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The School of Education

Parent Perspectives on Teaching and Learning During Covid-19 School Closures:

Lessons Learned from Irish Primary Schools

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www.tcd.ie/education

About This Report

It is the second of a series of reports on the impact of Covid-19 school closures on education in Ireland. The report on post-primary teacher perspectives is available here:
http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/92883.

A further report is currently being prepared which focuses on school closures from the perspective of students.

For more information:
https://www.tcd.ie/Education/research/Family-Digital-Literacy/

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Partners & Contributors

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Abbreviations

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ETB	Education and Training Board
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison Coordinator
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
NPHET	National Public Health Emergency Team
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
SCP	School Completion Coordinator
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

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Executive Summary

This is the second in a series of Covid-19 and education reports that examine the teacher, parent and student experience of education online and home learning during school closures. This report focuses on the views of parents of primary school children and is based on a survey that took place towards the end of the period of lockdown. It follows on from the recently published report, *Teacher Perspectives of Teaching and Learning During Covid-19 School Closures* (Devitt et al, 2020). A further report in the series will focus on the impact of school closures from the student perspective and will be published in the coming weeks.

Along with pre-schools, second level schools and colleges of further and higher education, Irish primary schools closed on March 12, 2020 in response to advice by the National Public Health Emergency Team and as part of the government's efforts to control the spread of Covid-19. Understandably much of the research published to date has focused on second-level education and particularly the impact of school closures on state examinations in Ireland. There has been relatively little analysis of children in primary schools and less focus on the experiences of parents educating their children at home during this time. This report seeks to address this gap by examining the experiences of home learning during school closures from the perspective of parents of primary school children in Ireland. The findings are based on a survey of 797 parents and highlight their experiences with home learning, the types of family learning practices used, and the extent to which they feel their child's education continued following the closures of schools. Taking the parent perspective, the survey sought to address the following research questions:

- What **supports are required** to foster effective home learning for families?
- What communications, activities and resources were **most helpful** in supporting parents and children with home learning?
- What **factors impacted on children's continuity of learning**, from their parents' perspectives?

The findings below have clear implications both for future primary school closure and blended learning contingency planning as well as for primary education more generally.

Perceptions of continuity of learning

- Just over half of parents reported that their child's learning continued to an adequate level, at home during school closures.
- Over a quarter of parents reported their child was not continuing to learn to a sufficient degree at home.
- Parents of children with a disability, and those in the older primary classes, were more likely to report their child was no longer learning. Where schools communicated with children for reasons beyond the provision of schoolwork, parents were more positive about continuity of learning.
- Poor school-home communication and a lack of parent time were associated with negative perceptions of children's continuity of learning among parents.

Parental confidence in supporting learning at home

- Over three-quarters of parents reported that they were confident in supporting their child's learning at home during school closures.
- Fourteen per cent of parents surveyed reported not feeling confident to support their child in their learning at home. Parents of children with disabilities were more likely to lack confidence in supporting their child's learning compared to other parents.
- Parents' confidence is influenced by their knowledge of the curriculum and overall learning goals for their child.

Resources in the home during lockdown

- One-fifth of households did not have access to a good internet connection.
- Regarding access to digital devices, the majority of homes had access to a tablet regardless of socio-economic status.

- Access to laptops or desktop computers however, is far less likely where parents are unemployed or do not have a third-level qualification.

Family learning activities

- During lockdown, parents reported engaging in family learning activities far beyond engaging in schoolwork.
- Activities included family literacy practices (reading and writing), doing exercise and household activities such as baking or gardening. This was particularly the case for parents with younger primary school children.

School communication with parents during school closures

- Overall parents reported being happy with the communication from schools, given the unprecedented circumstances. Seventy-nine per cent stated it was excellent or good.
- Parents who had contact with a number of different people in the school (such as the teacher, principal, Special Needs Assistant or Home School Liaison Coordinator) were more likely to report being happy with the quality of home-school communications.
- Poor communication was associated with one-way communication from the school, teachers not providing feedback on work submitted, limited social presence from people in the school and limited opportunities for interaction.

Recommendations for policy

Based on the findings, there are a number of implications for parents, schools and the education system more broadly that are important for contingency planning for potential future primary school closures and for blended learning requirements of partial or staggered school re-opening. The recommendations highlight the supports required for parents to foster home learning, some of which can be addressed at system level, some at school and class level and some in the home.

Parents

- Continue and extend everyday family learning and literacy practices both in and outside the home. This will provide a meaningful context for your child to learn and practice new skills.
- Utilise available online resources to access to supports on how best to foster family learning.

Schools

- Broaden the scope of communications beyond assigning work for children at home.
- Provide parents with clarity around the overall learning goals and specific tasks intended to achieve these goals. Universal Design for Learning principles can support teachers in offering learning goal-oriented opportunities for children to access, build and internalise learning.
- Provide students with regular and meaningful feedback in order to maintain student engagement in online learning. Integrate this feedback with learning goals by providing clarity about the desired learning outcomes.
- Maintain social presence when communicating with families by establishing or maintaining regular, personal contact. Encourage school-home communication by more than one staff member where possible and relevant, to improve engagement.
- Assess available resources in children's homes in order to identify needs and tailor provision accordingly (e.g. use of worksheets posted to homes where devices or broadband are not adequate).

System level recommendations

- Prioritise professional development for full school communities on communicating effectively with parents.
- Ensure school-based family learning programmes can operate within health guidelines for social distancing.

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- Resource internet alternatives for families with poor access to broadband, such as greater use of phone contact, print out packs or provision of digital storage devices to remove this barrier to learning at home.
- Address school IT infrastructure, particularly the provision of Virtual Learning Environments, which are associated with high quality school-home communication and greater student engagement.
- Resource schools wishing to provide material resources (e.g. stationary) and digital devices (e.g. tablets, computers, printers) to children at home where online education is not possible due to lack of broadband or access to devices and resources.

This report provides important insight into what home learning involved for families and what was effective in supporting both parents and children during this unprecedent period of school closures. Using the reflections of parents on the home learning experience, the report provides an important insight into what supports worked for parents during this time, but also highlights the key barriers that prevented continuity of learning at home.

1   Introduction

1.1   Background to the report

This report is the second in a series of reports focusing on education in Ireland during the Covid-19 school closures. It focuses on the views of parents of primary school children towards the end of the period of home learning. This parent perspective on school closures follows on from a recently published report on post-primary teacher perspectives of teaching and learning during Covid-19 school closures. A further report on the perspective of students will be published in the coming weeks.

Following the announcement of school closures on 12 March 2020, parents in Ireland were suddenly responsible for the education of their children. The impact of this on the 560,000 primary school children (DES, 2019) remains unknown with much of the focus of research and commentary on second level (Devitt et al., 2020) and in particular exam years (Mohan et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2020; McGuire, 2020). Where research has been undertaken on the experiences of school closures at primary school level, findings show difficulties among teachers and parents in moving to online education, which reinforces social inequalities (Burke and Dempsey, 2020).

The purpose of this report is to examine the experiences of home learning during school closures from the perspective of parents of primary school children in Ireland. Using findings from a survey of nearly 800 parents, this report provides an in-depth analysis of the experiences of parents with home learning, family learning practices in the home, interactions with schools, and most importantly, parents' opinions on the extent to which their children continued to learn during this period. The survey sought to address the following research questions:
- What supports are required to foster effective home learning for families?
- What communications, activities and resources were most helpful in supporting parents and children with home learning?
- What factors impacted on children's continuity of learning, from their parents' perspectives

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By analysing the insights of parents in the weeks before the end of the school year, this report provides important insights into what home learning involved for families and what was effective in supporting both parents and children. The survey methodology sought to capture the experiences of parents with unmet literacy learning needs in particular and of parents of children with disabilities. The analysis allows for the views of these two groups of parents to emerge under the primary research questions noted above. The report provides an overview of parents' reflections on home learning experiences that extend beyond the immediate reaction to the closures in March. The report focuses on supports that were noted as being effective and barriers to be addressed for both parent and children during this period of education at home. The findings will be important in contingency planning for any possible future school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the report highlights how elements of the home learning experience may act as a positive catalyst for change in education more generally.

This chapter places the findings of this parent survey in the context of the emerging research on home learning during the Covid-19 school closures (Devitt et al., 2020; Mohan et al., 2020; Burke and Dempsey, 2020; Doyle, 2020). It details the Department of Education and Skills' response to the sudden and dramatic changes required during this period and provides an overview of Department policy and guidance issued to schools and parents during this time (Section 1.2). Section 1. 3 explores the empirical research conducted since the beginning of the pandemic on home learning experiences during school closures with a focus on the primary school context. This is extended in Section 1.4 to examine the impact on children with disabilities. Section 1. 5 examines the value and importance of family learning and family literacy practices outside of the Covid-19 context, including family digital literacy and joint media engagement, to identify home practices that are effective in supporting children's learning.

1. 2   Guidance for parents and guardians educating their children at home

The Department of Education issued a number of documents for primary school children during the Covid-19 school closures (DES, 2020b; DES, 2020c) with specific guidance for children at risk of educational disadvantage (DES, 2020e) and those with disabilities (DES, 2020d). On 13 May, it issued guidance specifically aimed at parents to support them while their children are at home. Available in eleven languages, the document advises parents on what to expect from their school and includes information on how much communication they should expect from class teachers, who to contact if they have a concern about the level of contact between their school and home, and tips on how to support their child's learning at home (DES, 2020f).

Organisations such as the National Parents Council also provided sources of support and guidance for parents supporting their child's learning at home. It operated a helpline for parents during lockdown and provided a FAQ forum on their website where parents could get advice on issues they were having with their children while learning at home. Addressing the social and emotional impact of learning at home some organisations such as ParentsPlus provided parents and families with a series of resources on how to 'help themselves and their children' during lockdown. Also emphasising the psychological wellbeing of parents during lockdown, print, online and social media outlets provided advice on how to continue learning at home[1].

Policy guidance on children with disabilities during school closures was provided by the Department of Education and Skills and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (DES, 2020d, NCSE, 2020). Students with 'special needs' are specifically referred to in the May publication by DES for all parents and guardians of students in primary school continuing school at home (DES, 2020f). For students with disabilities the document states that parents 'should expect regular and in some instances daily contact by the special

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[1] See the Irish Times article *Coronavirus: How to keep children happy, learning and entertained at home* https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/parenting/coronavirus-how-to-keep-children-happy-learning-and-entertained-at-home-1.4202320; a weekly broadcast for parents which tackled issues at home including how best to educate your child, http://drmaliecoyne.ie/facebook-live/l; https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0511/1137636-good-enough-parenting-lockdown-coronavirus/

education teacher and/or class teacher' (DES, 2020f, p.3). Furthermore, specific guidance was published for teachers communicating with the parents and guardians of primary school children with 'special educational needs'. Additional supports were also announced by the DES in early June that expanded the summer provision[2] programme for some children with disabilities[3] and those at high risk of disadvantage to reengage with learning.

1.3   Research on the parent perspective since school closures

Given the centrality of parents or guardians in continuing learning at home for their children, there has been surprisingly little research to date on their experiences of educating children at home during school closures. Where research has been undertaken with parents, the findings highlight the widening inequalities in education during this time, as parents living in poverty and those with lower levels of education were less likely to be able to spend time or resources on their child's education (Doyle, 2020). Preliminary findings from a survey of parents conducted by researchers in NUI Galway in collaboration with the National Parents' Council Flynn et al (2020) suggest that the majority of parents feel their children learnt less during school closures than they would in school.

Some studies have focused on parental ability and confidence in supporting their children to learn at home. In a survey of parents in the UK, Cullinane and Monticute (2020) show that despite the challenges, parents were generally positive about schools during closures. The study noted the role of parental level of education in influencing how confident they were in continuing education at home. They found that more than two-thirds of parents with a postgraduate degree 'felt confident directing their child's learning', compared to less than half of parents with A-level or GCSE level qualifications (p. 1). The amount of time spent supporting the child with their learning is also the focus of parent surveys during Covid-19 school closures. In July 2020, NFER published a short

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[2] Consisting of a school-based or home-based programme known as 'July Provision' and a HSE-led summer programme.
[3] The programmes focus on children with complex needs, within defined categories.

report based on a survey of 4,000 parents of school-aged children in the UK. The findings show that parents from lower income households spent the most amount of time supporting their child with schoolwork (Eivers et al., 2020).

Given the emphasis on educational inequality, and in particular, the digital divide at second level (Devitt et al., 2020; Mohan et al., 2020; Doyle, 2020), it is not surprising that there are similar patterns in studies of primary schools. Research by Burke and Dempsey (2020) published on Covid-19 practices in primary schools pointed at a digital divide among students. They found that educators and parents resorted to using their personal resources to try and make contact through text, phone calls and by posting out materials to pupils without internet access (Burke and Dempsey, 2020). Similarly, in the UK, a NFER (2020) study highlights how one-quarter of pupils in schools in England have little or no IT access at home with students at risk of educational disadvantage far less likely to be engaging in learning activities. Andrews et al (2020) also highlight the differences in home learning set-up for children in poorer families, with reduced access to devices for learning for primary and post-primary children in these contexts.

Other studies have sought information from parents about the frequency, mode and quality of communication between them and their child's school. Schools in Ireland generally appear to have maintained contact with students about their learning at home, and made assigned work available to them (DES, 2020g). A parent survey carried out by DES (2020g) in collaboration with the National Parents' Council Primary (NPC-P), found that 71 per cent of parents of primary school children agreed that their child was well supported by the school to keep up with their work. Findings also showed that many schools have been creative in their responses to communicating with learners during this period of school closures and have adapted their teaching and learning practices to use platforms, applications and digital modes of learning (for similar findings see Devitt et al., 2020). In the UK, findings on parent satisfactions are socially stratified with parents in middle class families more satisfied with the level of support from schools than parents in lower class families (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020).

As noted in other research, the mode of communication is important for child engagement in learning at home (Devitt et al., 2020; NFER, 2020). Research suggests that as the weeks of school closures passed, the mode of communication changed. For some schools in Ireland, a survey of parents showed that initial engagements with learners were by email, using the school's website or by phone, to provide activities and tasks for learners. After these initial engagements, many schools recognised that they needed to improve their practice in this regard and to allow for two-way communication (DES, 2020g). There are however mixed practices around the provision of feedback to learners. Just 43 per cent of parents of primary children who responded agreed that their child received regular and practical feedback from their teacher on work completed, although the agreement rate amongst parents of post-primary students who responded was higher, at 69 per cent.

Many studies have pointed to the importance of schools having a virtual learning environment (VLE)[4] system for delivering learning materials to students during the Covid-19 school closures. These systems include assessment, student tracking, collaboration and communication tools (Mohan et al., 2020; NFER, 2020). In the UK, NFER (2020) found that schools using a VLE to inform pupils about learning activities have higher levels of student engagement than schools not using VLEs.

1.4   School closures and children with disabilities

Given that between 25 and 28 per cent of students have some form of disability in Irish mainstream schools (Banks and McCoy, 2011; Cosgrove et al., 2014), it is necessary to understand the impact of school closures on this group of students. Internationally, children with disabilities have faced increased challenges to their education, health and home life due to the pandemic. The OECD (2020) has highlighted how school closures in particular, have introduced stress to many children with disabilities, whose wellbeing often depends on the structure and routine of the school day. Furthermore, many of these

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[4] A VLE is a dedicated web-based platform where education providers can offer students resources and activities and also interact with them to provide feedback.

children also experienced a disruption to therapeutic supports intended to develop their communication and social-emotional skills, thus putting greater pressure on them and their families (OECD, 2020). In the UK, a survey by Alghrani and Byrne (2020) highlights the 'detrimental effect' Covid-19 school closures are having on children with disabilities (p.1). The authors acknowledge that some good practice exists among schools but found that just under half of parents of children with disabilities were dissatisfied with the level of education provision their children were receiving while their schools were closed and where education had moved online. The type of provision reported by parents in this survey ranged from none at all, to the work sent home 'being too generic or beyond the ability of the child' (p.1). The research also highlights the negative impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of children with disabilities during this period (Alghrani and Byrne, 2020).

Education stakeholders and commentators in Ireland have also expressed their concern about the impact of Covid-19 school closures on children with disabilities (Clifford, 2020). Although there have been several research reports on the topic of education in general during Covid-19 (Devitt et al., 2020; Mohan et al., 2020; Burke and Dempsey, 2020; Doyle, 2020), there has been little examination of the experience of students with disabilities. One notable exception is an Inclusion Ireland survey of parents published in May 2020. This research sought to understand some of the problems faced by parents and children with disabilities seeking to continue their education at home. The findings show that 35 per cent of parents reported that their child was not getting proper supports from school, or that they were not being told what was expected of them in terms of home schooling. Over half of these parents predicted that their children will have difficulties returning when schools reopen (Inclusion Ireland, 2020).

1. 5   Pre-Covid literature on family learning and family literacy

During this unprecedented period of school closures and home learning, the research area of family learning is highly relevant. The term Family Learning denotes both the learning that family members engage in with each other through their lifetimes, but also the

educational programmes to develop and support rich family learning environments. Family learning programmes can help to overcome the barriers to learning felt by families who may hitherto have felt excluded or marginalised from the expectations of school and society (NALA, 2011). Strong evidence suggests that a clear strategy and substantive support for family learning not only secures better outcomes for children and their parents, but also has measurable positive impacts on a wide range of economic and social policy agendas (SOLAS, 2020a; NIACE, 2013). Of particular relevance in this study are the activities in the home that develop learning rather than the educational programmes to support these, given that in the absence of formal schooling during the Covid-19 school closures these activities become of even greater importance to children and families. It is widely acknowledged that the single biggest influence on a child's development during their early years is the role of their parents and the establishment of a rich home learning environment (DES, 2011; Taggart et al, 2015). In particular, family literacy and the development of a literate environment in the home are the foundations for the development of children's literacy (Kennedy et al., 2011). A rich home learning environment, in which parents support children's oral language and literacy development both formally and informally, and where there is access to literacy-rich resources, plays a significant role in children's literacy learning (Hartas, 2011; Sénéchal, 2011; Neuman and Dickinson, 2006).

Literacy is defined broadly here as encompassing written and oral language, but also 'traditional' literacy skills and digital and multimodal literacies (DES, 2011). Indeed, since school closures, the role of digital literacy for family learning and home learning has been vital for supporting continuity of children's education when families were restricted to the confines of their dwellings. The space, size, location, availability and affordability of digital devices and connectivity of the household impacted home learning. This emerging field of 'digital literacies' is now more important than ever in context of the Covid-19 school closures and teaching and learning at home for both parents and children.

1. 6   Outline of the report

Chapter 2 outlines the methodology used in the research. Chapter 3 focuses on the findings of the study in relation to supports for home learning identified, parental confidence in supporting the child's learning, access to resources and family learning practices. Chapter 4 explores parent responses in relation to communication with their child's school during school closures. Where relevant, these two chapters also highlight findings specific to parents with unmet literacy learning needs and parents of children with disabilities. Chapter 5 explores parents' perceptions of their child's continuity of learning, and examines factors in the data that predict whether or not they perceived their child to have continued learning to a sufficient extent during the lockdown. Chapter 6 provides a summary of the findings of the report and highlights the policy implications stemming from its findings.

2 Methodology

2. 1 Questionnaire design

A survey of parents of primary school children in Ireland was carried out between 27 May and 15 June 2020. The survey is part of a broader study on family digital literacy funded by the Irish Research Council and in partnership with NALA. The survey was designed prior to the Covid-19 pandemic to explore the use of digital devices for home learning with a specific focus on literacy including families where there might be unmet literacy learning needs. However, in the context of the school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic, the focus of the survey was expanded to include the experiences of parents with teaching and learning during school closures, home learning activities, and home–school communication during school closures. The survey sought to be solution focused, engaging with parents on what they found most useful to support their child's learning. The survey was piloted with professionals in the field and with parents in family learning programmes. Adjustments to content and structure were made as a result. The survey was conducted by a self-completion questionnaire online, using the Qualtrics survey tool. In some cases, survey participants were supported to complete the survey by adult literacy organisers.

The survey draws on a literature review of family (digital) literacy practices and joint media engagement and draws on existing work in family learning and literacy in Ireland and internationally. The survey was divided into six main sections which examined:

1) Child, parent and household demographics and child's school characteristics (for findings see section 2. 2);

2) Child continuity of learning, including factors supporting this (section 3. 1);

3) Parent confidence to support their child's learning, including supports and barriers to this (section 3. 2);

4) Digital devices: availability and their uses in the home during school closures (section 3. 3);

5) Family learning practices during school closures (section 3. 4);

6) School contacts and communications: quality, mode and focus (section 4).

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The survey included a small number of open response items and it should be noted that parents used these extensively.

2.2   Sampling

In Ireland, there are 3,106 mainstream primary schools and 133 special schools, with approximately, 568,000 children in school nationally (DES, 2019). The sample of parents included in this report was selected by two means: using voluntary response and snowball sampling methods with the support of Amárach market research, and using purposive sampling of parents in areas of educational disadvantage to ensure that the voice of these often under-represented parents was included in this study.

In total, the survey was completed by 797 parents of children in primary school. Given that in the 2016 census, there were 731,412 parents in families with children under the age of 15 (CSO, 2016), this represents approximately 0.1 per cent of parents in Ireland. This represents a substantial sample of parents in Ireland. Comparable studies in the UK, which has over ten times the population of Ireland, collected data from 4,559 and 4,157 parents of primary and secondary school students, approximately 0.06 per cent of the parent population (Andrew et al., 2020; Green, 2020).

2.2.1. Parent respondent demographics

The majority of parent respondents in the survey were female (72.3 per cent) and the average age of respondents was 41. There was a good spread across the 4 provinces and Dublin with a majority of respondents from Dublin (34 per cent) and the smallest representation from Ulster (5.4 per cent).

In terms of the parental education level of respondents, approximately 44 per cent of parents in the sample have a third-level qualification which is close to the 2016 census value of 42 per cent (CSO, 2016). This sample is somewhat skewed with a higher representation of parents with postgraduate degrees in the sample than in the general population.

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Responses relating to the work status of the respondents during Covid-19 revealed that the majority of respondents (72 per cent) were in employment. Eighteen per cent of these reported being an essential worker during Covid-19. For those not in paid employment, 17 per cent reported being in a care role or looking after their home or family.

There are a number of multilingual families represented in the sample with 94 parents who say English and Irish is used in the home and a further 90 parents who state that languages other than English are used in the home to varying degrees. Over 30 different languages are listed for this multilingual cohort. These include Irish, French, Romanian, Italian, Polish, Czech, Turkish, Spanish, Arabic, Filipino, Thai, Vietnamese, Shona, Maori, Dutch, Slovak, Afrikaans, Croatian, Russian, Latvian, Portuguese, Swahili, Yoruba, Urdu, Punjabi, Estonian, Norwegian, Ghanaian, Ibo and Finnish.

A key objective in deploying the survey was to seek responses from parents with unmet literacy learning needs who are typically hard to reach with standard text-based surveys. In the sample there are 15 parents (7 female and 7 male and 1 unspecified) (2.3 per cent of the sample) with unmet literacy learning needs. The survey purposive sampling strategy set out to target these parents in order to ensure representation from groups that are typically very hard to reach. With the support of adult literacy organisers and home-school liaison coordinators, these parents were asked to participate in the survey and facilitated to do so by those professionals with whom they had an existing contact. This small sample is distributed across the regions and covers a range of employment types. The age and gender of these parents and the age and gender of their children follows the same distribution as the overall survey sample. This group reported a higher proportion of children with disabilities or additional learning needs: 5 out of the 14 who responded to these questions, as opposed to 1 in 8 of the survey as a whole.

The average household size in the survey is 4.4. Of these households, in addition to the primary school children, 195 include pre-school children, 263 include post-primary students and 78 include third-level students. On average there are 3.1 people working or

in full-time education in the households in the sample. This represents a significant demand on resources in the home.

2. 2. 2. Child in focus demographics

Parents were asked to consider their primary school child closest to the age of seven when responding to the questions in the survey. This marks the mid-point of the primary school journey, coming towards the end of the junior primary curriculum in second class. For this reason, the majority of the children referred to in the responses were in first or second class (24 per cent of children). The rest of the responses were spread evenly across all class groups.

In the sample, 104 parents reported that they had a child with a disabilities or additional learning needs and 27 parents responded that they were not sure about this. The gender distribution of the children is very even (47 per cent female, 52 per cent male and 1 per cent preferred not to respond).

2. 2. 3. Child's school characteristics

Parents were asked a number of questions about their child's school: its size, gender mix, DEIS status, fee-paying status and language medium as well as the school location. The schools in question are spread across urban, rural, suburban and small-town settings (Figure 1). The majority of parents reported that their children attended coeducational schools (86 per cent). There is a slightly larger proportion of single sex schools in this sample with 6 per cent girls only and 8 per cent boys only schools (Figure 2), relative to the national distribution with 5.2 per cent and 3 per cent respectively. The sample of parents with children in DEIS schools is 160, or 20 per cent of the sample, which is close to the national distribution of 22 per cent of primary schools that have been designated as 'disadvantaged'. The DEIS schools are distributed in different settings with more representation in urban and small-town settings[5]. The sample from Gaelscoileanna also approximates the national distribution of 8 per cent, with 83 respondents or just over

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[5] Pearson Chi-Square=30.862, df=4, p<=.000.

10 per cent. Eighty-two schools in the sample are fee-paying schools. In terms of school size, there is a stronger representation (45 per cent) of large schools (schools with over 250 pupils) in the study sample in comparison with the national distribution of 24 per cent of schools.
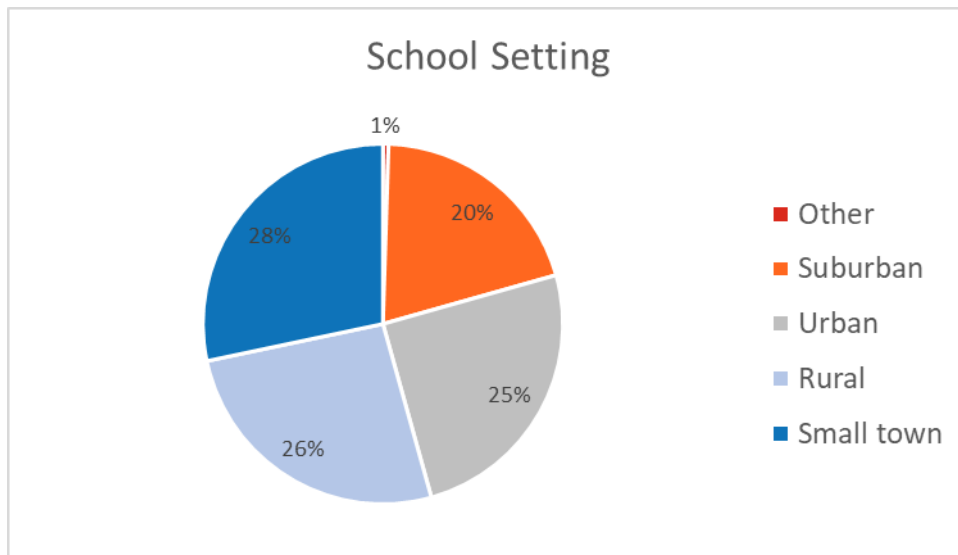
Figure 1 School setting

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19
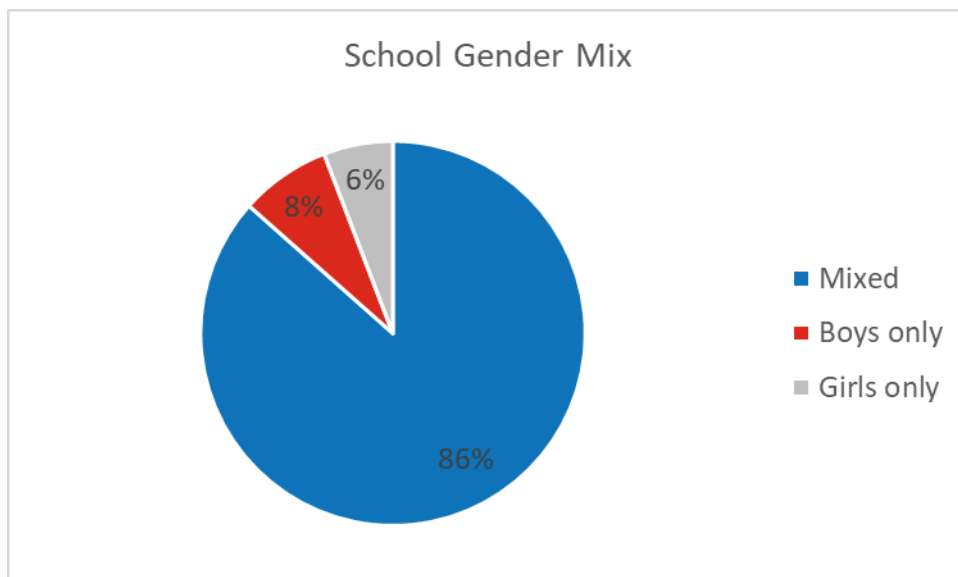
Figure 2 School gender mix

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

2.3 Data analysis

Analysis of the quantitative survey data was largely descriptive, examining home learning activities, access to devices, school communications, etc., as well as how these differed according to parental education, confidence in home learning levels, and school characteristics such as school size, gender mix and disadvantaged status. Multilevel binary logistic regression was used to understand key factors influencing parents' perceptions of their child's learning. Preliminary thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative open responses in the data and is reported, with the quantitative results in chapters below.

2.4 Summary

By gathering the parent perspective, the information presented in this survey provides crucial evidence around what has and has not worked, with important implications for education policy and practice. Importantly, the analysis presented in this report highlights factors that promote or inhibit parent confidence with home learning. These findings are invaluable for understanding how learning was progressing in homes during the school closures and for identifying the most effective supports for parents and children during this time. The findings also have wider relevance in the exploration of family learning practices and effective supports for these.

3 Parent experiences of learning at home during Covid-19 school closures

This chapter examines the experiences of parents as they made the sudden and difficult transition from being parent to educator for their child. Section 3. 1 focuses on the types of supports that parents reported as useful for their child's learning during this period. Section 3. 2 examines the extent to which parents felt confident supporting their child's learning at home and highlights reasons associated with high and low confidence. Section 3. 3 outlines the digital resources available in the home including those identified as necessary but missing by some parents. Section 3. 4 examines home learning activities happening in homes during school closures.

3. 1 Useful supports for learning at home

Parents were asked to identify what or who had been useful in supporting their child's learning from a range of options including the adults in the home and material and digital devices available to them (Section 3. 3).

What has been useful to help your child learning during school closures?

The adults in the household (including you)	80%
Materials in the house (pencils, paper, books,…	65%
Digital media and devices	55%
Materials sent from their school	54%
Their schoolbooks	53%
Contact from someone in their school	45%
Other children in the household	37%
The television	22%
All of the above	3%
Nothing	1%

Figure 3 Useful supports for child's learning

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

The findings show that the most valuable resource reported by parents are other adults in the home, followed by material resources, which include both traditional and digital resources. The majority of parents also note school supports and schoolbooks as useful resources for their child's home learning during this time. For parents with unmet literacy learning needs, schoolbooks were noted more frequently as a useful resource but materials and contact from school as marginally less. As this sample is small, strong conclusions cannot be drawn from this.

Across all of the above measures, parents of children with disabilities reported lower levels of supports. In relation to materials available in the house for example, 49 per cent of parents of children with disabilities reported them being useful compared to 62 per cent of other parents. Similar differences were identified in relation to finding schoolbooks useful (51 per cent of parents of children with disabilities compared to 42 per cent of other parents). Parents of children with disabilities are, however, more likely to report that contact with someone from the school (such as the class teacher or SNA) was useful in helping their child learn when compared to other parents.

3. 2   Parent confidence with home learning

A unique aspect of this survey is that it explored parents' perceptions of their confidence in supporting their child 's learning during school closures. Figure 4 Parent confidence with helping their child learnhighlights parent responses to the question about confidence in their ability to help their child learn with three-quarters of parents reporting that they felt able to support their child's learning. The response of parents with unmet literacy learning needs are broadly similar. For all respondents, the responses to this question were highly correlated to parents' responses relating to the continuity of their child's learning (see chapter 5).

I feel able to help this child learn during the COVID-19 shutdown

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
4%	10%	10%	47%	28%

Percentage of Parents
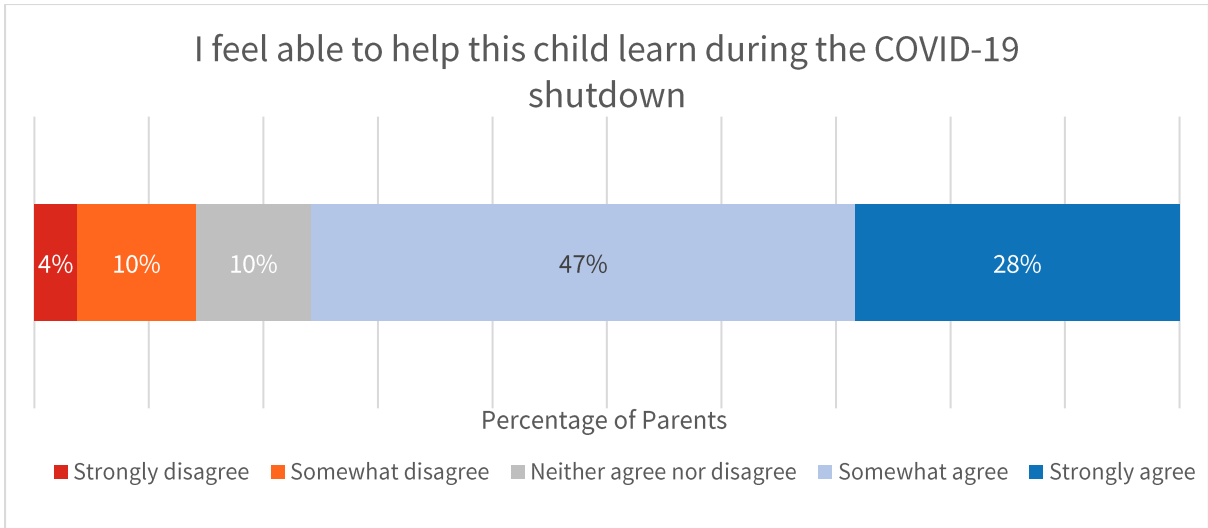
Figure 4 Parent confidence with helping their child learn

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

The findings also show that parents of children with disabilities reported feeling less able to support their child's learning during school closures. Figure 5 highlights how 17 per cent somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed with feeling able to help their child during school closures compared to 11 per cent of parents of children without disabilities.

No Disability

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
3%	10%	10%	47%	31%

Disability

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
6%	13%	16%	46%	19%
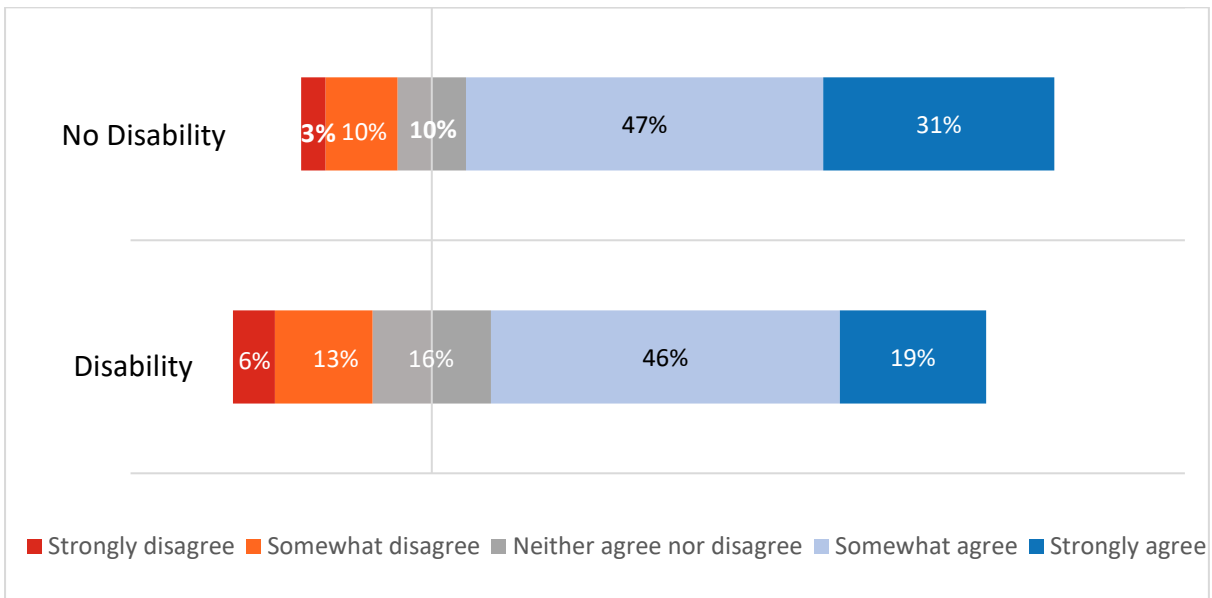
Figure 5 Parents feeling able to help their child during closures by child's disability

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

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Figure 6 outlines the reasons for parents' positive evaluation of their role in learning at home. The findings show that their child's school is clearly of critical importance with 69 per cent of parents stating the school sends what they need and 54 per cent saying they know the school will support them if they need it.

I feel able to help my child learn because …

Reason	Percentage
The school sends what we need	69%
I know I can get help from their school if I need it	54%
I know what is important for them to learn now	50%
I have time to help	50%
I can find what I need to help them learn on the…	41%
We have everything we need at home for this	38%
I know I can get help from the household for this	23%
I know the curriculum	19%

Percentage of parents who expressed confidence about helping their child learn

Figure 6 Reasons for Parent Confidence with Home Learning

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

In addition to this however, a key factor noted by half of the parents surveyed is that they have clarity in relation to what the child needs to learn at a given point in time. Other reasons that influenced parental confidence relate to resources available in the home learning context: parent's available time, household support, and material and digital resources at home and online.

Differences also emerged where parents responded to questions relating to what makes them feel able to help their child at home. Parents of children with disabilities were less likely to give positive responses across a range of factors compared to other parents (Figure 7). They were less likely to report that the school sent what they needed (36 per cent of parents of children with disabilities compared to 50 per cent of other parents). Similar differences are evident in their responses to knowing what is important for their child to learn, having the time to help their child learn and having supports in the

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home to help with learning. Similarly, parents with unmet literacy learning needs reported fewer positive responses on supports, in particular in relation to sourcing support on the internet.

Percentage of parents who expressed confidence about helping their child learn

	No disability	Disability
The adults in the household (including you)	75%	70%
Materials in the house (pencils, paper, books, tools, etc)	62%	49%
Digital media and devices	52%	47%
Their schoolbooks	52%	32%
Materials sent from their school	52%	42%
Contact from someone in their school	41%	48%
Other children in the household	34%	31%
The television	20%	17%

Figure 7 Factors that help with the child's learning by disability

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

Worryingly, 14 per cent of parents surveyed expressed lack of confidence in their ability to support their child's learning. Parents who responded that they did not fully agree with the statement that they 'feel able to help their child learn', were asked to provide some reasons for this (Figure 8). The primary reason was a lack of familiarity with the curriculum – both in terms of knowing the curriculum itself but also in knowing what was important for the child to learn. Other frequently referenced reasons relate to the serious constraints on families during the school closures such as lack of time, high levels of stress and lack of support in the home for learning. A small proportion of parents locate the reasons with the child's school (the school does not send what they need (6 per cent) or they do not think the school would help if asked (2 per cent). For parents with unmet literacy learning

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needs, in addition to familiarity with the curriculum, the key issue emerged again of sourcing support on the internet.

I do not feel fully able to help my child learn because.....

I don't know the curriculum	45%
I have no time to help	28%
I don't know what is important for them to learn…	25%
I am too stressed to help	16%
We do not have what we need at home for this	10%
I have no support at home for this	7%
The school does not send what we need	6%
I cannot find what I need to help them learn on…	4%
I have problems with my own reading, writing…	4%
I don't think the school will help if I ask	2%
I am too shy to ask for help	2%
I don't have good English	1%

Percentage of parents who did not express full confidence in helping their child learn

Figure 8 Reasons for parent lack of confidence with home learning

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

In the qualitative responses, the lack of confidence among some parents seemed to stem from their feeling that they 'don't know the curriculum' or how to teach it:

> *If we had a better understanding of exactly what the curriculum contains, we could move forward faster and stop him being bored going over subjects he already knows.*

> *I know they're doing work but I don't know if they're learning anything as I don't have teaching skills.*

Some parents struggled with individual subjects such as Irish, and focused their energy on a couple of 'core subjects':

> *My Irish is limited and he attended a Gaelscoil.*

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> *Neither my husband nor I can do the Irish homework. We are concentrating on core.*
> *English and maths, reading & writing. The Irish is just so stressful.*

Respondents also expressed concern at the impact of their teaching on their relationship with their child:

> *I try go through reading and made charts with letters, numbers, key words for*
> *reading but I lose patience after 30 minutes its unfair on my son and me.*

Others acknowledged that schools provide a much-needed structure that was not easily implementable at home:

> *I do my best, but kids play up on parents, school environment is more structured.*

In addition to a lack of knowledge about the curriculum, parents described how their circumstances at home impacted on the amount of time they had to spend with their child to support their learning. Many reported that one or both parents were working at home full-time and this was a major source of stress and a barrier to their child's learning:

> *I have to work from home and also have a toddler. Trying to juggle all is hard and we*
> *both need to work for the family to survive. Pay mortgage bills put food on table. We*
> *are sharing the week at home and out at work. Feel as a result of this parents will*
> *burn out and kids will suffer.*

> *It is extremely stressful trying to ensure the children have access to digital devices*
> *and internet, do their schoolwork with them to a good quality and also have to work*
> *myself. I feel like I am not giving enough time to either my children or my own work.*

> *I work remotely every day as does my husband. We still have work deadlines to meet.*
> *It is difficult to allocate a period of time [to learning] daily.*

Some parents were working as frontline workers making education online difficult:

> *I am a nurse working full-time.*

> *Working frontline so not always there to help.*

Were both working on the frontline. On shifts. So were trying to work and reduce childcare.

This was particularly exacerbated in one-parent households:

I also work full-time, and it is getting increasingly hard to multitask both work and schoolwork. I'm a single mother and don't have a lot of help.

I am a single parent, with 2 children, and I'm also trying to work from home.

The qualitative data emphasises the extent of the stress that many parents were under during school closures, while they did their best to balance continuity of learning for their children with their other work and life responsibilities.

3.3   Digital resources: Broadband and devices in the home

The parents in the survey were asked a number of questions about access to broadband and digital devices, and how they were used for learning. As regards a good internet connection, of the 797 respondents, only 26 (3 per cent) said they did not have a good internet connection with a further 139 (18 per cent) respondents saying they only had a good connection sometimes. This accounts for just over 21 per cent of the sample. National access to fixed broadband is estimated at 82 per cent (CSO, 2018), the sample of respondents in this report approximates this distribution. Among parents with unmet literacy learning needs, access to good internet was marginally worse, with one-quarter of participants reporting they had poor internet access. Only five respondents of the 797 parents reported not having an internet-enabled device in the home. These are very much the outliers in the data.

While respondents were not asked to give the total number of devices in the home, they did respond on which device types were available in the home (Figure 9). The average number of different devices in the home was 6.21 in line with existing research (Eivers, 2019).

Percentage of homes with devices

Device	Percentage
Smartphone	95%
Computer (laptop or desktop)	84%
Tablet	79%
Smart TV	74%
Games Console	69%
TV	67%
Handheld video game player	43%
Landline	38%
E-reader	26%
Ipod touch or other video iPod	24%
Educational Game Device	11%
Mobile phone	10%
None	0.3%
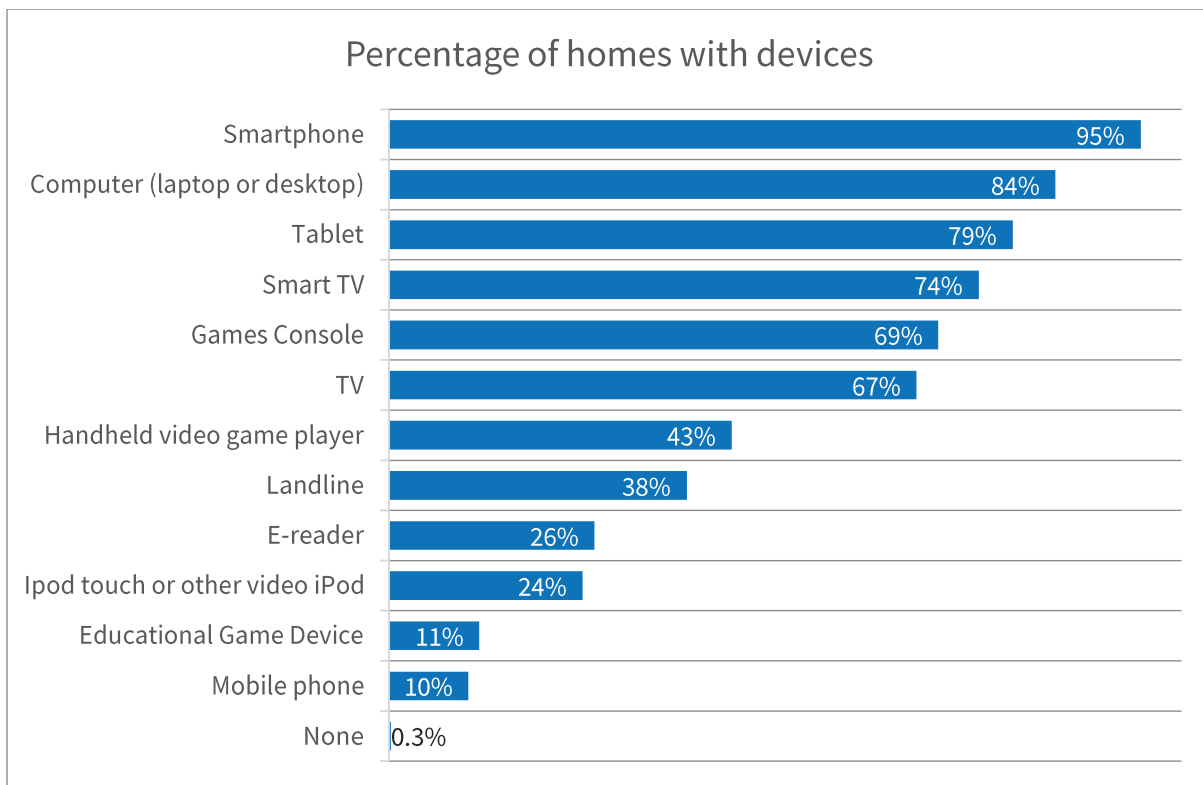
Figure 9 Percentage of homes with different devices

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

Sixty-three per cent of homes reported they had at least a smartphone, smart TV and a computer. Fifty-three per cent of homes reported they had these three core devices and in addition a tablet. The number of different devices in the home is highly correlated with household size as might be expected[6]. The type and number of devices also varies according to the socio-economic status of the parents, as represented by their education level and employment status, with parents without third-level qualifications and those who are unemployed reporting fewer devices in the home[7] and reduced access to desktop/laptop computers[8], as in Andrews et al. (2020) in the UK context.

Parents with unmet literacy learning needs present a significantly different profile of device access in the home. The average number of devices is much lower (5.13 rather than

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[6] Pearson Correlation =0.641 p<=0.001.
[7] T-tests were conducted to test the difference in means between parents with and without third level degrees (*t(783)*=-2.281, p<=.023) and parents in employment or not (*t(785)*=--2.128, p<=.034).
[8] Pearson Chi-Square=5.714, df=1, p<=.017 and Pearson Chi-Square=16.629, df=1, p<=.000 respectively.

6.21) and less than half of respondents had access to the triad of smart tv, smartphone and computer as opposed to sixty-three per cent in the full cohort. Furthermore, just over half of respondents had access to a tablet in contrast with 78 per cent in the full cohort.

Parents were also asked which devices the child uses for learning (Figure 10), which devices the parent uses with the child for learning, and which are used for communicating with friends and family. The findings show that the device most commonly used by the child for learning was a tablet while the device used for learning with the parent was either a tablet or a computer. Games consoles are also used quite frequently by the child for learning but much less frequently with a parent. As expected, smartphones are used predominantly for communicating with friends and family.

Parents with unmet literacy learning needs overall reported somewhat less use of digital devices by their child for learning. The most frequently used was a tablet, with 7 out of the 8 respondents who reported having a tablet reporting that their child used this for learning. Only one-fifth of these parents reported using computers with their child for learning. Taking into consideration the previously noted difficulties in accessing materials on the internet by this parent cohort, these findings might suggest that digital resources are not being deployed to their fullest potential in families where parents have unmet literacy learning needs.

Parents report their child's levels of experience with technology as high, with three-quarters of parents reporting their child is 'very' to 'fairly experienced' with technology. The profile here is of mostly digitally literate children, with the ability to manipulate technology in different contexts in order to achieve different goals. However, the extensive use of devices by the child, in particular where they may be using a device on their own, does give rise to questions about ensuring the safe and ethical use of technology as noted in DES (2020j). Furthermore, the differences in numbers of different devices according to employment status would indicate evidence of the digital divide noted in much of the emerging research on the Covid-19 school closures (Mohan et al.,

2020; Devitt et al., 2020; Doyle, 2020). With reference to tablets specifically which are reported as a key device for learning by parents in this survey, parents who are not in employment and parents with unmet literacy learning needs are less likely to report access to a tablet device in the home[9]. Therefore, while the profile of the highly digitally literate child engaging with learning through technology may be a positive dimension of home learning during school closures, it is worth noting that this is not currently universally available, nor is it without risk.

Percentage of Children Using the Device for Learning

Device	Percentage
Tablet	56%
Computer (laptop or desktop)	45%
Smartphone	38%
Smart TV	30%
TV	22%
Games Console	16%
Handheld video game player	9%
Ipod touch or other video iPod	6%
None	4%
Educational Game Device	4%
E-reader	2%
Mobile phone	1%
Landline	1%
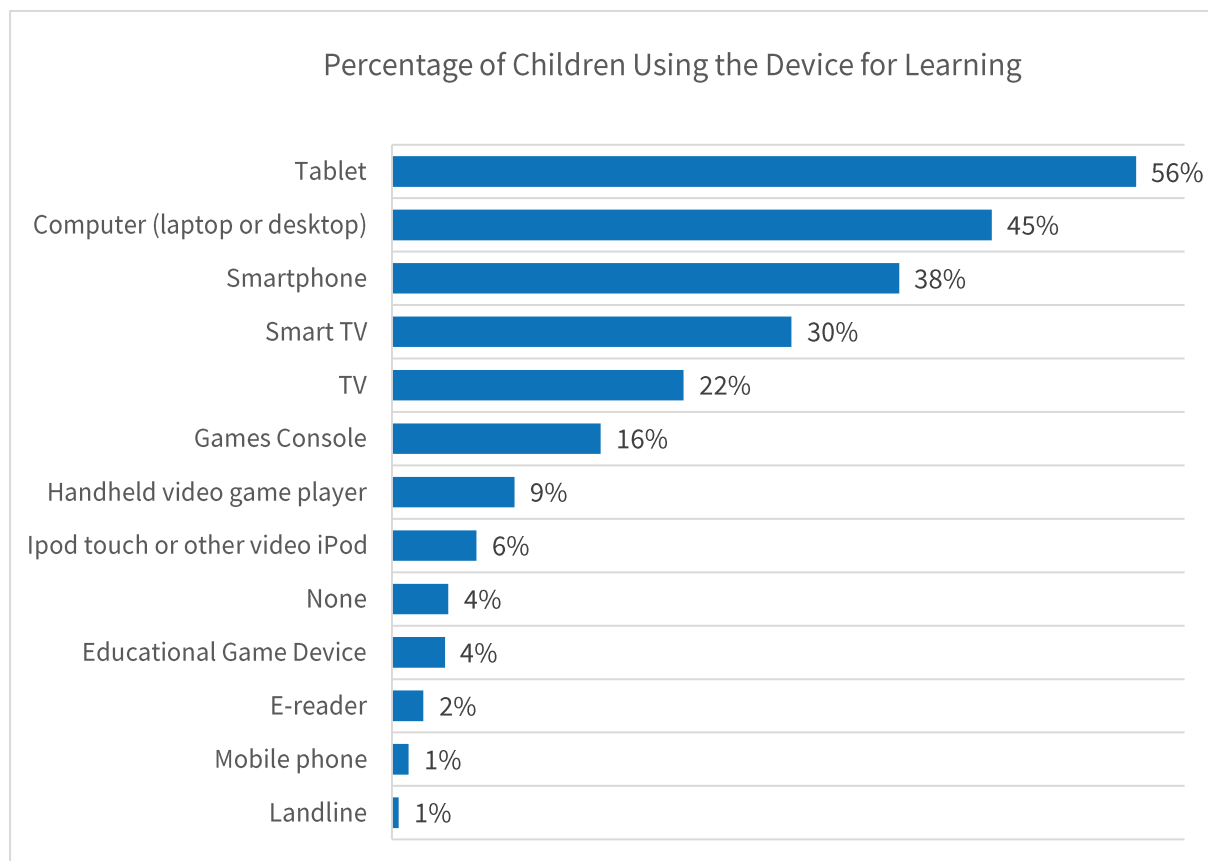
Figure 10 Devices used for learning by the child

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

3. 3. 1. Resources lacking in the home

One tenth of parents noted that they are lacking resources in the home to support their child's learning. The key resources lacking here include digital resources (printers,

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[9] Pearson Chi-Square   3.826   1   .050 and Pearson Chi-Square=5.991, df=1, p<=.014 respectively.

devices, good internet), traditional materials (paper, pencils, books), and space (Figure 11). Furthermore, an analysis of the demand on devices in the home as defined by the number of people working or studying in the home would suggest that on average households required access to 3 to 4 devices suitable for work or study. Therefore, it is not only access to an appropriate device but sufficient devices for the household that is a potential issue for families.

Resources missing in the home

Category	Value
A printer	23
Books	20
Space	17
Enough digital devices for everyone	15
Other materials (paper, pencils, paints, etc)	11
An appropriate digital device	10
Good quality internet connection	8
All of the above	4
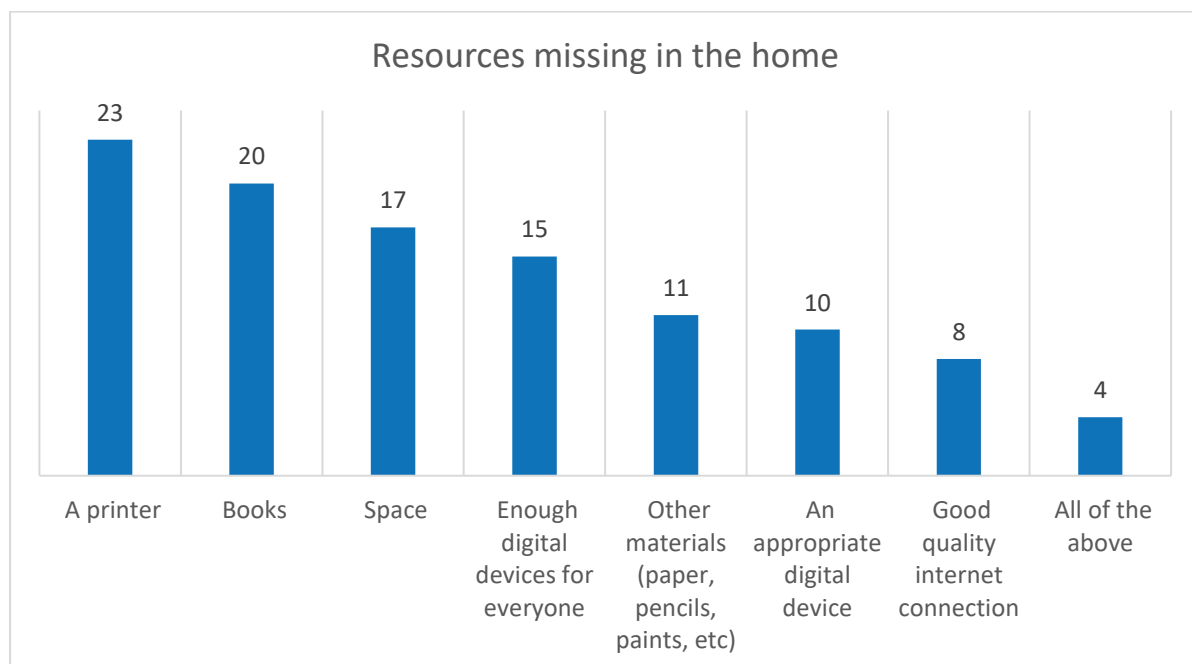
Figure 11 Resources lacking Figure 11in the home

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

The difficulties identified in the statistical analysis were confirmed in parents' qualitative responses to the survey question in relation to resources in the home. Many stressed the importance of having access to a printer, digital device and internet:

> *Need a printer. School sends stuff but a lot of it needs printing and we don't have one.*
>
> *Internet is dreadful especially with both parents working from home via Internet.*

Some parents felt that schools should have had 'consideration for houses that do not have a printer'. To overcome these difficulties the school could have sent out packs to their homes with what their child had to do for the week:

> *I feel if we had packs delivered to our homes that would have been helpful as my child has no interest at all and I can't print the work. There is zero pressure from the school they are great but if my child was given a pack to finish by end of week, he would do it rather than online.*

> *Packs sent from school would be beneficial rather than trying to do workbooks from a laptop.*

Recent research notes that traditional post was used as a mechanism for connecting with post-primary learners, in particular in DEIS schools (Devitt et al., 2020; Mohan et al., 2020). The parent open responses in this survey suggest that printed materials from schools would have been very useful in the primary context.

3.4   Family learning and family literacy activities

Parents in this survey were asked about the types of family learning and in particular family literacy activities that they, or someone in their house, used regularly with the child (see Figure 12). These activities ranged from informal play, to helping with schoolwork, to using devices in an educational way. The most prevalent learning activity was helping with schoolwork closely followed by family literacy practices such as reading books, writing, texting, googling or telling stories. Figure 12 illustrates the prevalence of these types of literacy activities, suggesting a rich and varied profile of learning activities in many households during the school closures.

Family Learning Activities in the Home

Activity	Percentage
Help with schoolwork	87%
Do exercise of any kind	76%
Do household activities (baking, gardening, etc)	74%
Read with your child or help your child read	64%
Play with your child using toys, games or puzzles	61%
Do something creative together (music, art, etc)	49%
Write with your child or help your child write	42%
Use a digital device with them in educational ways	37%
Sing songs together	36%
Watch educational programmes together	32%
Tell stories orally (without a book or screen)	29%
Make up stories together	24%
Play rhyming or other language games	11%
Listen to audio books or podcasts	9%
Do not do any of these	1%

Figure 12 Family learning activities in the home

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

Parents with unmet literacy learning needs report lower rates of some family learning activities, notably less use of digital devices in educational ways, but similar amounts of family literacy activities. Parents with a third-level qualification were somewhat more likely to report that they read and write with their child[10] but the range of wider family literacy practices is equivalent between parents with and without third-level qualifications.

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[10] Pearson Chi-Square=4.461, df=1, p<=.035 and Pearson Chi-Square=4.382, df=1, p<=.036 respectively

Similarly, the range of activities in which the child engages specifically on digital devices presents a rich profile of activity, including a range of digital literacy practices, school work and creative and leisure activities (Figure 13).

Activities on Devices

Activity	Percentage
Digital Literacy practices	86%
Doing school work	79%
Playing games	78%
Watching (TV, films, YouTube)	70%
Listening to music	45%
Taking photographs and videos	41%
Doing exercise, dances or other physical activity	39%
Using educational apps or websites	31%
Drawing	29%
Using other apps or websites	23%
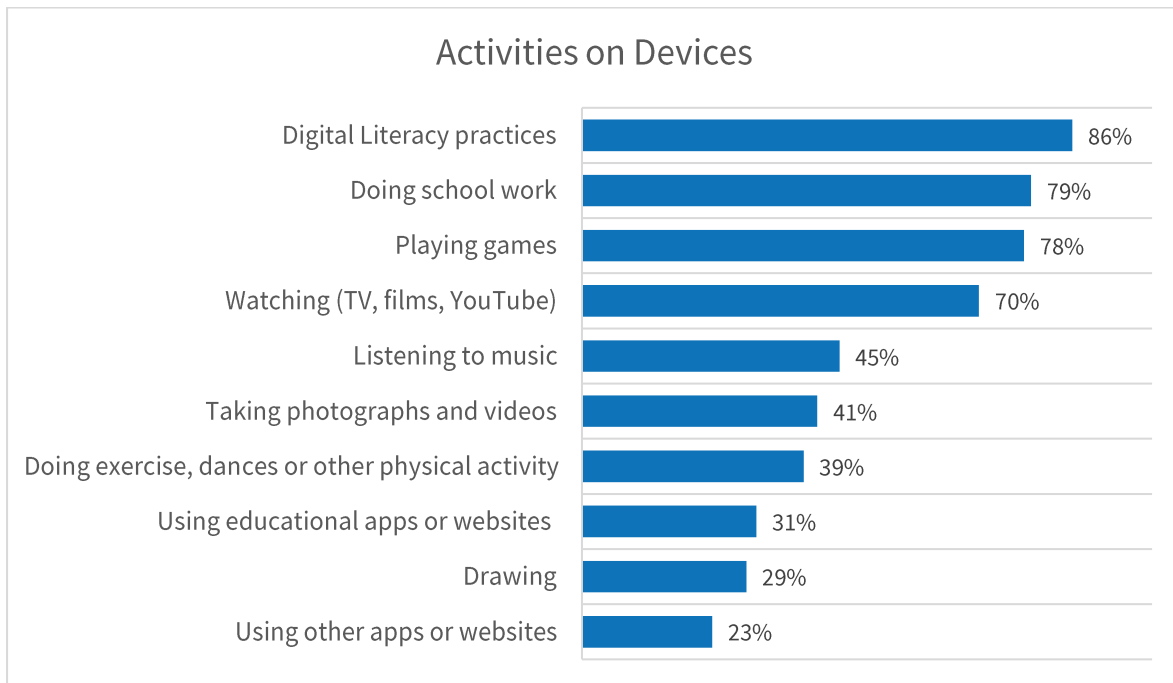
Figure 13 Activities on digital devices

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

Many of the family learning practices were significantly associated with the age of the child, with parents of children in junior primary more likely to respond in the affirmative. Significant differences between parents of children in junior and senior primary were found in relation to the practices outlined in table 1:

Table 1 Family learning practices: differences between junior and senior primary

Family learning practice	χ2	df	p-value
Read (books or screen)	104.814	1	<.001
Write (on paper or digital)	39.733	1	<.001
Play (toys/games/puzzles)	38.195	1	<.001
Sing songs	18.322	1	<.001
Make up stories	16.281	1	<.001
Tell stories (orally)	11.62	1	.001
Play rhyming games	9.589	1	.002
Do something creative	5.942	1	.015
Watch education programmes	5.743	1	.017

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

These differences are clearly illustrated in the figure 14, below.

Figure 14 Family learning activities and school level.

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

3.5   Summary

This chapter focused on the experiences of learning at home from the perspective of parents. Focusing on the types of supports that parents found useful for their child's learning during this period, the findings show that other adults in the home are considered one of the most valuable resources available to them. This is followed by access to resources includ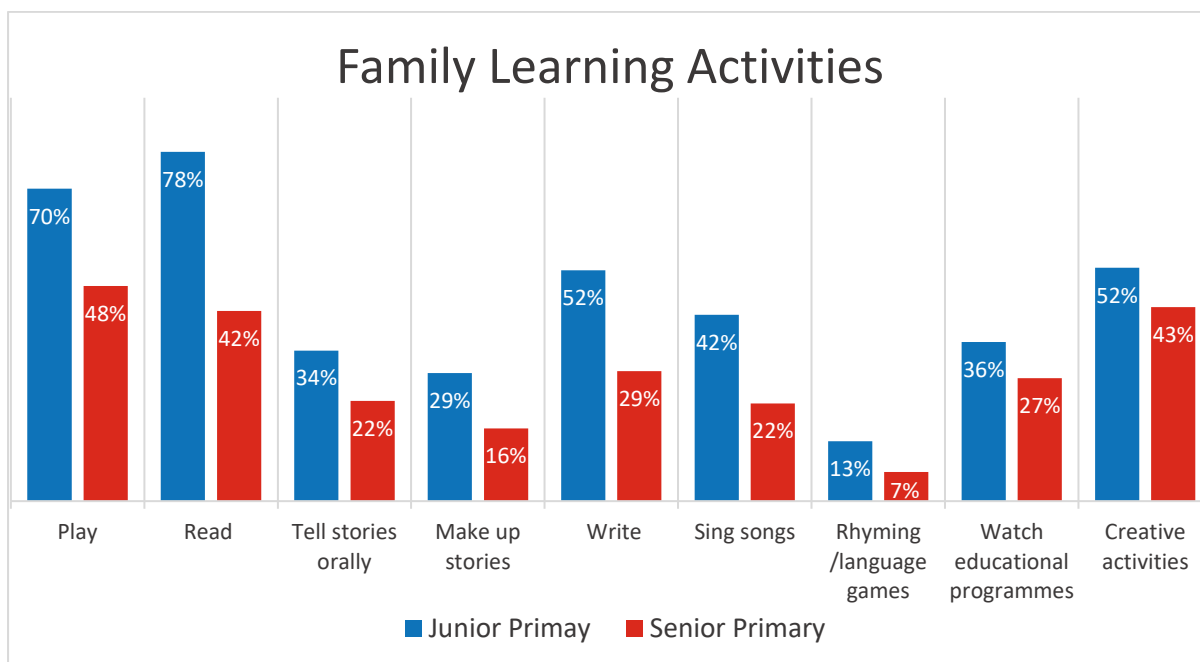ing traditional resources and materials and digital resources. Parents of children with disabilities are less likely to report these types of supports as being useful, but are more likely to report that contact with the class teacher or SNA was useful in helping their child learn when compared to parents of children with no disabilities.

Section 3.2 examined the extent to which parents felt confident supporting their child's learning at home and highlights reasons associated with having high and low confidence. The findings highlight how the majority of parents reported feeling able to support their child with learning at home. It is a concern, however, that 14 per cent of parents reported a lack of confidence in their ability to support their child's learning. The main reason given was a lack of familiarity with the curriculum and a lack of knowledge about what was important for the child to learn. Again, parents of children with disabilities were less likely to report feeling able to support their child when compared to other parents.

Overall, parents are satisfied that the school sends them what they need in order to educate their child at home and over half of those surveyed reported having clarity in relation to what the child needed to learn. Parents with unmet literacy learning needs and parents of children with disabilities were less likely to respond positively about supports available, compared to other parents. Family and household circumstances, such as a lack of time and stress associated with both parents working at home, or as frontline workers, were also reported as being a barrier for parents trying to support their child's learning.

This chapter also explored access to digital resources available in the home including those identified as necessary but missing by some parents. The device most commonly

used in the home to support learning was a tablet or a computer. The vast majority of those surveyed have good internet connection and an average of 6 devices per home, although this varied by socio-economic background indicating the existence of a digital divide. Indeed, those with unmet literacy learning needs had fewer devices in the home compared to other parents in the sample. One-tenth of parents noted that they are lacking resources in the home to support their child's learning; digital resources such as printers and devices and traditional materials including paper, pencils and books were mentioned in particular.

Section 3. 4 examined the types of home learning activities that took place during school closures. These activities included informal play, helping with schoolwork and using digital devices for educational purposes. The most prevalent learning activity reported by parents was helping with schoolwork closely followed by family literacy practices such as reading books, writing, texting, googling or telling stories. Parents with third-level qualifications were more likely to report that they read and write with their child, but overall the broad range of family literacy practices is equivalent for parents with and without third-level qualifications. The findings also show that many of these practices were associated with the age of the child, with those parents of children in junior primary more likely to positively respond to engaging in these activities.

4 School communication and support

This chapter examines parents' perceptions of home-school communication with regard to the quality, mode and focus of school communications during Covid-19 school closures. While effective communication with parents is a core aspect of teacher and school activity at any time (Teaching Council, 2017; Urban et al, 2011), school closures foregrounded the importance of communication with parents in supporting children's learning. Parents were asked how well their child's school had communicated with them during the school closures. Responses to this question were significantly correlated with responses relating to both continuity of their child's learning (see chapter 5) and parents' confidence in supporting their child's learning (3. 2); where parents responded positively on school communications, they were likely to respond positively on both other variables.

As in the DES NPC-P survey (2020g), overall parents were very positive about the communications with their child's primary school, with 41 per cent saying it was excellent and 36 per cent saying it was good (Figure 15). The quality of the communications reported by parents does not vary systematically according to any of the school characteristics recorded (school size, gender mix, DEIS status, fee-paying status, language medium or school setting).

Quality of school communication during the COVID-19 shutdown

| 2% | 7% | 13% | 36% | 42% |

Percentage of Parents

■ Terrible ■ Poor ■ Neither good nor bad ■ Good ■ Excellent
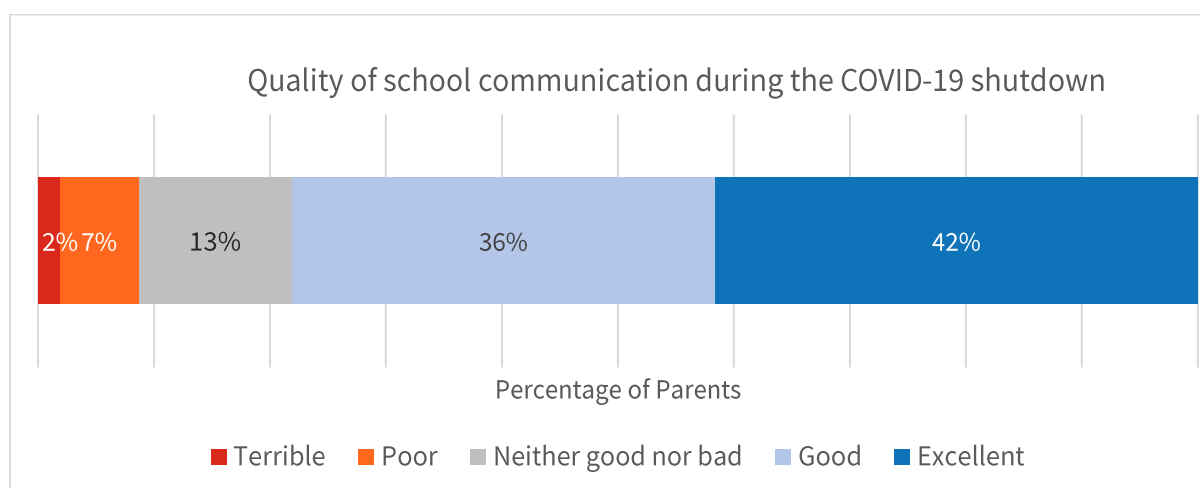
Figure 15 Quality of school communications during school closures

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

4.1   School contacts

Parents were also asked who, in their child's school, was most helpful during school closures. Figure 16 highlights, not surprisingly, that 86 per cent of parents said the child's class teacher had been helpful during the school closures. Interestingly, for almost a quarter of parents, the school principal also took a prominent role in supporting their child's learning. This was more commonly noted in smaller schools[11]. Parents with unmet literacy learning needs noted slightly lower contact with the class teacher but similar contact with principals.

Who from the child's school has been helpful during school closures ?

Contact	Percentage
Class Teacher	86%
The principal	23%
Learning Support Teacher	11%
No one	8%
Home School Liaison Coordinator	4%
Special Needs Assistant	3%
All of the above	1%
School Completion Programme Coordinator	1%
Other	1%

Figure 16 Helpful contacts in child's school

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

Differences were evident between parents with and those without children with disabilities, with slightly higher levels of class teacher contact for parents where their children do not have a disability. Instead, parents of children with a disability reported

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[11] Pearson Chi-Square=15.206, df=4, p<=.004

higher levels of communication with learning support and resource teaching roles and to a lesser extent, the special needs assistant.
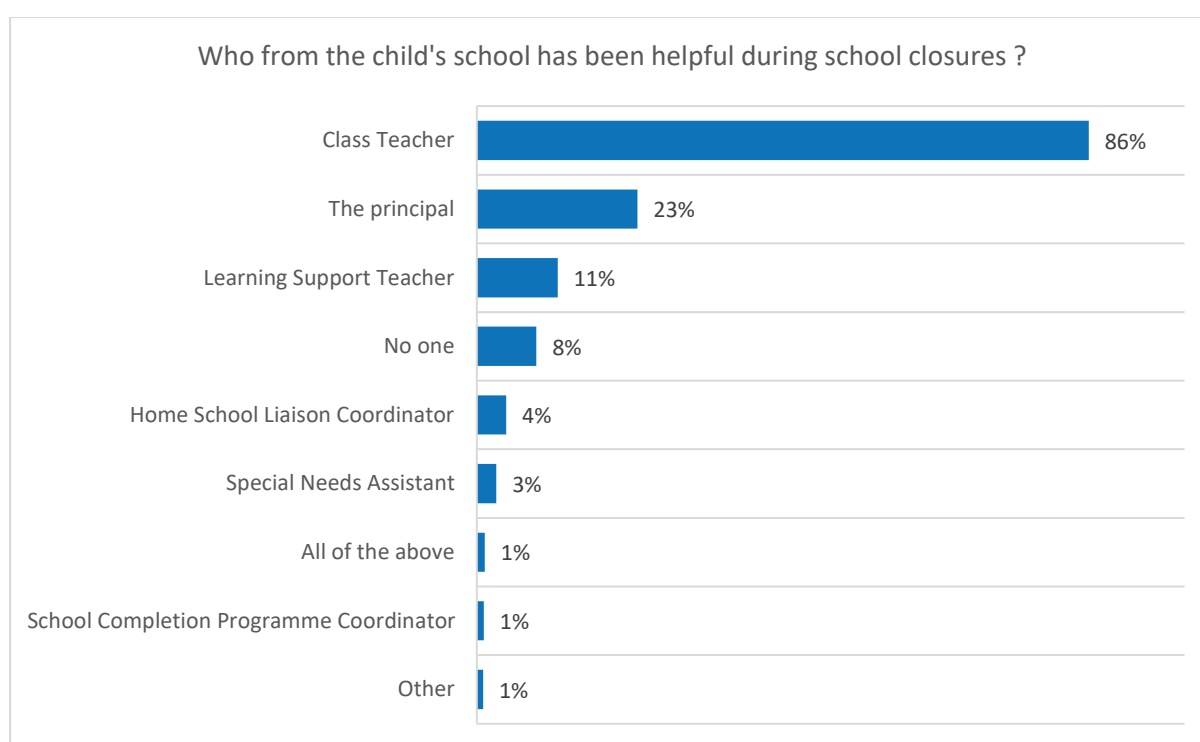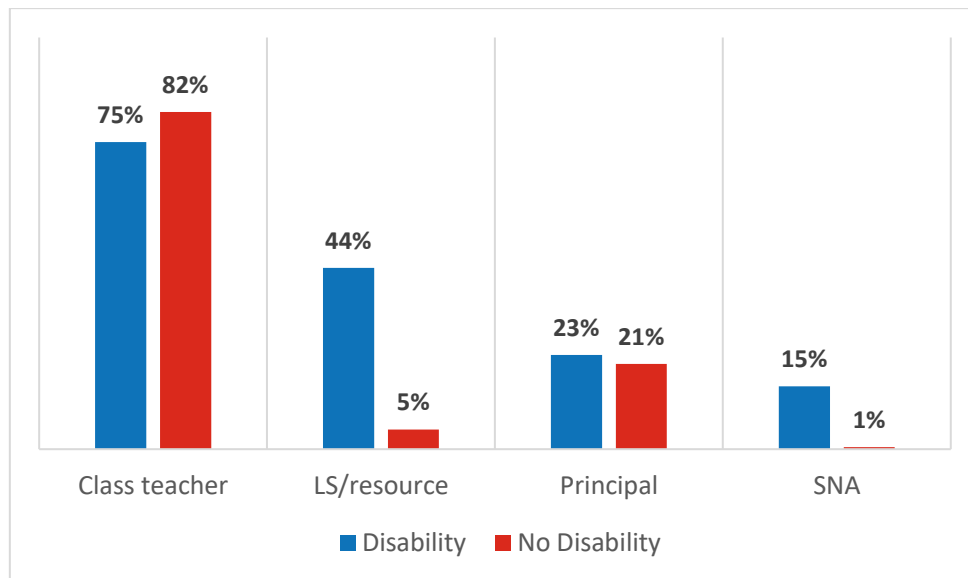

Figure 17 Helped the child with learning during school closures by disability

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

Four per cent of parents, and one in five of parents with literacy learning needs, reported the Home School Liaison Coordinator (HSC) had been helpful. In designated disadvantaged (DEIS) schools, parents who reported contact from HSLCs and School Completion (SCP) Coordinators were more likely to state their child was not continuing to learn and they did not feel confident to support their child's learning. However, none of these respondents rated school communications as poor or lower and the vast majority (88 per cent) reported it as good or excellent. Furthermore, when responding to the reasons for this, the parents who had been in contact with HSCLs were much more likely to give reasons related to knowing the curriculum and none responded negatively regarding the school providing or being available to provide support. This may suggest that the families supported by HSCLs are well targeted as needing substantial support and feel supported by the schools.

Parents also provided information on the number of people they were in contact with in their child's school. Altogether 269 parents (34 per cent) reported contact with multiple

people, a finding that was particularly evident in DEIS and smaller schools[12], and for parents with unmet literacy learning needs. Parents of children with disabilities also reported engaging with multiple contacts from their school. For all parents, multiple contacts were associated with better communications; in fact, it aligned with parents noting the excellence of the school communications.

Despite these positive findings around school–home communication, 8 per cent of parents reported that they did not find anyone from their child's school helpful. This appears to be related to school size, with larger schools more likely to be reported as providing no helpful support. These responses are also associated with lower perceived continuity of child learning and lower parental confidence to support the child[13]. Unsurprisingly, it is also strongly associated with parents reporting poor or terrible school communications[14] (see section 4.4).

4. 2   Mode of school communications

Parents were also asked about the mode by which the school had been communicating with them during school closures with a range of options including several common virtual learning environments. Figure 18 sets out the range of tools used with a prevalence of email and VLE reported equally by parents, as in Cullinane and Montacute (2020). Better quality school communications in this data is associated with the use of email, phone calls and any of the VLEs list on the survey platform. Social media however (e.g. Twitter and Facebook), was not associated with better perceived quality of communication. DEIS schools are more likely to use phone contact (as in Devitt et al., 2020) and social media[15]. There was no difference noted among parents in DEIS schools in the extent of use of VLEs nor in the quality of communication from the schools, suggesting that the modes of communication in use are appropriate for these contexts.

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[12] Pearson Chi-Square=5.236, df=1, p<=.022 and Pearson Chi-Square=12.395, df=4, p<=.015 respectively.
[13] Pearson Chi-Square=40.348, df=4, p<=.000, Pearson Chi-Square=25.213, df=4, p<=.000 respectively.
[14] Pearson Chi-Square=203.878, df=4,p<=.000.
[15] Pearson Chi-Square=12.099, df=1, p<=.001 and Pearson Chi-Square=5.096, df=1, p<=.024 respectively.

How does your child's school communicate with you during school closures?

Email	79%
VLE	79%
Phone (call or text)	45%
Other	11%
Social Media	7%
Does not communicate	1%
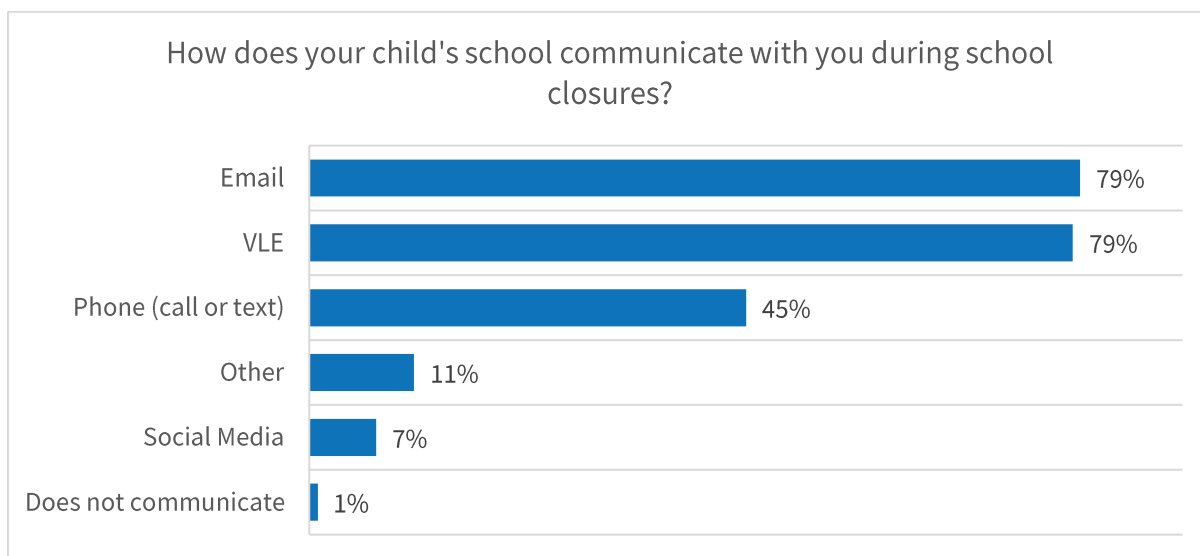
Figure 18 School communication: mode of communication

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

4. 3   Focus of school communications

In terms of the focus of school communications, the vast majority of parents (93 per cent) reported that school communication focused on providing schoolwork. Many schools also communicated to provide support for the child and/or for the parents with home learning. DEIS schools were more likely to provide wellbeing advice than other schools[16]. Only a quarter of schools focused on connecting the children to their peers or to the school community. Smaller schools were somewhat more likely to provide support to parents to help their child learn[17]. In fact, the majority of parents (68 per cent) reported that their child's school focused on at least 2 different aspects of learning in their communications. This was associated with good-excellent school communications[18], and was also significantly correlated with higher levels of belief that the child was continuing to learn during lockdown (see chapter 5)[19].

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[16] Pearson Chi-Square=8.517, df=1, p<=.004.
[17] Pearson Chi-Square=9.523, df=4, p<=.049.
[18] Pearson Chi-Square=280.926,df=4,p<=.000.
[19] Pearson correlation: r=-.269, p=<.000, with an R^2=.07.

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What has been the focus of communication from your child's school?

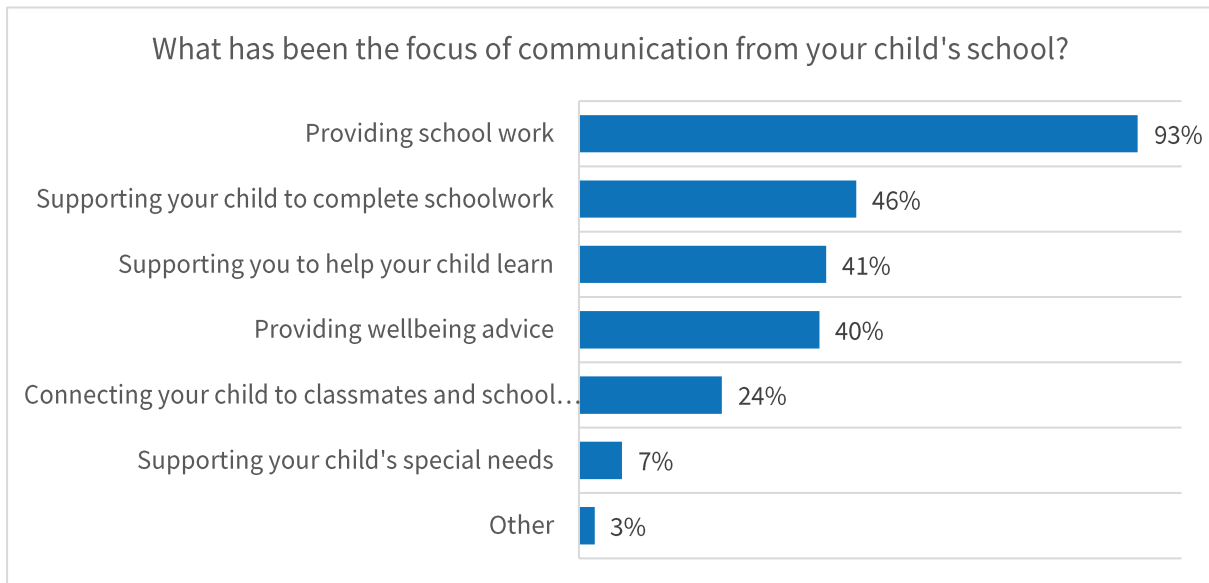|	
Providing school work	93%
Supporting your child to complete schoolwork	46%
Supporting you to help your child learn	41%
Providing wellbeing advice	40%
Connecting your child to classmates and school…	24%
Supporting your child's special needs	7%
Other	3%

Figure 19 School communication: focus of communication

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

Parents with unmet literacy learning needs reported very positively on the communications from the school. Two-thirds of this cohort report being contacted by phone (call or text); this is significantly higher than the overall cohort. Only one-fifth (as opposed to four-fifths in the main sample) report the school using a VLE to contact them. The proportion reporting email as a mode of contact is also somewhat lower (three-fifths, rather than four). Two aspects stand out as distinctly different in terms of the focus of school communications with this group of parents. There was less emphasis on providing schoolwork (2 out of 3 parents rather than nearly all parents (93 per cent)) in the full sample). There is a much greater emphasis on supporting the parent to help the child learn – three-fifths of parents (9/15). This is quite a different emphasis from the parents in the full cohort where this focus is noted for only two-fifths of respondents. As the sample is small and there is a higher number of parents of children with disabilities in the sample, it is difficult to draw strong conclusions from this, but the findings may suggest that schools are focusing their support on parents with unmet literacy learning needs in supporting the home learning environment.

The focus of communication also varied between students with and without disabilities with teachers more likely to focus on providing schoolwork to students without disabilities compared to those with disabilities (86 per cent compared to 76 per cent respectively). Not surprisingly, 30 per cent of parents of children with disabilities reported that the focus of communication from schools was about supporting their child's disability or 'special need' compared to just 3 per cent of homes in which the child did not have a disability.

What has been the focus of communication from your child's school?

Category	No Disability	Disability
Providing school work	86%	76%
Supporting your child to complete schoolwork	43%	37%
Supporting you to help your child learn	37%	40%
Providing wellbeing advice	37%	35%
Connecting your child to classmates and school community	22%	23%
Supporting your child's special needs	3%	31%
Other	2%	6%

■ No Disability ■ Disability

Figure 20 Focus of school–home communication during school closures

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

4. 4   School communications: What the parents said

Over half of parents surveyed provided additional qualitative responses relating to the topic of school communication. Some were positive about their school and felt there has 'been tremendous support' since the beginning and that they 'couldn't be more helpful and supportive'. Parents appreciated where their child was given feedback and their work acknowledged by their teacher and other school staff:

I think feedback on work is very important for a child to get acknowledged for work well done and this has been so supportively done since day one. The class teacher, principal and support teacher have all been in contact every day or week to check how he's doing, excellent support all round.

I think they are doing an excellent job and I know they are there if needed.

A number of parents also expressed empathy for school personnel who themselves were managing their own difficult situations:

The school has been excellent, and we cannot expect too much of them as they have their own families to care for.

Other parents had a more negative experience of communication with their school during closures. These comments related to their child not receiving adequate feedback and the sense that it was a one-way communication channel from the school to home:

It's a one-way communication process at the moment from the school's teacher just emailing work and posting activities on Seesaw – there is no 2 way comms – they don't seem to seek or want feedback from parents and there is no proper review of the child's work. Most of the feedback from the teachers which we upload on Seesaw is just a like emoji – I'm not sure if the teacher is even reading or reviewing what's being uploaded?

They use Seesaw but only using it to send scanned pictures of schoolbooks. They are not uploading videos which would continue learning and no feedback is provided to the child on work submitted. The learning element has stopped.

Some parents felt that more direct interaction was needed with the teacher in order to engage the child in learning:

At least sporadic direct contact with teacher would be helpful. No direct interaction with teacher since school closure in March without school books is a problem. Parents may not have the same authority level as teachers when it comes to teaching school's curriculum.

A number of parents stressed the need for their child to see 'their teacher every morning' and have a 'live connection' with their class rather than depending on a weekly email:

> *Some online classes would be of value, maybe an hour a day at normal school start time. It would add some structure to the day and would help set out what needs to be done for the day and the kids might be more inclined to do it knowing they were seeing their teacher every morning.*

> *It has all been through email for her class but I think she would really have benefitted from frequent small group zoom sessions*

Others also noted that they felt the school 'could have done more' and was leaving the responsibility for learning with the parents. They did not welcome the weekly 'list of homework' sent to them without associated 'live classrooms via social media'. Some criticised the ad hoc nature of work being sent home by their school and the lack of initiative of the class teacher to contact and engage the child:

> *The school has had a pretty laissez fare attitude, sending a homework sheet once per week (junior infants). More recently there has been a short check in on Zoom once per week but that is very recent. No directed learning and no homework to be submitted. The teacher does respond when approached but only at parents initiative.*

Some parents compared 'how different schools work' in their communication with families at home. They were frustrated at the inconsistency across schools and the resulting lack of engagement of their child during school closures:

> *There is a complete lack of consistency with each schools approach. Other primary schools in my area have continued to deliver lessons on zoom – there has being no class since lockdown. My daughter has lost all interest – each week they send a long list of work but do not correct it.*

A number of parents called for more creative approaches to learning to be introduced such as linking learning to practical life skills that parents have:

> *Practical life experiences. Learning how things grow, learning how to prepare food, household chores. There is time to teach these things now.*

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Because not all learning is curriculum based, they can learn many other things outside of school.

Some reported that they 'had given up' and prepared their own work for their children:

Dishing out homework is not continuing education. I've given up and gotten them to read every day and to make presentations about what they've read. Teaching and learning must continue. Not emails. Work must be meaningful and feedback given.

Feedback and the delivery of online sessions were seen as the answer to this both during lockdown but also in September if and when children return to school:

The children would make more of an effort if they had online lessons every day with their teacher.

In summary, although most parents were satisfied with the communications from schools, many of them identified ways in which the schools could improve their communications with parents and children.

4.5   Summary

This chapter focused on the communication of schools with parents and children. Overall most parents were happy with the quality of communication from schools across all school types. The classroom teacher and, for a quarter of parents, the principal were noted as key useful contacts. Other school personnel (home school liaison coordinators, learning support teachers and special needs assistants) were noted as valuable for particular parent groups. Reporting of multiple contacts within the school was strongly associated with high-quality school communication. The most common modes of communication were email and VLE but phone communication by call or text message was prevalent in disadvantaged settings. All of these communication modes are associated with high-quality communication, which would suggest that schools are appropriately tailoring how they are connecting to parents to different contexts.

In terms of the areas of focus for school communications, the vast majority of schools used their communication channels to provide schoolwork. In addition, many schools

also focused on supporting children and parents with home learning as well as wellbeing advice. A broader focus of school communications, beyond the basic provision of schoolwork, was strongly associated with perceived high-quality communication. This would suggest that it is important for schools to diversify both the message and the messengers to best support parents and children with home learning. This is emphasised in the analysis of parents' responses to open questions. Over half of the parents provided responses on open items relating to school communications, suggesting that this is an area of critical concern for them. Many parents reported examples of excellent contact and communication from schools, but equally many parents noted examples of poor communication.

Poor communication was typically represented as one-way communication with little opportunity for interaction or personalised input from the teacher. Parents noted Zoom and phone calls, modes of communication that emphasise personal and immediate interaction, as being valuable for supporting their child. They felt that the teacher's presence could impart both authority and structure to the home learning context. Parents also highlighted feedback as an essential component of school interactions with them and their children.

5 Children's continuity of learning during school closures

For the purposes of this report *continuity of learning* is understood to represent parental perception of whether or not their child is continuing to learn to an adequate degree during the school closures. It was measured by response to the question: *Do you feel that this child is continuing to learn enough during the Covid-19 shutdown?* Responses were measured on a 5-point scale with the following options: 'definitely yes', 'probably yes', 'maybe', 'probably not', 'definitely not'. In order to conduct binary logistic regressions this variable was recoded such that the 'definitely' and 'probably yes' options were adequate, or high levels of continuity of learning, and the 'maybe', 'probably not' and 'definitely not' options as inadequate or low.

5.1 Continuity of learning during school closures

A small majority of parents feel their child did continue to learn enough during school closures (55 per cent). However, there is a substantial proportion of parents who did not feel that their child continued to learn – 27 per cent of respondents (112 parents of which 71 responded their child was definitely not continuing to learn). This aligns with preliminary findings from Flynn et al (2020) who report that 52 per cent of parents stated their children were learning less during school closures. There is no relationship in the data between continuity of learning and the child's gender, the parent's gender or the region in which they live.
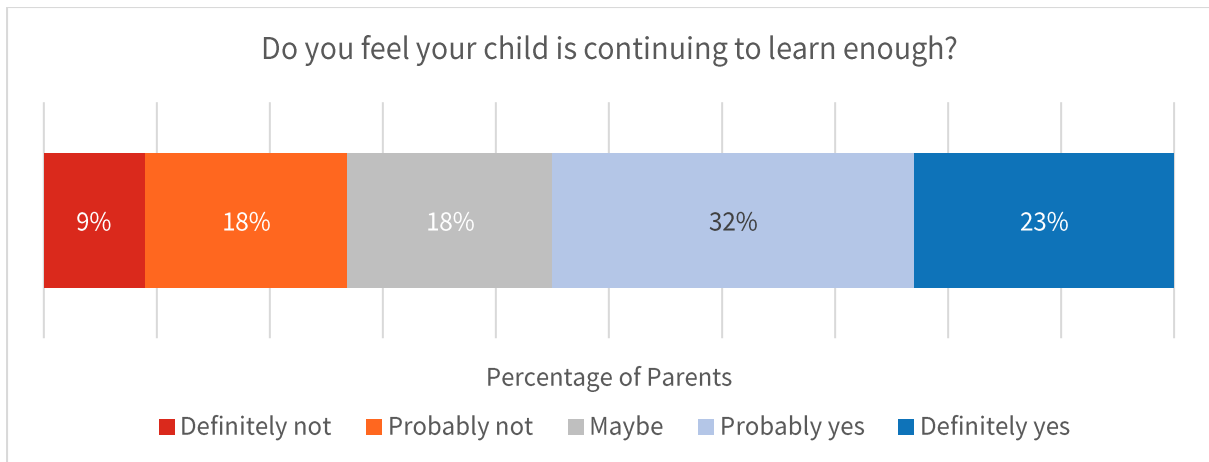
Do you feel your child is continuing to learn enough?

| 9% | 18% | 18% | 32% | 23% |

Percentage of Parents

■ Definitely not ■ Probably not ■ Maybe ■ Probably yes ■ Definitely yes

Figure 21 Child's continuity of learning

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

There is also no significant relationship between any school variables and the parent's perception of their child's learning (school size, gender mix, DEIS status or setting), although parents who reported having poor internet connection were more likely to report that they felt their child was probably or definitely not learning enough.

Parents in multilingual families (see 2. 2. 1) were more likely to report that they felt their children were continuing to learn.[20] This is consistent across English- and Irish-medium schools. Given the strong empirical evidence for transfer of skills across languages (Cummins and Ó Duibhir, 2012), which forms the basis for the new Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019), this could be considered support for multilingual education. However, concerns were raised in relation to parents who have unmet literacy learning needs or speak a language other than that spoken in the school.

> *I am well educated and understand the curriculum and English is my first language. For those who were not born in Ireland I can imagine it is more difficult.*

Parents of children with disabilities were more likely to report not thinking their child is continuing to learn compared to other parents in the survey. Thirty-eight per cent of these

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[20] Pearson Chi-Square=6.655, df=1 p<=.010.

parents reported 'probably' or 'definitely not' compared to 27 per cent of other parents in the survey.

Do you feel that this child is continuing to learn enough during the COVID-19 shutdown?

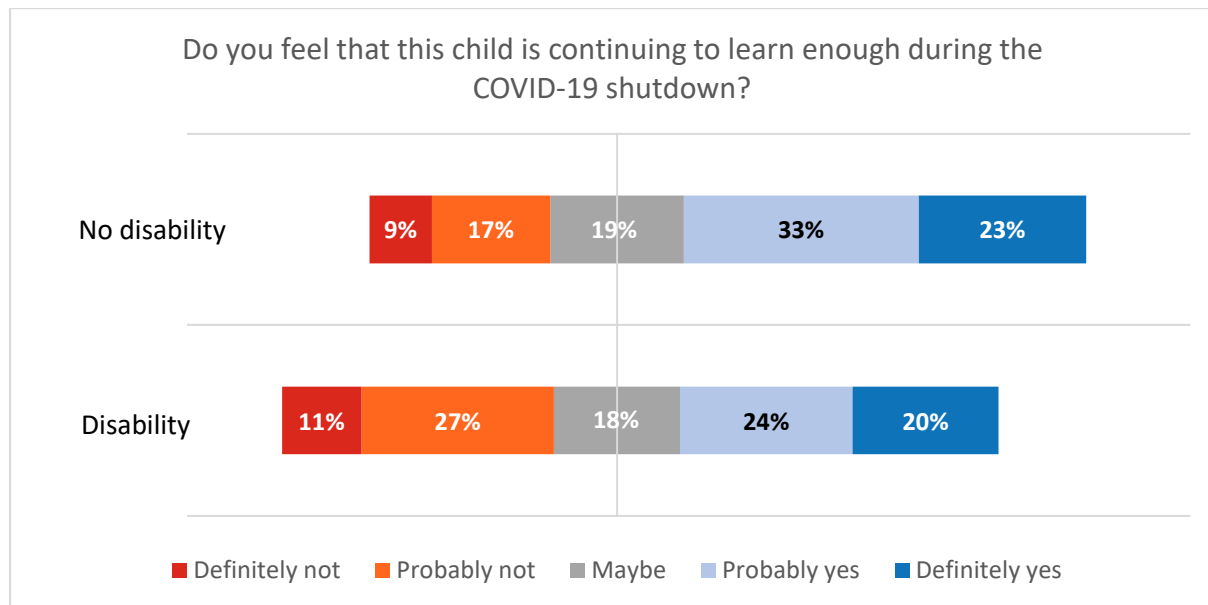|	Definitely not	Probably not	Maybe	Probably yes	Definitely yes
No disability	9%	17%	19%	33%	23%
Disability	11%	27%	18%	24%	20%

Figure 22 Child is continuing to learn, by disability

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

Qualitative responses support the quantitative results that parents of children with disabilities have serious concerns about the negative impact of school closures on their child's continuity of learning:

> *He has ADHD so it's hard to get him motivated outside of a school routine.*

> *My child is on the Autism Spectrum and attends a special school, he has two other siblings one of whom also is on the Autism Spectrum. I work part-time from home and my husband works outside the home. It's a lot of pressure.*

> *The restrictions have stopped the assessment of their needs and therefore we are unable to meet his needs in the home.*

5.2   Factors impacting continuity of learning: regression model

This section examines in more detail the factors influencing lower perceived continuity of learning during school closures using multilevel logistic regression modelling. The descriptive analysis presented thus far has illustrated the relationship between continuity

of learning and a number of child, parent or household characteristics such as whether the child is in junior or senior primary or whether the home has a good internet connection. This section explores the relationships between different parent, child, home and school characteristics in a regression model in order to identify the individual impact of particular factors as predictors of parents' perception of their child's continuity of learning [21]. This section presents the results in relation to child-level factors, school communications factors and parental confidence factors in turn. Table 2 Factors influencing continuity of learning summarises the findings, showing the factors found to predict low perceived continuity of learning during school closures[22].

Interestingly, although parental (age, gender, employment status, highest level of education, etc.) and school characteristics (DEIS status, language medium, gender mix, size, etc.) were taken into consideration, none of these factors emerged as significant predictors of lower perceived continuity of learning.

Model 1: *Child characteristics* considered included gender, whether the child had a disability, and whether they were in the junior (Junior Infants – 2nd class) or senior (3rd – 6th class) end of primary school. While gender did not emerge as a predictor, the other two variables did, with parents of children with a disability 1.5 times more likely to report lower perceived continuity of learning than those without, and those with children in the senior end of primary school 1.4 times more likely to report inadequate continuity of learning.

Model 2: *Communications with school.* The second model takes the child's characteristics into account, and explores factors associated with communications with the school into

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[21] In the survey data, a number of parent, child, school and home factors may be inter-related and so may occur concurrently. A regression model allows us to control for a number of factors simultaneously and thereby estimate the extent to which the factors predict the outcome in question. As the outcome variable is binary ('maybe/not continuing to learn enough' contrasted against 'definitely continuing to learn enough'), a binary logistic regression model is used.

[22] Negative coefficients mean that a factor is associated with a lower chance of having low perceived continuity of learning and positive coefficients mean that a factor is associated with a greater chance of low perceived continuity of learning.

consideration. Poor reported quality of communication with the school is a predictor of perceived low continuity of learning, as is a focus on at most one area. Of the 32 per cent of respondents who reported focus on at most one area, the vast majority (84 per cent) said that the only communication from the school was in relation to the provision of schoolwork. In fact, parents who reported no communication, or only communication in relation to the provision of schoolwork were almost 2.1 times more likely to report inadequate continuity of learning for their child. In addition, the 20 per cent of respondents who reported poor internet were 1.8 times more likely to report lower levels of continuity of learning for their child. Interestingly, the communication with school model appears to be a mediating factor for the significance of the disability of the child; once these variables are added to the model, the disability status loses significance. Parents of children with disabilities were more likely to report contact with multiple personnel in the school including the learning support teacher and special needs assistants and this was associated with good home-school communication and this may have mitigated the impact on parents' perception of their child's continuity of learning.

Model 3: *Factors influencing parental confidence.* It is very clear from this model that factors which negatively impact on parental confidence in their capacity to support their child have a significant effect on their perception of their child's continuity of learning. Parents who feel that they do not know the curriculum (32 per cent), and those who do not feel that they know what is important for their child to learn (18 per cent) are respectively 1.6 and 2.1 times more likely to feel their child's continuity of learning is inadequate. A lack of time (20 per cent), insufficient resources (7 per cent) and a lack of support in the home (5 per cent) also came out as significant predictors, with parents reporting these barriers respectively 2.1, 2.9 and 2.8 times more likely to report of lower levels of continuity of learning.

Table 2 Factors influencing continuity of learning

Factor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	-.363©	-.729©	-4.137***
Child Characteristics			
Disability	.436*	.388©	.243
Senior Primary	.320*	.392*	.476**
Comms with School			
High-Quality Communication		-.315**	-.255*
Less than two areas of focus		.737***	.603**
Poor Internet		.587**	.545**
Barriers to Parental Capacity to help			
Curriculum knowledge			.417*
What is important?			.764**
Time			.734***
Resources			1.179**
Support at home			.927*
Nagelkerke R2	.016	.136	.241

Note: From a logistic regression model.

*** $p<.001$; ** $p<.01$; * $p<.05$; © **$p<.10$.**

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

In summary, taking account of child, parent and school factors, parents were more likely to report that their child had continued to learning during school closures if the child was in junior primary, home-school communication was perceived to be good, communications from school focused on more than just providing school work, the household had a good internet connection and parents felt they knew what the child needed to learn and the parent had the time, resources and support at home to help.

5. 3   Factors impacting continuity of learning: comparing junior and senior primary

As the child's progression in the primary school system – identified by whether they were in junior (second class or below), or senior primary (third class and above) – emerged as a significant predictor of their perceived continuity of learning, it was clear that, in addition

to the modelling of the full cohort, each of these groups should be considered separately. In particular, while family learning activities were highly correlated with parents' perception of continuity of learning (see section 3.4), the level of engagement with such practices was significantly different for parents of junior and senior primary school children. In order to fully examine the contribution of family learning practices at junior and senior primary levels, the next two subsections present separate regression models for the responses of parents of junior primary children and senior primary children in turn to explore predictors of continuity of learning at each level.

5.3.1   Factors impacting continuity of learning at junior primary level

This section presents the results of the regression model in relation to child-level, school communication and parental confidence factors. Similar to the full cohort model in section 5.2 above, neither school nor respondent characteristics were found to be significant predictors of perceived continuity of learning at junior primary level. The disability of the child was significant in the first model, with parents of a child with a disability 1.8 times more likely to report lower levels of learning. However, again similar to the overall cohort, the significance of disability status was mediated by the addition of variables relating to communication with the school.

Addition of family learning practices to the model highlighted that those parents who engaged more with their child in relation to literacy (reading, writing, telling/inventing stories, etc.) and non-literacy focused activities (exercise, arts and crafts, baking, etc.), were significantly more likely to consider their child as having good continuity of learning.

The barriers linked to reduced parent capacity to help their child that were identified as predictors of their perception of continuity of learning were the same in the junior primary model as for the full cohort (Table 2). Interestingly, the addition of barriers associated with parent clarity on the curriculum and learning goals (what it is important for the child to learn) negated the significance of family literacy practices as a predictor of parent perception of child learning. There is a strong association between parents who report not

knowing what is important for their child to learn and the most common literacy practices of reading[23] and writing[24] with the child. This would suggest that the value of family literacy practices to positively impact on children's learning in junior primary needs to be clearly and strongly communicated to parents in order to enhance and increase these practices in homes.

Table 3 Factors influencing perceived continuity of learning in junior primary

Factor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	-.182	-.710	-1.788**	-5.661***
Child Characteristics				
SEN	.594*	.530©	.535©	.427
Comms with School				
High-Quality Communication		-.472***	-.434***	-.340**
No provision of schoolwork		1.110*	.900*	.758
Poor Internet		.584*	.569*	.516*
Family Learning Practices				
Literacy focused			-.179*	-.150
Non-literacy focused			-.179**	-.209**
Barriers to Parental Capacity to help				
Curriculum knowledge				.622*
What is important?				.869**
Time				.751**
Resources				1.270**
Support at home				1.028*
Nagelkerke R2	.012	.129	.193	.326

Note: From a logistic regression model.

*** $p<.001$; ** $p<.01$; * $p<.05$; © $p<.10$.

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

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[23] Pearson Chi-Square= 6.411, df=1, p<=.011
[24] Pearson Chi-Square= 5.520, df=1, p<=.019

In summary, taking account of child, parent and school factors, parents of children in junior primary school were more likely to report that their child had continued to learning during school closures if home-school communication was perceived to be good, the household had a good internet connection and parents felt they had the time, resources and support at home to help and they had sufficient knowledge of the curriculum and what it was important for the child to learn, for junior primary this entails a strong focus on emergent literacy skills.

5.3.2 Factors impacting continuity of learning at senior primary level

Only three significant predictors of perceived inadequate continuity of learning of children at senior primary level were identified: schools communicating with families beyond just providing schoolwork, parents engaging in general family learning activities with their children and parents having the time to help.

The first predictor is related to communication from the school and in particular those parents who reported the communication as having at most one area of focus. More specifically, of the 31 per cent of parents who responded in this way, the majority (81 per cent) reported that the only communication from their child's school during lockdown had been in relation to the provision of schoolwork. Such parents were 3.8 times more likely to report inadequate continuity of learning.

Parents who reported engaging in higher levels of non-literacy focused family learning activities were more likely to feel their child was continuing to learn in an appropriate manner. It is likely that the literacy-focused activities did not emerge as significant in this case as senior primary children would typically have more established literacy skills and the family literacy practices are particularly relevant to the development of emergent literacy skills for junior primary.

The final predictor at senior primary related to parents' available time. For this cohort, this is the only significant factor that related to parental capacity to help their children.

Table 4 Factors influencing perceived continuity of learning in senior primary

Factor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	-1.019***	-1.810***	-2.630***
Comms with School			
Less than two areas of focus	1.428***	1.380***	1.331***
Family Learning Practices			
Non-literacy focused		-.197**	-.197**
Barriers to Parental Capacity to help			
Time			1.037**
Nagelkerke R2	.125	.177	.198

Note: From a logistic regression model.

*** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; © p<.10.

Source: Family Digital Literacy Survey during Covid-19

5.3 Summary

Although a small majority (55 per cent) of parents felt their child's continuity of learning during lockdown was sufficient, 45 per cent of respondents were unsure or did not agree that their child had continued to learn as they would have expected. In order to identify predictors of being in the cohort of parents who did not agree that their child's continuity of learning was adequate, multilevel logistic regression modelling was used. The predictors that emerged through the statistical analysis were borne out by parents' qualitative responses in relation to their child's continuity of learning.

This analysis identified that parents of children in senior primary were 1.4 times more likely to report insufficient continuity of learning than parents of children in junior primary, and that parents of children with a disability were 1.5 times more likely not to report adequate continuity of learning.

> *I have a few concerns regarding my daughter's ability to read as she is only in junior infants I'm wondering am I making too much fuss; she loves the maths but her*

reading skills are a bit behind and I'm worried it will effect her I'm also worried for my ASD son.

Quality of, and areas of focus of, communication with schools also emerged as predictors of perceived continuity of learning. Specifically, parents who reported being provided with schoolwork alone, with no other communication from the school, were 2.1 times more likely to consider their child's continuity of learning as inadequate in the full cohort, a figure that rose to over 3.5 in the senior primary group.

She is disinterested, not engaging in the work sent home even though I try daily to help her. Not enough structure for her to want to do work. Think if school was stricter, provided more guidance, it would help. Google Classroom or other online device like my secondary child has would have helped. Because of no interaction with teacher she quickly tuned out. To email work and say do that is no support what so ever.

Parental confidence in their own capacity to support their child also emerged as a significant predictor, with a lack of curriculum knowledge, insufficient understanding of what is important for their child at a given point, and a lack of time, resources and support at home all contributing factors at the full cohort and junior primary levels. A lack of time was the only barrier to parents' capacity to support their child that spanned across all three models.

I work remotely every day as does my husband. We still have work deadlines to meet. It is difficult to allocate a period of time daily.

Parents can't work at home and give the time for teaching and revert to supervision of tasks rather than teaching the curriculum.

Parental engagement in family learning practices was also associated with their capacity to support their child. Higher levels of family learning practices were significant predictors of better perceived continuity of learning, with literacy-focused practices particularly influential in junior primary.

Education is such a wide spanning thing; I've realised it's not just about learning from a book as they've been doing that with me and I still feel they've missed a lot.

6   Conclusions and recommendations

This study provides a unique insight into parents' experiences and concerns in relation to home learning with their child during school closures. This chapter summarises the key findings and outlines the main policy recommendations that arise from this.

6.1 Summary of findings

Just over half of the parents in this study were confident that their children were continuing to learn enough during school closures. Worryingly, **over a quarter of parents reported that they feel their child was not continuing to learn enough** during this time. This finding is consistent across all parents regardless of socio-economic status or school characteristics. **Parents of children with a disability are more likely to report that their children were not continuing to learn** enough during the school closures. However, this effect is mitigated by good school communications (section 5.5. 22). **Parents of children in senior primary were also more likely to report that their children were not continuing to learn enough**. Parents identified the adults in the household as the key support in helping their child learn. Materials and digital resources in the home as well as contact and materials from schools are also identified as important.

In terms of the supporting adult, over **three-quarters of parents reported high confidence in supporting their child's learning at home**. School supports are a major factor in high confidence levels as is knowing what it is important for the child to learn and having the time to help. However, **14 per cent of respondents state they do not feel able to help their child**. Parents of children with disabilities reported feeling less able to support their child's learning during school closures. Critical to parent confidence are a **focused knowledge of what the child needs to learn, knowledge of the curriculum, and time**.

In terms of resources in the home, **one-fifth of households did not have access to a good internet connection**. There were a range of different devices reported across all

homes with a high demand on these devices in most homes (3.3 average number of household members relying on devices for work or study). **Tablets were readily available** in 79 per cent of homes regardless of socio-economic status. However, **laptop or desktop computers**, while available in 84 per cent of homes, were **less likely in households where parents were unemployed or did not have a third-level qualification**. While **access to devices** is broad as noted in Eivers (2019), it is **not universal for all device types** and this should be considered in providing for home learning resources.

The family learning activities reported by parents present a **rich profile of engagement with their child extending far beyond the completion of schoolwork**. Family literacy practices for emergent literacy are very prevalent in the families of children in junior primary school.

As regards contact and communications with schools, **parents were happy overall with the communication from schools** given the circumstances, with 79 per cent of parents reporting it as excellent or good. Parents reported schools communicating across a range of modes including email, Virtual Learning Environment, phone and social media. In line with existing research, DEIS schools reported higher use of phone communications (Devitt et al., 2020). There was no variation in parents rating of the quality of school communication according to school characteristics. The quality of school communications was however, strongly associated with the number of different contact people in the school and the focus of school communications. **Schools that communicated solely to provide work for students had significantly worse ratings on school communications**. Those that communicated across different areas of focus (e.g. supporting children, supporting parents, wellbeing advice, etc.) had significantly better ratings. **Where parents had contact with multiple people in the school (teacher, principal, SNA, HSCL, etc.) they were more likely to report school communications as excellent**. The parent responses on open questions identified the following as characteristic of poor communication from schools: one-way communication from the

school, not providing feedback on work, limited social presence from people in the school and limited opportunities for interaction.

In the regression model examining parent perceptions of their child's continuity of learning, **poor school communication factors and lack of parent time** to support learning were **predictive of more negative perceptions of continuity of learning** in the full cohort and across junior and senior primary. In **junior primary, family literacy activities were highly correlated with parent clarity on learning goals for the child** ('what it is important for the child to learn now') and knowledge of the curriculum. These were **predictive of more positive perceptions of continuity of learning at junior primary**. This could suggest that some parents have the necessary educational resources to establish a rich home literacy environment, but that others may require additional support from schools to establish this in their homes. At **senior primary, school communication beyond provision of schoolwork and use of some family learning practices** were predictive of more positive perceptions of continuity of learning, in addition to the factor relating to parent time.

6.2 Recommendations for policy

The findings of this study have clear implications for contingency planning for potential future primary school closures and for blended learning requirements of partial or staggered school re-opening as well as for primary education more generally. It is clear from the analysis presented that greater support is required for parents to support home learning, some of which can be addressed at system level, some at school and class level and some in the home.

The recommendations below are solutions-focused and address the key areas of need and the barriers identified in the report. The recommendations address parents, school leaders and educators and stakeholders at government level. While many of the recommendations are applicable at school and educator level, they require system-level resourcing and support to be achievable. Similarly, recommendations that apply in the

home may require explicit supports from schools and/or the education system more generally.

Parent Recommendations

Continue and extend all the family learning and family literacy practices you are already doing. For parents, the key message from this report is that **family learning is effective**. All of the everyday activities which develop literacy, numeracy and other learning are hugely valuable for children whether as part of household chores or leisure activity. They provide a meaningful context in which children can learn and practice their developing skills. There are many useful resources available online to support and enhance these practices in simple ways.[25]

School- and Educator-level Recommendations

Home-School Communications

Broaden the scope of school communications beyond providing work to learners. The findings in chapter 5 clearly point to the need for schools to go beyond merely providing work to learners and calls on them to broaden the remit of support and communications to families. As summarised by one parent respondent:

> *Dishing out homework is not continuing education.*

The factors negatively impacting on continuity of learning from the parent perspective are varied but the solutions can be considered in a coherent and integrated way. Time is identified as a critical issue for parents, as is high-quality school communication that extends beyond the provision of schoolwork and provides clarity on the learning goals and curriculum focus for their children. Lack of time, particularly for working parents, is not something that can be easily addressed during a period of lockdown. However, it is

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[25] For a list of a number of available resources, see here: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/5720cc-learning/. See also the video series produced for parents supporting their children's learning at home available here by TCD School of Education: Literacy on the Loose, Numeracy in the Now and Home Languages Home Learning, available here: https://www.tcd.ie/Education/research/Family-Digital-Literacy/

possible to focus communications from schools in order to provide the desired clarity to parents and in so doing, to maximise parents' time in supporting their children where they most need support.

Prioritise clear, learning goal-focused communication with parents. This report highlights the crucial importance of communication with parents in supporting children learning at home. As noted above, parents face many barriers in supporting their children, most notably time and clarity on where to focus the time they have with their child. In order to address the time constraints and high stress-levels of parents brought on by school closures, communications about children's learning need to clarify the learning outcomes. This will help parents understand the purpose of their child's work and facilitate parents identifying when and if their children are meeting those goals. Explicit focus on goals allows activity to be provided in meaningful and manageable chunks. Universal Design for Learning principles in relation to multiple means of engagement, representation, action and expression can support teachers in offering learning goal-oriented opportunities for children to access, build and internalise learning (CAST, 2018).

Provide feedback to learners. Parent comments emphasised the value of informative feedback on their child's motivation and learning. DES (2020g) notes that many schools were providing feedback on learning to children during the school closures after the initial upheaval of the closures had passed. The data in this report would suggest that this is not universal across primary schools. Following Assessment for Learning and Universal Design for Learning principles, meaningful feedback can be integrated with focused communication to parents on learning goals. Furthermore, clarity on the learning outcomes can support parents' and children's own ability to generate meaningful feedback themselves through parent or self-assessment. Providing answer sheets or rubrics for assessment when appropriate, can support parents and children in checking their own work.

Maintain meaningful social presence in communicating with children and families.
The value of the social contact with individuals in schools was noted in the survey findings but the parents' comments highlighted the full significance of the personal connection to individuals in the school to support and motivate children. Parents noted how even short daily contact in particular could provide structure and focus to the daily learning for children. In a face-to-face school environment, the teacher establishes norms of behaviour and learning with the children in the classroom. Increased visibility and social presence of the teacher could go some way to establishing this norm of behaviour in the home learning environment during school closures.

Maintain contact from the wider school community. This report notes that for many parents, contact from more than one person in the school was associated with excellent home-school communications. This was especially the case for parents of children with disabilities where the contact from the class teacher but also the learning support teacher and/or special needs assistant was highly valued. For schools with a many different actors including teachers, SNAs, HSCLs and more, this would entail collaboration between colleagues to ensuring clarity of communication to parents.

Identify the available resources in homes in order to target home learning focus. This report has highlighted the difference in provision of digital and material resources across different homes of the parents in this study. In order to address the needs of children, it is critical to identify resources available in homes and to tailor provision of home learning resources to this. For example, where families do not have printers, packs may need to be posted or digital interactive alternatives identified if appropriate. Similarly, where children have access to their own tablet, home learning resources that work on those operating systems or devices should be prioritised.

System-Level Recommendations

Professional Development

Prioritise professional development for full school communities on communicating effectively with parents. The DES Digital learning report (2020g) highlighted the need for
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CPD in relation to digital learning. Our study highlights the critical importance of a specific aspect of this that is highly relevant at primary: the quality and focus of schools communicating with parents in order to support children's learning at home. The recommendations for school communications noted above go far beyond the usual remit of home-school communications and schools would need substantial support to establish consistent good practice that draws on expertise in the field of communication as well as education.[26] DES and PDST have a crucial role in supporting this professional development including providing templates and guidelines for schools and teachers.

School-based Family Learning Programmes

Ensure school-based family learning programmes can operate within health guidelines for social distancing. This report emphasises the value of family learning practices in homes during school closures, in particular family literacy practices for junior primary school. This aligns with a strong evidence base in Ireland and internationally for the social and economic value and effectiveness of family learning programmes (SOLAS, 2020a; NIACE, 2013). However, anecdotal evidence from people in the field would suggest that the use of family rooms in schools typically used for family learning programmes may be curtailed or restricted with Covid-19 guidelines, or due to a need for additional classroom space for children. Given the critical importance of family learning in general, and during any potential future school closures, creative solutions through distance or blended learning, or in alternative venues that follow the most recent evidence-based guidelines on family learning provision from SOLAS (2020b) must be found.

Home Infrastructure

Provide internet alternatives for families in need. Access to broadband in the parent survey approximates the provision of broadband nationally. While the national broadband plan will address the needs of families in the long-term, in the event of future school closures or blended learning, solutions must be found in the short term as a good internet

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[26] For example, cross-disciplinary support webinar, short videos and tip sheets produced by TCD School of Education, NALA, Learnovate and Mothertongues available here: https://www.tcd.ie/Education/research/Communicating-effectively-with-parents-supports-for-schools/

connection is predictive of parent perception of continued child learning during shutdown. Three potential options include:

1. providing mobile broadband access for families in need where coverage is available;
2. greater reliance on phone contact to establish connections to parents as has been the case in particular in DEIS schools to date;
3. provide print-out packs or digital storage devices of materials to parents to obviate or at least reduce the need for a good internet connection. These can draw on the significant resources available through scoilnet.ie for example.

This report focuses solely on parents. However, the recent DES (2020g) report on digital learning highlights the need for high-speed dependable broadband also in schools. In the event that teachers are on site in schools supporting children at home, this will be critical for successful home learning

School Infrastructure

Address school ICT infrastructure. Many of the schools were using a VLE to work with parents and this was associated with high-quality communication as were email and phone communications. The DES report on Digital Learning released in July 2020 highlighted that schools that did not have an established digital infrastructure found it more difficult to transition to home learning. The provision of VLE infrastructure for post-primary has been noted as a necessity at post-primary level (Devitt et al., 2020). The findings of this report would suggest that coherent ICT infrastructure is also critical at primary level, in particular allowing a consistent approach for class teachers across different class groups. This is not solely a matter of resourcing ICT provision for schools. Clear guidance and support for schools is required in conducting needs analysis and identifying and sourcing the most appropriate structures and tools for their needs.

Resourcing

Resource schools to provide materials required in homes for home learning. This study highlights the value of material resources (such as pencils, colours, paper) and digital devices (such as tablets, computers and printers) in the home to support learning. The report also identified these as key difficulties for families lacking these resources. While schools cannot resource all needs in all homes, some schools, in particular in areas of disadvantage, have provided these resources to families and this need will continue in the event of future school closures. In particular, learning packs containing printed learning materials, pencils, colours and so on can obviate the need for printers and devices in the home, and may be a cost-effective way to address needs at least in the short term. These additional costs on schools need to be resourced.

Digital Devices

Prioritise the use of low cost, low-floor devices for digital learning in homes. As regards digital devices, it is worth noting that this study highlights the availability and existing uses of tablets in many homes for learning with and without a parent. These devices are typically lower cost than computers. They also have a lower floor to entry for users typically with more intuitive interfaces and less maintenance required. For this reason, in developing Continuing Professional Development provision for teachers and in considering provision of resources for homes, consideration should be given to how tablets may be deployed to support learning.

In summary, through this research we have identified numerous factors that have had an impact on children's learning at home, and on parent's capacity to support this during school closures. The recommendations that arise from this can be considered by stakeholders, at government and school levels as well as by parents, in order to ensure the highest quality education for Irish primary school children. These recommendations range from infrastructural actions to ensure equity of access to resources, to in-school recommendations for practice and activities for parents to engage in at home with their children.

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