

This article provides an insight into the experience of the leaders of all-Irish schools in the Education and Training Boards sector, both successes and challenges, since the school closures on that fateful day in March 2020. While all schools faced many challenges, school leaders in Irish-medium schools had to deal with certain challenges that were unique to their context.

Introduction

Education is always a hot topic, but since 12 March of this year, Ireland's schools have been under a constant spotlight. In the Education and Training Boards (ETB) sector, at post-primary level there are 245 schools, 48 of which provide education through Irish, including Gaeltacht schools, Gaelcholáistí, and Aonaid Lán-Ghaeilge. While every school in the country faced a variety of challenges, school leaders in all-Irish settings faced additional challenges.

This article provides an insight into the experience of the leaders of all-Irish schools in the ETB sector, both successes and challenges, since the school closures on that fateful day in March 2020. In August 2020 a questionnaire was distributed to those school leaders to share their insights with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). The issues raised reflect the views shared by the principals themselves.

Experience of school leaders since 12 March 2020

If you speak to principals from any school in the country at the moment, you are likely to hear of the same experiences: distance learning, Junior Cycle challenges, Leaving Certificate calculated grades, reopening of schools. While all schools have faced similar challenges, all-Irish schools faced additional ones.

From the research carried out to gather the insights of school leaders in all-Irish settings, three themes emerged: communication, technology, and progress of students. While there were lessons to be learned that reinforced practices in schools, there was also an unprecedented workload placed on the shoulders of principals to meet the challenges.

Communication from the DES

The country as a whole had to deal with circumstances that no one expected when Covid-19 hit us. School leaders understood that

Experience of School Leaders in Education and Training Board Irish-Medium Schools during Covid-19

Successes and challenges since 12 March 2020



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the Department of Education and Skills (DES) faced a challenge, that difficult decisions would have to be made, and that not everyone would be happy with them. School leaders were deeply disturbed that announcing messages at 4 p.m. on Friday evenings became a norm. It contributed greatly to the dissatisfaction with announcements trickling into the news media. How were these messages in the media before they came to school leaders' desks? It was stressful when parents approached them with enquiries and they lacked the whole story.

The biggest problem facing the leaders of all-Irish schools during Covid-19 was the DES's delay in publishing updates through Irish. Sometimes schools had to wait a week or more for the Irish version to arrive. Some principals said it was disrespectful to all-Irish schools:

It happens too often, and although I would be sympathetic to the Department of Education at the beginning of the process, it is not good enough that this is still happening.

Another said:

I didn't feel like I was a partner in this challenge. And it has created dissatisfaction and a lack of confidence in the school community.

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People may say that the updates were available through English, and what harm if there was a delay, but what good is that when school leaders want to respect their own context and adhere to normal practices and the school's language of communication?

Communication in the school community

In some cases, school leaders said that school community communication practices became better than ever before. Entire staff teams came together online every week, 'which helped a lot to maintain good spirits and support each other'. Regular meetings were held with school senior management teams. Teachers took on additional responsibilities so that pastoral care of students remained the school's priority. School leaders were extremely proud of the 'staff and student approach and involvement'. They referred to the support available from the ETBs, ETBI, and other schools in their board. This network model greatly reassured them because it meant they had constant support available.

Because everyone worked from home, it was challenging for school leaders not to be available – to students, teachers, and parents. Despite the help of assistant principals and deputy principals, they said they were unable to escape the demands of the school community when the schools closed in March. There have always been concerns about the well-being and mental health of teachers and students. Everyone relied on the school leader for the answers – answers that this time were not available and that no one had.

According to school leaders, relationships between schools and parents have changed for the better because of Covid-19. While schools were

making efforts to promote parents' voices, something happened during the pandemic that reinforced that relationship. School leaders said that parents were very appreciative of the efforts made by schools to engage with students and parents, and that schools made every effort to make accurate information available to families.

Technology

Thanks to digital technology, schools have had the opportunity to continue teaching and learning. More teachers than ever before were seen sharing skills, professional conversations were taking place, and 'classroom doors' were opening. Schools could arrange regular meetings with staff, parents, students, and boards of management. One of the many benefits of technology during the pandemic was the capability to celebrate the Leaving Cert class of 2020 graduations online.

Of course, technology also created challenges for schools. No other profession had to change its entire practice overnight when schools were forced to move to remote teaching and learning and the use of digital methodologies.

Not only were school leaders worried about teachers struggling with new methodologies, but there was huge concern for the students themselves. In many all-Irish schools, especially on the islands, 'some teachers and students were operating with little broadband and equipment'. School leaders said there were several weeks at the beginning when students had no access to digital devices or broadband until the schools found ways to provide these.

Staff's digital capability – or lack thereof – greatly increased the stress load on school leaders. Although the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) Technology in Education and Scoilnet made tremendous efforts to assist schools, accessing resources through Irish was challenging for some time. Teachers spent a lot of time translating resources into Irish.

Many teachers did not have the digital skills required to do distance learning, nor could they be blamed. Aside from schools where technology was embedded in their daily practice, all other schools were under pressure and suffering as a result of the unpreparedness and lack of opportunity to respond appropriately in such a short time frame. No one had realised the day would come when teaching and learning would depend entirely on technology. School leaders felt guilty for not being able to do more for their teachers:

Teachers were stressed, and I didn't think I could give them enough support when I wasn't in school. Also, I teach fifteen classes a week. So, trying to do both was challenging.

While students of this generation are said to be proficient in digital skills, there are many students currently with limited digital skills. School leaders said that students had experience of basic aspects of educational technology, and that teachers as a result had to spend considerable time

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guiding students and preparing resources to support them. This put more pressure on teachers and, in turn, on school leaders.

It was students' maturity, independence, strength, and courage that gave school leaders the most satisfaction during the pandemic. Students realised there were new ways to learn and that they were developing new skills. In their feedback, school leaders said many of the students were eager to work and had a positive attitude, though of course there were some who encountered difficulties.

The lack of structure and routine interfered with learning. The new learning habits did not suit some students. A large cohort were 'not involved in their learning'. Every effort was made to support the most vulnerable students, and these efforts were mostly successful, but in some cases they were less effective than was hoped. Student well-being, more so than academic affairs, was every school's main priority.

Decline of competence in spoken Irish

The biggest problem for students in all-Irish schools in terms of progress in their learning was falling behind in their ability to practise speaking Irish. School leaders are worried about

long-term consequences of this gap in direct contact with Irish on the language ability of students in an area outside the Gaeltacht.

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Many students at all-Irish schools have parents at home who do not speak Irish. This created huge problems for their progress, because they did not have support with the language at home. During school closures, parents were willing to help their children, but in the case of all-Irish schools, one of the most-needed supports for students was the opportunity to practise their Irish – and unless a parent or guardian had some competence in the language, that support was lost.

School leaders said some teachers were 'turning to English to make sure the work was understood and that parents could support them'. It was challenging for teachers to provide the same support through distance learning compared to the physical immersion setting. Socialisation through Irish also suffered, especially when students were physically unable to come together. There was a tendency for students to turn to English when in contact with their friends.

Plan for the future

The challenges of Covid-19 are far from over, but when leaders in all-Irish schools were asked what plan would they implement if the same events happened again, they were in agreement. The points they raised included an emphasis on planning for distance learning, communication, and student progress.

To undertake distance learning:

- Teachers and students should have the appropriate skills.
- Students and teachers should have access to digital and broadband tools.
- There should be an effective timetable that caters for all students.
- Training should be available for teachers on differentiation in digital classes.

To ensure effective communication:

- Information should be disseminated in a timely manner (and concurrently through Irish as well as English).
- A code of conduct and safety statement should be in place that incorporates distance learning.
- Students should be aware of and clear about a new learning system.

To ensure student progress:

- A support plan should be in place to support the promotion of Irish in the home.
- Pastoral care duties should be shared across the entire staff to lessen the burden on a few.
- Participation should be tracked from the outset to support non-participating students.
- Students should have access to resources and equipment to give them every opportunity.
- Formal supports should be provided for students with special educational needs.

Conclusion

Ireland's school principals must be acknowledged and commended for the efforts they have made to benefit their students, teachers, parents, and the school community. Leaders in all-Irish schools deserve high praise. They faced challenges that other schools may not have understood. Their success was due to their commitment and dedication.

Covid-19 continues to challenge schools. While much progress has been made, school leaders endeavour to enhance and develop practices across all facets of school life. Education and Training Board schools take comfort in the fact that the ETB model provides a constant source of supports, assistance, and guidance. *Ní neart go cur le chéile.*