Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Trinity Access and the School of Education

Post-primary Student Perspectives on Teaching and Learning During Covid-19 School Closures

Executive Summary

Lessons learned from Irish Students in schools in a Widening Participation Programme

August 2020
Aibhín Bray, Eilís Ní Chorcora, Jen Maguire Donohoe,
Joanne Banks, Ann Devitt

About This Report

It is the third in a series of reports on the impact of Covid-19 school closures on education in Ireland. The report on post-primary teacher perspectives is available here: http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/92883. The report on primary parent perspectives is available here: http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/92899. A further report is currently being prepared which focus on school closures from the perspective of primary teachers.

Partners & Contributors

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

Overview

This report is the third publication in series of reports published by the School of Education in collaboration with Trinity Access in Trinity College Dublin. The aim of this research series has been to understand the impact of Covid-19 school closures on education in Ireland from a range of perspectives. The first two reports focused on the perspectives of second-level teachers (Devitt, Bray, Banks, & Ní Chorcora, 2020) and parents of primary school children (Devitt, Ross, Bray, & Banks, 2020). This third report in the series focuses on the Covid-19 school closures from the perspective of second-level students. The over 1,000 student respondents are from 15 schools in the greater Dublin area, which are part of the Trinity Access: a programme specifically aimed at increasing access to post-secondary education for students in areas of low progression to higher education. Previous research (Devitt et al. 2020a) has identified this cohort as being significantly more likely to have disengaged with their education during the lockdown. The data were collected as part of a broader longitudinal study by Trinity Access. The report therefore provides a unique insight on the experiences of students during the Covid-19 Pandemic but also an opportunity to compare their educational experiences with previous years. It addresses the following research questions:

1. What impact did school closures and working from home have on student wellbeing?
2. In what ways did teaching and learning, and engagement with education, change for students during school closures?
3. How did relationships between students and teachers change during school closures?

The report provides a critical analysis of the findings in the context of the existing research on young people and education, during and before Covid-19, in order to identify implications for policy and practice. In line with the previous publications, this report

adopts a solution-focussed approach and provides important evidence for policy for any future school closures and for school – home communication more generally.

Key Findings

Student wellbeing during school closures

> **Decline in student wellbeing during school closures**
> - The students surveyed reported lower scores on a wellbeing measure in 2020 compared to 2019.
> - A perceived increase in workload was reported by students to be a source of stress during school closures.
> - Where students reported negative relationships with their teachers or felt there was a lack of feedback about their work, they were more likely to have poorer mental wellbeing being during lockdown.
> - Parental involvement in schoolwork was found to be linked to wellbeing, with students with more parental input less likely to have poor mental wellbeing during school closures.

Student views on changes to the Leaving Certificate

> - Students have mixed views about changes to the Leaving Certificate examination.
> - Approximately half of students agreed with the cancellation of the leaving certificate whereas just a third agreed the introduction of calculated grading.
> - The findings highlight increased stress among some students in the move to calculated grading with many concerned about how the role of student-teacher relationships may impact on this process.
> - Some students suggested that we use this unprecedented time as an opportunity to move away from high stakes examinations and have greater use of continuous assessment in senior cycle.

Changes to teaching, learning and school engagement

- Four out of five students reported that their workload increased during school closures and experienced increased levels of stress in relation to managing this.
- Students experienced less collaboration and communication with their peers during school closures.
- Students had mixed reports on levels of feedback from students during school closures with an increase for a significant proportion (37 per cent) but a decrease for over a quarter of students (26 per cent).
- Students reported using more technology for educational purposes and were more likely to self-direct their learning during school closures.
- Students' responses in relation to the provision and use of feedback from teachers indicates the critical importance of assessment for learning practices in sustaining student engagement and educational relationships.

Importance of Parental Involvement

- Level of parental involvement with education was predictive of levels of student wellbeing, active engagement with education and student-teacher relationships.

Policy implications

The findings of the report point to clear recommendations for policy for second level schools in Ireland. The following sections provide an overview of recommendations for policy stemming from the report's analysis.

System level recommendations

Student wellbeing during Covid-19

- Recognise the importance of the role of schools and teachers in identifying mental health difficulties among students. Support school principals and teachers to recognise anxiety and stress among their students and to source appropriate help and supports. A wellbeing contingency plan should be in place for staff and students in the event of any temporary school closures.

Widening participation in further and higher education for students from areas of low progression

- Given the findings around the importance of parental involvement in maintaining student engagement during school closures, the report argues that existing supports such as the Home School Liaison Scheme, which seeks to increase home-school communication, should be enhanced.

- Similarly, the role of the school guidance counsellor should be recognised as a support to students' mental wellbeing during these unprecedented times of school closures. Equally, this role should be supported to provide students with more traditional career guidance through the provision of resources and information around their choices post-school.

- Funding is needed for research and development on the impact of school-based programmes which seek to widen participation in education for students from areas of low progression.

Guidance for online teaching

- Given the resources available from organisations, such as the PDST, teachers should be made aware of supports aimed at facilitating online collaboration and the provision of feedback.

- Given the findings around the need for greater peer interactions in education online, guidelines around best practice for small group online teaching should be put in place to ensure online safety for children and young people.

- In the event of future temporary school closures, clear guidance should be provided to schools in relation to appropriate workload expectations for students working from home.

Senior Cycle Assessment

- The findings suggest the need to develop a plan for the 2021 Leaving Certificate examination that is flexible and adaptable and removes the emphasis off the terminal examination. The ongoing review of Senior Cycle (Smyth et al., 2019)

should be consulted in any future changes to senior cycle assessment in light of Covid-19.

Wellbeing

- Teachers should be made aware of CPD and resource available (such as the PDST) in relation to how to promote good mental wellbeing amongst students.
- Teachers could also use this time as an opportunity to 'check-in' with their students regarding their mental wellbeing. Information could be gathered from students around how students fared during school closures assessing what worked and what did not.

Student voice

- The report findings highlight the importance of listening to student feedback during school closures. In the context of learning online, information should be gathered around students' access to devices and broadband, and a quiet workspace, for example.
- The report findings also suggest the need for greater liaison between the student body and the school when learning online. This could be done through the creation, or further development, of student councils that can operate in a face-to-face or online context. These mechanisms could ensure that each class group has a method of having their voice heard.

Teaching and learning

- Develop a contingency plan in case of further lockdowns, making sure that a coordinated, whole-school approach is taken to the provision of online learning addressing in advance the issues of platform, timetable, and student workload.
- Prioritise professional development opportunities in relation to:
  - effective and time-efficient Assessment for Learning approaches (self- and peer- assessment, use of rubrics)

- o collaborative work in online or socially-distanced spaces, in line with both health and safe-guarding best practice guidelines.

References

Devitt, A., Bray, A., Banks, J., & Ní Chorcora, E. (2020a). *Teaching and Learning During School Closures: Lessons Learned. Irish Second-Level Teacher Perspectives*. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/2262/92883

Devitt, A., Ross, C., Bray, A., & Banks, J. (2020). *Parent Perspectives on Teaching and Learning During Covid-19 School Closures: Lessons Learned from Irish Primary Schools*. Retrieved from Dublin: http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/92899

Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Contact

For more information, please contact:
Dr Aibhín Bray
The School of Education
Trinity College Dublin
Dublin 2
Ireland

W: **www.tcd.ie/education**