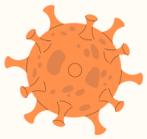




The Impact of COVID-19 on Junior Infants Pupils



COVID-19

The emergence of COVID-19 and the associated measures introduced to curb the spread of the virus had a significant impact on the lives of people in Ireland and across the world. While rates of serious illness in children and young people have been low, their lives have been significantly affected by restrictions imposed on society due to COVID-19.

Schools and other educational institutions closed for in-person learning in early March 2020, with some moving teaching online and others providing alternative forms of remote learning. Early Years Education settings also closed, but the option to provide online learning was not feasible for their young students, so the responsibility of providing early learning opportunities for young children fell predominantly onto families. Even when schools reopened for in-person learning, they continued to experience interruptions in learning due to further lockdowns, and COVID-19 related staff and student absences across 2020, 2021 and into 2022. Social distancing regulations, classroom “pods”, and mask wearing further changed the landscape of education in Ireland for many young children.

EDUCATION INEQUALITY



Research has consistently shown inequalities in educational attainment based on socio-economic background. The Growing up in Ireland study found that these inequalities can be seen even when children start school. Differences in vocabulary test scores, a less positive disposition towards school, and less developed pre-academic skills were all noted in children who attend urban DEIS schools compared with the general population (Smyth, 2018). The report also found however that this disparity is somewhat reduced by the time the children reach Senior Infants, suggesting that school-based learning plays a vital role in reducing the negative impact of social inequality (Smyth, 2018).

EARLY YEARS EDUCATION



A large-scale longitudinal study into the effectiveness of early years education carried out in the UK has found that attendance at formal, high quality, early years education settings is associated with cognitive and socio-emotional benefits for children. Increased time spent in formal Early Years Education settings such as preschools was associated with more prosocial behaviour, fewer peer problems, and better behavioural self-regulation (Melhuish & Gardiner, 2018).

STARTING SCHOOL DURING COVID-19



A UK-based study which looked at the impact of COVID-19 on childrens' academic achievement and socio-emotional development during the first year at school found that the proportion of children who achieved ‘a good level of development’ during the school year decreased from 72% in the school year 2018/19, to 58.7% in 2020/2021. When compared with pre-pandemic cohorts, 76% of schools reported that the cohort of children who started school in September 2020 needed adjusted support. At the end of the school year, 56% of schools continued to report the need for additional supports for this cohort (Tracey et al, 2022).

The majority of children who took part in the UK-based research did not attend Early Child Education and Care prior to entering primary school due to pandemic related closures. In Ireland, similar closures of preschool and other early childhood education settings meant that the majority of children who started primary school in September 2021 missed out on some or all of their preschool education. During lockdown periods, preschools in the area were closed. As restrictions eased, some preschools offered the opportunity for children to return to classroom based Early Years Education, and others opened to provide family support services only. This inconsistency meant that many children missed periods of learning and opportunities for growth and development.

KEY FINDINGS

- This small-scale study found significant impacts on children who started in Junior Infants in September 2021 due to missed Early Years Education. School staff noted difficulties for children across all developmental milestones including motor skills, language skills, and socialisation.
- Teachers reported that 17 of the 28 children in their classes were either currently in receipt of at least one additional service or had been referred for additional services
- Teacher-reported difficulties were higher across all areas on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire in the 2022 Junior Infant cohort compared with the Junior Infant cohort in 2019, particularly the hyperactivity and prosocial domains.
- Focus group findings underscored the need for extra supports to help the children impacted by COVID-19.
- Delays in accessing early intervention services were noted by school staff. As childrens' needs were not identified in preschool, they now face longer wait times for assessment and early intervention.

Methods

Data was collected from a primary school located in an area of high socio-economic need in an urban setting in Ireland.



Focus Group

A focus group was held with seven staff members in one primary school. The focus group comprised of Junior Infant classroom teachers, members of the Special Education Teaching team, a Traveller Support Worker, the Deputy Principal, and the Principal. The focus group was facilitated by a researcher from Let's Grow Together. The interview was audio recorded and the qualitative data generated was subjected to Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).



Questionnaires

Junior Infant classroom teachers completed Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires and purposefully developed 'About the Child' forms for a total of 28 children, 19 boys and 9 girls. These children started primary school in September 2021. At the time of the research, in February 2022, the children ranged in age from 4 years 10 months to 7 years 1 month. Of the 28 children, 2 children used English as a second language.

Focus Group Findings



Focus group participants expressed concern for the Junior Infant cohort. They discussed how COVID-19, the resulting lockdowns and service disruption, had impacted on these children. They highlighted how missing out on preschool education was affecting the children's ability to learn in Junior Infants, and also the adaptations they, as teachers and school staff, had to make to the curriculum as a result. School staff also noted how the children's home life had been impacted by COVID-19, with an increased reliance on technology at home, and continued difficulties with COVID-19 related absenteeism in school. The impact COVID-19 had on parents and wider families was also highlighted in the discussion. Participants noted the increased difficulties families faced in attending to children's needs in the absence of wider support services, such as preschools and other Early Years Education settings.



As a result of the closure of preschools, Early Starts, and other education centres, the children who started Junior Infants in September 2021 had limited opportunities to socialise with other children or take part in the vital Early Years Education curriculum offered in these settings. School staff also noted that access to additional supports such as Speech and Language, Occupational Therapy, and Children's Disability Services has been severely impacted by the pandemic. Not only were appointments cancelled or delayed, but the closure of Early Years settings meant that the needs of some children were missed and access to support delayed as the referral system was not functioning properly during this period. The focus group participants felt that families at home may not have the specialist skillset and knowledge that Early Years Practitioners possess in identifying additional needs in a timely manner.



Focus Group

MAIN THEMES & SUBTHEMES

MOTOR SKILLS

"Their pencil hold, their pencil grip is terribly weak because they missed their early start year [...] of cutting, gluing, painting, of all that hands on activity, manipulative activity to strengthen their fingers and their hands. [...] Because of that, their pre-writing skills would be very very weak."

Impact of COVID-19 on Developmental Milestones

LANGUAGE SKILLS

"It's a lack of oral language skills or just the ability to express themselves or communicate."

SOCIALISATION

"The yard is a very good example [...] they don't know how to play. What they have out in the yard is fresh air, space, and each other and they can't cope with it at all."

LACK OF INDEPENDENCE

"When they were at home, they had Mom and Dad or whoever was there and now in school they're in their group and they have to work alone I suppose to an extent, and they find that very difficult."

Value of Early Years Education

COMPARISONS TO CHILDREN WHO RECEIVED EARLY YEARS EDUCATION

"I don't see the same behaviour at all [in older classes]. [...] They are very settled. They are very engaged in learning. They are able for their learning. They are tuned in. It's like COVID didn't happen for them. They had the foundations. They had their structure of the day, they know what school is all about but it is a different story in Infants."

READINESS TO LEARN

"Value of pre-school and the value of engaging in preschool and the early start years [...] The value of it is so obvious now that it was taken away. There's a huge gap that's there."

Adapting & Responding

MODIFYING CURRICULUM

"It's kind of a reactionary approach. [...] We tried our level best to keep delivering [the curriculum] as we have always been doing but it has just been failing [...] We are all kind of learning on our feet."

ATTENDANCE

"I think COVID is still is having a huge impact [on children] because you're playing catch up with the curriculum and because of attendance [due to COVID] it's really hard to kind of bridge that gap and try to continue on."

Emotional Needs

"I have talked to so many parents [...] they have been talking about their children with anxiety and when I delve into it a little bit, its COVID anxiety and its as far as secondary school. It is going all the way up."

"If you're emotionally not happy you can't learn. [...] We just have to get back now to the children being happy and safe and being calm in the room."

Home Life

PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

"[...] You have everything stacked against [the children] along the way."

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PARENTING

"The whole country was in lockdown. [...] adults were finding it difficult to regulate themselves. [...] So, if a child at an age where they are learning everything [...] we can just see now the effects this has had."

External Supports for Schools & Families

NEED FOR ADDITIONAL SCHOOL SUPPORTS

"Extra behavioural support is definitely needed. Emotional language. That's huge. The whole emotional behaviour."

DELAYS IN SERVICES DUE TO COVID-19

"There has been a huge delay in getting children on the system. Because they would have been put forward at Early Start."

FEAR OF RE-ENGAGING IN SOCIETY POST COVID-19

"They have a huge cohort missing at one point and for long periods of time."

Questionnaires

Number of additional services per child	Number of Children Receiving	Number of Children Referred
1	9	4
2	0	2
3	4	3

Service (reported by class teacher)	Receiving	Referred
SLT	7	4
OT	4	4
CDNT	4	3
Community Psychology		2
ADHD Assessment		2
ASD Services	1	1
Psychology	1	
Educational Psychology		1
CAMHS	1	
Play Therapy	1	
Le Cheile SCP Team	1	
School Behavioural Teacher	1	

Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)



The SDQ (Goodman, 2001) is a brief behavioural and emotional screening questionnaire for children and adolescents. The SDQ comprises of 25 items on 5 subscales; conduct problems, hyperactivity, emotional problems, peer relationships, and prosocial behaviour. The SDQ can be completed by parents, teachers, or young people themselves, and separate forms of the questionnaire are available for each group. The current research used a teacher completed form of the SDQ.

The SDQ categorises the scores for each subset into a four-fold classification system; “close to average” (80% of children), “slightly raised/lowered” (10%), “high/low” (5%), and “very high/low” (5%). This classification system is based on a large UK community sample. The Total Difficulties Score is calculated by adding together all the subscales, apart from the prosocial subscale.

SDQ Findings

- The number of children who scored 'very high' on the Conduct subscale increased from 1 student in 2019 (4%) to 4 students (14%) in 2022.
- Similarly, those scoring 'very high' on the Hyperactivity subscale increased from 2 students in 2019 (7%) to 6 students (21%) in 2022. There was a corresponding decrease, from 18 students (67%) in 2019 to 15 students (54%) in 2022, in the number of children scoring in the 'close to average' range on the Hyperactivity subscale.
- In 2019 no child scored 'very high' in the Peer Problems subscale, while in 2022 3 students (11%) scored within the 'very high' level.
- Scores on the Emotional Problems subscale were similar in 2019 and 2022, with 4 children scoring 'very high' in both years.
- On the Prosocial subscale, in 2022 16 children (57%) scored in the 'close to average' category and 2 (7%) were 'very low'. While in 2019, 21 children (78%) scored in the 'close to average' classification and 5 children (18%) were classified as 'very low'.

About the Child

Number of Additional Services

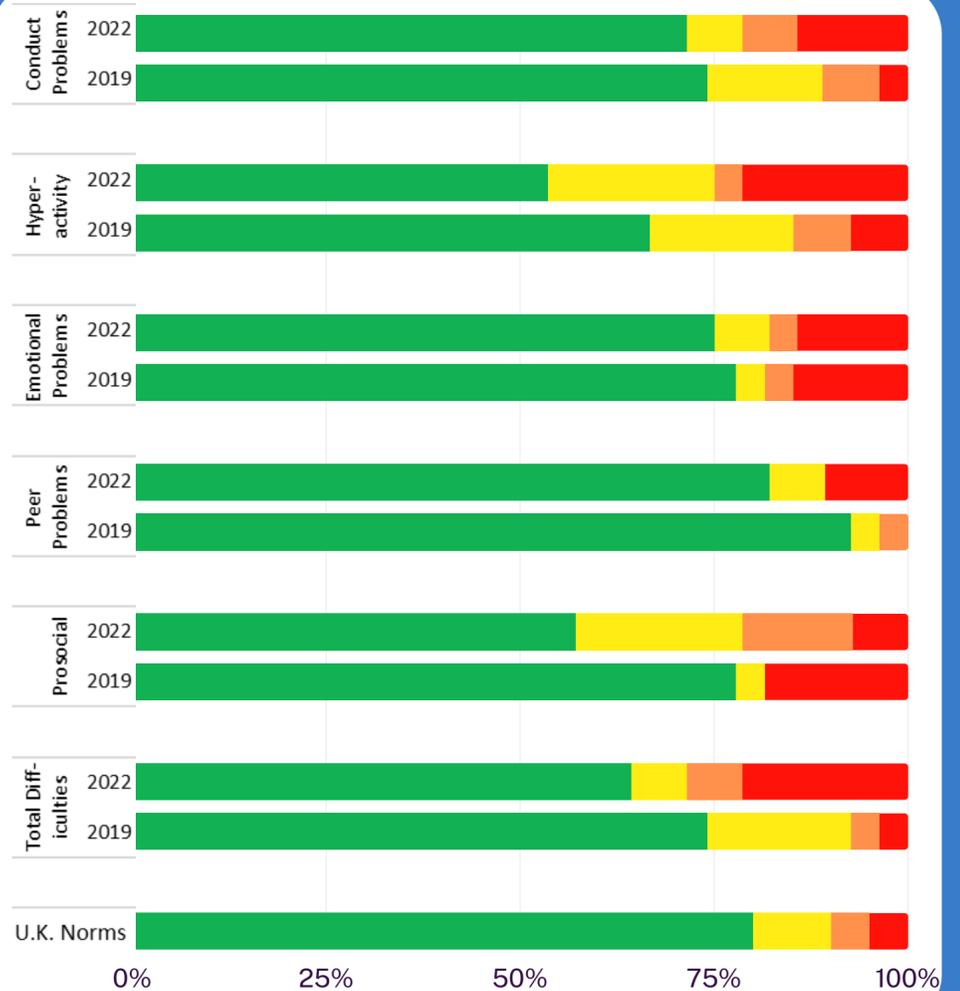
The classroom teachers reported that 17 of the 28 children in their classes were either referred for additional services or already attending services. At the time of data collection, among the 17 children identified as needing additional services:

- 13 children in total were in receipt of additional services. Of the 13 children, 9 were in receipt of one service and 4 were in receipt of three services.
- 9 children were awaiting additional services. Of the 9 children, 5 were in receipt of one service and awaiting additional services, 4 were awaiting access to one service, 2 were awaiting access to two services, and 3 were awaiting access to three services.



Types of Additional Services

At the time of data collection, 7 children were in receipt of SLT, four were attending OT, and four had been accepted by the CDNT. In addition, 4 children had been referred for SLT, four had been referred to OT, and three had been referred to the CDNT.



- In 2022, 6 children (21%) had 'very high' Total Difficulties Scores, 2 (7%) had 'high' scores, and 2 (7%) had 'slightly raised' scores. 18 out of the 28 children (64%) had Total Difficulties Scores categorised as 'close to average'. This is compared with 20 out of the 27 children (74%) in 2019 who had Total Difficulties Scores categorised as 'close to average'. 5 children (18%) had 'slightly raised' scores, 1 (4%) scored 'high', and 1 (4%) scored 'very high'. This increase in 'very high' scores and decrease in 'close to average' Total Difficulties scores for all subscales between 2019 and 2022 represents an increase in teacher perceived problems within the 2022 cohort, compared with the 2019 cohort.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensuring access to Early Years Education

The value of Early Years education in preparing children for Primary school was highlighted in focus group feedback. The closure of Early Years settings during COVID-19 has had a significant impact on children who missed out on this vital part of their educational journey. Access to these services, particularly for families living in areas of social disadvantage, is vital and must be prioritised even during times of uncertainty. Every effort must be made to ensure closing Early Years settings does not happen again.

Additional resources in schools

Additional resources and supports in schools are required to help support children in the aftermath of COVID-19. Teachers noted a particular need for speech and language and behavioural support.

Family Supports

Additional supports for families must also be prioritised. Schools are still seeing a large number of absences due to families' hesitation to re-engage with society after the trauma of COVID-19. Findings show a significant number of children are awaiting early intervention and primary care services. Families need support in the interim to manage and support their children's developmental needs.

Wait Lists

Prior to COVID-19, wait lists for primary care and early intervention services were already long and many families faced substantial wait times for assessment and intervention. These wait times have increased further due to COVID-19. Children in low SES areas often have to wait longer as their families cannot afford private assessment and support services. These services should be prioritised, and every effort should be made to reduce wait times for children and families, particularly in areas of disadvantage.

Catch-up supports for missed Early Years education

Children who started in Junior Infants in September 2021 missed a significant amount of Early Years education. Schools staff noted the impact this education gap was having on their ability to implement the Junior Infant curriculum. Guidelines around how best to support children in this cohort is needed for schools. Catch-up classes and other supports would help build the foundations for their future learning in primary school and beyond.

School Curriculum

As noted by teachers, adapting the school curriculum to suit the needs of this cohort of children is vital for their future learning. Teachers report “learning on their feet” in their attempt to respond to children's needs. Guidelines and resources to help teachers deliver the curriculum are needed.

Future research

The needs and experiences of this cohort of children are unique and it is recommended that this group of children are followed through their school life to assess and record their progress.

GLOSSARY

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CDNT	Children's Disability Network Team
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools Programme
EYE	Early Years Education
OT	Occupational Therapy
SDQ	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
SES	Socio-economic status
SLT	Speech and Language Therapy

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