

# Inequalities in the Challenges Affecting Children and their Families during COVID-19 with School Closures and Reopenings: A Qualitative Study

Dr Ilaria Galasso and Gemma Watts, University College Dublin – School of Business

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Schoolchildren, COVID-19, Inequalities

*This paper seeks to illuminate the policy implications of Covid-19 school closures and reopenings in Ireland through the voices and experiences of households, which reveals inequalities in terms of access to education and within home settings during school closures.<sup>i</sup> Using these insights, this paper identifies strategies and policy recommendations to mitigate inequalities throughout and beyond public health crises, including flexible working policies, parental access to external expertise, government supports to enhance school adaptability, dedicated stakeholder consultation during decision-making processes, and the regular use of qualitative interviews within school settings to better determine needs and inequalities requiring policy attention.*

## Introduction

Children may not have been the greatest victim of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) but may have suffered the biggest detrimental effect because of the pandemic. This was because of the preventative measures that were implemented by governments globally, to contain and mitigate the number of cases and indeed deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic. One of these preventative measures was the closure of schools. As of April 2020, 188 countries worldwide had implemented these closures ([United Nations, 2020](#)). According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), between March 2020 and February 2021, 214 million children globally missed more than three-quarters of their in-person learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, and more than 168 million schools have been completely closed for almost an entire year ([UNICEF, 2021](#)). The United Nations defined it as ‘a generational catastrophe’ ([United Nations, 2020](#): 3), which has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and marginalized children and youth, and warned that almost 24 million children and young adults may never go back to school due to the pandemic’s economic impact.

School closures forced the educational and social interaction setting to be the home, and was therefore reliant on and affected by that child’s home environment ([OECD, 2020](#)). This

exacerbated existing inequalities and has been further detrimental for the already more disadvantaged children and for the lower income families ([Marmot et al., 2020](#); [United Nations, 2020](#); [Engzell et al., 2021](#); [UNESCO, 2022](#)).

In Ireland, closure of all schools was ordered from 12 March 2020 ([MerrionStreet.ie, 2020](#)) and schools did not reopen until the beginning of the new school year (end August–early September at schools’ discretion) but remained open for the remainder of 2020.

## **Public Health Dilemma:**

The Irish Government faced two options: one to close schools as a preventative measure with the aim to mitigate the spread of the virus versus the second option to keep schools open and to continue to provide education in person during a worldwide pandemic. This predicament for the governments we see as a ‘public health dilemma’ and the outcome of the government’s decision either way greatly affected children, families and schools.

Both promoting children’s well-being and education, and protecting the health of the population—also given the impact that both have on other essential aspects of human life—are examples of what the philosopher Lisa Tessman calls ‘non-negotiable moral requirements’ ([Tessman, 2015](#)). When two non-negotiable moral requirements conflict with one another, neither of them can override the other: in this case we have a *genuine* moral dilemma (a genuine public health dilemma), and either option have morally unacceptable consequences ([Sinnot-Armstrong, 1988](#)).

## **The Right To An Education:**

The obvious consequences of school closures relate to children’s learning and education, but education disruption is expected to affect several other important aspects of life, ranging from freedom to health. Education has been argued to play a central role in terms of fair equality of opportunities ([Rawls, 2001](#)), in terms of capabilities ([Walker and Unterhalter, 2007](#)) of what people are able to do and to be ([Sen, 1979](#)), and consequently in terms of freedom as the substantial opportunity to achieve what is wanted and valued ([Sen, 1999, 2002](#)). Education has also been argued as a key factor in terms of health ([Daniels, 2008](#); [Marmot et al., 2020](#)). In this respect, by analyzing existing data and referring to several studies evidencing a correlation between education level and life expectancy, Christakis et al. estimated that the educational disruption due to school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic may cause 5.53 million years of life lost globally: more, according to the authors, than would have been lost due to COVID-19 mortality ([Christakis et al., 2020](#)).

Moreover, school closure does not have implications only in terms of education disruption, but importantly also on many physical, mental and social aspects of children’s well-being: as many studies report ([Marmot et al., 2020](#); [OECD, 2020](#); [UNESCO, 2022](#)), it increases children’s social isolation, risk of poor nutrition, potential exposure to violence and exploitation; it is expected to cause stress to parents, and even work and wage loss, with further economic and emotional consequences for children themselves. Therefore, inequalities in education are

expected in the long term to translate into broader social, economic and health inequalities, and an exacerbation of education inequalities will correspond to an exacerbation of these other inequalities.

### **The Right To Good Health:**

Society has a moral duty to promote good health and the right to health is also defended in terms of equality of opportunities and of capabilities (see [Daniels, 1981, 1985, 2008, 2010, 2017](#)). In the case of COVID-19, to also add to this obligation, given the emotional and physical suffering often generated by COVID-19 infection, its prevention is also supported by the principle of beneficence and the ethical obligation to prevent harm ([Buchanan, 1984](#)). Moreover, sickness and death have serious disruptive consequences at many levels not only on the person incurring them: the emotional, financial, logistical costs of long-term illness and premature death often weigh heavy on family members, and may compromise their opportunities and capabilities to the further detriment of social equity ([Golics et al., 2013](#)). Once again, the highest multi-level cost is for children, especially in the millions of cases in which they were orphaned by COVID-19 ([Flaxman and Hills, 2022](#); [Unwin et al., 2022](#)). Against this background, we argue that society has a moral duty both not to interrupt children's education and to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

### **Methods:**

As part of consortium called Solidarity in Times of a Pandemic,<sup>ii</sup> a series of in-depth qualitative interviews in Ireland and 8 other European countries were conducted over two time periods. In Ireland, 32 interviews took place in the first time period (T1) 24 April—5 May when schools were closed and 29 interviews took place during the second period (T2) 6 October—5 November when schools had reopened but further school closures were possible. The aim was to explore how and why people responded to COVID-19 and ensuing containment measures, such as school closures and reopenings.

Demographic questions were used to ensure a broad range of perspectives of those interviewed, such as different ages, gender, financial situation, family situation living conditions and geographical area. The study only included adults, so the perceptions of children were not captured directly. However, nine of those interviewed in T1 had children in their household and six had children in their household for T2.

### **Interview Results:**

Two distinct categories emerged from the results around inequalities:

(1) *Inequalities in access to education during school closures*

Most interviewees whose children experienced distance learning were extremely critical and considered it inadequate and insufficient compared to what children could have learnt in

school. However, substantial differences emerged in the ways distance learning was implemented and perceived.

Overall, many interviewees believed that school closures had been for children “a terrible interruption in their education” that was “only going to impact their development” (T2). However, some participants did reflect positively about children being at home more, arguing that they were “going to learn far more in life skills than they ever will in the academic setting” (T1). The difference in the perspective of our respondents in this regard, appeared to be crucially dependent on whether or not someone within the family setting had the capacity to oversee the education of these life skills.

Also, interviewees reported different experiences around the assistance that they or other adults could provide to children for their education. Some parents explicitly realized that they had a new role in their children’s education: “now I have to be the teacher” (T1). Most reported that for them it was “quite a challenge actually to do home-schooling” (T1), whereas some parents in lockdown were actual teachers, so they just adopted a new norm whereby they became their children’s teacher:

“I have neighbours where both parents are teachers and it is like a religion nearly every morning the kids have to be up, do work, do the school programme that comes on RTÉ, that 11 to 12 or something, that has to be done. Like the morning of every day is set out for school and then the afternoons are free” (T1).

Although all the parents were implicitly requested to become their children’s teachers, the interviews evidenced that not everyone had the same competences, capacities and equipment to successfully comply with this role: reported or emerged inequalities in family situations, as well as inequalities in schools organization and in teachers helpfulness, appeared to correspond to very unequal educational settings during school closure.

## **(2) *Inequalities in the home setting during school closures***

Different—or unequal—capacities of family support were not reported only in the context of home-schooling, but around all the aspects of children’s lockdown. Importantly, the situations narrated in our interviews remarked that not only children, but also their families were exposed to unequal challenges: if school closure disrupted children’s education, in some cases it also appeared as disrupting the family life and home setting, and in some cases even parents’ working life—with further reverberations on children.

Some interviewees described their efforts to lighten the mental burden on their children, like allowing some minor infringements to the restrictions to let them go out or see their friends:

“We obey most of the rules most of the time and I think it is a matter of balance and sometimes it can be you know we have our children’s mental health to consider” (T2).

Some committed to providing their children with “the same kind of environment that you had before, but obviously under completely different conditions...” and by finding a new routine that “especially for the kids that they have a sense of it’s all normal, this is our new norm, it’s fun, you know there’s nothing to worry about” (T1).

Some however expressed major concern for extreme situations, such as in the context of domestic violence or abuse:

“...there are housing issues here in Ireland anyway, so you could have overcrowded houses, you could have houses full of kids that are just very difficult, you could have domestic violence, the obvious issues, all those issues I think are really stretching everyone at the moment” (T1).

These remarks importantly recalled that, if some children had parents who improved their situations by committing themselves to building the children a routine as normal as possible, in some cases parents in abusive environments only worsened the situation for their children.

From their part, parents also reported challenges they faced themselves by reorganizing the routine and the spaces in the house to accommodate children staying home rather than at school. Very different scenarios were described, with some even reporting positive aspects for their children as well as for themselves:

“the kids are kind of playing around and doing stuff like playing cards and having quizzes that we never did before, so it is not all doom and gloom, for me” (T1).

An important difference was described as relating to having someone in the household who was not working:

“At home obviously my wife is at home with the children all the time, but she would stay at home anyway so she would have been at home with them, so she hasn’t had to give up work or anything like that. So the impact from that perspective is quite limited” (T1).

Conversely, interviewees who were working reported their situation as very challenging and were struggling to make rearrangements “so splitting up the days” between working and looking after the children (T1).

The interviews remarked how school closure had a major impact not only on children’s life, but also on their parents’ and carers’ life: an impact bringing unequal consequences to the home setting and to children themselves, which emerged as importantly related to parents’ working position, including the flexibility they were allowed or not allowed in terms of working times and remote working.

## **Conclusion and Policy Recommendations:**

What is most important about our results, is that it indicates how, for either option of schools closed or open, the dilemma generates different and unequal consequences to different people. A wide range of consequences spanning from manageable challenges to possible long-lasting disruption such as those affected in their job due to school closures.

Both options of the dilemma as described by our interviewees are actually associated with unequal challenges: exacerbation of existing inequalities is disgracefully associated with



several aspects both of the pandemic itself and of its containment measures ([Fiske et al., 2021](#)). As a consequence, rather than arguing in favour or against containment measure policies, such as school closures, in relation to the inequalities that they generate or exacerbate ([Kraaijeveld, 2021](#)), we claim that institutions should take these inequalities into account and strive to mitigate them regardless of which option or policy they adopt to harness the pandemic.

From the results we identified strategies that could be implemented in policy making to try to mitigate inequalities due to this and other public health dilemmas:

- (1) **Flexible working policies:** The described challenges suggest that some actions could be taken to facilitate support from schools and from families to assist children's education and well-being, at least to a certain extent. For example, our interviews suggest that flexible working arrangements for parents, and in some cases financial support, could at least in some settings alleviate pressure on parents and allow them adequate time and energy to assist in their children's education and to provide them with entertainment, as some parents actually were reported to have done: consistently, we recommend that governments encourage and facilitate companies to allow some flexibility to working parents, at least (although possibly not only) during public health emergencies.
- (2) **Access to consultants and external expertise:** The challenges reported by some about dealing with children's trauma and uncertainty, suggest that access to external consultants and experts could be a vital resource to provide critical help to parents in this regard.
- (3) **Government supports to enhance school adaptability:** The successful achievements as reported by our respondents around some schools suggest that better equipped and adaptable schools could provide appropriately structured and coherent distance learning, and we recommend that governmental support and subsequent policies on this, such as enhanced funding for school digital infrastructure and in-service teacher training days for distance learning, may thence minimize the harm in terms of education loss
- (4) **Dedicated stakeholder consultation within the policy processes:** Overall, we encourage consultation of the concerned segments of the population in all policies dealing with moral or public health dilemmas, especially when decisions are taken in conditions of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. By taking into account the full range of consequences as lived by the concerned people in either scenario would provide a more comprehensive picture of what is at stake with either option and help with the policy decisions accordingly. Moreover, while a dilemma cannot by definition be solved, knowing the specific challenges the two conflicting options raise can help to mitigate their detrimental consequences (Weinstock, 2020).
- (5) **Qualitative interviews to illuminate needs and inequalities requiring policy attention:** For example, we believe it would be very useful to implement nationally organized qualitative interviews in every school on a regular basis with teachers, school staff, parents and, importantly, children. This would help to collect first-hand lived experience that can illuminate the needs, the inadequacies and disparities requiring deeper commitment or concrete action from the school and/or from the State.

We are aware that it is not always so simple, indeed quite the contrary, we do acknowledge that in most cases inequalities and challenges are related to upstream, complex, structural

inadequacies, involving both families and schools ([Creary, 2021](#)). The recommendations listed above in relation to policy development and implementation can mitigate some short term effects of the current pandemic on children, especially in not-extreme situations. However, for cases of domestic violence or abuse, or of total lack of family support, or for schools unequipped and unable to assist children especially from problematic socioeconomic backgrounds or with special needs, more radical and long-term policy strategies, social reforms and financial plans need to be implemented ([OECD, 2020](#); [United Nations, 2020](#); [Creary, 2021](#)). Importantly some of these inadequacies, and some other minor ones reported in our interviews, are not derived from the pandemic: the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than creating new ones, evidenced long-lasting structural inequalities and inadequacies affecting children and schools ([Doyle, 2020](#); [Marmot et al., 2020](#); [OECD, 2020](#); [UNESCO, 2022](#)). In that respect, the pandemic can and should be regarded as an opportunity to detect and to tackle pre-existing structural inequalities regarding schools and society in general ([Fiske et al., 2021](#)).

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