



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council
for Special Education

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Education of Children with Special Educational Needs

William Kinsella, Joyce Senior, Jennifer Symonds, Gráinne O'Donnell,
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Andrea Maynard, Elizabeth Tobin, Áine Mahon.

Research Report No. 30 / 2024





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Foreword

The NCSE is pleased to publish the first report from ICOSSEN study looking at the Impact of COVID-19 on Students with Special Educational Needs. This is the first of two reports arising from research commissioned by the NCSE to examine the impact of the pandemic on students with special educational needs in Ireland, outlining good practice to meet students' needs and how to prepare for a more resilient education system in the future. The study utilises data collected through surveys and interviews specifically for this project, and secondary data from the Children's School Lives study commissioned by the NCCA. This report focuses on the impact of the pandemic during the periods of school closures in 2020 and 2021 and into 2022 with the reopening of schools and resumption of normal teaching and learning activities.

This report offers unique insights into the experiences of students with SEN in Ireland during and immediately after the pandemic. The findings highlight the significant impact of closures on students with SEN, and that students' experience of the pandemic has differed with variation by type of student need, family background, age, stage of school and by school type. Some positives were noted in the study such as some students reporting being more comfortable learning at home and benefits around reduced anxiety for other students, particularly those who enjoyed fewer restrictions in their behaviours (e.g., stimming, moving, taking breaks). However, there were gaps in supports and students with SEN in Ireland fared less well than students without SEN and experienced challenges that negatively impacted their learning and wellbeing, during and immediately after school closure periods.

From a systemic perspective, should school closures occur again, several findings for consideration were noted. These included- the benefits of direct communication between schools and families, particularly for students with SEN; the requirement for more supports (e.g., learning, mental health) for students with SEN; the assignment of less schoolwork and the balanced scheduling of classes; more IT training for students with SEN and their parents; and the usefulness of integrating digital technology practices in the classroom and the ongoing benefit of this in meeting the needs of students with SEN.

The findings from this study contain important evidence for all those involved in the education of students with special educational needs in Ireland, both in supporting this cohort of students throughout their education and reviewing the system response and preparedness for possible pandemic crises in the future. A second report arising from the study covering the period 2022-2023 will be published in due course and will focus on the continued impact the pandemic may have on the learning and wellbeing of children with special educational needs.

I would like to thank the research team at the UCD School of Education and in particular the students, parents, school staff and principals for their participation and contribution to this valuable research study.

John Kearney
Chief Executive Officer

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Language Statement and Terms

We understand that within the disability community there can be different preferences with regard to certain terminology. For this report, we are using the term “special educational needs” or “SEN” to describe children who may need additional support in school due to various needs. This term has been chosen as it is the term utilised by the NCSE and within the Irish school system. This report also utilises a mix of identity-first and person-first language. We understand that language preferences can often vary by individual. In this report, identity-first language has been used when describing autistic individuals due to the clear consensus in the literature of this preference (Kenny et al., 2015).

Terms

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
DCD	Developmental Coordination Disorder (Dyspraxia)
DS	Down Syndrome
ID	Intellectual Disability
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
MLD	Mild Learning Disability
OCD	Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
PPS	Post-Primary School
PS-AC	Primary School, Autism Class
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SEN	Special Educational Need
SET	Special Education Teacher
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SEBD	Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties
SPD	Sensory Processing Disorder
SS	Special School
TBI	Traumatic Brain Injury

Executive Summary

Study Overview and Aims

In Ireland, schools first closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. As the lockdowns and school closures were extended, concern grew regarding the potential impact of these closures on children, and particularly children with special educational needs. This study, commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and conducted by researchers from the UCD School of Education, constitutes the first study specifically investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children with SEN in Ireland. This mixed-method study aimed to understand how students with SEN experienced and were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures, the topic is investigated using principal surveys, interviews with students, parents, and educators, and an extensive literature review. The study also aimed to outline how schools responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and supported students with SEN during this time, with a view to identifying the characteristics that would render an education system more resilient in the event of future school closures.

The research aims were to:

- Describe the impact and changes on the educational system arising from the pandemic in the Irish context and generally how the response compared internationally.
- Review the international evidence available on the impact of school closures generally arising out of natural disasters and closures over the summer period; review the literature relating to alternative forms of educational instruction and any extended or additional programmes delivered to address regression for students with SEN.
- Review the international evidence available on what worked best to respond to student needs during the pandemic and what worked best to ameliorate regression arising from the crisis.
- Document how education providers and professionals responded to the crisis in Ireland in terms of alternative forms of educational instruction and additional supports and programmes put in place.
- Measure the impact of the disruption caused by the pandemic on outcomes for students with SEN in the short-term and also the estimated impact in the long-term.
- Outline good practices identified in the Irish schools in this study and from the international evidence about how the needs of these students were best met and how these practices can be considered to prepare and design for a more resilient education system, should further waves of this or another pandemic transpire.

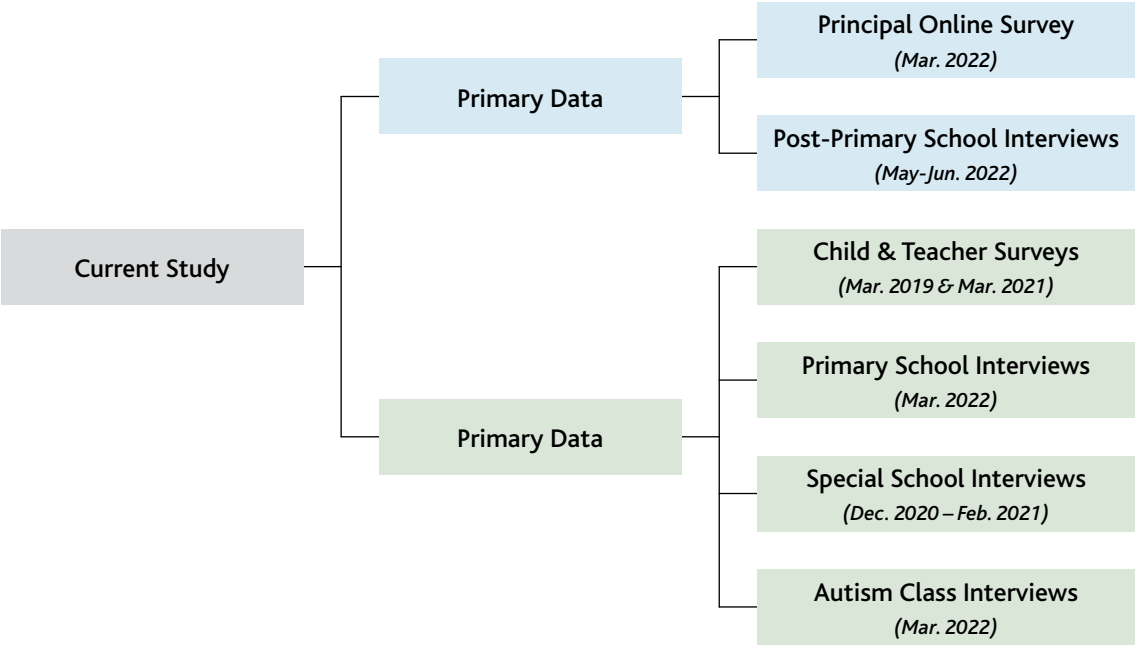
Literature Review

A comprehensive literature review of key national and international literature focusing on the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic school closures on the learning and wellbeing of students with SEN was conducted. As school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic are a relatively new phenomena, there is limited data on their impact on children. Therefore, literature relating to the impact of school closures as a result of national disasters as well as research on 'summer loss' is also reviewed. Due to the recency of this topic, key literature was included up to the submission of the report in autumn of 2023.

Methodology

This study methodology, which is outlined in detail in Chapter Three, included a literature review and analysis of both primary and secondary qualitative. The primary data were collected specifically for this project and included an online principal survey (principals of primary, post-primary and special schools) and interviews with post primary schools. The secondary data were collected as part of the NCCA Children's School Lives (CSL) study with primary schools and analysed according to the research questions of this study. Though it was not possible to have a fully representative sample of the Irish school system, this report has achieved a wide and varied sample due to the multiple data sources, participant types, and school types included in the study.

Figure 1. Primary and Secondary Data Sources



Online Principal Survey

An online survey was sent to primary, post-primary, and special school principals in March 2022. It was completed by 122 primary school principals, 148 post-primary school principals, and 56 special school principals.

Primary School Child and Teacher Survey

Secondary data from the CSL child and teacher surveys which were administered to primary school children (in Senior Infants and 4th class; N=270 classes in 175 primary schools, totalling 4,585 children) and their teachers in March 2019 and March 2021 were also analysed.

Post-Primary School Interviews

Interviews in 4 post-primary schools between April and June 2022 included 19 students with SEN, 18 parents of students with SEN, 15 teachers, SENCOs, Year Heads and SETs, 7 SNAs, and 2 principals.

Primary School Interviews

In March 2022, as part of the CSL study, interviews were conducted in 13 case study primary schools with 13 teachers and 11 principals. Interviews were also conducted with 2 parents, 1 deputy principal, 1 teacher, and 1 SNA in an autism class from one of the case study schools.

Special School Interviews

The special school interviews were conducted between December 2020 and February 2021 with 10 parents of students with SEN, 5 teachers, and 5 SNAs as part of the CSL study.

Analyses

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS software. Qualitative data were analysed with NVivo software and using a thematic analysis approach. Further information on the methodology and analyses are outlined in detail in Chapter 3 Methodology.

Interpretation of findings

In the findings that follow, “some” refers to 30% of participants or less, “most” refers to 30-60% of participants, and “many” refers to 60% of participants or higher.

Summary of Findings

Children's Engagement and Learning during School Closures

In March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools in Ireland were required to rapidly change their mode of delivery of education to students, from traditional in-class teaching to alternative modes of delivery using technology. While some school personnel reported that their schools were reasonably well-prepared for the transition to online learning, mainly through the use of iPads, the majority of participants reported that schools were not well-prepared. While all schools established online learning platforms, post-primary schools were most likely to offer 'live' classes. Online learning platforms appear to have been least effective for special schools, as reported by principals. Principals reported that engagement with online learning was lower for students with SEN compared to those without SEN and also lower in special schools compared to primary and post-primary schools. Interview participants listed both negative and positive aspects of online learning, and while many students did not like remote learning, some preferred it to traditional schooling. One of the key factors influencing the level of engagement of students with SEN with online learning was the level of ability and availability of parents to support them. Parents' capacity to provide support depended on a range of factors such as their work commitments and the needs of other family members. Parents and students identified the barriers to remote learning as arising from lack of suitable study space, unreliable internet, lack of technological devices, and lack of space in the home setting for all family members. The general indications are that, understandably, schools were better prepared and organised for the second period of school closures, with a reliance on the use of 'assigned work' during the first lockdown and greater use of 'live' classes during the second closure. Despite the efforts of school personnel, post-primary students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) who were interviewed as part of this study expressed dissatisfaction with the level of support available in accessing remote learning.

Principals' perceptions of being equipped to address the concerns of parents of students with SEN varied by school type, with special school principals perceiving themselves as being least well-equipped to do so. In addition to online communication, personnel from approximately one-fifth of schools reported that home visits by teachers or SNAs formed part of their home-school communication and support strategy during lock-down. This was more prevalent in primary and special schools than in post-primary schools. In relation to the level of contact between schools and families during closures, most principals reported daily or weekly contact with parents of students with SEN. While some parents were satisfied with the contact from schools during school closures, many felt "out of the loop", reporting that they were unaware of their children's timetable or assignment deadlines. Principals commented on their efforts to access external education and allied healthcare services during the pandemic and post-primary staff expressed frustration with the lack of external supports during school closures. In particular, parents of students in the special school referred to the impact of lack of access to allied healthcare and respite services for their children during closures.

Children's Engagement and Learning during School Closures: Key Findings

- Due to the unexpected nature of the pandemic, most school staff reported that neither they nor their school were ready for remote learning particularly during the first lockdown. Overall, the participants reported that all schools were more organised in the second lockdown and had more synchronous (live) online classes.
- It was found that 98.1% of schools established a dedicated remote learning platform for students to access during lockdowns and quarantine periods. It was also reported that SNA and teacher visit to students' homes was the least used approach to remote learning during both school closures (19.6% and 23.7% respectively) and quarantine periods (both 7.9%).
- In general, principals reported that there was higher engagement in remote learning for students without SEN. In addition, the findings indicate that participation in online learning amongst students with SEN varied based on school type, i.e., with the lowest rates of participation occurring for students in special schools.
- The findings from the interviews with staff, students and parents indicate that there were barriers to engaging in online learning such as not having suitable space within the home for focused work, not having access to reliable internet or devices, as well as environmental stressors in the home such as interruptions from siblings. Teachers reported that a crucial factor in how well students with SEN engaged in remote learning in the home environment was parental involvement and support.
- Principal survey data indicated that most principals thought that students' learning had been at least moderately negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and that children with SEN were those most affected. Post-primary principals and primary principals viewed the negative impact of the pandemic as being more severe on students with SEN academic attainment than special school principals.
- Principals' responses to the survey indicated that schools made daily (44.6%) or weekly (50.5%) contact with parents of children with SEN during the school closures.
- The majority of principals surveyed said that they were somewhat (68.7%) or very (28.4%) well equipped to address the concerns of parents of students with SEN. The findings suggest that post-primary school principals were, on average, more likely to feel equipped to deal with parents' concerns than primary principals, while special school principals felt the least equipped.

Children's Wellbeing

Participants reported that students experienced a range of emotions during the lockdowns, with some students demonstrating heightened anxiety levels, while a minority of students experienced reduced anxiety, compared to the stress involved in attending school. Some were very anxious about the prospect of contracting COVID-19 or their elderly relatives contracting the virus. Principals' perceptions were that the wellbeing of students with SEN was more negatively affected than students without SEN. Analysis of secondary data from primary school teachers and children confirmed a link between children's wellbeing and their SEN status. The findings indicate that children with SEN felt less positive about themselves in general as well as academically, and were allegedly more prone to bullying and victimisation, than children without SEN across the first two years of the pandemic. Students with SEN reported varying levels of contact with friends. Some did not have any contact while others kept in touch through texting, social media, or playing computer games. Many participants spoke of how important routine is for students with SEN and how the lack of routine during lockdown negatively affected their wellbeing and their learning. This was particularly the case for autistic students.

Children's Wellbeing: Key Findings

- While students reported a range of emotional responses to school closures, including initial excitement and enjoyment of time at home, in general students reported experiencing anxiety, stress, boredom, cabin fever, confusion, and loneliness.
- In the interviews, participants reported that not seeing their friends was difficult for many students with SEN. Parents and staff noted that they were concerned for the wellbeing of students with SEN who did not have friends outside of school. In the autism classes, parents and staff reported organising online activities for students to interact with friends. Many students also reported keeping in contact through texting, social media, going for walks, and playing video games together.
- While many students reported missing the classroom setting, others reported being more comfortable learning from home, particularly those who enjoyed being less restricted in their behaviours (e.g., stimming, moving, taking breaks). However, some parents stressed that their children's wellbeing was better when they were in school.
- The importance of routine was noted by parents, staff, and students, with the lack of routine being named as a negative impact on wellbeing.

Experiences after School Closures

Some students with SEN reported that they found it difficult returning to school, finding it more difficult to concentrate and being prone to distraction. Some found it difficult to cope with the quarantine regulations that were in place. Others reported appreciation of being able to meet peers again while some students would have preferred to have continued learning at home. Some parents reported that their children with SEN had changed their attitude to school over the course of the pandemic and had lost interest in school. Some of these students wanted to start working rather than continue in school. There was an increased level of both school refusal and school non-attendance reported from a special school post-pandemic. However, some students reported a more positive attitude to, and a greater appreciation of, school post-pandemic.

In the interviews, participants reported an increase in social anxiety and a decrease in social skills of students with SEN as a result of school closures. Staff in post-primary schools reported that this was particularly the case for students who transitioned from primary to secondary school during the pandemic. There was also conflicting evidence on the possible impact of school closures on home-school relationships, with some reporting more positive relationships and a greater level of parental and student appreciation of schools, and teachers, while others reported a deterioration in such relationships. While primary and post-primary principals did not report any significant negative impact on school attendance post-pandemic, special school principals did report an impact and increased levels of school refusal. Most school principals believed that all students' learning had been at least moderately impacted by the pandemic, with students with SEN being more impacted than students without SEN. Parents and teachers expressed concern that students with SEN had fallen behind in their learning and would not be prepared for examinations. There was particular concern expressed in relation to students who had not completed Junior Certificate examinations and the possible impact of that on their performance in the Leaving Certificate examination. To address regression in learning among students with SEN during school closures, the most frequent response by principals across all three school types was the use of 'class hours', made possible by additional funding to schools during the academic year post school closures.

In interviews, school personnel commented on how COVID-related staff shortages after schools reopened had led to increased workloads for teachers and had negatively impacted provision for students with SEN, with SET teachers sometimes redeployed to mainstream classes. After the return to school, staff reported a renewed focus on the wellbeing of students and described efforts to ease students back into school and offer more psychological and pastoral supports. The secondary data indicated a notable increase in primary school children with SEN feeling less confident about their academic abilities after returning to school. Interview participants reported a negative impact on the social skills of students with SEN following school closures and parents of students in the special school discussed how their children's behaviour regressed as a result of the lockdown and school closures. Overall, the evidence garnered from this study demonstrates that young people with SEN experienced challenges relating to their engagement, learning and wellbeing due to the COVID-19 pandemic school closures.

Experiences after School Closures: Key Findings

- Most principals reported either no change in attendance (50.0%) or lower attendance (36.9%) since schools reopened.
- Many participants in the interviews reported that students were happy to return to school and be back in the routine of in-person schooling and in particular to see their friends.
- Interview participants believed that students with SEN had missed out on key experiences regarding their social and academic development, and that this had impacted their development in key areas such as their social, emotional, and educational development.
- The principal surveys indicated that in general principals believed that the school closure had negatively impacted students' wellbeing. It was also found that mainstream school principals believed that the negative effects were more pronounced for students with SEN.
- There was an emphasis on wellbeing support when schools reopened with some common school responses including more movement breaks, wellbeing programmes, and provision of other accommodations such as quiet spaces for children with SEN.
- From the principal survey findings, it was evident that principals increased the academic component of learning, with more of a focus on academic skills and catch-up classes. In addition, the findings indicate that the most frequent school-based response to academic regression was to utilise Department of Education assigned 'class hours'; principals reported that 'class hours' were extremely useful, and they would have liked more of them.
- Principal survey also investigated principals' views regarding the efficacy of school responses to student regression. The findings show that although/student support/IEP plans were not utilised as much as other responses, they were rated as being the most effective, followed by digital resources and curriculum adaptations.
- In the special schools, principals reported that the school closures were most impactful for students with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties and, more broadly, for children with SEN from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Considering the key findings from this report, a number of implications for future practice and research that emerged from the current study. These implications are especially relevant in the context of future school closures.

- Schools, students and families need more support from the wider education and healthcare systems in the event of future school closures. More targeted and more intensive support with an emphasis on communication and flexibility should be available as an option for students with SEN in the event of school closures. Schools should be provided with additional support from agencies within the education and healthcare systems during enforced school closures to enable them to provide adequate support to students with SEN. Many participants noted that the access to external support during school closures was limited and that schools were the only support many families had.

- Some school staff reported difficulties with gaining access to sufficient resources and support for students with SEN. For example, some school staff members reported difficulties in accessing timely assessments for students. Some teachers, principals and parents reported difficulties in receiving adequate SNA allocation for their students. Participants spoke of a 'back-log' in allied healthcare services due to the suspension of services during periods of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The present study as well as previous research indicates that loss of learning time can lead to academic learning regression as well as regression in behaviours, social skills, life skills and general personal development for students with SEN. Thus efforts to ameliorate such effects must be considered should future closures occur. Bidirectional communication between schools, students and families was found to be beneficial in reducing the gap in learning as was additional instructional time or 'class hours' and synchronous online classes.
- The evidence garnered from the present study suggests that the wellbeing of students with SEN was negatively impacted by the pandemic and that additional targeted wellbeing support during periods of school closures as well as in the aftermath should be considered.
- The present study suggests that the wellbeing of students can be impacted by their relationships with peers and teachers, thus an emphasis on teaching methods that facilitate peer-to-peer communication as well as two-way communication between teachers and students should be cultivated.
- There was evidence that some students were isolated and had no access to friends during school closures. This was particularly true for students from the special schools. Efforts should be made to support peer to peer relationships should future closures occur. In addition, students spoke of having less opportunity for interaction in schools upon reopening due to the COVID-19 restrictions.
- Research indicates that the loss of learning may be exaggerated for those from particular groups such as those from lower socioeconomic homes and those with less access to digital technology, at-home instructional support and adequate internet facilities. Thus, it may be prudent when conducting future planning for potential closures to incorporate solutions to these barriers to learning. Solutions such as supporting parents in providing at-home instructional support, as well as internet and device access.
- While most parents reported that they had very good communication with schools, some expressed a desire for increased bidirectional communication. Some parents would like to be more informed about their child's timetable, homework and academic attainment on an ongoing basis. Parents also expressed a desire for more guidance on how to best support their child's learning at home.

- Due to the school closures school staff reported an increased appreciation of the importance of communication with families with regard to supporting students. Communication between schools and students with SEN during school closures should incorporate a coordinated approach to school-student communication during school closures, especially in relation to task assignment at post-primary level, to help reduce the risk of work overload.
- Teachers need continuing professional development in relation to the delivery of online education, with a focus on delivery of such education for more vulnerable students, such as those with SEN. There is a need for enhanced training in technological skills for students with SEN and, where necessary, their parents. Ongoing use of technology and virtual communication could be embedded more in regular school life for students with SEN as a preparation for further disruptions to school.
- Consideration should be given to implementing measures aimed at preventing ongoing academic regression amongst children with SEN with a particular focus on those who have experienced challenges academically and in their broader learning (social and life skills) as a result of the pandemic related school closures. The findings indicate that children with learning difficulties may have faced greater learning disruption on average when compared with their peers without such difficulties. Moreover, children who did not have the same access to parental support and to essential learning resources (quiet study space, internet access, devices) may have experienced more learning regression than those who had adequate support and resources. Special attention and care should be taken to ensure that these children are not left behind academically, socially or in terms of their overall personal development.

Chapter 1: Study Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic school closures on education for students, particularly those with special education needs. The chapter outlines the research rationale and objectives. Additionally, it introduces the research methodology, outlining the use of interviews and surveys and also gives a brief overview of the chapters to follow.

COVID-19 has had a major impact on society in general and had a very significant impact on education systems worldwide. This impact has not been the same for all students within the education system. In Ireland, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI, 2020) reported that students with special educational needs and those from disadvantaged backgrounds were disproportionately disadvantaged, compared to other cohorts of students. Evidence suggests that those from disadvantaged backgrounds may be more negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic than those with a higher socioeconomic status therefore suggesting that those with special education needs and social disadvantage may have been more negatively impacted than others. School closures and the need to transition from regular schooling to 'home-schooling' and then back to regular schooling again, will have impacted very significantly on some groups of students, such as autistic students, for whom consistency, routine and structure are so important. The loss of support, whether therapeutic support or Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support, will also have impacted on some students with SEN.

The impact on students is likely to have varied according to stage within the educational cycle, i.e., primary or post-primary school, and possibly according to school type, mainstream school or special school. The impact of COVID-19 will not have been confined to the individual students, but will have impacted on their families, because disability is not an individual issue, it is a family issue. Family-school partnerships could deteriorate due to withdrawal of support and pressures each party was under while also possibly being enhanced by the increased contact between home and school, through online teaching and learning. While there are national (Bray et al., 2021; Burke & Dempsey, 2021; ESRI, 2020; Flynn, et al., 2022; Keane et al., 2021; Mohan et al., 2021; O'Connor et al., 2021) and international studies (e.g. Devitt et al., 2020; Hammerstein et al., 2021) on the impact of COVID-19 school closures on students, there is no in-depth national study of the particular impact on students with SEN. The purpose of the current research was to describe the impact of COVID-19 on students with special educational needs and their families, and to explore the individual, family, and school factors that may have protected students and families or further exacerbated the problems arising. The process of returning to schools, post-pandemic, was also examined to identify models of good practice in this regard.

This study investigated the impact and implications of the pandemic on the education and wellbeing of children with SEN using two main approaches. The first approach was qualitative interviews with children, parents, and educators in primary and post-primary schools and in a primary school autism class and a special school. The second approach was an online survey of principals in primary, post-primary, and special schools, and a paper and pencil survey of children and teachers in primary schools. The results from the study are preceded by a literature review of the relevant publications on school closures, online learning, and the impact of the pandemic for children with SEN, their teachers, and families. The findings from this 2022 study have informed the second phase of the study (2022-2023) which investigates the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning and wellbeing of children with special educational needs. Specifically, the present study has helped highlight critical areas in need of further investigation. The findings warrant further exploration of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's wellbeing and their educational engagement and learning outcomes in the short and the long-term. While the present study focused on the impact during school closures and in the period immediately following closures the next phase of the study is better placed to focus on the lasting impacts the COVID-19 pandemic experiences may have had on students. The 2023 phase of the study further untangles areas of importance identified during the present study such as system changes in teachers' and schools' provision of supports to children with SEN, potential continued (dis)engagement of children with SEN in education and schooling, children's learning outcomes, and the long-term impact of the pandemic on children's wellbeing. As with the present stage of the study, the overarching aim of stage two of the study is to document information regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education and learning of SEN children, that can be used by the NCSE and other agencies to inform policy and best practice.

Chapter One provides an overview of the study and the structure of the report. The national and international literature on the impact of school closures on children's learning and wellbeing are outlined in Chapter Two. This review also includes literature relating to the impact of national disasters and what is termed 'summer loss'. Chapter Three outlines the methodology employed in the study. Subsequently, Chapters Four, Five and Six outline the findings of the empirical research with results presented thematically within each chapter. Chapter Four presents the findings related to experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic while Chapter Five outlines the findings from the period after schools reopened. Chapter Six: 'Looking Forward' outlines findings pertaining to participants' views on the future. Finally, Chapter Seven serves as the discussion and the conclusion chapter, offering implications for the future and outlining the next steps of the research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The following literature review summarises key international and national studies of children's learning and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, given that at the time of this review studies from the COVID-19 pandemic were sparse, this review also examines relevant literature from periods of school closure before the COVID-19 pandemic. The review takes a systemic approach in that views of key cohorts such as parents and teachers are also investigated. Thus, the international literature is reviewed to develop a comprehensive picture of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for children with special educational needs. As school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic are a relatively new phenomena, there is limited data on their impact on children. However, there is extensive literature available on the effects of other types of school closures, such as those due to national disasters or school closure during the summer break. The following section provides a summary of the most pertinent international studies relating to both the impact of school closures due to national disasters and also 'summer loss' or regression.

2.2 Impact on Educational and Wellbeing Outcomes due to National Disasters

Previous studies on the impact of disasters and the associated changes and policies on children's educational experiences are very relevant to a review of the potential impact of COVID-19 on the education and wellbeing of students with SEN. Research suggests that there can be ongoing stressors that can negatively impact mental health and educational outcomes for years following the initial trauma of a national disaster (Bonanno, Brewin, Kaniasty & La Greca, 2010; Bryant et al., 2014; Bryant et al., 2017). Children can be impacted by the specific challenges that are linked with various stages of emotional, physical, cognitive and social development (Anderson, 2005; Bonanno et al., 2010; Peek, 2008). Previous literature notes that one of the main potential disruptors for children is lack of access to school as school facilities may be destroyed or inaccessible and at times children are relocated (Casserly, 2006; Sacerdote, 2008; Vogel & Vernberg, 1993).

A study by Gibbs et al. (2019) noted that while the social disruption that is caused by natural disasters can interrupt educational opportunities for children little is known of the impact in the following years. In a large-scale quantitative study, Gibbs et al. (2019) examined the changes in the academic outcomes for children exposed to a major devastating bushfire in Australia. The authors made comparisons between children from high, medium and low disaster-affected primary schools and between the two- and four-year period since the bushfire occurred (N= 24,642; 9-12 years). The findings showed that results in reading and numeracy were lower in schools and year cohorts with higher levels of impact from the bushfire. The authors suggest that the findings highlight the extended period of impact on the academic outcomes of children following disasters of this scale. Gibbs et al. (2019) note that the severity of the disaster can undermine the capacity of societal systems and of public services to respond, often resulting in significant loss of infrastructure, resources and facilities (Gibbs et al., 2019). In another review of the potential impact of national disasters on students, Cauchemez et al. (2019) conducted a

multidisciplinary narrative review regarding the impact of the H1N1 influenza on children in the USA. The authors noted that the school closures used as interventions to mitigate flu pandemics can incur high economic and social costs. Berkman (2008) and Cauchemez et al. (2009) note that there are often adverse social consequences as a result of school closure policies and that this raises ethical considerations. In many countries there are social programmes in schools that are designed to support socially disadvantaged children who rely on school resources and facilities (Berkman, 2008; Cauchemez et al., 2009). For example, in the United States in 2004 the national school lunch programme as well as the breakfast programme delivered 29 million daily meals to children with half of those lunches being free and 10% at a reduced price. Cauchemez et al (2009) notes that when schools are closed during response to disasters there may be negative consequences for the children who depend on these school-based programmes.

Di Pietro (2018) investigated the prolonged impact of the L'Aquila earthquake on school dropout and time of graduation for a sample of impacted students ($N = 2,570$) using data from three waves (i.e. 2004, 2007 and 2011) of a national cross-sectional survey of student participants who were enrolled in a third level school in central Italy. The students were tracked for three to four years following enrolment and the study contrasted the difference between students from areas unaffected by the earthquake versus students from high impact areas. The authors also looked at the different outcomes for students who started their studies in 2007 (the year of the earthquake) versus those who started at the same institution in 2001 and 2004. The empirical results indicate that this disaster significantly reduced students' probability of graduating on time and also increased the probability of dropping out. Di Pietri (2018) suggests that, while post-disaster measures to re-establish education may have mitigated the impact, the disruption to the learning environment as well as the impact of the trauma experienced by students continued in the years following the disaster event and may have worsened their academic outcomes.

Watson, Loffredo, & McKee (2011) conducted a mixed methods survey with 515 university students from hurricane affected areas in Texas in the United States. Their results indicated that for all students the evacuation due to the storm led to ongoing difficulties with anxiety and poorer academic performance. The authors warn that there should be more emphasis on the post-disaster recovery and, that following natural disaster, students often experience more distress than what may be apparent. Boon et al. (2011) examined peer reviewed literature that addresses school disaster planning policies, with a focus on children with disabilities. Based on their findings, the authors suggested that children and young people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to disasters due to socioeconomic and health factors. They noted that many disaster policies are not inclusive, and there is a dearth of literature regarding the appropriate and inclusive school disaster policies for those with disabilities (Boon et al., 2011). This is supported by the literature, with many authors noting that children with disabilities are often excluded from disaster policies and protocols. This exclusion along with the vulnerability derived from socio-political and economic systems, limit access to necessary resources during and post-disasters (Boon et al., 2011; Mihaylov et al., 2004; Peek & Stough, 2010; Hans et al. 2008; Wisner et al. 2012).

2.3 Impact on Educational and Wellbeing Outcomes due to Summer Regression

Summer regression in learning is a well-documented phenomenon in the literature. On average, all students tend to show a slight decline across all subject areas over the summer (Borman et al., 2005; Cooper et al., 1996; Heyns, 1987; Murnane, 1975). Summer learning loss appears to be greater for students with SEN and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Cooper et al., 1996; Patton & Reschly, 2013). A comprehensive meta-analysis by Cooper et al. (1996) explored the extent to which students learn and/or forget academic knowledge and skills over the summer. They found that the test scores from students from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to drop between the spring and the Autumn, while middle-class and wealthy students retain the same scores (in maths) or show improvement (in reading). A longitudinal study in Baltimore (USA) followed a group of students from 1st grades until they turned 22 years old. They found that different summer experiences at 'home' (particularly low socio-economic status and school segregation) in the primary school (equivalent) years explained the test score gaps between those from higher and lower socio-economic status (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007; Entwisle, Alexander, Olson, 2000). They were able to demonstrate that low socio-economic status African American students performed as well or better than wealthier white students when school was in session (Entwisle & Alexander, 1996). Similar impacts with summer learning loss have been observed with students with SEN. For example, Menard and Wilson (2014) found that students with reading disabilities, when compared with students without RD, showed significant regression on scores of automatic reading. As a result, some (e.g., Cooper, 2003) have argued for ongoing instruction for students with SEN, as a standard, across the summer months to mitigate this impact.

Previous research indicates that the negative impacts incurred from school closures may be due to the loss of instructional time for students (Lavy, 2015). Lavy (2015) estimated how differing instructional times in different countries impacted learning. The findings indicate that just one more hour of instructional time per week over the academic year results in a nearly 6% of a standard deviation increase in test scores (Ibid). Based on this study, Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) estimate that a 12-week school closure due to COVID-19 could result in a 6% regression in learning for school-aged children. Similarly, Kuhfield et al. (2020) sought to estimate students' learning regression due to the pandemic. According to their findings, students will achieve between 63-68% of learning gains compared to those gains normally incurred in a typical school year (Ibid). However, it must be noted that there is substantial disagreement within the literature on the relationship between instructional time and academic performance (Sahlberg, 2015).

2.4 Distance Learning Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

Nevertheless, distance learning has been an instructional technique for many years now and several meta-analyses have shown no statistically significant differences in effectiveness between distance learning and in-person learning (Allen et al., 2004; Cavanaugh, 2001; Cavanaugh et al., 2004; Means et al., 2013; Zhao et al., 2005). Interestingly, the effectiveness of distance education appears to be unaffected by whether it is delivered through synchronous or asynchronous provision (Means et al., 2013). However, an important point to note is that most of the studies on distance education involve adult neurotypical learners (Cavanaugh, 2001; Cavanaugh et al., 2004; Means et al., 2013, Allen et al., 2004). Some research claims that success with distance education may be influenced by certain student factors such as academic achievement, self-esteem beliefs, technical access and skill level, responsibility or risk-taking orientation, and organisational and self-regulation skills (Roblyer & Marshall, 2002). These findings indicate that such student characteristics, particularly organisation and self-regulation, may have been critical for student success in online learning during the pandemic (Roblyer & Marshall, 2002).

Moreover, meta-analyses focusing on the effectiveness of distance education for primary and secondary students indicated that there are no statistically significant differences between distance education and face-to-face instruction (Cavanaugh, 2001; Cavanaugh et al., 2004). However, a limitation of these meta-analyses is that they did not include studies of students with special educational needs. Vasquez and Straub (2012) sought to address this by reviewing the relevant research and concluded that the six reviewed articles did not provide sufficient evidence of the effectiveness of distance education for students with special educational needs.

2.5 Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic School Closures on Students

2.5.1 Academic Outcomes

In Ireland, Mohan et al (2021) fielded an online survey of 236 principals two months after the first lockdown, from the 13th to the 29th of May 2020 given that there are 723 post-primary schools in Ireland the sample is highly representative of the national population of schools and accounts for 33 percent of all post-primary principals in Ireland (Ibid). While Mohan et al (2021) found that the impact of the pandemic was experienced by all students, it was more profound for key groups including the special education needs student population. Mohan et al (2021) highlight that those with SEN were particularly impacted by the closing of school buildings and the move to online/distance learning. Overall, Mohan et al (2021) reported that the motivation, engagement, and wellbeing of students with SEN was severely negatively impacted and that 89.3 percent of schools reported a detrimental impact on students with SEN. The following quote from Mohan et al (2021) illustrates the challenges experienced by some students with SEN:

Remote school has been a particular challenge for some students with additional needs... we run the risk of a minority of students never returning to school at all. The gap in their learning will be too great and the return may seem too daunting. Schoolteacher (Mohan et al, 2021, p. 68).

The Mohan et al (2021) study highlights that student engagement, attrition and regression are key associated challenges relating to these periods of lockdown (Ibid).

Overall, Mohan et al (2021) found that the move to online learning negatively impacted the entire student population participation and engagement. In addition, Mohan et al's (2021) findings reflect the findings of the study by Doyle (2020) and suggest that the negative impact of the move to online learning was more pronounced for students in areas of lower household income and in areas with less access to high-speed broadband as well as for those in DEIS schools. In addition, difficulties relating to learning from home arose, and the ability of schools to cover the practical elements of the curriculum was impeded (Mohan et al, 2021). Mohan et al (2021) also note that while their findings suggest that most students engaged during the lockdown, some struggled to engage, and others disengaged entirely. In relation to this, some schools reported an increase in self-regulated learning among students with high levels of intrinsic motivation (Mohan et al., 2021). However, this was not the case for students who were more extrinsically motivated, as many of their extrinsic motivators disappeared and school closures prevented them from meeting fellow students and staff members in person (Mohan et al., 2021). Importantly, Mohan et al (2021) suggest that working directly with students with special educational needs on creating daily routines was found to be helpful in increasing academic engagement during periods of remote learning.

Another study conducted in Ireland by Bray et al (2021) investigated the influence of student-teacher relationship and modes of online learning and teaching on student engagement during school closures. Bray et al (2020) analysed survey findings from 1,004 Irish post primary students in socio-economically disadvantaged areas across six-year groups in 15 Dublin-based schools. In addition, they concurrently examined findings from a survey of 723 teachers from 102 schools, representing 3% of the total post-primary population in Ireland. Bray et al (2021) found that meaningful connection between students and teachers is important for student engagement in remote learning. The findings suggest that teachers may be able to increase student engagement with innovative learning and teaching methods and by encouraging the development of students' key skills.

International research suggests that there was learning loss in relation to reading and mathematics amongst primary school pupils during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic (Engzell, Frey, & Verhagen, 2021; Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022). There are also findings which show a widening attainment gap between pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers (Di Pietri et al., 2020; Gaidelys, 2020). Studies in Ireland and internationally have also reported that younger children, children from marginalised families and those from lower SES backgrounds were most negatively affected by COVID-19-related school closures (Chaabane et al., 2021; Darmody, Smyth, & Russell, 2020; Oberg et al., 2022; Ramaiya et al., 2023; Rao & Fisher, 2021; Szulewicz, 2023). However, some evidence suggests that these negative impacts might not be as significant as thought in relation to academic attainment and learning generally across all populations. For example, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2021) has been assessing the reading achievement of fourth-class students internationally since 2001. Ireland first took part in 2011, and results for reading scores were relatively stable between 2016 (567) and 2021 (577), suggesting there may not have an impact on and a decrease in

literacy attainment due to the school closures during the pandemic to the same extent that was evident in other countries (Delaney et al., 2021). However, it must be noted that due to the COVID-19 restrictions during the PIRLS 2021 testing, the students were possibly at an advantage as they were tested later in the year when compared with the 2016 cohort. The students in the 2021 cohort were tested in the autumn 2021 rather than in spring 2021, meaning that they were older and had more time to mature and develop their reading and numeracy skills (Martin, et al 2008). Data from the previous 2016 PIRLS cycle show that younger students were at a small but significant disadvantage when compared with their peers of medium age. At the time of the 2021 testing, all Irish students were of medium age or above what was the medium age bracket in 2016. Students in the PIRLS study were categorised as being of a medium age if their age fell within one standard deviation (0.4 years) of the mean age (10.5 years), this accounted for approximately 65.7% of the students. While those falling more than one standard deviation below the average age (an age below 10.1 years) were classified as younger, comprising approximately 19.7% of the students. With this taken into consideration, it is thought that as the students tested for PIRLS in the autumn of 2021 in Ireland they may have performed higher on average than they would have if they had been tested in the previous spring. When compared internationally, Ireland performed very well in terms of overall reading performance. A total of 57 countries took part in the PIRLS 2021 study, with 14 countries including Ireland conducted testing half a year later than planned. Therefore great care should be taken when comparing these countries and those that tested earlier. All things considered, the findings do indicate that Ireland retained its place among the group of very high-achieving PIRLS countries.

Other large-scale assessments (e.g. Programme for International Students Assessment [PISA], 2022) have shown small (though not statistically significant) declines in Mathematics and English results, supporting the theory that there is stability in performance across time. In Ireland, PISA 2022 testing was conducted with a representative sample of 5,569 students, aged 15-16 years from 170 schools. When compared with results from 85 other Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development (OECD) countries, Ireland scored higher than the average in mathematics, reading and science. On average the 2022 results were lower when compared to the 2018 Irish cohort results in relation to mathematics and about the same in reading when compared with the 2018 results. However, in relation to science, the 2022 results were up when compared with 2018 results. While performance in science was close to the results from the 2015 study, they remained below the high mark set by Irish students in PISA in 2012. The trend in reading results from PISA 2012 to PISA 2022 were described as "flat", indicating neither a decline nor improvement. In contrast, mathematics performance was below that of any other assessment since 2012. However, the gap between low and high achievers does not appear to have changed and performance in mathematics dropped to a similar extent for both groups. The PISA 2022 study also included questionnaires asking students about their learning during the COVID-19 pandemic; 39% of students reported that they had problems with understanding assignments at least once a week; and 25% had difficulty finding someone who could assist them compared with the OECD averages of 34% and 24% respectively.

Like with the PIRLS 2021, there are caveats associated with the PISA 2022 findings due to disruptions caused by COVID-19 pandemic, for example, in Ireland student response rates decreased slightly between 2018 and 2022 and fell below the minimum target set by the technical standards of PISA. Additional analyses were conducted to determine whether bias would result from the differences in response rate. The findings indicated that due to fewer students partaking in the study in 2022 the resulting average scores may be slightly higher than they would be should the participant numbers have been higher. However, the authors emphasise that the bias associated with trends and cross-country comparisons may not impact results because other countries and past data are likely biased in the same direction (Delaney et al., 2021).

Further studies of student attainment include the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) assessments. During the first two weeks of May 2021, the National NAMER tests were administered to a representative sample of over 10,000 second and sixth class pupils in 188 Irish primary schools. According to the findings of the assessments, second class pupils' performance in English and sixth class pupils' performance in mathematics were consistent with their counterparts' results in 2014, indicating that this measurement of performance is also stable across time despite the COVID-19 disruptions (Kiniry et al., 2023). Similar to the PIRLS results, the NAMER results point to stability in reading and numeracy performance for children in Ireland. The findings did not show significant improvements in performance from 2014 to 2021, but it did show that a level of performance had been sustained. The findings also indicate that the achievement gap in results between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has remained stable and has not widened (Nelis et al., 2023). According to Nelis et al these findings are to be welcomed in the context of the COVID-19 disruptions and the impact of the disruption on pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The authors suggest that due to the extended time period between NAMER 2014 and NAMER 2021, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions regarding the impact of the pandemic on students' learning and performance. Additional representative testing conducted by the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (2019) [TIMSS], conducted in 64 countries also showed relative consistency in Ireland's performance prior to COVID-19. The findings from the 2023 assessment will be published in December 2024 and may shed more light on the impact of the pandemic on education. Importantly, the aforementioned research does not address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational experiences and outcomes of children with SEN but serves as context for the current study.

In the United Kingdom, Code et al. (2022) conducted semi structured interviews with 13 parents of autistic children aged 7-18 years who transitioned to a new school to investigate the impact of the lockdowns on their school transition experiences. Their findings suggest that some parents felt that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on aspects of school transition. However, for other parents, the same circumstances provided opportunities to view school transition in an improved and unique manner. The authors also note that parents reported that having preparatory materials such as video tours and maps helped introduce children to their new school. Moreover, parents of autistic children noted that there were benefits associated with reduced social contact and the retention of the primary school model whereby students remain in the same classroom and have consistent support (Ibid). Another study conducted in the UK found that remote learning and school closures negatively impact the learning and academic performance of children with SEN (Ofsted, 2021). The study investigated the views of 969 teachers and found that remote learning was associated with decreases in student engagement. Ofsted (2021) reported that

four in ten parents were worried about their children's focus on studying. Engagement efforts included the provision of online platforms to facilitate student-teacher dialogue, using peer-to-peer interaction to boost morale, and directly contacting students when their motivation appeared to be waning.

A literature review conducted during the nascent period of the pandemic by Doyle (2020) indicates that previous studies suggest that the lockdowns may have potentially increased the educational divide between some groups. According to Doyle (2020), a potential consequence of the school closures is a widening inequalities gap in education and skills. In addition, Doyle (2020) notes that in *Growing Up in Ireland*, young people from lower socio-economic status (SES) households on average have poorer educational outcomes than those with higher SES. Doyle (2020) notes that while schools do not fully eradicate the gaps in learning associated with SES they are effective in reducing the size of the effects and thus lockdowns may increase the gap. Given that the gap in education and skills was present for those with SEN before the school closures, Doyle suggests that school closures could have potentially widened this gap (Doyle, 2020; Means et al., 2013; Vasquez and Straub, 2012).

2.5.2. Impacts on Social and Emotional Functioning

In Ireland in the spring of 2021, Keane et al (2021) conducted focus groups with marginalised young people investigating their emotional and social wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 13 young people including those from ethnic minority groups, those attending alternative educational providers and the Foróige youth organisation were interviewed. Keane et al (2021) found that young people reported being both bored and lonely during the lockdowns and they noted that young people reported missing friends as well as extended family. In addition, young people reported having missed out on many normal activities and experiencing uncertainty about the future. According to their findings the young people disliked online schooling and found it difficult to manage distractions and stay motivated at home (Ibid). Furthermore, Keane et al (2021) noted that participants reported feeling self-conscious on camera and being socially isolated from peers with no opportunity for informal connection. However, participants also reported positives associated with the pandemic such as there being less pressure to achieve and having more time with family.

In addition, Bray et al (2020) examined survey data from over 1,000 post primary students from 15 mainstream schools in the greater Dublin area to investigate the impact of the lockdowns on students' reported social and emotional wellbeing. Bray et al (2020) found that students reported a decline in overall wellbeing; the survey results indicated lower scores on a wellbeing measure when compared to scores from the same cohort in 2019. In addition, Bray et al (2020) noted that students reported being less connected and having fewer communications with their peers during lockdown. They also found that those who reported negative relationships with their teachers were more likely to experience lower levels of wellbeing during the lockdown as were those with less parental involvement in their schoolwork (Bray et al., 2020).

Another study in Ireland conducted by Flynn et al. (2022) investigated the impact of the return to school for all students following these lockdowns. The authors conducted an intensive ecological momentary analysis exploration of the affective wellbeing, coping methods, and experiences of 82 mainstream second-level students. According to their findings participants experienced more positive than negative events and had moderate to high levels of positive affect and perceived coping ability upon their return to school. However, the authors also note that some students may need targeted support, particularly those with pre-existing psychological difficulties. The authors stress the need for schools to prioritise the psychological recovery of students with an emphasis on re-establishing a sense of connectedness within the school environment. Flynn et al (2022) highlight that schools play a vital role in nurturing the psychological recovery of students and mitigating the negative psychosocial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the UK, Canning and Robinson (2021) investigated the experiences of eight families of autistic children and those with complex needs aged between 5 and 13 years. The research was conducted via remote interviews during 2020 when the UK government message was 'stay home, stay safe' (Canning & Robinson, 2021). According to Canning and Robinson's findings, meetings with agencies took place within the home, the boundaries between the home and clinical settings were blurred. Thus, the participants reported that the home, formerly perceived as a haven, felt invaded and this negatively impacted the social and emotional wellbeing of the children. The authors highlight that for children with SEN/SEND/autism the home and the school environment are viewed as very separate spaces which have different boundaries, functions, and expectations and that the integrity of these boundaries are important for their wellbeing.

In Japan, Kawaoka, Ohashi, Fukuhara, Asai, Imaeda & Saitoh (2022) recruited a sample of parents whose children were described as autistic, having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and/or an intellectual disorder. The 121 children were aged between 6 and 14 years and their parents completed a postal questionnaire before and after school closures. According to their findings, externalising and aggressive behaviours increased in all children regardless of the nature of their special education needs. In view of this fact, the authors argued that children with neurodevelopmental disorders need a stable life and that the students and their families require more supports (Kawaoka et al., 2022).

In addition, Tokatly et al (2021) conducted telephone interviews with 31 parents of autistic children in Israel. The findings suggest that autistic children experienced a challenging change in routine and there was a lack of available special education services. A frequently mentioned challenge was the lack of means and space for children to exert energy, resulting in various degrees of psychomotor agitation (Ibid). The parents also identified challenges relating to sleep and food intake with their autistic children. The authors concluded that the children's success or failure was related to how well their parents coped. Consequently, Tokatly et al (2021) argued that the best way to support autistic children is to provide a strong support system to their parents.

A similar recommendation emerged from a Slovak study by Polonyiova et al (2021) as all parents (N = 332), including those of typically developing children, experienced heightened levels of anxiety, stress, and depression in the second lockdown. Their findings suggest that this was especially the case for parents of autistic children as the children's behaviour changed significantly between wave one and wave two of the COVID-19 pandemic with internalising behaviours increasing. The authors suggest that while all families were negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact on families with autistic children was more severe the impact on families with autistic children was more severe when compared with typically developing children (Polonyiova et al, 2021). Since parental depression, anxiety, and stress were positively related to the behaviour of both autistic and neurotypical children, the authors argued for the provision of support to parents as well as to children (Polonyiova et al., 2021).

Furthermore, in a systematic literature review of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on autistic children, Ahmed, et al (2022) reported that 82.7% of families and caregivers of autistic children (544 out of 658) faced challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the authors suggest that behavioural issues in children and adolescents significantly increased with half (51.9%) of the 1004 autistic individuals presenting with behavioural changes. These issues included conduct problems, emotional issues, aggression, and hyperactivity. Increased anxiety and difficulties in managing emotions were also reported in some studies (Ahmed, et al (2022). Highlighting the social and emotional challenges experienced by children with SEN during this period (Ibid).

In addition, an online survey investigating social wellbeing was completed by 504 parents in the UK of young people with special educational needs at four points in time between March 2020 and October 2020 (Toseeb, 2020). As lockdown progressed, young people with special educational needs were more likely to be victimised (picked on) by their siblings. However, there was no change in how frequently young people with special educational needs were perpetrators of the victimisation of their siblings (Ibid). Toseeb (2020) suggests that given these findings there is a need to consider siblings and their relationships in planning and providing support for children with special educational needs during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

More recently, in the United Kingdom, Fox, et al (2022) conducted interviews with 14 parents of autistic children regarding the social wellbeing of their children during COVID-19. Findings indicate that due to the pandemic, the children had limited opportunities to socialise, and in some cases, this had a negative impact on the children's behaviour. The authors suggest that parents were worried about the effect of lockdown on their children's social skills as the students were described by their parents as being more insular. Moreover, Fox et al (2022) reported that the COVID-19 lockdowns had a negative impact on the social wellbeing of some autistic students, as they experienced reduced contact with their friends. Others were reported to have had positive to neutral experiences regarding their friendships and welcomed the break from social interaction with peers. Thus, the authors highlight that the school experiences of autistic children can be heterogeneous in nature and stress the need for a personalised approach to support positive peer to peer relationships (Fox et al., 2022).

However, research suggests that students' social wellbeing may be overlooked in crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Hurwitz, et al 2022). In a mixed methods study by Hurwitz

et al., (2022) in the United States, 106 teachers, behaviour specialists from 40 school districts completed a survey regarding the modifications they were making to autistic students' individualised education programmes. Their findings suggest that due to the shorter days and the changed schedules, special educators were less able to work on behavioural goals, to track student progress or to help students interact socially. Consequently, social goals were eliminated in some cases. The findings suggest that there was a renewed appreciation of the importance of collaboration with parents who helped deliver the interventions and monitor progress at home (Hurwitz, et al 2022). Hurwitz et al (2020) also note that while some autistic students with more complex needs struggled, others preferred virtual instruction to in person learning.

These findings from both Ireland as well as the international literature illustrate the complex impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social and emotional wellbeing of young people with SEN.

2.5.3 Impact on Mental Health

Mental health has also been a focus of research regarding the impact of the pandemic on students with SEN. In Ireland, O'Sullivan, et al (2020) interviewed 48 families during the COVID-19 pandemic to understand the pandemic's impact on the mental health of children with SEN. Higher levels of stress, depression, and anxiety were reported. The authors suggest that autistic children and adolescents faced mental health challenges attributable to the changes in routine necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ibid).

Research also suggests that while some children with SEN understood why their routines and circumstances changed, others did not, and this led to distress, often seen as an increase in challenging behaviours (Asbury et al., 2021). Asbury et al., (2021) suggest that the abrupt closure of schools caused mental health challenges for children with special educational needs. The factors contributing to poor mental health included missing peers, and activities, as well as experiencing confusion. The authors also noted that children's poor mental health impacted their physical health, as their anxiety levels impaired their ability to look after themselves.

Moreover, in the UK, Toseeb, et al. (2020) surveyed 339 parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities, the majority of whom were parents of autistic children. The parents completed an online survey during the first two months of social distancing in the United Kingdom from March to May 2020. Overall, the parents reported considerable differences and varied levels of satisfaction with the degree of mental health support received. Thus, the authors argued for clear routines and targeted mental health supports in facilitating the return to school of children with special educational needs and disabilities (Toseeb et al., 2020). In follow up research, Asbury and Toseeb (2022) recorded that parents reported their children to have higher levels of depression and anxiety if their children were autistic compared to children and young people in other categories of special educational need. According to the study findings, between March and October 2020, children's worry and psychological distress were always to the fore. Asbury's and Toseeb (2022) also found that the degree of worry exhibited by autistic children remained stable across time but decreased among those with other forms of special educational needs and disabilities. However, a minority of autistic children benefited from not having to attend school in terms of their wellbeing, as there were fewer stressors in the home environment.

Students with ADHD were the focus of a study by Hatton & Powell (2022) involving interviews with one parent and their child, and teaching staff in the UK (N=9). Thematic analysis led to the identification of three main themes namely anxiety caused by at home learning, changes in social interaction and academic impact of at home learning. Social anxiety was perceived to be a significant problem in that not all schools permitted students with ADHD to take advantage of at home learning, suggesting perhaps that they did not recognize the students' needs. The teachers interviewed also reported challenges for students with at-home learning, including difficulties with space, distraction and lack of one-on-one instruction. Some of the teachers noted that many students do not have the necessary resources to learn at home and that this impairs the quality of education when compared to in-person learning. Mete Yesil et al (2021) conducted a descriptive study on the impact of the pandemic on young children with SEN (N = 114) of 4 -6 years. The children's mothers recorded that during lockdowns, their children were bored (61%), happy (32%), angry (24%), sad (27%), restless 22%), confused (16%), excited (12%), anxious (9%) and frightened (3%). In a similar vein, Berasategi Sancho et al. (2021) noted that children with special educational needs in the Basque region from 2-12 years in felt a greater degree of anger, nervousness, sadness and cried more than usual (Berasategi Sancho et al., 2021).

Asbury et al (2021) invited parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities in Britain to describe the impact (if any) of the pandemic on the health of their child. Descriptions of loss, worry and changes in mood and behaviour were elicited. Some parents felt overwhelmed by the change in circumstances while a minority of parents noted that the pandemic had little impact on the mental health of family members and in some cases led to improvements. In an Australian study, Pellicano, et al, (2022) conducted 144 qualitative interviews with autistic adults, parents of autistic children, autistic parents, and autistic young people. A key finding was the serious and damaging impact of social isolation on autistic people's mental health and subjective wellbeing. Pellicano et al (2022) concluded that autistic people need support so that they can keep socializing, even in challenging times such as in a pandemic. In the Netherlands, Hornstra, et al. (2021) investigated the views of 470 parents in their study of home-schooling on secondary school mainstream students (children's average age was 14.23 years). Parents reported that their children's motivation and wellbeing decreased during lockdown. However, the authors observed that these declines were not as pronounced for gifted children and those with behavioural issues (Hornstra, et al., 2021).

2.6 Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic School Closures on Parents

2.6.1 Parents' Experience of School Closures

Just as schools had to quickly adapt to teaching remotely, parents had to adapt to supporting their child's learning at home. Ludgate, Mears & Blackburn (2022) stated that little attention has been paid to the possible benefits of families engaged in home-schooling. They ascertained the views of 71 parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities in England by means of an online survey. The authors highlighted the possibilities for creative and inclusive learning practices as well as opportunities for family bonding. The authors highlighted the possibilities for creative and inclusive learning practices as well as opportunities for family bonding. Ludgate, Mears & Blackburn (2022) also note that homeschooling presented many challenges for parents. Reporting

that parents described challenges with changes in routine, expectations from school, children's behavioural changes and ability to cope with change and balancing parent and child needs in terms of work and education. Ludgate, Mears and Blackburn (2022) outline that while the success stories enable a greater understanding of the strengths of increased family time for some families the school closures caused an increased level of challenge for parents and children alike.

Nusser (2021) concentrated on the experiences of parents of students with special educational needs as well as those with low levels of attainment at the end of primary schooling in Germany. Using longitudinal data as well as an online survey, Nusser (2021) solicited the responses of 1,452 parents of students attending mainstream secondary school. Interestingly, half of the students (49.54%) resided in households which were described as having an academic background. Nusser observed that the sample size for students with special educational needs was rather small. The parents of students with special educational needs as well as the parents of low achieving students reported similar challenges to other parents. However, there were differences observed in the level of satisfaction expressed with the support provided by the school and the amount of time devoted to learning each week. The perceived challenges associated with school closures were reduced when parents felt they could help their children with schoolwork and were satisfied with the support provided by the schools.

2.6.2 Contact with Schools and Communication Difficulties

Previous research suggests that a major issue for parents during school closures was the level of communication they received from schools. Lipkin & Crepeau-Hobson (2022) interviewed 15 parents of children with special educational needs. Parents expressed frustration over receiving vague email updates for "fear of over promising and under delivering" (Lipkin & Crepeau-Hobson, 2022, p. 6), necessitating follow up calls by the parents. Almost half of all parents were frustrated by the need to learn and use different online platforms. Many parents felt that their voices were not heard during this period. They discussed the challenges of not being included in planning for their children. Many parents highlighted the importance of well- established, pre-pandemic supportive relationships with teachers, and other professionals as these individuals helped them navigate the changed circumstances (Lipkin & Crepeau-Hobson, 2022).

Research by Couper-Kenney and Riddell (2021) suggests that contact with the schools varied with most families being able to contact the schools when necessary. However, Couper-Kenney and Riddell (2021) reported that many parents in Scotland felt that the children would have benefited from increased school contact. In a study in Northern Ireland by O'Connor et al. (2021) eight in ten parents (83%) of children with special educational needs reported receiving regular communication from school. Greenway and Eaton-Thomas (2020) recorded that six in ten parents (62%) in the UK, had been contacted by their children's school. More than two-thirds (68 per cent) reported receiving educational resources from the school although a significant minority (42% of parents) were dissatisfied with the resources received. Many parents considered the resources inappropriate, as they were not tailored to their children's level, or the material was not differentiated. The parents highlighted the fact that they were not given clear guidance on how to use the materials, and/or not having the resources at home to utilise the materials properly.

Parental dissatisfaction was also expressed in a study by Couper-Kenney and Riddell (2021) with parents feeling that schools did not properly prepare them for home-schooling. The parents would have appreciated being taught what skills, strategies, and tools they could use to educate their children at home. Couper-Kenney and Riddell (2021) noted that parents were given work that was of an inappropriate level for the children. The parents felt disappointed by the apparent lack of knowledge of their children.

A minority of parents (23 per cent) in a study by O'Connor et al (2021) felt confident in their ability to home-school their child. However, eight in ten parents felt unprepared for home-schooling their children (Greenway and Eaton-Thomas, 2020). These feelings were attributed to "not being up to the job," as well as the fact that parents lacked knowledge about their children's needs. Other issues causing concern were the provision of insufficient resources, lacking sufficient time to prepare and not knowing how to manage their children's behaviour (Greenway and Eaton-Thomas, 2020).

2.6.3 Time Spent by Parents in Home-Schooling their Children

Nusser's (2021) study compared children with and without special educational needs in Germany. Parents reported that students with special educational needs spent an average of 35 hours per week on learning and were assisted by parents for 11 hours per week. This contrasted with children without special educational needs who were reported to spend 16 hours per week on learning and whose parents helped them for five hours weekly. According to Greenway and Eaton-Thomas (2020), most parents (52%) allocated between 1-2 hours for home-schooling daily, although a quarter of the parents were involved for 3-4 hours each day. A minority (6%) spent 5 hours or more in home-schooling while approximately a tenth of parents (11%) did not engage in home-schooling. Most parents were flexible in the approach adopted while a third indicated that lessons and activities were unplanned.

O'Connor et al. (2021) identified that almost a fifth of parents had to take time off work to home-school their child. Of those working, four in ten parents struggled to manage the children's education alongside their work. The biggest challenges were managing their child's health and behavioural needs while trying to work, dealing with interruptions to work, and organising a schedule for themselves. Parents also struggled to home-school their children with special educational needs when they had other children. Parents of multiple children were more likely to experience difficulties managing their children's health and behavioural needs and to have difficulties maintaining a routine and balancing childcare with work. Similarly, Sonnenschein et al. (2022) noted that six in ten parents of students currently receiving special education services observed that their children received fewer special education hours once the schools closed. They reported that their children were unable to participate in virtual learning without significant adult support. However, due to work and caring commitments, parents were often unable to provide such support. Parents were caught balancing several responsibilities at once, between home-schooling, work, and family commitments. Generally, parents felt negatively towards home-schooling (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020; O'Connor et al., 2021).

Some studies suggest that parents of children with disabilities can often be dissatisfied with distance learning (Sonnenschein et al., 2022). The parents frequently reported that distance learning for children with special needs “just doesn’t work” (Sonnenschein et al., 2022, p. 8). They want better instructions for completing the work, more modifications to assignments and flexible deadlines. However, many parents felt the only option was a return to school or the provision of an in-home tutor. According to findings by Greenway & Eaton-Thomas (2020) almost three-quarters (71%) of parents with children with special educational needs would not consider undertaking home-schooling in the future.

2.6.4 Effects of School Closures on Parents’ Mental Health and Well-Being

In some studies, parents talked about the positive impacts of home-schooling on their wellbeing. These parents reported feeling happy to spend more time with their children and described their experiences together as enjoyable. The benefits of home-schooling included spending more time together, learning more about their children, listening and talking to each other more, enjoying new activities together, and learning together (O’Connor et al., 2021). However, in other studies, parents also mentioned the negative impact of school closures on their wellbeing, with four in ten parents (41%) reporting that home-schooling had caused them increased stress (Greenway and Eaton-Thomas, 2020). These parents in the United Kingdom (UK) reported feeling more tired and anxious, having less patience, and being more irritable, which worsened family relationships. Parents felt guilty and inadequate. Shaw and Shaw (2021) were also interested in parents’ experiences in the UK during the first and second lockdown. Of the 141 participants who responded to an online survey, approximately one third (34.1 per cent) reported that school closures had a negative effect on their mental health.

Sideropoulos et al. (2022) involved 402 parents of individuals with special educational needs and disabilities including parents of typically developing children in a further UK study. An online survey was used to solicit details of their experiences with approximately six in ten respondents having a university degree (58.45%). Data collection occurred at three points in time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Anxiety increased across all points in time. However, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the well-being of those with special educational needs and disabilities differently to those of the typically developing siblings. The parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities had higher levels of reported worries attributable to a lack of structure across the three points in time. They were concerned about the loss of support because of the closure of schools and activity centres.

Ren et al. (2020) indicated that parents of children with special educational needs in Guangdong Province, in China (n=1451) experienced mental and behavioural problems themselves as well as parenting stress. Social support negatively predicted parents’ anxiety. By contrast, parental stress and parental mental problems were positively predictive of parents’ state anxiety, suggesting that the parents themselves needed psychological support.

2.7 Impacts of School Closures on Teachers

Mohan et al. (2020) conducted a mixed methods study, involving a survey (n = 236 educators) and case studies (N = 10 schools), that investigated distance education in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of the quality of distance education, most schools reported that distance learning was like, or worse, than standard practice with most teachers able to adapt (Mohan et al., 2020). Teachers reported that drawing on their teaching experience and contact with fellow teachers were helpful in the transition to online teaching. Teachers also stressed the importance of planning and organising, communication, and staff support in aiding the transition process. Access to high-speed internet and ICT equipment presented as a challenge for students and teachers alike and was exacerbated in DEIS schools and for lower-income students.

Similar findings were reported in the UK by Ofsted (2021) where almost half of the teachers (49 per cent) struggled to align the curriculum with remote learning. According to the teachers, mathematics and science were more difficult to teach remotely. It was more challenging to engage students in learning and in offering them feedback. Since teachers were not physically in the classroom, they were inhibited in terms of observing student misunderstanding or confusion. They adapted their feedback practices by pre-empting student misconceptions before the lesson and communicating with students through chat rooms and calls. They also employed digital exercise books, which permitted teachers to comment on and edit students' work. Many teachers reported learning more about their students with special educational needs. Other positive outcomes of the pandemic reported by teachers included better relationships and more collaboration with their students' families (Hurwitz et al., 2021; Steed et al., 2021). Others claimed that the pandemic facilitated the individualisation of the curriculum for the students (Steed et al., 2021).

Special educators reported many barriers in adapting to remote provision. Teachers in the United States had a lack of professional education and insufficient guidance on how to deliver remote education (Hurwitz et al., 2021; Steed et al., 2021). There was a steep learning curve in delivering virtually (Steed et al., 2021), and difficulties were experienced in communicating with students (Simó-Pinatella et al., 2021). Teachers reported that parents struggled to understand the function of children's behaviour (Simó-Pinatella et al., 2021) and to provide the same quality of assistance and service the children previously received in school (Steed et al., 2021). Delivering a virtual service was extremely difficult for students with higher support needs (Hurwitz et al., 2021).

Among the novel adaptations adopted, Aloizou et al. (2021) in a case study of three schools in Greece used a video conferencing and online gaming system to teach children with special educational needs remotely during the pandemic. Teachers showed children how to use the game-based activity, then the children played the game on their devices, before assigning more game-based activities for asynchronous learning at home. The children did better than expected on achieving their learning goals and there was a dramatic increase in motivation and attention skills. The children were more cooperative with their teachers. Kim and Fienup (2021) evaluated an intervention based on task analysis and virtual reward to increase the engagement of three eight-year-old students with special educational needs. A preference assessment was conducted

to determine the students' preferred reward. The children were rewarded if they completed all the daily assigned activities. Before the intervention, the students completed an average of 1.5 (range 0.5-1.5) activities a day. After the intervention the students completed an average of 4.7 (range 4.6-4.8) activities per day. Kim and Fienup (2021) suggest that virtual rewards can help in increasing school engagement for children with special educational needs.

2.8 Summary

The international research reviewed here has recorded a set of mainly negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning and wellbeing of children with SEN, their families, and teachers, similar to findings reported regarding the mainstream school population. Parents reported increased experiences of stress, challenges with home-school communication, feeling underprepared for homeschooling their children, and needing to take time off from work to help their child learn. However, some parents also enjoyed the opportunity to spend more time with their children when schools were closed. The research on children found declines in school participation for children with SEN, and increases in social, emotional, and behavioural problems during and after the school closure period. Being home schooled also resulted in a loss of physical activity for some children, and increased mistreatment from siblings. Parents have reported declines in motivation, and wellbeing, and increased depression and anxiety, for their children with SEN across school closures and lockdowns. Finally, teachers have reported struggling to adapt the curriculum to online instruction, with limited resources and supports. However, some teachers also reported improved relationships with families of children with SEN due to increased attention to this population during the school closure period. Although across parent, child, and teacher groups there have been some positive impacts recorded, the overwhelming message from the evidence base is that school closures resulted in barriers to learning and reductions in wellbeing for this vulnerable group.

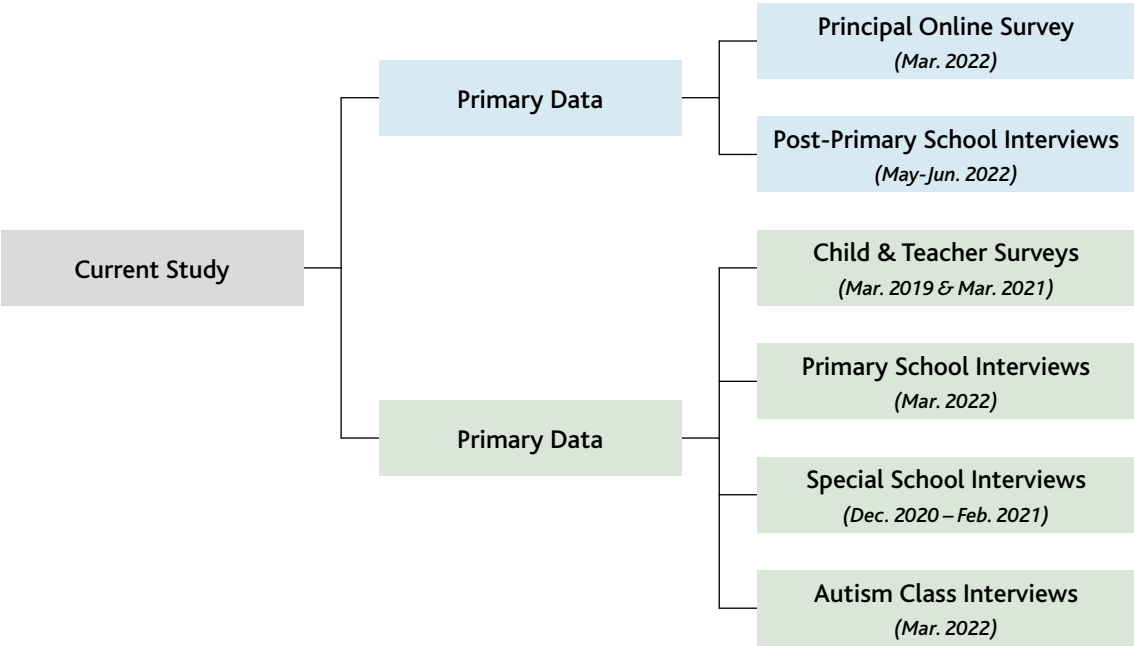
Chapter 3: Study Methodology

3.1 Overview of the Study Design

This chapter presents an overview of the study design which employed a mixed methods approach utilising both primary and secondary data sources. The chapter outlines the collection methods for both the primary and the secondary data, which included an online principal survey, in-depth interviews and data from the Children’s School Lives (CSL) study. Following this the study procedures for each primary data source are detailed along with participant selection criteria. Additionally, the chapter discusses the secondary CSL Child and Teacher surveys and case study school interviews with participants from primary, and special school and autism classes. A summary of demographics and data collection procedures and timelines is provided offering an overview of the diverse and comprehensive sampling involved in this study.

The study was mixed-methods and utilised both primary and secondary data sources to ascertain the perceptions of educators, parents, and children on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning and wellbeing of children with SEN. The primary data were collected specifically for this study and include an online principal survey and post-primary school interviews. The secondary data were collected as part of the NCCA funded Children’s School Lives (CSL) study with primary schools and were analysed according to the research questions of this project. The secondary data included the CSL Child and Teacher on Child Surveys and interviews in primary schools, one special school, and one autism class. Figure 2 shows a representation of the different data sources in the project and the time periods when each data source was collected.

Figure 2. Primary and Secondary Data Sources



The Children's School Lives (CSL) Study

The secondary data for this project comes from the Children's School Lives (CSL) Study, which is Ireland's national cohort study of primary schooling. CSL is a mixed-methods study that involves a national study of children across 189 primary schools and more in-depth research in 13 case study primary schools. The CSL study contains two cohorts. Starting in 2019, Cohort A is tracked from preschool to 2nd class and Cohort B is tracked from 2nd Class to 1st Year of secondary school.

This project utilises data from the child and teacher surveys, which were part of the national study, and from primary school, special school, and autism class interviews, which were part of the in-depth case studies.

3.2 Study Procedures

3.2.1 Primary Data Sources

Principal Online Survey

Principals of special schools, post-primary schools, and primary schools were invited to respond to an online survey in March 2022. All post-primary (N = 728) and special schools (N = 137) registered with the Department of Education were emailed with an invitation to respond to the survey. Furthermore, the 175 primary schools recruited into CSL were also emailed with an invitation to the principal online survey. The online principal survey for this study was added as a module to the pre-existing CSL principal survey.

The principal surveys (see Appendix 2) were administered to all participant groups via Qualtrics and contained five chapters: (1) contact details, (2) principal characteristics, (3) school characteristics, (4) pedagogy and curriculum, and (5) impact of COVID-19 on education of children with SEN.

Post-Primary School Interviews

Interviews with four post-primary schools were conducted between May and June 2022. Schools were selected based on demographic factors (e.g., DEIS, urban/rural, Educate Together/Community, co-educational, size) from the Department of Education register of schools. The sample size was determined in relation to what was feasible within the budget and time constraints of the school year.

Each school identified a representative group of five students with SEN aged between 13 and 18 (to include specific, general learning, physical difficulty, neuro-diverse conditions and health and rare diseases) from the Special Education Register. Students were only eligible to participate if they were on this register. The Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) sent information letters and consent/assent forms to the parents and students of this representative sample.

To gain insight into the views of school staff who had worked with students with SEN, a representative sample of 8 staff per school (N = 32) who had a key role in supporting students with SEN over the past two years were also included. Data were collected through researcher-designed interview schedules with principals, special education coordinators/special education teachers, special needs assistants, parents, and students with SEN.

Interview schedules (see Appendix 3) differed according to participant type, but all had the same main themes: (1) demographic Information, (2) education, learning, and support during school closures, (3) wellbeing during school closures, (4) learning and education during school reopening, (5) wellbeing during school reopening, and (6) long-term impacts. The interview schedules were piloted with practitioners (principal, special education teacher, special needs assistant, educational psychologist) and a student with SEN and their parents. Interviews were conducted in person in the school or remotely by telephone or via the online platform Zoom, depending on the preference of the participant. With written consent/assent, interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

3.2.2 Secondary Data Sources

Child and Teacher Survey

As part of the CSL study, children in primary schools and their teachers were visited in March 2019 and March 2021 by fieldworkers. The children were asked to complete a child survey in the form of a workbook containing games and questions about their experiences of school. Selected parts of the workbook were used in the current study (see Appendix 4a).

The children's classroom teachers were also asked to complete a teacher on child survey (see Appendix 4b), regarding each child who had parental approval to participate in the study. In this report we present analysis of the information reported by teachers on children's special educational needs, and social, emotional, and behavioural functioning.

Primary School, Special School, and Autism Class Interviews

The interviews with the primary schools, special school, and autism class parents and staff were conducted as part of the CSL study. These data were collected in March 2022 and represent the experiences of those teaching children in junior infants (Cohort A) and 3rd Class (Cohort B) during the lockdown.

Interviews were also conducted in March 2022 with parents and school staff in an autism classroom within a primary school in the CSL study. Only the data related to the lockdown were analysed for this study.

Interviews in the special school were also conducted as part of the CSL study. Parents of children in the special school and school staff were interviewed online between December 2020 and February 2021. Only the data related to the lockdown was analysed for this study.

3.3 Participants

3.3.1 Principal Online Survey

School Characteristics

A total of 326 primary, post-primary and special schools were represented as part of the principal survey. Of these, 31.1% (N = 84) were DEIS schools and 28.5% (N = 78) were in rural areas (<1,500 inhabitants in local area). Fifty-six were special schools, with most having a designation of mild general learning difficulties and moderate learning difficulties. More information about the schools involved in the ICOSSEN principal survey is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. School and participant characteristics

School Characteristics	n	% Within Characteristic
School type		
Primary school	122	37.40%
Post-primary school	148	45.40%
Special school	56	17.20%
DEIS status		
Non-DEIS	186	68.90%
DEIS Band 1	37	13.70%
DEIS Band 2	24	8.90%
DEIS Rural	23	8.50%
School size		
<100 students	84	25.80%
100-199 students	54	16.60%
200-299 students	39	12.00%
300-399 students	24	7.40%
400-499 students	27	8.30%
500-599 students	23	7.10%
600-699 students	24	7.40%
700-799 students	17	5.20%
800+ students	27	8.30%

School Characteristics	n	% Within Characteristic
School type		
Special school type		
Autism school	9	16.10%
Moderate severe profound autism school	12	21.40%
Mild general learning disability school	13	23.20%
Moderate general learning disability school	4	7.10%
Profound learning disability school	3	5.40%
Physical disability school (visual and hearing)	5	8.90%
Social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties school	6	10.70%
Hospital/medical school	2	3.60%
Other special school designation	2	3.60%

Participant group	Surveys		Interviews	
	Schools	Participants	Schools	Participants
CSL sample				
Primary	175			
Children		4,585	14	27
Parents			14	28
Teachers – classroom			14	28
Principals			14	14
ICOSEN sample				
Post-Primary	148			
Children			3	12
Parents			3	12
Teachers/SET			3	6
SENCO			3	3
SNA			3	6
Principals		148	3	3
Special School	56			
Children			1	0
Parents			1	4
Teachers/SET			1	2
SNA			1	2

Participant group	Surveys		Interviews	
	Schools	Participants	Schools	Participants
Principals		56	1	1
Primary School Special Class	122			
Children			1	6
Parents			1	6
Teachers/SET			1	2
SNA			1	2
Principals		122	1	1
Children	175	4,585		18
Parents				18
Teachers/SET				10
SENCO				3
SNA				10
Principals	326	326		7
Total	326	4,911	19	66

Participant Characteristics

Of the 326 principals who completed the principal survey, 65.3% ($n = 213$) identified as female. Most principals were between 46 and 55 years of age (45%, $n = 147$), with primary school principals tending to be younger than post-primary and special school principals (See Table A1 and Figure A1 in the appendix.)

In terms of education, most principals had a post-graduate diploma (31.3%, $n = 102$) or master's degree (47.2%, $n = 154$), with 2.1% ($n = 7$) indicating that they had completed a doctoral degree. On average, post-primary school principals tended to have the highest educational levels followed by special school principals (See Figure A2 in the appendix).

Principals were also asked about their highest qualification regarding special educational needs. Many primary and post-primary school principals had completed modules on special needs as part of a degree or professional development programme (28.7%, $n = 35$ and 28.4%, $n = 42$ respectively) but about half of primary and post-primary school principals had no qualifications in special needs 50%, $n = 61$ and 52.7%, $n = 78$ respectively) (See Figure A3 in the appendix).

During the school closures, most schools used some form of remote teaching. To gain a sense of how prepared schools were for this transition, we asked principals about their highest qualification in digital technologies. Mostly, principals across the three school types had no training in terms of digital educational technologies (46.0%, $n = 150$) or had only completed

some relevant modules (37.7%, $n = 123$). (See Figure A4 in the appendix).

3.3.2 Child and Teacher Survey

School Characteristics

Secondary data representing 270 individual classes from 175 primary schools were sourced from the Children's School Lives (CSL) study for the purposes of the ICOSSEN project. Of these schools, 36.0% ($n = 64$) were DEIS schools, 53.7% ($n = 145$) were in rural areas and 46.3% ($n = 125$) were in urban areas. The majority (63.4%, $n = 111$) of these schools had 101 to 400 students on roll. Further information about the sample of CSL schools included in this study is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. School characteristics (CSL Child & Teacher on Child Survey)

CSL School Characteristics	Total ($N = 175$)		CSL Cohort A ($n = 74$)		CSL Cohort B ($n = 99$)	
	N	%	n	%	n	%
DEIS Status						
Non-DEIS	111	63.4	49	66.2	62	63.0%
DEIS	64	36.6	27	36.4	37	37.0%
School Size						
Small (< 100 students)	49	28.0%	17	22.4%	32	32.3%
Medium (100-400 students)	111	63.4%	51	67.1%	60	60.6%
Large (401+ students)	15	8.6%	8	10.5%	7	7.1%

Participants

Responses from 4,585 children were included as part of the secondary data analysis. 2,300 of these were from the CSL Cohort A sample, while the remaining 2,285 were part of the CSL Cohort B sample. Both samples were well-balanced for gender, with female children representing 50% ($n = 1,150$) of the Cohort A sample and 51% ($n = 1,165$) of the Cohort B sample. In total, 13.6% ($n = 623$) of children were reported by their teachers to have their learning impacted by a special educational need, with speech impairments and specific learning difficulties being the most common form of SEN (see Table 3). In the 2021 spring data collection, children in Cohort A were in senior infants (age 6/7-years) and children in Cohort B were in 4th class (age 9/10-years).

Table 3. Children's type of SEN (CSL Child & Teacher Survey)

SEN Characteristics	Total (N = 4,585)		Cohort A (n = 2,300)		Cohort B (n = 2,285)	
	N	%	n	%	n	%
SEN Status						
With SEN	623	13.6%	168	7.3%	455	19.9%
Without SEN	3962	86.4%	2132	92.7%	1830	80.1%
SEN Type						
Autism	116	18.6%	44	26.2%	72	15.8%
Emotional or behavioural difficulty	132	21.2%	36	21.4%	96	21.1%
General learning difficulty	114	18.3%	18	10.7%	96	21.1%
Physical disability (including visual or hearing impairment)	96	15.4%	18	10.7%	78	17.1%
Specific learning difficulty	145	23.3%	14	8.3%	131	28.8%
Speech impairment	145	23.3%	64	38.1%	81	17.8%

Note. The SEN status of 51 children in Cohort B was unknown due to missing data.

3.3.3 Interviews

School Characteristics

In total, interviews were conducted in four post-primary schools, 13 primary schools, and one special school. For a breakdown of the different data strands in the study, please refer to Table 1 in the beginning of the methodology chapter.

As part of the primary data collection for this study, interviews were conducted in four post-primary schools. Of the four schools, all were co-educational, and one had DEIS status. Two of the schools were in cities and two in provincial towns. All the schools were multi-denominational with school sizes ranging between 450 and 1,000 students.

Thirteen primary schools participated in interviews as part of the Children's School Lives study. This data was analysed for this study according to the study research questions.

In the 13 primary schools there were a total of 15 classes, including an autism class. Each class was selected to represent the diversity of primary school types in Ireland. Of the 13 schools, six had DEIS status. Eight schools were co-educational and the remainder single sex. Nine schools were under Catholic patronage; two were multi-denominational, one Church of Ireland and one Irish medium.

Interviews were also conducted in one special school as part of the CSL study. The special school was in a provincial town and is co-educational with Catholic patronage. The school includes students from ages 4 to 18 and at the time of data collection had 117 students.

Participant Characteristics

The interviews from the post-primary, primary, and special schools included a range of participant types including students with SEN, parents of students with SEN, and school staff.

To protect the anonymity of the participants, they have been given specific ID tags. The first part of the ID tag details the school type of the participant (PS = primary school, PS-AC = primary school autism class, PPS = post-primary school, and SS = special school). Post-primary schools are also labelled between 1 and 4. After the school type, the participant type is detailed. Participants are either marked with S for student, P for parent, or their staff role is written out (e.g., Principal). After that the participant is also numbered. Lastly, more details are given about the participant or their child, such as age, sex, and SEN type. Many acronyms are used in the ID tags, and these are explained in the acronyms chapter at the start of the report. A full list of interview participants are included in Appendix 1b, Table A2 Interview Participants.

Table 4. Interview participants

Participant group	Total	Primary	Primary autism class	Post-primary	Special
Students	19	-	-	19	-
Parents	30	-	2	18	10
Teachers, SENCOs, Year Heads, SETs	33	12	1	15	5
SNAs	13	-	1	7	5
Principals	13	10	1	2	
Total	108	22	5	61	20

Because the interviews in the post-primary schools were conducted as part of our primary data collection, it was possible to interview all participant groups listed in the table. Interviews in the primary schools, primary autism class, and special school were collected initially for the CSL study and used as secondary data in this study. In the primary schools, parent and child interviews were not included because no interviews had been conducted with parents of/and students with SEN. Students with SEN had also not been interviewed in the primary autism class or special school interviews. This is a limitation of the study as student voice is only represented for the post-primary school students with SEN.

3.4 Analyses

The study involved the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. For quantitative data a range of methods and SPSS software was used for qualitative data thematic analysis and NVivo software were used. See further details of the analyses conducted outlined below.

3.4.1 Online Principal Survey

Data from the online principal survey were retrieved from Qualtrics and cleaned by the ICOSEN research team. Quantitative principal survey data were analysed in SPSS using descriptive statistics including counts, frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency.

3.4.2 Child and Teacher Survey

Quantitative data on children's wellbeing were collected from children and teachers by the CSL research team. Cleaned and de-identified copies of the data were transferred to the ICOSEN research team for secondary data analysis. The data were analysed using inferential statistics, where we tested the impact of being rated by teachers as having (i) an emotional or behavioural disturbance (EBD) or (ii) a SEN without EBD (independent variables) on different indicators of children's wellbeing (outcome variables). The choice of independent variables was based on previous research using CSL data where SEBD was found to impact children's wellbeing in very different ways to other types of SEN. Statistical analysis was carried out in SPSS Version 27 and MPlus version 8.7. While structural equation modelling was used to test the impact of the independent variables on the outcome variables controlling for children's gender (i.e., removing any bias caused by an unequal gender balance in the SEN/non-SEN groups) no significant findings emerged from the modelling. Standardised estimates (i.e., *t*-tests) are presented in figures to indicate the size of the impact of the independent variables on the outcome variables.

3.4.3 Interviews

Transcripts from the post-primary, primary, and special schools were anonymised and then uploaded to NVIVO 12 for analysis. Thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), was used to analyse the data. More specifically, this project utilised *Codebook TA*, a form of thematic analysis in which a structured coding framework is developed before analysis, but themes can be refined or created through the coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The codebook for the analysis was based on the topics included in the post-primary interview schedules (1) demographic Information, (2) education, learning, and support during school closures, (3) wellbeing during school closures, (4) learning and education during school reopening, (5) wellbeing during school reopening, and (6) long-term impacts. This codebook was used for all participant types in all schools. Because the qualitative analysis involved both primary and secondary data sources, not all interviews included all of the mentioned topics. In the secondary data sources (primary school, special school, and autism class interviews), only data related to these topics were coded.

The six steps of thematic analysis that were used in this study are outlined below.

Step 1: Data familiarisation

Coders were given the codebook and discussion was had on the categories in the codebook. Next, the interview data were divided amongst five coders by participant type. All coders followed the same steps for analysis. First the coder familiarised themselves with the data, and coded data to one of the six overarching topics in the codebook.

Step 2: Generating initial codes

Next, the coders began to inductively create lower-level initial codes under each major code in the codebook. Because of the diversity of participant types (parents, students, and teachers in four different school/class types), a large quantity of initial codes was created.

Step 3: Searching for themes

The next step involved reviewing the initial codes to create themes. For this step, all the coders shared their various codes for each participant group and began to identify patterns and overlap between the codes. Some themes were unique to one participant group, while others appeared amongst several groups.

Steps 4 and 5: Reviewing themes and defining themes

The next step involved all coders looking over the themes and sub-themes under each major code and coming to a consensus. Next, themes were slightly altered or renamed to better represent the data.

Step 6: Producing the report

In the final stage of analysis, quotes were selected to represent the various themes and the findings chapter was written for the report. The findings chapter aimed to summarise the thematic analysis and to highlight certain themes with quotes from participants. Quotes were selected to represent the vast diversity of participant types and variety of opinions and experiences portrayed within the data. In addition to the quotes, themes were summarised, and quasi-statistical terms (some = < 30%, many = 30-60%, most = > 60%) were used to show how common themes and codes were amongst participants.

3.5 Limitations

This study used mixed-methods and both primary and secondary data. While this approach allows for great scope in investigating children with SEN's experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, it also comes with some limitations. The primary data sources (the principal survey and post-primary school interviews) were designed and collected specifically for this project and as a result, all the data in these sources were relevant for analysis. However, the secondary data sources (the child and teacher surveys and primary school, special school, and autism class interviews), were designed and collected for other projects. The secondary data were not designed specifically for the research questions in this study, and as a result, only parts of these data sources were relevant for analysis.

The qualitative data in this report represent the views of just a few individuals within the Irish school system. It is important to remember that these individuals are speaking about their own experiences which may be not reflected throughout the Irish school system. The voices of these participants serve to give us an idea of how the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted upon students with SEN, but we cannot generalise these experiences and opinions to all Irish schools.

Throughout this report data is presented from post-primary, primary, and special schools. When looking at this data it is important to note how difficult it can be to compare different school types. Throughout the pandemic each school type, post-primary, primary, and special, experienced shared challenges, but also challenges unique to their context.

3.6 Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for the interviews with the post-primary school staff, students and parents was obtained from the UCD Human Research Ethics Committee in April 2022 (Ref HS-22-09-Senior-Kinsella). For the principal survey with secondary schools and special schools, an application for a low-risk study review was submitted to the UCD in December 2021 and granted approval (HS-E-21-188-Sloan). Ethical approval for the CSL study was granted through full review in November 2018 (HS-18-83-Symonds). All participants were provided with information sheets. Adult participants signed consent forms to participate, whilst children assented to being part of the study. All participants under the age of 18-years old participated only with signed parental consent.

3.7 Structure of the Study Findings

The following chapter reports the findings of the online principal survey, the child and teacher survey, and the interviews in post-primary, primary, and special schools. The results have been reported thematically to portray the experiences and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students with SEN. This chapter contains three main chapters: Experiences During School Closures, Experiences After School Closures, and Looking Forward.

The first chapter, Experiences During School Closures, describes the experiences of students with SEN during the COVID-19 lockdowns when schools closed. It contains four chapters: Engagement and Learning During School Closures, Supports and Provisions During School Closures, Home-School Relationship During School Closures, and Wellbeing During School Closures.

The second chapter, Experiences After School Closures, describes how students with SEN and their schools adapted to returning to school following school closures. It contains four chapters: Engagement and Learning after School Closures, Supports and Provisions after School Closures, Home-School Relationship After School Closures, and Wellbeing after School Closures.

The third and final chapter, Looking Forward, contains three main chapters: Thinking about Future School Closures, Learning from School Closures, and Long-term Impacts. This chapter details what schools might do in the event of future school closures, what schools can learn from school closures, and the long-term impacts of school closures and the COVID-19 Pandemic on students with SEN.

Chapter 4: Findings – Experiences During School Closures

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the mixed methods findings in relation to the experiences of students during the period of school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter is broadly split into three sections that explore experiences thematically, these themes are provisions and supports, learning and engagement and student wellbeing.

In Ireland, schools first closed in March 2020 in an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 (DES, 2020a). The closure was originally planned to only last two weeks, but was extended until mid-April (DES, 2020b), with most students staying at home for the remainder of the school year (Devine et al., 2020). Students returned to school in the Autumn of 2020 with strict COVID-19 guidelines in place (DES, 2020c). However, in January 2021, schools were forced to close again due to high COVID-19 case numbers. This second school closure lasted until March 2021, with children returning to school in a staggered format before the Easter holiday (DE, 2021). This chapter details the experiences of students with SEN, their parents, and their schools during these two school closures.

4.2 Engagement and Learning During School Closures

4.2.1 Remote Learning Experiences

In the interviews, post-primary school students with SEN differed greatly in their appraisal of remote learning. Some students enjoyed it while others disliked it. A summary of post-primary students' negative and positive perceptions of remote learning is in Table 5.

Table 5. Post-primary students' perceptions of remote learning (Interviews)

Negative Perceptions	Positive Perceptions
1. Not being able to do practical subjects at home	1. Becoming more skilled with technology
2. Not enough breaks	2. Listening to music while working
3. Feeling less motivated	3. Not having to make the journey to school
4. It's harder to ask the teacher for help	4. Spending time alone
5. It's harder to learn	5. Home is a more comfortable sensory environment
6. It's harder to manage your time	6. Home is less distracting
7. You have to teach yourself more	7. There's more time to do other things after Remote Learning
8. It makes home a more stressful place	8. Remote Learning is more efficient

Negative Perceptions	Positive Perceptions
9. Missing face to face help from teachers	9. Working at your own pace
10. Missing the classroom environment and interacting with people in class	10. Sleeping in
11. Missing the routine of school	11. Wearing comfortable clothes
12. Not understanding what to do	12. It's easier to work from a computer
13. Remote learning is more stressful	
14. There are more distractions at home	

4.2.2 Negative Perceptions and Experiences

In the post-primary, special school and primary school interviews, many participants reported that students had many negative experiences during remote learning. Students spoke of feeling like it was harder to learn remotely and reported that they missed the classroom environment.

A classroom has a specific vibe or an energy that you can't really get at home. I preferred the classrooms because I was spending more time with my friends (PPS3 S4 – Autistic Boy in 5th Year with Dyslexia And DCD).

They love the school environment, you know they were so excited to come back in on Monday because they were sick of being off school because their structure wasn't there you know (PS AC Teacher 2).

In addition, many students with SEN spoke of feeling less supported during remote learning and reported that they found it very difficult to ask their teachers for help. This was coupled with the fact that many no longer had access to external supports during this time.

You could send the teacher a message looking for help and you might get it a few hours later even (PPS1 S1 Boy In 6th Year with Dyslexia & DCD).

You know, a lot of the service supports, small and all as they are, hasn't been happening either (SS P7 Mother of boy with severe ID & ASD, age 12).

Many teachers reported that there were additional challenges for families in supporting students with SEN.

SEN children are really struggling at the moment, I have a child in my class with severe special needs and I know his family are under enormous pressure at the moment with him at home (SS Teacher 2).

It is a lot easier on the family when he is in school, there is still a little bit of work there, you know, that you wouldn't have with a mainstream kid (SS P5 Father of boy with moderate ID & DS, age 13).

The following parent explained how it was very difficult to support his child in engaging in schooling at home, despite his teacher making home visits with materials.

He didn't want to do anything got to do with school, even when his teacher came up with a box of materials for him, he wanted to run back into the house (SS P3 Father of boy with severe ID, age 6).

In addition, educators and parents explained that for some students learning online was extremely challenging and that it was likely students stopped learning and may have regressed in learning during this period. Educators and parents also noted the challenges in supporting students with SEN during school closures.

It's very difficult to do a lot of the work on that size of a screen and I just think it's very, very challenging for children like that, particularly SEN kids (PS Teacher 2).

And I think the other inequality is the SEN children, I think they're really, really struggling at the moment (PS Teacher 5).

She hasn't looked at any book once... if she's not used to speaking to people and if she's not used to reading or sound finding, it's going to be harder to bring them up back on track (PS Teacher 3).

Across all settings many participants including staff, parents and students described negative student experiences of varying types, from regression in learning to missing friends. Overall, the findings indicate that participants perceived the school closures as having a negative impact on students across all school settings (post-primary, primary and special schools).

4.2.3 Positive Perceptions and Experiences

While the negative experiences were evident from the findings it was also evident that there was heterogeneity of experiences of remote learning for students. With some students preferring learning within the home for varying reasons, such as having the freedom to take movement breaks, spend time with family, do work in one's own time and so forth (please refer to table 5).

I think some of the children with special needs are quite happy to be at home now and have the pressure off them to perform in a classroom (PS Teacher 5).

She loved it, she loves being at home, she's a very sociable child, but it doesn't bother her not to be around people (SS P10 Mother of girl with ASD, age 14).

The following quotations illustrate how some students favoured learning from home as it was less demanding for them, for example if they had sensory differences. Others found that they were happier at home because they were not as restricted in their behaviours, e.g., taking breaks, stimming.

I have sensory processing disorder and in school I find it really hard, the distractions, then at home I was in my own comfort space, I was really happy at home (PPS1 S2 Boy in TY with DCD & SPD).

He was quite happy to learn at home because he could bounce on his ball, he could stim when he liked, he could make tea and coffee and have little micro breaks (PPS1 P3 Mother of Autistic Boy in TY With Dyslexia, DCD, & SPD).

In addition, some students perceived remote learning to be more efficient than traditional classroom learning and enjoyed setting their own schedule.

Being able to get stuff done within a certain amount of time, instead of having to stay in school for that whole six hours and doing work, and then you could really do what you wanted for the rest of the day (PPS4 S1 Boy in 3rd Year with Dyslexia & ADHD).

He kind of can get frustrated in the school if there's sort of messing going on. I suppose as he would perceive it, there was less time wasting because of the Zoom (PPS2 P1 Father of Boy in TY With Dyslexia).

However, some parents of post-primary students with SEN and staff members stressed in their interviews that while their children often preferred remote learning, learning in the school setting was better for their academic development as well as their wellbeing.

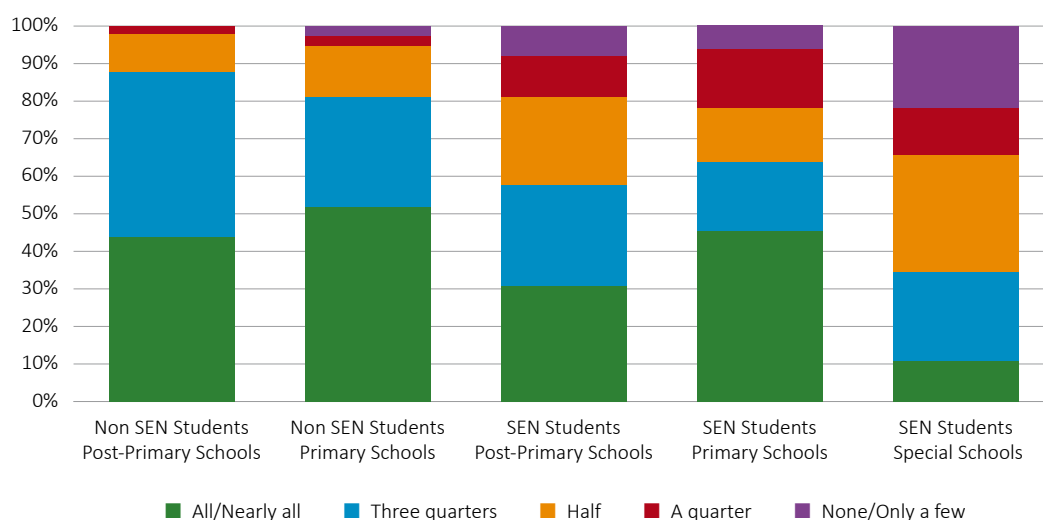
He would have preferred to stay at home but... I would have preferred him to go into school because the concentration is there (PPS4 P5 Mother of boy in 3rd Year with Anxiety).

Overall, the findings indicate that some students enjoyed certain aspects of remote learning. The findings also illustrate how some students had mixed feelings, with many initially enjoying remote learning and then tiring of it. Across all settings while students mainly had negative perceptions of remote learning, they also reported that there were positive aspects of it. Importantly parents and staff stressed that although some students may have preferred remote learning, they thought that in-person learning was better for their wellbeing, their social development as well as their academic progression.

4.2.4 Attendance in Remote Learning

In general, principals in the principal survey reported that participation in remote learning was higher for students without SEN than for those with SEN. Participation amongst students with SEN also appeared to vary based on school type, with the lowest rates of participation occurring for those in special schools (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Students accessing remote learning during lockdowns (Principal Survey)



In the post-primary school interviews, many parents of students with SEN reported that their children were not fully attending or engaging with online learning classes. Parents described their children as skipping classes, struggling to log into classes, or logging into classes, but turning their cameras and microphones off and doing something else.

A lot of the time, they were signing in and just not attending the class (PPS3 P2 Mother of Girl in 5th Year with MLD).

He wasn't doing what he should have been doing. He'd say to me he hadn't got a class until 10 o'clock where he would have had a class at 8.30 but he couldn't log on. Ah, he just wasn't interested at all (PPS4 P5 Mother of Boy in 3rd Year with Anxiety).

4.2.5 Resources in the Home During Remote Learning

Students' home environments were cited as having an impact on engagement with remote learning. Staff, students, and parents described barriers to engaging in remote learning such as not having a suitable space for focused work, access to reliable internet, enough devices for everyone as well as noise in the home. The following are quotes from the post-primary school settings.

They found it difficult to concentrate and they would email you and say, look Miss, I haven't got my work done because my sister was using the laptop (PPS4 SET & Year Head 2).

We live in a small apartment as well, the noise and... it wasn't an ideal setting for learning, and my child would be easily distracted with things (PPS4 P3 Mother of Boy in 3rd Year).

Furthermore, parental involvement and support appeared to be a crucial factor in how well students with SEN engaged in remote learning in the home environment. The interviews indicated students varied in the amount of support needed to engage in remote learning with some students only needing occasional support from their parents. The following parent of a post-primary school student explained that they were not involved in the remote learning of their child.

We offered to help and he'd go, no, it's OK, I have it sorted, I'll deal with it. So, it is that he was quite happy to work away himself (PPS2 P1 Father of Boy in TY With Dyslexia).

A teacher from a CSL primary school explained that the learning of children depends on the resources and parental support available to children in the home.

I think there will be a huge discrepancy in the understanding and a lot of the families who are sitting down every day with their children, those children are still familiar with school as a concept (PS Teacher 4).

The following parents in the post-primary interviews explained that students needed more support from a parent to engage in remote learning depending on their needs (e.g., autism, DCD).

100%, she wouldn't have been able to do it on her own, by the end of it we were experts, but we learned together (PPS3 P4 Mother of Autistic Girl in 3rd Year with Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, & DCD).

Many parents of students with SEN reflected on their ability to support their child's learning during this time and how it was often difficult to balance supporting their child with other responsibilities.

I was off work as well, but my husband wasn't – and I had the younger child at home. So, it was trying to manage keeping the younger child happy, while attending to him as well. So, it was a struggle at times (PPS4 P3 Mother of Boy in 3rd Year).

If I was working, she wouldn't have succeeded. Like, if I had a job, we wouldn't have been able to do that and she wouldn't have succeeded (PPS3 P4 Mother of Autistic Girl in 3rd Year with Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, & DCD).

In the special school and CSL primary school interviews, staff also reflected on how crucial parent involvement was for student engagement as well as how challenging it can be.

I think it's very hard for our students to learn independently. So, unless they have parental input to help them with what we send home, it's not going to happen (SS SET 5).

Children with special needs, it's so hard on the parents, like, so hard, at home 24/7, then trying to teach in such a confined space (PS Teacher 7).

Post-primary school, primary school and special school staff also highlighted that parents may not have always been able to support students due to their work commitments, with some noting that some students had to take on household responsibilities such as minding their siblings as their parents were working. The participants noted that it was extremely challenging for parents to support their children, particularly those with full time jobs.

It's so hard for the parents to keep going, I've loads of parents that are still working and then when they come home from work, they're trying to do a bit with the girls, that's so hard, I don't know how they'll manage that (PS Teacher 1).

In the main across all settings, it was found that participants reported that it was challenging for both parents and staff to support students during remote learning, it was difficult to monitor progress of students also with many parents feeling 'out of the loop'. Participants of all types across all settings noted that the ability to learn was impaired by the remote setting and that many of the supports that had been available in person were lost online. Staff noted that students with more support at home were more likely to fare well when returning to school compared with those who were not receiving the same supports during remote learning.

4.3 Provisions and Supports During School Closures

This chapter describes how schools adapted to each school closure and the strategies they used to support students with SEN. It contains six subchapters: School Readiness for Remote Learning, Remote Learning Approaches, Comparisons between Lockdowns, External Supports, School Supports during Remote Learning, and Staff Role Changes during Remote Learning.

4.3.1 School Readiness for Remote Learning

In the interviews, post-primary school staff were asked how prepared they felt their school had been for the transition to remote learning during the school closures. Some staff reported feeling lucky that the school was using some form of online platform prior to the pandemic.

We were very lucky, because we were using the iPads and the kids know how to use this and Teams from before (PPS1 SET).

Our school had introduced Microsoft teams before the pandemic and that really helped (PPS3 SENCO).

However, others reported that their schools were not prepared for the move to remote learning. Many participants noted that the unexpected nature of the pandemic closures made preparation impossible, saying that changes happened overnight and without forewarning. Teaching modes and methods had to change in haste to try and meet the new demands of remote learning.

We weren't prepared at all. You know...Our kids didn't even have school emails at that stage, so it was very, very difficult for us (PPS4 SET & Year Head 2).

We were told, gather your books, schools closed. So, there wasn't that kind of heads-up this might happen (PPS3 SET 1).

4.3.2 Remote Learning Approaches

The principal survey indicated that schools utilised a wide variety of remote learning approaches during the school closures and periods when the children were in quarantine (Table 6). Almost all schools established a dedicated remote learning platform for students to access during lockdowns (98.1%, n = 312) and quarantine periods (89.0%, n = 282), while teacher and SNA visits to children's homes were the least used approaches during both lockdowns (23.7%, n = 75 respectively) and quarantine periods (7.9%, n = 25).

Table 6. Remote learning during lockdowns and quarantines (Principal Survey)

Remote Learning Approaches	During Lockdowns			During Quarantines		
	Primary	Post-Primary	Special	Primary	Post-Primary	Special
Books/Worksheets for Use at Home	94.9%	83.6%	94.5%	96.6%	82.2%	80.0%
Dedicated Digital Learning Platform	98.3%	100.0%	92.7%	84.5%	98.6%	72.7%
Live Video Lessons	75.9%	97.9%	78.2%	22.6%	53.4%	40.0%
Pre-Recorded Video Lessons	82.8%	91.8%	65.5%	30.2%	62.3%	47.3%
Chat Applications for Teacher to Pupil Interactions	73.0%	91.8%	70.9%	48.7%	81.5%	50.9%
Teacher Visits to Students' Homes	25.2%	13.7%	23.6%	9.6%	6.2%	9.1%
SNA Visits to Students' Homes	30.4%	19.9%	20.0%	8.7%	6.8%	9.1%
iPad or Tablet Given to Students	77.8%	89.0%	60.0%	41.0%	69.9%	50.9%

The approaches used appeared to vary by school type. For instance, compared to primary and special schools, post-primary schools were more likely to offer access to dedicated digital learning platforms, live and pre-recorded video lessons, chat applications, and tablets during both lockdowns and quarantine periods.

This utilisation of digital technology was also reflected in the interviews with school staff. Participants reported an overnight switch to remote teaching with an emphasis on digital spaces due to the pandemic.

We certainly tried, we prepared the laptops and we even prepared packs for them to do at home, for those who weren't able to get much from the online classes. (PPS3 SENCO)

The principal survey indicated that primary schools offered significantly fewer live and pre-recorded video lessons during quarantine periods than both post-primary and special schools. Also, in the primary school interviews, teachers reported that online learning can be difficult for younger children.

These children need that tangible, hands-on approach. Remote learning is all auditory in a sense, and visual, looking at a computer (PS Teacher 2).

In the principal survey, both primary and special school students were more likely to receive home visits from their teachers and SNAs than post-primary school students across lockdown and quarantine periods. This was also echoed in the interviews, here is a quote from a parent in the primary school autism class.

During lockdown I would drop work out to all the parents' houses once a week, I didn't send stuff over email, I came into school, printed stuff off and dropped it out to them because I felt that they needed that connection, the face to face and to actually talk to them at the front door (PP AC Teacher).

In general, most principals in the principal survey viewed all remote learning approaches as quite effective or very effective, though perceptions of effectiveness did appear to vary based on school type (see Figures A5 and A6 in appendix). For instance, compared to primary and post-primary principals, special school principals were more likely to rate an approach as ineffective. Additionally, special school principals were the only group in which most participants expressed negative views on one or more approaches. Conversely, primary principals were the most likely to rate these two approaches as effective and held the most positive views about the use of books and worksheets for remote learning. Post-primary principals were most likely to view the use of dedicated digital learning platforms, live video lessons, chat applications, and the provision of tablets as effective. For figures relating to how principals rated the effectiveness of remote learning responses during lockdowns and quarantine periods, please see Tables A5-A8 in the appendix.

In the interviews, special school teachers spoke of needing to be creative to adapt their teaching to remote learning. Teachers spoke of working with parents to best create learning materials that their children would engage with.

I contacted the parents and said I can send you home exactly what I was going to be doing... I sent it home and then... the following month 'would you like me to do that again?', 'Oh God no, sure he won't do anything for me'. So we pulled together some ideas... for example, how to have sensory play (SS SET 1).

Other teachers spoke of using novel approaches to engage their students. For example, one special school teacher created a YouTube channel for her students.

I set up a cookery YouTube channel ... with pictorial recipes that they could download from Google Docs. One of the other teachers did PE and set up a PE YouTube channel (SS SET 5).

This creativity on the part of teachers was also evident in the post-primary school interviews.

The English teacher put up a podcast as well, she really enjoyed that (PPS3 P4 Mother of Autistic Girl in 3rd Year with Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, & DCD).

The findings indicate that overnight staff developed new modes of providing an education to students, incorporating pre-existing methods as well as developing and adopting new ones. In the main the participants reported that remote learning was less effective and more difficult for younger students in primary schools as well as those in the special schools. In addition, across all settings there was an exponential increase in the usage of digital technologies during the provision of remote education.

4.3.3 Comparisons Between Lockdowns

Participants in the post-primary school interviews reported that the remote learning approaches adopted by schools varied between the two lockdowns. Most students, parents, and teachers described the first lockdown as being disorganised and discussed how schools developed a more defined structure for remote learning in the second lockdown.

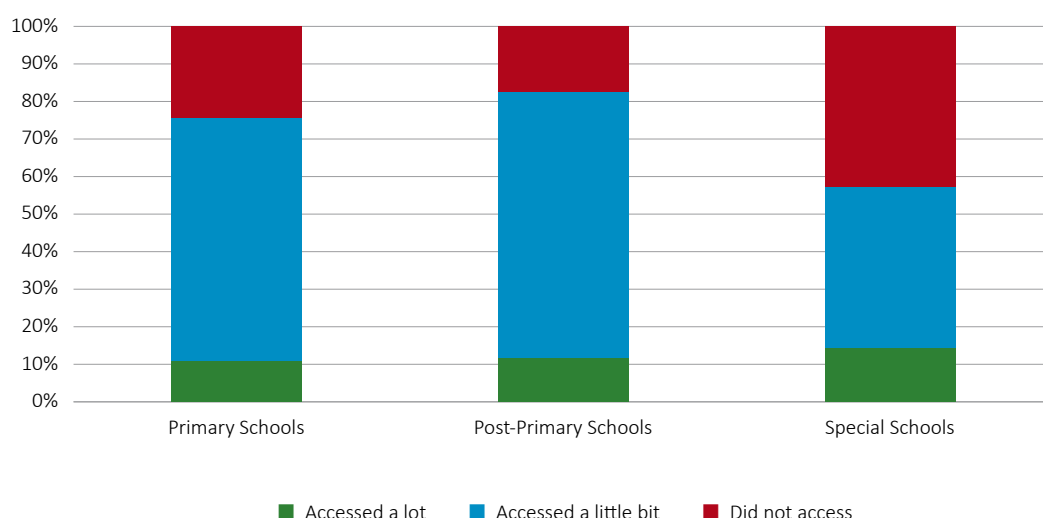
Chalk and cheese, the first lockdown you might meet the class once a week for five minutes on Zoom, a typical day in the second lockdown was closer to a school day (PPS4 SENCO & Year Head).

At first, no one was actually doing the video classes, so it was kind of hard to keep up with who was assigning what, people were assigning things erratically (PPS2 S5 Autistic Girl in TY).

Many participants described how schools relied on assigned work more in the first lockdown and switched to more live classes in the second lockdown. In general, the findings suggest that provision and supports were more organised and streamlined across all school settings during the second lockdown when compared with the first.

4.3.4 External Supports

In the principal survey, most school principals (75.7%, $n = 218$) reported that they accessed external supports (e.g., from the National Educational Psychological Service, the Health Service Executive, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, or the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) for students with SEN during the pandemic. In general, post-primary school principals accessed these supports the most, while special school principals accessed them the least (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. School access of external support (Principal Survey)

However, interviews with post-primary school staff and parents in the special school revealed frustration with a lack of access to external supports during the school closures.

They just didn't show up... they went to ground and we didn't see them at all and all those important services just disappeared overnight (PPS3 Principal).

*Being put on a waiting list... like how do they know when they don't even see them?
The input has been zero (SS P8 Mother of boy with moderate ID & ASD, age 11).*

In the special school interviews, parents spoke of what resumed access to respite services meant for them and for their children after the second lockdown.

We have carers coming in and we have them now three days a week. So, that's kind of a break from the norm with me because otherwise, it's just me (SS P1 Mother of Girl with Severe-Profound ID, Age 13).

Respite started again. So, he's had two sessions since this year. So, he gets two days being a young man, away from his parents and he loves that (SS P2 Father of Boy with Moderate ID & DS, Age 12).

The following teacher from an autism class likened the lack of support for those with SEN as being akin to a lack of intensive care unit beds, in that more funding is needed and that additional support is vital.

I can compare it to the coronavirus; the ICU units are taken up with people who have coronavirus, but there's loads of other people with other illnesses who need to go into ICU, so, [in special needs supports] you need special dedication for different people to look after, there's just not enough, they just need to do more, I know it's hard but they need to fund more special schools (PC AC Teacher).

Overall participants across all school settings reported that there were challenges in getting access to appropriate services during remote learning. Parents and staff across all settings reported that lack of access to external services was extremely challenging for parents, staff and students alike and reduced the quality of support that students received.

4.3.5 School Supports During Remote Learning

In the post-primary school interviews, most of the students with SEN had been receiving some form of support prior to school closures, most often SNA support or special education teaching. When schools closed some participants described supports continuing in some way, but others said there were no supports during this time. One teacher explained that the loss of in-person schooling was a loss of important support for students and their families.

The interviews with the families on the news breaks my heart, the stress that they're going through, school is respite to them kind of, and I just think they need it (PS Teacher 4).

Many post-primary school staff described how they tried to support students with SEN during school closures.

We did contact all of them and we did Zooms, we gave resources to teachers, and contacted parents to see did they need anything and gave resources where we could (PPS4 SET & Year Head 1).

However, many students and parents were disappointed with the lack of supports during school closures.

It was a bit weird because you would have so much support within the actual school grounds and then when you get home you were like what happened to all that? (PPS1 S2 Boy in TY with DCD & SPD).

With COVID there's no parent-teacher meeting so it's hard to get in to (child)'s school for an IEP (SS P8 Mother of boy with moderate ID & ASD, age 11).

The following staff member from a special school explained that it was frustrating to receive many emails and website links from different organisations but no tangible support.

We're not getting any support and then the other thing that drove me cracked was... you're getting emails from all over with reference to this website, that website, the other website (PS Teacher 3).

Parents and staff across all settings noted the challenges with students gaining access to suitable support during the school closures. Staff noted that in-person schooling was 'respite' of sorts for many parents who otherwise were not aided in supporting their child. While many staff noted the lengths they went to support students they also acknowledged that given the constraints of the situation these efforts often fell short. Parents also noted that the support for students was not adequate during this time and that supports that were available during in-person schooling became unavailable overnight.

4.3.6 Staff Role Changes During Remote Learning

In post-primary school interviews, many staff reported that the school closures caused their roles to change dramatically. While there was some guidance from schools, many staff noted that during the first lockdown, they were devising their own ways of fulfilling their roles in the remote learning setting.

Staff described how they tailored their methods to suit the needs of their students during remote learning. They described upskilling their computer skills with urgency, a process which many staff members found to be challenging.

My whole stance of teaching was completely stripped back, I went back to the infant level, everything was very hands-on, all my materials were hands-on, all my approaches were movement based, sensory based (PS Teacher 1).

Previous to this, there were people engaging in online teaching and learning to varying degrees and then suddenly you'd no choice, it was sink or swim (PPS2 Principal).

Staff in the interviews also described finding it difficult to set boundaries between work and home while working remotely. The following special education teacher noted that if they received an email from a child with SEN they would feel compelled to reply out of hours.

I struggled trying to navigate Teams, also setting boundaries, because I wanted to help them but do I answer them when they message me at nine in the evening? (PPS3 SET 1).

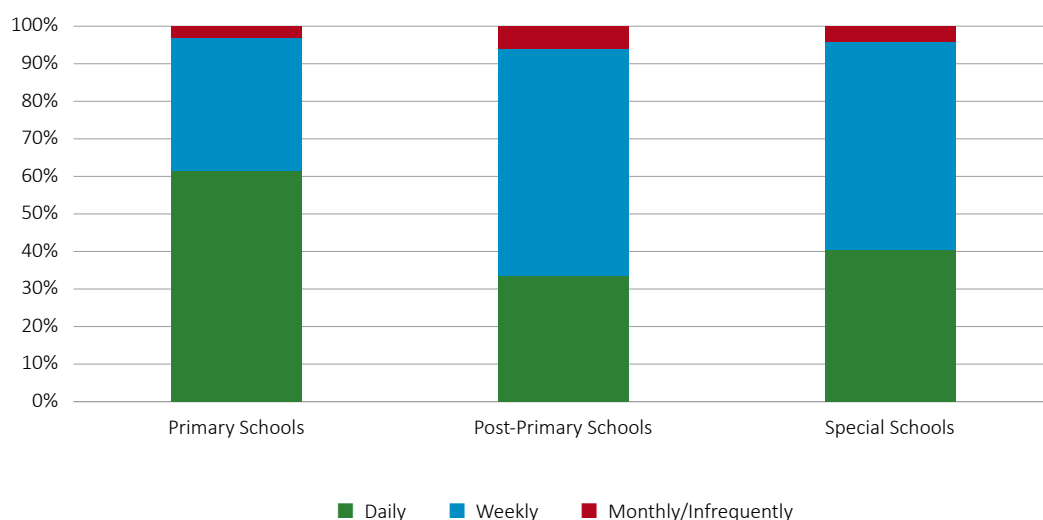
4.4 Home-School Relationship During School Closures

The school closures were an unprecedented time for both schools, students, and parents. This section details how schools kept in contact with parents of students with SEN during the school closures and parents' satisfaction with this contact.

4.4.1 Contact with Parents During School Closures

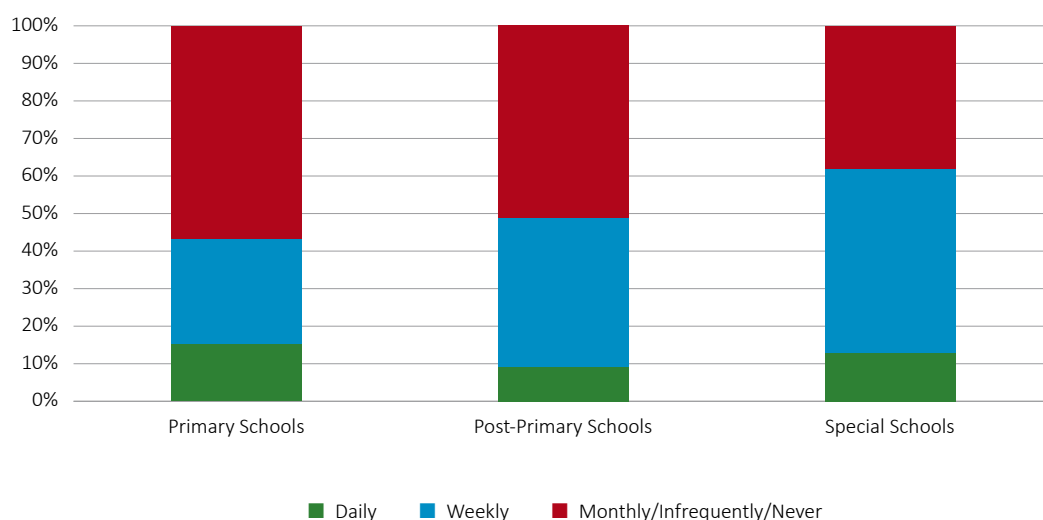
In the principal survey, most principals reported that their school made daily (44.6%, n = 135) or weekly (50.5%, n = 153) contact with parents of children with SEN during school closures. In general, school-to-parent contact appeared to be most frequent in primary schools (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. School contact with parents of SEN children during closures (Principal Survey)

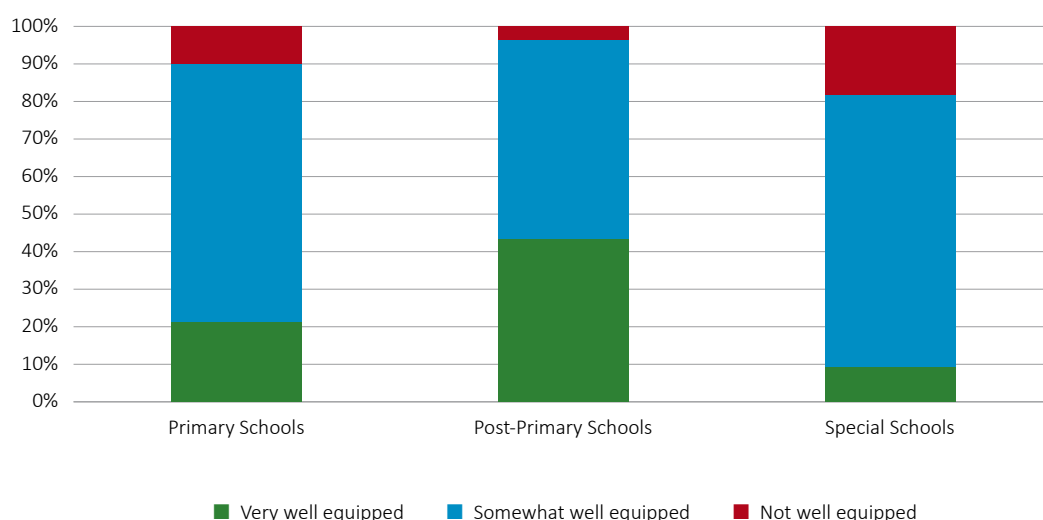


Regarding parent-to-school contact, most principals reported that they were contacted by parents of children with SEN either weekly (35.3%, $n = 107$) or very infrequently (39.9%, $n = 121$). As seen in Figure 6, special school principals appeared to have been contacted more regularly by parents than primary or post-primary school principals.

Figure 6. Parents contacting principals during school closures (Principal Survey)



Many principals in the principal survey felt somewhat (60.7%, $n = 184$) or very (28.4%, $n = 86$) well equipped to address the concerns of parents of children with SEN. Post-primary school principals were, on average, more likely to feel equipped to deal with these concerns than primary or special school principals, while special school principals, in general, felt the least equipped (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Preparedness to address parents' concerns (Principal Survey)

4.4.2 Satisfaction with Contact During School Closures

In the interviews, parents of post-primary school students with SEN varied in relation to their satisfaction with the contact from schools during school closures. Some parents reported great satisfaction with the contact from their school:

The school's contact with the girls was fantastic, we even got messages from the SNAs to say that they missed the girls and they hoped to see them soon and stay safe (SS P9 Mother of twin girls with moderate ID, age 18).

However, other parents described feeling out of the loop and would have liked to have been more informed regarding their child's education during the school closures. Many parents in post-primary schools explained that the school communicated directly with students and parents relied on their child to relay information provided by the school.

I suppose the parents maybe didn't really know what was going on, it was kind of just the school and student and you had to just maybe kind of trust your child (PPS1 P1 Mother of Boy in 6th Year with Dyslexia & DCD).

Parents of post-primary school students also described not knowing their child's schedules for their remote classes or when assignments were due.

There was no correspondence really. I didn't know he was in a class, he'd say 'I'm in a class.' Sure he could have been playing the computer (PPS4 P5 – Mother of Boy in 3rd Year with Anxiety).

Some post-primary parents expressed frustration that the school only contacted them when their child was very behind.

She was behind and the teacher contacted me. But I suppose rather than waiting for her to be behind, it would have been useful to have that information upfront (PPS3 P2 – Mother of Girl In 5th Year with MGLD).

In the main it was evident that while parents across all school settings thought that the communication from schools was adequate some reported that they would have liked to have been 'kept in the loop' more.

4.5 Wellbeing During School Closure

4.5.1 Emotional Wellbeing during School Closures

The negative impact of school closures on the wellbeing of students was evident in the interviews with the post-primary, primary as well as the special schools. Participants described multifaceted experiences of regression in emotional and social development. There was a wide array of emotional experiences described with post-primary school students reporting feeling a range of emotions including anxiety, stress, boredom, cabin fever, confusion, happiness, and loneliness.

Figure 8. Post-primary students' wellbeing during school closures

Negative Perceptions	Positive Perceptions
1. Not being able to see friends	1. Feeling more comfortable and less anxious in one's one space in comparison to at school
2. Not having social outings to cafes, activities, sports	2. The break was initially enjoyable
3. Feeling isolated	3. Home is a more comfortable sensory environment compared to school
4. Feeling anxious, stressed, bored, depressed, lonely, and sad	4. Having the freedom to stim
5. Developing unhealthy habits such as long hours alone in one's room, over-eating, lack of exercise	5. Having the freedom to take movement breaks
6. Lack of routine	6. Spending more time with family
7. Regression in emotional and social development	7. Spending more time doing activities one enjoys at home
8. Being at home feels more stressful as boundaries between home and school blurred	8. Listening to music while working
9. Missing face to face interactions in school	9. Enjoying spending time alone
10. Becoming more socially anxious and less comfortable in social settings	
11. More challenges in regulating emotions	

Many parents interviewed from the special schools explained that their children had regressed in their social and emotional development, with some students developing unhealthy habits such as long hours in isolation, over-eating, and lack of exercise.

The separation from school and the routine definitely threw the girls off, initially it was fine because everyone likes a break from school, but once that wore off, the girls were very anxious (SS P9 – Mother of girls with moderate ID, age 17-18).

In the interviews, many parents and teachers spoke of an increase in anxiety as well as reduced wellbeing for students during the lockdown.

All of a sudden that sanctuary [his bedroom] is now his classroom as well, so that would have probably added a lot to his anxiety (PPS1 P4 Mother of Autistic Boy In 1st Year with ADHD).

He'll start crying... he used to be like that about two years ago, but now he's getting back like that because the schools were closed (SS P3 Father of boy with severe ID, age 6).

Some parents spoke about health and wellbeing being negatively impacted and anxiety levels rising during this period due to the lack of structure and routine.

He put on a lot of weight! I think that it's the lack of routine, socialising and not seeing his friends, he goes into phases of occasional bad behaviours, where he just gets stressed out and bored (SS P2 Father of boy with moderate ID & DS, age 12).

The girls work really well with structure, one of the twins actually... she got very nearly addicted to food, both of them have put on like a bit of weight now over the lockdown, the anxiety, yeah, the anxiety (SS P9 Mother of twin girls with moderate ID, age 18).

Parents also explained that their child's wellbeing was impacted by the lockdowns because they used to enjoy the routine and the social interaction associated with in-person schooling and activities and they didn't have access to this during lockdowns.

She is a social butterfly so, pre-lockdown, she would be going to Costa coffee every weekend and now, she hasn't had that in, oh gosh, well over a year now at this stage (SS P1 Mother of girl with severe-profound ID, age 13).

However, some interview participants reported that some students enjoyed being at home during the lockdowns and reported lower anxiety while at home.

My anxiety would not kick in as much than if I was in school (PPS4 S5 Boy in 3rd Year with Anxiety).

I'd say he was happier being at home. I'd say the anxiousness would be maybe now and would have been after (PPS1 P1 Mother of Boy in 6th Year with Dyslexia & DCD).

From the findings it is evident that the impact of the school closures on student wellbeing was heterogeneous, with participants reporting both negative and positive outcomes from the closures. While there were positive outcomes such as the initial enjoyment of time off, in the main most participants across all settings noted that the closures had a detrimental effect on the emotional wellbeing of students.

4.5.2 COVID-19 Anxiety During School Closures

In the interviews, participants reported that students with SEN experienced varying levels of anxiety in relation to the pandemic with some students being very worried by COVID-19.

If I left the house, I would wash my hands a couple of times. Take off all the clothes. You know, I didn't want to catch it (PPS2 S3 Boy in 2nd Year with Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, ADHD, & OCD).

Well, I thought if you get it, you die (PPS4 S5 Boy in 3rd Year with Anxiety).

Other students in the interviews felt less worried about themselves and more worried about vulnerable family members.

He was just so panicked about what could happen if his great granddad could get this (PPS4 P2 Mother of Boy in 2nd Year with Dyslexia & Dyscalculia).

Both my parents are slightly older so I was constantly worried about that (PPS2 S4 Girl in 4th Year Class).

This highlights that some students across all school settings became hypervigilant about hand hygiene and the prevention of COVID-19 contamination in general, with some students noting they would remove all outdoor clothing upon re-entering the home. Many students became concerned for vulnerable loved ones, and this caused them stress and distress.

4.5.3 Social Interaction and Wellbeing During School Closures

In the interviews, parents and students alike reported how difficult it was for many students with SEN to not see their friends during the school closures.

At the beginning I was happy that school was closed. But then the longer it went on, the more isolated you kind of felt. Pulled away from everybody else. So, you start getting a bit lonely in a way that you can't see your friends (PPS1 S1 – Boy in 6th Year with Dyslexia & DCD).

She keeps asking for her friends (SS P4 – Mother of Girl with Moderate ID & DS, Age 17).

Interview participants reported various levels of contact with friends and peers during the school closures. Some participants were particularly worried about the wellbeing of students who did not have any friends and only socialised during school.

For the kids that we work with, they don't really have anything outside of school and for the months that they had off all they had was their family around them and like, it's very tough (SS SNA 4).

Parents of students explained that some children preferred not to talk to people, and they missed out on opportunities to become more socially competent when school closed.

If he had been in school, he would have had to do group work, he would have had to talk to teachers, he would have had to talk to SNAs and people and that would have challenged him, in a positive way (PPS1 P3 – Mother of Autistic Boy in TY With Dyslexia, DCD, & SPD).

Post-primary school students reported keeping in contact with friends through texting, social media, going for walks, and playing video games together, while in the autism class and special school, parents reported organising online activities for their children to interact with friends.

We do some stuff, you know, online with her friends with Down Syndrome from her youth club and her dance class and things like that (SS P4 Mother of Girl with Moderate ID & DS, Age 17).

Many parents and educators spoke of students with SEN regressing in their social skills because of the school closures and of the importance of schools in assisting students with SEN in developing their social skills.

In terms of their social skills and all that because that was the big thing with the SEN kids that we had, socially that they weren't great, so, it's kind of put that on the back burner now for a while, you know? (PS Teacher 2).

Across all settings participants noted the major impact the school closures had on the social world of students. Many participants noted that students missed their friends and found other ways of connecting online. However, other students who were less social secure regressed in their social development and friendships became impaired or non-existent, this was reported to be particularly true for students in the special schools.

4.5.4 The Importance of Routine

Many interview participants spoke of how important routine is for students with SEN and how the lack of routine during the school closures negatively affected their wellbeing.

I think students with additional needs, they really need routine and being in school is the best routine for them so when they were out of routine it can be quite a struggle (PPS1 SNA 1).

They like the routine of getting up in the morning, coming into school. Even if they don't like school, it becomes their routine and they become dependent on what we do here and then all of a sudden, it was gone (PPS4 SET & Year Head 2).

The following parent from the special school described how work sent home from the school helped give structure to the day for their children.

The school gave us two weeks of a workload and we did Zoom classes and they had a reason to get up and they had a reason to do stuff (SS P9 Mother of Twin Girls with Moderate ID, Age 18).

The importance of creating a routine during school closures for wellbeing was also highlighted in the primary schools.

A lot of them have built up their own routines, and they're telling you what they do and their little timetables... but that's hard on any child, you know, any child with autism or that loves their routine (PS Teacher 1).

Parents and staff across all settings thought that the lack of routine was detrimental to students' learning and wellbeing. Participants noted that when students returned to all school settings, that is post-primary, primary and special schools, both their wellbeing and learning outcomes improved.

4.6 Summary

This chapter detailed the experiences of students with SEN, their parents and their schools during the school closures of 2020 and 2021. The findings illustrate the importance of the home environment and the supports accessible therein for the success of remote learning for children. Participants noted the challenges associated with remote learning such as the lack of access to high-speed internet, devices, workspace as well as the availability of parental support for students. The experiences recounted by participants indicate that schooling during school closures was experienced differently for many students, with some initial excitement akin to that experienced during summer holidays. However, this excitement subsided for many students and was replaced by a multiplicity of challenging emotions, such as boredom, loneliness, and anxiety.

While there were some reports to the contrary in the interviews regarding preparedness, most post-primary school staff interviewed reported that neither they nor their school were sufficiently prepared for remote learning, particularly during the first lockdown. Most participants reported that schools were more prepared for the second lockdown. Participants also reported that provision and supports were more organised and streamlined during the second school closure when compared with the first. In addition, while the views expressed by parents regarding school contact were heterogeneous, all views indicate the importance of communication from schools and its impact on the relationship between families and schools. Furthermore, this chapter outlined the views shared regarding school supports during school closures, the findings suggest that most participants experienced challenges relating to reduced supports during this period.

Overall, this chapter regarding experiences during school closures highlights the challenges associated with the lack of access to supports for those with SEN during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. This chapter also highlights the importance of routine for those with SEN, emphasising that should future school closures occur, that the establishment of routine should be to the fore in plans for remote learning. Finally, the findings outlined in this chapter indicate the importance of digital technologies, bidirectional communication between homes and schools and synchronous online classes in bridging the gap caused by necessary virus control measures during this time.

Key Findings

Provisions and Supports

- Most schools established a dedicated remote learning platform for students to access during lockdowns (98.1%) and quarantine periods (89.0%), while teacher and SNA visits to children's homes were the least used approaches during both lockdowns (19.6% and 23.7% respectively) and quarantine periods (both 7.9%).
- Due to the unexpected nature of the pandemic most post-primary school staff reported that neither they or their school were ready for remote learning, particularly during the first lockdown but that they were more organised in the second lockdown and had more synchronous (live) online classes.
- When surveyed, most principals reported that their school made daily (44.6%) or weekly (50.5%) contact with parents of children with SEN during school closures. It was also found that school-to-parent contact was most frequent in primary schools.
- Most principals surveyed felt somewhat (68.7%) or very (28.4%) well equipped to address the concerns of parents of students with SEN. The findings suggest that post-primary school principals were, on average, more likely to feel equipped to deal with these parents' concerns than primary principals, while special school principals felt the least equipped.
- Principals reported that participation in remote learning was higher for students without special educational needs than for those with SEN. In addition, participation amongst students with SEN varied based on school type, with the lowest rates of participation occurring for students in special schools.

Learning

- Staff, students, and parents in the post-primary school interviews described barriers to engaging in remote learning such as not having a suitable space for focused work, access to reliable internet, enough devices for everyone in the home as well as environmental stressors such as noise in the home.
- Teachers reported that parental involvement and support was a crucial factor in how well students with SEN engaged in remote learning in the home environment.

Wellbeing

- Post-primary students and their parents reported how difficult it was for many students with SEN not seeing their friends in person during the school closures. Some participants (parents and staff) were particularly worried about the wellbeing of students who did not have any friends and only socialised during school as they were particularly isolated during school closures.
- Post-primary school students reported keeping in contact with friends through texting, social media, going for walks, and playing video games together, while in the special class.
- In the interviews, students with SEN varied in their emotional responses to the school closures. Post-primary school students reported feeling a range of emotions including happiness, excitement for some at the beginning, but in the main students reported experiencing anxiety, stress, boredom, cabin fever, confusion, and loneliness. Many students reported missed the classroom setting while others felt more comfortable learning from home, particularly those who enjoyed being less restricted in their behaviours (e.g., stimming, moving, taking breaks). However, some parents reported that their children's wellbeing was better when they were in school.
- Many interview participants (parents, teachers, and students) spoke of how important routine is for many students with SEN and how the lack of routine during the school closures negatively affected their wellbeing.

Chapter 5: Findings – Experiences After School Closures

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the mixed methods findings in relation to the experiences of students following the period of school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter is broadly split into three sections that explore experiences thematically, these themes are provisions and supports, learning and engagement and student wellbeing.

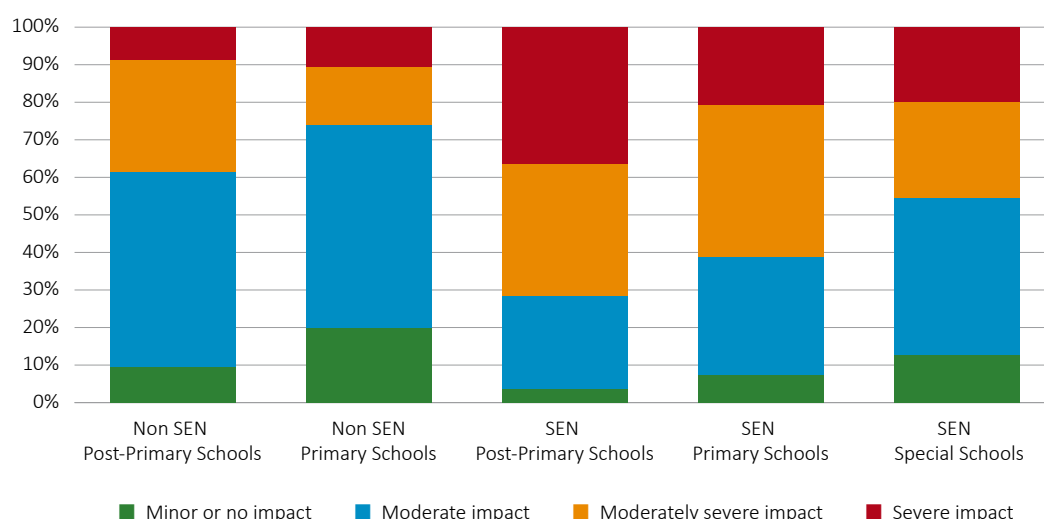
The two major school closures in Ireland occurred between March and June 2020 and between January and April 2021 (DES, 2020a & 2020b; DE, 2021). This chapter details how students with SEN and their schools adapted to schools reopening. It contains four sub-chapters: Learning and Engagement after School Closures, Supports and Provisions after School Closures, the Home-School Relationship after School Closures, and Wellbeing after School Closures.

5.2 Learning and Engagement after School Closures

5.2.1 Impact on Learning for Students with and Without SEN

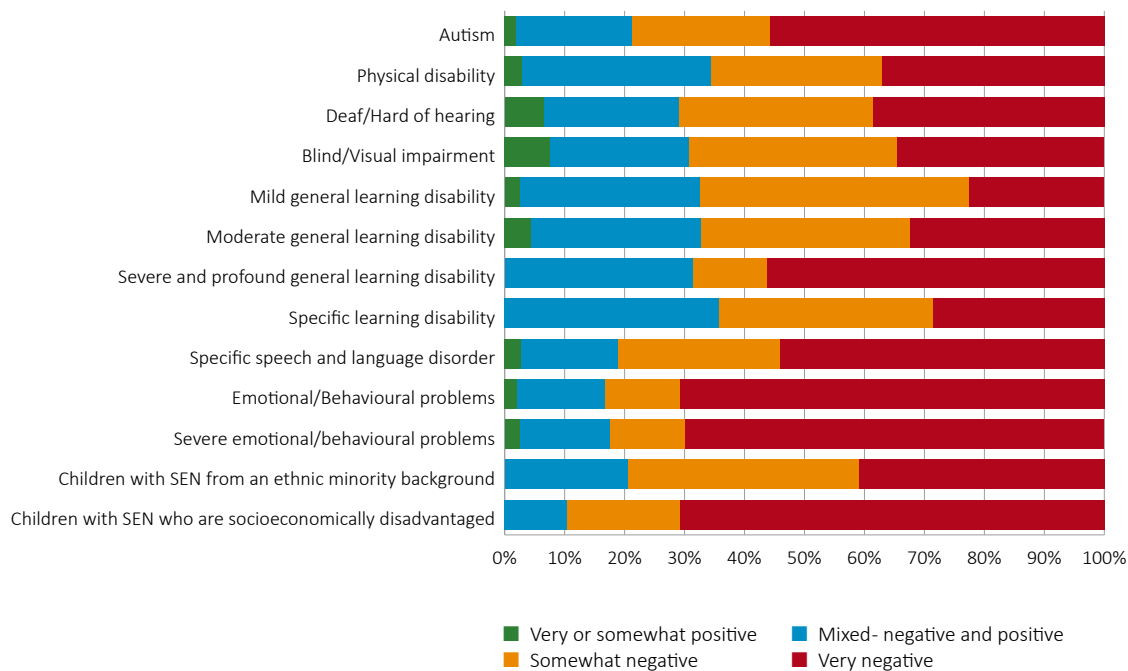
Most principals in the principal survey believed that their students' learning had been at least moderately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Like their views on the impact of the pandemic on their students' wellbeing, mainstream primary and post primary principals also felt that children with SEN were most affected. However, unlike with the patterns observed in relation to children's wellbeing, in this case ratings about the perceived negative impact on children's learning were higher across the board for students with SEN (see Figure 9). Interestingly, primary and post-primary school principals perceived the impact of the pandemic on students with SEN as much more severe than special school principals.

Figure 9. Principals' perceptions of the impact on children's learning (Principal Survey)



Most special school principals in the principal survey perceived the impact to be mostly negative for children with emotional or behavioural difficulties and for those with a specific speech and language disorder, as well as for children with SEN from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (see Figure 10). Children with a physical disability other than a hearing or visual impairment and those with a specific learning disability were seen to be least affected.

Figure 10. Special school principals: impact on children's learning (Principal Survey)



5.2.2 Concerns for Learning for Students with and Without SEN

In the CSL Teacher and Child Survey, principals, teachers, and parents in mainstream primary schools were asked if they were concerned that children's learning had been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We analysed these data using linear regression analyses (Table 7), to see whether concern was higher for (1) parents of children with SEN compared to parents of children without SEN (2) teachers of classrooms with higher proportions of children with SEN in them (3) principals of schools with higher proportions of children with SEN in them.

Overall, the analysis showed that children's SEN status was a significant predictor of parental, teacher, and principal concern. As a parent, having a child with an identified SEN was associated with higher levels of concern about the impact of the pandemic on that child's learning. For teachers, teaching a class with a higher proportion of students with intellectual or learning disabilities or a higher proportion of students with behavioural difficulties was associated with higher levels of concern. However, while these results were observed for teachers overall, the former was only a significant predictor of concern for teachers of Cohort A (i.e., those teaching the younger cohort of children), while the latter was not a significant predictor of concern for teachers in either individual cohort. Finally, for principals, the larger the proportion of students needing learning support or the larger the proportion of students with behavioural difficulties, the higher the level of concern expressed by principals.

Table 7. Concern about the impact of the pandemic on children's learning/wellbeing

		Learning				Wellbeing			
		<i>n</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Parent views									
SEN yes/no	Cohorts AB	795	0.15	4.31	.000	795	0.18	5.17	.000
SEN yes/no	Cohort A	362	0.14	2.75	.006	362	0.25	4.80	.000
SEN yes/no	Cohort B	433	0.15	3.24	.001	433	0.13	2.69	.007
Teacher views									
Learning disability	Cohorts AB	170	0.22	2.98	.003	170	0.01	0.16	.876
Learning disability	Cohort A	83	0.29	2.68	.009	83	-0.02	-0.14	.885
Learning disability	Cohort B	87	0.11	0.98	.329	87	-0.03	-0.26	.799
Behavioural difficulties	Cohorts AB	171	0.15	1.99	.048	171	0.08	1.02	.311
Behavioural difficulties	Cohort A	83	0.21	1.89	.062	83	0.01	0.10	.920
Behavioural difficulties	Cohort B	88	0.11	1.06	.293	88	0.13	1.26	.212
Principal views									
Learning disability	Cohorts AB	135	0.26	3.06	.003	135	0.22	2.59	.011
Behavioural difficulties	Cohorts AB	135	0.19	2.29	.023	135	0.21	2.49	.014

5.2.3 Concerns about Education and Future Learning

Many interview participants spoke of their concerns about how the pandemic impacted the learning of students with SEN. Some of the most common concerns were in relation to falling behind in learning, anxiety about upcoming examinations, and feeling more distracted in school.

5.2.4 Falling Behind

Many interview participants expressed concern that students with SEN had fallen behind in their learning due to the school closures. In the primary and special school interviews, teachers described the potential widening of the gap between students with and without SEN.

I do find now, due to the closure, the gaps are really widening, that those particular children that I tailored the curriculum towards are really being left behind (PS Teacher 3).

With regards to his development and regression, it is holding him back not being in school because he's not getting the full attention, when he goes back now after being closed for so long, it will take a bit of time to settle in (SS P8 Mother of boy with moderate ID & ASD, age 11).

In the special school interviews, parents also spoke of their children forgetting what they had learned in school during the lockdown.

It's been hard. I see mentally, she can count to 20, she can go to 30 if you prompt her. But she's actually forgetting it, so I see regression in some little areas like that for her learning (SS P1 Mother of Girl with Severe-Profound ID, Age 13).

In the post-primary school interviews, parents reported that the progress of their child's learning development was impacted, with many parents suggesting that their child did not learn as much as they would have in the school setting.

I think his learning has went backwards, I can see the difference if he had of been in school and someone had of been teaching him, there were Zoom calls like what we're doing now, but it's still not the same (PPS4 P2 Mother of Boy in 2nd Year with Dyslexia & Dyscalculia).

When asked how he was feeling about his son returning to school and whether or not he was behind in his learning, the father of a boy in the special school responded in the following way.

A little trepidation, his teacher gave him a Teams meeting last week, and he was so good. His language was better than I've ever heard it. I was in tears in the background. I'm a bit dramatic anyway! But no, I was really proud and that kind of lifted me a bit because I thought, 'Well ok, it's going to be ok' (Father of boy with moderate ID & DS, age 12).

Participants across all settings noted that they witnessed regression in students' learning as a result of school closures. Both parents and staff reported on the impact on students' academic attainment as well as their social and life skills. Overall, staff and parents were concerned over the loss of learning caused by the school closures across all settings.

5.2.5 State Examinations

Many interview participants from the post-primary schools also expressed concern about examinations, such as the Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate.

I'm very worried about the Leaving Cert. I'm worried about the exams, because the certificate that he got for the Junior Cert, 60% of it was based on what we did at home together (PPS1 P3 Mother of Autistic Boy in TY With Dyslexia, DCD, & SPD).

Well, I was worried about the mocks for the Junior Cert. I'm worried because the course isn't covered in any subject. It's just not covered. In the mocks, a question came up on the Renaissance and she just hasn't done it (PPS3 P4 Mother of Autistic Girl in 3rd Year with Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, & DCD).

Staff and parents noted that because students had missed out on key learning experiences, they were concerned that they were not prepared for state examinations.

5.2.6 Feeling More Distracted

Post-primary school students reported in their interviews that now they are back in school, they feel more distracted than before.

I definitely find it harder to concentrate. I find it hard; my mind wanders an awful lot more than it used to (PPS1 S1 Boy In 6th Year with Dyslexia & DCD).

Parents of post-primary school students with SEN also reported changes in their child's ability to focus following school closures.

He got a few reports that he wasn't concentrating, and he was easily distracted. And before, he was so good in school and then all of a sudden, he's getting reports that he's distracted (PPS4 P5 Mother of Boy In 3rd Year with Anxiety).

This theme highlights that staff, parents as well as students noted that for some students there appeared to be changes in their ability to focus and concentrate as a result of the school closures. Staff noted that sustaining attention for longer classes of one hour appeared to be extremely challenging for some students.

5.2.7 Attitudes Towards Learning and Education

Students, parents, and staff in the post-primary school interviews were asked to reflect on how they felt the school closures and remote learning had impacted upon student attitudes towards school. Some participants reported that students appreciate school more after going through the experience of remote learning.

You don't really know how good something is until it's taken away. I didn't know how good it was to learn in school until I had to learn at home (PPS4 S2 – Boy in 2nd Year with Dyslexia & Dyscalculia).

However, other participants reported that some students have lost interest in school post-lockdown.

I'd say his feelings about school have changed. He's looking forward to finishing. And before that, he would have said he really liked school (PPS1 P1 Mother of Boy in 6th Year with Dyslexia & DCD).

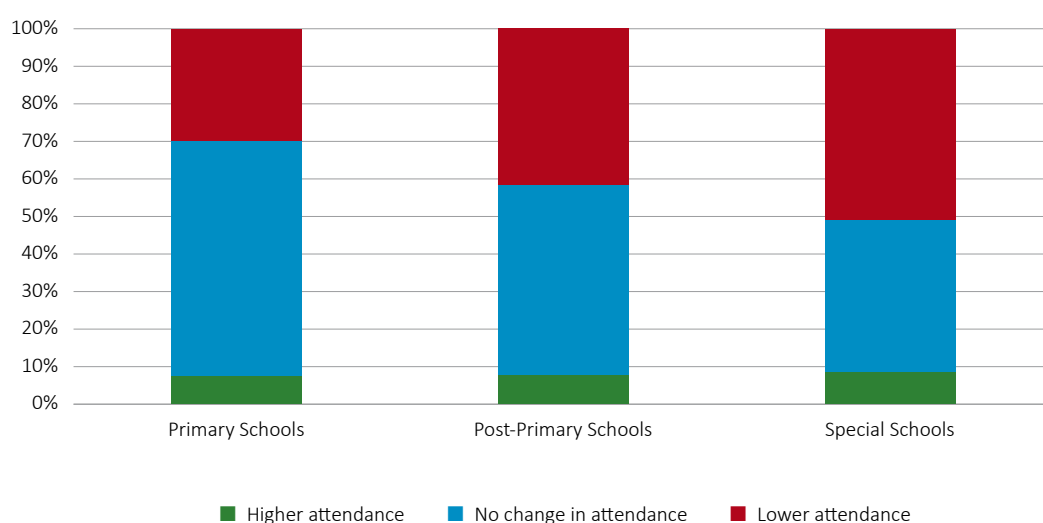
Across all settings participants reported that students were generally happy to return to school and had a new-found appreciation for school. Parents and staff noted students smiling upon returning to in-person schooling and their elation at seeing their friends in-person again. However, some participants also reported that some students lost interest in school, and it was more challenging to engage them following the closures.

5.3 Supports and Provisions after School Closures

5.3.1 Attendance Since Schools Reopened

Since the schools reopened in Autumn 2021, most principals in the principal survey reported either no change in attendance (50.0%, n = 145) or lower attendance (36.9%, n = 107). As with attendance during remote learning, this varied depending on the school type, with special school principals being most likely to indicate that attendance rates for students with SEN had lowered (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Attendance changes since schools reopened: SEN students (Principal Survey)



In the interviews, post-primary school staff spoke about attendance issues following the school closures. Staff spoke about a decrease in attendance due to a combination of public health guidelines regarding isolation as well as students no longer wanting to attend school.

I think this more casual approach to attendance is because they have realised they can stay out and actually, a lot of the time, there is very little we can do about it (PPS3 Principal).

However, other school staff reported an increase in the attendance of their students with SEN following school closures.

Our attendance is better than it was before COVID. Well, I think it's parents just kicking them out the door, you know? I've a first year SET group and they're always in. It's rare that they're absent (PPS4 SET & Year Head 1).

5.3.2 Staff Shortages and Increased Workloads

In the interviews, post-primary school staff reflected upon the implications of staff shortages after schools reopened. The participants described how many colleagues were often on sick-leave due to COVID-19, which resulted in increased workloads for their colleagues and not enough staff to meet the needs of students with SEN, with one school reporting how they had to send students' home.

We would have struggled with staff shortages and in particular when we are short-staffed, SET doesn't get covered. So, we have to cover each other's groups because they're so short (PPS3 SET 2).

In general, many staff noted that workload increased during the COVID-19 period and it was challenging to support students with SEN to the standard that they had previously.

5.3.3 School Responses to Student Regression

In the principal survey, principals were asked to list up to four things that their school had done to respond to regression in learning for children with SEN after school closures. These responses are detailed in Table 8.

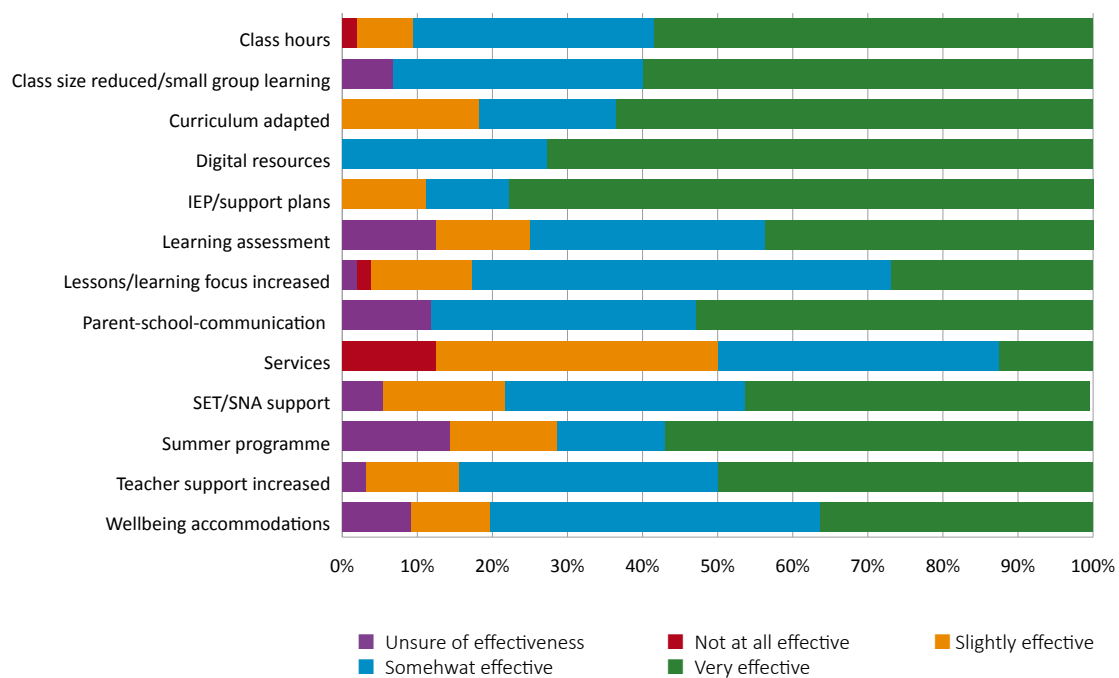
Table 8. School Responses to Student Regression (Principal Survey)

Regression Response	Primary		Post-Primary		Special	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Class hours	34.40%	42	24.30%	36	35.70%	20
Class size reduced/small group learning	4.90%	6	8.10%	12	5.40%	3
Curriculum adapted	8.20%	10	5.40%	8	5.40%	3
Digital resources	4.10%	5	5.40%	8	5.40%	3
IEP/support plans	0.80%	1	2.70%	4	8.90%	5
Learning assessment	11.50%	14	8.10%	12	7.10%	4
Lessons/learning focus increased	19.70%	24	31.80%	47	10.70%	6
Parent school communication	5.70%	7	6.80%	10	16.10%	9
Services	1.60%	2	3.40%	5	5.40%	3
SET/SNA support	28.70%	35	23.00%	34	7.10%	4
Summer programme	4.10%	5	3.40%	5	3.60%	2
Teacher support increased	8.20%	10	18.90%	28	8.90%	5
Wellbeing accommodations	19.70%	24	31.80%	47	42.90%	24
Other	6.60%	8	9.50%	14	12.50%	7

The most frequent response to regression by principals in the survey was to utilise class hours, which principals reported were extremely useful and of which they would have liked more. Principals also increased the academic component of learning, with more focus on academic skills and catch-up classes and increased withdrawal and the amount of one-to-one time for children with special education staff, and greater input from teachers on what children needed to catch up on. A major response from schools was to create more wellbeing accommodations such as a staggered return to school, movement breaks, wellbeing programmes, and other accommodations such as quiet spaces for children with SEN.

Principals in special and mainstream schools also rated how effective their responses to student regression were in the principal survey. Although IEP/support plans were not used as much as other responses, they were rated as being most effective, followed by digital resources and curriculum adaptations. Increasing the focus on academic learning, although used by nearly all schools, was not rated as being particularly effective (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Responses for addressing student regression in learning (Principal Survey)



5.3.4 The Home-School Relationship after School Closures

Parents, staff, and students reflected on how school closures and the return to school impacted the relationship between home and school. Many parents and staff in the interviews reported that the relationship between home and school had improved compared to before the school closures. Parents of post-primary school students reported that after the pandemic, they respect the school more, are happy with the contact from the school, and have a better relationship with their child's teachers and SNAs.

I suppose I probably respect them more (PPS2 P1 Father of Boy in TY With Dyslexia).

I think because of COVID, I developed a relationship with the SNAs. I wouldn't have had that relationship now because we got to know them over Zoom (PPS3 P4 Mother of Autistic Girl in 3rd Year with Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, & DCD).

In the special school interviews, the following parent remarked on how seeing how her child's teachers had to respond to such diversity within the class led to a new-found appreciation for them.

There's about seven in the class and not two of them that would be on the exact same level all the time. And the teaching that they have to give to varieties of children on a daily basis. And I've only learned that over COVID. Like, they're great teachers (SS P9 Mother of Twin Girls with Moderate ID, Age 18).

Strengthened home-school relationships and communication were also reported in the interviews with post-primary school staff.

I really felt that the parents appreciated all that we were doing for the students, they really did get it and knew we were doing our best and they were genuinely very appreciative, for the most part (PPS3 SENCO).

However, some interview participants in post-primary schools reported a more negative impact on the home-school relationship. Some parents expressed frustration because they felt that the school was communicating less now than before the pandemic. Some parents described how they had face-to-face communication with the school, and how impersonal it felt to only be contacted through technology.

Some post-primary school staff described a divide growing between the school and certain families. They remarked that this divide depended on the particular family and was impacted by various factors including, timing, frequency, and mode of communication.

Sometimes it depended on parents, it strengthened it because there was more home regular contact and then in other ways the divide grew, if they didn't have the facilities, they felt guilty and the divide actually grew more (PPS4 Deputy Principal & SENCO).

While some participants noted that a 'divide' grew between the school and students' families, in general the findings indicate that across all settings parents and staff felt that the relationship between the school and students' homes was not impaired due to the school closures.

5.4 Wellbeing after School Closures

A key concern for many after schools reopened was the wellbeing of students with SEN as they transitioned back into daily school life. This chapter contains Missed Experiences and Delayed Development after School Closures, How Students with SEN Settled Back into School, COVID-19 and Returning to School, Increased Focus on Wellbeing in Schools Post-School Closures, Impacts on Student Wellbeing, and Social Wellbeing after School Closures.

5.4.1 Missed Experiences and Delayed Development

Many students, parents, and staff in the interviews reflected on how the school closures and COVID-19 lockdown robbed children of experiences important for their development. In the post-primary school and primary school interviews, staff suggested that due to missing key life experiences such as Communion, birthday celebrations, school tours, 6th class graduations, students' social, emotional, and educational development was negatively impacted. Staff reported that many students' general development was often not where it should have been because of key missed experiences within the environment of the school setting. This was particularly evident in relation to students who had transitioned from primary school to secondary school during the pandemic and also students in third year.

I am worrying about how much they will get left behind, there is so much they are going to miss out on, I just worry that they are not getting the full preparation that they should be for the transition into secondary school (PS Teacher 2).

I think it's really affected different age groups differently. I look at our current third years, this was their first full year in secondary school and those two years, there was no school (PPS3 SET 2).

I mean the kids I work with, they haven't finished a full year of school since fourth class, so the immaturity levels are something else (PPS4 SNA 1).

Many parents of post-primary school students spoke of how their children missed out on important life events and opportunities to become more independent during the lockdown.

They missed birthday parties, their birthdays came and went, various celebrations, my twins made their Communion with no celebration, they had no school tours, they had none of the fun stuff (PPS2 P3 Mother of Boy in 2nd Year with Dyscalculia & TBI).

Interview participants also spoke of how some children in the special school and autism classes had regressed in their behaviour during the lockdowns.

Because of this lockdown, he's gone so lazy. He won't even use his spoon or fork to feed himself. He wants me to do it (SS P3 Father of Boy with Severe ID, Age 6).

One or two kids in particular have regressed massively... they were toilet trained before Christmas and now they're back in nappies, parents in absolute dire straits, crying on the phone. Parent black and blue from behaviour problems at home (PS AC Deputy Principal & SENCO).

It was evident across all settings that parents and staff believed that students had missed out on key experiences both in terms of their academic learning as well as in terms of their general development. Parents and teachers alike reported that students in post-primary, primary and special schools in particular missed out on key experiences due to the school closures and that this led to regression in many areas such as social development and academic skills.

5.4.2 Settling Back into School

Interviews with the post primary schools revealed that most students with SEN were excited to return to school. In the special school interviews, many parents expressed how happy their children were to return to school.

Every day now when he sees the school bus coming, he's all excited to go out to the bus and get to school (SS P3 Father of Boy with Severe ID, Age 6).

He's gone back today, and you've never seen a happier boy to be heading back to school (SS P6 Father of boy with moderate-severe ID & ASD, age 17).

In the post-primary school, primary school and special school interviews students reported feeling happy to see their friends, to be back in a classroom, and to have a routine again. Interview participants reported that most students transitioned back into school easily or that they found it difficult at first but adapted within a few weeks.

Oh like a duck to water. He was thrilled to get back in. Thrilled to see everyone, Teachers and everything (PPS2 P4 Mother of Autistic Boy in 1st Year).

I think the joy, I suppose, of seeing his friends again, kind of made it a bit easier for him to come back to school (PS AC P1 Mother of Autistic Boy, age 12).

I think they have hugely adapted to being back at school, and I think they're actually happy to be back at school (SS P3 Father of Boy with Severe ID, Age 6).

However, some parents said that their children struggled to transition back to the school environment.

He didn't like going back into school because then he was meeting all the people he hadn't met in ages. And then it was like starting school all over again (PPS4 P5 Mother of Boy in 3rd Year with Anxiety).

In the special school interviews, a teacher reported a concerning issue with school refusal post-lockdown.

I'd say at the moment there are at least five children in our school that are finding it very stressful to come into school. And an awful lot of that is due to the long break that they had at home (SS SET 6).

While there were accounts of challenges with adjusting to in-person schooling most participants across all school settings reported that students adjusted well and in general preferred to be back to in-person schooling.

5.4.3 COVID-19 and Returning to School

Many students in the interviews were worried about contracting COVID-19 when they returned to school, particularly those with vulnerable people in their household.

He was very anxious and when they came back, he was keeping lunches because he didn't want to touch his bag. He would come home and he was starving (PPS2 P2 Mother of Boy in 2nd Year with Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, ADHD, & OCD).

Parents of children in special school were asked how they felt about their child returning to school in relation to COVID-19. Many parents reported great confidence in the school's ability to keep their children safe.

I can't wait. I'm absolutely delighted. As regards to safety, they couldn't be any safer. I have huge confidence in the school (SS P1 Mother of Girl with Severe-Profound ID, Age 13).

However, some parents from the special school expressed concern about sending their child back to school.

I don't mind him going back to school. I'm just nervous of COVID itself to be honest with you and that's the reason why I didn't send him back last Thursday (SS P8 Mother of Autistic Boy with Moderate ID, Age 11).

In the interviews, participants reported varied reactions to new COVID-19 rules in schools. In the post-primary schools, some participants reported that COVID-19 rules and restrictions were challenging for some students; masks were uncomfortable and hindered communication; lack of movement between classes was difficult; and sanitisation measures were stressful.

I was having panic attacks coming back in... obviously when this piece of fabric on you [mask] for so many hours, it does get a bit on you (PPS1 S2 Boy in TY with DCD & SPD).

Interview participants described COVID-19 rules dramatically changing the school environment that students had been familiar with before the pandemic.

It was just there was no fun, they couldn't see anyone's face, you couldn't go close to anybody. Lunch time you just sat at the desk (PPS3 P4 – Mother of Autistic Girl in 3rd Year with Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, & DCD).

In the special school interviews, some parents reported that their children did not understand COVID-19 rules and why they needed to follow them.

She won't wear a mask and she has no filter. She doesn't realise to keep her distance and things like that (SS P1 Mother of Girl with Severe-Profound ID, Age 13).

However, some students with SEN were happy to follow COVID-19 rules, adhering to them strictly and expressing frustration when others did not follow them. With some interview participants remarked that students with SEN adhered to COVID-19 guidelines to a greater degree compared to their peers without SEN.

I think she was probably one of the last ones in her primary school to give up her mask. She wore her mask constantly (PPS3 P1 Mother of Girl In 2nd Year with Epilepsy & DLD).

In addition, some students reported in their interviews that following COVID-19 regulations in school made them feel safer and some expressed frustration with other students who would not follow the rules.

He kind of came home a bit agitated a few days saying there was a few guys in his class that weren't wearing face masks. And he found that quite stressful because we had been so conscious of managing infection (PPS3 P3 Mother of Autistic Boy in 5th Year with Dyslexia & DCD).

Across all settings some staff expressed concern over how social distancing would impact on supports for students with SEN.

We have a lot of children with special needs who have an SNA and who need to be in very close contact with their SNA... you mightn't necessarily be able to socially distance from a child if they're about to put themselves or others in harm's way (PS Teacher 1).

This illustrates that some students were concerned for the safety of vulnerable loved ones as well as their own safety due to the COVID-19 virus. Participants reported that while they were generally happy that schools were reopened this was not without concerns and some participants were very nervous about contracting COVID-19.

5.4.4 Increased Focus on Wellbeing in Schools Post-School Closures

In the interviews, many school staff reported an increased focus on student wellbeing when schools reopened with staff reporting that after the school closures, their first concern was for the wellbeing of students.

We focused on wellbeing a lot when they first came back rather than learning. It was very much like, make sure they're happy and OK in school and then we'll try and teach them something (PPS4 SET & Year Head 1).

I'd be mostly concerned about her mental wellbeing out of everything, whatever about academically (PS Teacher 3).

In the special school interviews, teachers spoke of changing as little as possible and retaining a routine that children were familiar with to aid them to transition back to the school setting.

We minimized as much as possible any changes within the school so that the kids could kind of slot back in where they slotted out, you know? (SS SET 1).

In the post-primary school interviews, staff also spoke of new counselling supports put in place for students.

We have put more emphasis on connection, and counselling has become a huge thing. We have contracted a private psychotherapist for 16 hours per week and she comes in and works with groups and sees individuals. This is a huge need (PPS3 Principal).

Across all settings interviews participants stressed that there was more of an emphasis on the wellbeing of students than there had been prior to the school closures. Staff noted that upon schools reopening the emphasis was on ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all students.

5.4.5 Impact on Student Wellbeing

In general, principals in the principal survey believed that the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively impacted the entire student populations' wellbeing, including students with and without SEN. Mainstream school principals also suggested that the negative effects were more pronounced for students with SEN. However, an examination of principals' ratings when considering both SEN status and school type suggests a less straightforward pattern. As seen in Figure 13, post-primary school students with SEN were seen to be most negatively impacted, followed by students with SEN in special schools.

Special school principals were also asked about the impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of children with specific categories of SEN in the principal survey. In general, these principals perceived the impact to be most negative for children with emotional or behavioural difficulties and, more broadly, for children with SEN from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (see Figure 14). Conversely, children with various forms of physical disabilities and those with severe or profound general learning disabilities were seen to be least affected.

Figure 13. Principals' perceptions of the impact on children's wellbeing (Principal Survey)

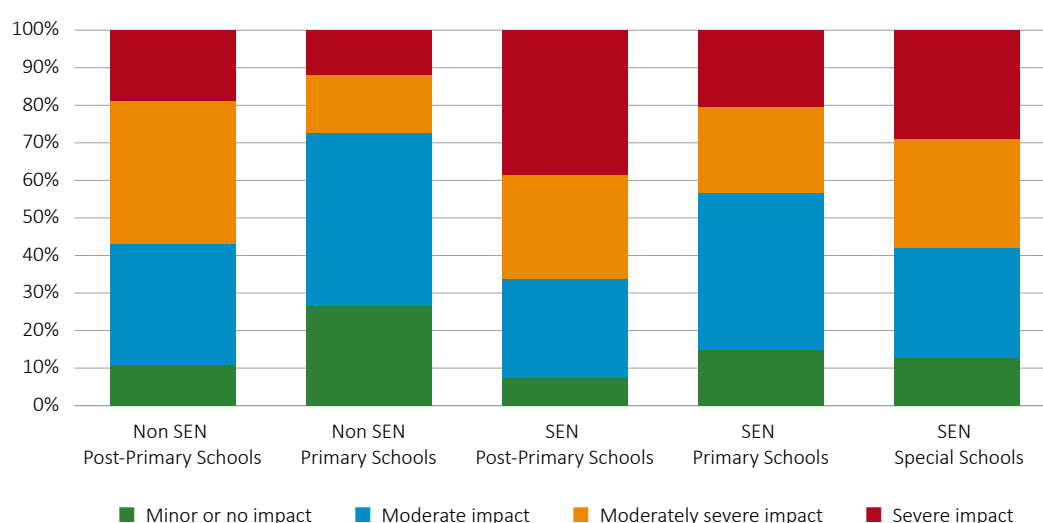
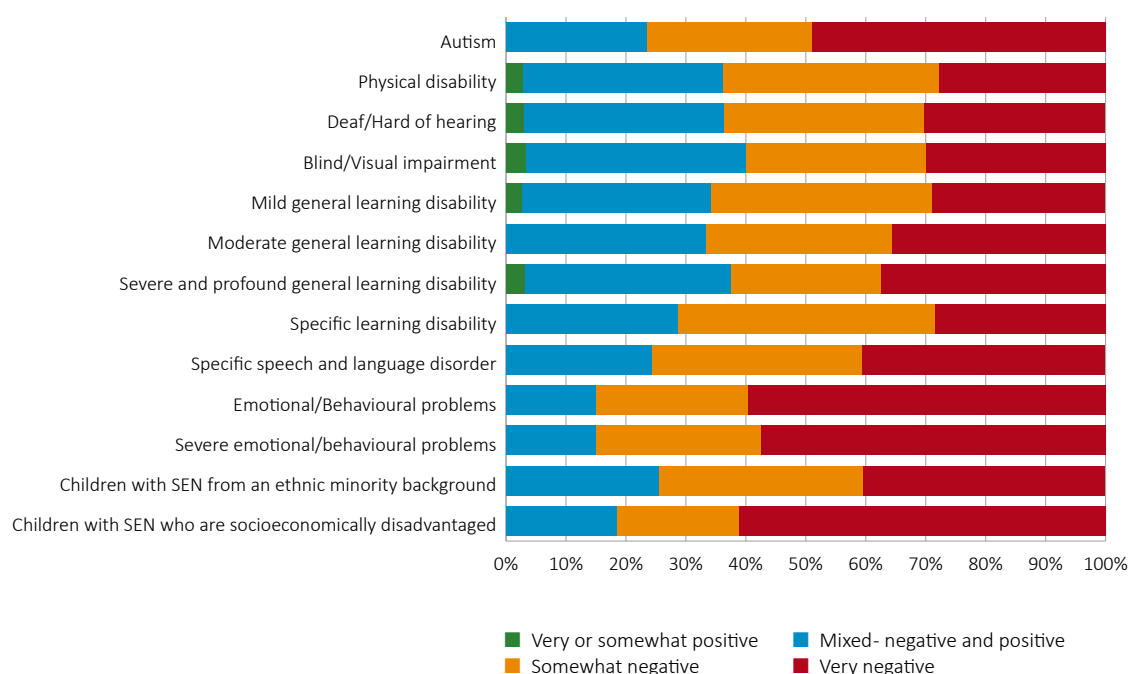


Figure 14. Special school principals: impact on children's wellbeing (Principal Survey)



5.4.6 Primary School Principal, Teacher, and Parent Concerns

In the CSL Child and Teacher Survey, parents, teachers, and school principals in mainstream primary schools were asked to reflect on the impact of the repeated school closures and to rate their level of concern about the impact of these closures on the wellbeing of their child/the children in their class or school. To investigate whether there was an association between SEN and the level of concern expressed, we conducted a series of linear regression analyses on the data. Overall, children's SEN status was a significant predictor of parental and principal concern, but not of teacher concern. Specifically, for parents, having a child with an identified special need was associated with higher levels of concern about the impact of the pandemic on that child's wellbeing. For principals, the larger the proportion of students needing learning support or of students with behavioural difficulties, the higher the level of concern expressed by principals.

5.4.7 Children's Views on their Wellbeing

In the CSL Child and Teacher Survey, children with special education needs and emotional and behavioural disorders in primary schools were surveyed in 2019 and 2021 about their psychological wellbeing, school engagement, academic confidence, bullying behaviours, and experiences of being victimised by bullies. At the same time, their teachers were asked to report on the children's special needs and the children's behaviour in classrooms.

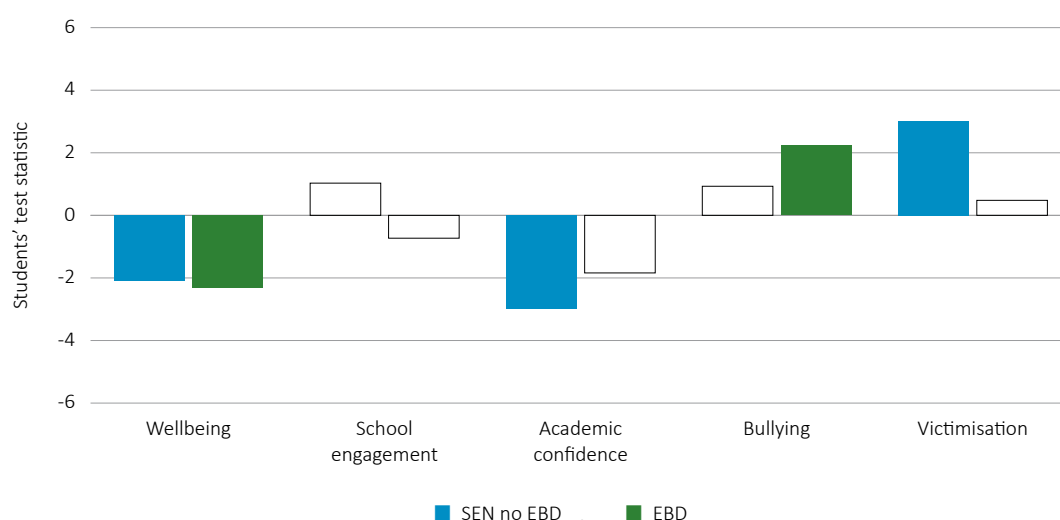
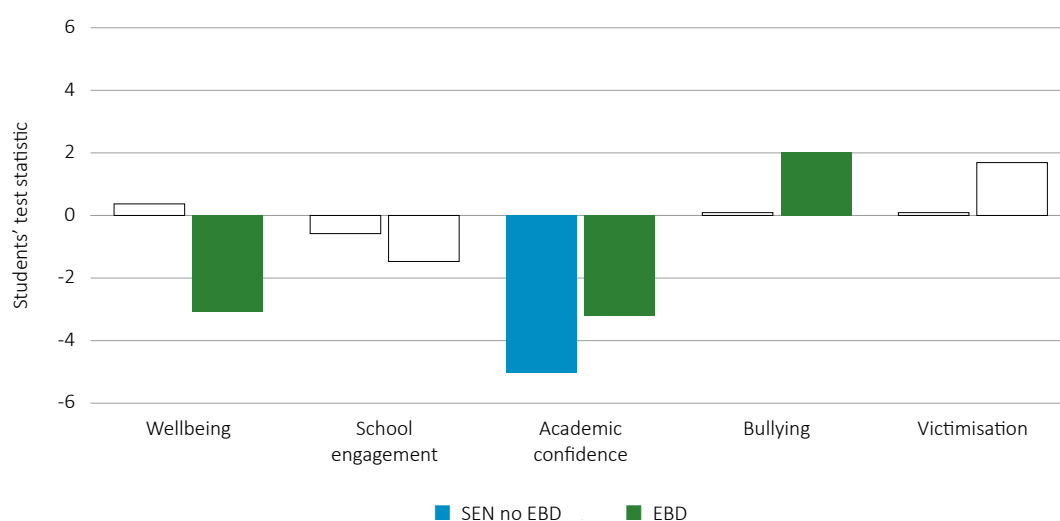
Using advanced statistical modelling the impact of having special educational needs on children's wellbeing and behavioural outcomes was analysed. Special needs were measured as physical, visual, hearing, or speech impairments, autism, specific learning disability, general learning disability, moderate/severe/profound learning disability, and emotional or behavioural disturbance (EBD). The group of children with special needs was split into two categories: those with SEN and EBD and those without ('SEN no EBD'). This revealed quite different patterns of wellbeing and behaviour for children who did, and did not, have emotional or behavioural difficulties in the classroom context.

The figures in this chapter show statistically significant¹ results in colour. These results are generalisable to the wider population of children in Irish primary schools. In 2019, children in 2nd class with SEN but without EBD reported lower wellbeing, lower academic confidence, and more incidences of victimisation compared to children without SEN. When the children were in 4th class in 2021, the differences in wellbeing and victimisation were not present, however their academic confidence tended to be even lower compared to children without SEN.

In 2019, children in 2nd class with EBD reported lower wellbeing and more incidences of bullying others, compared to children without SEN. When the children were in 4th class in 2021, these differences remained, and the children also reported having lower academic confidence compared to children without SEN.

Together these results indicate that children with SEN felt less positive about themselves in general and academically, and were more prone to bullying and victimisation, than children without SEN across the first two years of the pandemic. While the longitudinal changes in wellbeing are not being investigated, the analysis of the predictable nature and strength of the relationship is still useful in that it illustrates that during this period there was a decrease in self-reported/teacher reported wellbeing for this cohort of children. As noted the data were collected in May to June in the year before and the year after the school closures, while it cannot be confirmed that the differences in findings were due to the pandemic the findings do illustrate that these differences did occur during this period. However, while these are useful findings it is worth noting that there are similar patterns for students generally as they progress through school in terms of their wellbeing (McCoy and Banks, 2011; Cosgrove et al, 2016).

1 Significance of $p = .05$ or less.

Figure 15. Children's reports on wellbeing in 2019 (2nd class) (CSL Child & Teacher Survey)**Figure 16. Children's reports on wellbeing in 2021 (4th class) (CSL Survey)**

5.4.8 Teacher's Perceptions of Children's Wellbeing

Data from the Children's School Lives child and teacher surveys also suggest that teachers were also more likely to observe that children with SEN had higher levels of social, emotional, and behavioural problems across the pandemic period.

In 2019, children in 2nd class with SEN but without EBD, and children with EBD, were reported by their teachers as having greater emotional problems, peer problems, and hyperactivity, compared to children without SEN. Also, children with EBD were reported by teachers to have greater conduct problems compared to children without SEN. These differences persisted to a similar degree when the children were in 4th class in 2021.

In 2021, children in senior infants were also observed by their teachers to have more conduct problems and peer problems if they had SEN with and without EBD. Senior infant children with EBD were, in addition, more likely to be rated by their teachers as having emotional problems and hyperactivity. Further research with this early years cohort will examine if these differences persist into 1st class and beyond.

Figure 17. Teacher's views on children's wellbeing in 2019 (2nd class) (CSL Survey)

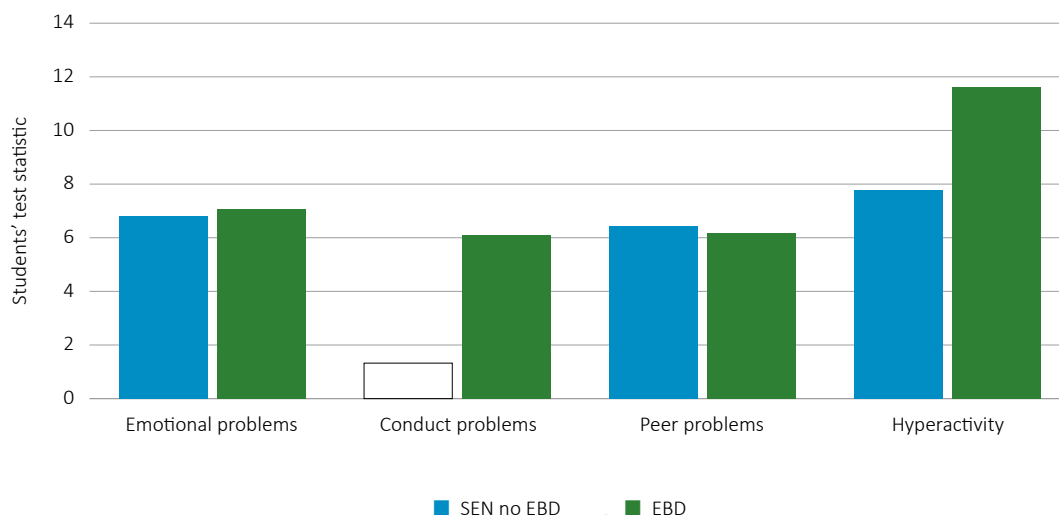


Figure 18. Teachers' views on children's wellbeing in 2021 (senior infants) (CSL Survey)

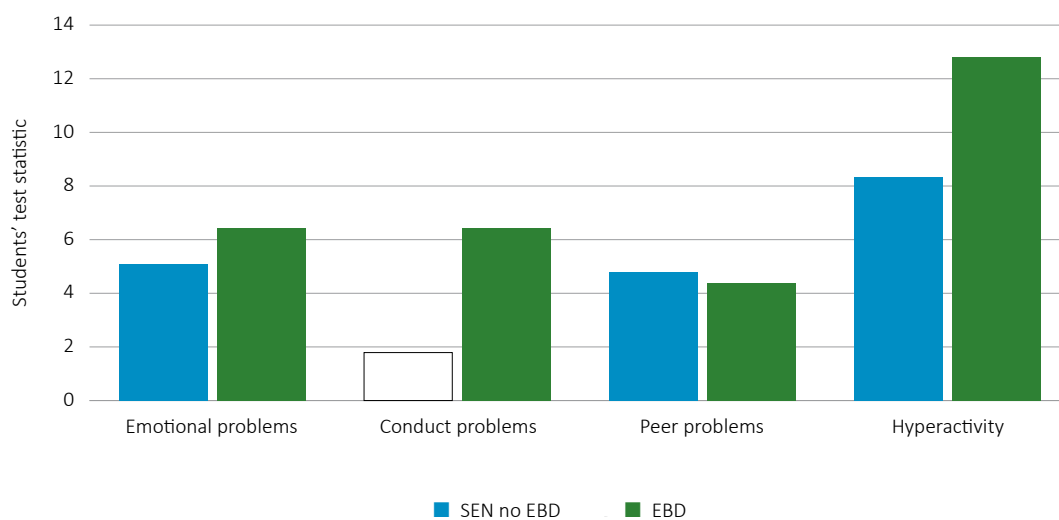
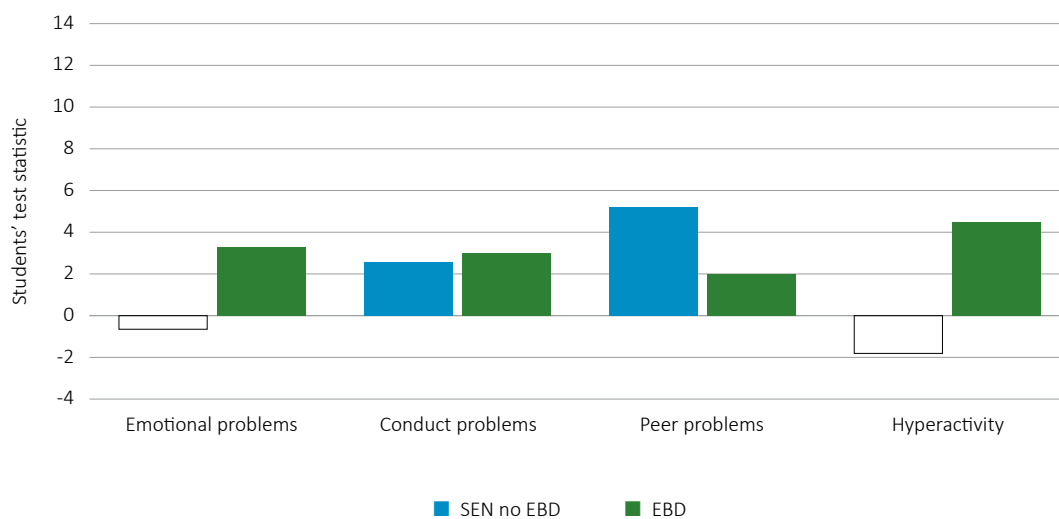


Figure 19. Teacher's views on children's wellbeing in 2021 (4th class) (CSL Survey)



5.4.9 Social Wellbeing after School Closures

In the interviews, many participants also noted an increase in social anxiety and decrease in social skills for students with SEN after the school closures. Parents and teachers also noticed a big impact on social skills.

I would see that some students have lost a lot of the skills, communication skills, language skills, in being able to initiate things, conversations or asking someone to play a game with them, those skills were lost or severely reduced, as a result of COVID (PPS2 SET 3).

A few post-primary students reported feeling more shy and less talkative than they had been before the pandemic. However, some post-primary school students also reported feeling more friendly and more talkative upon returning to school.

I'm a lot more friendly, I feel like because I couldn't spend time with a lot of people so it kind of opens up how I really feel about my friends and how much I like spending time with people (PPS2 S4 Girl In 4th Year Class).

In the post-primary school interviews, students and parents noted the impact on their social skills and interactions when they returned to school.

I think my social skills might have gone down like I was more nervous when talking to people in-person afterwards (PPS2 S3 Boy In 2nd Year with Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, ADHD, & OCD).

He's regressed a lot. Before the school closed, he would have been more independent. Now he just wants to do stuff on his own whether it's on his tablet or watch TV. That's all (SS P3 Father of boy with severe ID, age 6).

This theme illustrates that across all school settings students' social wellbeing was negatively impacted by the school closures. Many students regressed in terms of their social development and some students lost friendships due to the closures. However, participants also noted that some students became more enthusiastic in terms of social interaction as the loss of access to social contact during the closures increased their appreciation and desire for it when schools reopened.

5.5 Summary

This chapter detailed the experiences of students with SEN and their schools after schools reopened following the COVID-19 lockdowns. In this chapter we outlined the findings in the following domains: Wellbeing after School Closures, Learning and Engagement after School Closures, Supports and Provisions after School Closures, and the Home-School Relationship after School Closures. The findings suggest that most school principals believed that all of their students' learning had been at least moderately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and that this was more severe for those with SEN. In addition, mainstream school principals reported that children with SEN were most affected in terms of engagement and learning and reported that there was a greater negative impact on learning for children with SEN when compared to those without SEN. Some of the most common concerns were regression in learning, anticipatory exam anxiety, and higher levels of distraction observed for students. The findings highlight the concerns about education and the future learning of students with SEN, with many interview participants noting concerns about Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations.

This chapter also highlights the missed experiences and the delayed development of students. In post-primary interviews staff suggests that because of school closures, students' emotional, social, and educational development was impaired. This was found to be particularly evident for students who had transitioned from primary school to secondary school during the pandemic. In the surveys, teachers and principals in mainstream primary schools were asked to report their level of concern regarding all students and students with SEN with regards to the school closures, findings suggest that parents and staff experienced greater concern for the wellbeing of those with SEN due to the closure of schools. In addition, teachers reported that students with SEN had higher levels of emotional, behavioural, and social problems across the pandemic period.

This chapter also outlined findings that suggest that there was a greater focus on student wellbeing after the school closures, with staff reporting that when schools reopened a key focus was the wellbeing of the students. In the interviews, while some parents reported that their child's school was communicating less following the closures than prior to the pandemic, most parents and staff reported that the relationship between homes and schools had improved. Parents of post-primary school students noted that following the closures they have increased respect for the school and are satisfied with the levels of and forms of contact from the school, in addition they reported having better relationships with their child's teachers and SNAs.

While the interviews indicated that most students were happy to return to school after the school closures, the findings also suggest that some students struggled with returning to in-person learning. The COVID-19 rules and restrictions were challenging; masks were uncomfortable and impaired communication; lack of movement between classes was challenging; and sanitisation measures were cumbersome and stressful. Further, the findings from the interviews with parents, teachers, principals, and students indicate that many students experienced an increase in social anxiety as well as a decrease in social skills after the school closures. However, nevertheless the findings overall suggest that most students were happy to return to school, see their friends and have routine again, and while some found it difficult at first the findings suggest that this subsided for most within a few weeks.

Key Findings

Provisions and Supports

- Since the schools reopened, most principals reported either no change in attendance (50.0%) or lower attendance (36.9%).
- In the principal survey the most frequent school-based response to academic regression was to utilise 'class hours', which primary and post-primary principals reported were extremely useful and of which they would have liked more. Principals also increased the academic component of learning, with more of a focus on academic skills and catch-up classes.
- Principals of both special and mainstream schools also rated how effective their responses to student regression were. Although IEP/student support plans were not used as much as other responses, they were rated as being most effective, followed by digital resources and curriculum adaptations.
- Many post-primary school staff reported that digital learning technology can be very useful in traditional classrooms in particular in further supporting the needs of students with SEN.

Learning

- The majority of principals believed that their students' learning had been at least moderately negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and that children with SEN were most affected. Primary and post-primary principals perceived the impact of the pandemic on students with SEN as being much more severe than special school principals.

Wellbeing

- A major school response to the impact of the pandemic was more wellbeing accommodations such as a staggered return to school, movement breaks, wellbeing programmes, and provision of other accommodations such as quiet spaces for children with SEN.
- Many participants reflected on how the school closures and COVID-19 lockdown deprived children of experiences important for their social and academic development. In the post-primary schools, staff suggested that due to missing key life experiences, students' social, emotional, and educational development was not where they would expect it to be based on their age group.
- In the special school, many parents reported how happy their children were to return to school, students reported feeling happy to see their friends, to be back in a classroom, and to have a routine again. Interviews with post primary schools revealed that most students with SEN were happy to return to school.
- In general, school principals believed that the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively impacted students' wellbeing. Mainstream school principals also reported that the negative effects were more pronounced for students with SEN.
- Special school principals were also asked about the impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of children with specific categories of SEN. In general, they perceived the impact to be most negative for children with emotional or behavioural difficulties and, more broadly, for children with SEN from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Chapter 6: Findings – Looking Forward

6.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings regarding the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic school closures and associated experiences for students with SEN. Participants were invited to share their views regarding the lasting impact of the pandemic on students with SEN. It explores staff and parents' views on and concerns regarding the ongoing impact the pandemic, school closures and associated experiences may have on students with SEN. It also explores what students', parents' and staff views on what was learned which would inform practice if faced with school closures in the future.

6.2 Long-Term Impacts on Students with SEN

It is still too soon to know what the long-term impacts of school closures on students with SEN will be. However, many interview participants spoke about how they thought the closures will impact students and schools.

I don't know how quickly they'll bounce back from it. I would be worried that that would have a lasting impact on them (PPS3 SET 2).

I think that the effects of COVID are going to last for a while. Like, every student in the school system at the time lost out on formative years, no matter where they were in the school system (PPS4 SET & Year Head 1).

In addition to these concerns, school staff also expressed worry about how the increased use of technology as well as the lockdowns will impact upon the handwriting of students.

Some things that really suffered were like handwriting (PPS3 SENCO).

His handwriting has probably suffered. So that if it's required when he's in person, then it's a bit harder (PPS2 P1 – Father of Boy in TY With Dyslexia).

In the interviews, school staff also speculated that the school closures may leave a lasting impact on school culture. One positive impact of school closures mentioned by staff was the greater awareness of the different types of SEN and how to support students with SEN.

Teachers now are very aware of the SEN reg, how it's structured, what all the acronyms and letters and everything mean now (PPS4 SENCO & Year Head).

I think we are more aware of the differences in our students and our teaching has changed (PPS4 SET & Year Head 1).

In summary, participants reported being concerned about students falling behind in their learning, not being prepared for state examinations, and not having as much focus in school compared to before the pandemic. It is unknown whether these concerns will be translated into long-term impacts or whether students will adapt and overcome their concerns the longer they are in school.

6.3 Thinking About Future School Closures

In the post-primary school interviews, participants were asked to reflect on what schools should do if ever faced with more school closures in the future.

6.3.1 More IT Training

Students, parents, and staff in the interviews all highlighted the need for improving technology skills. Many students and parents said that they did not know how to use remote learning technology at the start of the pandemic and were never taught throughout the school closures. Students and parents stressed that if school closures were to ever happen again, schools must prioritise training students and parents on how to use this technology first.

I think definitely a bit of time, money and resources put into IT for kids with special needs so that they are able to use the IT as much as possible that it's not a sort of a bolt from the blue because our kids don't do well with things that come out of nowhere (PPS1 P4 – Mother of Autistic Boy In 1st Year With ADHD).

Participants in post-primary school interviews also highlighted the need for further training in remote learning technology.

I would say making sure that each student is fully trained in whatever system the school is using (PPS4 SET & Year Head 2).

6.3.2 Retaining Technology in the Classroom

Many staff reflected in their interviews on how useful digital learning technology can be in traditional classrooms and how this technology can further support the needs of students with SEN.

There's a huge amount of positive learning that's been taking place in terms of integrating ICT into teaching and learning (PPS2 Principal).

For my dyslexic students I love when it's typed directly onto Classroom, it's on the board – if they haven't got it finished, they can discreetly have a look at it later (PPS2 SET 1).

"We'd use technology in our classrooms a lot now and I think that's good for students with additional needs who like... say if it's dyspraxia, they don't have to write now. They can just type and things like that. So, I think we've adapted better for them as well from it (PPS4 SET & Year Head 1).

6.3.3 More Supports

In addition to more IT training, many interview participants said that future school closures should prioritise more supports for students with SEN.

I'd say just like more support online for people that have learning difficulties and then even for people that would have found it hard to kind of go back over stuff, or just get a bit of extra support there, would have been brilliant (PPS2 S2 – Girl In 6th Year with Dyslexia & DCD).

Staff in the post-primary school interviews also reported that mental health support for students was important.

We had a principal's conference recently and very strongly what came from the room, it was a room full of principals or chairpersons, very strongly was we're gone past having somebody called a guidance counsellor, we need a guidance teacher and a professional counsellor in schools (PPS2 Principal).

Across all settings it was evident that participants felt that more support was needed in terms of assessing and supporting students as well as in upskilling in technological skills.

6.3.4 More Communication

Many interview participants also stated that if there is ever another school closure, there must be more communication between schools and families. During the school closures many parents in the interviews were frustrated with not knowing when their child had classes or assignments due. In the future, parents said that they want to be more informed about their child's education and given more guidance on how they can support them at home.

If they'd send us out a timetable of the days she was supposed to be in class online and then if there was a programme of work that she was supposed to do. Even that would have helped (PPS3 P2 – Mother of Girl In 5th Year with MLD).

In the interviews, school staff further supported the need for increased communication if another lockdown ever occurs.

Regular contact is so important. And establishing a routine I think from early on. That was my biggest worry at the start, was they're just not going to know what's going on here. The best thing you can do for most of our kids is to establish a routine (PPS3 SET 2).

6.3.5 Consider the Workload and Timetables

Perhaps the most common recommendation in the interviews from post-primary school students for future school closures and remote learning was to assign less work. Earlier in the report, students spoke of the immense pressure they felt having so many assignments and not enough time to complete them.

Maybe less assignments. Where you can just focus on the ones that are needed like. Because I just felt like when you're getting so much, you're putting not a lot of effort into the rest of them. Just to get them over and done with. (PPS2 S2 – Girl In 6th Year with Dyslexia & DCD).

As well as considering how much work is assigned to students, in the future schools could consider the length of classes and how a student's classes are scheduled throughout the week.

I would say I think shorter classes. And then also, I'd say with the timetable, we found Monday and Tuesday were back-to-back classes and then as the week went on, Friday you could only have one or two classes. But to balance the online classes through the week (PPS3 P4 – Mother of Autistic Girl In 3rd Year with Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, & DCD).

6.4 Learning from the School Closures

Despite such a difficult transition to remote learning, many schools emerged from the lockdowns having gained some valuable lessons. Many school staff reflected on how certain elements of how things were done during school closures could be retained now that schools are open again.

6.4.1 Increasing Communication with Families

In the interviews, participants reported that during the school closures they learned how valuable communication with families is in regard to supporting students with SEN. SNAs in particular spoke about how direct communication with families helped them to better support students and know what was going on with the student at home before they came into school.

We decided that if there was a problem at home before he came to school, the mother would text me, and then I would be ready to help him... I know they say an SNA has nothing to do with the parents – it's the principal and the teachers – but the SNA is one-to-one with the student. They know them inside out" (PPS2 SNA 1).

Other teachers talked about how digital technology, such as zoom, can make it easier to keep parents informed in the future.

Even with the parent teacher meeting, there were teachers who were happy having them on Zoom, and then there were parents that were happy on Zoom as well (PPS1 SET).

Overall participants across all settings suggested that should school closures occur again it would be beneficial to ensure more bilateral communication between schools and families, to have more synchronous online classes, to consider the workload and ensure it is not excessive, to retain technology in classrooms and to provide the necessary supports to students in terms of their learning and wellbeing within all school settings.

6.5 Summary

This chapter outlined findings regarding the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic school closures and associated experiences for students with SEN. Participants were invited to share their views regarding the lasting impact of the pandemic on students with SEN. The findings outlined in this chapter indicate that many staff and parents have concerns regarding the ongoing impact the pandemic, school closures and associated experiences may have on students with SEN. At the time of this study participants expressed concern regarding learning regression for students with SEN, lack of preparation for exams, as well as students being less focused than what they were prior to the closures. When asked about future closures students, parents, and staff alike stressed the need to improve technology skills training, noting that should closures occur again that training in technology should be of paramount importance.

Furthermore, given the lack of access to supports during the lockdowns many interview participants (parents and teachers) stressed the importance of access to supports for students with SEN during school closures. In addition, this chapter outlined that teachers/staff in the post-primary interviews emphasised the importance of access to mental health support for SEN students who require it. Further, the findings outlined in this chapter illustrate that communication between schools and homes is of the utmost importance during school closures, with many parents advising that should there be future lockdowns, bidirectional channels of communication must be established early on. Parents noted the importance of being furnished with information regarding their child's timetable, assignments, attendance, and progress as well as the importance of being provided guidance on how best to support them from home.

Moreover, participants (parents, staff, and students) suggested that should future closures occur it would be better to assign less work, students spoke of being overloaded with work and not having sufficient time to complete all assignments. Participants also reported learning from the school closures with students and expressed the wish to retain new pedagogical and administrative practices developed because of the pandemic. Practices such as using zoom and digital technology for communication between schools and homes. Moreover, many expressed a desire to retain the use of technology in the classroom, and reported that digital technology can be useful in meeting the needs of those with SEN.

Key Findings

- Students regression: due to the lockdowns, parents, teachers, and principals reported concern regarding student learning regression, lack of exam preparation, and a decrease in focus when compared to before the school closures.
- A common recommendation from post-primary school students for future school closures and remote learning was a reduction in assigned schoolwork. Students reported experiencing immense pressure given the high number of assignments allocated with insufficient time to complete said assignments.
- Many post-primary school staff emphasised the usefulness of digital learning technology in traditional classrooms and how this technology can now further support the needs of students with SEN.
- Students, parents, and staff all highlighted the need for further training in digital technology skills to support them in adapting their pedagogy for the transition to online teaching.
- During the school closures, post-primary school staff reported an increased appreciation for direct communication (email, texting, phone-calls) with families regarding supporting students with SEN. SNAs in particular spoke about how direct communication with families helped them to better support students and understand their home environments and potential challenges.
- Parents reported that should future school closures occur they would like increased bidirectional communication with schools, to be more informed about their child's education (e.g., timetable, homework) and to be given more guidance on how they can support them at home.
- Post-primary school staff also speculated that the school closures may have a positive impact on school culture such as greater awareness of the different types of SEN and how to support students with SEN.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

In Ireland, schools first closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. As the lockdowns and school closures were extended, concern grew regarding the potential impact of these closures on children, and particularly children with special educational needs. This study, commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and conducted by researchers from the UCD School of Education, constitutes the first study specifically investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures on children with SEN in Ireland. Informed by a literature review and using a mixed-method approach, the study aimed to describe the impact of COVID-19 on students with special educational needs and their families, and to explore the individual, family, and school factors that may have protected students and families or further exacerbated the problems arising. The study also aimed to outline how schools responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and supported students with SEN during this time, with a view to identifying the characteristics that would render an education system more resilient in the event of future school closures.

The process of returning to schools, post-pandemic, was also examined to identify models of good practice in this regard.

The findings emanating from this study provide in depth insight into the lived experiences of students with special educational needs across all school sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic and school-related closures in Ireland from 2020-2022. Drawing on principal survey data and information shared during interviews with principals, teachers, SNAs, parents, and most importantly students themselves, this study provides detailed insight into the impact of COVID-19 on the learning and wellbeing of children with SEN. In general, a consistent negative impact of the first two years of the pandemic consisting of periods of school closure and lockdown was reported. This overarching finding is tempered by the few children and parents who reported benefits of school closures including avoiding the pressures of in-person school life that were exacerbated by the children's special needs. Many teachers, principals, SENCOs, SETs and SNAs interviewed in the study reported being under considerable stress while having to adapt their management, pedagogy, and curriculum in order to shift to remote teaching and learning. School staff also reported that considerable attention was given to meeting the needs of children with SEN on the return to school after school closures, including an increased focus on wellbeing and the provision of supports. This chapter summarises the key findings in relation to three key themes: Children's Engagement and Learning, Children's Wellbeing, and Provisions and Supports: School and Systemic and Level Responses. Findings from the current study will be discussed with reference to the key national and international literature review relating to COVID-19 and disasters in general. The chapter concludes with implications for future research and policy and suggestions for future research.

7.2 Children's Engagement and Learning

7.2.1 Student Engagement in Online Learning

In relation to children's engagement and learning, data from the current study indicates that the COVID-19 related school closures did have a significant impact on children with special educational needs. However, the impact was not the same across school types, across school stages, across family backgrounds or across types of SEN. As expected, principals reported that participation in remote/online learning was higher for children without SEN than those with SEN, and that participation amongst children varied by school type, being lower amongst students from special schools and younger children. This study supports and expands on findings within the national and international literature in terms of the reported negative impact on students' motivation and engagement with learning (Mohan et al., 2021). Students' reported engagement and negative perceptions of school closures were multi-faceted and related to factors such as the inability to study practical subjects effectively, feeling less motivated, lack of routine, time-management issues, lack of teacher support, lack of peer interaction, and more distractions at home. Parents and students both identified barriers to online learning such as lack of suitable study spaces and technological devices as well as unreliable internet. In the interviews, when asked about their child's online learning, some parents reported that their children did not engage effectively with online classes. Parents reported non-attendance, difficulties logging in and non-engagement with learning even when they were logged on and online. They were reported to have struggled with organisation, distraction, and social isolation both during and following lockdowns. In line with the literature, issues with internet access created barriers for learning, similar to findings by Mohan et al (2021). In the UK, Hatton & Powell (2022) reported while participants noted that there were benefits associated with at-home learning, such as lack of distraction and more time for family bonding, teachers also reported challenges for students including difficulties with space, distraction and lack of one-on-one instruction. Some of the teachers noted that many students did not have the necessary resources to learn at home and that this impaired the quality of education when compared to in-person learning. In the present study, some students reported contrasting views of their remote learning experience, and a few gave positive feedback regarding the initial stages of remote learning. Positive comments referred to becoming more skilled with technology and having more autonomy in relation to their learning. A few post-primary students also spoke of developing independence in relation to their daily schedules and the clothes they wore i.e. not having to wear a uniform.

Similar to the findings of Nusser (2021) in Germany, parental support as well as ability and availability to provide support for online learning emerged as crucial factors in engagement of post-primary students with SEN. In the current study, such support was also considered as essential for students attending special schools and classes. Parents' capacity to provide support depended on a range of factors such as their work commitments and the needs of other family members. This is in keeping with other national findings such as that by O'Connor et al. (2021) in Northern Ireland as well as Devitt et al. (2020) who conducted a survey with 723 post-primary subject teachers in 102 schools and found that the most significant obstacles to student engagement were lack of support in the home as well as a lack of access to devices which they noted were more prevalent in lower income families. Moreover, in their survey of 797 parents of primary school children in Ireland, Devitt et al. (2020) found that one fifth of parents reported that they did not have access to a reliable internet connection.

7.2.2 Return to School

While the findings summarised above do show some positive student perceptions regarding online learning, overall participants across all settings reported that children in the current study were happy to return to in-person schooling. Students themselves reported a range of emotions in relation to school closures, with many describing an initial sense of novelty and excitement, with many stating that this turned to stress, anxiety, boredom, and a sense of isolation. In the interviews most children reported a more positive attitude to, and a greater appreciation of, school post-pandemic. This was similar to Keane et al. (2022) who found that students felt that life had been boring and lonely and that they disliked online schooling and were happy to be back in school despite the COVID-19 social distancing challenges. However, for a minority of students in the current study, online teaching and learning remained their preferred mode of learning, and they reported less stress and anxiety in the home setting than in the school environment. Some children reported that they found it difficult returning to school, finding it more difficult to concentrate and being prone to distraction. Some parents reported that their children with SEN had changed their attitude to school over the course of the pandemic and had lost interest in school. It was reported that a small minority of these post-primary children wanted to start working rather than continue in school. There was an increased level of school refusal reported from some schools post-pandemic. Similarly, Totsika et al. (2023), in a study of school absence among 1,076 children aged between 5 and 15 years with neurodevelopmental conditions (intellectual disability and/or autism) approximately one year following the start of COVID-19 in the UK, found that child anxiety was associated with absenteeism due to school refusal while hyperactivity was associated with lower levels of absenteeism but higher levels of school exclusion. Totsika et al. (2024) suggest that the role of child mental health plays a key role in absenteeism and note that a positive parent-teacher relationship may play a protective role. In interviews with 19 professionals and 29 parents of primary-school children experiencing school anxiety and refusal and in Southern England, McDonald, Lester & Michelson (2023) also found that attendance was especially challenging for children with special educational needs and pre-existing anxiety presentations. These challenges were compounded by COVID-19 related anxiety, difficulty adapting to new school routines, and concerns about academic life. The authors suggest that effective support should be characterised by schools and families working closely together. Their recommendations focused on early intervention, the nurturing of parent and school relationships and open chains of communication, peer support for parents and improving special education provision generally.

7.2.3 Reported Impact on Learning and Attainment

In the current study, parents and staff reported that there were discernible impacts due to school closures and learning losses and regression not only in relation to students' broader social and life skills but also their learning and academic attainment. In this context, it is important to note that on average, school closures in Ireland lasted for 72 days for pre-primary schools, 96 days for primary, 91 days for lower second-level students and 72 days for upper second level when compared with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 55 days for pre-primary schools, 78 days for primary, 92 days for lower second-level and 101 days on average across the OECD countries (PISA, 2021). While the inefficacy of remote learning was reported to be particularly applicable for younger students in primary schools as well as

students in special schools, the majority of participants across all settings reported that in-person schooling was most effective for all cohorts. Overall, staff and parents were concerned about the loss of learning caused by the school closures and online learning across all settings. Participants noted that they observed regression in students' learning in many areas during and following school closures. This is aligned with the findings of Gibbs et al. (2019) who found that there is an extended period of impact following disasters of scale that can impact academic attainment for children not just during but also following such events. They also noted that the severity of the disaster can undermine the capacity of societal systems and of public services to respond, often resulting in significant loss of resources and facilities. In the current study the findings suggest that parental support is an important factor in bridging this learning gap for students. However, the findings indicate that parents' capacity to provide support depended on a range of factors such as their work commitments and the needs of other family members. This is in keeping with other Irish studies such as that by O'Connor et al. (2021) in Northern Ireland and Devitt et al. (2020) who conducted a survey with 723 post-primary subject teachers in 102 schools in Ireland.

In the current study, participants reported being concerned about students' regression in relation to attainment as well as lack of examination preparedness and a lack of focus in school compared to before the pandemic. The findings also suggest that children's SEN status was a significant predictor of parental, teacher, and principal concern in relation to impact on learning, especially in relation to younger children. Principals' levels of concern correlated with the proportion of children needing support with learning in their school and the proportion of children presenting with behavioural difficulties. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was perceived as being most severe amongst children with SEN in post-primary schools. In the special school context, principals reported that the engagement learning of students with social emotional and behavioural needs was most severely impacted, as was that of children with speech and language disorders and children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. In interviews, parents expressed concern that their children had 'fallen behind' in their learning and many parents from post-primary schools expressed concern in relation to readiness for, and performance in, upcoming State examinations. The literature mirrors these findings, with Mohan et al.'s (2020) survey of 236 post-primary principals suggesting that SEN students were a key group of concern and that the risk of regression was higher among this group of students when compared to their peers. They also noted that school closures affected the learning, wellbeing, motivation as well as the engagement of Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examination students more negatively when compared with other students. In their nationwide survey of parents of 797 Irish post-primary students, Devitt et al. (2020) found that parents of children with disabilities were more likely to report that their child was no longer learning at school during this period. In a subsequent study, Devitt et al. (2022) found that 14% of parents reported that they did not feel equipped to support their children's learning at home during this time, and parents of children with SEN were found to be more likely to report this.

In a survey of 1004 Irish post-primary students in socio-economically disadvantaged areas across six-year groups in 15 Dublin based schools and a survey with 723 teachers from 102 schools, Bray et al. (2021) investigated the influence of student-teacher relationship and modes of online learning and teaching on student engagement during school closures. They found that many students reported being less connected and having fewer communications with their peers during school closures. In addition, participants reported that during this period they

had reduced interaction and collaboration with their peers. Overall, four out of five students reported an increase in their academic workload and associated heightened stress levels. Students also reported using more technology for educational purposes and were more likely to self-direct their learning during school closures. Students reported that feedback from teachers was very useful, indicating the critical importance of assessment for learning practices in sustaining both student engagement and educational relationships. In addition, the Mohan et al. (2020) study in Ireland also found that the move to online learning was particularly impactful for those with special education needs and that the motivation, engagement, learning and wellbeing of students with SEN was severely negatively impacted. They also noted that 89.3 percent of 723 post-primary schools reported a detrimental impact on learning and wellbeing of students with SEN. In the current study, some parents reported that their post-primary children were not engaging effectively with online classes, reporting non-attendance, difficulties logging in and not engaging even when apparently online. In addition, Mohan et al. (2020) highlighted that students from low-income backgrounds were also more significantly negatively impacted. Based on their research findings they suggest that there is a need for concrete supports to best provide for all students, including ICT, professional development and wellbeing supports

In the current study, special school principals reported that online learning approaches during school closures were ineffective for their students, while primary school teachers reported that online learning was more difficult for younger children. Another study which investigated the views of 969 teachers in the UK also found that remote learning and school closures negatively impacted the learning and academic performance of children with SEN (Ofsted, 2021). The study found that remote learning was associated with decreases in student engagement. Most school principals reported that the learning of all children had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with children with SEN perceived as having been more severely impacted than their peers without SEN. Similarly, Devitt et al. (2022) in their survey of 797 primary school parents found that parents of children with a disability were more likely to report that their child was no longer learning during the lockdown periods. The study reported that parents were more positive about the continuity of their child's learning when schools communicated with children beyond the provision of schoolwork. In research with 1004 post-primary students, Bray et al. (2021) found that the meaningful connection between teachers and students is important for student engagement in remote learning and they reported that when teachers use innovative methods to encourage engagement and the development of key skills there is increased student engagement for all students. They suggest that their findings indicate that pedagogical practices that nurture the development of key skills such as collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, project work as well as self-direction should be emphasised as they found that students with lower exposure to these teaching practices were more likely to be less engaged with their remote learning education.

Lavy (2015) suggests that negative impacts on learning and attainment due to school closures may be caused by lack of instructional time for students. Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) also suggest that the 12-week COVID-19 pandemic school closure could result in a 6% regression in academic achievement for students. Moreover, Kuhfield et al. (2020) found that the COVID-19 pandemic closures could lead to students experiencing only 63-68% of learning gains compared to those normally incurred in a school year. In Ireland, 80% of students reported that their school premises remained closed for over three months as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Comparatively, in other OECD, approximately 51% of students encountered closures of a similar duration (PISA, 2021). School staff in the current study reported that, in order to address learning loss and possible regression in learning amongst children with SEN during school closures, schools utilised the following resources and approaches: Department of Education designated 'class hours', class size reduction/small group learning, curriculum adaptation, the use of digital resources, IEP/student support plans, increase in lessons/learning focus, increased parent school communication, external services, SET/SNA support, summer programmes, teacher support increases, and wellbeing supports and accommodations. The principal survey findings indicated that the most frequent response to regression across all three school types was the use of the Department of Education 'class hours', with principals reporting that class hours worked very well and that they would have liked more of them. Principals also emphasised the importance of investing in resources to help students with their academic learning such as increased support from Special Education Teachers and Special Needs Assistants following school closures. In the principal survey where principals were asked to rate the efficacy of school responses to student regression, IEP/student support plans were rated as being most effective followed by digital resources and curriculum adaptations. However, it is notable that while principals reported that IEP/student support plans were the most effective they were also utilised the least.

The findings relating to the impact of COVID-19 school closures on learning and attainment are similar to those of Gibbs et al. (2019) who noted that the social disruption that is caused by natural disasters can interrupt educational opportunities for children and that little is known of the impact in the following years. They quantitatively examined the changes in the academic outcomes for children exposed to a major devastating bushfire in Australia. The authors made comparisons between children from high, medium and low disaster-affected primary schools and, between the two- and four-year periods since the disaster bushfire occurred (N= 24,642; 9-12 years) and found that the educational outcomes for children from disaster impact areas can be negatively impacted for years following the initial event. This is similar to the findings of Watson, Loffredo, & McKee (2011) who found that students from disaster affected areas who experienced school closures had ongoing reduced wellbeing and poorer academic performance.

This is aligned with the findings of Gibbs et al. (2019) who found that there is an extended period of impact following disasters of scale that can impact academic attainment for children not just during but also following such events. They also noted that the severity of the disaster can undermine the capacity of societal systems and of public services to respond, often resulting in significant loss of resources and facilities. In the present study the findings suggest that parental support is an important factor in bridging this learning gap for students. However, the findings indicate that parents' capacity to provide support depended on a range of factors such as their work commitments and the needs of other family members. This is in keeping with other Irish studies such as that by O'Connor et al. (2021) in Northern Ireland and Devitt et al. (2020) who conducted a survey with 723 post-primary subject teachers in 102 schools in Ireland.

7.3 Children's Wellbeing

7.3.1 Impact on Wellbeing and Behaviour

Literature relating to students with SEN reports declines in school participation for children with SEN as well as increases in social, emotional, and behavioural challenges during and after the school closure period (Asbury et al., 2021; Mohan, 2021; O'Sullivan, 2020; Toseeb, 2020). In the current study, participants across all school settings noted the negative impact the school closures had on the socio-emotional wellbeing of students. It was also reported that students who were less socially adept regressed in their social development and friendships became impaired or non-existent; this was reported to be particularly true for students in the special schools. Further, the lack of routine during remote learning was generally found to not work well for most students and to be detrimental to some students' learning and wellbeing. Parents and teachers reported that lack of routine impacted on the wellbeing of children with SEN, especially autistic students. This was similar to previous literature that found that the disruption of routines can significantly impact the wellbeing of children with SEN, particularly autistic children (Rogers & Vismara, 2008; Mazuek & Curran, 2018).

Participants also noted that students missed their friends and that this had an impact on their wellbeing. Many parents described their children as being more insular and said that they were concerned about their social wellbeing due to the pandemic. Children reported varying levels of contact with peers during the closures and that many found other ways of connecting online. Post-primary school children reported that they tried to maintain contact by means of virtual communication. In particular, parents and teachers expressed concern about the impact on students from special schools as many have fewer social interactions outside of school and more limited access and use of modes of virtual communication. In the UK, Fox et al. (2022) conducted interviews with 14 parents of autistic children regarding the social wellbeing of their children during COVID-19 and also found that, due to the pandemic, students had limited opportunity to socialise, and at times this had a negative impact on their behaviour. However, they also noted that some students enjoyed the break from in-person social interactions and highlighted the heterogeneous nature of student experiences during the pandemic and the related need for a personalised approach to social wellbeing for students with SEN. In addition, a mixed methods study by Hurwitz et al. (2022) with 106 special education teachers in the U.S.A. found that, given the demands on staff during the pandemic lockdowns, social wellbeing support was suboptimal for students during this period and their social wellbeing deteriorated as a result. Thus, Hurwitz et al. (2022) note the importance of including parents in supporting students' social wellbeing, in delivering interventions and monitoring progress at home.

Participants in the current study also reported that children in special schools and autism classes regressed in their behaviours during the school closures. These findings concur with a systematic literature review conducted by Ahmed et al. (2022) on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on autistic children. It found that 82.7% of families and caregivers (544 out of 658) faced challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the authors suggest that behavioural issues in children and adolescents significantly increased with half (51.9%) of the 1004 children presenting with behavioural changes. These issues included conduct problems, emotional issues, aggression, and hyperactivity. Increased anxiety and difficulties in managing emotions were also reported in some studies, highlighting the social and emotional challenges experienced by children with

SEN during this period. Being homeschooled also resulted in a loss of physical activity for some children, and increased mistreatment from siblings (Toseeb et al. 2020). O’Sullivan et al. (2021) also reported that autistic children and adolescents faced mental health challenges attributable to changes in routine arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Toseeb and Asbury (2022) reported that the mental health of autistic children was likely to have been disproportionately affected during and after the first lockdown in the UK and high anxiety levels were sustained on return to school. Bray et al. (2020) also found that there was a decline in student wellbeing during school closures. In their survey of 535 post-primary school students in Ireland, Bray et al. (2020) found that the students reported levels of lower wellbeing in 2020 when compared to 2019. Students also reported increased workload to be a source of stress during school closures. In addition, they found that parental support with schoolwork was found to be linked to improved wellbeing during lockdowns; students who had more parental involvement were more likely to have better wellbeing during school closures.

7.3.2 Return to School: Child and School Responses

In general, participants across all settings reported that students were happy to return to school and had a new-found appreciation for school. However, some participants reported that children’s wellbeing was impacted by concerns about contracting COVID-19 on their return to school. Some children found it difficult to cope with the new arrangements arising from the health and safety measures that were in place on their return to school, as it was difficult wearing masks all the time and there was reduced movement between classes as well as reduced peer to peer, and teacher interaction. Some participants also reported that some students had lost interest in school with a small number not returning to school at all. However, the findings indicate that in general when students returned to the routine of in-person schooling wellbeing and learning outcomes improved for most. In a study with 269 post-primary students, Keane et al. (2023) also noted that the most significant general life challenges they experienced since the start of the pandemic were being socially isolated, worrying about relationship stability, missing activities, in particular sport. Keane et al. (2023) suggest that it was evident that many of the young participants strongly disliked online schooling, with 43% reporting that they were unsure or unhappy about their academic progress over the pandemic period. Overall, Keane et al. (2023) found that students were “happy” and “relieved” to be back in in-person schooling, this was attributed to finding learning to be easiest in school and being able to see friends. When asked about how they would like to be supported, students suggested more time and opportunities for interacting with their friends, support with revising content covered during online schooling, and thirdly mental health support.

In the current study, school staff reported an increased focus on children’s wellbeing when schools reopened. Overall, the impact on wellbeing was perceived as being greatest on students with SEN in post-primary schools, followed by children in special schools. In the interviews, participants reported an increase in social anxiety and a decrease in social skills of students with SEN after school closures. Staff in post-primary schools reported that children’s social, emotional and educational development had been negatively impacted by school absences and this was particularly true for students who transitioned from primary to secondary school during the pandemic. Code et al. (2022) reported similar findings from interviews with parents of children

with autism in the UK. Similarly, Bray et al. (2021) found that primary school students ($N = 1004$) who reported negative relationships with teachers or a reported lack of feedback regarding their work during school closures were more likely to have poorer wellbeing during lockdown. In addition, Bray et al. (2021) found that low levels of student wellbeing and poor student-teacher relationships were also associated with lower scores in relation to engagement in learning.

7.4 Provisions and Supports: School and Systemic Level Responses

7.4.1 School Readiness for Transition to Online Learning

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic school closures, school staff were rapidly tasked with developing new modes of providing an education to students, incorporating pre-existing methods as well as developing and adopting new ones. These adaptations were often conducted at the school or teacher level rather than being directed by overarching systemic Departmental guidance. While some school personnel reported that their schools were reasonably well-prepared for the transition to online learning, mainly through the use of iPads, the majority of participants reported that schools were not well-prepared for such an eventuality. This is in keeping with the findings of Hurwitz et al. (2021) and Steed et al. (2021) who also found that teachers had a lack of professional training and insufficient guidance on the delivery of remote education. Moreover, similar to the present findings, Steed et al. (2021) found that there was a steep learning curve for many teachers in delivering education virtually and there were difficulties in communicating effectively with students (Simó-Pinatella et al., 2021). These findings also align with Devitt et al.'s (2020) survey of 723 post-primary school subject teachers in 102 schools in Ireland. When asked what supports and professional development would be useful, teachers stated support with regards to meaningful integration of technology with pedagogy for online teaching rather than solely being supported in learning how to use the technology itself.

In the current study, almost all schools established a dedicated remote learning platform and used a variety of online materials and means of communication to communicate with students. In addition to online communication, approximately 20% of schools reported that home visits by teachers or SNAs formed part of their home-school communication and support strategy during lock-down. This was more prevalent in primary and special schools than in post-primary schools. However, despite their best efforts, the findings of the current study indicated that, in the main, the participants believed that online learning and communication was less effective and more difficult than in-person schooling. Primary school teachers reported that online learning was more difficult for younger children. Special school staff in particular found it challenging to adapt to online provision. They experienced many barriers in adapting to remote provision, with special school principals reporting that online learning approaches during lockdowns were ineffective for their students.

There was general agreement that the schools were better organised for remote online learning during the second period of school closures, resulting in an improved experience for most students, as schools provided more synchronous (live) online classes. This mirrors the findings of Devitt et al. (2020) who noted that the teachers ($N = 723$) in their survey reported that there was a predominance of asynchronous transactional modes of communication during the first lockdown.

When discussing the school-level response, staff noted that due to the closures their roles changed greatly, and they devised their own ways of fulfilling their roles during school closures and in the aftermath. Many staff noted that workload increased during the COVID-19 period and it was challenging to support students with SEN to the standard that they had previously due to the increased demands. Staff reported that they tailored their methods to suit the needs of students insofar as possible, noting that they were tasked with improving their technological skills concurrently. These are similar to the findings of Ofsted (2021) where almost half (49%) of the UK teachers struggled to align the curriculum with remote learning. In the current study, another major systemic level response to the COVID-19 pandemic school closures was to have an increased overall focus on the wellbeing of students. Common responses from schools were to create more wellbeing accommodations and supports including a staggered return to school, movement breaks, wellbeing programmes, and other accommodations such as quiet spaces for children with SEN. All of these accommodations were thought to have worked well according to principals, staff, teachers and students.

7.4.2 School Home Communication

In the present study, approximately half of the school principals reported that their schools made daily contact with parents of students with SEN, with school-to-parent contact being most frequent in primary schools. Principals' perceptions of being equipped to address the concerns of parents of students with SEN varied by school type, with special school principals perceiving themselves as being least well-equipped to do so. Overall satisfaction with the levels of school contact varied amongst the parents with some parents being very satisfied, while others described feeling "out of the loop", especially where schools were communicating directly with students, with the result that parents were not always aware of students' timetables or what was being expected of them in terms of learning tasks. This contrasted with Devitt et al.'s (2020) survey of 797 parents of children in primary school in Ireland which reported that overall parents were happy with the communication they had with schools given the circumstances, with 79% reporting that the communication was 'excellent' or 'good'. Where parents did rate communication as 'poor' this was associated with one-way communication from schools, teachers not providing sufficient feedback on work, and limited opportunities for interaction (Devitt et al. 2020).

While the majority of parents in the current study noted that communication with schools worked well, some parents noted that they would have liked to have been kept more informed about their child's progress and engagement. At times some students had fallen behind, were not attending classes, or completing assigned work unbeknownst to their parents. This is in keeping with the findings of Crepeau-Hobsen (2022) who interviewed 15 parents of students with SEN and found that parents reported concerns about school connectedness, communication and relationships with teachers and external service providers during remote learning. While the parents reported facing challenges with online learning platforms, they also reported that they gained insights into their child's learning style. Further, in the UK, during the first two weeks of the social distancing measures in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 234 parents of children with SEN completed an online survey (Toseeb et al., 2020). While a small percentage (approximately 11%) reported their child was adequately supported, the majority of participants reported a need for more support from various services such as schools, health

and social care services, and the government. The results indicate that 40% of parents surveyed reported receiving adequate support, with 37% reporting that the support was inadequate and 22% saying that it was neither adequate nor inadequate. Toseeb et al (2020) suggest that their findings overall highlight the diverse support needs of children with SEN as there was significant variability in the parental satisfaction with the support provided to their children. Toseeb et al (2020) also suggest that strategies aimed at supporting the general transition of SEN children back to school should prioritise the establishment of routines and should provide targeted mental health support. Post school closures, many parents and post-primary school staff in the current study reported improved home-school relationships with some parents reporting an enhanced appreciation of schools and school personnel. Other parents regretted that schools were making more use of technology to communicate with families post-pandemic and that they had not resumed more face-to face communication.

7.4.3 Access to External Supports

In the current study it was evident that not having access to external support services during the school closures was extremely challenging for schools, parents, and students. The majority of participants reported a need for more support from Department of Education agencies as well as various services such as allied healthcare and social care services. In the special school interviews, parents spoke about the vital role that services play in their children's lives. While parents generally acknowledged the efforts schools made to bridge the gap in services for parents and stressing that school staff were very supportive, parents reported that the support for students was not adequate during and following closures and that supports that were available during in-person schooling became unavailable "overnight". While school staff highlighted that parental support in the home worked well in preventing learning regression, and that the impact for children without this parental support was heightened, some parents did not always have the capacity to support their children during the lockdown and this may have been due to other commitments or a lack of knowledge regarding ways to support their child.

The findings from this study highlight both the systemic and school-level responses to the pandemic and school-related closures. It was clear that schools invested additional time and resources in an effort to meet the needs of students amidst the challenges associated with the pandemic in terms of their academic learning and their general wellbeing. Nevertheless, it was evident that some needs were still unmet, with parents and school staff noting that systemic challenges such as lack of resources including special needs assistant allocation combined with long wait lists for external assessments and therapeutic interventions and supports were exacerbating the difficulties caused by the pandemic. This is similar to findings by Di Pietri (2018) who found that students from disaster affected areas were less likely to receive adequate educational support following large scale disasters. In addition, Di Pietri (2018) noted that while post-disaster measures to re-establish education may mitigate impact, the disruption to the learning environment as well as the trauma suffered by students can continue in the years following the disaster event and may worsen their academic outcomes. In addition, the systematic review conducted by Boon et al. (2011) found that children and young people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to disasters due to being excluded from disaster protocols and policies and the related lack of access to support services.

Across all settings in the current study, it was evident that more systemic support was needed in terms of assessing and supporting students' needs as well as professional development and training with upskilling in technological skills for staff and students alike. In addition, it was evident that some students did not have exclusive access to devices during the closures and that this was detrimental to their learning during these remote learning periods. Overall, participants across all settings suggested that, should school closures occur again, it would be beneficial to ensure more bilateral communication between schools and families, to have more synchronous online classes, to consider the workload and ensure it is not excessive, to retain technology in classrooms following closures and to provide the necessary systemic and school level supports to students in terms of their learning and wellbeing within all school settings. This aligns with much of the previous research which suggests that following disasters of this scale there can be ongoing problems with regards to accessing supports and resources in the subsequent years (Gibbs et al., 2019; Bonanno, Brewin, Kaniasty, & La Greca, 2010; Bryant et al., 2014, 2017; Anderson, 2005; Peek, 2008; Casserly, 2006; Sacerdote, 2008; Vogel & Vernberg, 1993; Cauchemez et al., 2019; Berkman, 2008; Cauchemez, 2009; Di Pietro, 2018; Watson, Loffredo, & McKee, 2011; Boon et al., 2011; Mihaylov et al., 2004; Peek & Stough, 2010; Hans et al., 2008; Wisner et al., 2012).

7.5 Conclusion

While general experiences within the school setting in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic have been investigated and documented within the existent literature, this report offers unique and important insights into the experiences of students with SEN, an area which has heretofore been a research lacuna. The data from this study indicate that the of COVID-19 related school closures had a significant impact on children with special educational needs. This impact has not been the same across school types, across school stages, across family backgrounds or across types of SEN. It is likely that the full impact of the closures is yet to unfold. There are some positive findings from this study and, in general, families were well supported by schools during this pandemic. However, they also expressed gaps in relation to external systemic supports during this time. In the main, the evidence garnered from this study demonstrates that young people with SEN experienced challenges relating to their engagement, learning and wellbeing due to the COVID-19 pandemic school closures.

The present findings offer unique and important insights into what worked and what did not work during this unique and challenging time. It is important that lessons are learned so that, in the event of further unplanned school closures, the education system is prepared in so far as possible for such an eventuality. The fact that the impact of this pandemic has been found to vary across a number of variables, such as school, family, age, and SEN type, renders it essential that the response to possible future closures is also varied, with priority and additional support given to schools which serve disadvantaged communities and families from these communities, to students with SEN, to students in special schools and special classes, to children at particular stages in the education system, such as transitioning from primary to secondary school, from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle in secondary school, and from secondary school to life post-secondary school. At a broader systemic level, it appears that schools need more support from the wider education and allied healthcare systems in the event of future unanticipated school closures. The present report concludes with some future considerations in anticipation of such

eventuality, especially in relation to children with SEN. While this report answers many important questions, there are still many unanswered as the true impact and toll of the pandemic and related school closures is yet unknown. The longer-term impact of the closures on students with SEN is yet to be investigated, thus this study has been extended to fully examine the breadth and extent of the impact of the pandemic on students with SEN.

7.6 Implications for Future Research and Practice

Considering the key findings from this report, a number of implications for future practice and research that emerged from the current study. These implications are especially relevant in the context of future school closures.

- Schools, students and families need more support from the wider education and healthcare systems in the event of future school closures. More targeted and more intensive support with an emphasis on communication and flexibility should be available as an option for students with SEN in the event of school closures. Schools should be provided with additional support from agencies within the education and healthcare systems during enforced school closures to enable them to provide adequate support to students with SEN. Many participants noted that the access to external support during school closures was limited and that schools were the only support many families had.
- Some school staff reported difficulties with gaining access to sufficient resources and support for students with SEN. For example, some school staff members reported difficulties in accessing timely assessments for students. Participants spoke of a 'back-log' in services due to the suspension of services during periods of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The present study, as well as previous research, indicates that loss of learning time can lead to academic learning regression as well as regression in behaviours, social skills, life skills and general personal development for students with SEN. Thus, efforts to ameliorate such effects must be considered should future closures occur. Bidirectional communication between schools, students and families has been found to be beneficial in reducing the gap in learning as has additional instructional time or 'class hours' and synchronous online classes.
- The evidence garnered from the present study suggests that the wellbeing of students with SEN was negatively impacted by the pandemic and that additional targeted wellbeing support during periods of school closures as well as in the aftermath should be considered.
- The present study suggests that the wellbeing of students can be impacted by their relationships with peers and teachers, thus an emphasis on teaching methods that facilitate peer-to-peer communication as well as two-way communication between teachers and students should be cultivated.

- There was evidence that some students were isolated and had no access to friends during school closures. This was particularly true for students from the special schools. Efforts should be made to support peer to peer relationships should future closures occur. In addition, students spoke of having less opportunity for interaction in schools upon reopening due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Care should be taken to support peer to peer communication amidst COVID-19 prevention protocols.
- Research indicates that the loss of learning may be greater for those from particular groups such as those from lower socioeconomic homes and those with less access to digital technology, at-home instructional support and adequate internet facilities. Thus, it may be prudent when conducting future planning for potential closures to incorporate solutions to these barriers to learning. Solutions such as supporting parents in providing at-home instructional support, as well as internet and device access.
- While most parents reported that they had very good communication with schools, some expressed a desire for increased bidirectional communication. Some parents would like to be more informed about their child's timetable, homework and academic attainment on an ongoing basis. Parents also expressed a desire for more guidance on how to best support their child's learning at home.
- Due to the school closures school staff reported an increased appreciation of the importance of communication with families with regard to supporting students. Communication between schools and students with SEN during school closures should incorporate a co-ordinated approach to school-student communication during school closures, especially in relation to task assignment at post-primary level, to help reduce the risk of work overload.
- Teachers need continuing professional development in relation to the delivery of remote education, with a focus on delivery of such education for more vulnerable students, such as those with SEN. There is a need for enhanced training in technological skills for students with SEN and, where necessary, their parents. Ongoing use of technology and virtual communication could be embedded more in regular school life for students with SEN as a preparation for further disruptions to school.
- Consideration should be given to implementing measures aimed at preventing ongoing academic setbacks amongst children with SEN. Particularly focussing on those who have experienced challenges academically and in their broader learning (social and life skills) as a result of the pandemic related school closures. The findings indicate that children with learning difficulties may have faced greater learning disruption on average when compared with their peers without such difficulties. Moreover, children who lacked parental support and access to essential learning resources (quiet study space, internet access, devices) may have experienced more learning regression than those who had adequate support and resources. Special attention and care should be taken to ensure that these children are not left behind academically, socially or in terms of their overall personal development.

7.7 Next Steps: Investigating the Prolonged Impact on Wellbeing and Educational Attainment

The findings from this 2022 study have informed the second phase of the study (2022-2023) which investigates the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning and wellbeing of children with special educational needs. Specifically, the present study has helped highlight critical areas in need of further investigation. The findings warrant further exploration of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's wellbeing and their educational engagement and learning outcomes in the short and the long-term. While the present study focused on the impact during school closures and in the period immediately following closures the next phase of the study is better placed to focus on the lasting impacts the COVID-19 pandemic experiences may have on students.

The 2023 phase of the study further untangles areas of importance identified during the present study such as system inspired changes in teachers' and schools' provision of supports to children with SEN, potential continued (dis)engagement of children with SEN in education and schooling, children's learning outcomes, and the long-term impact of the pandemic on children's wellbeing. As with the present stage of the study, the overarching aim of stage two of the study will be to document information regarding any ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education and wellbeing of children with SEN, that will inform Government agencies policy and best practice.

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An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
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Appendices



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Appendix 1. Additional Tables and Figures

1a. Principal Survey Participants

Table A1. Principal gender distribution

Principal Groups	n	Female		Male	
		n	%	n	%
All principals	326	213	65.3%	112	34.4%
Primary school principals	122	85	69.7%	37	30.3%
Post-primary school principals	148	81	54.7%	66	44.6%
Special school principals	56	47	83.9%	9	16.1%

Figure A1. Principal age distribution

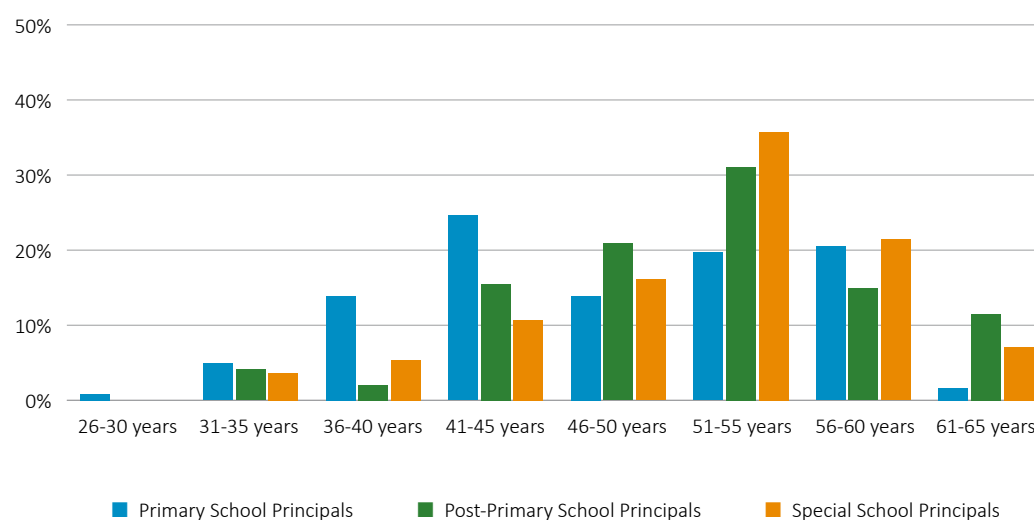


Figure A2. Principal's highest education level

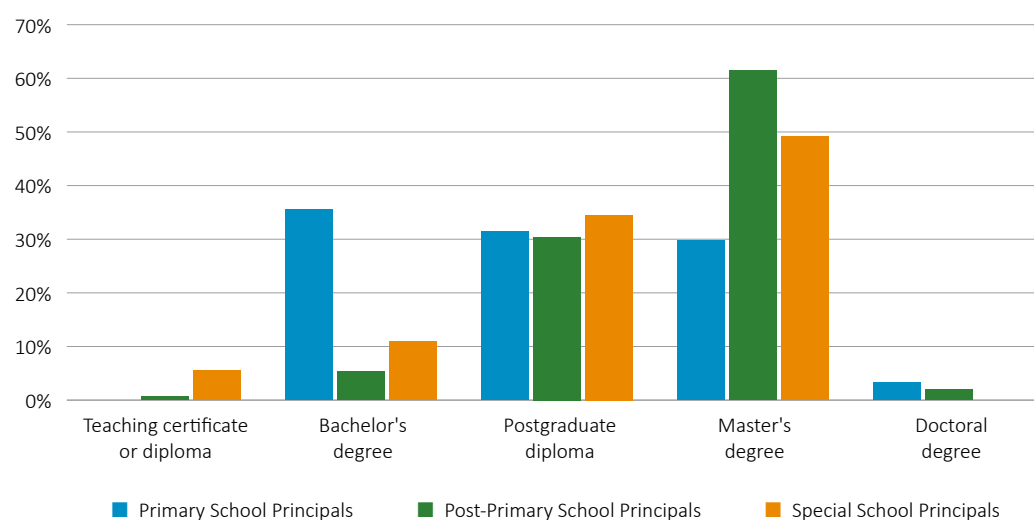


Figure A3. Principal's highest qualification in special needs education

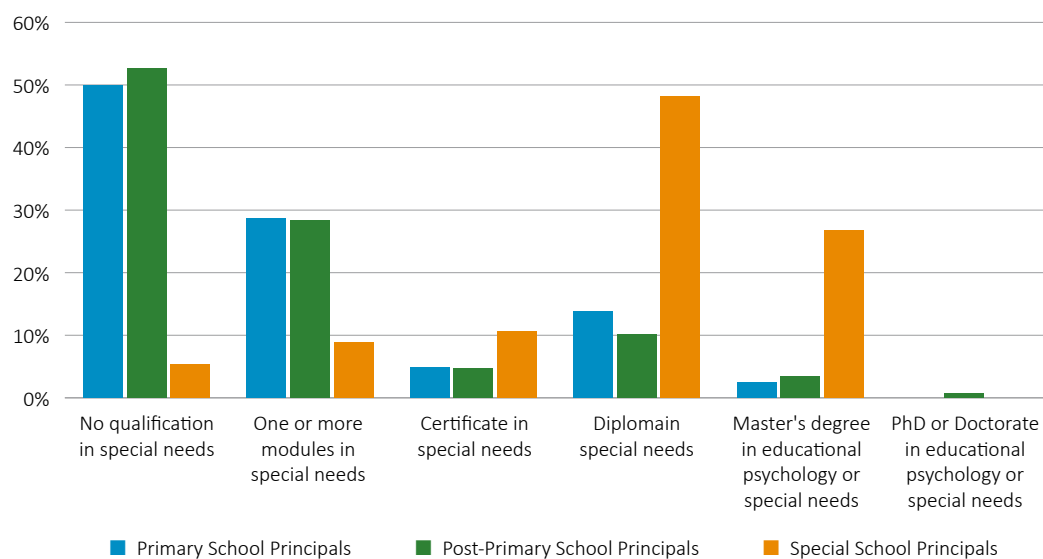
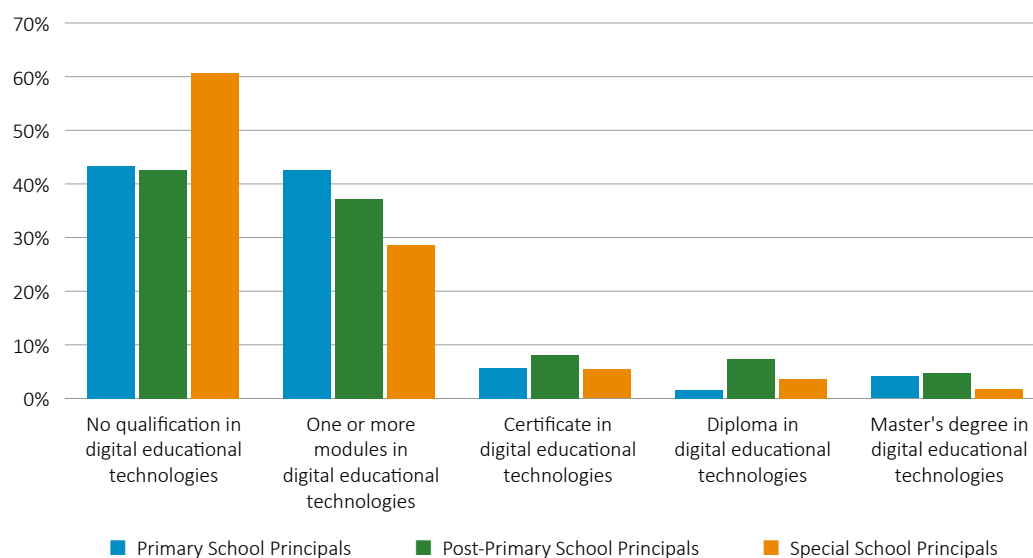


Figure A4. Principal's highest qualification in digital technologies



Appendix 1. Additional Tables and Figures

1b. Interview Participants

Table A2. Interview participants

School	Participant Type	Participant ID
Primary School (PS)	Staff	PS Teacher 1
		PS Teacher 2
		PS Teacher 3
		PS Teacher 4
		PS Teacher 5
Primary School Autism Class (PS-AC)	Parent	PS-AC P1 – Mother of Autistic Boy, Age 12
		PS-AC P2 – Mother of Autistic Boy, Age 12
	Staff	PP-AC Deputy Principal & SENCO
		PP-AC SNA
		PP-AC Teacher
Post-Primary School (PPS)	Student	PPS1 S1 – Boy In 6th Year with Dyslexia & DCD
		PPS1 S2 – Boy in TY with DCD & SPD
		PPS1 S3 – Autistic Boy in TY with Dyslexia, DCD, & SPD
		PPS1 S4 – Autistic Boy in 1st Year With ADHD
		PPS2 S1 – Boy in TY With Dyslexia
		PPS2 S2 – Girl In 6th Year with Dyslexia & DCD
		PPS2 S3 – Boy In 2nd Year with Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, ADHD, & OCD
		PPS2 S4 – Girl In 4th Year Class
		PPS2 S5 – Autistic Girl in TY
		PPS3 S1 – Girl In 2nd Year with Epilepsy & DLD
		PPS3 S2 – Boy In 5th Year LCA With DCD
		PPS3 S3 – Girl In 5th Year With MLD
		PPS3 S4 – Autistic Boy In 5th Year with Dyslexia And DCD
		PPS3 S5 – Autistic Girl In 3rd Year with Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, & DCD
		PPS4 S1 – Boy In 3rd Year with Dyslexia & ADHD
		PPS4 S2 – Boy In 2nd Year with Dyslexia & Dyscalculia
		PPS4 S3 – Boy In 3rd Year
		PPS4 S4 – Autistic Boy In 2 nd Year
		PPS4 S5 – Boy In 3rd Year with Anxiety

Table A2. Interview participants *continued*

School	Participant Type	Participant ID
Post-Primary School (PPS)	Parents	PPS1 P1 – Mother of Boy In 6th Year with Dyslexia & DCD
		PPS1 P2 – Mother Of Boy In TY with DCD & SPD
		PPS1 P3 – Mother of Autistic Boy in TY With Dyslexia, DCD, & SPD
		PPS1 P4 – Mother of Autistic Boy In 1st Year With ADHD
		PPS2 P1 – Father of Boy in TY With Dyslexia
		PPS2 P2 – Mother of Boy In 2 nd Year with Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, ADHD, & OCD
		PPS2 P3 – Mother of Boy In 2 nd Year with Dyscalculia & TBI
		PPS2 P4 – Mother of Boy In 1st Year With ASD
		PPS3 P1 – Mother of Girl In 2nd Year with Epilepsy & DLD
		PPS3 P2 – Mother of Girl In 5th Year with MLD
		PPS3 P3 – Mother of Boy In 5th Year with Dyslexia, ASD, DCD
		PPS3 P4 – Mother of Autistic Girl In 3rd Year with Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, & DCD
		PPS3 P5 – Mother of Girl In 6th Year with Dyslexia
		PPS4 P1 – Mother of Boy In 3rd Year with Dyslexia & ADHD
		PPS4 P2 – Mother of Boy In 2nd Year with Dyslexia & Dyscalculia
		PPS4 P3 – Mother of Boy In 3rd Year
		PPS4 P4 – Mother of Autistic Boy In 2nd Year
		PPS4 P5 – Mother of Boy In 3rd Year with Anxiety
Post-Primary School (PPS)	Staff	PPS1 SET
		PPS1 SNA 1
		PPS1 SNA 2
		PPS1 Year Head
		PPS2 Principal
		PPS2 SENCO
		PPS2 SET 1
		PPS2 SET 2
		PPS2 SNA 1
		PPS2 SNA 2
		PPS2 SET 3
		PPS2 Year Head 1
		PPS2 Year Head 2
		PPS3 Principal

Table A2. Interview participants *continued*

School	Participant Type	Participant ID
Post-Primary School (PPS)	Staff	PPS3 SENCO
		PPS3 SET 1
		PPS3 SET 2
		PPS3 SNA
		PPS3 Year Head 1
		PPS3 Year Head 2
		PPS4 Deputy Principal & SENCO
		PPS4 SENCO & Year Head
		PPS4 SET & Year Head 1
		PPS4 SET & Year Head 2
		PPS4 SNA 1
		PPS4 SNA 2
Special School (SS)	Parents	SS P1 – Mother of Girl with Severe-Profound ID, Age 13
		SS P2 – Father of Boy with Moderate ID & DS, Age 12
		SS P3 – Father of Boy with Severe ID, Age 6
		SS P4 – Mother of Girl with Moderate ID & DS, Age 17
		SS P5 – Father of Boy with Moderate ID & DS, Age 13
		SS P6 – Father of Autistic Boy with Moderate-Severe ID, Age 17
		SS P7 – Mother of Autistic Boy with Severe ID, Age 12
		SS P8 – Mother of Autistic Boy with Moderate ID, Age 11
		SS P9 – Mother of Twin Girls with Moderate ID, Age 18
		SS P10 – Mother of Autistic Girl, Age 14
Special School (SS)	Staff	SS SET 1
		SS SET 2
		SS SET 3
		SS SET 4
		SS SET 5
		SS SNA 1
		SS SNA 2
		SS SNA 3
		SS SNA 4
		SS SNA 5

Appendix 1. Additional Tables and Figures

1c. Principal Survey Findings – Tables & Figures

Figure A5. Effectiveness of remote learning approaches during lockdowns (1) (Principal Survey)

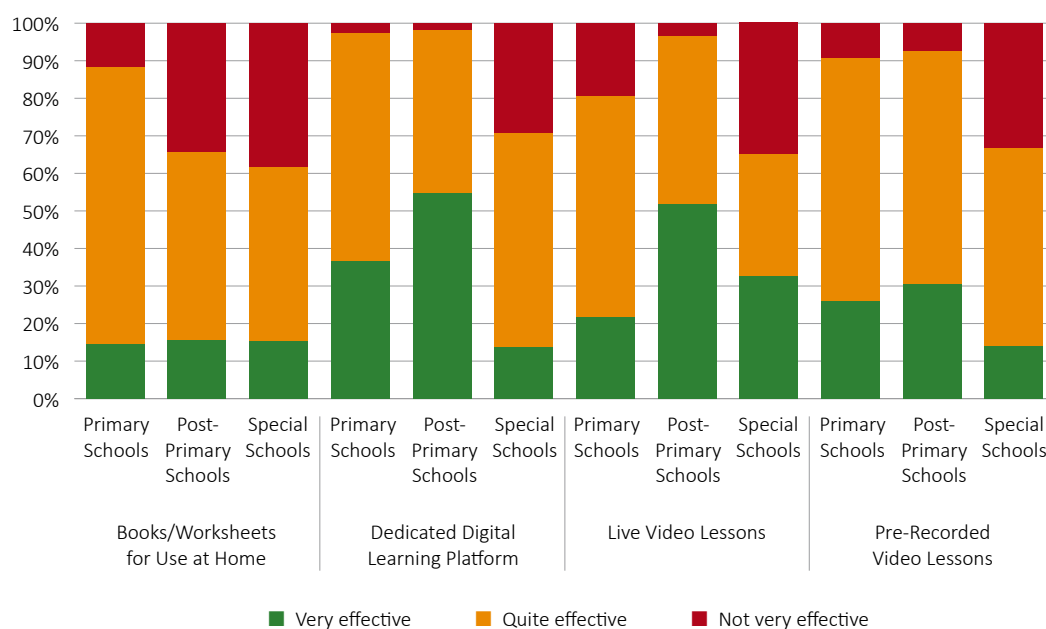


Figure A6. Effectiveness of remote learning approaches during lockdowns (2) (Principal Survey)

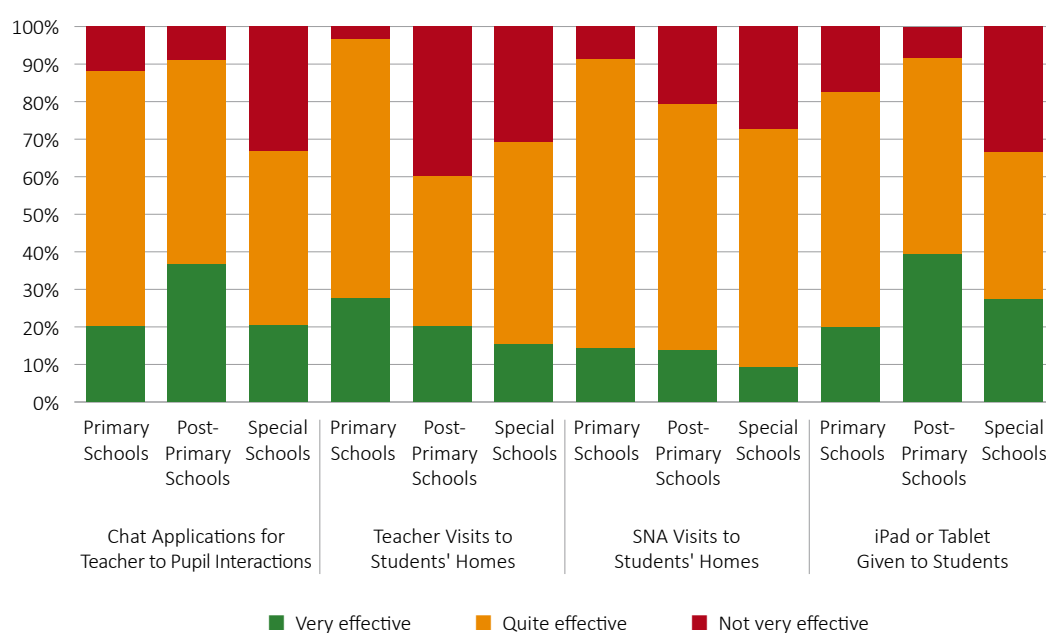


Figure A7. Effectiveness of remote learning approaches during quarantine periods (1) (Principal Survey)

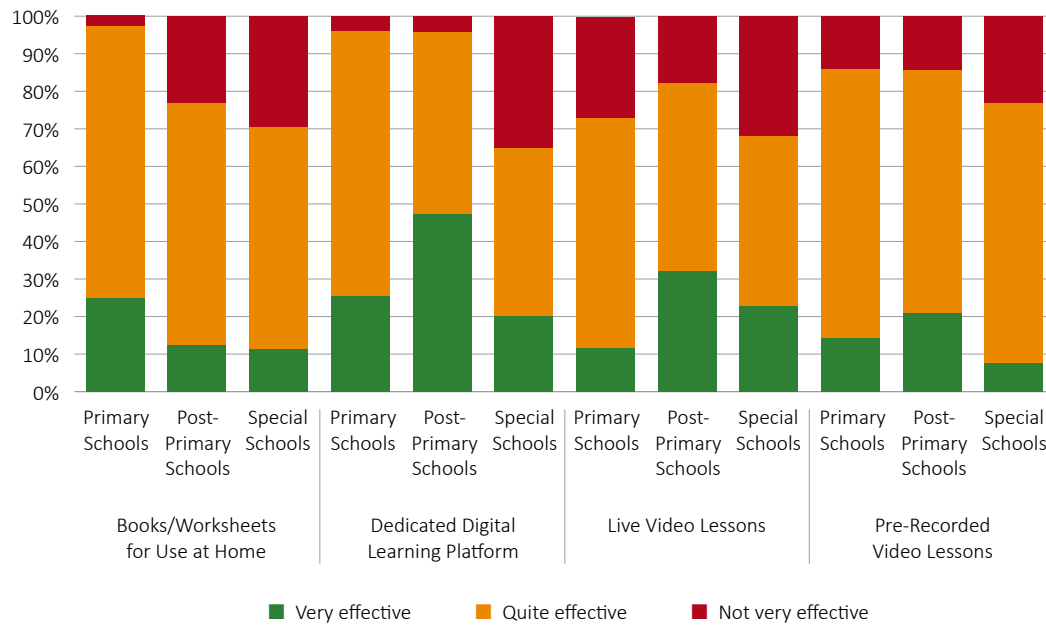
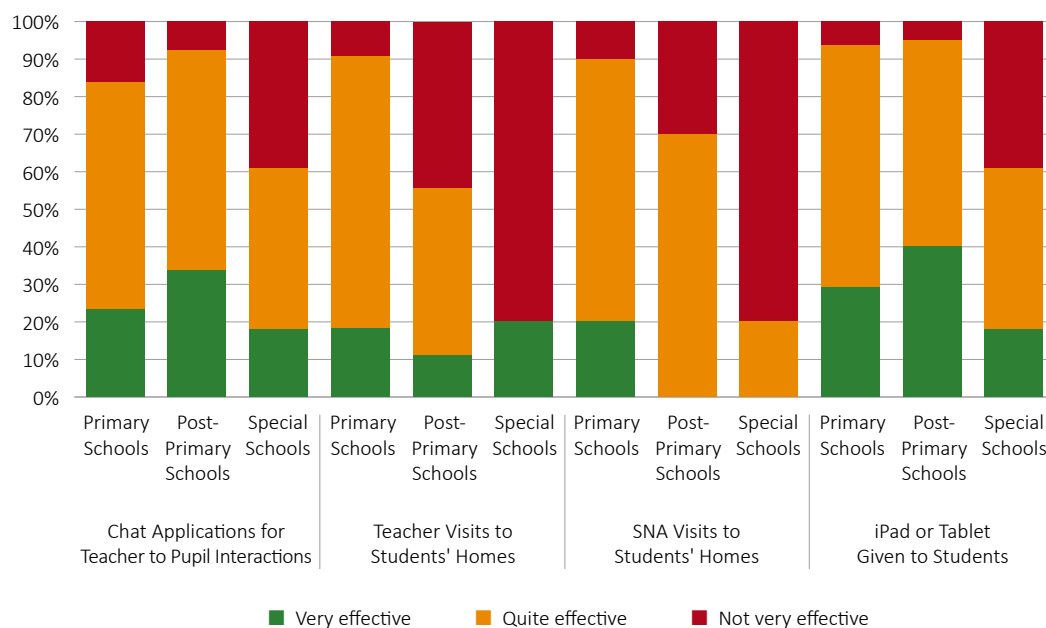


Figure A8. Effectiveness of remote learning approaches during quarantine periods (2) (Principal Survey)



Appendix 2. Principal Survey

Principal characteristics

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Gender	Are you	1 = Male 2 = Female 3 = Non-binary 4 = Other	CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Age	What is your age?	1 = 21-25 2 = 26-30 3 = 31-35 4 = 36-40 5 = 41-45 6 = 46-50 7 = 51-55 8 = 56-60 9 = 61-65 10 = Over 65	Adapted from the EPPE headteacher questionnaire
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Highest qualification	What is your highest qualification?	1 = Teaching certificate or diploma 2 = Bachelor's degree 3 = Postgraduate diploma 4 = Master's degree 5 = Doctoral degree 6 = Other [please specify]	CSL team

Principal characteristics *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Special needs qualifications	Please indicate your highest level of qualification in working with children with special needs	1 = No qualification in special needs 2 = One or more modules (e.g., within degree or CPD programme) in special needs education 3 = Certificate in special needs education 4 = Diploma in special needs education 5 = Master's degree in educational psychology or special needs education 6 = PhD or Doctorate in educational psychology or special needs education	CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Digital technology qualifications	Please indicate your highest level of qualification in digital/educational technologies	1 = No qualification in digital/educational technologies 2 = One or more modules (e.g., within degree or CPD programme) in digital/educational technologies 3 = Certificate in digital/educational technologies 4 = Diploma in digital/educational technologies 5 = Master's degree in digital/educational technologies 6 = PhD or Doctorate in digital/educational technologies	CSL team

School characteristics

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Special School Survey only	Special school	Is your school a designated special school?	1 = Yes 2 = No	ICOSEN/CSL team
Special School Survey only	Special school type	What type of special school is your school? is the designation of your special school?	1 = Autism School 2 = Mild GLD School 3 = Moderate GLD School 4 = Profound Learning Disability School 5 = Physical Disability School (including hearing and visual impairment) 6 = Social, Emotional, and Behavioural difficulties School 7 = Other [text box]	ICOSEN/CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Roll size	What is the approximate total number of students in your school?	Enter number	ICOSEN/CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys (the term 'special education' removed for Special Schools Surveys)	SET staffing	How many special education teachers work in your school?	[write in]	ICOSEN/CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	SNA staffing	How many special needs assistants work in your school?	[write in]	ICOSEN/CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	School tiers	What sectors does your school provide for? Select all that apply	1 = Primary 2 = Junior cycle or equivalent 3 = Senior cycle or equivalent	CSL team

School characteristics *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	School location	Which best describes your school's location?	1 = Village (population up to 1,000) 2 = Small town (population between 1,000 and 5,000) 3 = Town (population between 5,000 and 10,000) 4 = Large town (population >10,000) 5 = City (population >100,000)	CSL team
Mainstream Survey only	DEIS classification	How is your school classified?	1 = Non DEIS 2 = DEIS Band 1 3 = DEIS Band 2 4 = DEIS Rural	CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Patronage	What is the patronage of your school?	1 = An Foras Pátrúnachta 2 = Catholic 3 = Church of Ireland 4 = Educate Together 5 = Community National School 6 = HSE 7 = Other	Adapted from the Department of Education

School characteristics *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys (with the exception of 'Children supported by SET teacher' which is only on mainstream survey)	Minority group prevalence	<p>Please give an approximate percentage of children in the following groups in your school (some children may belong to more than one group and can be counted more than once)</p> <p>Children who are immigrants or with migrant background</p> <p>Children who are refugees</p> <p>Children from the Travelling community</p> <p>Children who are not proficient in the language of instruction and whose mother tongue is not English/Irish</p> <p>Children supported by SET teacher</p> <p>Exceptionally able students</p> <p>Children who are homeless</p> <p>Children on reduced timetables</p> <p>Children from economically disadvantaged homes</p>	<p>1 = None</p> <p>2 = Less than 5%</p> <p>3 = 5-10 %</p> <p>4 = 11-25%</p> <p>5 = 26-40%</p> <p>6 = More than 40%</p>	CSL team

School characteristics *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Wellbeing Programmes	<p>Schools use different ways of providing personal and social support to students.</p> <p>Please indicate whether or not your school uses any of the following:</p> <p>Weaving Wellbeing (1)</p> <p>Nurture Groups (2)</p> <p>Incredible Years (3)</p> <p>Roots of Empathy (4)</p> <p>Zippy's Friends (5)</p> <p>Friends for Life (6)</p>	<p>1 = Yes</p> <p>2 = No</p>	CSL team

School characteristics *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	School resources	<p>How would you rate the following resources in your school?</p> <p>Instructional materials (for example textbooks)</p> <p>Supplies (for example paper, pencils, etc.)</p> <p>School buildings and grounds</p> <p>Heating and lighting systems</p> <p>Instructional space (for example classrooms)</p> <p>Technologically competent staff</p> <p>Audiovisual resources</p> <p>Computer technology for teaching and learning</p> <p>Access to SNA support</p> <p>Assistive technology for students with SEN</p> <p>Specialist break time facilities for students with SEN</p> <p>Assessments and resources for SEN</p> <p>Quiet room/space for students with SEN</p> <p>Sensory room/space for students with SEN</p>	<p>1 = Do not have this</p> <p>2 = Poor quality/access</p> <p>3 = Moderate quality/access</p> <p>4 = Good quality/access</p> <p>5 = Excellent quality/access</p>	Adapted from TIMSS 2020

Pedagogy/Curriculum

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Curriculum effectiveness	How would you characterise each of the following in your school: Teacher's understanding of the school's curricular goals Teacher's degree of success in implementing the curriculum Teacher's willingness to teach to the curriculum Teacher's recognition of the usefulness of the curriculum	1 = Very low 2 = Low 3 = Medium 4 = High 5 = Very high	TIMMS 2020 and CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Digital education	Please indicated the degree to which you agree with each statement: Our staff are competent in using digital forms of teaching and learning We have been working with digital technology in our school for quite some time Our staff are motivated to use digital forms of teaching and learning Our school has sufficient resources for digital forms of teaching and learning	1= Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Undecided 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly agree	CSL team

Pedagogy/Curriculum *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Distance learning during lockdowns	<p>Please indicate which distance learning approaches your school offered during the lockdown and how effective you would rate each approach.</p> <p>Please select all options that you are certain have been used in your school.</p> <p>1 = Books/worksheets for use at home</p> <p>2 = Dedicated digital learning platform</p> <p>4 = Live video lessons</p> <p>5 = Pre-recorded video lessons</p> <p>6 = Chat applications for teacher and pupil interactions</p> <p>7 = Teachers visited students' homes</p> <p>8 = SNAs visited the students' homes</p> <p>9 = iPad or tablet given to students</p>	<p>1 = This approach was not used</p> <p>2 = Not very effective</p> <p>3 = Quite effective</p> <p>4 = Very effective</p>	Adapted from Ofsted (2021) Ofsted's In-depth Study of Remote Education.

Pedagogy/Curriculum *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Distance learning during quarantine	<p>Which of the following distance learning approaches does your school offer to students who are quarantining? Please select all options that you are certain have been used in your school.</p> <p>1 = Books/worksheets for use at home 2 = Dedicated digital learning platform 4 = Live video lessons 5 = Pre-recorded video lessons 6 = Chat applications for teacher and pupil interactions 7 = Teachers visited the students' homes 8 = SNAs visited the students' homes 9 = iPad or tablet given to students</p>	<p>1 = This approach was not used 2 = Not very effective 3 = Quite effective 4 = Very effective</p>	Adapted from Ofsted (2021) Ofsted's In-depth Study of Remote Education.
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Distance learning quality	<p>How confident are you that your distance learning solutions for students are of high quality?</p>	<p>1 = Unconfident 2 = Unsure 3 = Confident</p>	Adapted from Ofsted (2021) Ofsted's In-depth Study of Remote Education.

Impact of COVID-19 on education of children with SEN

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys (option of '2. student with SEN' only provided for Mainstream survey)	Student uptake of remote learning	What proportion of students in your school accessed/participated in remote learning activities during lockdowns when school campuses were closed? <u>FILTER: Special school category = OFF</u> Please indicate the proportion for (1) all students, and (2) students with SEN	1 = None 2 = Only a few 3 = Around a quarter 4 = Around a half 5 = Around three quarters 6 = Nearly all 7 = All	ICOSEN/CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys (the term 'with SEN' was only included on the Mainstream survey)	Impact on students' wellbeing	To what extent do you think that the learning of students in your school has been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? <u>FILTER: Special school category = OFF</u> Please indicate your opinion for (1) all students, and (2) students with SEN	8 = Not at all 9 = Minor impact 10 = Moderate impact 11 = Moderately severe impact 12 = Severe impact	ICOSEN/CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys (the term 'with SEN' was only included on the Mainstream survey)	Impact on students' wellbeing	To what extent do you think that the wellbeing of students in your school has been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? <u>FILTER: Special school category = OFF</u> Please indicate your opinion for (1) all students, and (2) students with SEN	1 = Not at all 2 = Minor impact 3 = Moderate impact 4 = Moderately severe impact 5 = Severe impact	ICOSEN/CSL team

Impact of COVID-19 on education of children with SEN *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys (the term 'with SEN' was only included on the Mainstream survey)	Contact and support for parents of children with SEN	How often was the school in contact with parents of children with SEN during school closures?	1 = Mostly daily 2 = Mostly weekly 3 = Mostly monthly 4 = Very infrequently 5 = Never	ICOSEN/CSL team
		How often did parents of children with SEN contact you with concerns during school closures?	1 = Mostly daily 2 = Mostly weekly 3 = Mostly monthly 4 = Very infrequently 5 = Never	ICOSEN/CSL team
		How well equipped did you feel you were able to address the concerns of parents of students with SEN?	1 = Not well equipped 2 = Somewhat well equipped 3 = Very well equipped 4 = Unsure	ICOSEN/CSL team
		Did the school provide parents with any additional resources on how to engage their child with SEN in remote learning during school closures?	1 = Yes 2 = No 3 = Unsure	ICOSEN/CSL team

Impact of COVID-19 on education of children with SEN *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Special School Survey only	Impact on learning – SEN type	<p>What level of impact do you think that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the learning of students with the following types of SEN? Please choose a level of impact.</p> <p>Specific learning disability (e.g., dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia)</p> <p>Physical disability</p> <p>Deaf/Hard of hearing</p> <p>Blind/Visual impairment</p> <p>Mild general learning disability</p> <p>Moderate general learning disability</p> <p>Severe and profound general learning disability</p>	<p>Very negative</p> <p>Somewhat negative</p> <p>Mixed – negative and positive</p> <p>Somewhat positive</p> <p>Very positive</p> <p>Unsure</p> <p>NA – no students in my school have this type of SEN</p>	ICOSEN/CSL team
		<p>What level of impact do you think that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the learning of students with the following types of SEN? Please choose a level of impact.</p> <p>Autism</p> <p>Specific speech and language disorder</p> <p>Emotional/behavioural problems</p> <p>Severe emotional/behavioural problems</p> <p>Children with SEN who are socioeconomically disadvantaged</p> <p>Children with SEN from an ethnic minority background</p>	<p>Very negative</p> <p>Somewhat negative</p> <p>Mixed – negative and positive</p> <p>Somewhat positive</p> <p>Very positive</p> <p>Unsure</p> <p>NA – no students in my school have this type of SEN</p>	ICOSEN/CSL team

Impact of COVID-19 on education of children with SEN *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Special Schools survey only	Impact on wellbeing – SEN type	<p>What level of impact do you think that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the wellbeing of students with the following types of SEN? Please choose a level of impact, and type in an explanation for your choice.</p> <p>Specific learning disability (e.g., dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia)</p> <p>Physical disability</p> <p>Deaf/Hard of hearing</p> <p>Blind/Visual impairment</p> <p>Mild general learning disability</p> <p>Moderate general learning disability</p> <p>Severe and profound general learning disability</p>	<p>Very negative</p> <p>Somewhat negative</p> <p>Mixed – negative and positive</p> <p>Somewhat positive</p> <p>Very positive</p> <p>Unsure</p> <p>NA – no students in my school have this type of SEN</p>	ICOSEN/CSL team
		<p>What level of impact do you think that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the wellbeing of students with the following types of SEN? Please choose a level of impact, and type in an explanation for your choice.</p> <p>Autism</p> <p>Specific speech and language disorder</p> <p>Emotional/behavioural problems</p> <p>Severe emotional/behavioural problems</p> <p>Children with SEN who are socioeconomically disadvantaged</p> <p>Children with SEN from an ethnic minority background</p>	<p>Very negative</p> <p>Somewhat negative</p> <p>Mixed – negative and positive</p> <p>Somewhat positive</p> <p>Very positive</p> <p>Unsure</p> <p>NA – no students in my school have this type of SEN</p>	ICOSEN/CSL team

Impact of COVID-19 on education of children with SEN *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys (the term 'SEN' only used in the Mainstream Schools Survey)	Accommodations	What types of accommodations has your school provided during the pandemic for students with SEN? Please list up to four accommodations, rate their effectiveness, and state if you have continued to use these throughout the pandemic. [Type in] [Type in] [Type in] [Type in]	1 = This approach was not used 2 = Unsure of effectiveness 3 = Not at all effective 4 = Slightly effective 5 = Somewhat effective 6 = Very effective Used only during lockdowns Used throughout pandemic	ICOSEN/CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	System supports	To what extent did your school avail or access additional supports for children with SEN, e.g., from NEPS, HSE, CAMHS or NCSE, during the pandemic?	Did not access Accessed a little bit Accessed a lot	ICOSEN/CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Regression Response	What things has your school done, if any, to respond to any regression in the academic performance of students with SEN arising from the pandemic? Please list up to four responses, rate their effectiveness, and state which children these are for. [Type in] [Type in] [Type in] [Type in]	1 = This approach was not used 2 = Unsure of effectiveness 3 = Not at all effective 4 = Slightly effective 5 = Somewhat effective 6 = Very effective All children Mainly children with SEN	ICOSEN/CSL team

Impact of COVID-19 on education of children with SEN *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys (The term 'with SEN' is removed for the Special Schools Survey)	Attendance after school closures	Has there been any change in the attendance of students with SEN since schools have reopened? Please describe this change.	1 = Lower attendance 2 = No change 3 = Higher attendance 4 = Unsure	ICOSEN/CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys	Staff shortages	To what extent has your school had staff shortages during the pandemic?	1 = Never 2 = Rarely 3 = Occasionally 4 = Frequently 5 = Very frequently	ICOSEN/CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys (The term 'with SEN' is removed for the Special Schools Survey)	Impact of staff shortages	Has there been an impact on provision for students with SEN since the schools reopened due to staff shortages?	1 = Reduced provision 2 = No change 3 = Increased provision 4 = Unsure	ICOSEN/CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys (The term 'with SEN' is removed for the Special Schools Survey)	Recommendations for the future	Do you have any recommendations for supporting students with SEN on returning to school after unplanned school closures in the future? Please write your top 3 recommendations	[Type In] [Type In] [Type In]	ICOSEN/CSL team
Mainstream and Special Schools Surveys (The term 'with SEN' is removed for the Special Schools Survey)	Open question	If there is anything else you would like to comment on, regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for students with SEN in your school.	[Type In]	ICOSEN/CSL team

Appendix 3. Interviews

3a. Principal Interview Protocol

THEME	Principal N=35	
1. Contextual Questions and General COVID Questions	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So today we would like to hear about your experience and your school's experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic and school closures and particularly how these events impacted on students with special educational needs. We are first going to ask you a few questions about the impact of COVID in general and then we will talk about student learning and wellbeing before, during, and after the school closures.</i>
	General COVID Impact	* In your experience, how has the pandemic and related school closures had an impact on teaching and learning of students in general?
	Comparing impact on students with and without SEN	* And more specifically how has the pandemic and related school closures impacted upon students with special educational needs ? If yes, how?
		* Has the impact been greater on students with additional needs than on other students in the school?
2. Education, Learning, and Support During School Closures	Contact during school closures	What type of contact did the school have for all students during the school closures? How frequent was this contact? And for students with special educational needs, how much contact did the school have with them? And what type of contact was this? Did the amount of contact for students with SEN change over the course of the pandemic?
		* Are you satisfied with the level of contact with, and support for, students with additional needs achieved by school personnel during school closures? <i>E.g. Zoom sessions, specialised work plans, support format (one-to-one, group sessions, whole class).</i>
		* How much contact did the school have with parents of children with SEN during the school closures?
		Are you satisfied with the level of contact achieved?

THEME	Principal N=35	
2. Education, Learning, and Support During School Closures	Support during school closures	* What were the challenges for you as Principal in ensuring adequate support for students with additional needs during the closures?
		* How prepared was the school to work with the students remotely? Was this more challenging in relation to students with additional needs?
		What specific supports were put in place for children with special educational needs?
	School Closures	* Were there any particular students who might have been particularly disadvantaged during school closures, such as students supported by SNAs, students who might be attending special classes if there are such classes in your school? (Probe: other types of disadvantage SEN etc)
		* Was there any specific whole school approach developed by the school in relation to catering for children with SEN during school closures? If so, what/who developed/led on it? Or did individual teachers decide on their preferred course of action?
	Remote learning	How successful do you think remote learning was for students with special educational needs?
		Did teachers or school personnel receive training on how to best teach students with additional needs during the school closures?
		Were parents of children with special educational needs provided any training or information on how best to support their child's learning during school closures?
	Complaints	* Did you receive any complaints from parents of students with additional needs during the school closures? <i>Please elaborate.</i>
	Recommendations	* Have you any recommendations for how schools might be prepared for supporting students with additional needs during any possible future closures?

THEME	Principal N=35	
2. Wellbeing during schools closures	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So now I'd like to talk a little about the wellbeing of students with SEN during the school closures.</i>
	Wellbeing	Did the school develop an approach to protect the wellbeing of students during school closures? Was anything done to protect the wellbeing of students with SEN in particular?
		* Did school closures impact on the well-being of students with additional needs? <i>Was this consistent across types of additional needs and across school years?</i> Did their wellbeing differ at different times during the pandemic? How so?
		Do you think that there was a difference between how students with and without SEN adjusted to being at home during school closures?
3. Learning & Education during schools reopening	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So now I'd like to talk a little about the learning and education of students with SEN when schools reopened.</i>
	Concerns	Before schools reopened, what were you concerned about most in terms of the learning and education of students with SEN?
	Settling Back into school	* How did students with special educational needs settle back into school once it re-opened?
		* Were there some students with additional needs who did not wish to return to school or did not return to school? Why?
	Attendance	* Since the school reopened, has there been a change in the attendance of students with additional support needs? What change have you noticed? Why do you think this change has happened? If yes – Do you think this change in attendance has impacted on their learning?
		What specific supports were put in place for student with SEN when they returned to school? How successful do you feel these supports were?
		How do the supports students with SEN are receiving now compare to the supports they received before the pandemic? * Has there been an impact on provision since the schools reopened? <i>E.g. due to staff shortages, need to keep students in pods, etc?</i>

THEME	Principal N=35	
3. Learning & Education during schools reopening	Impact on Provision	* Has the pandemic restricted the educational provision for children/students with additional support needs? In what way has COVID impacted upon what is available to the students?
4. Well-being during schools reopening	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So now I'd like to talk a little about the wellbeing of students with SEN when schools reopened</i>
	Wellbeing policy	* Does the school have a policy generally on wellbeing? Is there a specific policy on the well-being of children with SEN?
	Return to school	How do you feel the students in your school felt about the return to school? <i>E.g. Positive, anxious, etc.</i> How do you think children specifically with additional needs felt?
	Not returning	Were there any students with SEN who did not want to or did not return to school?
	supports	* Were there any additional supports provided to students with additional needs in relation to adjusting back to school in addition to that provided to students in general.
5. Relationships	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So now I'd like to talk a little about how relationships you have and the school has may have been impacted by the pandemic and school closures.</i>
	Home-School	* Has the pandemic impacted either positively or negatively on the home-school relationship in relation to students with additional needs?
	School Staff	* Has the pandemic impacted either positively or negatively on staff relationships within the school, including between different categories of staff, e.g. class teachers, SET teachers, SNAs. etc
	External Agencies	* Has the pandemic impacted either positively or negatively on relationships between the school and external agencies, e.g. NEPS, NCSE, HSE.etc?
6. Long-term Effects	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So now I'd like to talk about long-term consequences of the pandemic and school closures.</i>
	Long term effects	* Do you think there will be long-term implications for SEN students as a result of COVID-19? What do you think will be needed to overcome any long-term effects?
	Change to school	* How has the school changed as a consequence of the pandemic and school closures?

THEME	Year Head N=35	
1. Contextual Questions and General COVID Questions		* In your role as Year Head, what year group are you responsible for?
		How many students are in that year group and, to the best of your knowledge, what proportion or how many present with special educational needs?
		What are the main types of additional education needs they present with?
2. Education, Learning, and Support During School Closures	Remote Learning	* How prepared was the school in March of 2020 to work with the students remotely? Was this more challenging in relation to students with additional needs? How prepared did you feel personally?
	Support	Were there any specific supports put in place to help students with SEN engage with Remote learning? How did these supports differ to those implemented for the general student body?
		* In your opinion, did the school provide adequate support to students with special educational needs during the pandemic? Why? What else might have helped?
	Student Engagement	How well did students with SEN engage with learning and remote teaching during school closures? Did their engagement remain consistent throughout the year?
		What strategies worked best to engage students with SEN in remote learning?
	Contact with parents	Did you have contact with the parents of students with SEN during the school closures? How often was this contact? Were parents provided with any guidance/information on how to best support their children with SEN during remote learning?
	Parent Voice	How do you think parents of children with SEN felt about their child's education provision during the school closures?
	Use in future	* Were there any elements of remote teaching and learning that we should consider retaining for students with special educational needs? <i>If so, which aspects?</i>
	Recommendations	* Have you any recommendations for how students with additional needs should be supported during unplanned school closures in the future? Have we learned any lessons?
		* Were there any elements of remote teaching and learning that we should consider retaining for students with special educational needs? <i>If so, which aspects?</i>

THEME	Year Head N=35	
2. Wellbeing during schools closures	Experience of being at home	<p>* Did school closures impact on the well-being of students with additional needs? <i>Was this consistent across types of additional needs and across school years?</i> Did their wellbeing differ at different times during the pandemic? How so?</p> <p>* Do you know how students with special educational needs felt about being at home during the school closures? What did they say about learning at home? Did you talk to them about this? <i>E.g. Increase or decrease anxiety, happiness</i></p>
	Miss/not miss about school	<p>* What, if anything, did the students with special educational needs miss when the school was closed? Did you talk to them about this? <i>E.g. Friends, teachers, routine, activities.</i> Do you think there were aspects of school they did not miss?</p>
	Positive Impact	<p>* Were there some students with special educational needs for whom the closures may have had a positive impact? If so, which students? Why?</p>
	What worked well	<p>* What worked well for students with additional needs during school closures in relation to their well-being?</p>
3. Learning & Education during schools reopening	Settling Back into school	<p>Before the return to school, were you concerned about how students with SEN would adjust to returning to school? Please explain. Were those concerns realised when students did return to school? What things went better than expected? Which was worse? <i>E.g. Learning outcomes, attainment, motivation</i></p> <p>* How did students with additional needs cope with the return to school?</p>
	Voice	<p>Were the views of parents of children with SEN and children with SEN themselves sought in relation to the school reopening?</p> <p>Were your views sought in relation to the school reopening?</p>
	Support	<p>How does the support students with SEN are receiving now compare to the support they received before the pandemic? (Is there more or less?)</p> <p>* Did you feel it was necessary to make additional accommodations for children/students with special educational needs once the school reopened? What extra support was provided? Why?</p>

THEME	Year Head N=35	
3. Learning & Education during schools reopening	Attendance	<p>* Since the school reopened, has there been a change in the attendance of students with additional support needs?</p> <p>What change have you noticed?</p> <p>Why do you think this change has happened?</p> <p>If yes – Do you think this change in attendance has impacted on their learning?</p>
	Impact on provision	<p>* Has there been an impact on provision since the schools reopened?</p> <p><i>E.g. due to staff shortages, need to keep students in pods, etc?</i></p>
4. Well-being during schools reopening	Return to school	<p>How did students with SEN feel about returning to school?</p> <p>Were they happy, anxious, etc? Why?</p>
		<p>What do you think students with SEN enjoyed more upon the return to school?</p> <p>What do you think they found more difficult?</p>
		<p>Were there any students with SEN who did not want to or did not return to school?</p>
	Support	<p>* Were there any additional supports provided to students with additional needs in relation to adjusting back to school in addition to that provided to students in general.</p>
5. Relationships	Student Friendships/ Social skills	<p>Have you noticed any changes in the friendships, relationships, or social skills of children with SEN since the return to school?</p> <p>Do you have any concerns about these domains?</p>
	Student-Teacher relationship	<p>How do you think the pandemic and school closures have impacted upon your own relationships with your students with SEN?</p>
	Teacher-Parent relationship	<p>How do you think the pandemic and school closures have impacted upon your own relationships with the parents of your students with SEN?</p>
6. Long-term Effects	Long term effects	<p>* Do you think there will be long-term implications for SEN students as a result of COVID-19?</p> <p>What do you think will be needed to overcome any long-term effects?</p>
	Change to school	<p>* How has the school changed as a consequence of the pandemic and school closures?</p>

Appendix 3. Interviews

3b. Year Head Interview Protocol

THEME	Year Head N=35	
1. Contextual Questions and General COVID Questions		* In your role as Year Head, what year group are you responsible for?
		How many students are in that year group and, to the best of your knowledge, what proportion or how many present with special educational needs?
		What are the main types of additional education needs they present with?
2. Education, Learning, and Support During School Closures	Remote Learning	* How prepared was the school in March of 2020 to work with the students remotely? Was this more challenging in relation to students with additional needs? How prepared did you feel personally?
	Support	Were there any specific supports put in place to help students with SEN engage with Remote learning? How did these supports differ to those implemented for the general student body? * In your opinion, did the school provide adequate support to students with special educational needs during the pandemic? Why? What else might have helped?
	Student Engagement	How well did students with SEN engage with learning and remote teaching during school closures? Did their engagement remain consistent throughout the year?
		What strategies worked best to engage students with SEN in remote learning?
	Contact with parents	Did you have contact with the parents of students with SEN during the school closures? How often was this contact? Were parents provided with any guidance/information on how to best support their children with SEN during remote learning?
	Parent Voice	How do you think parents of children with SEN felt about their child's education provision during the school closures?
	Use in future	* Were there any elements of remote teaching and learning that we should consider retaining for students with special educational needs? <i>If so, which aspects?</i>

THEME	Year Head N=35	
2. Education, Learning, and Support During School Closures	Recommendations	* Have you any recommendations for how students with additional needs should be supported during unplanned school closures in the future? Have we learned any lessons?
		* Were there any elements of remote teaching and learning that we should consider retaining for students with special educational needs? <i>If so, which aspects?</i>
2. Wellbeing during schools closures	Experience of being at home	* Did school closures impact on the well-being of students with additional needs? <i>Was this consistent across types of additional needs and across school years?</i> Did their wellbeing differ at different times during the pandemic? How so?
		* Do you know how students with special educational needs felt about being at home during the school closures? What did they say about learning at home? Did you talk to them about this? <i>E.g. Increase or decrease anxiety, happiness</i>
	Miss/not miss about school	* What, if anything, did the students with special educational needs miss when the school was closed? Did you talk to them about this? <i>E.g. Friends, teachers, routine, activities.</i> Do you think there were aspects of school they did not miss?
	Positive Impact	* Were there some students with special educational needs for whom the closures may have had a positive impact? If so, which students? Why?
	What worked well	* What worked well for students with additional needs during school closures in relation to their well-being?
3. Learning & Education during schools reopening	Settling Back into school	Before the return to school, were you concerned about how students with SEN would adjust to returning to school? Please explain. Were those concerns realised when students did return to school? What things went better than expected? Which was worse? <i>E.g. Learning outcomes, attainment, motivation</i>
		* How did students with additional needs cope with the return to school?
	Voice	Were the views of parents of children with SEN and children with SEN themselves sought in relation to the school reopening? Were your views sought in relation to the school reopening?

THEME	Year Head N=35	
3. Learning & Education during schools reopening	Support	How does the support students with SEN are receiving now compare to the support they received before the pandemic? (Is there more or less?)
		* Did you feel it was necessary to make additional accommodations for children/students with special educational needs once the school reopened? What extra support was provided? Why?
	Attendance	* Since the school reopened, has there been a change in the attendance of students with additional support needs? What change have you noticed? Why do you think this change has happened? If yes – Do you think this change in attendance has impacted on their learning?
	Impact on provision	* Has there been an impact on provision since the schools reopened? <i>E.g. due to staff shortages, need to keep students in pods, etc?</i>
4. Well-being during schools reopening	Return to school	How did students with SEN feel about returning to school? Were they happy, anxious, etc? Why?
		What do you think students with SEN enjoyed more upon the return to school?
		What do you think they found more difficult?
	Support	Were there any students with SEN who did not want to or did not return to school? * Were there any additional supports provided to students with additional needs in relation to adjusting back to school in addition to that provided to students in general.
5. Relationships	Student Friendships/ Social skills	Have you noticed any changes in the friendships, relationships, or social skills of children with SEN since the return to school? Do you have any concerns about these domains?
	Student-Teacher relationship	How do you think the pandemic and school closures have impacted upon your own relationships with your students with SEN?
	Teacher-Parent relationship	How do you think the pandemic and school closures have impacted upon your own relationships with the parents of your students with SEN?

THEME	Year Head N=35	
6. Long-term Effects	Long term effects	* Do you think there will be long-term implications for SEN students as a result of COVID-19? What do you think will be needed to overcome any long-term effects?
	Change to school	* How has the school changed as a consequence of the pandemic and school closures?

Appendix 3. Interviews

3c. SNA Interview Protocol

THEME	SNA N=34	
1. Contextual Questions and General COVID Questions		* How many students with special educational needs do you support?
		* What types of special educational needs/conditions/disabilities do these students present with?
		* What is the nature of the support you provide to these students?
		How did your duties/responsibilities as an SNA change during the school closures? Probe home based summer program
	General COVID Impact	* We are interested in the impact of COVID-19 and school closures on students with SEN. Was the impact similar across all types of special educational needs? If not, which students were most impacted by COVID-19 and school closures? Why/ * Was the impact similar across all school years? If not, which years were most impacted? Why
2. Education, Learning, and Support During School Closures	Remote Learning	To what extent were you involved in remote teaching for students with SEN? How prepared did you feel to do this? Were there any specific challenges to supporting your students online?
	Support	Were there any specific supports put in place to help students with SEN engage with Remote learning? How did these supports differ to those implemented for the general student body?
		* In your opinion, did the school provide adequate support to students with special educational needs during the pandemic? Why? What else might have helped?

THEME	SNA N=34	
2. Education, Learning, and Support During School Closures	Student Engagement	How well did students with SEN engage with learning and remote teaching during school closures? Did their engagement remain consistent throughout the year?
		What strategies worked best to engage students with SEN in remote learning?
	Recommendations	* Have you any recommendations for how students with additional needs should be supported by SNAs during unplanned school closures in the future? Have we learned any lessons?
		* Were there any elements of remote teaching and learning that we should consider retaining for students with special educational needs? <i>If so, which aspects?</i>
2. Wellbeing during schools closures	Experience of being at home	* Did school closures impact on the well-being of students with additional needs? <i>Was this consistent across types of additional needs and across school years?</i> Did their wellbeing differ at different times during the pandemic? How so?
		* Do you know how students with special educational needs felt about being at home during the school closures? What did they say about learning at home? Did you talk to them about this? <i>E.g. Increase or decrease anxiety, happiness</i>
	Miss/not miss about school	* What, if anything, did the students with special educational needs miss when the school was closed? Did you talk to them about this? <i>E.g. Friends, teachers, routine, activities.</i> Do you think there were aspects of school they did not miss?
	Positive Impact	* Were there some students with special educational needs for whom the closures may have had a positive impact? If so, which students? Why?
	What worked well	* What worked well for students with additional needs during school closures in relation to their well-being?
3. Learning & Education during schools reopening	Settling Back into school	Before the return to school, were you concerned about how students with SEN would adjust to returning to school? Please explain. Were those concerns realised when students did return to school? What things went better than expected? Which was worse? <i>E.g. Learning outcomes, attainment, motivation</i>
		* How did students with additional needs cope with the return to school?

THEME	SNA N=34	
3. Learning & Education during schools reopening	Voice	Were the views of parents of children with SEN and children with SEN themselves sought in relation to the school reopening?
		Were your views sought in relation to the school reopening?
	Support	How does the support students with SEN are receiving now compare to the support they received before the pandemic? (Is there more or less?)
		* Did you feel it was necessary to make additional accommodations for children/students with special educational needs once the school reopened? What extra support was provided? Why?
	Attendance	* Since the school reopened, has there been a change in the attendance of students with additional support needs? What change have you noticed? Why do you think this change has happened? If yes – Do you think this change in attendance has impacted on their learning?
4. Well-being during schools reopening	Impact on provision	* Has there been an impact on provision since the schools reopened? <i>E.g. due to staff shortages, need to keep students in pods, etc?</i>
	Return to school	How did students with SEN feel about returning to school? Were they happy, anxious, etc? Why?
		What do you think students with SEN enjoyed more upon the return to school? What do you think they found more difficult?
		Were there any students with SEN who did not want to or did not return to school?
	Support	* Were there any additional supports provided to students with additional needs in relation to adjusting back to school in addition to that provided to students in general.

THEME	SNA N=34	
5. Relationships	Student Friendships/ Social skills	Have you noticed any changes in the friendships, relationships, or social skills of children with SEN since the return to school? Do you have any concerns about these domains?
	Student-SNA relationship	How do you think the pandemic and school closures have impacted upon your own relationships with your students with SEN?
	SNA-Parent relationship	How do you think the pandemic and school closures have impacted upon your own relationships with the parents of your students with SEN?
6. Long-term Effects	Long term effects	* Do you think there will be long-term implications for SEN students as a result of COVID-19? What do you think will be needed to overcome any long-term effects?
	Change to school	* How has the school changed as a consequence of the pandemic and school closures?

Appendix 3. Interviews

3d. SET and SENCO Interview Protocol

THEME	SET N=41	
1. Contextual Questions and General COVID Questions		* Approximately, how many students with special educational needs attend this school?
		* What are the most prevalent types of special educational need in the school?
	General COVID Impact	* We are interested in the impact of COVID-19 and school closures on students with SEN. Was the impact similar across all types of special educational needs? If not, which students were most impacted by COVID-19 and school closures? Why/ * Was the impact similar across all school years? If not, which years were most impacted? Why

THEME	SET N=41	
2. Education, Learning, and Support During School Closures	Contact	* Was it possible for you or another SET teacher to have contact with students with special educational needs when the school was closed? <i>E.g. Zoom sessions, specialised work plans, support format (one-to-one, group sessions, whole class)</i>
		* What was the nature of your contact? How often were you or another SET in contact with the students?
		Were you satisfied with the amount of and type of contact with students with SEN achieved during the school closures?
	Remote Learning	* How prepared was the school in March of 2020 to work with the students remotely? Was this more challenging in relation to students with additional needs? How prepared did you feel personally?
		* Were students with special educational needs able to avail of remote teaching when the school was closed?
		* How did the students with special educational needs experience remote teaching?
	Support	Were there any specific supports put in place to help students with SEN engage with Remote learning?
		* In your opinion, did the school provide adequate support to students with special educational needs during the pandemic? Why? What else might have helped?
	Enjoyment/difficulties	* Were there any aspects of remote teaching and learning that you believe students with special educational needs enjoyed/found more difficult? <i>E.g. Online interactions over face to face, independent work</i>
	Student Engagement	How well did students with SEN engage with learning and remote teaching during school closures? Did their engagement remain consistent throughout the year?
		What strategies worked best to engage students with SEN in remote learning?
	External Factors	Were there any factors at home that you think may have influenced how well students with SEN learned from home? <i>E.g. access to device, ability to use device, internet connection, parents working, siblings...</i>

THEME	SET N=41	
2. Education, Learning, and Support During School Closures	Work Submission & Feedback	<p>* Did the students with special educational needs submit work electronically? If not, why not?</p> <p>* Was feedback given to the students with special educational needs?</p> <p>How was the feedback provided?</p>
	Contact with parents	<p>Did you have contact with the parents of students with SEN during the school closures? How often was this contact?</p> <p>Were parents provided with any guidance/information on how to best support their children with SEN during remote learning?</p>
	Parent Voice	How do you think parents of children with SEN felt about their child's education provision during the school closures?
	Recommendations	* Have you any recommendations for how students with additional needs should be supported during unplanned school closures in the future? Have we learned any lessons?
		* Were there any elements of remote teaching and learning that we should consider retaining for students with special educational needs? <i>If so, which aspects?</i>
2. Wellbeing during school closures	Experience of being at home	<p>* Did school closures impact on the well-being of students with additional needs?</p> <p><i>Was this consistent across types of additional needs and across school years?</i></p> <p>Did their wellbeing differ at different times during the pandemic? How so?</p>
		<p>* Do you know how students with special educational needs felt about being at home during the school closures?</p> <p>What did they say about learning at home? Did you talk to them about this? <i>E.g. Increase or decrease anxiety, happiness</i></p>
	Miss/not miss about school	<p>* What, if anything, did the students with special educational needs miss when the school was closed?</p> <p>Did you talk to them about this? <i>E.g. Friends, teachers, routine, activities.</i></p> <p>Do you think there were aspects of school they did not miss?</p>
	Positive Impact	* Were there some students with special educational needs for whom the closures may have had a positive impact? If so, which students? Why?
	What worked well	* What worked well for students with additional needs during school closures in relation to their well-being?

THEME	SET N=41	
3. Learning & Education during schools reopening	Settling Back into school	Before the return to school, were you concerned about how students with SEN would adjust to returning to school? Please explain.
		Were those concerns realised when students did return to school? What things went better than expected? Which was worse?
		<i>E.g. Learning outcomes, attainment, motivation</i>
	Voice	* How did students with additional needs cope with the return to school?
		Were the views of parents of children with SEN and children with SEN themselves sought in relation to the school reopening?
		Were your views sought in relation to the school reopening?
	Support	How does the support students with SEN are receiving now compare to the support they received before the pandemic? (Is there more or less?)
		* Did you feel it was necessary to make additional accommodations for children/students with special educational needs once the school reopened? What extra support was provided? Why?
	Attendance	* Since the school reopened, has there been a change in the attendance of students with additional support needs?
		What change have you noticed? Why do you think this change has happened? If yes – Do you think this change in attendance has impacted on their learning?
	Impact on teaching/provision	* Has the pandemic impacted upon the teaching methods you are using with students with special educational needs? <i>If yes, please elaborate. E.g. lesson planning, teacher strategies, lesson or materials design</i>
		* Has there been an impact on provision since the schools reopened? <i>E.g. due to staff shortages, need to keep students in pods, etc?</i>

THEME	SET N=41	
4. Well-being during schools reopening	Return to school	How did students with SEN feel about returning to school? Were they happy, anxious, etc? Why?
		What do you think students with SEN enjoyed more upon the return to school? What do you think they found more difficult?
		Were there any students with SEN who did not want to or did not return to school?
	Support	* Were there any additional supports provided to students with additional needs in relation to adjusting back to school in addition to that provided to students in general.
5. Relationships	Student Friendships/ Social skills	Have you noticed any changes in the friendships, relationships, or social skills of children with SEN since the return to school? Do you have any concerns about these domains?
	Student-Teacher relationship	How do you think the pandemic and school closures have impacted upon your own relationships with your students with SEN?
	Teacher-Parent relationship	How do you think the pandemic and school closures have impacted upon your own relationships with the parents of your students with SEN?
6. Long-term Effects	Long term effects	* Do you think there will be long-term implications for SEN students as a result of COVID-19? What do you think will be needed to overcome any long-term effects?
	Change to school	* How has the school changed as a consequence of the pandemic and school closures?

Appendix 3. Interviews

3e. Parent Interview Protocol

THEME	Parents N=33	
1. Demographic Info	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So today we would like to talk to you to learn more about your child's experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic and school closures. We will first ask you a little about yourself and your child and then talk about your child's learning and wellbeing before, during, and after the school closures.</i>
	Demographic Info	What is your name? What is your child's name? How old is your child now?
	Family Info	Who lives in the house with you and your child? Does your child live at home all the time, or do they sometimes lives somewhere else? Do you work full-time? Does your partner work fulltime?
	SEN type Info	What is the nature of the difficulty experienced by your child? Does your child have an official diagnosis? When did your child's needs become apparent/When did your child receive a diagnosis?
	Support before school closures	Did your child receive any extra support in school before the first school closure? Can you tell me a little about this extra support? (Who provided it? Was it on a one-to-one withdrawal basis or in class? With which subjects did they receive support? Was it helpful for your child?) Ensure to differentiate if child is on the SET register or not and this is help from an SET teacher
	General COVID Question	How do you believe the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted upon families on children with additional needs? How has it been for your family in particular?
2. Education, Learning, and Support During School Closures	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So I'd like to talk to you a little bit about [child's name]'s experience of learning at home during the school closures.</i>

THEME	Parents N=33	
2. Education, Learning, and Support During School Closures	Contact	<p>Did [child's name] have much contact with the school when it closed?</p> <p>How often was this contact?</p> <p>What type of contact was this?</p> <p>Did it change throughout the school closures? (probe regularity, type, satisfaction)</p> <p>Were you happy with this type of contact? Was [child's name] happy with this amount of contact?</p>
	Support during school closures	<p>* Did [child's name] need support from home to engage in classes and do homework during remote learning?</p> <p>Who provided this support?</p> <p>Was any extra support provided by the school? (if not mentioned previously)</p> <p>Did you feel capable or well resourced enough to provide support to [child's name] ? (If applicable)</p>
		<p>How supported by the school and by [child's name]'s teacher(s) when schools had to close?</p> <p>Were you satisfied with the support you received?</p> <p>What kind of support would you have liked to receive?</p>
	Experience of learning from home	<p>How do you think [child's name] felt about learning at home?</p> <p>How do you think they felt about learning at home compared to learning at school?</p> <p>Which form of learning do you think has been better for them?</p>
		<p>* Comparing [child's name] with siblings or other children his/her age, would you say that learning from home presented him/her with particular challenges? Why? <i>E.g. due to attention difficulties, physical difficulties, sensory difficulties, etc</i></p>
	External factors influencing learning	<p>* Did you work with [child's name] during remote learning?</p> <p>Did you feel equipped to do this?</p> <p>Did you have the resources and time to do this?</p> <p>Were there any factors at home that you think may have influenced how well your child learned from home? <i>E.g. access to device, ability to use device, internet connection, parents working, siblings...</i></p>
	Voice	<p>If you had been asked your opinion on the best way for students with SEN to learn remotely during school closures, what would you have said?</p>

THEME	Parents N=33	
3. Wellbeing during School Closures	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So now I'd like to talk a little about [child's name]'s wellbeing during school closures.</i>
	Experience of school closures	* How did [child's name] feel about being at home during the school closures? Why? <i>E.g. Increase or decrease anxiety, happiness</i>
		Did how they felt about being at home during school closures change during the subsequent lockdown? What was different when schools closed again?
		Was there anything that your child liked about being at home during school closures or anything that you felt benefitted their wellbeing? Was there anything they did not like or that you felt may have harmed their wellbeing?
	Relationships	* Did [child's name] maintain contact with any class peers while schools were closed?
		* Was the relationship with you (and with siblings?) any different from pre pandemic?
4. Learning & Education during schools reopening	COVID Anxiety	* Did [child's name] feel anxious about the risk of getting COVID-19 or the risk of family members getting it? If so, how did anxiety compare to your own or other family members'? Were they more or less anxious in comparison?
	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So now I'd like to talk about [child's name]'s experiences with learning when schools reopened.</i>
	Settling back into school	* How did [child's name] settle back into school when it reopened after the first school closure?
		Was it easier or more difficult for your child to settle back into school after it opened following the subsequent school closures?
		Would your child have preferred to continue learning at home?
	Attendance	* What was your child's attendance in school like before the first school closure?
		What is your child's attendance in school like now?
		Do you think your child's attendance has changed after the school closures? If so, why?
	Learning when schools reopened	* Did you have any concerns about [child's name] learning or school work when schools reopened? <i>E.g. Learning outcomes, attainment, motivation</i>
		Do you have any concerns now? <i>E.g. Assessment, standardised tests, State exams</i>
		* Are you satisfied with [child's name] academic performance since returning to school?

THEME	Parents N=33	
4. Learning & Education during schools reopening	Support	<p>* What specific supports were put in place for [child's name] when they returned to school?</p> <p>Are they getting the same level of support as before?</p> <p>Are you satisfied with the amount of support [child's name] is receiving?</p>
	Voice	<p>Were parents consulted at all about the school's plan for reopening?</p> <p>(if no) – If you had been asked what you thought your child needed to thrive upon their return to school, what would you said?</p>
5. Well-being during schools reopening	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So now I'd like to talk about [child's name]'s wellbeing when schools reopened. So this means how you felt about schools reopening and the emotions you felt when coming back to school.</i>
	Worry about return to school	<p>How did your child feel before the return to school? Were they worried about going back?</p> <p>How did your child feel when they actually did go back to school?</p>
	Enjoyment of returning to school	<p>What do you think your child enjoyed about being back in school? What do you think they did not enjoy?</p> <p>Was anything particularly difficult for them?</p>
	Feelings towards school	<p>Do you think your child feels the same way about school now as before the pandemic?</p> <p>What has changed?</p>
	Behaviour	<p>Do you think [child's name] acts the same way in school now compared to before school closures?</p> <p>Why do you think they may be acting differently?</p> <p>(Prompt: getting into trouble/how social they are/how engaged they feel, etc)</p>
	Relationships	<p>Do you think your child's friendships and relationships have changed at all since they have returned to school?</p> <p>How so?</p> <p>Prompt number of friends and quality of friendships</p>
		Do you believe the pandemic and school closures have impacted on your child's social skills in any way?
		<p>Do you feel your relationship to school has changed at all following the school closures?</p> <p>How so?</p>

THEME	Parents N=33	
6. Long term Impacts	Overall learning impact	Do you think that [child's name]'s learning has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures?
	Long term Effects	* Do you think there will be long-term effects of COVID and school closures for [child's name] What do you think [child's name] needs to address any long-term issue?

Appendix 3. Interviews

3f. Student Interview Protocol

THEME	Students N=30	
1. Demographic Info	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So today we would like to talk to you about your experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. First we are going to ask you some questions about yourself and then we will be talking about your learning and wellbeing, before, during, and after the school closures.</i>
	Demographic Info	What is your name? How old are you? What year are you in now? What year were you in when the first school closure (March 2020) due to COVID-19 occurred?
	Support inside school	Did you receive any extra help in school before the first school closure? Can you tell me a little about this extra help? (Who provided it? Where did you receive help? Was it in a group or one to one? Which subjects did you need help in? Was it helpful for you? <i>Ensure to differentiate if child is on the SET register or not and this is help from an SET teacher</i>
	Supports outside school	Before COVID, did you receive any supports from services outside of school? Can you describe these supports? How has the pandemic and school closures affected these supports? Did they stop for awhile? Are you getting the same level of support now?
2. Education, Learning, and Support During School Closures	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So I'd like to talk to you a little bit about your experience of learning at home during the school closures.</i>

THEME	Students N=30	
2. Education, Learning, and Support During School Closures	Contact	<p>Did you much contact with the school when it closed?</p> <p>How often was this contact?</p> <p>What type of contact was this?</p> <p>Did it change throughout the school closures? (probe regularity, type, satisfaction)</p> <p>Were you happy with this type of contact?</p>
	Support during school closures	<p>Did the school provide you with any extra support to help you with your learning during the school closures?</p> <p>Can you describe this support for me.</p> <p>(probe: type, amount, satisfaction)</p>
	Enjoyment of remote learning	<p>Did you enjoy learning at home?</p> <p>What parts did you like most?</p> <p>What parts did you like least?</p> <p>Why do you think this was the case?</p>
	External factors influencing learning	<p>Were there any factors at home that made it easier or harder for you to learn at home?</p> <p><i>E.g. parents working, siblings around, access to device, reliable internet, etc.</i></p>
	Voice	<p>If you had been asked your opinion on the best way for students to learn remotely during school closures, what would you have said?</p>
3. Wellbeing during School Closures	Section Instruction/Intro	<p><i>So now I'd like to talk a little about your wellbeing during school closures. So this means how you felt about the pandemic and school closures and any emotions you were feeling during this time.</i></p>
	Experience of school closures	<p>* How did you feel about being at home during the first school closures? Why?</p> <p>Did how you were feeling about being at home during school closures change during the subsequent lockdown?</p> <p>What was different when schools closed again?</p>
		<p>What did you like about being home during school closures? What did you not like?</p>
		<p>Did you miss anything about school?</p> <p>What did you not miss about school?</p>

THEME	Students N=30	
3. Wellbeing during School Closures	Relationships	* Did you keep in touch with classmates while schools were closed?
		* Were the relationships with family members any different during the lockdown?
	COVID Anxiety	* Did you feel anxious about the risk of getting COVID-19 or the risk of family members getting it?
4. Learning & Education during schools reopening	Section Instruction/Intro	So now I'd like to talk about your experiences with learning when schools reopened.
	Settling back into school	* How did you settle back into school when it reopened after the first school closure?
		Was it easier or more difficult to settle back into school after it opened following the subsequent school closures?
		Would you have preferred to continue learning at home?
	Attendance	* What was your attendance in school like before the first school closure?
		What is your attendance in school like now?
		Do you think your attendance has changed after the school closures? If so, why?
	Learning when schools reopened	* Did you have any concerns about learning or schoolwork when schools reopened?
		Do you have any concerns now?
	Support	* Are you satisfied with how you're doing in school since school reopened?
		* What specific supports were put in place for you when you returned to school?
		Are you getting the same level of support as before?
	Voice	Are you happy with the amount of support you're getting now?
		If you had been asked what support you needed to do well in school when they reopened, what would you have said?

THEME	Students N=30	
5. Well-being during schools reopening	Section Instruction/Intro	<i>So now I'd like to talk about your wellbeing when schools reopened. So this means how you felt about schools reopening and the emotions you felt when coming back to school.</i>
	Worry about return to school	Before the return to school were you worried? How did you feel about going back? How did you feel when you actually did go back to school? Was it like you expected or different?
	Enjoyment of returning to school	What did you like about returning to school? What did you not like? Was anything particularly difficult?
	Feelings towards school	Do you feel the same way about school now as you did before the pandemic? What has changed?
	Behaviour	Do you think you act the same way in school now compared to before school closures? Why do you think you may be acting differently? (Prompt: getting into trouble/how social they are/how engaged they feel, etc)
	Relationships	Do you think your friendships have changed at all since you have returned to school? How so? Prompt number of friends and quality of friendships
		How do you feel being around so many other kids your age again after the school closures? Do you feel uncomfortable, comfortable, etc?
	Voice	If your school had asked you what students need to settle back into school well when it reopened what would you say?
6. Long term Impacts	Overall learning impact	Do you think that your learning has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures?
	Long term Effects	* Do you think there will be long-term effects of COVID and school closures for you? What do you think you need to address any long-term issue?

Appendix 4. CSL Surveys

4a. Child Self-Report Variables

Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Victimisation and bullying	How often have you been bullied at school in the last couple of months? How often have you taken part in bullying another child at school in the last couple of months?	1 = Never 2 = Once or twice 3 = A few times 4 = Around once a week 5 = Several times a week	Olweus, D. (2006). <i>Revised Olweus bully/victim questionnaire (OBVQ)</i> . PsycTESTS. Doi: 10.1037/t09634-000.
School engagement	I look forward to going to school. I like being in school. I wish I didn't have to go to school. I like many things about school.	1 = Never 2 = Rarely 3 = Sometimes 4 = Usually 5 = Always	Rowe, E. W., Kim, S., Baker, J. A., Kamphaus, R. W., & Horne, A. M. (2010). Student personal perception of classroom climate: Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. <i>Educational and Psychological Measurement</i> , 70(5), 858-879
Academic confidence	I am better than most people at my classwork. I do well in my classwork. Work in class is easy for me. I learn things quickly in class. I'm no good when it comes to my classwork I have always done well in my classwork.	1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Undecided 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly agree	Marsh, H. W. (1990). The structure of academic self-concept: The Marsh/Shavelson model. <i>Journal of Educational Psychology</i> , 82(4), 623

Domain	Items	Response scale	Reference
Psychological wellbeing	Do you feel good about who you are? Do you think people care about you? Are you happy in general? Can you do things well for yourself? Can you do the things you want to do in your life? If you have a problem, can you find a way to deal with it? Do you feel safe in general? Do you think you are helpful to other people?	1 = Never 2 = Rarely 3 = Sometimes 4 = Usually 5 = Always	Symonds, J. E., Sloan, S., Kearns, M., Devine, D., Sugrue, C., Suryanaryan, S., Capistrano, D., & Samonova, E. (2022). Developing a Social Evolutionary Measure of Child and Adolescent Hedonic and Eudaimonic Wellbeing in Rural Sierra Leone. <i>Journal of Happiness Studies</i> , 23(4), 1433-1467. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-021-00456-4

Appendix 4. CSL Surveys

4b. Teacher Report on Child Variables

Domain	Items	Response	Reference
Special needs and other characteristics	Do any of the following limit the kind or amount of activity this child can do at school? Autism General learning disability Specific learning difficulties (e.g., dyslexia) Physical disability or visual or hearing impairment Speech impairment Emotional or behavioural disturbance	No Yes	CSL team adapted from the National Council for Special Education Definitions of High and Low Incidence Special Educational Needs <i>Information Booklet for Parents of Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs</i>

Domain	Items	Response	Reference
Peer problems	Think about this child. Please base your answers on the child's behaviour over the last school year. Rather solitary, tends to play alone Has at least one good friend Generally liked by other children Picked on or bullied by other children Gets on better with adults than with other children	Not true Somewhat true Certainly true	Goodman, R. (1997). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: a research note. <i>Journal of child psychology and psychiatry</i> , 38(5), 581-586.
Hyperactivity	Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long Constantly fidgeting or squirming Easily distracted, concentration wanders Thinks things out before acting Sees tasks through to the end, good attention span	Not true Somewhat true Certainly true	Goodman, R. (1997). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: a research note. <i>Journal of child psychology and psychiatry</i> , 38(5), 581-586.
Conduct problems	Often has temper tantrums or hot tempers Generally obedient, usually does what adults request Often fights with other children or bullies them Often lies or cheats Steals from home, school or elsewhere	Not true Somewhat true Certainly true	Goodman, R. (1997). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: a research note. <i>Journal of child psychology and psychiatry</i> , 38(5), 581-586.
Emotional problems	Often complains of headaches, stomach-aches, or sickness Many worries or often seems worried Often unhappy, depressed or tearful Nervous in new situations, easily loses confidence Many fears, easily scared	Not true Somewhat true Certainly true	Goodman, R. (1997). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: a research note. <i>Journal of child psychology and psychiatry</i> , 38(5), 581-586.



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