported by 38%). The three most

\(^6\) It is important to note that only a proportion of the total sample of parent participants chose to respond to the various open-ended questions of the survey. The exact number of individuals who responded to each open-ended question is noted in the results section of this report.
prominent worries among second-level parents were: young people not being allowed back full-time due to physical distancing requirements (reported by 56% of second-level parents); children being behind academically (reported by 41%); and children potentially being exposed to COVID-19 (reported by 38%). The majority of parents who responded to follow-up open-ended questions were very worried about how they would cope if schools did not open fully (particularly those working full-time), and emphasised their child(ren)’s need to return to school for academic, social and mental health reasons. A minority expressed apprehension about the reopening of schools on health grounds. In the context of preferences for a potential blended learning model in schools from September onwards, the most commonly endorsed options were “attending 2-3 days per week” (37% of primary parents, 40% of second-level parents, 41% of second-level students), or “mornings/afternoons attendance only” [26% of primary parents, 16.7% of second-level students (but responses for “unsure” were higher at 19.2%), and 18% of second-level students].

With respect to the cancellation of State Examinations and the use of a calculated grade model in place of the Leaving Certificate examination, diverse views were expressed by the parents and students who responded to this subset of open-ended questions. While some of the responding parents felt that it was a mistake, others perceived it to be the best decision in a very challenging context. Many disapproved of the delay in reaching and publically announcing a decision, particularly in relation to the Leaving Certificate. In terms of the calculated grades model, some of the parent participants felt it was the fairest decision in the context, but others were concerned about teacher bias and transparency. A similar variation in opinion was evident among second-level student participants in relation to both the cancellation of the examinations and the use of a calculated grade model, with core concerns centring on whether academic progress from March to May would be known or taken into account by teachers in their calculation of subject grades.

Based on the findings of this study, we can make the following recommendations:

1. Ideally, but subject to public health advice and with due regard to the safety and wellbeing of teachers and students, schools would remain open full-time so as to protect students’ academic progress, their socio-emotional development, and mental health, as well as the wellbeing of parents.
2. It would be helpful if the government were to further develop and issue clearer and more detailed guidelines for schools and teachers in relation to remote and/or blended teaching and learning, including clear guidance on engagement with parents. This would facilitate equity of access to the curriculum, and appropriate support for students across all schools, at both primary and second-level, should school buildings closures at national or local level be necessary in the future.

3. Appropriate support and training is needed for all principals and teachers with regard to effective communication with parents and students, and most pertinently, with respect to good practice in remote and blended teaching and learning, and student support in that context.

4. In a potential future ‘schooling at home’ scenario, the following are recommended:
   a. Schools and teachers should respond with flexibility to home learning contexts (e.g., where parents need to support different ages and learning levels) by adapting their support, and teaching and learning approaches, accordingly;
   b. There should be greater cognisance of the multiple competing demands faced by working parents, and more attention focused on the provision of supports to children and young people to enable them to engage in learning more independently, learning which still needs to be directed and led by the relevant teacher(s). Supports are also needed for parents to assist them in supporting their child(ren)’s learning;
   c. More attention should be focused on monitoring and sustaining students’ interest in ‘schooling at home’ over time, for example, through the provision of meaningful engagement (including through regular live online classes at both primary and second-level, in an age-appropriate fashion) and learning tasks, and feedback on completed work;
   d. Ideally, opportunities for online social interaction and collaborative learning with peers would be facilitated by schools and teachers; and
   e. Resources need to be provided to relevant families for necessary equipment/internet access for ‘schooling at home’;
5. The following are recommended for future research:

a. As the participants in the survey were, in the main, from majority ethnic and less disadvantaged groups, further research exploring the perspectives and experiences of those from minority ethnic and lower socio-economic groups, including those in DEIS schools, needs to be prioritised;

b. Follow-on research is needed to capture students’ lived experiences of transitioning back to their schools or of transitioning to new educational settings (e.g., second-level or third-level) in September 2020;

c. Research exploring parents’ and students’ experiences of, and perspectives on, the outcome of the calculated grades process would be valuable;

d. Further research is required regarding the ‘schooling at home’ experience of school-aged children with SEN and their parents. Only a small number of the individuals who participated in this study (12.7%) were parents of a child with a recognised SEN. Furthermore, the survey only collected data pertaining to the oldest school-aged child in each family, potentially resulting in an incomplete representation of each of these families’ unique situations.
The report should be cited as follows: