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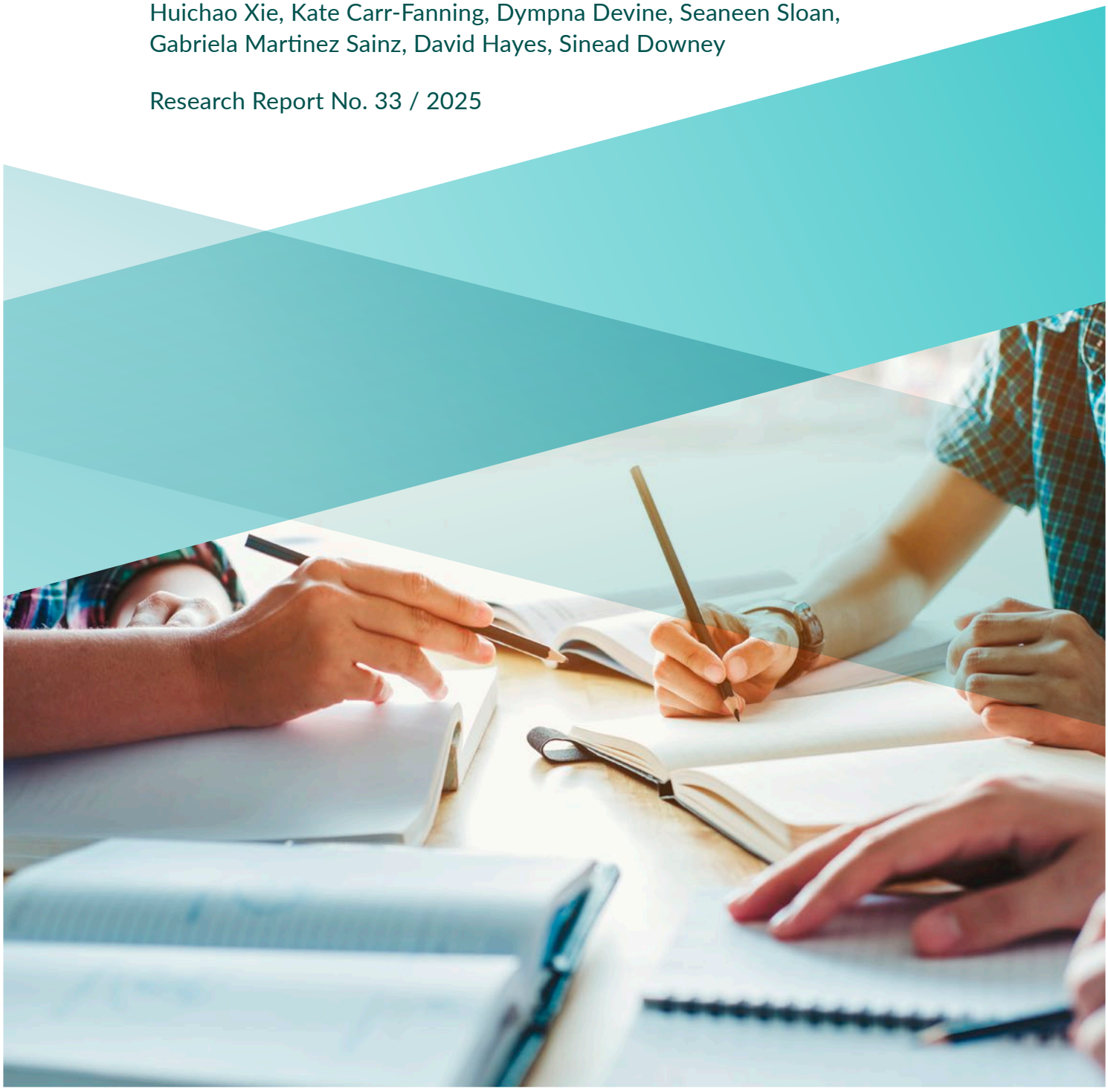
National Council
for Special Education

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

Joyce Senior, Jennifer Symonds, Linda Bhreathnach, Natalie Barrow, Huichao Xie, Kate Carr-Fanning, Dympna Devine, Seaneen Sloan, Gabriela Martinez Sainz, David Hayes, Sinead Downey

Research Report No. 33 / 2025



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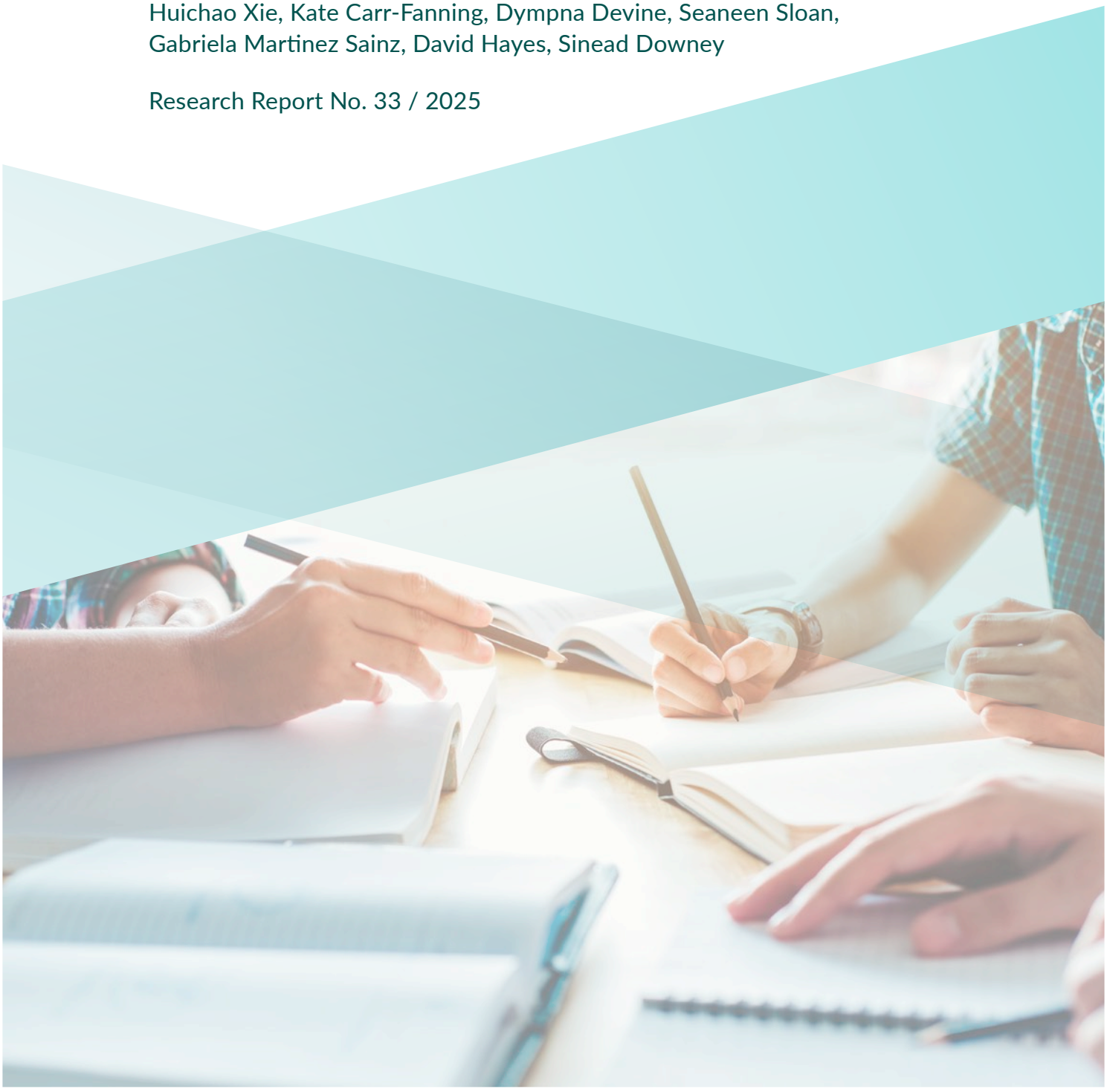

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Foreword

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is pleased to publish this research report investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children with special educational needs (SEN). This is the second of two reports on this subject. The NCSE commissioned this follow-up study to investigate the longer-term impact of school closures on the education and wellbeing of students and young people with SEN in mainstream and special schools in Ireland. We also wanted to determine how schools were continuing to respond to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study used primary and secondary qualitative and quantitative data sources. Its findings are presented across three themes: student wellbeing; student engagement and learning; and provision and supports.

The study illustrates that the negative impact on wellbeing was still evident up to 2023. The findings from the principal (n=312) and staff surveys (n=340) indicate that when asked to pick the three greatest long-term impacts on the wellbeing of students with SEN, a third of school personnel, regardless of school type, stated 'social development, interaction and skills affected' and 'increase in anxiety/fear/stress'. Continued negative impacts of the pandemic on the wellbeing of students with SEN were noted across all school types. School personnel were also asked to rate the extent of the pandemic's lasting impacts on four areas of student wellbeing – students with special educational needs scored higher in each category. This includes negative impacts on their social skills (61 per cent, students with additional needs; 56 per cent, students without); emotional regulation (57 per cent; 50 per cent, respectively); behavioural issues (47 per cent; 35 per cent, respectively) and enjoyment of school (23 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively).

In terms of student engagement and learning teachers in interviews revealed they had to adapt their learning targets and pedagogical practices to address learning gaps and meet the needs of students after the schools reopened. Ongoing negative effects for those in need of additional supports for both literacy and numeracy skills were reported across all school types. Staff across school types were asked to rate if students had caught up on learning. Students with SEN were reported as either 'very behind' or 'slightly behind' by 82 per cent in post-primary; 76 per cent in primary; and 59 per cent in special schools.

On provisions and supports participants reported a system shift in focus from academics to wellbeing. According to staff some students needed more support for their wellbeing and ability to interact with other children, sustain attention in class along with their general ability to manage school life. Teachers noted altering their teaching approach to meet the needs of students as they had not hit the level expected for their age and ability. Staff also spoke of the pandemic's continued impact on access to external support services and therapeutic supports and intervention (occupational therapy, speech and language, psychology, psychiatry) since schools reopened with numerous reports of long waitlists as well as reduced access to external services (assessment and therapeutic support). As a result, school staff were trying to provide support outside of their teaching remit.

I would like to thank the research team at the UCD School of Education. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the resilience of students and schools during this extremely challenging period. I want to extend my sincere thanks to the study participants – students, parents and school staff – for taking the time to contribute to such a valuable piece of empirical research. These findings will contribute to ongoing support for students and preparing or responding to future pandemics.

John Kearney
Chief Executive Officer

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the National Council for Special Education for commissioning this research and in particular for providing funding to engage in a follow-up study to investigate the continued impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of students and their schools. We are sincerely grateful to the students, parents and staff who gave so generously of their time and shared their experiences and insights. We also gratefully acknowledge the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment as funders of the Children's School Lives study from which some secondary data pertaining to primary schools was obtained.

List of Acronyms

ABI	acquired brain injury
ADHD	attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
ASD	autism spectrum disorder/autism
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CSL	children's school lives
DCD	developmental coordination disorder/dyspraxia
DD	developmental disorders
DS	Down syndrome
EAL	English as an additional language
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
GLD	general learning disability
HSCL	home school community liaison
HSE	Health Service Executive
ID	intellectual disability
IEP	individual education plan
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
MGLD	mild general learning disability
NAMER	National Assessments of Mathematics and Reading
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
OCD	obsessive compulsive disorder
ODD	oppositional defiant disorder
OT	occupational therapy
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PPS	post-primary school
PS	primary school
PS-AC	primary school, autism class
SENCO	special educational needs coordinator
SET	special education teacher
SNA	special needs assistant
SPD	sensory processing disorder
SS	special school
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TY	Transition Year
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Language Statement and Terms

Within the disability community there can be different preferences for certain terminology. For this report, the term 'special educational needs' or 'SEN' is used to describe children who may need additional support in school due to various needs. This term has been chosen as it is the one utilised within the NCSE and the Irish school system. This report also utilises a mix of identity-first and person-first language. 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 on this preference (Kenny et al., 2015)

Executive Summary

Study Overview

For children with special educational needs, COVID-19 school closures meant limited access to the support and specialised services given by schools, particularly for those who relied on schools for overall mental health and wellbeing (Winfield et al., 2023; Dvorksy et al., 2023; Layachi & Schuelka, 2022). Research has shown these children were more vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic and were at greater risk of impaired wellbeing (Tso et al., 2023). The school environment is a unique setting where children's social and emotional wellbeing can be supported and promoted. When this support is taken away, however, there can be negative impacts (Layachi & Schuelka, 2022). The pandemic continues to have an impact on society in general as well as a very significant impact on education systems worldwide. This has not been the same for all students within the education system. In Ireland, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI, 2020) reported that, compared to other cohorts, students with special educational needs and those from disadvantaged backgrounds were disproportionately disadvantaged by closures and restrictions.

In Ireland, schools first closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. As lockdowns and school closures were extended, concern grew about the potential impact of these on children, and particularly those with special educational needs (SEN). In 2021, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) commissioned UCD School of Education to research the pandemic's impact and related school closures on this cohort. It examined how schools responded to the pandemic and supported these students during 2021-22 with a view to outlining good practice. This study report was published in 2024 (Kinsella, Senior, Symonds et al., (2024). The NCSE commissioned a follow-up study to investigate the COVID-19 pandemic's ongoing impact on children with special educational needs. This (2022-23) aimed to investigate its potential ongoing and medium-term impact and especially the school closures on the education and wellbeing of children needing additional support in mainstream and special schools in Ireland. A further aim was to determine how schools continued to respond to this ongoing impact with a view to identifying the approaches, characteristics and mechanisms that would support the education system and those working and learning within it in the event of future school closures. While the terms medium- and long-term impacts of COVID-19 are used throughout the study it is with the caveat that the focus was on 2022-23. Its results are organised into three main themes relating to the pandemic's continued impact: student wellbeing; student engagement and learning; and provisions and supports.

Research Aims

Informed by the findings of the first study (2021-22), the overall aim of this study, Report 2, was to investigate the medium-term impact of school closures on children's engagement and learning and wellbeing across primary, post-primary and special school settings in 2022-23. It examined the changes in approaches to inclusion, pedagogical practices, access to curriculum and supports for children with special educational needs. It also explored the home-school relationship as well as external support services for schools and students.

Literature Review

Drawing on the principles of a systematic literature review, Chapter 2's review is an extension of the literature in the first report (Kinsella, Senior, Symonds et al., 2024) and includes international and national literature published between January 2022 and July 2023. Its focus is literature about the impact of COVID-19 on children with special educational needs, specifically changes in provisions and services for this cohort and the impact of the pandemic on their wellbeing, engagement in learning and learning outcomes. In terms of wellbeing, these students appear to have been particularly at risk, with the wellbeing of those with mental health and/or behavioural difficulties mostly affected. The evidence suggests we need to understand these experiences holistically in the context of the family system. Families of children with special educational needs may have experienced more challenges than those with children without, including higher levels of parental anxiety, depression and stress. Findings suggest ongoing negative effects on their mental health post-pandemic. Similar to the findings on wellbeing, research found some groups may be at greater risks than others, such as students with autism, ADHD and/or intellectual disability. Further research is needed, however, to understand the experiences of these diverse groups as findings across studies were often conflicting about whether and how students (especially with autism) were negatively or positively affected by homeschooling.

The literature review also explores the efficacy and impact of online learning and the effects of the COVID-19 disruption on the ongoing learning of students with educational needs who appear significantly more affected by school closures than those without SEN. They were also reportedly much more dependent on family/parental support to engage in online learning. However, parents/carers often perceive themselves to lack the knowledge and skill to support their child and, as previously discussed, experienced greater stress which emphasises the need for more parental support and strong home-school communication. Other issues identified were a lack of student motivation, the effects of changes to routines (particularly for autistic students) and the reduction or cessation of therapeutic interventions. In general, the literature suggests the changes to pedagogy developed in response to school closures do not appear to have been effective for students with learning difficulties. There appears to have been a lack of SEN support and provisions (e.g. differentiation, accommodations and student support plans/individual education plans). The literature on continuing issues with educational provisions and supports for these children post-pandemic appeared to show a lack of resources to support them during school closures and as they returned to school. Once back in school, supports, services and interventions accessed before the COVID-19 pandemic were either reduced or not available.

Summary of Literature Review Findings

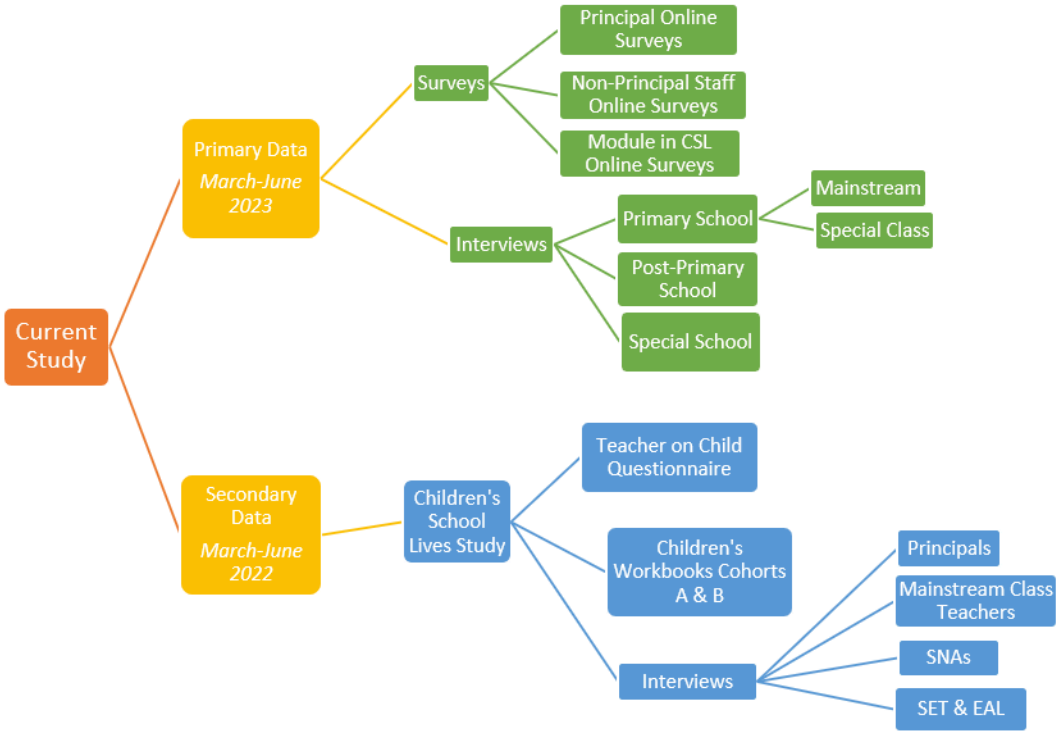
- Negative impact on mental health and lower engagement with online learning compared to in-person learning (Dobosz et al., 2022; Bakaneine et al., 2022).
- Children with pre-existing mental health difficulties are more at risk of experiencing ongoing and long-term negative impact (Morgul et al., 2022; Tso et al., 2022).
- The academic needs of students with special educational needs are often unmet through online teaching and learning (Bellacicco et al., 2022).

- Students with SEN experienced more educational and wellbeing challenges during online learning and had higher negative emotional experiences when compared to other students (Pozas & Letzel-Alt, 2022).
- High levels of stress reported by parents of children with learning needs due to supporting homeschooling (Winter et al., 2022).
- Need for more school support and guidance for parents homeschooling children with SEN (Dobosz et al., 2022).
- Significant disruption and ongoing learning losses for all children due to school closures, greater losses for vulnerable children with additional learning needs (Spiteri et al., 2023).
- Greater long-term learning loss for students with SEN (Blasko et al., 2022).

Methodology

This study included primary and secondary qualitative and quantitative data sources (see Figure 1). The primary quantitative data collected specifically for this research study included an online survey of principals and staff in primary, post-primary and special schools between March and July 2023. Primary qualitative data were obtained through interviews with students, parents, principals, teachers, special education teaching staff and special needs assistants in two primary, three post-primary and two special schools between March and June 2023.

Figure 1. Primary and secondary sources for current study



Secondary data drawn from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) Children's School Lives (CSL) longitudinal study with primary schools (Devine et al., 2020) were analysed according to Report 2's research questions. These data included interviews with staff (11 principals, 13 class teachers, 11 special needs assistants, two special education teachers and two English as an additional language teachers) in the 12 case studies primary schools conducted as part of the CSL study between December 2022 and March 2023. Specific questions were added into CSL study for the purposes of this NCSE-funded report. Teachers were asked to complete a single page, close-ended survey on each child in their class (Teacher on Child Questionnaire). The children completed a paper and pencil survey administered between March and June 2022. During data collection children were in first class (Cohort A) or fifth class (Cohort B). Only data exploring the impact of COVID-19 on these children were analysed for this report.

Descriptive and inferential statistics were conducted utilising SPSS while the qualitative data were thematically analysed utilising Nvivo. Details relating to the research design and analysis are outlined in Chapter 3. While it was not possible to have a fully representative sample of all children with special educational needs within the Irish school system, Report 2 has achieved a wide and varied sample due to the multiple data sources, participant types and school types included in the study.

Summary of Findings

Student Wellbeing

The first study which focused on 2021-22 (Kinsella, Senior, Symonds et al., 2024) found that, in general, participants across all settings reported negative effects on the wellbeing of most students by the pandemic and related school closures and restrictions in place when they reopened. Report 2 found that, while over time this had dissipated for most students, for some it remained evident up to 2023. When asked in the principal (n= 312) and staff surveys (n= 340) to choose the three greatest long-term impacts of the pandemic on the wellbeing of students with learning difficulties, about a third, regardless of school type, stated 'social development, interaction and skills affected' and 'increase in anxiety/fear/stress'. In general, half (52 per cent) of school staff surveyed reported continued negative pandemic impacts on the wellbeing of post-primary students needing additional supports. The proportion reporting negative impacts was lower in primary (36 per cent), similar to the 30 cent rate reported by special schools. In contrast, only 27 per cent of primary school staff reported continued negative impacts on the wellbeing of those without SEN. A large proportion of school staff reported a mixture of negative and positive impacts, ranging from 40 per cent for students with special educational needs in post-primary to 55 per cent for those in special schools.

When asked to rate the extent of lasting pandemic impacts on four areas of student wellbeing, a majority of school staff reported negative effects on students' social skills (61 per cent students with special educational needs; 56 per cent students without) and emotional regulation (57 per cent students with learning difficulties; 50 per cent without). Fewer school staff reported negative impacts on behavioural issues (47 and 35 per cent respectively). Only a small proportion of staff reported negative impacts on enjoyment of school (23 and 15 per cent, respectively). Parents,

school staff and students across all school settings noted that most students were glad to return to in-person schooling and this enjoyment was still evident two years after schools reopened. School enjoyment was largely attributed to being reunited with friends and having a routine. For special school students, staff noted how the return to in-person schooling was important as they tended not to see their friends outside of school.

While happy to return to school, see their friends and have a routine, students also reported finding some aspects of in-person schooling challenging such as getting used to the long school day again and catching up on their academic learning. Some reported feeling anxious when they returned, particularly in interactions with others. Many found social distancing challenging and noted ongoing difficulties with personal protective equipment that was uncomfortable. Students and school staff noted that it also affected communication. For most students, these challenges subsided in time and they enjoyed the experience of seeing their friends within the school setting.

Student Engagement and Learning

When asked about the ongoing impacts of school closures on those with additional needs, many reported that students were still impacted by missed academic learning experiences with some school staff, parents and students, noting that it might be impossible for some to catch up given the lack of time and resources. In interviews, teachers reported having to adapt their learning targets and pedagogical practices to address learning gaps and meet student needs after schools reopened, with some staff reporting that some students were not where they would expect them to be in literacy and numeracy. Those with good parental support during closures were reported to be faring better academically than those who did not. In principal and staff surveys, a majority reported ongoing negative impacts on the literacy and numeracy skills of students with additional needs in primary (56 per cent for literacy; 53 per cent for numeracy) and post-primary schools (62 per cent for literacy; 63 per cent for numeracy). Similarly, more than half reported lasting negative impacts on the academic skills (54 per cent for literacy; 53 per cent for numeracy) for post-primary students without special needs. Special school staff reported slightly lower effects on students' academic attainment (46 per cent for literacy; 48 per cent for numeracy). Fewer primary school staff reported such negative impacts on those without SEN (37 per cent for literacy; 38 per cent for numeracy) but more on students needing supports (56 per cent for literacy; 53 per cent for numeracy).

In school surveys, most staff reported lasting negative impacts on the attention and concentration of students with special educational needs across the three school sectors (66 per cent for SEN in post-primary; 57 per cent for SEN in primary; 52 per cent for special schools) while 62 per cent reported negative impacts on the attention and concentration of post-primary students without SEN. In contrast, only 43 per cent of staff reported negative impacts on the attention and concentration for students without SEN in primary schools. When asked to rate if students had caught up in learning, 82 per cent of staff working with post-primary students with special needs reported 'very behind' or 'slightly behind', followed by 76 per cent of those working with students with SEN in primary schools, and 59 per cent in special schools. Similarly, a majority (71 per cent) of post-primary staff working with students without SEN selected 'very behind' or 'slightly behind'. For staff working with primary school students without SEN, a majority (60 per cent) selected 'almost caught up' or 'completely caught up'.

Another important factor with the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on student engagement and learning is school attendance in the years after closures. However, it is important to note that while media and research studies (Nathwani et al., 2021; Santibañez & Guarino. 2021) have reported increased disengagement, chronic absenteeism and school phobia since the initial COVID-19 closures, Report 2 data have not suggested attendance was an ongoing issue. Further exploration of this is required to ascertain why this may have been the case for schools included in this study.

Provision and Supports

In interviews, when asked about changes to pedagogy in the year after school closures, many participants reported a system shift from a focus on academics to wellbeing. Staff reported that some students needed more support for their wellbeing and ability to interact with other children, sustain attention in class, as well as their general ability to manage school life. Survey findings indicate that, according to staff, the three greatest long-term effects of the pandemic are a continued negative impact on student wellbeing (39 per cent), a continued use of digital technology (post-primary 29 per cent; special schools 19 per cent; primary 18 per cent) and ongoing gaps in student learning and attainment (primary 31 per cent; post-primary 24 per cent; special schools 7 per cent).

Based on interview findings it appears that while initially there was no pressure to 'catch up', this pressure and focus on attainment increased during 2022-23. Teachers became very aware of academic regression and learning loss. This was more evident in post-primary settings for students in State examination years (e.g. Junior and Leaving Certificate students). In addition, when asked about the pandemic's long-term impact on pedagogy, it was notable that survey participants (principals n=312; staff n=340) listed the effect on student wellbeing most frequently in primary (39 per cent) and special schools (34 per cent). Furthermore, 'gaps in student attainment and learning' was among the pandemic's top three reported ongoing impacts in primary (31 per cent) and post-primary (24 per cent) schools while in special schools only 7 per cent of staff reported this. In interviews, teachers reported having to adjust their teaching methods to address gaps in learning and to meet students' individual learning needs. They noted altering their teaching approach to meet student needs, chiefly for literacy, numeracy and fine motor skills as they were not at the expected level for their age and ability.

Some staff members reported a shift to a more pastoral and counselling role. Others spoke of the pandemic's continued impact on access to external support services and therapeutic supports and intervention (e.g. occupational therapy, speech and language, psychology, psychiatry) since schools reopened. Post-primary schools noted this especially in students not having their needs assessed to inform relevant supports and access to resources. Reports of long waitlists were numerous as well as reduced access to external services (e.g. assessment and therapeutic support) which meant school staff were trying to provide support outside of their teaching remit.

Discussion and Conclusion

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions and related school closures were widely reported across all school settings and among all participants, with consistent accounts of negative impacts on the wellbeing of most students. Although findings indicate a majority of students experienced a gradual improvement in wellbeing in the years post closures, some were still experiencing adverse effects at the time of this study. Findings show that the consequences of school closures continued to affect support services, with participants across all settings reporting significant waiting lists and delays in accessing key services and supports (e.g. access to occupational therapy or psychology) necessary for the educational and wellbeing support of students with special educational needs.

In general, while teaching and learning provision returned to normal practice following school closures, digital technology use increased as a pedagogical tool. In addition, when asked about changes to pedagogy most participants reported an initial shift in focus from academics to wellbeing. Report 2 findings and the literature highlight that schools require more support from the wider education and healthcare systems in the event of future unanticipated school closures. The response in such circumstances must be varied with priority and additional support given to those serving disadvantaged communities and families from these communities, 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 to Senior Cycle in secondary, and from secondary to life post-secondary school.

Nearly all participants reported that students missed out on learning due to school closures. However, the continued impact of these missed learning opportunities was not still evident for all students; students who had parental/carer support with their learning during closures were reported to be faring better academically. Some school staff noted that it might be impossible for some to catch up given the lack of time and resources. Some students noted feeling as if they had missed out on opportunities to learn and were left wondering where they might be academically had the lockdowns not happened. In interviews some primary teachers noted that some students' fine motor skills were not at the level expected for their age group. For example, several noted more students entering primary school unable hold a pencil or a crayon since the pandemic and they associated this with increased home use of personal technological devices. Students were reported to have missed out on key learning opportunities in their social and life skills with staff reporting a marked lack of development for some in these key areas. Students may need additional support in areas beyond academics to catch up on other aspects of life learning that in-person schooling offers.

Implications for the Future

Key salient implications for policy and practice that emerged from the current study are listed below.

Learning and Engagement: Ongoing Gaps in Academic Attainment

Students across all school sectors who were particularly affected by learning loss should be provided with additional targeted interventions to support specific academic, social and emotional development.

Increased Use of Technology

Research highlights the need for effective, feasible tools to help promote student engagement using online or remote technologies. A focus on Universal Design for Learning principles is essential to promote and embed inclusive pedagogies for all learners including those with special educational needs.

Increased Home-School Communication and Supports

Increased co-ordinated, systemic support is essential for the whole family, including support with homeschooling as well as financial and mental health support required to support students with learning difficulties post-pandemic. A focus is needed on modes of support for parents to ensure their children with additional needs achieve greater equality and inclusivity during periods of remote educational provision. In addition, families of these children require targeted home-school communication and supports to help them respond to additional challenges including online learning.

Multi-Disciplinary Team School-Based Support

Support for students' socio-emotional wellbeing is a priority with more co-ordinated multidisciplinary assistance from external agencies necessary, for example the Educational Therapy Support Service (ETSS) or the North East Inner City Multi-Disciplinary Team (NEIC MDT) which delivers a high-quality, collaborative, school-based service across the disciplines of occupational/speech and language therapy, and psychology.

Chapter 1: Study Introduction

1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter gives an overview of Report 2 of the NCSE-commissioned study on the impact of COVID-19 on students with special educational needs (ICOSEN). To contextualise, the research rationale, its aim and objectives and research methodology are briefly outlined here. Report 2 offers a unique contribution to the empirical research on the COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures giving insights into its continued impact on students with special educational needs. As a result, it contributes to the national and international literature.

1.2 Background to the Current Study

In 2020, the NCSE commissioned a study to investigate the experiences of students with special educational needs during and immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic school closures. Its findings from 2020-21 (Kinsella, Senior, Symonds et al., 2024) informed the second phase of the current research (2022-23), Report 2, that investigates the pandemic's continued impact on the learning and wellbeing of those children. Report 2 presents the results of the research's second phase. While the previous study focused on the impact during school closures and the period immediately following, this second phase focuses on the pandemic's longer-term impact on students. It investigates areas of importance identified during the first study, including systemic changes in teacher and school provision of supports for children with special educational needs, their potential continued (dis)engagement in education, their learning outcomes and the pandemic's long-term impact on their wellbeing. Specifically, Report 2 highlights key areas for further investigation primarily COVID-19's impact on children's wellbeing and educational engagement and learning across all school sectors in both the short- and medium-term.

1.3 Study Context and Aims

While there are national (Bray et al., 2021; Burke & Dempsey, 2021; Chzhen et al., 2022; Crean et al., 2023; Flynn, et al., 2022; Keane et al., 2021; Mohan et al., 2020, 2021; O'Connor et al., 2021) and international studies (Devitt et al., 2020; Hammerstein et al, 2021) on the impact of COVID-19 school closures on students, to date there is no in-depth national study of its ongoing impact on those with special educational needs. Report 2's aim, therefore, is to explore that ongoing impact on the wellbeing of children with special educational needs in Irish educational settings in the years immediately post-pandemic. It also aims to investigate how school closures have to date affected their engagement and learning, the impact of parental involvement on a child's learning during school closures, and the long-term impact on student attainment and school enjoyment. This study examines the changes in educator approaches to inclusion, pedagogical practices, access to curriculum and supports for children. It looks at external support for schools and students, the home-school relationship and ongoing wellbeing supports for children.

1.4 Report Structure

Report 2 has seven chapters, with the first giving an overview of the study and the report's structure. The national and international literature on the continued impact of school closures on children's learning and wellbeing is outlined in Chapter 2. This includes literature about online learning, the pandemic's continued impact on children with special educational needs, their teachers and families along with examining the impact of national disasters and what is termed 'summer regression' on student learning.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology employed, including analysis of primary and secondary qualitative and quantitative data sources. The primary data were collected specifically for this project and comprised an online survey and interviews with principals and staff in primary, post-primary and special schools between March and July 2023. Secondary data were drawn from the child and teacher surveys and interviews conducted as part of the CSL study (Devine et al., 2020).

Chapter 4 explores the experiences of students with special educational needs in the months and years after COVID-19 school closures. It contains five sections on topics such as challenges with returning to school and ongoing impact on wellbeing.

Chapter 5 outlines how students needing additional supports engaged with learning since returning to school. It is presented in eight sections covering the ongoing impact of missed learning experiences, gaps in literacy and numeracy, attention and attitudes towards learning as well as the role of parents in education.

Chapter 6 explores provisions and supports available to students with additional needs from when schools first reopened until July 2023. It comprises nine sections, detailing the effectiveness of different support strategies and services and the overall impact on student wellbeing and academic progress.

The final Chapter 7 synthesises study findings and highlights key themes, drawing connections between the experiences of students with special education needs in this study and that of the international and national literature. It is organised into the three main research themes: student wellbeing student engagement and learning; and provision and supports.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review summarises key studies on the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing, educational engagement and learning outcomes, as well as school provisions and supports, for children with special educational needs. The review includes literature on the school closures period along with the ongoing impact in the following years (2020-23). While the international literature provides a comprehensive overview of the pandemic's continued impact on these children, there is a dearth of literature on how it affected them in Ireland. While the first report from this research aids in filling this gap and in understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students with special educational needs (Kinsella, Senior, Symonds, et al., 2024), Report 2's literature review builds on this regarding the ongoing and lasting impact of school closures. A summary of the review's main findings in Report One (Kinsella, Senior, Symonds, et al., 2024) is presented below followed by a narrative literature review for the present phase.

Social and Emotional Wellbeing

- Increased boredom and loneliness among marginalised youth (Keane et al., 2021).
- Decline in overall wellbeing and increased negative feelings reported (Bray et al., 2020).
- Return to school involved mixed emotional experiences for students with some students needing targeted support (Flynn et al., 2022).
- Increased externalising behaviours in children with neurodevelopmental conditions (Kawaoka et al., 2022).
- Autistic children found routine disruptions and lack of special education services to be challenging (Tokatly Latzer et al. 2021).
- Increased behavioural difficulties in some children during the pandemic (Ahmed et al., 2022).
- Increased sibling victimisation for some children with special educational needs (Toseeb, 2020).
- Increased stress, depression, and anxiety among children with learning issues (O'Sullivan et al., 2020).
- Abrupt school closures linked to mental health challenges for some students (Asbury et al., 2021).
- The pandemic had varying impacts on the mental health of children with learning needs, with some experiencing improvements (Asbury et al., 2021).
- Mixed emotional responses among young children with learning needs; some experienced boredom and confusion (Mete Yesil et al., 2021).

Efficacy of Online Learning

- Academic attainment during online learning was influenced by student factors including previous academic achievement, self-esteem, technical and technological access and skills, responsibility and self-regulation (Roblyer & Marshall, 2002).
- Limited evidence on effectiveness of distance learning for students with learning needs (Vasquez & Straub, 2012).
- Students in lower-income areas and with limited broadband and device access were more negatively affected (Mohan et al., 2021; Doyle, 2020).

Learning and Engagement

- Principals reported negative impacts on students with special educational needs, including motivation, engagement and wellbeing due to school closures (Mohan et al., 2021).
- Meaningful student-teacher connections increased engagement (Bray et al., 2021).
- PIRLS study showed stable reading scores in Ireland between 2016 and 2021, suggesting minimal academic decline overall in this domain (Delaney et al., 2021).

2.2 Ongoing Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic School Closures on Children's Wellbeing

Worldwide school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an emergency switch to distance learning and home-schooling for many children. Research is now emerging on their effects of forcing many students to learn from home as well as many adults to work from home. This resulted in disruption to regular routines, cutting many families off from support outside the home (Winfield et al., 2023). Studies have shown that the school environment is a factor that can promote student wellbeing (Lombardi et al., 2019). For children with special educational needs, worldwide school closures meant they had limited access to the support and specialised services given by schools, and to those who relied on the support in terms of overall mental health and wellbeing (Winfield et al., 2023; Dvorksy et al., 2023; Layachi & Schuelka, 2022). Research has shown these children with were more vulnerable during the pandemic than those without SEN and were at risk of poorer mental wellbeing and maltreatment (Tso et al., 2023). The school environment is a unique setting where children's social and emotional wellbeing can be promoted but there can be negative impacts when this is taken away (Layachi & Schuelka, 2022). This section explores the research suggesting COVID-19 has impacted negatively on the wellbeing and mental health difficulties of children with learning needs.

In the UK, Morgul et al. (2022) conducted a survey of 995 caregivers to examine changes in the socioemotional wellbeing and daily habits of children with additional needs (aged five to 12 years) during the first COVID-19 lockdown. The findings highlighted that these children who also had mental health difficulties were more likely to experience more emotional and behavioural difficulties during the lockdown, than those without. Furthermore, the study found

they used screens more often than children without SEN both before and during the lockdown, but their time online greatly increased during lockdown. Caregivers of children needing extra support reported more difficulty with the confinement than caregivers of children who did not, compounded by their own mental health difficulties and those of their children. Findings suggest that the wellbeing of children with special educational needs was more negatively affected than those without; Morgul et al. (2022) concluded it was likely that the mental health of caregiver and children explained these differences.

Similar reports of this bi-directional parent-child relationship were included in a systematic literature review by Dobosz, Gierczyk and Hornby (2023). Their review of 11 papers exploring parent perspectives on COVID-19's effects on the learning and wellbeing of children with special educational needs found a relationship between parental stress levels and children's behaviour, with increased stress linked to increased behavioural difficulties. They also reported negative effects on parent-child wellbeing attributed to balancing home-schooling and parental work, home-school relationships and a lack of support services. However, they also noted positive effects, such as more time spent with their child(ren) and more time together as a family. This bi-directional relationship suggests a need to consider the family as a whole in terms of wellbeing and mental health of children with special educational needs. In the US, Northrup et al. (2023) conducted a survey of 249 caregivers between April and August 2022 on potential impacts of COVID-19 on their children with an intellectual disability. Nearly 50 per cent of participants reported feeling anxious and almost 25 per cent reported feeling depressed for most of their days. More than half reported decreased social support and a fifth employment disruptions and decreased access to food. These findings suggest families of children with special educational needs, as well as the children themselves, are still experiencing ongoing negative pandemic impacts. The findings also highlight the need for continued support for parents/families as a consequence of these disruptions.

In Mexico, Pozas & Letzel-Alt (2023) surveyed mainstream students in lower secondary school, including students with special educational needs (n=52) and those without (n=241) to explore how they coped with the transition to distance learning, and its impact on their emotional experiences as they returned to school. Compared to students without learning difficulties, those needing support self-reported that they coped significantly worse during distance learning as well as having higher levels of negative emotional experiences. However, they did note some positive aspects such as reduction/removal of demands that negatively affect wellbeing, such as bullying and school pressure.

Some research also suggests, however, that some children with special educational needs had positive experiences during lockdown that had improved their wellbeing and learning. Holland, Hornstra et al. (2022) examined 470 parents' perceptions of secondary school students' motivation and wellbeing before and during lockdown, specifically satisfaction, academic motivation and wellbeing. The study examined the differential impact of the lockdown for different groups of children based on parental educational level, academic track, gender and SEN. They found that for some, particularly for those without SEN, their motivation and wellbeing decreased during the lockdown. They concluded that this occurred for students whose needs were met and whose wellbeing was better supported in school. Interestingly, the lockdown

effects were reportedly less negative for children with special educational needs, especially gifted children and those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism. Their parents/carers reported more positive outcomes for wellbeing and motivation when they were at home rather than in school. The study suggests that for some children with learning needs, the home environment may be more beneficial for their development and wellbeing than the school. In contrast, studies from Algeria (Layachi & Schuelka, 2022) and Hong Kong (Tso et al., 2022), discussed further below, found schools to be a source of social and emotional support that boosted the wellbeing of students needing learning support. It may be the case, however, that these positive experiences were enjoyed more by students with particular types of needs, conditions and/or particular experiences in school. In a longitudinal UK-based study by Asbury & Toseeb (2023) of autistic children's mental health, they reported that removing demands, mainly the demand to attend school, was a driver of wellbeing for a significant minority of pupils, particularly autistic students and their parents/carers. An Australian study by Simpson & Adams (2022) explored the experiences of 180 parents/carers of school-aged autistic children. While the majority cited mostly negative effects, discussed further below, a significant minority (8.1 per cent) reported improvements in their child's mental health or wellbeing, with more flexibility making home a more positive learning environment for them.

In another study, the experiences of autistic students, those with ADHD and controls were explored using data from the Co-SPACE study, a UK web-based longitudinal survey using parent-completed questionnaires. The impact of COVID-19 on symptoms and functional impairments was complex and unique for different types of SEN. The researchers (Hall et al., 2022) proposed positive (e.g. reduced social and academic pressure) and negative effects (e.g. reduced access to outdoor space, movement breaks, friendships and routine) for students with autism and/or ADHD to account for these complex variations. From an educator perspective, Boddison & Curran (2022) conducted a national survey in the UK of special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) (n= 1022) during summer 2022. They found SENCOs believed the prioritisation of mental health and wellbeing was of paramount importance for their students across all settings and phases of education. Within the timeframe of this literature review, there was no published research on the impact of COVID-19 school lockdowns on the wellbeing of children with special educational needs in Ireland. An emergent body of research suggests the pandemic resulted in a global burden of mental health difficulties among all children and adolescents. An umbrella review (a methodology synthesising systematic reviews and meta-analysis) carried out by Hossain et al. (2022) found a high prevalence of several mental health problems including anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, suicidal behaviour and stress-related disorders among children and adolescents. While this review reported on children and adolescents with and without additional needs, emerging research suggests the former are more at risk.

In contrast to Hornstra et al.'s (2022) study, discussed above, which reported possible positive effects for children with learning needs (particularly ADHD and autism), Tso et al. (2022) in Hong Kong reported negative effects. This study explored the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of these children and their risk of parent/carer maltreatment during the pandemic given concerns that lockdowns would lead to unreported maltreatment which can have long-term negative consequences for physical and mental health. During school closures, 417 children with learning needs in special schools and 25,427 children without in mainstream schools completed an online survey in April 2020. The researchers concluded that children with special educational

needs, especially those with ADHD, autism and intellectual disabilities, were at greater risk of maltreatment than those without. The study compared its findings with pre-COVID-19 data and found a significant rise in psychological aggression and physical assault towards these children. In 80 per cent of cases, they reported being the victim of psychological aggression and 20 per cent reported severe physical assault. Tso et al. (2022) suggested that higher levels of parental stress contributed to this maltreatment. The study highlighted the concern that closure of schools and specialist provisions could lead to unidentified/unreported child maltreatment. The results showed those with learning needs had significantly poorer overall quality of life and higher levels of mental health difficulties (Tso et al., 2022).

In Saudi Arabia, Alenezi et al. (2022) conducted a cross-sectional national study design of 1,848 parents of children with special educational needs (aged seven to 18) to examine the pandemic's psychological effect on them and their children. The results found parental worries about children's ongoing health, including psychological wellbeing and support need, were significantly higher than pre-pandemic, and parental-perceived general anxiety had risen significantly across time. It should be noted that children and caregivers were reported to have had high levels of anxiety before COVID-19, which rose significantly as the pandemic developed, suggesting it may have exacerbated existing mental health difficulties. Layachi & Schuelka (2022) looked at the impact of school closures on the mental health and wellbeing of children with learning difficulties and their parents in Algeria. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using online video platforms. The study found both children with SEN and parents experienced mental health and socio-emotional difficulties post school closure. Interestingly, many participants reported school as a source of emotional support and thus aided children in regulating their emotions. Therefore, it was reported that loss of schooling had a negative impact on the children's 'emotional stability' (Layachi & Schuelka, 2022). Furthermore, the study highlighted that participants felt their children did not fully understand the sudden school closures and were not emotionally ready for the abrupt change and new experience. Conversely, some parents expressed a positive learning experience as a result of digital learning and communication platforms. This study highlighted the pivotal role the school climate has in promoting and maintaining student mental health and wellbeing.

The literature reviewed thus far has explored generally the impact of COVID-19 on children with special educational needs. However, findings consistently indicated variations in experiences across different categories of SEN with certain groups being more at risk, such as children with existing mental health difficulties (Morgul et al., 2022; Tso et al., 2022). Sideropoulos et al. (2023) conducted a study in the UK exploring the effects of the pandemic on individuals with Down Syndrome (DS) compared to other groups with SEN and their siblings without SEN. Children with DS reportedly scored lower for anxiety across all three timepoints in the study than children with other SEN diagnoses and is in line with research that those with DS experience lower mental health difficulties compared to other SEN populations (Gameren-Oosterom et al., 2011, as cited by Sideropoulous et al., 2023). While the study found anxiety levels were lower, it was reported that children with DS had higher levels of anxiety, particularly social-related. It highlighted that not all SEN groups were equally affected by anxiety during the pandemic.

Some studies suggest autistic children and adolescents and their parents are likely to have been disproportionately affected during COVID-19. In the UK, Asbury and Toseeb (2023) focused on the mental health of autistic children and adolescents and their parents across four timepoints during March-October 2020, specifically looking at worry, psychological distress and wellbeing. The study of 478 parents/carers of pupils with autism and other special educational need found higher levels of parent-reported depression and anxiety symptoms than those with other SEN. Furthermore, worry and psychological distress were dominant categories at all four timepoints, with worry in autistic pupils remaining stable over time but decreasing for those with other SEN. Similarly, Tso et al. (2022) reported that autistic students may have struggled with aspects of lockdowns, such as abrupt changes to routines. In Kazakhstan, a mixed-method study (Amirova et al., 2022) was conducted to examine the pandemic's effects on autistic children's wellbeing (<5 years, n=36; 6-8-years, n=36; >9 years, n=18) from their parents' perspective. It found these parents perceived that their children experienced elevated mental health and behavioural challenges during lockdown. Most reported that restrictions in their child's therapeutic and educational services were most prominent and brought overwhelming challenges to their regular treatment and learning.

In Australia, Simpson and Adams (2022) examined the impact of school closure restrictions on schooling and the move to online learning on autistic students, most of whom were under age eight, as reported by their parents (n=180). They were asked open-ended questions on how the pandemic had affected their child's education. The majority (42.2 per cent) of parents/carers reported negative impacts on their child's mental health or wellbeing with a significant minority (10.3 per cent) reporting a rise in anxiety, self-harming and depression. Contributing factors included isolation, online classes, coping with learning and concerns about COVID-19 infection. As previously discussed, a significant minority (8.1 per cent) of parents reported improvements in their child's mental health or wellbeing due to the flexibility of homeschooling.

In Canada, Winfield et al. (2023) examined the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of families with children with ADHD (age range was not reported) using virtual interviews. Drawing on data from 33 participants (15 parent-child dyads), the major themes identified were increased child anxiety and disconnectedness, as well as deteriorating parental mental health (Winfield et al., 2023). When looking at barriers to maintaining optimal mental wellbeing, participants reported lack of routine, lack of social interaction and social support as well as uncertainty and fear. The study emphasised the importance of one-on-one educational support for children with special educational needs, including targeted support programmes during their learning in order to optimise their learning. The study also emphasised the schools' need to utilise their network of teachers and faculty members to provide greater learning support for students requiring additional support.

Further insights into the varied experiences across types of SEN are provided drawing on findings from the Co-SPACE study (Hall et al., 2022), a UK web-based longitudinal survey using parent-completed questionnaires. Parents/carers (n=6,507) of children (aged four to 16) with ADHD, autism, autism + ADHD and a control group completed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to explore symptoms and functional impairment. There was a mixed pattern of findings, with children with ADHD and/or autism showing greater reduction

in symptom scores in some domains but less in others. The study found that autistic children experienced increases in pandemic anxiety over time, while those with ADHD had fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties but also showed a deterioration in functional impairment. Furthermore, Hall et al. (2022) proposed positive effects in that school closures may reduce academic and social pressures for children, particularly those who struggle in a classroom and/or structured school environment. The increase in functional impairment for children with ADHD, however, may suggest there are also negative aspects of home confinement with many children having experienced limited access to outdoor space, movement breaks, friendship groups and major disruption to familiar and routine activities.

Other studies suggest no significant variations across types of SEN. For example, Kawaoka et al. (2022) looked at the effect of COVID-19 school closures in Japan on 121 schoolchildren with neurodevelopmental disorders (ND): autism, ADHD and/or ID. The study found externalising and aggressive behaviour increased in all NDs, regardless of diagnosis type. Additionally, there was a rise in anxiety levels in children with ID only. It must be noted this study had no control group, a limitation as no comparison was made with children without SEN. Another factor to consider within the overall picture is the effects (positive and negative) of COVID-19 on students with special educational needs and/or particular groups of these students is variability over time, that is, during and post school closures. Toseeb and Asbury (2023) conducted a longitudinal study with 527 parents/carers of children with learning difficulties (of which 75 per cent were parents/caregivers with autistic children), collecting data via an online survey at four points between March (school closure) and October (reopening) 2020, exploring the mental health of both children and parents during COVID-19. They reported that autistic students had more depression and anxiety symptoms compared to those with other special educational needs during the study period. Furthermore, as lockdown progressed and schools reopened for face-to-face teaching, anxiety levels fell for those with special needs, but not for autistic students. Depression symptoms remained stable for both as did parent/caregiver psychological distress and wellbeing. As previously discussed, Asbury and Toseeb (2023) reported that not having to attend school may have supported the mental health of a significant minority, namely autistic students and their parents/carers.

In Ireland, research has not explored the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of children with learning issues. Gilligan et al. (2023) conducted a study on primary school children aged eight to 13 without SEN during the first lockdown and found no major evidence of a change in mental health among them during 2019-20. It should be noted that they received a response rate of 35 per cent in 2020, compared to 87 per cent in 2019. This was also conducted during the first wave of lockdown and further research should look at a longitudinal design to draw comparisons during different periods of school closures, as well as the return-to-school period.

2.3 Impact of Non-COVID-19 Pandemic School Closures on Educational and Wellbeing Outcomes

2.3.1 Impact on Educational and Wellbeing Outcomes from School Closures due to National Disasters

Previous studies on the impact of natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes and associated impacts on children's education provide an important context for the potential impact of COVID-19 on the education and wellbeing of students with special educational needs. Research suggests that ongoing stressors can negatively affect 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 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 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 caused by natural disasters can interrupt educational opportunities for children, little is known of its later impact. In a large-scale quantitative study, Gibbs et al. (2019) examined the changes in the academic outcomes for children exposed to a 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 bushfire (n=24,642; 9-12 years). The findings showed reading and numeracy results were lower in schools and year cohorts with higher levels of impact from the bushfire. The authors suggested this highlighted the extended period of impact on the academic outcomes of children following disasters of this scale. Gibbs et al. (2019) noted that the disaster's severity can undermine the capacity of societal systems and public services to respond, often resulting in significant loss of infrastructure, resources and facilities. In another review of the potential impact of national disasters on students, Cauchemez et al. (2019) conducted a narrative review of the H1N1 influenza's impact on children in the US. The authors noted that school closures used as interventions to mitigate flu pandemics can incur high economic and social costs. Berkman (2008) and Cauchemez et al. (2009) noted there were often adverse social consequences as a result of school closure policies and that this raised ethical considerations. In many countries social programmes in schools are designed to support socially disadvantaged children who rely on school resources and facilities (Berkman, 2008; Cauchemez et al., 2009). For example, in the US in 2004 the national school lunch and the breakfast programmes delivered 29 million daily meals to children with half being free and 10 per cent at a reduced price. Cauchemez et al. (2009) noted that when schools were closed during response to disasters there could be negative consequences for the children depending on these programmes.

Di Pietro (2018) investigated the prolonged impact of the L'Aquila earthquake on school dropout and time of graduation for a sample of affected students (n=2,570) using data from three waves (2004, 2007 and 2011) of a national cross-sectional survey of participants enrolled in a third level school in central Italy. They were tracked for three to four years post enrolment and the study contrasted the difference between students from areas unaffected by the earthquake versus those from high-impact areas. The authors also looked at the different outcomes for students who started their studies in 2007 (the earthquake year) versus those who started at the same

institution in 2001 and 2004. The empirical results indicated that this disaster significantly reduced students' probability of graduating on time and increased the probability of dropping out. Di Pietro (2018) suggested that, while post-disaster measures to re-establish education may have mitigated the impact, the disruption to the learning environment and the trauma's effects on students that continued in the years after the disaster 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, US. The results indicated that for all students, evacuation due to Hurricane Ike in 2009 led to ongoing difficulties with anxiety and poorer academic performance. The authors warned there should be more emphasis on the post-disaster recovery and that after a natural disaster, students often experienced more distress than what may be apparent. Boon et al. (2011) examined peer reviewed literature addressing school disaster planning policies with a focus on children with disabilities. Based on their findings, the authors suggested socioeconomic and health factors made children and young people with disabilities especially vulnerable to disasters. They noted that many disaster policies were not inclusive and there was a dearth of literature on appropriate and inclusive school policies for those with disabilities (Boon et al., 2011). The literature supports this with many authors noting how these children were often excluded from disaster plans and protocols. This exclusion, along with the vulnerability derived from socio-political and economic systems, limits 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).

2.3.2 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 at this time (Borman et al., 2005; Cooper et al., 1996; Heyns, 1987; Murnane, 1975). Summer learning loss appears to be greater for students with special educational needs and those 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 summer. They found the test scores of those from low socio-economic backgrounds tended to drop between spring and autumn while middle-class and wealthy students retained the same scores (in maths) or showed improvement (in reading). A longitudinal study in Baltimore (US) followed a group from first grade until they turned 22. They found different summer experiences at 'home' (particularly low socio-economic status and school segregation) in 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 have been observed among students with special educational needs. For example, Menard and Wilson (2014) found that students with reading disabilities, when compared with their peers without difficulties showed significant regression on scores of automatic reading. As a result, some (Cooper, 2003) have argued for ongoing instruction for students with special educational needs, as a standard, across the summer months to mitigate this impact.

Previous research indicates that the negative impacts of 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 indicated that just one more hour of instructional time per week over the academic year resulted in a nearly 6 per cent of a standard deviation rise in test scores (ibid). Based on this study, Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) estimated that a 12-week closure due to COVID-19 could result in a 6 per cent regression in learning for schoolchildren. Similarly, Kuhfield et al. (2020) sought to estimate students' learning regression due to the pandemic. According to their findings, students will achieve 63-68 per cent of learning gains compared to those gains normally incurred in a typical school year (ibid). It must be noted, however, substantial disagreement exists within the literature on the relationship between instructional time and academic performance (Sahlberg, 2015).

2.4 Ongoing Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic School Closures on Engagement and Learning

The rapid change in routines and the move to online learning was challenging, especially for children with special educational needs (Pihlainen et al., 2022). International research has shown that online learning due to COVID-19 closures, has severely affected those students (Pozas & Letzel-Alt, 2022; UNICEF, 2021), with similar adverse effects reported for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (UNICEF, 2021). Furthermore, many needing additional curriculum support relied almost entirely on family members for help and assistance (Winter et al., 2022; Thorell et al., 2022). Parents of children with learning issues experienced exceptional levels of stress and had to take on new roles and undertake tasks they were not accustomed or trained to do (Flynn et al., 2022). Previous research sheds light on how the intersection of disability and poverty may intensify the educational challenges these students faced in ways relevant to the pandemic context (Levterova, G., & Tsokov, G., 2021; Riddell & Weedon, 2018). Previous findings suggest economic constraints can mean these students lack access to essential educational resources, such as technology and stable internet, all crucial for remote learning (Levterova, G., & Tsokov, G., 2021; Riddell & Weedon, 2018). Riddell (2018; 2020) also highlighted the psychological impact of these intersecting issues. Economic stress combined with the challenges of disability can lead to increased anxiety and emotional distress for families which can be further compounded by limited access to mental health resources.

A systematic literature review of 11 papers examining parental perspectives on the pandemic's impact on home-schooling of children with learning difficulties found transitioning to online learning had negatively affected their mental health and wellbeing and that of their parents (Dobosz et al., 2022). Findings related to online learning suggested parents/carers perceived their children with additional learning needs as lacking in motivation to engage with online learning and was exacerbated when there were technology issues. Parents reported challenges not only with the stress of trying to balance home-schooling with work and life demands, but also with their own perceived lack of knowledge and skill to educate and support their child's learning needs, and a greater need for support from their school. The review acknowledged a shift to homeschooling might be more common among students with learning needs outside COVID-19. They argued there was a need for learning from the pandemic and the development of guidance for parents/carers who had to home-school their children with special educational needs in the future.

Bakaneine and colleagues (2022) conducted a scoping review of 19 studies from ten countries to investigate the challenges of online learning for children with special educational needs (ages not reported) during COVID-19. Many challenges identified by teachers and parents included the need for parental support, routine changes, resource inequalities and access to technology, lack of accommodations and social isolation. Sonnenschein et al (2022) examined parental views of children's special education services in the US during COVID-19 and found many parents reported these services were decreased during online learning. Furthermore, they reported their children were unable to participate in virtual learning without significant adult support and often could not provide them with this due to other commitments including work and childcare.

In Belgium, a study by Baten et al. (2022) with parents/carers (n=2,222) of children aged five to 19, with and without developmental disorders (DD), examined the impact of school closures and the home environment on home learning experiences during COVID-19. Children with these disorders and their parents exhibited more negative experiences than those without. Parental reports suggested many teaching methods schools used during remote learning were less effective for these students, particularly those used in secondary school. Parents of these children were less satisfied with the school's COVID-19 measures than other parents. Baten et al. (2022) highlighted that continued specific therapy and support for children with learning difficulties during school closures were necessary to avoid falling behind and learning loss among children with developmental issues.

Bellacicco et al. (2022) investigated the challenges and opportunities of lockdown on the Italian school system through a survey of 3,291 teachers' perceptions of distance teaching for students with learning needs. Half (50 per cent) indicated a total or partial exclusion of their students from online learning and reported knowing other students with difficulties who were being totally excluded. The study found this exclusion to be caused by the digital divide and the didactic level of teaching. Bellacicco et al. argued that a negative experience with distance learning was significantly correlated with a deterioration in children's learning outcomes and behaviours.

A US study (Harkins et al., 2022) aimed to understand the effect of changes to special education services in schools during COVID-19. It explored the perspective of 78 caregivers of children in grades two to 12 (aged five to 18) who received special education services in mainstream settings in 21 states. In 44.87 per cent of cases, participants indicated a moderate level of family stress. Many caregivers (32.65 per cent) reported their child was not receiving the special education services outlined in their individualised education programmes (IEPs), or that the services had been reduced or eliminated entirely. Furthermore, participants reported their child's IEP was not revised or adapted during distance learning or that the services were unable to provide updates on their child's distance learning plan. Many reported their child had difficulty accessing virtual instruction/services due to cognitive, behavioural or physical limitations and so required extensive parent support to participate. Many caregivers (14.29 per cent) reported feeling increased stress and burden associated with the changes in educational service provision caused by COVID-19. Similarly, a Norwegian mixed method study by Cameron, Matre and Canrinus (2022) explored students' (n=6) and teachers' (n=128) experiences in lower secondary school, teachers reported that students receive none of the services and supports they were legally entitled to. They reported their concerns about the long-term consequences on learning and, as a result, in Norway children with special educational needs were often permitted to return to face-to-face teaching.

In Mexico, Pozas and Letzel-Alt (2022) conducted an online survey exploring how lower mainstream secondary students with learning needs (n=52) and those without (n=241) coped with the move to distance learning and its impact on their emotional experiences as they returned to school. Compared to students without SEN, those with learning issues self-reported that they coped significantly worse during distance learning, as well as having higher levels of negative emotional experiences. The authors attributed this to an absence of special support, and proper parental and teacher support. They suggested teachers might have lower expectations for these students and so did not offer them the same initiatives. They did note, however, that the shift to online learning meant some students with learning needs who had previously been unable to participate in school life now could. They argued for a need to support students in developing self-efficacy to positively impact their return to school.

In Northern Ireland, Bates et al. (2023) conducted an online survey to explore parent (n=2,509) perspectives and experiences of primary children aged four to 11 during COVID-19 school closures and how they supported their children's home learning. Findings highlighted practice differences in home-school communications across schools as well as the challenges experienced by parents, particularly those with one or more children with special educational needs. Most (75 per cent) respondents said they had experienced difficulties with their children's learning from home during lockdown. Implications for online learning for students with additional needs were identified, such as the setting of generic learning outcomes or tasks, without being specific about how these might need to be differentiated for different students. Many parents experienced competing demands of employment and home-schooling when schools moved online amid the pandemic. In Northern Ireland, Skinner et al. (2023) studied the experiences of home-school among working parents. Communication between teachers, students and parents was considered vital, including clarity from teachers on assigned work, less screen time, daily live interaction, feedback on work done and more printed resources from school to avoid undue expense for parents.

A body of research is beginning to emerge suggesting there may be negative educational outcomes as a result of COVID-19's school closures. Understanding of these short- and long-term outcomes, however, is in its infancy. It may take many years for the necessary (e.g. comparative) data to be available to fully understand their impact on the learning and development of students with and without learning needs (Blasko et al., 2023). Research indicates that the longer schools were closed and the more time students spent in distance learning, the higher the expected learning loss (Engzell et al., 2020, as cited by Blasko et al., 2023). Drawing on international literature, Spiteri et al. (2023) conducted a rapid review examining COVID-19's impact on children's learning outcomes. They found significant educational disruption due to pandemic school closures that resulted in learning losses. Another study of mainstream primary (n=1,782) and post-primary (n=898) teachers in the UK explored the challenges they would face once schools reopened. Almost all (98 per cent) estimated their students would be on average three months behind, with further learning gaps estimated for disadvantaged students (Sharp et al., 2020, as cited by Skinner et al., 2023). Research indicated that two-thirds of a full academic year was lost on average worldwide due to COVID-19 school closures (Wu et al., 2023). On average, the impact of summer school shutdowns resulted in a 6 per cent regression in learning in schoolchildren (Sievertsen, 2020). This loss is higher for those with additional needs and/or those from a lower socio-economic background (Blasko et al., 2022). The following section discusses the continued effect of COVID-19 on students' academic performance, difficulties on returning to school and absence rates, and potential learning loss.

Blasko et al. (2023) conducted a study using the most recent large-scale international achievement survey pre-pandemic, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019. This aimed to see which European countries were most likely to have experienced higher learning loss among their children, as well as identifying those that had most likely experienced the greatest increase in learning inequalities. This study was not specifically looking at children with additional learning needs. It explored access (or lack of it) to home learning resources, the importance of these resources to learning and the length of school closures. Findings were variable within the sample of countries identified as high-risk. Most at risk were Bulgaria, Czechia, Malta and Hungary. The results indicated that educational inequalities between and within countries were likely to have risen substantially throughout Europe for all children. Ireland was evaluated to be low risk in terms of children's access to learning resources, but they estimated that those most at-risk pre-pandemic were also most at risk during the pandemic (this includes children needing additional support). They also identified Ireland to be particularly at-risk because it fell into the category of countries with the longest school closures (more than 18 weeks). For students with special educational needs, learning loss was reported during the pandemic. In Australia, Simpson and Adams (2022) looked at the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on schooling and the move to online learning on autistic students aged nine to 16. An online survey of 180 parents of autistic schoolchildren asked open-ended questions on how the pandemic had affected their education. A significant amount (42.2 per cent) of parents reported negative impacts on their child's mental health or wellbeing, with them doing 'no learning' or 'bare minimum'. They also reported them being less engaged and regressing in some areas of learning.

The return to school was particularly challenging for some children, especially those with support needs (Winter et al., 2022). Research has shown a significant number was uncomfortable navigating change and often experienced difficulties with new environments (Winter et al., 2022). On return to school after global lockdowns, some changes included students being confined to 'bubbles' or 'pods' within the classroom and playground, staff wearing masks, issues with non-verbal communication due to masks, noise disturbance due to open windows and air purifiers, and minimal socialising, which are likely to have compounded learning loss. A US study carried out by Donnelly et al. (2022) examined teacher support and perceptions of working with students with special educational needs during COVID-19. It reported that teachers found their students with learning issues as 'less ready' for grade-level schoolwork than their counterparts. The study also found they perceived these students as attending school less often. In the US, Harkin et al. (2022) explored caregiver perspectives on the return to school of their children with learning issues and reported that parents perceived changes in their engagement in academic activities and social interactions at school.

Learning loss must be considered holistically, including social, emotional and academic learning. An emergent body of research is exploring the impact of COVID-19 on social and emotional development. For example, Bayley et al. (2022) conducted longitudinal research on school trajectories as a result of school closures and their effects on Ethiopian children's holistic learning, including socio-emotional and academic learning. The study included 2,000 students and drew on data from 2019 and 2021. The results showed a decline in student social skills during closures. The findings reported that, although they drew on longitudinal data to examine changes in children's social skills, numeracy and school enrolment, it could not unequivocally be claimed that any changes during closures solely resulted from disruption associated with the pandemic.

As previously discussed, school closures may have impacted the emotional development of children with special educational needs. In an Algerian study, Layachi & Schuelka (2022) interviewed parents and children with learning needs and found they often received emotional support at school which helped them develop emotional regulation. In Norway, Cameron, Matre and Canrinus (2022) conducted two mixed-method studies of students with special educational needs (n=6) and teachers' (n= 128) experiences in lower secondary school. For both groups their primary concerns on long-term consequences were for the social and emotional development of these students. Another issue that may compound learning loss is ongoing school attendance problems and school avoidance/refusal post-pandemic. As Ireland emerged from lockdowns and schools reopened, ongoing restrictions remained to limit spread of COVID-19. A review of the literature on its implications for the Irish education system by Winter et al. (2022) reported that in 2022 Irish primary schools had an average of 30 per cent of students and almost 20 per cent of teachers absent for COVID-related reasons. They suggested these high absence rates increased difficulty in making up for lost time, especially for students who required targeted support. Poor school attendance has been previously shown to be associated with adverse outcomes including low academic attainment and school drop-out (McDonald, 2022).

In the UK, McDonald et al. (2022) conducted qualitative surveys and interviews with parents and education professionals to explore school attendance problems among schoolchildren due to COVID-19. A significant number (48 per cent) in the study had special educational needs. The results found attendance was particularly challenging for these children and others with pre-existing anxiety difficulties. Compounding factors included COVID-related anxiety, difficulty adapting to new school routines, poor home-school communication and collaboration, and concerns about academic catch-up. They also explored effective support for these difficulties and emphasised the need for families and schools to work closely together. They identified a need for early intervention, rebuilding parent-school relationships, peer support for parents and improving special educational provision. A recent study by Shaw and Shaw (2023) investigated the views of parents of students needing support in the UK (n=141) by surveying their opinions during the pandemic in March-June 2020 and January-March 2021. The results indicate that parents were particularly challenged and found it difficult to educate their children at home. The authors outlined recommendations for schools including details on collaborating with parents to ensure the students with SEN achieved greater equality and inclusivity during periods of remote educational provision.

Another study in the UK, conducted by Kouroupa et al. (2023), examined the association between learning location during school closures (home, hybrid or school learning) and subsequent school attendance among children with neurodevelopmental disorders. Parents/carers (n=809) of autistic children and/or children with ID aged five to 15 completed an online survey. The results found school absence rates and persistent absence were significantly higher in the home learning group. School attendance problems have also been found in other UK studies. Totsika et al. (2023) focused on school attendance problems among 1,076 children (aged five to 15) with neurodevelopmental disorders 12 months post-pandemic and found 32 per cent presented with persistent absence from school. Interestingly, COVID-19 related absence had a limited impact on school attendance problems during this period, with anxiety and child unmet needs being the most reported barrier.

2.5 Ongoing Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic School Closures on Provisions and Supports

Many teachers moved to online learning often without the necessary tools and knowledge of digital technologies. At the pandemic outset, few educational leaders foresaw the effect it would still have almost three years later (Lane et al., 2023). For parents of children needing learning supports attending special school, the loss of educational and therapeutic interventions added a further layer of complexity unique to these children (O'Connor Bones et al., 2022). Emerging research highlights the need for effective, feasible tools to help promote student engagement using online or remote technologies (Lane et al., 2023). Furthermore, as previously discussed, some studies (Harkins et al., 2022) suggest SEN support was reduced or absent within online educational provision (e.g. IEPs, differentiation, accommodation) during the pandemic. When schools reopened and attendance became compulsory for all, research highlighted a lack of school resources to support the return into class for some children with neurodevelopmental disorders (Kouroupa et al., 2023).

Other research suggests ongoing changes to, and issues with, special education and provisions on students' return to school. When looking at caregiver (n=75) perspectives on special education service changes in US public schools due to COVID-19, Harkins et al. (2022) reported that 13.27 per cent of participants cited changes in their child's engagement in academic activities and social interactions during school hours. Many described reduced or eliminated services, with 32.65 per cent reporting that their child was not receiving what their IEPs outlined. Further challenges included distance learning, increased stress and advocacy efforts, and varying perceptions of student engagement and teacher efforts. Additionally, caregivers reported decreased opportunities for social interaction and a significant lack of motivation and enthusiasm for their children to attend school virtually. Also in the US, Northrup et al. (2022) conducted an online survey of 249 caregivers in April-August 2022 about potential COVID-19 impacts on their children with an intellectual disability. Most reported disruptions in access to, and quality of, school-based therapeutic services for their child as well as a reduction in educational accommodations in the 2021-22 academic year. This together with the negative effects reported by the parents themselves suggest that families of children with special educational needs, and the children themselves, were still experiencing ongoing negative impacts of the pandemic and require continued support to deal with its effects.

Some research reviewed above suggests positive experiences and outcomes for families of children with special educational needs due to closures, such as spending more time together (Dobosz, Gierczyk, & Hornby, 2022) and increased flexibility (Simpson & Adams, 2022). A systematic literature review by Dusi and Addiracach (2022) found similar positives for students without SEN in spending more time with their families, adapting the pace of learning to their own abilities. This review suggested no contact with their classmates and peers was a negative aspect, however. Furthermore, given the findings of increased absenteeism among students with special educational needs (SEN) and learning difficulties, there is a clear need, as highlighted by research from Rosaaseles et al. (2022), to upskill teachers and equip them with the necessary tools to effectively support these students in online and distance learning environments. Enhancing teachers' competencies in this area aims not only to improve learners' behavioural and cognitive engagement but also to strengthen the pedagogical practices of both teachers and parents supporting home-schooled students with SEN during and beyond the pandemic.

2.6 Summary and Conclusion

This predominantly international literature review identifies three areas in the ongoing and medium-term impact of COVID-19 on children with special educational needs: mental health and wellbeing; learning and development; provisions and supports. The review of the impact on mental health and wellbeing gives a complex picture of a growing understanding of the impact of COVID-19 lockdown and experiences post-pandemic. Students with learning difficulties appear particularly at risk to negative effects on wellbeing. The welfare of those with mental health difficulties and/or behavioural difficulties may have been particularly affected. Evidence suggests these experiences need to be understood holistically in the context of their families. Families of children with special educational needs may have experienced more stress and more challenges than those with children without SEN, including higher levels of parental anxiety, depression and stress. As the latter increased the child was negatively affected; and these challenges are continuing post-pandemic. Several studies suggest a minority of students needing supports, especially a significant minority of autistic students, and perhaps some with ADHD, experienced positive effects with school closures. Findings suggest ongoing negative effects on the mental health of children with learning difficulties post-pandemic. Similar to the findings on wellbeing, some groups may be at greater risks than others, such as students with autism, ADHD, and/or ID. The picture is complex and incomplete, however, and further study is needed to understand what is happening to these diverse groups, as findings across studies often conflict on whether and how homeschooling affected students, chiefly those with autism, negatively or positively.

This review also explored lessons learnt from online learning and the effects of COVID-19 on ongoing learning of students with learning difficulties. In general, studies recommend the identification of key learning from the pandemic, further research, and/or guidelines to support homeschooling of students with learning issues as they were already more likely to be homeschooled and more reluctant to return to school post-pandemic. They appear to have been significantly more affected by school closures than students without SEN and are also reportedly much more dependent on family/parental support to engage in online learning. However, parents/carers often perceive themselves to lack the knowledge and skill to support their child and, as previously discussed, experience greater stress. As a result, there is a need for support for parents and good home-school communication. Other issues identified were a lack of student motivation, the effects of changes to routines (particularly for autistic students), and the reduction/removal of therapeutic interventions. Those teaching methods developed during the pandemic do not appear to have been effective for students needing support. There appears to have been a lack of SEN support and provisions (e.g. differentiation, accommodations, IEPs). Reports suggest that lower teacher and parent expectations may have affected student learning and meant fewer initiatives were set up for them. Since schools reopened, these students have continued to be at greater risk in readjusting to school and from COVID-19 effects on their learning. They have experienced more learning loss than students without SEN and are more likely to be absent, compounding gaps in their academic, social and emotional development.

Finally, the literature explored ongoing issues with educational provisions and supports for children with special educational needs post-pandemic. There appeared to be a lack of resources to support them during school closures and as they returned to school. Once back, previously available supports, services and interventions were either reduced or not available. There is a need for enhanced supports to address ongoing issues with school absenteeism and learning loss. In addition, support for the whole family is needed, including further aid with homeschooling as well as financial and mental health assistance for students with learning difficulties to cope with the effects of the pandemic. Below is a summary of key points from the literature review:

Ongoing and Long-Term Impact of the COVID-19 School Closures

- Negative impact on mental health and lower engagement with online learning when compared to in-person learning (Dobosz et al., 2022; Bakaneine et al., 2022).
- Children with pre-existing mental health issues are more at risk of experiencing ongoing and long-term negative impacts (Morgul et al., 2022; Tso et al., 2022).
- High exclusion rates of students with special educational needs from online learning (Bellacicco et al., 2022).
- Inconsistent provision of special education services during the pandemic (Harkins et al., 2022).
- Students with learning difficulties coped worse during distance learning and had higher negative emotional experiences (Pozas & Letzel-Alt, 2022).
- High levels of stress reported by parents of children with special educational needs due to new homeschooling roles (Winter et al., 2022).
- Need for more school support and guidance for parents homeschooling this group of children (Dobosz et al., 2022).
- Significant disruption and ongoing learning losses due to school closures (Spiteri et al., 2023).
- Greater expected ongoing and long-term learning loss for students with additional learning needs (Blasko et al., 2022)

Chapter 3: Study Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Report 2 focuses on the medium-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children with special educational needs and constitutes phase two of the NCSE-commissioned ICOSEN study. To date, national (Burke & Dempsey, 2021; Crean et al., 2023; Mohan et al., 2021) and international studies (Devitt et al., 2020; Hammerstein et al., 2021) have focused on the impact of emergency school closures on students. No in-depth exploration of the pandemic's continuing impact on this cohort in Irish educational settings has appeared. As such Report 2 contributes to national and international empirical research. Its first phase (Kinsella, Senior, Symonds et al., 2024) investigated the experiences of students during and post-pandemic. First phase findings indicated key areas for further investigation that, in turn, informed this second phase. Employing a mixed-methods design, Report 2 used primary and secondary data sources to ascertain the perceptions of school staff, parents and students on the pandemic's continued effects on the learning and wellbeing of children with learning difficulties. Chapter 3 first outlines its aim and objectives. A detailed overview of research design, ethical considerations, procedures to recruit participants, participant demographics and data analysis is then provided.

3.2 Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this study (2022-23) is to explore the continued impact of COVID-19, especially school closures, on the education and wellbeing of children with learning needs in primary, post-primary and special schools in Ireland. A more specific aim is to examine changes in educator approaches to inclusion, pedagogical practices, access to curriculum and supports for children, the home-school relationship and external support services for schools and students. The research aims to evaluate how schools continue to respond to the pandemic's ongoing impact in order to identify the approaches, characteristics and mechanisms that would render an education system and those working and learning within it more resilient to future school closures. Report 2's research objectives are outlined below and grouped thematically to align with subsequent chapters:

Student Wellbeing:

- Examine how the pandemic has affected the wellbeing of children with special educational needs in relation to their experiences in educational contexts.
- Investigate how the pandemic has shaped children's engagement in managing and sustaining their own wellbeing in educational contexts.
- Investigate how the pandemic has shaped parent involvement in their children's wellbeing in educational contexts.

Engagement and Learning:

- Investigate how the pandemic has shaped children's engagement in education, including any changes in views towards school and learning.
- Investigate how having experienced COVID-19 closures and restrictions has affected children's perceptions of themselves as learners.
- Examine the impact of pandemic disruption on learning outcomes for children with special educational needs in the short term and the estimated impact in the long term.
- Investigate how the pandemic has shaped parent involvement in their children's education.

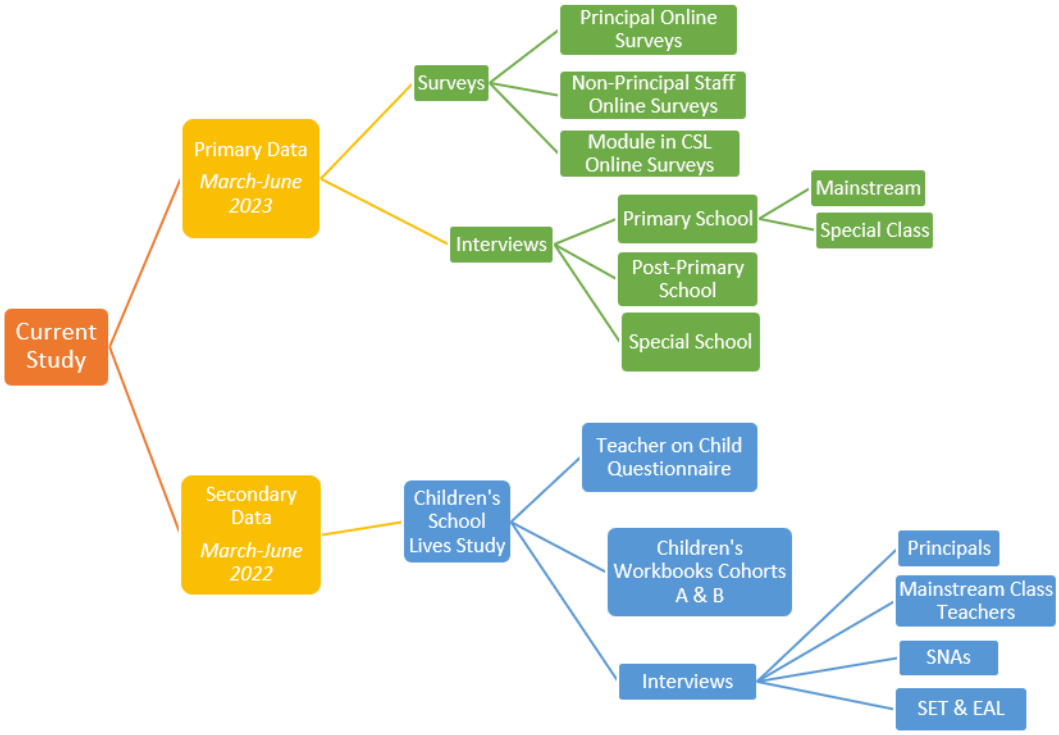
Provisions and Supports:

- Investigate how the pandemic influenced educator understanding of and approaches to the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools.
- Investigate how the pandemic has influenced educators' pedagogical practices in working with children with learning issues in special and mainstream schools.
- Investigate how the pandemic has influenced how this cohort accesses the curriculum in special and mainstream schools.
- Investigate how the pandemic has influenced how they are assessed for learning and wellbeing in special and mainstream schools.
- Investigate how schools are supported by external support agencies since re-opening.
- Investigate the pandemic's impact on the home-school relationship for children with special educational needs.
- To explore the strategies and practices schools have implemented to support student wellbeing in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3 Overview of the Study Design

As summarised in Figure 2, a mixed methods design including primary and secondary qualitative and quantitative data sources was utilised. The primary data were collected specifically for Report 2 and included an online school survey (principal and staff) in primary, post-primary and special schools during March-July 2023. Interviews with students, parents, principals, teachers and special education and support staff in primary (n=2), post-primary (n=3) and special (n= 2) schools were also conducted during March-June 2023. Secondary data, drawn from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's Children's School Lives (CSL) longitudinal study of primary schools (Devine et al., 2020), were analysed according to this study's research questions. Figure 2 summarises the different data sources and time periods when each data source was collected.

Figure 2. Primary and secondary data sources



3.4 Study Procedures

3.4.1 Primary Data Sources

School Staff Online Surveys

Principals and staff from special, post-primary and primary schools were invited to respond to an online survey in March 2023. All post-primary (n=728) and special schools (n=137) registered with the Department of Education were emailed an invitation to respond. The 175 primary schools recruited into CSL also received an email inviting principals and teachers to complete an additional section that had specific questions on the impact of COVID-19 in the pre-existing CSL survey.

The main survey (see Appendix 1) was administered to principal participants in all school sectors using Qualtrics. It contained five sections: contact details; principal characteristics (e.g. gender, age, qualification); school characteristics (e.g. year groups, type of school, student numbers, special education staff numbers, location, DEIS classification, patronage, students from minority backgrounds); pedagogy and curriculum (e.g. wellbeing programmes, school resources, digital education); and COVID-19's impact on the education of children needing additional supports. The school staff survey (see Appendix 2) was administered to non-principal participants in all three school sectors via Qualtrics and contained four sections: contact details; staff characteristics (e.g. gender, age, qualification); school characteristics (e.g. year groups, type of school); and impact of COVID-19 on the education of children needing support.

School Interviews

Interviews with three post-primary, two primary (with special classes) and two special schools were conducted during March-June 2023. They 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[1]. The sample size was determined by what was feasible within the budget and the school year's time constraints. Each school identified a representative group of students with additional needs aged eight to 18 (to include specific, general learning, physical difficulty and neuro-diverse conditions) from their special education teaching register. The special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) sent information letters and consent/assent forms to parents and students of this representative sample. To gain insight into the views of school staff who had worked with these students, a representative sample of staff with a key role in supporting them over the previous two years was included. Data were collected through interviews with principals, SENCOs/SETs, special needs assistants, parents and the students themselves. While interview schedules (see Appendix 3-6) differed according to participant type, they had the same general themes: demographic information; provisions and supports; engagement and learning; and, wellbeing. Interview schedules were piloted with two post-primary school students and SENCOs before interviewing study participants. Interviews were conducted in person in the school or remotely by telephone or via the online platform Zoom, depending on participant preference. With written consent or assent, interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

3.4.2 Secondary Data Sources: The Children's School Lives (CSL) Study

The secondary data for Report 2 were from the Children's School Lives (CSL) study (Devine et al., 2020), Ireland's national cohort study of primary schooling. CSL is a mixed-methods study involving a national survey of children across 175 primary schools and more in-depth research in 12 case study schools[2]. It contains two cohorts. Starting in 2019, Cohort A is tracked from preschool to second class and Cohort B from second class to first year post-primary. This project uses data from child and teacher questionnaires that were part of the larger quantitative national study; and interviews from the in-depth, qualitative case studies.

Child and Teacher Surveys

As part of the CSL study, fieldworkers visited primary school children and their teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022. Teachers were asked to complete a single page, close-ended survey on each child in their class (Teacher on Child Questionnaire). It included questions on child demographics, numeracy and literacy ability and behaviour. The children were asked to complete a child survey in the form of a workbook (Symonds et al., 2022a) containing games and questions about their experiences of school. They were asked to complete the eight-item personal dimension

1 Ireland's Department of Education maintains a comprehensive register of all primary, post-primary and special schools across the State. This is a resource that helps in understanding the educational landscape and has data on various demographic factors such as geographic location (urban or rural), school type (eg, Educate Together, Community), size, DEIS status (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, due to socio-economic factors).This register was utilised to select a diverse sample of schools for this study's interviews.

2 The Children's School Lives study has 12 case study schools that consists of 13 classrooms as one school had two participating classrooms.

from the Child and Adolescent Personal and Social Assessment of Wellbeing (CAPSAW) (Symonds et al., 2022b, 2023) (see Appendix 7) which measures children's psychological wellbeing. They answered on a five-point scale from 'never' to 'always'. The average score across the eight items was computed for each child. They also completed the six-item Academic Self-Concept Scale (Marsh, 1996) (see Appendix 8) that measures children's academic self-concept. They answered on a five-point scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The average score across the six items was computed for each participant.

Primary School Interviews

Interviews with staff (11 principals[3], 13 class teachers, 11 SNAs, two SETs and two EALs) in the 12 case study schools conducted as part of the CSL study between December 2022 and March 2023 were also included.

3.5 Participant Details

3.5.1 School Staff Online Survey Participants

In the school staff online survey, there were 312 principal and 340 staff responses. Table 1 gives an overview while Appendix 16 provides more detailed demographics.

Table 1. Participant characteristics in principal and school staff surveys

Characteristics	Frequency (percentage)	
	Principals, n = 312	Non-principal staff, n = 340
Type of School		
Primary	117 (38%)	62 (18%)
Post-primary	144 (46%)	243 (72%)
Special	51 (16%)	35 (10%)

School Principal Survey Participants

Of the 312 respondents who completed the principal survey, a majority (63 per cent, n=185) identified as female. Less than half (41 per cent, n=125) of these were aged 41 to 50 while 38 per cent (n=118) were aged 51 to 60. In terms of highest level of education obtained, just over half had a master's degree (52 per cent, n=161), 27 per cent (n=85) had a postgraduate diploma, 17 per cent (n=53) a bachelor's degree, 3 per cent (n=9) had completed a doctoral degree, and another 1 per cent (n = 4) only had a teaching certificate or diploma. Principals were asked about their highest qualification in special educational needs. More than a third (n=115, 37 per cent) reported 'none,' while 32 per cent (n=100) selected 'one or more modules or classes'.

3 One CSL school has an A and B cohort, meaning the principal is only interviewed once. One CSL school is a two-teacher school. In this particular wave, the principal participated in the teacher interview as opposed to the principal interview.

Non-principal School Staff Participants

A total of 340 school staff participated in the school survey, with most identifying as female (86 per cent, n=269). The majority (72 per cent, n=243) worked in post-primary, with 18 per cent (n=62) working in primary and 10 per cent (n=35) in special schools. Over half of respondents were aged 31 to 50 (26 per cent, 31-40 years; 37 per cent, 41-50 years). Although 7 per cent (n=24) reported holding a Level 5 or 6 or 7 certificate, the majority reported having a postgraduate diploma (n=107, 33 per cent), master's degree (n=99, 30 per cent) or bachelor's degree (n=70, 21 per cent). A third (n=112, 33 per cent) reported having a diploma in special educational needs, while 22 per cent (n=74) had completed one or more modules or classes in SEN, and 20 per cent (n=69) reported having "no qualification" qualification in this area. Participants indicated their role as mainstream/subject teacher (n=147, 43 per cent), special education teacher/coordinator (n=161, 47 per cent), special needs assistant (n=59, 17 per cent), year head/deputy principal/assistant principal (n=39, 11 per cent), guidance counsellor (n=5, 2 per cent), resource teacher (n=2, 1 per cent), and a combination of autism/EAL/HSCL/Leaving Certificate Applied coordinator (n=7, 2 per cent).

3.5.2 Children's School Lives Survey Data

Responses from 3,883 children were included as part of the secondary data analysis: 1,801 of these were from the CSL Cohort A sample, while the remaining 2,082 were part of the CSL Cohort B sample. In the 2022 spring data collection, children in Cohort A were in first class (age seven to eight) and Cohort B were in fifth class (age ten to 11).

Table 2. Types of SEN reported in the CSL Teacher on Child questionnaire

SEN Characteristics	Total (n=3,883)		Cohort A (n=1,801)		Cohort B (n=2,082)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
SEN Status						
With SEN	566	13.6%	240	13.3%	326	15.7%
Without SEN	3,317	85.4%	1,561	86.7%	1,756	84.3%
SEN Type						
Physical, Visual or Hearing Needs	79	14.0%	44	18.3%	35	10.7%
Speech Impairment	64	11.3%	36	15.0%	28	8.6%
Autism	132	23.3%	18	7.5%	114	35.0%
General Learning Disability	89	15.7%	18	7.5%	71	21.8%
Specific Learning Difficulty	56	9.9 %	14	5.8%	42	12.9%
Emotional or Behavioural Challenges	178	31.4%	64	26.7%	114	35.0%

3.5.3 Interview Participants

Interview Participants from Primary and Secondary Sources

As part of the primary data collection for this study, interviews were conducted in three post-primary, two primary (with special classes) and two special schools with school sizes from 450 to 1,000 students. Twelve primary schools participated in interviews as part of the Children's School Lives study. These data were analysed for this study according to the research questions. In the 12 primary schools there were a total of 13 classes. Each class was selected to represent the diversity of primary school types in Ireland. Of the 12 schools, six had DEIS status, eight were co-educational and four single sex. Eight were under Catholic patronage, two were multi-denominational, one was Church of Ireland patronage and one was a Gaelscoil (Irish-medium).

The interviews from post-primary, primary and special schools included a range of participant types including students with special educational needs, their parents and school staff. To protect anonymity, participants were assigned specific ID tags. The first part of the tag details school type (PS – primary school, PPS – post-primary school and SS – special school). Then participant type is detailed. They are marked either with S for student, P for parent or the staff role is spelt out (e.g. principal). The participant is numbered. More details are given about them or their child, such as age, gender and SEN type. Many acronyms used in the tags are set out in the acronyms section at the start of the report. A full list of interview participants groups can be found in Appendix 15.

Table 3. Interview participants (primary and secondary sources)

Participant group	Schools	Participants
Post-Primary Schools	3	42
Students		12
Parents		12
Teachers – SET		6
SENCO		3
SNA		6
Principals		3
Special Schools	2	18
Students		0
Parents		8
Teachers		4
SNA		4
Principals		2

Participant group	Schools	Participants
Primary Schools with Autism/Early Intervention Class	2	24
Students		8
Parents		8
Teachers		2
SNA		4
Principals		2
CSL Primary Schools	12	39
Students		0
Parents		0
Teachers – Mainstream, SET and EAL		17
SENCO		0
SNA		11
Principals		11
Total	**19**	**123**

3.6 Analyses

This study employed quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyse the primary data from the online principal and school staff survey and interview data with staff, students and parents from post-primary, primary and special schools as well as secondary data from the CSL study.

Quantitative Analyses of School Online Survey Data

Data from the online staff surveys and CSL surveys, collected via Qualtrics, were cleaned by the ICOSEN research team and descriptive and inferential statistics were conducted utilising SPSS. Descriptive statistics included frequencies, percentages and measures of central tendency.

Qualitative Interview Analyses

Transcripts from post-primary, primary and special schools were pseudo-anonymised and then uploaded to NVIVO 12 for analysis. Thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) was used to analyse the data. More specifically, the research 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 analysis codebook was based on themes in the post-primary interview schedules: demographic information; provisions and supports; engagement and learning; and wellbeing. The qualitative analysis involved primary and secondary data sources and therefore not all interviews included all of the above themes. In the secondary CSL sources (primary school interviews), only data related to these themes were coded. The six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) used in this study are outlined below.

Step 1: Data familiarisation

Coders were given the codebook and discussions were held on its categories. Next, interview data were divided among 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, coders began to inductively create lower-level initial codes under each major code in the codebook. Because of the diversity of participant type (parents, students and teachers in three 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 coders shared their various codes for each participant group and began to identify patterns and overlap between them. Some themes were unique to one participant group, while others appeared among several.

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. 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 Report 2's findings section was written. This aimed to summarise the thematic analysis and to highlight certain themes with participant quotes. These were selected to represent the diversity of participant type, opinions and experiences expressed. In addition to quotes, themes were summarised, and the following descriptive terms (some=< 30 per cent; many = 30-60 per cent; most=> 60 per cent) were used to show frequency of themes and codes.

3.7 Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for interviews with 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 and special schools, an application for a low-risk study review was submitted to 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 received information sheets. Adults signed consent forms to participate, while children assented to being part of the study. All participants under 18 did so only with signed parental consent.

3.8 Research Limitations

Report 2 used primary and secondary data. While this approach allows for greater scope in investigating how children in need of learning support experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, it has some limitations. The primary data sources (principal and staff survey and post-primary, primary and special 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 (child and teacher surveys and primary school interviews) were not designed specifically for Report 2's research questions and, as a result, only parts of them were relevant for analysis. The qualitative data in this report represent the views of a small sample relative to the Irish school system. It is important to remember that participants were discussing their own experiences which may be not reflective of all sectors of the Irish school system. While their voices give invaluable insight into how the pandemic may have affected students with special educational needs, these experiences and opinions cannot be generalised to all Irish students and schools. Throughout this report data are 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 and systems. Throughout the pandemic each school type – post-primary, primary and special – experienced shared challenges, but also challenges unique to their context. Notwithstanding these limitations, Report 2 offers an in-depth exploration of the pandemic's ongoing impact on students needing extra supports in Irish educational settings, and as such contributes to national and international empirical research.

3.9 Summary

This chapter provides a detailed overview of Report 2's research design and methodology employed, including analysis of primary and secondary qualitative and quantitative data sources. The following three chapters report the findings of the online principal and staff survey and the interviews with post-primary, primary and special schools as well as the CSL primary school child and teacher survey and interviews. The results have been reported thematically to portray the experiences and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students with special educational needs. The final Chapter 7 synthesises the findings and highlights key themes drawing connections between the experiences of the children in this study and those of the international and national literature. This chapter is organised into the three main research themes: Student Wellbeing; Student Engagement and Learning; and Provision and Supports.

Chapter 4: Student Wellbeing

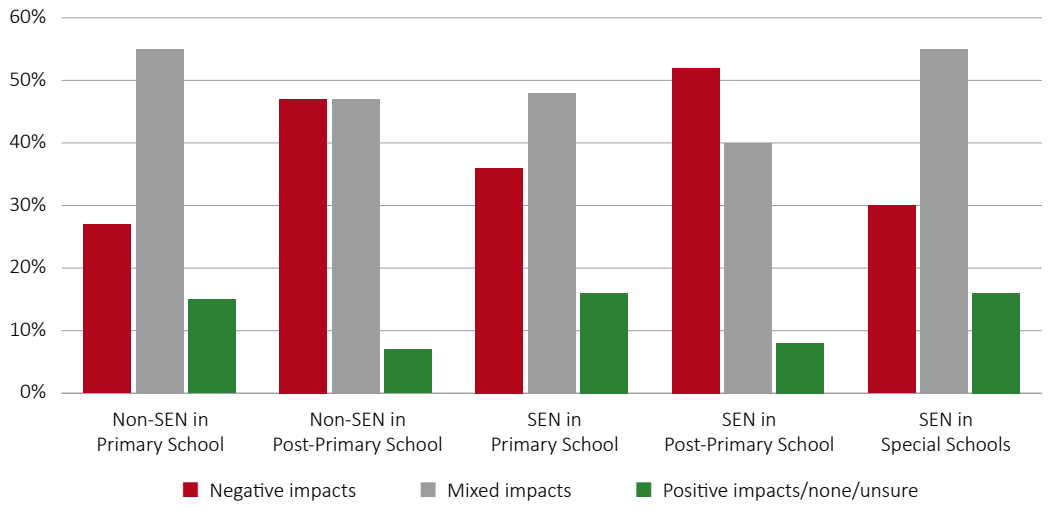
4.1 Introduction

Studies have shown the school environment to be an important factor in promoting student wellbeing. For children with learning difficulties, closures meant limited access to the support and specialised services given by schools. The same held for those who relied on the support for overall mental health and wellbeing. Chapter 4 outlines findings on COVID-19's ongoing impact on the wellbeing of those students as informed by interviews with them, parents and school staff as well as the online principal and staff survey and secondary data from the CSL study. When referring to interview findings, 'few' refers to 15 per cent or less; 'some' refers to 30 per cent or less; 'most' refers to 30-60 per cent: and 'many' refers to 60 per cent or higher.

4.2 Return to School: Student Wellbeing in the Years Following Closures

In the school staff survey, when asked what level of impact the pandemic had on the wellbeing of post-primary students needing supports, half (52 per cent) reported a continued negative impact. The proportion of staff reporting negative effects on these children was lower in primary (n=61, 36 per cent), similar to the 30 per cent rate reported by special schools. In contrast, only 27 per cent of primary school staff reported continued negative impacts on the wellbeing of students without SEN. As summarised in Figure 3, a large proportion of school personnel reported a mixture of negative and positive impacts, ranging from 40 per cent for students with special educational needs in post-primary schools to 55 per cent in special schools. A small proportion reported positive or no impact or stated they were 'unsure', ranging from 7 per cent for students without SEN in post-primary to 18 per cent for the same group in primary.

Figure 3. Proportions of school staff rating on the continued impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of students with and without SEN in three school settings



In interviews, parents, staff and students across all school settings noted that most students were glad to return to in-person schooling. This opinion was still evident two years after reopening. School enjoyment for students was largely attributed to being reunited with friends and having a routine. Some special school staff noted that for their students the return to in-person education was significant as they tended not to see their friends as much outside school.

> *The children in this school, and I'm sure it's the same in every special school, they run in, they're all smiles, because it's their social life, It's like us on a night out. They're delighted to meet their friends, and this is the only place that they meet them (SS2 SNA 1)*

4.3 Challenges with Transitioning Back to School

While happy to return to school, see their friends and have a routine, students reported that some aspects of in-person schooling were challenging post-pandemic. Some reported feeling anxious on return, particularly when interacting with others, and catching up on their academic learning. Many found social distancing to be challenging and getting used to the long school day again.

> *Well, I was really tired, and they didn't really know what to do, We were all really tired and our brains weren't really working (PS2-AC S3 – Autistic boy in fourth class with sensory disability, EBD and ODD)*

> *I feel like the sanitiser and everything and the masks. I didn't like the whole masks and the whole social distancing thing, I obviously did follow it, but I wasn't too much of a fan because I just felt that I couldn't be near anyone at all. I felt like I had COVID even though I didn't (PPS3 S1 – Autistic boy in second year with DCD)*

Ongoing challenges were noted with personal protective equipment. In the years following reopening, students found personal protective equipment to be a communication barrier and noted they would have liked to have seen people's faces and that it was 'weird' when masks were removed first.

> *It was very different, because there was social distancing and the masks, and it was very hard to hear each other with the masks on, so… and now that masks are gone and all that, it's much, much better (PPS3 S3 – Autistic boy in TY with ADHD, Dyslexia & Dyscalculia)*

Some students noted that they missed physical contact such as hugging friends. One said it was difficult to feel supported by a teacher when the teacher stayed physically far away from them.

> *I feel like there's still maybe a bit of distance. Like, I couldn't go up and just hug someone. Maybe I'd have to stay like, like I wouldn't just come up and say, 'hello', and then give you a hug. I'd have to be like, 'oh hello'. Maybe shake hands or something (PPS2 S1 – Autistic girl in third class with DCD)*

While some students noted experiencing trepidation returning to in-person schooling, this subsided in time for most. When asked if they enjoyed school in the years after closures, most parents and staff said they appeared to enjoy it and that the routine of in-person schooling appeared to be better for student wellbeing.

> *I think from what I see as a principal that the children adore being back. They're so happy. They love their classes; they love their routines (PS1-AC – Principal)*

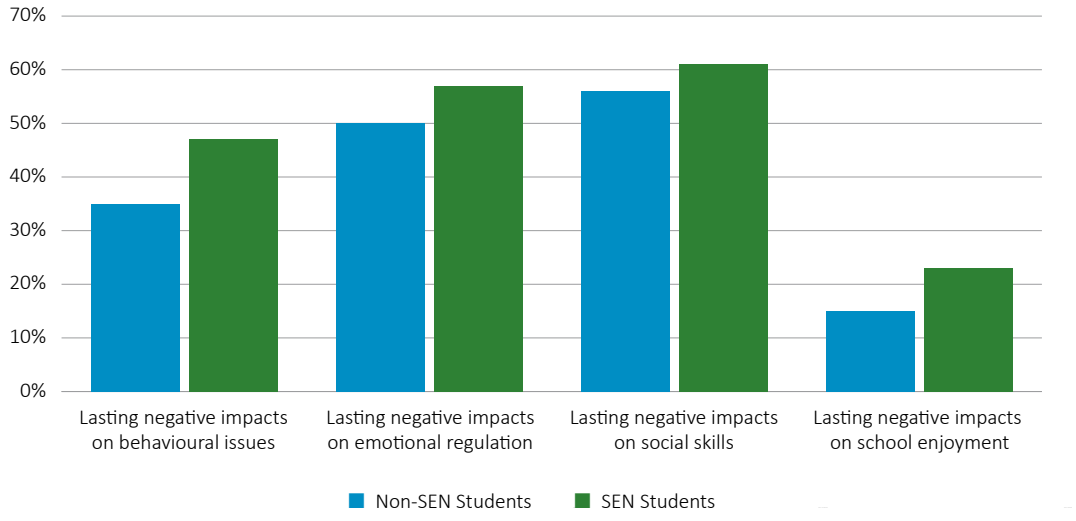
However, a few participants reported that some students did not enjoy the return and preferred online learning from home during school closures. Staff and parents noted that when the possibility of online learning became a reality for some the return to in-person schooling became less desirable.

> *There's a split there. The kids themselves would probably tell you that they'd rather be at home, but I do know that they enjoy being in school (PS1-AC SNA 1)*

4.4 Ongoing Impact of School Closures on Overall Student Wellbeing

When asked to rate the extent of COVID-19's lasting impacts on four areas of student wellbeing (emotional regulation, behavioural issues, school enjoyment and social skills), the majority reported negative impacts on student social skills (61 per cent for students with special educational needs; 56 per cent for students without) and emotional regulation (57 per cent for students with learning issues; 50 per cent for those without). On reported negative impacts on behaviour, 47 per cent of staff reported these for students with additional needs; 35 per cent for those without. Only a small proportion of staff reported adverse effects on school enjoyment (23 per cent for students with SEN; 15 per cent for students without).

Figure 4. Percentage of staff reporting lasting negative impacts on specific dimensions of student wellbeing



When asked to list the pandemic's greatest long-term impacts on wellbeing of students with additional needs, a third of staff, regardless of school type, listed 'social development, interaction and social skills affected' and 'increase in anxiety/fear/stress.'

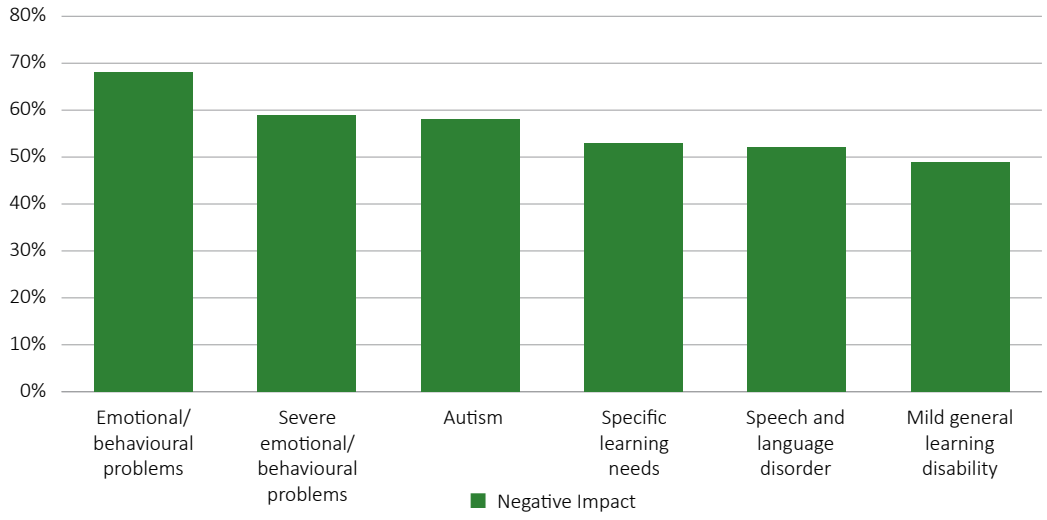
Table 4. Three greatest long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of students with SEN as reported by school staff

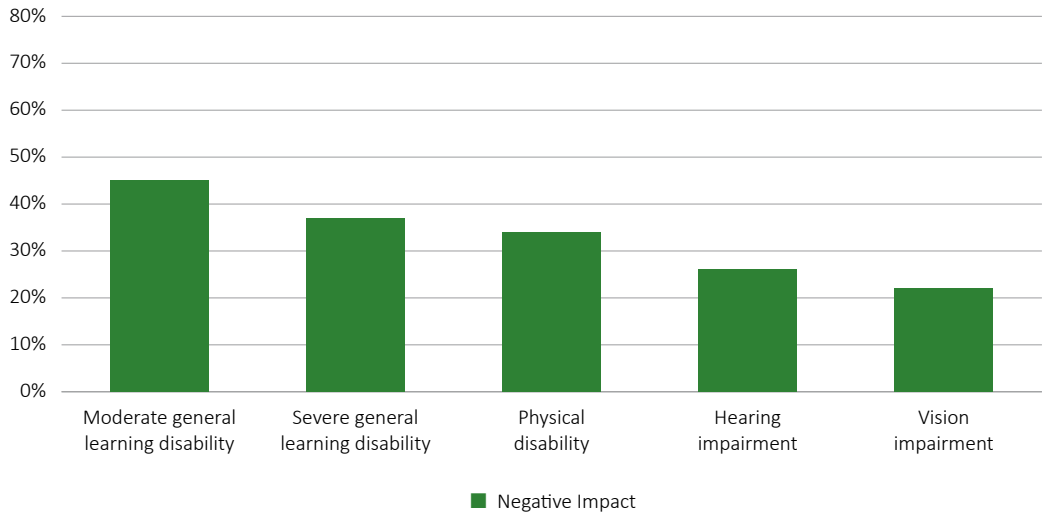
	Primary n = 179	Post-primary n = 387	Special schools n = 86
Social development, interaction and social skills affected	31%	41%	36%
Increase in anxiety/fear/stress	31%	34%	27%
Student confidence/self-esteem affected	13%	11%	7%
Student attendance/school refusal	5%	13%	4%
Student coping/emotional regulation affected	10%	7%	5%
Change in student engagement	5%	8%	5%
Use of technology/social media	3%	7%	5%
Change in emotional issues	7%	5%	1%
Student resilience affected	2%	7%	1%
Change in behavioural needs and issues	5%	3%	8%
Student concentration/attention affected	7%	2%	2%
Mental health affected	1%	2%	8%
Change in home life	5%	1%	4%
Increase in social anxiety	0%	3%	2%
Lower maturity levels	0%	3%	0%
Change in focus of school	3%	1%	4%
Issues with accessing support services	3%	0%	6%
Change in student routine	0%	1%	5%
Less support/more pressure from home	2%	1%	1%
Physical wellbeing affected	1%	0%	5%
Loss of student independence	1%	1%	0%
Positive impact on wellbeing	3%	0%	4%
Other (e.g. teacher shortages, stress from family)	28%	23%	34%

4.5 Impact on Wellbeing of Students with Specific Needs

In school surveys, staff reported students with emotional and behavioural difficulties as the most affected, with 68 per cent (n=251) indicating negative impacts on their wellbeing, followed by those with severe emotional/behavioural problems (n=217, 59 per cent) and with autism (n=213, 58 per cent). Students with vision impairment (n=79, 22 per cent), hearing impairment (n=95, 26 per cent) and physical disability (n=124, 34 per cent) were reported by staff as experiencing lasting negative impacts on wellbeing.

Figure 5a & Figure 5b. Proportion of school staff reporting lasting negative impacts on student wellbeing by profiles of special needs





In the CSL children's workbook in 2022, primary school students (n=2,082 in fifth class; n=1,801 in first class) were surveyed on their psychological wellbeing. Overall, this was rated as 'moderate to high' in 2022. Among the 326 students with special educational needs in fifth class (Cohort B), only those with emotional and behavioural difficulties (n=114) had statistically lower reported wellbeing

than children without SEN (n=1,756). Among the 240 students with additional needs in first class (Cohort A), wellbeing scores were statistically lower in categories of speech impairment (n=56) and emotional and behavioural difficulties (n=98), compared to students without SEN (n=1,561).

Table 5. Students' self-report wellbeing scores in the CSL sample

Categories	Cohort B (5th Class)		Cohort A (1st Class)	
	M	SD	M	SD
No special need	4.00	0.59	4.02	0.64
Any special need	3.93	0.63	3.97	0.78
Physical, visual or hearing needs	4.00	0.62	4.06	0.71
Speech impairment	3.90	0.64	3.89*	0.88
Autism	3.91	0.61	3.98	0.88
General learning disability	3.97	0.69	4.03	0.99
Specific learning difficulties	4.01	0.63	3.88	0.69
Emotional or behavioural challenges	3.81*	0.68	3.91*	0.93
Language needs	3.98	0.54	3.95	0.76

** Students' wellbeing scores in this category were statistically lower than scores of students without special needs.*

4.6 Ongoing Impact on Wellbeing

In general, across all settings and participants the pandemic school closures and restrictions were reported as still negatively affecting some students' wellbeing. While this dissipated for most over time, for some the negative impact was still evident up to the time of this study.

> *Things are kind of back to normal now, but I would say the damage is done, you know, so you have to repair that damage, so I don't think they're out of the woods yet, the ones that went through the pandemic (PPS2 Deputy principal)*

Some parents reported that school closures had brought about negative changes for their children's social wellbeing that were still evident two years after schools reopened. The negative impact was reported as particularly evident for children with existing social difficulties. In addition, staff noted that lack of social interaction during closures was detrimental to the social skills of many students.

> *They were isolated, they missed out on the socialising end of things so when they come here then, when they came back, you were kind of starting from the start, all over again (PS2-AC – SNA 1)*

> *We've definitely seen huge changes, or a huge impact of the pandemic with regards to emotional development. Like we've found our current third classes who have come in [with] a lot more emotional and social difficulties (CSL9 – Principal)*

Some participants noted practical changes in students' social behaviour with many connecting with friends online rather than in person. Staff reported some students were less socially confident on return. In post-closure years the challenges with social interactions diminished for some, while for others it was reported to have remained. Staff and parents spoke of how some students regressed in their social skills during lockdown and did not return to their pre-COVID-19 competency after reopening. Staff and parents in special schools noted the lack of socialisation opportunities in these settings was very evident, adding that children who did not socialise outside of school or online were impacted more.

> *I think in a special school, the biggest impact with our students was socially, more than academically (SS2 – SNA 1)*

> *They're not as confident, they're not as outgoing. I think there's been more incidence where there's students feeling a bit isolated where you're trying to then encourage them to re-engage with their friend (PPS2 – SET)*

Some parents spoke of how their children became very isolated and did not engage in the activities they had previously. They reported their worry that the lack of social interaction and regression in social skills was detrimental to their wellbeing. Parents and staff reported that students who preferred being alone became very isolated and it was more difficult than previously to encourage them to interact with others at home and in school. Some students themselves spoke of how they withdrew after lockdown and still find it more challenging to socialise again.

> *All kids missed out on that socialisation during the pandemic, I think the children that are on the spectrum who struggle with social skills anyway are even more set back, I don't think [son's name] left the house for a good six months (PS2-AC P3 – Mother of autistic boy in fourth class with sensory disability, EBD, & ODD)*

> *I'm very less sociable now. I'm very like, keep to myself, like I don't really go out much like. I'm very like, like I like my own space, I like my own time, like I don't really go out or anything (PPS2 S3 – Girl in sixth year with dyslexia and dyscalculia)*

Staff, students and parents all reported that some students experienced social anxiety when school reopened, and this continued as a lasting impact for a number of them. While this dissipated in time for some, and they went back to being comfortable in social settings, the interview findings indicated that for others the increase in social anxiety was still present for up to two years post-pandemic.

> *I think there's a lot more social anxiety. Children are having a lot more difficulty interacting with each other. But you can see that coming into the school as well, they don't know how to play with each other (PS1-AC – SNA 1)*

> *Before the pandemic he, well he's a social butterfly, he loves people, like he's really good with people but he was very nervous in interacting with people outside, like when COVID was going on and even going back to school, it took him a long time to get back in with his social group (PPS3 P3 – Mother of autistic boy in TY with ADHD, dyslexia and dyscalculia)*

Staff and parents reported that for some students, the level of maturity was not what was expected for their age group and ability. Staff noted that some entering first year in post-primary played games such as tag in the school yard, games typically associated with younger age groups. They noted they needed to support students with conflict resolution and regulating their emotions in ways not previously needed.

> *Definitely in terms of maturity, just very juvenile behaviour, as a whole cohort, they're probably developmentally not where they should be (PPS2 – SET and year head)*

> *I've never had senior students as immature. I'm dealing with an awful lot more disciplinary stuff than I would ever have had to have dealt with in pre-COVID, you know? I mean we would never have had first year students coming in playing tag or chase on the school yard, and we had that for the last two or three years, you know? (PPS3 – Principal)*

Staff noted that students continued to need more support and guidance with peer-to-peer interactions as well as for self-regulation and handling day-to-day school life.

4.7 Chapter Summary

- Half of staff (52 per cent) in post-primary schools reported continued negative impacts of the pandemic on the wellbeing of students with special educational needs. The proportion of staff reporting such effects on this group was lower in primary (36 per cent), similar to the 30 per cent rate reported by special schools. In contrast, only 27 per cent of staff from primary reported continued negative impacts on the wellbeing of students without SEN.
- When asked to nominate the three greatest medium impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of students with learning difficulties, about a third of staff, regardless of school type, stated 'social development, interaction and social skills affected'.
- When evaluating the perceived impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of students with different needs in the staff survey, those with emotional/behavioural problems were reported to have been most affected by the largest proportion of staff (68 per cent), followed by students with severe emotional/behavioural problems (59 per cent) and those with autism (58 per cent).
- In interviews, staff, students and parents all reported that some students experienced social anxiety with their social skills affected when schools reopened. While for some this dissipated in time, for others the increase in social anxiety and lack of social skills remained three years later.
- School staff noted some students appeared less able to manage their emotions and self-regulate. Some who had previously coped with being around others had regressed in their social and self-regulation skills and were more prone to becoming emotional or aggressive in school.
- Parents noted that many students missed out on key experiences in their social development and self-regulation, many saying their child had regressed in social development and had not reverted to pre-COVID-19 levels.

- When schools reopened ongoing challenges were associated with COVID-19 restrictions up to the date of interviews (2023). Students and staff found that when schools first reopened personal protective equipment was a barrier to communication. Some students noted that they continued to miss physical contact, such as hugging friends.
- Most participants noted that students had greater appreciation for in-person schooling post closures. Staff and parents reported a rise in enthusiasm for in-person schooling and said students were often smiling as they walked through the school gates.

Chapter 5: Student Engagement and Learning

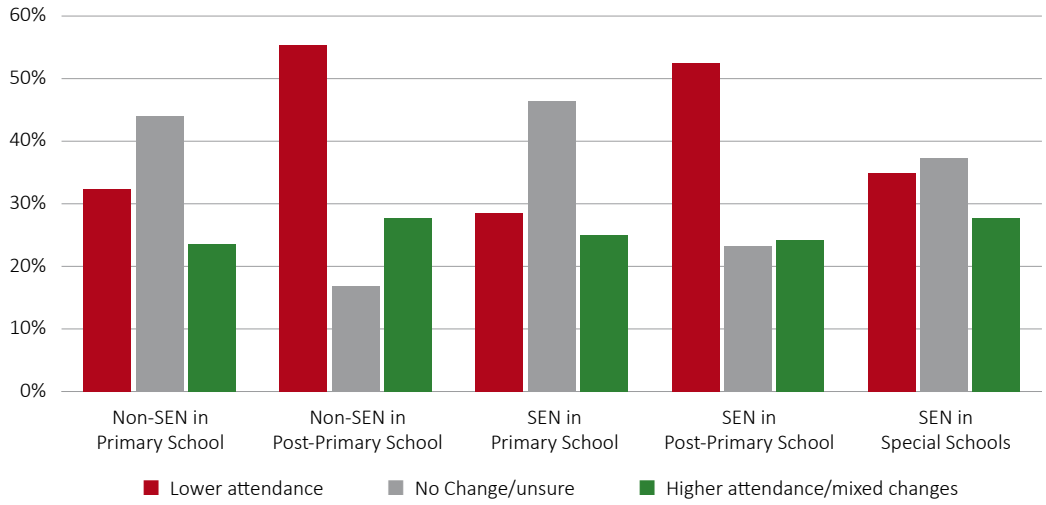
5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines findings on student engagement and learning in the years after school closures. Survey and interviews were conducted to examine ongoing impacts in these domains. The findings illustrate views of principals and teachers on students, while interview findings are more in-depth and illustrate the views of students, parents and school staff (principals, SENCOs, teachers and SNAs). Overall, in terms of engagement and learning, research indicates students with special educational needs may have been more vulnerable to the impact of school closures and the pandemic.

5.2 School Attendance Since the Start of the Pandemic

While media and research studies (Nathwani et al., 2021; Santibañez & Guarino. 2021) have reported increased disengagement, chronic absenteeism and school phobia since the initial COVID-19 closures, school attendance was not reported as an enduring issue in the current study. When asked if there was a difference in attendance since the start of the pandemic, more post-primary participants reported 'lower attendance' for both children with additional needs (53 per cent) and without (55 per cent). This compared to primary participants (27 per cent for those with learning difficulties; 32 per cent without) and special schools (35 per cent). Similarly, fewer post-primary staff reported 'no change' or 'unsure' for children with learning difficulties (23 per cent) and those without (17 per cent) and compared to almost half from primary schools (46 per cent for SEN; 44 per cent non-SEN). About a third (37 per cent) of special school staff reported 'no change' or 'unsure'. It is notable that a quarter of participants (ranging from 28 per cent for special schools to 24 per cent for non-SEN in primary) reported 'higher attendance' or 'a mixture of higher and lower attendance' across all student groups and school types.

Figure 6. Proportions of school staff rating on difference in student attendance since start of COVID-19 pandemic



5.3 Impact on Academic Self-Concept

In 2022, academic self-concept was rated as 'moderate' among fifth (Cohort B) and first class (Cohort A) students. When compared to those without SEN, fifth class students' academic self-concept was significantly lower if they had any special needs ($p<.001$). When looking into each special need category, all reported significantly lower self-concept than their peers without special needs. Academic self-concept ratings reported by first class students (Cohort A) were also significantly lower among those with any learning issues ($p<.05$). Significant differences were found in categories of autism ($p< .01$), specific learning difficulties ($p<.01$) and emotional or behavioural challenges ($p< .01$) when compared to students without SEN.

Table 6. Means and standard deviations of academic self-concept scores in CSL survey

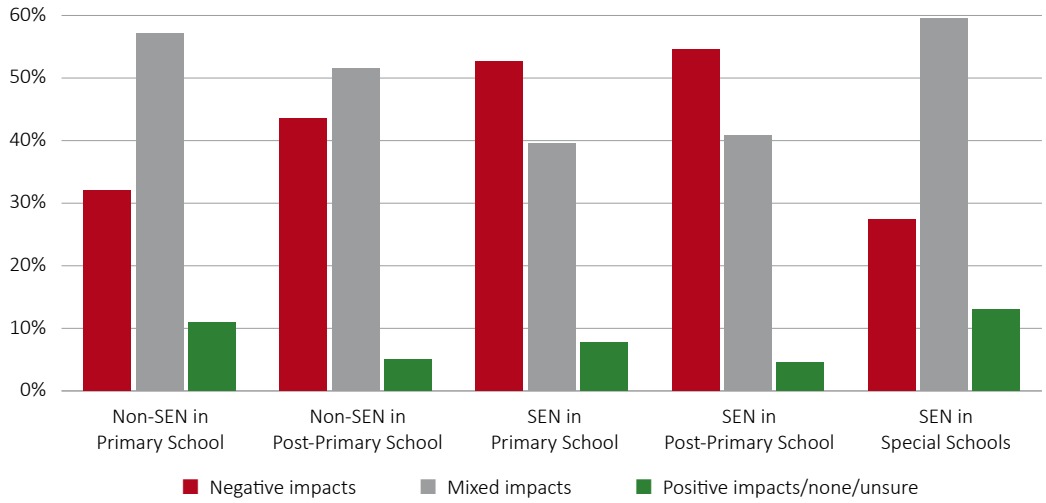
Categories	Cohort B (5th Class) n = 2,082		Cohort A (1st Class) n = 1,801	
	M	SD	M	SD
No special need	3.45	0.65	3.51	0.66
Any special need	3.10***	0.76	3.39*	0.76
Physical, visual or hearing needs	3.13***	0.64	3.57	0.85
Speech impairment	3.30***	0.76	3.29	0.77
Autism	3.28***	0.81	3.25**	0.86
General learning disability	2.99***	0.69	3.29	0.86
Specific learning difficulties	2.95**	0.70	3.15**	0.76
Emotional or behavioural challenges	3.03***	0.85	3.32**	0.81
Language needs	3.29***	0.55	3.50	0.79

** Student academic self-concept scores in this category were statistically lower than scores of students without special needs. The number of * indicates the level of statistical significance: *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05.*

5.4 Pandemic Impact on Learning

When asked if the pandemic continued to affect student learning, over half of staff in the school survey reported 'negative impacts' for those with learning difficulties in primary (53 per cent, n=88) and post-primary schools (55 per cent; n=196) while only 27 per cent (n=23) reported 'negative impacts' in special schools. For students without SEN, 31 per cent (n=47) of primary staff and 44 per cent (n=103) in post-primary selected 'negative impacts'. However, more staff selected 'mixed impacts' (57 per cent, n=84 for non-SEN in primary) and (52 per cent, n=122 for non-SEN in post-primary). Similarly, a majority (60 per cent, n=50) of special school staff selected 'mixed impacts' on students needing supports.

Figure 7. Proportions of school staff rating on continued impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on students' learning in general



When asked about any ongoing impact post closures, many interviewees reported students were still affected by missed academic learning experiences, with some staff, parents and students noting that it might be impossible for some to catch up given the lack of time and resources. Students noted feeling as if they had missed out on opportunities to learn and wondered what their ability level might have been without closures.

> *I just think it's so hard to pinpoint a specific task or goal that could ever amount to what they've missed in school especially for children with special educational needs, we'd need a few extra years in school I think to make up for what we missed (PS2-AC ASD – Class teacher)*

Some students spoke of receiving no education during lockdowns and finding it difficult to engage with learning in the digital space. Some said they did not feel prepared for examinations due to missed learning experiences and associated academic regression.

> *Am I ready for my Leaving Cert? No, I don't think so but yeah COVID did put an impact, I guess, on it. Like I felt like I missed out on years of school because of it. I felt like it was my time was cut short in school which is quite sad (PPS2 S3 – Girl in sixth year with dyslexia and dyscalculia)*

Participants reported that due to missed learning experiences many students lacked academic confidence and this had a further detrimental impact on their learning progress.

> *Like it's hard like coming back, it put a toll on my confidence because I felt like I wasn't doing my best because when my best wasn't like before the school closed. because of all this it kind of made my confidence go a lot (PPS2 S3 – Girl in sixth year with dyslexia and dyscalculia)*

Some staff in special schools and special classes noted that at times it was more difficult to differentiate additional learning needs to do with the pandemic and closures from others that might already have been present. They spoke about academic learning loss less than in the other school settings and explained that, for some students, academic attainment and progress was more difficult to identify and measure given the range of special educational needs. The impact of missed learning opportunities during closures was reported to be most evident for special school students on their social and independent life skills.

> *It's very difficult to notice gaps in SEN kids because they're SEN kids, so you don't know what's a gap, has he missed out or did he not have that piece to start? (PPS3 – ASD coordinator)*

5.5 The Ongoing Impact of Missed Learning Experiences

Staff, parents and students reported that school closures meant students missed out on a wide array of key learning experiences. Reports included missing out on social interactions and opportunities such as parties, mixing with other classes, attending outings, going to the shops and cinema. As a result, it was noted that students had to forgo important learning opportunities for personal and social development as well as life skills.

> *There was definitely an impact on the learning, lot of social experiences and collaborative educational experiences within the school even while schools were open, so I think it was like a lot of school initiatives just got put on pause on the 12th of March 2020 and things are only starting now to come back on stream in this academic year – three years later (CSL8 – Principal)*

> *Ours were the COVID group – they were the ones that were meant to finish sixth class, and they didn't, like ages 11, 12, 13, are the ages where you have all these milestone moments, and then none of that happened (PPS2 – SET and year head)*

Staff, parents and students reported lockdown depriving students of an array of experiences with the impact still evident at the time of this study. Some may have been unaware of this while others found it confusing.

> *She didn't get that opportunity to sit in a classroom and do little reading stations with kids and little bake sales. There's a whole lot of little things that have been missed out on and I suppose you can see yourself as an adult that they've missed out on those things and maybe kids aren't as aware of it (PS1-AC – SNA 1).*

> *I'd say it's weird, negative because you miss a lot of things, and it was kind of like your life was kind of taken away from you for a little while. And then you get it again and it's like this, it's just confusing (PS1-AC S2 – Autistic boy in sixth class)*

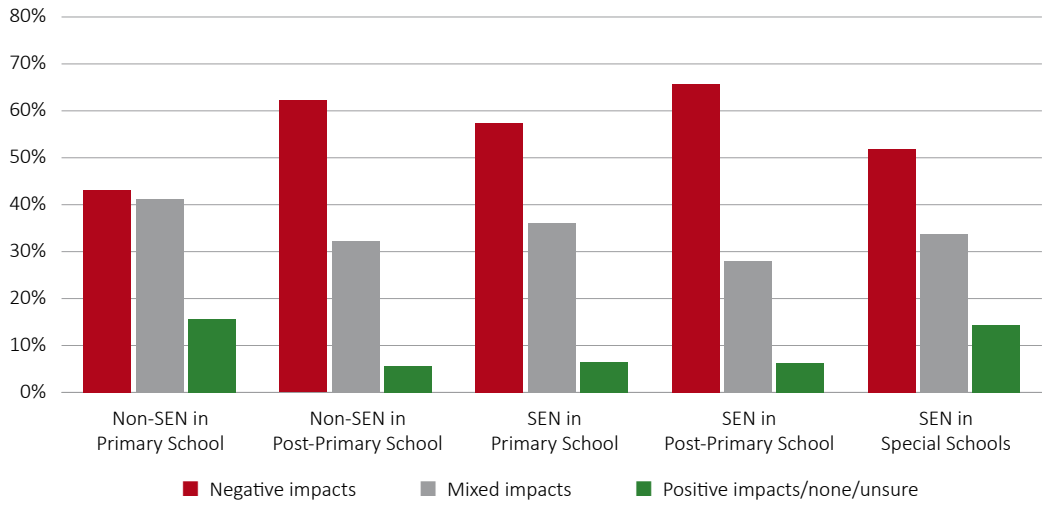
Some staff across all settings emphasised that schools offered more than academic learning under normal circumstances and highlighted the significance of the lost learning experiences for students around social/life skills and personal development. This principal from the Children's School Lives primary school interviews noted that some with special educational needs regressed in their behaviours post closures.

> *I don't think there was a lot of learning going on at home in probably 90 per cent plus of our families. If there were behavioural issues, you were going back and starting all over again, kids with special education needs would have been pushed further back (CSL4 – Principal 3)*

5.6 Ongoing Impact on Student Attention and Concentration

In the staff survey, a majority reported lasting negative impacts on the attention and concentration of students with special educational needs across the three types of schools (57 per cent of staff, primary; 66 per cent, post-primary, 52 per cent, special schools). Similarly, 62 per cent (n=143) reported negative impacts on post-primary students without SEN. In contrast, only 43 per cent (n=64) reported negative impacts on attention and concentration for primary students without SEN. A substantial proportion of participants selected 'mixed impacts', ranging from 28 per cent (n=100) for post-primary students with learning difficulties, to 41 per cent (n=61) for those without in primary.

Figure 8. Proportions of school staff rating on continued impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on student attention and concentration



Staff and students across all settings reported similar concerns about student attention, motivation and resilience. They said it was more difficult to keep students focused as they exhibited shorter attention spans and concentration. In schools where the class period had extended to 60 from 40 minutes, they and students observed this as challenging for students who often failed to sustain attention throughout. Staff remarked that some students did not have the same ability to persevere and were quicker to give up on academic challenges. In addition, a few reported some student attitudes towards schooling appeared to have changed following the pandemic.

> *Well, it's left them, in my opinion, that they're a lot more giddier and it's hard to calm them down, sometimes, not always, and they get too stressed out because they're not used to being given orders and having to sit still in class (PPS3 – SNA 1)*

> *The thing is because for a year I was paying more attention to a screen so it's harder to pay attention to like a board or a teacher (PS2-AC S3 – Autistic boy in fourth class with sensory disability, EBD, & ODD)*

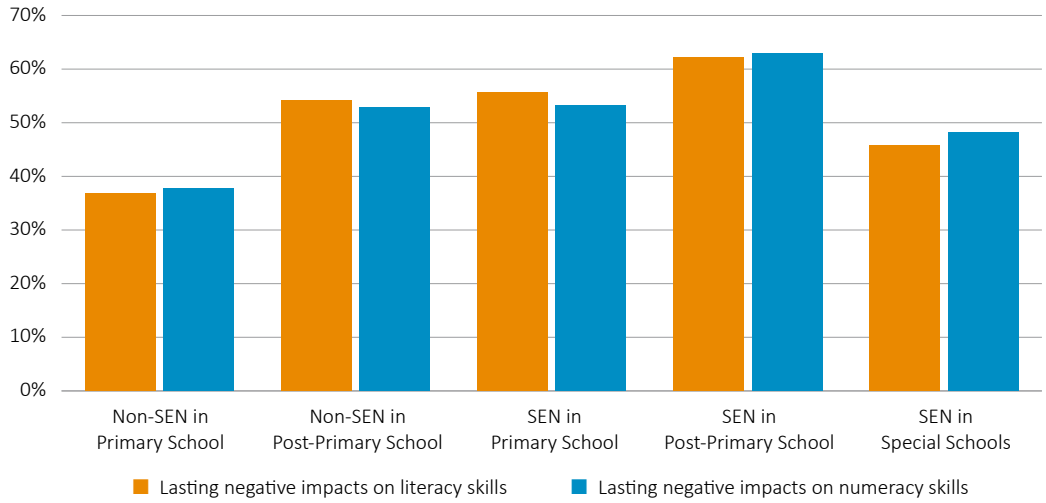
In general, staff and students reported that difficulty in sustaining attention was more evident when they first returned and this gradually subsided in time with spans appearing to return to pre-COVID-19 levels for most.

> *Their engagement is coming back to the way it was then but initially when they came back, they got it very hard to sit and study (PPS3 – SNA 1)*

5.7 Ongoing Impact on Learning: Literacy and Numeracy

In the staff survey, the majority of participants reported lasting negative impacts on the literacy and numeracy attainment skills of students with special educational needs in primary (56 per cent, n=94 for literacy; 53 per cent, n=90 for numeracy) and post-primary (62 per cent, n=221 for literacy; 63 per cent, n=223 for numeracy). Similarly, more than half reported lasting negative impacts on the academic skills of post-primary students without SEN (54 per cent, n=126 for literacy; 53 per cent, n=123 for numeracy). While relatively fewer special school staff reported such effects (46 per cent; n=38 for literacy; 48 per cent, n=40 for numeracy) it was still higher than those working with students without SEN in primary schools (37 per cent, n=55 for literacy; 38 per cent, n=58 for numeracy).

Figure 9. Proportions of school staff rating on lasting negative impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on student literacy and numeracy skills



In interviews, some primary and post-primary teacher settings noted that some students' literacy and numeracy skills were not at the level expected for their age group and ability. Primary teachers noted similar shortfalls for some students' fine motor skills. In particular, some noted that students were entering primary school unable to hold a pencil or crayon. Some participants cited increased technology use as a contributory factor for students not having the fine motor/ speech and language skills expected for their developmental age.

> *When they're coming into us. Now we're seeing like there's no muscle tone, or the core strength isn't there. You know, even the strength to hold a crayon, to colour for an extended period, the dexterity, the fine motor skills, the gross motor skills, they're not there (PS1-AC – Principal)*

When asked if those needing learning support had caught up on their learning, 82 per cent (n=295) of post-primary staff in the school survey stated they were 'very behind' or 'slightly behind', followed by 76 per cent (n=128) in primary and 59 per cent (n=49) in special schools. Similarly, a majority of post-primary staff working with students without SEN (71 per cent, n=169) stated they were 'very behind' or 'slightly behind'. For those without SEN in primary schools, a majority of staff (60 per cent, n=88) selected the option 'almost caught up' or 'completely caught up'.

When asked to nominate the three greatest long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning of students with special educational needs, staff responses from primary and post-primary differed from special schools. For staff in the former, the most common concern was 'gaps in student attainment and learning', reported by 39 per cent of primary and 33 per cent of post-primary schools. However, the most common concern that special school staff reported when asked about impact on learning was 'student wellbeing affected' (29 per cent) followed by 'social development and skills affected' (28 per cent).

Figure 10. Proportions of school staff rating on how much students have caught up in their learning since school reopened in autumn 2021

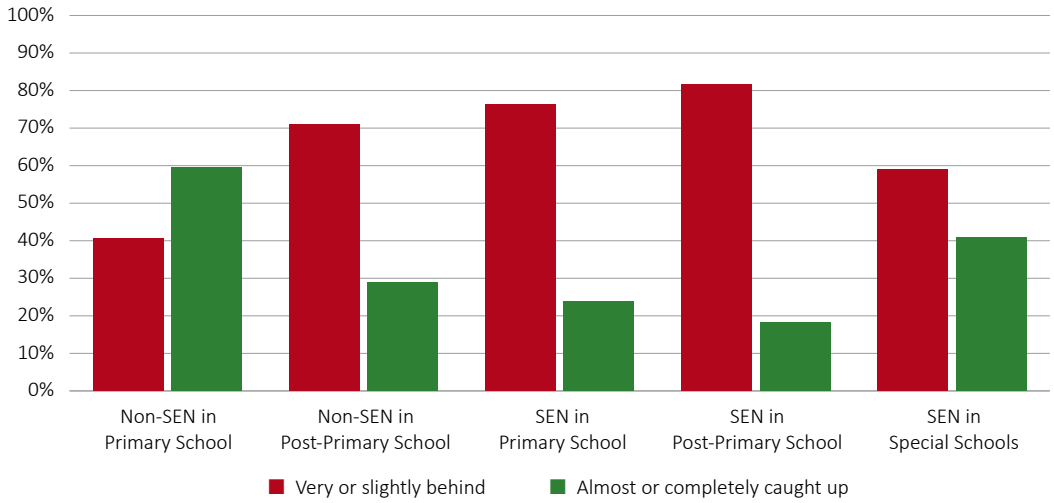


Table 7. Three greatest long-term impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the learning of students with SEN as reported by school staff

	Primary n = 179	Post-primary n = 387	Special schools n = 86
Gaps in student attainment and learning	39%	33%	19%
Student wellbeing affected	29%	35%	29%
Social development and skills affected	20%	21%	28%
Change in student engagement	8%	17%	8%
Change in student attendance	7%	18%	5%
Student concentration/attention affected	18%	11%	8%
Change in learner habits and skills	5%	12%	12%
Use of ICT	2%	8%	7%
Change in educational focus of school	9%	5%	7%
Change in behavioural needs and issues	3%	5%	15%
Issues with accessing support services	7%	2%	6%
Lost instruction time	3%	3%	4%
Staffing issues	4%	2%	6%
Change in home-school relationship	3%	1%	4%
Lack of SEN time, support and resources	2%	1%	1%
Exam preparedness affected	0%	2%	0%
Change in teaching methodologies	1%	1%	0%
Other (e.g. lower expectations, welfare)	12%	15%	23%

5.8 Missed Transitional Experiences

There were many accounts of lost transitional experiences. Transition year (TY) students either during lockdown or in the years following had no opportunity to participate in the typical TY experiences. Post-primary staff, parents and students spoke about the lasting impact on learning and personal development due to missing work experience, day trips, sports events and social interaction with their peers that characterise that year.

> *There's no doubting that they did miss out on transition year… all the trips that are growing up experiences… schools are more than just what goes on in the classroom, the playing football, the going on school tours, that's all learning (PPS3 – Principal)*

Many accounts described students losing out on TY opportunities; they reported feelings of having 'missed out' and staff noted this included key learning experiences for their personal, social and academic development.

> *I'm just kind of sad that I missed out on a lot of the fun and a lot of the new experiences that my sister and a lot of other students go to do with their fourth year (PPS2 S4 – Autistic boy in fifth year)*

School staff, parents and students reported on many aspects of this along with 'rites of passage' around important transitions, for example from primary to post-primary school and finishing in sixth year during lockdown. Participants reported not having the same opportunity to adjust as they would have had during typical in-person schooling.

> *First year was hard enough with, you know, the settling in period and all of a sudden being from the big kid to the smallest kid of settling in, first year is always a settling in period, whereas they were only in school for three months, or four months, and then the pandemic hit (PPS2 P1 – Mother of boy in fifth year with ADHD)*

Similarly, staff, parents and students noted that some students missed out on key religious milestones in the years post closures and the sense of having lost out was still evident with some. Some participants made comparisons with others (siblings and peers) who had the opportunity to have these experiences.

> *He also missed out on having I suppose the traditional communion ceremony from… due to the pandemic and the restrictions were put in there (PS2-AC P2 – Mother of autistic boy in fifth class with mild GLD)*

> *Ours were the COVID group – they were the ones that were meant to finish sixth class, and they didn't, like the age, like 11, 12, 13, are the ages where you have all these milestone moments, and then none of that happened. Even down to communion, confirmations, things like that – none of that happened (PPS2 – SET and year head)*

5.9 Role of Family Status and Parental Support

The continued impact of family status and availability of parental support for learning within the home during lockdowns was reported to still be evident for some students two years after school closures. Many staff emphasised the important role of parental support during this time, saying it was clear that some parents were able to be more actively engaged in supporting their child's learning than others while some students had to rely on their own resources.

> *Some of them have really good support at home. Some parents are really on the ball and some of them probably were sitting watching iPads for two years (SS2 – Class teacher 2)*

Staff noted that since schools reopened students who received support with their learning at home were faring better academically, while those who lacked such support were more significantly affected academically.

> *There's been gaps. See, the gaps are there regardless. The gaps are larger in homes where the parents didn't have the know-how to fill that gap as best they could (PPS3 – SENCO)*

> *In fact, some were way ahead – this is interesting now, because it was almost dependent on the family circumstances and support, they come back to you then and your class is very divided in terms of the children who engaged in learning and didn't engage in learning while we were away (PS1-AC – SET 1)*

Some staff members reported that school closures gave them increased awareness of and insight into the varied circumstances of students' home lives. While they reported always having had insight on this, the closures led to a deeper understanding of the challenges some children faced depending on their home environment. Others reported more awareness of the socio-economic challenges, addiction problems, domestic abuse, lack of resources and limited space and resources that some students faced at home.

> *It's made me acutely aware of some of our children's home environments and more aware of perhaps what's happening outside the school in their home lives. We would've always been aware of it but now, maybe a little bit more aware how, how important it is for our children to mix and be with their peers, particularly in a special school (SS2 – SNA 1)*

A few staff members reported having to pass on more child protection concerns to the Child and Family Agency Tusla[4]. In addition, they noted that the impact of family breakups during lockdown was still evident in students. They found addiction and domestic difficulties within families appeared to deteriorate at this time and that schools were continuing to support them with the consequences.

> *We are all engaging more with social services and Tusla than we've ever engaged before COVID (PS1-AC – Principal)*

> *There's been a lot of broken families since the pandemic as well and there's a lot of kids dealing with that and a lot of issues and very emotional about it (PS1-AC – SNA 1)*

4 (a dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children)

5.10 Chapter Summary

- In the surveys, post-primary participants reported 'lower attendance' for students with learning difficulties (53 per cent) and those without (55 per cent). Among primary staff, 27 per cent reported 'lower attendance' for children with special educational needs and 32 per cent for those without while special school staff reported 35 per cent. About a quarter (ranging from 24 per cent for non-SEN in primary schools to 28 per cent for special schools) of participants reported 'higher attendance' or 'a mixture of higher and lower attendance' across all student groups and school types.
- When asked to rate how student learning continued to be impacted by the pandemic, over half the staff reported 'negative impacts' for students needing supports in primary (53 per cent) and post-primary (55 per cent) schools, while only 27 per cent reported such impacts in special school students.
- In special school interviews, many participants noted more difficulty in identifying impacts on learning related to school closures and those that might have been present for children with greater additional needs. While many noted it was more difficult to assess the academic learning loss, the impact on social and life skills was reportedly more evident for special school students.
- In surveys, a majority of staff reported lasting negative impacts on the attention and concentration of students with special educational needs across three types of schools: 57 per cent in primary; 66 per cent in post-primary; and, 52 per cent in special schools.
- A majority of staff reported lasting negative impacts on the literacy and numeracy skills of students with learning difficulties in primary (56 per cent literacy; 62 per cent numeracy) and post-primary (53 per cent literacy; 63 per cent numeracy). Interestingly, half of staff also reported lasting negative impacts on academic skills (54 per cent for literacy; 53 per cent for numeracy) for students without SEN in post-primary schools.
- While relatively fewer special schools staff reported such negative effects (46 per cent literacy; 48 per cent numeracy), it was still higher than those working with students without SEN in primary (37 per cent literacy; 38 per cent numeracy).
- When asked to rate how students had caught up with learning, 82 per cent of post-primary staff working with students with special needs selected 'very behind' or 'slightly behind', followed by 76 per cent of those working with students with SEN in primary, and 59 per cent of those from special schools.
- When asked to rate the three greatest long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning of students in special schools the most common staff concern was notably around 'student wellbeing affected' (29 per cent) followed by 'social development and skills affected' (28 per cent).
- Staff, parents and students reported a range of missed experiences in key transitions and 'rites of passage', for example, students who moved from primary to secondary school or finished sixth year during lockdown. Staff spoke of schools being about more than what goes on academically and emphasised the effect of these missed experiences for students.

- A few staff members reported having to report more concerns to Tusla than pre-pandemic.
- A couple of teachers noted family breakups during lockdown were continuing to affect students. Some noted that schools were supporting more students for whom family addiction and domestic difficulties deteriorated during lockdown.

Chapter 6: Provision and Supports

6.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the general provision of education and support services to all students nationally. Research (Boon et al., 2011; Mihaylov et al., 2004; Peek & Stough, 2010) indicates that such provision and support for those with learning difficulties can be upset by large scale disasters and the ripple effect can be prolonged for years. Report 2 seeks to understand the impact of pandemic school closures on provision of education and support of these students in Ireland. Overall, findings indicate that disruption to provisions and supports due to COVID-19 and associated school closures were still affecting some students up to the time of this study in 2023. Findings[5] on pedagogical practices, curriculum accessibility, school level and external supports, and home-school relationships are outlined further in the following sections.

6.2 Long-Term Impact on Teaching and Learning

Survey participants including principals (n=312) and staff (n=340) were asked to indicate the pandemic's three greatest long-term impacts on teaching practice/pedagogy in their schools. Among the 652 total survey participants, 619 (95 per cent) responded to this question. As listed in Table 4, 'student and staff wellbeing affected' was most frequently mentioned by primary (39 per cent) and special school staff (34 per cent). For example, a special school staff member wrote: '… behavioural difficulties, regressed social skills, emotional regulation.' For post-primary staff, the most commonly reported impact was 'use of ICT', cited by 29 per cent. While most responses focused on increased ICT use, some also referred to being more confident in using ICT.

A quarter (25 per cent) of primary and almost a fifth of special school staff (18 per cent) referred to a change in educational focus, while only 12 per cent of post-primary staff indicated this. A wide range of such changes was reported, including 'catching up on curriculum', 'need to start from absolute basic level', 'greater focus on student wellbeing', and 'trying to get back to keeping school safe and happy'. In 31 per cent of cases, special school staff listed other types of impact that could not be categorised according to Table 4's list, therefore 'Other' refers to effects such as 'increased differentiation due to different levels of attainment', and 'lack of access to clinical team.'

5 When referring to interview findings, 'few' refers to 15 per cent or less, 'some' refers to 30 per cent of participants or less, 'most' refers to 30-60 per cent of participants, and 'many' refers to 60 per cent of participants or higher.

Table 8. Long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching/pedagogy

	Primary School n=169	Post-primary School n=365	Special School n = 85
Student and Staff Wellbeing Affected	39%	26%	34%
Use of ICT	18%	29%	19%
Gaps in Student Attainment and Learning	31%	24%	7%
Change in Student Attendance	16%	20%	9%
Change in Educational Focus of School	25%	12%	18%
Change in Student Engagement	8%	16%	4%
Social Development and Skills Affected	11%	12%	11%
Student Concentration/Attention Affected	12%	10%	6%
Change in Teaching Methodologies	5%	8%	5%
Change in Behavioural Needs and Issues	6%	5%	14%
Change in Learner Habits and Skills	4%	7%	7%
Gained New Perspectives or Awareness	5%	5%	2%
Staffing Issues	7%	1%	15%
Change in Home-School Relationship	8%	3%	6%
Lost Instruction Time	3%	4%	1%
School is More Resilient	2%	3%	5%
Exam Preparedness Affected	0%	4%	1%
Staff Training Affected	3%	1%	5%
Change in Staff Collaboration	1%	3%	2%
Change in Classroom Management	1%	1%	2%
Pressure from Society and Government	4%	0%	1%
Issues with Accessing Support Services	1%	0%	5%
Teacher Workload	0%	2%	0%
Other (e.g. waiting list, financial pressures)	17%	15%	31%

6.3 Impacts on Pedagogical Practices

As summarised in Table 8, a continued negative impact on student wellbeing was the most significant ongoing impact in terms of pedagogical practices reported in the survey in primary (n=169; 39 per cent); post-primary (n=365; 26 per cent); and special schools (n=85; 34 per cent).

In interviews when asked how their pedagogical practice had changed post closures, school staff spoke of a system-led change in focus from academics to wellbeing. They emphasised that their main focus was supporting student wellbeing. This increased focus was reportedly retained since schools first reopened after COVID-19 closures up until 2023. Teachers described the changes in their roles in response to this overall shift in focus.

> *My role as a teacher? I think we are more conscious of the wellbeing aspect of everybody (SS2 – Class teacher 1)*

> *I think teachers now are much more appreciative of the role of the whole social wellbeing aspect of school, much more than the academia (PP5 – SENCO)*

When asked about pedagogical changes since school closures, they reported taking on more of a 'pastoral' role since reopening.

> *Yeah, I think I'm more pastoral now with a lot of the students. We're there more to listen, to be like an ear for them to listen to, for them to be able to talk and to provide a safe space for them. I think teaching has always been that part, but I think since the pandemic I think it's more (PPS2 – SET)*

In the staff survey (Table 8), gaps in student attainment and learning were identified as one of three main ongoing impacts in pedagogy in primary (n=169; 31 per cent) and post-primary (n=365; 24 per cent) schools. In interviews, some teachers across all settings reported having to adjust their teaching methods to cater for gaps in learning and students' individual learning requirements. They also noted altering their teaching to cater to student needs when their attainment was not what they would expect for their age and ability.

> *You just had to be a bit more creative in your teaching and change your plan and try and do all those basic skills that we haven't been allowed to do for the last two years, I wonder where they would be if COVID hadn't happened (PPS3 – ASD coordinator)*

Staff also reported that when schools initially reopened certain restrictions affected aspects of their teaching methods. For example, a few noted that conducting lessons with students in small groups was not permitted. In addition, SNAs noted they could not be physically close enough to students to speak discreetly to them, something they reported as integral to their work. In addition, some primary and post-primary teachers noted having to go 'back to basics' in many ways in terms of academics. Special schoolteachers reported their primary emphasis was on wellbeing and life skills rather than academics. Some teachers noted that additional instruction was required to help certain students bridge learning gaps; they reported doing this while ensuring the entire class remained engaged, a task they reported as challenging.

> *You have to go back to the drawing board, don't you, because all these kids came back doing their own thing academically and we've to start all over again (PPS3 – ASD coordinator)*

6.4 Curriculum Accessibility in Special and Mainstream Schools

In the staff survey (Table 8), one of the most significant ongoing impacts of COVID-19 on teaching practices was ICT use, chiefly in post-primary (n=365; 29 per cent), and to a lesser extent in special (n=85; 19 per cent) and primary (n=169; 18 per cent) schools. In the interviews, staff and students across all settings noted a rise in digital technology use post closures. In post-primary, participants reported some digital technology tools/methods used during lockdown being retained. For example, some post-primary participants noted class notes and homework were often still put on an online system for them to access at home. Across all settings, however, most school staff reported students were largely accessing the curriculum via on-site in-person schooling. Overall, interview findings indicated that secondary students were utilising digital technologies more whereas primary and special schools reported generally discarding its use post school closures.

> *Before the pandemic we weren't using a lot of PowerPoints and stuff, then the pandemic hit and now everyone's much more able to use the online stuff (PPS3 S3 – Autistic boy in TY with ADHD, dyslexia and dyscalculia)*

Students expressed mixed views on technology with some reporting it useful to access notes outside the classroom and others stating it was at times confusing and difficult to access.

> *But since 2020 the use of tech has absolutely skyrocketed, I think... it's pretty good but it feels a bit weird at the same time (PPS3 S1 – Autistic boy in second year with DCD)*

It was reported that students were now using technology for entertainment and engaging with friends more so than before the pandemic. Staff reported their use of digital technology for social communication and entertainment purposes rose during the closures. Their comments illustrate how these newly developed tech habits and behaviours remained when schools reopened.

> *Yeah, a lot of them were playing computer games in their head all day while they were sitting in school, all they talk about is games… there doesn't seem to be any outside games going on anymore (PS2-AC – SNA 1)*

> *We locked them up and told them not to go out and I think that had a huge, huge impact and it drove them then more to technology to have friends (PPS2 – SET)*

6.4.1 Accessibility of School Resources

Principals were asked to rate the accessibility of their school's resources. As listed below in Table 9 some differences existed between mainstream and special schools. In the former, (primary and post-primary), the most commonly reported inaccessible resource was a 'sensory space for special educational needs (SEN)', with 35 per cent of mainstream principals stating, 'do not have this'. In special schools, the most commonly inaccessible resource was a 'quiet space for SEN': 26 per cent of principals stated they 'do not have this'.

The majority (92 per cent) of mainstream principals rated 'good' or 'excellent' the accessibility of instructional materials. In contrast, a substantial proportion of special school principals rated this 'poor' or 'moderate' while 12 per cent said 'do not have this' applied to their school. It was noteworthy that 64 per cent of mainstream principals rated their accessibility to SEN resources as 'good' or 'excellent'. More than half (53 per cent) of special school principals rated their SEN resources as 'poor' or 'moderate', with another 2 per cent stating 'do not have this' resource for SEN.

Table 9. Accessibility to school resources rated by mainstream and special school principal

	Mainstream Schools			Special Schools		
	Do not have this	Poor or moderate	Good or excellent	Do not have this	Poor or moderate	Good or excellent
Sensory Space for SEN	35%	29%	37%	12%	39%	49%
Specialised Break-time Facilities for SEN	24%	46%	30%	20%	33%	47%
Quiet Space for SEN	15%	44%	41%	26%	33%	41%
Instructional Materials, e.g. Textbooks	1%	7%	92%	12%	32%	56%
Special Needs Assistant (SNA)	3%	39%	58%	0%	33%	67%
Assistive Technologies for SEN	2%	31%	67%	0%	50%	50%
Assessments for SEN	1%	45%	54%	2%	65%	33%
Resources for SEN	0%	36%	64%	2%	53%	45%
School Buildings and Grounds	0%	31%	69%	0%	57%	43%
Technologically Competent Staff	0%	20%	80%	0%	53%	47%
Audio Visual Resources	0%	18%	82%	2%	41%	57%
Computer Technologies	0%	16%	84%	0%	39%	61%
Supplies e.g. paper, pencils etc	0%	10%	90%	0%	16%	84%
Heating and Lighting	0%	27%	73%	0%	46%	54%
Instructional Space	0%	33%	67%	0%	51%	49%

6.5 Support for Students from External Agencies Since Schools Reopened

Many staff in all school settings reported difficulties in accessing student assessment and external support services (e.g. NCSE, HSE, NEPS, CAMHS) after reopening. Some noted that during lockdowns many agencies (including those listed above) stopped providing services to students and this gap had led to increases in waitlist times and resulted in lack of support from and access to external assistance. In interviews, staff discussed long waitlists; some school staff and parents reported having no access to services.

> *Everyone is competing for a small pot. I think what's happened with COVID-19 is anyone trying to get a diagnosis has been then delayed. There is quite a backlog to get diagnoses for certain students (PPS2 – SET)*

> *There's a huge delay there and that child lost three months of support, he only has a month left in school and that could have made a huge difference had we got him early on (PPS3 – ASD Coordinator)*

Some staff also spoke of how external support agencies often lacked an understanding of student needs and their severity of circumstances as they were not physically present in the school to see what was 'actually going on' (PS1-AC – Principal).

> *It's those external services who are, they're not on the ground. They're in an office somewhere. They need to come and see what's actually going on in schools and how we're doing so well with so little (PS1-AC – Principal)*

> *I think the pandemic has just created the backlog. During the pandemic, all those services shut up shop (PPS2 – Deputy Principal)*

Many staff and parents from all school sectors spoke of how the pandemic exacerbated waiting lists and led to significant delays in assessments meaning that those with additional needs were only identified when they were much older. Staff noted that wait times were always there but had lengthened following the halt in service supply during closures. Staff across all settings stressed how extremely difficult it had become to access services post lockdown and how this had affected timely intervention, therapy, resources and even school placement.

> *There are children on waiting lists for different things and it seems ridiculous, sometimes some of them are at the place where they could be in secondary school before they're going to get around to getting that access (PS1-AC – SNA 1)*

> *I don't think we're supported at all; we have students that are waiting to be assessed, and we can't get an assessment for them. The pandemic just created a perfect storm of huge waiting lists now, and an underfunded system (PPS2 – SET and year head)*

The following quote from a principal illustrates the view of many schools that closures exposed gaps already present in service provision and that, while not in their remit, schools have always been key in providing such support to students and parents.

What the lockdowns actually demonstrated to me was that when you removed the layer of support that schools are doing all the time and the kids weren't in school and the parents were getting no respite, to me that just showed all the holes in the rest of the systems, that we take on quietly and like put up with, you know? And what a support we are to those families (CSL6 – Principal)

6.6 Wellbeing Support Programmes in Schools

Among all 312 principals surveyed, more than half (n=186, 60 per cent) reported using one or more of the listed wellbeing support programmes in their school. Among these (n=186, 36 per cent) reported using one programme, 31 per cent reported using two, 16 per cent reported three, 10 per cent four, 6 per cent (n=11) five, and only one participant (0.5 per cent) reported using all six listed programmes. Table 10 below lists the proportion of school staff who indicated the wellbeing support programmes used in their school.

Results from a general linear model ANOVA indicate that the average number of wellbeing support programmes was significantly higher in primary (M=2.84, SD=0.13) than in either post-primary (M=1.13, SD=0.11) or special schools (M=1.1, SD=0.18). There was no significant difference between post-primary and special schools on the average number of programmes.

Table 10. Average number of wellbeing support programmes and percentage of each programme being used as reported by principals

	Primary School n=80	Post-primary School n=83	Special School n = 23
Average number of support programmes (M, SD)	2.84 (0.13)[a,b]	1.13 (0.11)a	1.10 (0.18)[b]
Percentage of each programme being used:			
Friends for Life	65%	71%	14%
Weaving Wellbeing	42%	16%	13%
Incredible Years	48%	0%	5%
Nurture Groups	25%	31%	6%
Zippy's Friends	37%	1%	2%
Roots of Empathy	19%	10%	5%

a and b indicate statistically significant differences at p<.01 level.
M=mean, SD=standard deviation.

6.7 Layered Element of Agency: School and Systemic Level Responses

Participants reported systemic and school level responses to pandemic closures. While there was system level guidance, participants reported school level responses to provision and supports. For example, participants reported that during school closures some teachers and SNAs took it upon themselves to do printouts for students and drop them to their houses. Other staff members reported making calls from their personal telephones to parents to help support students' learning during lockdowns. These school level responses were still evident after schools reopened reopening with staff adapting their teaching and support strategies to suit class and individual student needs.

As discussed in section 6.5, staff and parents in all school settings spoke of challenges at systemic level, such as students not getting much needed external supports and interventions for long periods, having an impact at school level.

> *I find the systems here, you know, the likes of the speech therapy, I think the system's failing I suppose, I don't think the school is by any means, but I just think the outside resources could be a lot better (PPS2 – SNA)*

Some staff spoke of trying their best to meet students' educational and wellbeing needs in school given the deficits in external supports. They reported that many outside agencies were understaffed and underfunded and this led to the lack of services and supports.

> *We can only do so much with the children you know, we can't do Occupational Therapy obviously we can't do speech and language or whatever you know so they're things that make other things a little bit harder for you. More money needs to be pumped into them sort of resources for children with additional needs (PS2-AC – SNA 1)*

The following post-primary teacher noted how ideally schools would have more staff and technological resources.

> *In a perfect world, everyone would have iPads and laptops, and class sizes would be ten to one, instead of 25 to one. So, reduce the numbers, more teachers, more supports, more SNAs (PPS2 – SET and year head)*

The following post-primary student spoke of an overall loss of faith and hope in the education system post pandemic.

> *I feel a lot less faith in the education system now, just because of how poorly students' kind of mental health and everything was handled by teachers in my school personally and also on a wider level. Yeah, I think I just have a lot less faith in the system than I used to and I have less hope with it (PPS2 S4 – Autistic boy in fifth year)*

At post-primary, some system-led changes were challenging for some students, such as the class duration switch from 40 to 60 minutes. They reported missing movement and fresh air between classes. This interim inactivity also meant they had less time for casual interactions with friends from other classes. In one post-primary school class segregation was still occurring up to two years after school closures.

> *Everyone's segregated I guess like. And like everyone goes home at different times, I preferred when we mixed, you can't like see your friends and walk past or anything which is kind of sad (PPS2 S3 – Girl in sixth year with dyslexia & dyscalculia)*

Overall, all participant groups and settings noted a system-led emphasis on wellbeing when schools first reopened. However, they reported that while this response was initially very focused on wellbeing, at school level teachers became very aware of academic regression/learning loss. Teachers reported being particularly concerned for examination year students and were working to bridge the learning gaps.

> *There's a huge pressure on teachers to go, Jesus, these didn't sit a flipping Junior Cert, how are we going to get them ready for a Leaving Cert? (PPS3 – ASD coordinator)*

6.8 Academic Regression

While staff, parents and students reported this overall focus on wellbeing, some spoke of a pressure to 'catch up' academically in school. Some staff noted that while Departmental and systemic emphasis remained on wellbeing, regression, examinations, ongoing assessments and even whole school evaluations were a concern and a reality for all participants.

> *So, is there pressure? So, say from the Government, it's all flowery and wellbeing, wellbeing, wellbeing. Yet, we're still being inspected by the, in the inspectorate and told that we're you know, good, or fair or poor (PS1-AC – Principal)*

Generally, it was reported that while there was less pressure to catch up academically initially when COVID-19 problems subsided that pressure increased. This was more evident for Junior and Leaving Certificate students. Special schools reported the least emphasis on the need to catch up academically, followed by primary. One primary teacher noted that while there may have been pressure to catch up for some students, making up for lost time was challenging, in particular for those lacking the appropriate learning support at home.

> *Well some of them will catch up of course but anybody who's a little bit weaker you know or not getting the support at home won't catch up (CSL3 – Teacher)*

6.9 Impact of Closures on the Inclusion of Students with SEN in Mainstream Schools

When asked if closures had affected approaches to inclusion in general, most staff in all settings said they were always aware of students with special educational needs.

> *My approach to inclusion? I can't say it's made a difference. It's made me acutely aware of… how important in-person schooling is for students with SEN (SS2 – SNA 1)*

While most staff reported being always inclusive, some said it did amplify their awareness of the range of student need. Some stressed that closures made them more aware of the importance of in-person schooling for those with learning difficulties and this was reported to be particularly true for those in primary and special schools.

> *I think it's made teachers more aware of the multiple needs and that the additional needs of children aren't always obvious (PS1-AC – Principal)*

However, a few participants noted an inclusive approach was not always executed successfully in their respective schools. The following primary school teacher reported becoming more aware of inclusion and gaining awareness of particular learning needs as they had a student needing support in their class.

> *I would have had a really positive, and well-researched view of inclusion before COVID because of the needs that were in my class at the time. But if it hadn't been for that particular child who was in my class just coincidentally that year, it probably would have been an eye-opening experience (PS1-AC – SET)*

From a student perspective, the following post-primary student reported having to inform their teachers about their additional needs each year.

> *A lot of teachers don't even know that I have a disability. I had to tell all of my teachers last year and I had to tell them this year as well, some of them do know but there's a few that definitely don't, but there's not much that can be really done about it (PPS2 S1 – Boy in fifth year with ADHD)*

6.10 Home School Relationships

Most participants observed that the relationship between schools and students' homes strengthened as a result of the pandemic. Many parents acknowledged that school staff "did their best" during closures and maintained regular contact. Several participants also noted that communication between home and school increased during the lockdown, contributing to improved and more sustained relationships in the years that followed.

> *I think we've been more connected with the parents. I think we've checked in with the parents. I think we've had more conversations around simple things like is your child engaging more with learning since they've come back (PPS2 – SET)*

However, some parents spoke of less informal access to school and teachers since COVID-19. Some explained that previously they could walk into school and ask to speak to a teacher. But after the pandemic interaction was by appointment only. In addition, some spoke of the lack of a sense of community in school post pandemic. Parents explained that previously schools hosted social occasions such as a bake-sale or a school dance. These events had not resumed to the same extent following the school closures. Some parents suggested this might have had a detrimental impact on the home-school relationship and overall school spirit. However, across all settings most participants generally reported good relationships between homes and schools. The following post-primary principal noted that while the schools had to adhere to regulations and restrict parental access (COVID-19 restrictions) they were now eager to invite families back in.

> *We're two years keeping them out of the school, and now we're trying to invite them back in, and we were two years harping on about rules that were seen as necessary at the time, that were pretty much unimplementable in a secondary school setting, you know? And I look back and wonder if everything we did was right (PPS3 – Principal)*

6.11 Chapter Summary

- Survey findings indicate that, according to school staff, the pandemic's three greatest long-term impacts on teaching practice/pedagogy were first, a continued negative impact on student and staff wellbeing (39 per cent); second, a continued increase in the use of digital technology (post-primary, 29 per cent; primary, 18 per cent; special schools 19 per cent); and third, ongoing gaps in student learning and attainment (primary, 31 per cent; post-primary, 24 per cent; special schools, 7 per cent).
- Survey findings indicate that 64 per cent of mainstream principals saw their access to resources for students with learning difficulties in their own school as 'excellent'. Half (53 per cent) of special school principals, however, rated their own access as 'poor' or 'moderate'.
- In primary and post-primary schools, the most commonly inaccessible resource was reported to be a 'sensory space for special educational need students (SEN)', with 35 per cent of mainstream principals reporting they 'do not have this'. In special schools, the most commonly inaccessible resource was a 'quiet space for SEN' (26 per cent).
- More than half (n=186, 60 per cent) of principals in the survey reported using one or more of the six listed wellbeing support programmes in their school.
- In interviews when asked about changes to pedagogy following closures many participants reported a system wide shift from a focus on academics to wellbeing. Staff reported some students needed more support for wellbeing and social interactions, sustaining attention in class and their general ability to manage school life.
- Some staff noted that reduced access to external services (e.g. for assessment and therapeutic support) resulted in students not gaining access for extended periods to services and much needed assessments. There were many reports of long waitlists and situations where staff were left without assistance from external agencies.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Implications

7.1 Introduction

While national (Burke & Dempsey, 2021; Crean et al., 2023; Mohan et al., 2021) and international studies (Devitt et al., 2020; Hammerstein et al., 2021) have examined the impact of COVID-19 emergency school closures on students, there has been no in-depth exploration of its ongoing impact on students with special educational needs in Irish educational settings. Report 2 focuses on the pandemic's medium/longer-term impact on children with learning difficulties and constitutes phase two of the NCSE-commissioned study: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Education of Children with Special Educational Needs. This second phase (2022-23) was informed by key areas warranting further exploration from phase one (2021-22) such as changes in teacher and school provision of supports to those who need them, potential continued (dis) engagement of students in education and schooling and their wellbeing. While the first study focused on the impact during and immediately after school closures, this second phase was better placed to document the pandemic's more medium- and longer-term impacts on students with educational needs to inform Government agencies' policy and best practice. This study is significant in that it offers multiple stakeholder perspectives and experiences with contributions from students, parents, principals, teachers and special needs assistants on the lasting effects of school closures on student education and wellbeing. Notably, the research supplies empirical evidence on the experiences of special school students, an area receiving little attention to date. This combination enables the report to suggest meaningful recommendations for practice and policy.

The chapter begins by focusing on COVID-19's continued impact on student wellbeing in the years following school closures. Their engagement and learning in the months and years after returning to the traditional classroom settings is then discussed followed by the pandemic's ongoing effect on provision and supports. The results are organised into three themes to do with children's wellbeing: student engagement and learning; provisions; and, supports. The chapter concludes with implications for policy and practice to mitigate the challenges for children needing additional supports.

7.2 Ongoing Impact on Student Wellbeing

Research shows children with special educational needs were more vulnerable during the pandemic and at risk of poorer mental wellbeing and maltreatment (Tso et al., 2023). Report 2 explores the pandemic's continuing impact on their wellbeing. Survey findings indicate that half the post-primary staff respondents reported a continued negative impact in this area. Notably, the proportion of staff reporting negative effects on students with SEN was lower in primary (36 per cent) and special schools (30 per cent). These findings align with international studies such as that by Morgul et al. (2022) which explored the wellbeing of children with special educational needs in the UK during the first (2020) lockdown. Their survey of 995 caregivers found this cohort spent more time on screens and experienced more adverse effects on their wellbeing and mental health than children without SEN. In a survey of children (n=293), Pozas and Letzel-Alt (2022) found children with learning needs in Mexico coped significantly worse than those without SEN with homeschooling, and with their return to school. Report 2's findings

not only support international research but contribute to understanding of the negative impact on student wellbeing around needs and systemic individual and family factors. It shows families of these children may require specific supports for their welfare which aligns with prior research demonstrating the bi-directional effects of wellbeing between children and parents/carers (Dobosz, Gierczyk & Hornby, 2022; Morgul et al., 2022; Northrup et al., 2022) and the need to support families holistically (e.g. financial concerns, mental health).

Survey data reveal that continued negative effects on student wellbeing was the most significant ongoing impact on pedagogical practices affecting primary (39 per cent), post-primary (26 per cent) and special schools (34 per cent). Interviews with school staff also highlighted a system-wide shift from an academic focus to prioritising student wellbeing in the months and years following COVID-19 school closures. This shift in focus to wellbeing persisted up until the time of this study (2023). Teachers described their roles becoming more pastoral and how, in addition to developing academic skills, school served as a source of support for students in developing social and life skills. When asked to rate the pandemic's three greatest medium-term impacts on the wellbeing of students with learning difficulties about a third of staff, regardless of school type, listed 'social development, interaction and social skills affected' (primary 31 per cent; post-primary 41 per cent; special schools 36 per cent) followed by an 'increase in anxiety/fear/stress' (primary 31 per cent; post-primary 34 per cent; special schools 27 per cent). The third was a negative impact on confidence/self-esteem (primary 13 per cent; post-primary 11 per cent; special schools 7 per cent).

Study findings indicate ongoing pandemic impacts on special school students, with 30 per cent of staff reporting a perceived adverse effect especially on wellbeing, social and life skills. This aligns with international studies highlighting that during COVID-19 children with special educational needs experienced more negative effects on their wellbeing than their peers (Greenway, & Eaton-Thomas, 2020). The present study highlights concerns about the long-term consequences for the social and emotional development of special schools students. Teachers and parents noted regressions in social development and self-regulation. This is consistent with other studies indicating that loss of regular schooling and social interactions during lockdowns adversely affected emotional stability and self-regulation in children with special educational needs (Tasnim, 2021).

In the UK, the longitudinal Co-SPACE study (Hall et al., 2022) asked parents/carers (n=6,507) of children with autism, ADHD and a control group to complete the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to explore symptoms and functional impairment. They identified aspects of remote learning that may have contributed to these negative effects, such as having limited access to outdoor space, movement breaks, friendship groups and major disruption to familiar and routine activities. In Mexico, Pozas and Letzel-Alt's (2022) survey of secondary school students with and without SEN found that the former coped significantly worse during distance learning and had higher levels of negative emotional experiences. This was attributed to the absence of special education support and proper parental and teacher support. They also suggested teachers might have lower expectations for this cohort and did not give them the same provision and support as those without SEN. Another study of 180 parents/carers of autistic children in Australia found that 42.2 per cent of parents reported negative impacts on their child's mental health or wellbeing with 10.3 per cent citing an increase in their child's anxiety, self-harming and depression (Simpson & Adams, 2022). Contributing factors included isolation, online classes, coping with learning and

concerns about COVID-19 infection. It may be the case that lockdown exacerbated existing mental health difficulties. For example, Alenezi et al.'s (2022) cross-sectional national study of parents/carers of children with special educational needs (n=1,848) in Saudi Arabia found they believed their child's wellbeing and support needs were greater than pre-pandemic and parental-perceived general anxiety had risen significantly across time.

The current study suggests significant ongoing consequences for children with special educational needs across all domains of learning and socio-emotional development. While prior research helps to understand what contributed to these difficulties and/or losses in learning, further research is needed to understand the factors compounding or contributing to these negative effects and how schools can support these children to overcome them. Parents noted that many students missed out on key learning experiences in their social development and self-regulation, with many reporting their child had regressed in social development often with a negative impact on wellbeing. In Algeria, Layachi and Schuelka (2022) interviewed parents/carers and their children with special educational needs (n=23) about their lockdown experiences. They reported that children's ability to self-regulate and their emotional development were affected since the emotional support the school provided had helped them to develop these skills. Therefore, it was reported that the loss of schooling adversely affected the children's 'emotional stability' (Layachi et al., 2022). Similarly, in the current study, when asked to rate the pandemic's greatest long-term impacts on the learning of special school students, the most common teacher reported concern was 'student wellbeing' (29 per cent) and 'social development and skills' (28 per cent).

The findings indicate that school lockdowns affected students' social experiences, with parents reporting concern about the loss of in-person social interactions. This issue was especially pronounced among parents of special school students and those with fewer connections outside the school environment. Research has shown that social interaction is critical to development of social skills, emotional regulation and overall mental health in children and adolescents (Loades et al., 2020). Another change in student behaviour identified in Report 2 was their increased tendency to link with friends online rather than in person. Previous research suggests that while online interactions can provide a sense of connection, they may not fully replicate the benefits of in-person interactions, such as the development of empathy, non-verbal communication skills and ability to navigate complex social situations (Durlak et al., 2011). School staff and parents in this study reported that for students with learning difficulties missing out on in-person social experiences may have been detrimental to their socio-emotional wellbeing. Participants noted that for these students, especially in special schools, lack of socialisation opportunities was significant, even detrimental, for those who often rely heavily on structured environments and support from teachers and peers to develop social and communication skills (Murphy et al., 2020).

In interviews, staff, students and parents reported many students experienced social anxiety and that their social skills had decreased when schools reopened. While this dissipated in time for some, for others these issues were ongoing. Further research is needed to understand the contributing factors here. This should inform how best to support students with SEN who are experiencing these difficulties along with the supports needed at school level from external agencies such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). Parents of students who reportedly preferred to be alone said their children remained more isolated, with some reporting that children declined to

engage in activities they would previously have joined in with. Parents were concerned that the lack of social interaction and regression in social skills was negatively affecting their children's wellbeing. However, remote learning was not negative for this cohort as some research has reported positives. Simpson and Adams' (2002) study of autistic student parents/carers in Australia found a significant minority (8.1 per cent) of parents reported improvements in their child's mental health or wellbeing due to the flexibility homeschooling provided. In the UK, the Co-SPACE study (Hall et al., 2022), set up to understand how families coped in the pandemic and what parents could do to support children's mental health, also suggested that a move to online learning had beneficial effects for students with autism and/or ADHD who struggled with classroom and/or structured school environments, and that there was a reduction in social (e.g. bullying) and academic pressures. Report 2 findings suggest these positive effects were not reported once students returned to schools. However, it is important to note that participants in this study were referring to students who had returned to school and it did not capture the experiences of those who did not return (e.g. due to emotionally based school avoidance or homeschooling).

Staff, parents and students reported that many students missed out on an array of key developmental experiences and were thus not equipped to deal with the challenges of daily school life. Staff emphasised how schools were more than what goes on academically in classrooms; they offered a wide array of learning opportunities for social life and personal skills and the impact on learning and wellbeing was still evident for some students. This supports Layachi and Schuelka (2022) who found school closures in Algeria affected the emotional development of children with special educational needs. Interviews with parents and the children reported that this cohort received emotional support at school which helped them with their development of emotional regulation. On the continued impact of lost experiences on skills, maturity and development, accounts of missed transition year experiences were numerous. Students whose transition year occurred either during lockdown or when schools first reopened had no opportunity to participate in that experience in the typical way. Students were still affected by having missed out on work experience, day trips and the social interaction with their peers and others. Across all settings and participant types, there were reports of missed transitions and 'rites of passage' and the lasting impact of these missed experiences remained evident in some cases. Staff spoke of schools being 'more than what goes on academically' and emphasised the importance of missed experiences for students across all settings. Staff, parents and students reported that some students missed out on key religious experiences and milestone events such as communions and confirmations. Report 2's findings were similar to Bayley et al.'s (2022) longitudinal study in Ethiopia and Cameron et al.'s (2002) mixed-method study in Norway, where teachers feared long-term consequences to the social and emotional development of students with special educational needs. In the current study, more than two years post lockdown, students with learning difficulties were reportedly experiencing ongoing negative impacts on social and emotional development.

A significant factor in student wellbeing was the pandemic's continued impact on their families. In Report 2, staff members stated the need to report more concerns to TUSLA. They also noted that family breakups during lockdowns continued to affect students. Schools also noted supporting students due to increasing addiction and domestic problems within families. Internationally, caregivers of children with special educational needs reported more difficulty with confinement than those of children without SEN, which compounded their own mental health difficulties and

that of their children (Morgul et al., 2022). Dobosz, Gierczyk and Hornby's (2022) international systematic review exploring parent perspectives on COVID-19's impact found a relationship between parental stress levels and the behaviour of children with additional needs: increased stress correlated with increased behavioural difficulties. They also reported that negative effects on parent and child wellbeing could be attributed to balancing homeschooling and parental work, home-school relationships and a lack of support services. In the US, Northrup et al. (2022) surveyed caregivers (n=249) of children with ID and found nearly 50 per cent reported feeling anxious with almost 25 per cent reported feeling depressed. More than half of participants reported decreased social support, and a fifth cited employment disruptions and decreased access to food. In Hong Kong, Tso et al. (2022) explored COVID-19's impact on the mental health and risk of maltreatment of children with special educational needs in the home. They concluded that this group, especially those with mental health difficulties, were at greater risk. The study compared its findings with pre-COVID-19 data and found a significant rise in psychological aggression and physical assault towards them. Of concern, 80 per cent of children with special educational needs (n=417) who completed the survey reported being the victim of psychological aggression and 20 per cent reported severe physical assault at home. Researchers suggested that higher levels of parental stress contributed to this (Tso et al., 2022). Collectively, these data suggest many families of children with learning difficulties, as well as the children themselves, continue to feel the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings highlight the need to consider the family system in the context of continued multiagency support for both children and their parents/families.

7.3 Ongoing Impact on Student Engagement and Learning

Report 2 findings show staff, parents and students reporting a rise in appreciation and enthusiasm for school and that for most students with learning difficulties a return to in-person schooling was welcome. As for the continued impact on their engagement and learning, over half of staff reported 'negative impacts' for these students in primary (53 per cent) and post-primary (55 per cent), with only 27 per cent stating that for those in special schools. In special school interviews, teachers noted it was more difficult to assess the academic learning loss, whereas the loss in social development and life skills was more evident. A majority of school staff reported lasting negative impacts on literacy and numeracy skills of students with additional needs in primary (56 per cent literacy; 62 per cent numeracy) and post-primary (53 per cent literacy; 63 per cent numeracy). Relatively fewer staff from special schools reported such effects (46 per cent literacy; 48 per cent numeracy), but still higher than those working with students without SEN in primary (37 per cent literacy; 38 per cent numeracy). This aligns with international research suggesting that students with educational needs experienced more learning loss due to closures. Simpson and Adams (2022) investigated their impact on autistic student learning in Australia. Of the 180 parents who completed surveys, 42 per cent reported negative impacts on their child's learning progress. They also noted that students were less engaged than previously and had regressed in some areas of learning.

Large-scale national assessments such as PISA (OECD, 2022) showed minor declines in Irish student performance in maths and English. PISA scores from 5,569 students from 170 schools reported Ireland's above-average scores in maths, reading and science compared to other OECD countries. However, maths performance in 2022 was lower than in 2018, while reading remained stable and science improved. In addition, the NAMER 2021 tests indicated stable performance in

English and maths since 2014 despite COVID-19 disruptions to learning. The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019 also showed consistency in Ireland's general academic performance for children. However, these studies primarily provide a general overview of achievement within a particular curricular area and do not report the impact on children with special educational needs. Nearly all Report 2 participants described students missing out on learning due to school closures. However, the continued impact of these lost learning opportunities was not evident for all students. Those who had parental support during closures were reported to be faring better academically as were those who found online learning efficacious.

In relation to students with learning difficulties 'catching up', 82 per cent of post-primary schools reported they were 'very behind' or 'slightly behind'(76 per cent primary; 59 per cent special school) . Similarly, a majority (71 per cent) of post-primary staff working with students without SEN reported them being 'very behind' or 'slightly behind' and 60 per cent of primary students without SEN selected 'almost caught up' or 'completely caught up'. In an international systematic review of 11 papers on parental perspectives of the pandemic's continuing impact on the learning of students with additional needs, Dobosz et al., (2022) reported parents believing their child's learning and engagement was negatively affected by school closures and this was ongoing; they highlighted the need for more detailed guidance and support for parents for potential future closures. Some teachers in Report 2 noted some students lacked the literacy and numeracy skills expected for their ability and age. Some, they noted, might never make up what they had missed academically during closures as their learning had regressed to the extent it was unlikely they would catch up given the resources and time available. Some primary teachers noted that some students' fine motor skills were not at the level expected for their age group, with a few noting that more were entering primary school without the ability to hold a pencil or a crayon due to the pandemic-associated rise in technology use.

A number of contributory factors made students with special educational needs more susceptible to learning loss than those without and these were compounded by experiences during and post school closures. Students in Ireland were more at risk than other European countries as, at more than 18 weeks, the State had one of the longest closures (Blasko et al., 2023). Additionally, students with learning difficulties were more likely to experience learning loss and have lower academic attainment when compared with children without pre closures (Parson & Platt, 2016). Children with additional needs were very dependent on parent/carer support with online learning (Winter et al., 2022), they experienced more challenges at home during lockdown (Dobosz et al., 2022; Morgul et al., 2022) and had less access to vital supports and resources (Bakaneine et al., 2022). They also experienced reduced or absence of external multidisciplinary supports and services, both during lockdown and when they returned to school (e.g. Baten et al., 2022; Harkins et al., 2022), a concern which is reportedly ongoing based on findings from the current study. Online learning during COVID-19 was not always inclusive or designed to meet student needs (Baten et al., 2022; Bellacicco et al., 2022). In addition, the potential negative psychological effects on learners, such as their self-beliefs and self-esteem as well as their learning styles and attention and concentration, also need to be considered.

In interviews students noted the continued impact on their learning due to missed academic learning experiences, also noted by their parents and teachers. Many said they felt they had missed out on opportunities to learn and wondered what their level of proficiency would be had the lockdowns not happened. A few participants spoke of students lacking academic confidence and having poor perceptions of their abilities. The experiences of missed learning opportunities and academic learning loss may have significant long-term consequences for learners, as the teachers suggested they might not have the time to catch up. The potential psychological effects of these experiences must be considered, for example, the role and consequences of self-efficacy in learning (Bandura, 1978) and the impact of one's sense of achievement on wellbeing (Seligman, 2011) are well documented.

Many staff noted parental support during school closures was paramount to learning and engagement. Since schools reopened it was evident that students who received assistance with home learning did better in academic attainment. A study by Shaw and Shaw (2023) investigated the views of parents of students with special educational needs in the UK (n=141) in March-June 2020 and January-March 2021. The results indicated that their parents were challenged during this time and found it difficult to educate their children at home. The authors outlined school recommendations including details on collaborating with parents to ensure their children achieved great equality and inclusivity during periods of remote educational provision. The important role of parents in SEN online distance learning was highlighted by Narzisi (2020) in Switzerland who found the parental presence was essential to assist students in knowing when to connect, open/close and use software for online classes, access the webcam, download and arrange learning materials, for monitoring their attention and progress during classes and when doing assignments. However, not all parents could assist their children sufficiently during this time (Abuhammad, 2020; Azouley, 2020). In their scoping review of 19 studies from ten countries, Bakaneine and colleagues (2022) highlighted that parental support in remote learning was vital to student engagement and learning. Parents reported students being ill-equipped to engage with online learning without sufficient parental assistance. However, parents/carers of students with educational needs may have struggled more than those without. In a systematic review, Dobosz et al. (2022) reported that these parents/carers struggled more and experienced higher levels of stress. They also did not perceive themselves as having the knowledge and skills required to provide special educational support to their children. Similarly, Morgul et al. (2022) found these parents/carers of children with special educational needs in the UK were more likely to experience stress and mental health difficulties than those whose children had no SEN. Student attention and concentration was reported as an important contributory factor in engagement and learning. In surveys, staff reported lasting negative impacts on student attention and concentration across the three types of schools (57 per cent in primary; 66 per cent in post-primary; and 52 per cent in special schools). Similarly, 62 per cent reported negative impacts on post-primary students without SEN. In contrast, only 43 per cent of primary staff reported negative impacts for their students without SEN. A substantial proportion of participants selected 'mixed impacts', ranging from 28 per cent for post-primary students with SEN to 41 per cent for primary students without. In interviews, staff noted that students at times exhibited shorter attention spans and seemed not to have the same resilience or ability for concentration in class. Difficulty in sustaining attention was more evident when they first returned and this gradually improved. The potential role of attention and concentration within the ongoing learning loss reported by school staff and students themselves is a matter that requires consideration and support as it is, according to an international systematic review by Zhong and Yu (2021), arguably one of the most important aspects of learning. Indeed, it has been suggested that inattention may render the student 'unavailable' to learn (Silver, 1990).

Another important factor in the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on student engagement and learning is school attendance post school closures. When asked if there was a difference in student attendance since the start of the pandemic, more post-primary schools reported 'lower attendance' for children with SEN (53 per cent) and those without (55 per cent) and compared to primary school participants (27 per cent for SEN; 32 per cent for non-SEN) and special schools (35 per cent). About a third (37 per cent) of special schools reported 'no change' or 'unsure'. Interestingly a quarter of participants (ranging from 24 per cent for non-SEN in primary schools to 28 per cent for special schools) reported 'higher attendance' or 'a mixture of higher and lower attendance' across all student groups and school types. It is important to note that while media and research studies (Nathwani et al., 2021; Santibañez & Guarino. 2021) have reported increased disengagement, chronic absenteeism and school phobia since initial school closures, data in Report 2 did not suggest that persistent school attendance was an ongoing issue. Further exploration of this is required to ascertain why it may have been the case for schools included in this study.

In a UK qualitative study with parents and educational professionals, McDonald et al. (2022) found contributory factors to post-pandemic attendance included COVID-related anxiety, difficulty adapting to new school routines, poor home-school communication and concerns about academic catch-up. They emphasised the need for families and schools to work closely together and recommended a need for early intervention, rebuilding parent-school relationships, peer support for parents and improving special educational provision. Resources for learners who need learning support is an important factor for both Irish schools post-COVID and other educational systems as reported by research in the US (Harkins et al., 2022) and Norway (Cameron et al., 2022).

7.4 Ongoing Impact on Provision and Supports

When asked about changes to pedagogy following school closures, many interviewees reported a system-wide prioritisation and shift away from academics to mental health and wellbeing. As a result of COVID-19, staff said some students needed more support for wellbeing and ability to interact with other children, sustain attention in class and the general ability to manage school life rather than for academics. Some reported a shift to a more pastoral role, assuming a more caring and counselling function. This was similar to the findings of Boddison and Curran (2022) whose national UK survey of 1,022 special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) found they believed prioritising mental health and wellbeing was paramount for students with special educational needs in all settings and phases of education.

In the present study, the staff survey indicated that the greatest long-term impact of the pandemic on teaching and pedagogy was predominantly a continued negative effect on student and staff wellbeing (39 per cent), continued increase in ICT use (post-primary 29 per cent; primary 18 per cent; special schools 19 per cent) and ongoing gaps in student learning and attainment (primary 31 per cent; post-primary 24 per cent; special schools 7 per cent). While initially there was no pressure to catch up academically, as COVID-19-related issues subsided the pressure increased. This was evident for students in examination years, e.g. Junior and Leaving Certificates. The pressure to catch up was reported least of all in special schools with teachers citing a primary emphasis on wellbeing and life skills as opposed to academics.

International research has consistently found lockdown had negative impacts on the wellbeing of children with special educational needs (Morgul et al., 2022; Northrup et al., 2022) and/or on their return to school (Poza & Letzel-Alt, 2022). Report 2 findings demonstrate that this remains an ongoing issue for students, their families and for schools. While it can be argued that teaching pedagogy has long been understood to include a focus on wellbeing within the process of learning (Noddings' 2010, 2011, 2013 pedagogies of care), findings in this study detail a system-led shift in focus from academics to wellbeing. While teachers may be undertaking such new roles, prior research suggests they might feel unprepared or uncertain on how best to support students, particularly on mental health issues. As such, teachers may require support with this shift in focus (e.g. training, guidance and external support services) to sustain student wellbeing (Froese-Germain & Riel, 2012). Teachers' own wellbeing might have been affected by pandemic measures and might also need to be considered (Ryan et al., 2023).

In interviews, staff and students spoke of the continuation of ICT use as a tool to support in-person learning. However, reports on its use and efficacy varied between participants and school sectors. Some students reported it useful to access notes and homework outside the classroom while others said it was confusing at times, difficult to access and could lead to more work. Post-primary students were reportedly continuing to use digital technologies whereas primary and special schools largely reported having discarded remote online learning practices. Parmigiani et al (2021) investigated the views of 785 teachers on ICT's efficiency in special education in Italy and found that at times it did not suit all students. Instead, it was important to ensure e-inclusion by creating personalised interactive activities for students with asynchronous and synchronous tasks in small groups as well as individually. The authors highlighted the importance of family relationships and having access to suitable devices in ICT use. In Belgium, Baten et al.'s (2022) study of parents suggests that online teaching methods were not appropriate for their children with special educational needs. Similarly, Bellacicco et al.'s (2022) survey of Italian teachers suggests an ineffective reliance on didactic teaching along with a lack of an individualised approach to learning. It may be that ICT methods developed and/or used by teachers during lockdown were not as effective for students with additional learning needs.

Teachers reported having to adapt their pedagogical practices to address learning gaps and meet some student needs. They found some students were not where they might have been in their literacy, numeracy and fine motor skills due to school closures. Findings support prior international research with parents/carers (Simpson & Adams, 2022) and teachers (Donnelly et al., 2022) suggesting those with special educational needs were particularly at risk around learning loss and being academically 'less ready' than their non-SEN peers. In Iran, Sedaghati et al. (2021) investigated the impact of school closures on the motor skills of 30 boys with intellectual disabilities (ID). Their findings indicate that they were detrimental to the fine motor skills of inactive children with ID and that for more physically active children the effects were less negative. The authors findings highlight the importance of support in developing fine motor skills for students. Report 2 findings add to understanding the pandemic's effects as they demonstrate that, more than two years post school closures, the negative impacts on learning and development for all children, including those with special educational needs, were ongoing. Staff partly attributed differences in the academic attainment gaps evident between some students to a difference in level and efficacy of parental support. This was similar to findings of Grewinig et al (2021) who surveyed 1,099 parents in Germany before and during lockdown

and found the reduction in learning was more significant for students for whom academics was more challenging. In special school interviews, gaps in academic learning were reported as less evident and this was attributed to difficulties in measuring academic attainment in this setting. Similarly, in the special school principal survey, gaps in student learning and attainment were reported by 7 per cent compared to primary (31 per cent) and post-primary (24 per cent). Parsons and Platt (2016) evaluated the academic progress of children with special educational needs across England, by drawing on large-scale nationally representative longitudinal data from the Millennium Cohort Study, and administrative records of pupil attainment. It was found that those with special educational needs made less academic progress than their peers without SEN which may explain why learning loss was cited less in special schools in Report 2.

An important factor in student and school support strongly articulated by staff and parents was the continued impact of waiting lists for accessing external support services. While waitlists were an issue pre-COVID-19, this was exacerbated by the suspension of some services during lockdown and lengthening waiting lists since schools reopened. There were many reports of long waitlists as well as situations where schools were not getting support from external agencies, e.g. the NCSE and NEPS, during and post pandemic. Staff highlighted that more students transitioned to post-primary without having their needs assessed which affected resources and schools' ability to respond to their specific needs. This has been noted internationally, for example the findings from Harkins et al. (2022) who examined the views of 78 caregivers of students with additional needs in the US. Of these, 32 per cent reported their child was not receiving the educational services outlined in their individualised education programmes. It was noted that participants saw students experiencing a reduction in opportunities to engage socially with peers as well as a lack of motivation to engage in studies. In addition, the qualitative study conducted by Cameron et al. (2022) in Norway, found teachers (n=128) and students (n=6) believed there were gaps in learning for students due to service suspensions during lockdowns. These findings echo findings from Report 2 with participants across all groups and settings reporting students experiencing challenges in accessing services with long waitlists for assessments and support from multidisciplinary services.

7.5 Summary

The findings of this study include a comprehensive range of data from the perspectives of staff, parents and students on the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the engagement and wellbeing of students with special educational needs. While school responses to students in general has been well-documented in other research, the experiences of those with learning difficulties offer unique insights. Report 2 findings indicate a relatively consistent and continued negative impact on academic learning outcomes for some but not all students. These adverse effects were more evident for those who had no parental support with learning at home during lockdown and those for whom online learning is not suitable. The impact on wellbeing was most evident for students with ongoing social anxiety, challenges with self-regulation and interpersonal relationship difficulties within the school setting. Staff spoke of having to continue to adapt their teaching practices to address gaps in learning and of taking on a more caring and counselling role in support of student wellbeing. Across all settings the findings indicate that access to assessment and support services has been increasingly difficult since lockdown.

Overall, while most participants said the impact of the school closures was fading, for some students the consequences for their academic attainment and socio-emotional wellbeing were still evident and it was unclear if this would dissipate over time. Report 2 findings make a significant contribution to informing policy and practice at a national departmental and school level.

7.6 Implications for Policy and Practice

The report of the first phase of this study, The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Education of Children with Special Educational Needs[6], highlighted the significant challenges faced by students with special educational needs (SEN) and their families during school closures. Key findings emphasised the necessity for enhanced support from educational and healthcare systems during any future closures. It advocated for targeted interventions that prioritise communication and flexibility, underscoring the crucial role schools play as the primary support for many families. Participants revealed limited access to external support and resources, indicating that without sustained assistance during closures, students needing learning supports are at risk of falling behind. In detailing the pandemics adverse effects, the first study revealed that loss of learning time negatively impacted academic and personal development for these students. Issues like timely assessments and insufficient special needs assistant (SNA) allocations were noted, alongside a backlog in allied healthcare services. To mitigate these challenges in potential future closures, the report suggests implementing additional instructional hours, synchronous online classes and improved bi-directional communication between schools, students and families. These measures may help bridge learning gaps exacerbated by the pandemic. Student wellbeing of students with SEN was also significantly affected due to social isolation and limited peer interaction during closures. The report stressed the importance of fostering peer-to-peer relationships and enhancing communication between teachers and students to support their socio-emotional needs. Furthermore, it acknowledged that certain groups, particularly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, faced exacerbated educational barriers that needed to be addressed, such as access to technology and instructional support at home. Parents expressed a desire for more communication with schools on their children's progress and greater guidance on supporting their learning. Moving forward, the study recommends planning for inclusivity and support systems to enhance educational resilience during any future disruptions.

Following on from the first report, Report 2 explores lessons learnt about the pandemic's effects on the ongoing wellbeing and learning of students with learning difficulties. They appear to have been significantly more affected than students without SEN. They were also reportedly much more dependent on family and systemic school and external support supports to make up for the impact on wellbeing and learning and engagement. Key salient implications for policy and practice that emerged from the current report are outlined below, along with a cross-reference to findings from the first report from the study on the impact of school closures for children with special educational needs.

6 Available on the NCSE website.

Learning and Engagement: Ongoing Gaps in Academic Attainment

Nearly all participants reported that students missed out on learning due to school closures. However, the continued impact of these missed learning opportunities differed. For example, students with sufficient parental/carer support in their learning were reported to be faring better academically. In addition, those who could engage and learn via online learning fared better than those who could not. Some school staff noted it might be impossible for some students to catch up given the lack of time and resources. Similarly, some students noted they felt they had missed out on opportunities to learn and were left wondering where they would be academically had lockdown not happened. Students across all school sectors who were chiefly affected should have additional targeted interventions to support specific learning and developmental needs.

Increased Use of Technology

While the pandemic resulted in greater flexibility and accessibility in teaching and learning methods along with increased integration of educational technology to support diverse learning need, teaching methods developed during the pandemic do not appear to have been as effective for all students with special educational needs. For the parents of those attending special schools, the loss of educational and therapeutic interventions added a further layer of complexity unique to these children. The research highlights the need for effective, feasible tools to help promote student engagement using online or remote technologies. A focus on Universal Design for Learning principles to promote and embed inclusive pedagogies for all learners including those with additional needs is essential.

Increased Home-School Communication and Supports

While the pandemic contributed to strengthened home-school relationships and deepened staff understanding of student needs and experiences that resulted in improved bi-directional channels for regular updates and feedback between parents and teachers, the findings indicated that parents of children with special educational needs were particularly challenged during this time and found it difficult to support their learning. It is essential that there is increased co-ordinated, systemic support for the whole family, including support with homeschooling and the financial and mental health support needed to assist these students .A focus on modes of support is essential for parents to ensure their children with learning difficulties achieve greater equality and inclusivity during periods of remote educational provision. In addition, families of children with these needs require targeted home-school communication and supports to help them respond to additional challenges including online learning.

Multi-Disciplinary Team School-Based Support

The impact of the pandemic and school closures on wellbeing and learning was widely reported across all school settings and by all participants, with consistent accounts of negative impacts on some students' wellbeing and engagement and learning. Although the findings indicate a gradual improvement in wellbeing in the post closure years, some students were still experiencing mental health difficulties at the time of this study. Those with special educational needs appear to have been especially at risk in terms of negative effects on wellbeing with the welfare of those with existing mental health difficulties and/or behavioural difficulties being most affected. The evidence suggests that these experiences must be understood holistically in the context of their family system. Report 2's findings reveal that the pandemic exacerbated and continued to affect access to support services, with participants across all settings reporting delays in accessing key services and supports (e.g. access to occupational therapy and/or psychology) necessary for the educational and wellbeing support of students with educational needs. Long waitlists were reported as barriers to supporting wellbeing. Support for the socio-emotional wellbeing of students is a priority with more co-ordinated multidisciplinary support from external agencies necessary, for example that provided by the Educational Therapy Support Service or the North East Inner City Multi-Disciplinary Team (NEIC MDT) which delivers a high-quality, collaborative, school-based service across the disciplines of occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, and psychology.

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An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council
for Special Education

Appendices

Appendix 1. Principal Survey

Principal Characteristics

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Post-primary & Special	Gender	Are you	1 = Male 2 = Female 3 = Non-binary 4 = Other	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Post-primary & Special	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	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Post-primary & Special	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]	Multiple Choice – Single Answer

Principal characteristics *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Post-primary & Special	Special needs qualifications	Please indicate your highest level of qualification in working with children with special needs	1 = No Qualification 2 = One or More Modules or Classes 3 = Certificate 4 = Diploma 5 = Masters' Degree 6 = PhD or Doctorate	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Post-primary & Special	Ed Technologies	Please indicate your highest level of qualification in digital/educational technologies	1 = No Qualification 2 = One or More Modules or Classes 3 = Certificate 4 = Diploma 5 = Masters' Degree 6 = PhD or Doctorate	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Only Special	Special school type	What type of special school is your 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 = SEBD Social, Emotional, and Behavioural difficulties School 7 = Other (please specify)	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Post-primary & Special	Roll size	What is the approximate total number of students in your school?	[write in]	Text Entry

Principal characteristics *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Post-primary & Special	SET staffing	How many special education teachers work in your school?	[write in]	Text Entry
Post-primary & Special	SNA staffing	How many special needs assistants work in your school?	[write in]	Text Entry
Post-primary & Special	School tiers	What sectors school tiers does your school provide for? (Please tick all that apply).	1 = Primary 2 = Junior Cycle or Equivalent 3 = Senior Cycle or Equivalent	Multiple Choice – Tick boxes
Post-primary & Special	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) '	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Post-primary & Special	DEIS classification	How is your school classified?	1 = Non DEIS 2 = DEIS Band 1 3 = DEIS Band 2 4 = DEIS Rural	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Post-primary & Special	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	Multiple Choice – Single Answer

Principal characteristics *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Only Post-Primary	Minority group prevalence	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) Children who are immigrants or with migrant background Children who are refugees Children from the Travelling community Children who are not proficient in the language of instruction and whose mother tongue is not English/Irish Children supported by SET teacher Exceptionally able students Children who are homeless Children on reduced timetables Children from economically disadvantaged homes	1 = None 2 = Less than 5% 3 = 5-10 % 4 = 11-25% 5 = 26-40% 6 = More than 40%	Matrix Table
	Refugee Children	How many ___ are in your school? Ukrainian children Other refugee children	Text Entry Text Entry	Text Entry

Principal characteristics *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Post-primary & Special	Wellbeing Programmes	Schools use different ways of providing personal and social support to students. Please indicate whether or not your school uses any of the following: Weaving Wellbeing (1) Nurture Groups (2) Incredible Years (3) Roots of Empathy (4) Zippy's Friends (5) Friends for Life (6)	1 = Yes 2 = No	Matrix Table

Principal characteristics *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Post-primary & Special	School resources	How would you rate the following resources in your school? Instructional materials (for example textbooks) Supplies (for example paper, pencils, etc.) School buildings and grounds Heating and lighting systems Instructional space (for example classrooms) Technologically competent staff Audiovisual resources Computer technology for teaching and learning Access to SNA support Assistive technology for students with SEN Specialist break time facilities for students with SEN Assessments for SEN Resources for SEN Quiet room/space for students with SEN Sensory room/space for students with SEN	1 = Do Not Have This 2 = Poor Quality/Access 3 = Moderate Quality/Access 4 = Good Quality/Access 5 = Excellent Quality/Access	Matrix Table

COVID-19

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Only Special	Special School SEN Note	Please note that some of the following questions will ask you about students with SEN. These questions have been written for both mainstream and special schools. When we say students with SEN, you can interpret this as all students in your special school.		Text
Post-primary & Special	Student Type Filter	Do you have any of the following student types in your school? (Please click all that apply) students with SEN students without SEN	1 = Yes 2 = No	Matrix Table
Post-primary & Special	Impact on learning	To what extent do you feel the learning of students ... continues to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? students with SEN students without SEN	1 = No Impact 2 = Negative Impact 3 = Mixed Impacts 4 = Positive Impact 5 = Unsure	Multiple Choice – Single Answer

COVID-19 *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Only Post-primary	Learning Catch-up	To what extent do you think that students … have caught up in terms of their learning since schools reopened in Autumn 2021? (By caught up, we mean understanding and covering the material expected for their class.) students with SEN students without SEN	They are: 1 = Very Behind 2 = Slightly Behind 3 = Almost Caught Up 4 = Completely Caught Up	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Only Post-primary	Impact on Wellbeing	To what extent do you feel the wellbeing of students ….. continues to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? students with SEN students without SEN	1 = No Impact 2 = Negative Impact 3 = Mixed Impacts 4 = Positive Impact 5 = Unsure	Multiple Choice – Single Answer

COVID-19 *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Post-primary & Special	Impact on wellbeing – SEN type	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? Specific learning need (e.g. dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia) Physical disability Deaf/hard of hearing Blind/visual impairment Mild general learning disability Moderate general learning disability Severe and profound general learning disability Autism Specific speech and language disorder Emotional/behavioural problems Severe emotional/behavioural problems	1 = No Impact 2 = Negative Impact 3 = Mixed Impacts 4 = Positive Impact 5 = Unsure 6 = NA – I do not work with any students with this	Matrix Table

COVID-19 *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Only Post-primary	Specific Impacts 1 – SEN	Do you see a lasting impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on any of the following areas for students **without SEN**? To what extent? 1. Behavioural Issues 2. Emotional Regulation 3. Attention/Concentration 4. Social Skills 5. Literacy Skills 6. Numeracy Skills 7. Enjoyment of School	1 = No Impact 2 = Negative Impact 3 = Mixed Impacts 4 = Positive Impact 5 = Unsure 6 = I do not work with students without SEN	Matrix Table
Post-primary & Special	Specific Impacts 2 – SEN	Do you see a lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on any of the following areas for **students with SEN**? To what extent?To what extent?' 1. Behavioural Issues 2. Emotional Regulation 3. Attention/Concentration 4. Social Skills 5. Literacy Skills 6. Numeracy Skills 7. Enjoyment of School	1 = No Impact 2 = Negative Impact 3 = Mixed Impacts 4 = Positive Impact 5 = Unsure	Matrix Table

COVID-19 *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Only Post-primary	Attendance after school closures	Have you noticed a continued difference in the attendance of students … since the start of the pandemic? Please describe this change. Students with SEN Students without SEN	1 = No Change 2 = Lower Attendance 3 = Higher Attendance 4 = Mixed – Higher and Lower Attendance 5 = Unsure	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Post-primary & Special	Staff shortages	How often have staff shortages been an issue for you in the current school year?	1 = Never 2 = Rarely 3 = Occasionally 4 = Frequently 5 = Very Frequently	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Post-primary & Special	Impact of staff shortages	Has there been an impact on provision for students with SEN due to staff shortages in the current school year?	1 = Reduced Provision 2 = No Impact 3 = Increased Provision 4 = Unsure	Multiple Choice – Single Answer

COVID-19 *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Post-primary & Special	Opinion on Closures	Looking back at 2020 and 2021, how do you feel now about the school closures? The closures were the best solution at the time The closures were needed but could have been shorter in duration Alternative measures to closures could have been implemented	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Unsure 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree	Matrix Table
Post-primary & Special	Pedagogy Impacts	Thinking about the current school year, what are the three greatest long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching practice/ pedagogy in your school?	1 = Enter Text 2 = Enter Text 3 = Enter Text	Form Field
Post-primary & Special	Learning Impacts	Thinking about the current school year, what are the three greatest long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning of students with SEN in your school?	1 = Enter Text 2 = Enter Text 3 = Enter Text	Form Field
Post-primary & Special	Wellbeing Impacts	Thinking about the current school year, what are the three greatest long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of students with SEN in your school?	1 = Enter Text 2 = Enter Text 3 = Enter Text	Form Field

Pedagogy & Curriculum

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Post-primary & Special	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. Our staff were competent in digital technology before the Covid-19 pandemic. Our staff became more competent in digital technology in during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the last school closure, we have found new ways to use digital technology in the classroom. 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	Matrix Table

Appendix 2. School Staff Survey

Staff Characteristics

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Post-primary & Special	Gender	Are you	1 = Male 2 = Female 3 = Non-binary 4 = Other	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Post-primary & Special	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	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Post-primary & Special	School Role	What is your role in the school? If you hold more than one role, please tick all that apply.	1 = Mainstream/Subject Teacher 2 = Special Education Teacher 3 = Special Needs Coordinator (SENCO) 4 = Special Needs Assistant (SNA) 5 = Year Head 6 = Deputy Principal 7 = Other (Please specify)	Multiple Choice – Tick boxes

Staff characteristics *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Only post-Primary	Year Groups – Post-primary	Which year groups do you work with in each of your roles? (Carry forward choices from Q 4.4)	1 = 1st Year 2 = 2nd Year 3 = 3rd Year 4 = 4th Year *TY) 5 = 5th Year 6 = 6th Year 7 = Other	Multiple Choice – Tick boxes
Only Special	Year Groups – Special	Which age groups do you work with in each of your roles? (Carry forward choices from Q 4.4)	1 = Junior Infants 2 = Senior Infants 3 = 1st Class 4 = 2nd Class 5 = 3rd Class 6 = 4th Class 7 = 5th Class 8 = 6th Class 9 = 1st Year 10 = 2nd Year 11 = 3rd Year 12 = 4th Year *TY) 13 = 5th Year 14 = 6th Year 15 = Other	Form Field

Staff characteristics *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Post-primary & Special	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]	Multiple Choice – Single Answer

COVID-19

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Only Special	Special School SEN Note	Please note that some of the following questions will ask you about students with SEN. These questions have been written for both mainstream and special schools. When we say students with SEN, you can interpret this as all students in your special school.		Text
Post-primary & Special	Digital Education	Please indicated the degree to which you agree with each statement: I am competent in using digital forms of teaching and learning. I was competent in digital technology before the Covid-19 pandemic. I became more competent in digital technology during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the last school closure, I have found new ways to use digital technology in the classroom. I am 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	Matrix Table
Post-primary & Special	Student Type Filter	Do you work with any of the following types of students? (Please click all that apply)	1 = Students without SEN 2 = Students with SEN	Matrix Table

COVID-19 *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Post-primary & Special	Impact on learning	To what extent do you feel the learning of children... continues to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? students with SEN students without SEN	1 = No Impact 2 = Negative Impact 3 = Mixed Impacts 4 = Positive Impact 5 = Unsure	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Only Post-primary	Learning Catch-up	To what extent do you think that children... have caught up in terms of their learning since schools reopened in autumn 2021? (By caught up, we mean understanding and covering the material expected for their class.) students with SEN students without SEN	They Are: 1 = Very Behind 2 = Slightly Behind 3 = Almost Caught Up 4 = Completely Caught Up	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Only Post-primary	Impact on Wellbeing	To what extent do you feel the wellbeing of children... continues to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? students with SEN students without SEN	1 = No Impact 2 = Negative Impact 3 = Mixed Impacts 4 = Positive Impact 5 = Unsure	Multiple Choice – Single Answer

COVID-19 *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Post-primary & Special	Impact on wellbeing – SEN type	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? (If you do not work with children with this type of SEN, select NA) Specific learning need (e.g. dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia) Physical disability Deaf/hard of hearing Blind/visual impairment Mild general learning disability Moderate general learning disability Severe and profound general learning disability Autism Specific speech and language disorder Emotional/behavioural problems Severe emotional/behavioural problems	1 = No Impact 2 = Negative Impact 3 = Mixed Impacts 4 = Positive Impact 5 = Unsure 6 = NA	Matrix Table

COVID-19 *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Only Post-primary	Specific Impacts 1 – all	'Do you see a lasting impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on any of the following areas for students without SEN? To what extent?' 1. Behavioural Issues 2. Emotional Regulation 3. Attention/Concentration 4. Social Skills 5. Literacy Skills 6. Numeracy Skills 7. Enjoyment of School	1 = No Impact 2 = Negative Impact 3 = Mixed Impacts 4 = Positive Impact 5 = Unsure 6 = I do not work with students without SEN	Matrix Table
Post-primary & Special	Specific Impacts 2 – SEN	Do you see a lasting impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on any of the following areas for students with SEN? To what extent? 1. Behavioural Issues 2. Emotional regulation 3. Attention/Concentration 4. Social Skills 5. Literacy Skills 6. Numeracy Skills 7. Enjoyment of School	1 = No Impact 2 = Negative Impact 3 = Mixed Impacts 4 = Positive Impact 5 = Unsure	Matrix Table

COVID-19 *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Only Post-primary	Attendance after school closures	Have you noticed a continued difference in the attendance of children... since the start of the pandemic? Please describe this change. students with SEN students without SEN	1 = No Change 2 = Lower Attendance 3 = Higher Attendance 4 = Mixed – Higher and Lower Attendance 5 = Unsure	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Post-primary & Special	Staff shortages	How often have staff shortages been an issue for you in the current school year?	1 = Never 2 = Rarely 3 = Occasionally 4 = Frequently 5 = Very Frequently	Multiple Choice – Single Answer
Post-primary & Special	Impact of staff shortages	Has there been an impact on provision for students with SEN due to staff shortages in the current school year?	1 = Reduced Provision 2 = No Impact 3 = Increased Provision 4 = Unsure	Multiple Choice – Single Answer

COVID-19 *continued*

Question Allocation	Domain	Item	Response Format	Question Type
Post-primary & Special	Opinion on Closures	Looking back at 2020 and 2021, how do you feel now about the school closures? The closures were the best solution at the time The closures were needed but could have been shorter in duration Alternative measures to closures could have been implemented	1 = Strongly Agree 2 = Agree 3 = Unsure 4 = Disagree 5 = Strongly Disagree	Matrix Table
Post-primary & Special	Pedagogy Impacts	Thinking about the current school year, what are the three greatest long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching practice/ pedagogy in your school?	1 = Enter Text 2 = Enter Text 3 = Enter Text	Form Field
Post-primary & Special	Learning Impacts	Thinking about the current school year, what are the three greatest long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning of students with SEN in your school?	1 = Enter Text 2 = Enter Text 3 = Enter Text	Form Field
Post-primary & Special	Wellbeing Impacts	Thinking about the current school year, what are the three greatest long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of students with SEN in your school?	1 = Enter Text 2 = Enter Text 3 = Enter Text	Form Field

Appendix 3: Principal Interview Protocol

THEME	
1. Demographic Information & General Questions	What is your name?
	What is your role in the school?
	In general, how do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted upon students with SEN in your school?
2. Provision & Supports	Do you think that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted your understanding of inclusion in relation to the students with SEN in your school? How so?
	Do you think that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted your approaches to inclusion in relation to the students with SEN in your school? How so?
	How has the pandemic impacted your pedagogical practices regarding working with children with SEN in your school?
	Can you tell me about how well the school is supported by external services such as NEPS, HSE, etc? * Do you feel that the COVID-19 pandemic has had any impact on your school's access to these services?
	Do you feel that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed your role in the school in any way?
3. Engagement & Learning	Have you noticed any differences in how students with SEN are engaging with school now compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic?
	Do you feel that students with SEN were behind in their learning when they returned to school after the school closures? * Do you feel that they have caught up?
	Do you feel like there is a pressure in your school for students to catch up after the school closures?
	What are you and your school doing to address regression in learning for students with SEN who fell behind during the school closures?
	Is there anything you have not been able to do that you think students with SEN would benefit from to help them catch up in their learning?
	Do you feel like the students with SEN that you support/teach are prepared for their upcoming exams (Junior Cert/Leaving Cert)? * Do you feel like the school closures had any impact on their preparedness?

THEME	
4. Wellbeing	Do you think that the pandemic has had any effect on your relationship and the schools' relationship with parents of students with SEN?
	How do you think the pandemic has impacted on the wellbeing of students with SEN?
	Have you noticed any ways in which students with SEN's wellbeing are still being impacted by the pandemic?
	What supports does your school offer to support the wellbeing of students with SEN?
	Do you think the COVID-19 Pandemic has influenced your schools views and approaches to supporting the wellbeing of students with SEN?
	How do you think the students with SEN in your school feel about school? * Do they enjoy it? * Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic influenced these feelings in any way?
	Thinking about the students with SEN who you support, do you think many are happy to be back in school? Do you think any would prefer to still be at home?
Other	Has there been any change in the atmosphere of your school since COVID-19? How so?
	Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the transition year experience in your school?
	How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic impacted upon students with SEN's transition from primary to secondary school?

Appendix 4: Staff Interview Protocol

THEME	
1. Demographic Information & General Questions	What is your name?
	What is your role in the school?
	In general, how do you think the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted upon students with SEN in your school?
2. Provision & Supports	Do you think that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted your understanding of inclusion in relation to the students with SEN in your school? How so?
	Do you think that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted your approaches to inclusion in relation to the students with SEN in your school? How so?
	How has the pandemic impacted your pedagogical practices regarding working with children with SEN in your school?
	Can you tell me about how well the school is supported by external services such as NEPS, HSE, etc? * Do you feel that the COVID-19 pandemic has had any impact on your school's access to these services?
	Do you feel that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed your role in the school in any way?
3. Engagement & Learning	Have you noticed any differences in how students with SEN are engaging with school now compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic?
	Do you feel that students with SEN were behind in their learning when they returned to school after the school closures? * Do you feel that they have caught up?
	Do you feel like there is a pressure in your school for students to catch up after the school closures?
	What are you and your school doing to address regression in learning for students with SEN who fell behind during the school closures?
	Is there anything you have not been able to do that you feel like students with SEN would benefit from to help them became caught up in their learning?
	Do you feel like the students with SEN that you support/teach are prepared for their upcoming exams (Junior Cert/Leaving Cert)? * Do you feel like the school closures had any impact on their preparedness?

THEME	
4. Wellbeing	Do you think that the pandemic has had any effect on your relationship and the schools' relationship with parents of students with SEN?
	How do you think the pandemic has impacted on the wellbeing of students with SEN?
	Have you noticed any ways in which students with SEN's wellbeing are still being impacted by the pandemic?
	What supports does your school offer to support the wellbeing of students with SEN?
	Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced your schools views and approaches to supporting the wellbeing of students with SEN?
	How do you think the students with SEN in your school feel about school? * Do they enjoy it? * Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic influenced these feelings in any way?
	Thinking about the students with SEN who you support, do you think many are happy to be back in school? Do you think any would prefer to still be at home?
Other	Has there been any change in the atmosphere of your school since COVID-19? How so?
	Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the transition year experience in your school?
	How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic impacted upon students with SEN's transition from primary to secondary school?

Appendix 5: Parent Interview Protocol

THEME	
1. Demographic Information & General Questions	What is your name?
	What is the name of your child being interviewed?
	Can you briefly describe *Child's Name*'s experience learning remotely over the pandemic for me?
	In general, how do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted *Child's name*?
2. Provision & Supports	Do you feel that the support which *Child's Name* has received in school changed in any way due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
	How do you feel about *Child's Name*'s upcoming exams (Junior Cert or Leaving Cert)?
	Do you think the pandemic impacted upon his/her preparedness for these?
3. Engagement & Learning	Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced *Child's Name*'s attendance in school?
	Do you think that *Child's Name* feels any differently about school now compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic?
	Do you feel that *Child's Name* fell behind in their learning as a result of the school closures? * If so, do you feel that they have been able to catch up? * If still behind* – What do you think *Child's Name* needs to catch up on?
	What do you think *Child's Name* wants to do after they finish school? * Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic had any effect on this decision? How so?
4. Wellbeing	Do you think that the pandemic has had any impact on your relationship with *Child's Name*'s school? How so?
	How do you think *Child's name* has been feeling since returning to school after the school closures?
	Do you think *Child's name* is happy to be back in school or would they prefer to be at home?
	Have you noticed any changes in the way *Child's Name* interacts with their peers now compared to before the pandemic?
Other	Has there been any change in the atmosphere of *Child's Name*'s school since COVID-19? How so?
	Do you think there is an increase in pressure in the school to catch up on learning?
	Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic influenced *Child's Name* transition year experience?
	How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic impacted upon your transition from primary to secondary school?

Appendix 6: Student Interview Protocol

THEME	
1. Demographic Information & General Questions	What is your name?
	How old are you?
	Can you briefly describe your experience learning remotely over the pandemic for me?
	In general, how do you think you have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Provision & Supports	Do you feel that the support you have gotten in school has changed in any way due to the COVID-19 pandemic? How so?
	Have you noticed any changes in the way you are taught in school now compared to before the school closures?
	Is your school using more digital technology in the classroom?
	How do you feel about your teachers' ability to use digital technology?
	How do you feel about your own ability to use digital technology?
	Has your school kept any features from remote learning now that you are back in school?
	Were there any parts of remote learning that you wish your school had kept?
	How do you feel about upcoming exams (Junior Cert or Leaving Cert)? * Do you think the pandemic impacted upon your preparedness for these?
3. Engagement & Learning	Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced your attendance in school?
	Do you feel any differently about school and learning now compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic?
	What kind of student do you think you are? * Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted this?
	Have you noticed any differences in your ability to pay attention or concentrate in school now compared to before the school closures?
	Did you feel behind in your learning after the school closures? * Do you feel like you have caught up? * If feels behind* What do you think you need to catch up?
	Do you think there is an increase in pressure in the school to catch up on learning?
	What do you think you want to do after you finish school? * Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic had any effect on your thoughts/views on what you want to do after school?

THEME	
4. Wellbeing	How have you been feeling since you returned to school after the school closures?
	How do you feel being in the classroom environment?
	Are you happy to be back in school or would you rather be at home?
	How do you feel being around your peers again in the school environment?
	Have you noticed any changes in the way you interact with your peers now compared to before the school closures?
	Do you think your friendships have changed at all as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
	What emotions do you feel when you are in school? * Do you think you felt any differently before the school closures?
Other	Has there been any change in the atmosphere of your school since COVID-19? How so?
	Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic influenced your Transition Year Experience?
	How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic impacted upon your transition from primary to secondary school?

Appendix 7. CSL Wellbeing Measurement

Child and Adolescent Personal and Social Assessment of Wellbeing (Symonds et. al, 2022b)

Personal Dimension

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
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?					

Presented in CSL Child Workbook A & B (Symonds et. al, 2022a)

Appendix 8. CSL Academic Self-Concept Measurement

Self-Description Questionnaire (SDQ-I) (Marsh, 1990)

Academic Self-Concept

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
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 have always done well in my classwork.					
I'm no good when it comes to my classwork					

Presented in CSL Child Workbook A & B (Symonds et. al, 2022a)

Appendix 9. Descriptive Statistics for Wellbeing Measurement

Categories	Cohort B				Cohort A			
	2019		2021		2022		2022	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
No special need	4.01	0.62	4.06	0.56	4.00	0.59	4.02	0.64
Any special need	3.87	0.78	3.91	0.66	3.93	0.63	3.97	0.78
Physical, visual or hearing needs	3.81	0.81	3.97	0.59	4.00	0.62	4.06	0.71
Speech impairment	3.79	0.81	4.02	0.61	3.90	0.64	3.89	0.88
Autism	3.80	0.87	3.94	0.67	3.91	0.61	3.98	0.88
General learning disability	4.09	0.67	4.06	0.65	3.97	0.69	4.03	0.99
Specific learning difficulties	3.91	0.79	4.00	0.63	4.01	0.63	3.88	0.69
Emotional or behavioural challenges	3.77	0.90	3.72	0.75	3.81	0.68	3.91	0.93
Language needs	3.94	0.71	3.93	0.58	3.98	0.54	3.95	0.76

Appendix 10. Descriptive Statistics for Academic Self-Concept Measurement

Categories	Cohort B				Cohort A			
	2019		2021		2022		2022	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
No special need	3.59	0.69	3.42	0.62	3.45	0.65	3.51	0.66
Any special need	3.41	0.80	3.12	0.74	3.10	0.76	3.39	0.76
Physical, visual or hearing needs	3.24	0.84	3.11	0.68	3.13	0.64	3.57	0.85
Speech impairment	3.46	0.76	3.30	0.74	3.30	0.76	3.29	0.77
Autism	3.43	0.80	3.13	0.87	3.28	0.81	3.25	0.86
General learning disability	3.46	0.77	3.07	0.72	2.99	0.69	3.29	0.86
Specific learning difficulties	3.16	0.81	2.97	0.64	2.95	0.70	3.15	0.76
Emotional or behavioural challenges	3.35	0.84	3.06	0.79	3.03	0.85	3.32	0.81
Language needs	3.60	0.75	3.22	0.59	3.29	0.55	3.50	0.79

Appendix 11. Statistical Tests of Change in Wellbeing

Category	ANOVA			2019-2021		2021-2022		2019-2022	
	F	*df*	*p*	*Md*	*p*	*Md*	*p*	*Md*	*p*
No SEN	4.708	1.833	0.011	0.052	0.024	-0.051	0.006	0.002	1.000
SEN	1.765	1.817	0.175	0.051	0.793	-0.027	1.000	0.079	0.257
Physical, visual, hearing	3.857	2.000	0.024	0.181	0.275	0.062	1.000	0.243	0.032
Speech	3.414	1.640	0.047	0.277	0.032	0.114	0.535	0.163	0.619
Autism	1.044	1.659	0.345	0.159	0.525	-0.086	0.914	0.073	1.000
GLD	0.471	1.802	0.605	-0.075	1.000	0.009	1.000	-0.066	1.000
SLD	1.249	1.691	0.285	0.042	1.000	0.070	0.596	0.113	0.485
EBD	0.122	1.813	0.866	0.037	1.000	0.014	1.000	0.051	1.000
Language*	0.275	2.000	0.758	-0.079	1.000	0.033	1.000	-0.046	1.000

*Notes: Repeated measures ANOVA reported in the table. Greenhouse-Geisser results reported for tests of within subject effects for all categories unless indicated. *=Sphericity assumed. F=F-test, df=degrees of freedom, Md=mean difference, p=probability statistic.*

Appendix 12. Statistical Tests of Change in Academic Self-Concept

Category	ANOVA			2019-2021		2021-2022		2019-2022	
	F	*df*	*p*	*Md*	*p*	*Md*	*p*	*Md*	*p*
No SEN	34.962	1.854	0.000	-0.159	0.000	0.027	1.230	-0.132	0.000
SEN	21.493	1.873	0.000	-0.255	0.000	-0.028	0.496	-0.284	0.000
Physical, visual, hearing	1.328	1.728	0.268	-0.163	0.129	0.071	0.372	-0.093	0.418
Speech*	0.785	2.000	0.457	-0.137	0.217	0.053	0.105	-0.084	0.472
Autism*	2.379	2.000	0.098	-0.270	0.052	0.071	0.556	-0.199	0.129
GLD*	12.556	2.000	0.000	-0.353	0.000	-0.115	0.195	-0.468	0.000
SLD	9.438	1.792	0.000	-0.310	0.000	0.019	0.778	-0.291	0.002
EBD*	4.117	2.000	0.018	-0.216	0.070	-0.109	0.290	-0.325	0.011
Language	6.358	1.654	0.005	-0.414	0.004	0.113	0.209	-0.301	0.026

*Notes: Repeated measures ANOVA reported in the table. Greenhouse-Geisser results reported for tests of within subject effects for all categories unless indicated. *=Sphericity assumed. F=F-test, df=degrees of freedom, Md=mean difference, p=probability statistic.*

Appendix 13. Statistical Tests of Group Differences in Wellbeing

Cohort B	2019					
Category	*F*	*df*	*p*	*b**	*t*	*p*
SEN	14.49	2	0.000	-0.08	-3.67	0.000
Physical, visual, hearing	7.10	2	0.000	-0.06	-2.35	0.019
Speech	7.48	2	0.000	-0.07	-2.55	0.011
Autism	7.11	2	0.000	-0.06	-2.51	0.012
GLD	5.27	2	0.005	0.04	1.44	0.150
SLD	5.51	2	0.004	-0.04	-1.68	0.093
EBD	12.10	2	0.000	-0.09	-3.62	0.000
Language	3.64	2	0.026	-0.02	-0.61	0.544

Cohort B	2022					
Category	*F*	*df*	*p*	*b**	*t*	*p*
SEN	7.17	2	0.000	-0.05	-2.13	0.033
Physical, visual, hearing	4.54	2	0.011	-0.01	-0.21	0.837
Speech	4.71	2	0.009	-0.04	-1.66	0.098
Autism	4.55	2	0.011	-0.04	-1.51	0.133
GLD	4.10	2	0.017	-0.01	-0.58	0.563
SLD	4.77	2	0.009	0.00	0.11	0.912
EBD	9.61	2	0.000	-0.09	-3.54	0.000
Language	4.36	2	0.013	-0.01	-0.39	0.699

Cohort A	2022					
Category	*F*	*df*	*p*	*b**	*t*	*p*
SEN	0.78	2	0.457	-0.04	-1.24	0.215
Physical, visual, hearing	0.04	2	0.966	0.00	-0.13	0.896
Speech	2.67	2	0.070	-0.07	-2.31	0.021
Autism	0.29	2	0.749	-0.02	-0.75	0.454
GLD	0.00	2	0.997	0.00	0.02	0.978
SLD	0.33	2	0.791	-0.04	-1.25	0.211
EBD	2.78	2	0.063	-0.07	-2.35	0.019
Language	0.18	2	0.836	0.02	-0.56	0.576

Notes: Multiple linear regressions controlling for gender. F=F-test, df=degrees of freedom, p=probability statistic, b=standardised beta-weight, t=t-test.*

Appendix 14. Statistical Tests of Group Differences in Academic Self-Concept

Cohort B	2019					
Category	*F*	*df*	*p*	*b**	*t*	*p*
SEN	16.01	2	0.000	-0.12	-5.43	0.000
Physical, visual, hearing	11.57	2	0.000	-0.11	-4.44	0.000
Speech	2.83	2	0.059	-0.04	-1.71	0.084
Autism	2.73	2	0.066	-0.04	-1.61	0.107
GLD	3.16	2	0.043	-0.05	-1.83	0.068
SLD	26.49	2	0.000	-0.17	-7.13	0.000
EBD	7.91	2	0.000	-0.09	-3.66	0.000
Language	3.20	2	0.041	0.00	0.05	0.958

Cohort B	2022					
Category	*F*	*df*	*p*	*b**	*t*	*p*
SEN	31.59	2	0.000	-0.03	-1.21	0.225
Physical, visual, hearing	25.61	2	0.000	-0.01	-0.45	0.654
Speech	23.61	2	0.000	0.01	0.26	0.797
Autism	28.88	2	0.000	-0.05	-2.08	0.038
GLD	24.45	2	0.000	0.01	0.36	0.716
SLD	29.58	2	0.001	-0.03	-1.21	0.225
EBD	29.86	2	0.000	-0.05	-2.08	0.038
Language	19.38	2	0.000	0.04	1.47	0.142

Cohort A	2022					
Category	*F*	*df*	*p*	*b**	*t*	*p*
SEN	4.20	2	0.015	-0.06	-2.30	0.022
Physical, visual, hearing	1.02	2	0.359	0.01	0.17	0.863
Speech	2.93	2	0.054	-0.05	-1.18	0.076
Autism	6.39	2	0.002	-0.09	-3.12	0.002
GLD	2.03	2	0.132	-0.04	-1.20	0.232
SLD	5.19	2	0.006	-0.08	-2.73	0.006
EBD	5.30	2	0.005	-0.08	-2.90	0.004
Language	1.87	2	0.154	-0.01	-0.39	0.699

Notes: Multiple linear regressions controlling for gender. F=F-test, df=degrees of freedom, p=probability statistic, b=standardised beta-weight, t=t-test.*

Appendix 15: Interview Participant Details

School	Participant Type	Participant ID
Primary School – Autism Class (PS – AC)	Staff	PS1 – AC Teacher & Deputy Principal
		PS1 – AC Principal
		PS1 – AC SNA 1
		PS1 – AC SNA 2
		PS2 – AC Principal
		PS2 – AC ASD Class Teacher
		PS2 – AC SNA 1
		PS2 – AC SNA 2
	Parents	PS1 – AC P1 – Mother of Autistic Girl in 3rd Class with DCD
		PS1 – AC P2 – Mother of Autistic Boy in 6th Class
		PS1 – AC P3 – Mother of Boy in 4th Class with SB & Mild GLD
		PS1 – AC P4 – Father of Autistic Girl in 4th Class with EBD & Mild GLD
		PS2 – AC P1 – Mother of Autistic Boy in 4th Class
		PS2 – AC P2 – Mother of Autistic Boy in 5th Class with Mild GLD
		PS2 – AC P3 – Mother of Autistic Boy in 4th Class with Sensory Disability, EBD, & ODD
		PS2 – AC P4 – Mother of Autistic Girl in 3rd Class
	Students	PS1 – AC S1 – Autistic Girl in 3rd Class with DCD
		PS1 – AC S2 – Autistic Boy in 6th Class
		PS1 – AC S3 – Boy in 4th Class with SB & Mild GLD
		PS1 – AC S4 – Autistic Girl in 4th Class with EBD & Mild GLD
		PS2 – AC S1 – Autistic Boy in 4th Class
		PS2 – AC S2 – Autistic Boy in 5th Class with Mild GLD
		PS2 – AC S3 – Autistic Boy in 4th Class with Sensory Disability, EBD, & ODD
		PS2 – AC S4 – Autistic Girl in 3rd Class

School	Participant Type	Participant ID
Post-Primary School (PPS)	Staff	PPS1 Principal
		PPS2 Principal
		PPS Principal
		PPS1 SET 1
		PPS1 SET 2
		PPS1 SNA 1
		PPS1 SNA 2
		PPS2 Deputy Principal
		PPS2 SET
		PPS2 SET & Year Head
		PPS2 SNA 2
		PPS3 ASD Coordinator
		PPS3 Principal
		PPS3 SENCO
		PPS3 SET 1
		PPS3 SET 2
		PPS3 SNA 1
		PPS3 SNA 2
	Parents	PPS1 P1 – Mother of Autistic Boy in TY with ADHD & Dyslexia
		PPS1 P2 – Mother of Autistic Girl in TY with Dyslexia, Dyscalculia & DCD
		PPS1 P3 – Mother of Girl in 3rd Year with Speech and Language Difficulty & Mild GLD
		PPS1 P4 – Father of Girl in 5th Year with ADHD & Dyslexia
		PPS2 P1 – Mother of Boy in 5th Year with ADHD
		PPS2 P2 – Mother of Autistic Boy in 2nd Class
		PPS2 P3 – Mother of Girl in 6th Year with Dyslexia & Dyscalculia
		PPS2 P4 – Mother of Autistic Boy in 5th Year
		PPS3 P1 – Mother of Autistic Boy in 2nd Year with DCD
		PPS3 P2 – Mother of Boy in 6th Year with ABI, Physical Disability & Dyscalculia
		PPS3 P3 – Mother of Autistic Boy in TY with ADHD, Dyslexia & Dyscalculia

School	Participant Type	Participant ID
Post-Primary School (PPS) *continued*	Students	PPS1 S1 – Autistic Boy in TY with ADHD & Dyslexia
		PPS1 S2 – Autistic Girl in TY with Dyslexia, Dyscalculia & DCD
		PPS1 S3 – Girl in 3rd Year with Speech and Language Difficulty & Mild GLD
		PPS1 S4 – Girl in 5th Year with Dyslexia & ADHD
		PPS2 S1 – Boy in 5th Year with ADHD
		PPS2 S2 – Autistic Boy in 2nd Class
		PPS2 S3 – Girl in 6th Year with Dyslexia & Dyscalculia
		PPS2 S4 – Autistic Boy in 5th Year
		PPS3 S1 – Autistic Boy in 2nd Year with DCD
		PPS3 S2 – Boy in 6th Year with ABI, Physical Disability & Dyscalculia
		PPS3 S3 – Autistic Boy in TY with ADHD, Dyslexia & Dyscalculia
Special School (SS)	Staff	SS1 Principal
		SS1 SNA 1
		SS1 SNA 2
		SS1 Class Teacher 1
		SS1 Class Teacher 2
		SS2 Principal
		SS2 SET
		SS2 SNA 1
		SS2 SNA 2
		SS2 Class Teacher
	Parents	SS2 P1 – Mother of Autistic Girl in 2nd Year with Sensory Disability, EBD & Moderate GLD
		SS2 P2 – Mother of Autistic Boy in 6th Year with Speech & Language Difficulty, SPD & Moderate GLD
		SS2 P3 – Mother of Boy in 2nd Year with Speech & Language Difficulty & Mild GLD
		SS2 P4 – Mother of Girl in 6th Class with DS
		SS1 P1 – Mother of Student with SEN
		SS1 P2 – Mother of Student with SEN
		SS1 P3 – Mother of Student with SEN

School	Participant Type	Participant ID
CSL Data	Principals	Listed from CSL1 – Principal, to CSL 11 – Principal
	Teachers	Listed from CSL1 – Teacher, to CSL 13 – Teacher
		CSL1 – SET
		CSL2 – SET
		CSL1 – EAL
		CSL2 – EAL
	SNAS	Listed from CSL1 – SNA, to CSL11 – SNA

Appendix 16. Characteristics of Participants in Principal and School Staff Survey

Table 1. Characteristics of participants in principal survey and school staff survey

Characteristics	Frequency (percentage)	
	Principals, n=312	Non -principal staff, n=340
Type of school		
Primary schools	117 (38%)	62 (18%)
Post-primary schools	144 (46%)	243 (72%)
Special schools	51 (16%)	35 (10%)
Age of participants		
21-30	4 (1%)	53 (16%)
31-40	44 (15%)	89 (26%)
41-50	125 (41%)	126 (37%)
51-60	118 (38%)	63 (18%)
61-65	18 (6%)	6 (2%)
Over 65	1 (0.3%)	3 (1%)
Gender		
Male	110 (37%)	45 (14%)
Female	185 (63%)	269 (86%)
Non-binary	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Highest education level		
Teaching certificate or diploma	4 (1%)	27 (8%)
Bachelor's degree	53 (17%)	70 (21%)
Postgraduate diploma	85 (27%)	107 (33%)
Master's degree	161 (52%)	99 (30%)
Doctoral degree	9 (3%)	1 (0.3%)
Level 5 or 6 or 7 certificate	na	24 (7%)
Highest qualification in working with students with SEN		
None	115 (37%)	69 (20%)
One or more modules or classes	100 (32%)	74 (22%)
Certificate	15 (5%)	58 (17%)
Diploma	46 (15%)	112 (33%)
Master's degree	32 (10%)	24 (7%)
PhD or Doctorate	3 (1%)	1 (0.3%)

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