

# How lockdown highlighted educational inequality in Ireland

March 11 2022, by Yekaterina Chzhen



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Children in Ireland experienced one of the longest school closures among rich countries during the first wave of the pandemic. School children lost 141 days of face-to-face instruction during the 2019–2020 academic year.

I and other researchers have been tracking the impact of the pandemic on the education and wellbeing of children in Ireland through the nationwide [Children's School Lives](#) (CSL) study. This project collected data from eight- and nine-year-old children both before the pandemic, in spring and summer 2019, and during the pandemic, from May to July 2020.

Our research looked at children's emotional engagement with school. This is a useful indicator of children's overall experiences of learning because it captures the extent to which they like school.

[We found](#) that Irish primary school children were more engaged with remote learning during the spring 2020 lockdown if they had access to adequate equipment, help, and resources for home schooling.

However, we did not find differences in engagement according to family socio-economic status. One reason for this could be that children whose parents were on furlough or lost their jobs during the pandemic were more available to help with schoolwork. Another reason could be that the child-reported family affluence questions did not fully capture socio-economic status.

School closures during the pandemic disrupted children's learning and social development. They are also likely to have increased inequalities in education. Remote learning required access to technologies that may have not been available to all students, and different levels of support may also have been provided by different schools.

Our research is based on the information provided by 374 children from 71 schools who participated in the study both before and during school closures.

To assess their engagement with remote schooling, we asked the

following five questions: "I look forward to home schooling," "I like doing home schooling," "I wish I didn't have to do home schooling," "I like many things about home schooling," and "Home schooling is interesting and fun."

We also looked at the access to resources the children had during lockdown. We found that children were not equally well prepared to adjust to remote learning as Irish schools shut their doors in March 2020.

Only 32% did their remote schoolwork on a computer or laptop. Three in five (59%) said they could get help with schoolwork if worried about it. A similar proportion said their work was checked by a teacher. This is consistent with surveys of parents run by other studies.

Our research showed that children reported higher levels of engagement with remote learning if they used laptops or desktop computers, rather than tablets or smartphones. Their engagement was also higher if they had a parent to turn to when they were worried about their homework, and if they had a teacher who checked their work.

A [COVID-19 web survey](#) conducted as part of the [Growing Up in Ireland](#) study in December 2020 showed that only half of 12-year-olds always had a quiet place to study, 74% had access to a suitable computer and 19% always had access to online classes.

We also found that children who reported higher levels of school engagement in the pre-pandemic school year tended to cope better with [remote learning](#). Meanwhile, children with greater inattention-hyperactivity problems, reported by their teachers before the pandemic, felt less positive about school both before and during the pandemic.

This is consistent with [findings from the UK](#) that suggest that children with [special educational needs](#) and [neurodevelopmental disorders](#)

experienced more symptoms of mental ill health than other children during the first COVID-19 lockdown.

## Learning loss

Irish primary schools did not administer standardized tests at the end of the 2019/20 school year, and the results of the 2021 tests are not publicly available. There is no analysis published on the extent of any learning loss in literacy and numeracy among primary school children due to the pandemic.

Yet learning loss is likely significant due to the length of [school closures](#) in Ireland. Children of essential workers were taught face-to-face in some countries, but all children were taught remotely during the first round of school closures in Ireland.

A nationally representative [survey](#) conducted by Ireland's Central Statistics Office in August 2020 found that 41% of adults with [primary school children](#) said that Spring 2020 school closures had a major or moderate negative impact on their children's learning. A similar proportion (42%) said that school closures had a negative impact on their children's social development.

A more [recent poll](#) from November 2021 showed that 37% of parents rated their children's online education experience as poor or very poor, while fewer than one in three (29%) rated it as good or excellent.

Recent [evidence](#) for England highlights substantial learning losses among year one primary [school children](#) who missed much of their reception year education in 2019–2020. National assessments in summer 2021 showed that they were three months behind the expected standard in reading and one month behind in math.

Our research shows the impact the digital divide—between those who have adequate technological resources and those who do not—had on education in Ireland during school closures. The impact of these inequalities must be addressed as children work to recover the learning they missed during the [pandemic](#).

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