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It Wasn't All Zoom and Gloom: Teacher and Student Experiences of Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic in an Irish Post-Primary School

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Abstract: Research into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational institutions in Ireland has primarily focused on third-level courses and initial teacher education programmes. Little research has captured the experiences of practising post-primary teachers and their students as they made the transition to online learning. This study begins by examining the digital context of post-primary education in Ireland prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, paying particular attention to ICT policies and their recommendations. Following this, the importance of schools as more than a centre for curriculum delivery is examined, as well as the potential challenges adolescents face in non-face-to-face contexts. In total, 49 teachers and 130 students participated in the study by completing online surveys about their online learning experiences. The findings indicate that although teachers felt underprepared, many benefits to online learning were identified, especially around assessment and the provision of asynchronous content. Students enjoyed elements of online learning but felt overwhelmed and isolated.

Keywords: online learning; COVID-19; ICT policy; teacher CPD

1. Introduction

In March 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic sweeping the world, the Irish government, along with most other governments, announced the radical step of closing all education institutions across the country. Teachers and students in post-primary education left the comfort of their physical classrooms and, with little or no preparation, began the process of online teaching and learning. While some studies (e.g., [1–3]) have examined the opportunities and challenges experienced by Irish pre-service teachers during this time, few have captured the challenging transition [4] to online teaching as experienced by practicing post-primary teachers and their students. This paper addresses this gap by detailing a specific school's response to the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring the experiences of teachers and students during this time, and outlining implications for the future.

2. Context

From the mid-1990s onwards, education policy in Ireland has sought to realise the potential of ICT in post-primary education [5]. In the intervening years, numerous strategy documents and reports have evaluated the progress made, emphasised barriers to success, and made recommendations for the future. The ICT framework for schools [6] provided a guide for teachers in

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embedding ICT in the curriculum and assessment across four key areas: (1) exploring the potential of ICT to create, communicate, and collaborate; (2) understanding and applying knowledge of how ICT functions, including safe practice and maintenance; (3) using ICT for thinking and learning, including enquiry, assessing information, solving problems, and expressing ideas; and (4) developing a critical appreciation for the role of ICT in society. The ICT in Schools report [7] found that ICT use was relatively low in teaching and learning, with teachers using technology primarily as an administration tool. The report recommended that more emphasis be placed on teacher training, both at the ITE stage and through targeted CPD for all teachers, which focuses on the application of ICT in teaching and learning and fostering a culture of using ICT in their work. The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015–2020 [8] states that when used correctly, ICT can play a central role in transforming teaching, learning and assessment practices for teachers and students, but for this to happen, ICT must be embedded in everyday teaching practice. Across all of the key skills presented in the revised Junior Cycle curriculum [9], teachers are encouraged to promote a variety of ICT-enabled activities. These activities should develop students' ability to use technology in a safe and responsible way, to manage their learning, collaborate with others, express themselves meaningfully and creatively, and access, manage and share content effectively. The digital framework for post-primary schools [10] promotes innovative pedagogical approaches using digital technologies and provides descriptors for a range of digital competencies teachers should strive towards. These include using a variety of digital technologies to design learning, provide opportunities for differentiation, and formulate creative and innovative assessments for their students. This framework also promotes teacher professional development and collaboration through and regarding digital technologies, i.e., using online networks to learn about practice and to cooperate with other teachers in the development of innovative approaches. However, other documents, such as the quality framework for post-primary schools 'Looking at Our School' [11,12], make sparse reference to the use of digital technology for teaching and learning, or the enhancement and measurement of quality in this regard. While there are significant contributions to ICT in post-primary schools from a policy perspective, the translation of this policy into practice is fraught with inconsistency. Teachers' confidence levels play a major role in the day-to-day integration of digital technologies, and while some relish opportunities to trial new ICT-enabled approaches, others only use technology intermittently as the need arises, and others still lack the confidence to step outside their established practice [13,14]. This inconsistency emerges, in part, as teachers often have few opportunities to witness how technology can be effectively used to achieve student learning [15] and, despite their best intentions, are often left learning how to use digital tools and platforms themselves [16]. The COVID-19 pandemic completely altered existing motivations to use technology, with teachers having no choice but to engage with ICT for their delivery of education and, as such, may have had impacts on their preconceived notions around their current and future abilities in this regard.

We know from previous research on the nature of schooling that schools are not simply places for knowledge acquisition; they are also spaces where students grow as individuals, and make connections with peers and supportive adults [17]. A fundamental part of education for adolescents is the social engagement that happens in the classroom, on the sports field, and through extracurricular activities. While individual students may have nuanced educational goals and extracurricular interests, their collective experience and shared space offer support, encouragement and reassurance [18,19]. This sense of connection to peers builds a sense of friendship, cohesion and satisfaction among students [20] and has a positive impact on overall wellbeing [21]. Students want to feel connected; they want to feel like they are part of a community [22], which in turn creates a space that is safe for students to express their ideas and work collaboratively [23,24]. One of the challenges of online learning in this regard is that students frequently feel disconnected from their peers and their teachers [25]. Technology is often seen as a barrier to creating connection and a sense of belonging [26,27]. Creating opportunities for connection requires teachers to prepare their delivery in new ways [28,29], recognising the challenges learners face in connecting online [16].

The academic literature on promoting and sustaining third-level students' engagement in online learning environments is relatively common, e.g., [30,31]. However, given the overwhelming focus on traditional classroom teaching at the post-primary level, research in this context is less prevalent. Post-primary teachers are adept at creating engaging and collaborative lessons in face-to-face settings [16]; however, researchers such as Pressley [32] and Priyadarshini and Bhaumik [27] queried the ability of teachers to transfer these skills to online environments. Post-primary teachers may face additional challenges, over and above those experienced by third-level lecturers and their students. First, we know from research in other contexts that while online learning offers more freedom and flexibility for learners in terms of how and when they engage with material [33], success is heavily dependent on a student's ability to work autonomously and actively engage in the learning process according to their needs and wants [34]. This kind of engagement differs drastically from traditional school settings which focus on timetabling and structure, and requires far greater levels of maturity and self-regulation. Even the most self-motivated students may not possess the required learning maturity and the self-regulation, and may become overwhelmed in online environments [35]. These issues can be compounded by the very tools that are designed to promote engagement in learning online. Computers and other digital devices on the one hand provide innovative ways for students to engage with material and each other, often offering efficient ways to complete work, communicate and access information. However, they can also be used for a host of non-productive activities that exacerbate the issues of maturity and self-regulation [36].

The COVID-19 pandemic presented post-primary teachers and students with an unprecedented challenge, yet the sudden shift to online delivery affords a valuable opportunity to gain insight into this experience. Following decades of policy rhetoric and investment in technology in schools, this study captures valuable insights into the experiences of students and teachers as they embarked on a fully online delivery.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

The study participants were drawn from one post-primary school in Ireland, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a single-school study, this research was not representative of post-primary experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland. Instead, it captured a broad range of experiences from teachers within the school, and the experiences of students who were at the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate stages, both of which are critical exam years within the Irish post-primary system. As such, invitations to participate were sent to all 148 teaching staff, and to students participating in the Junior Certificate ($n = 206$) and Leaving Certificate ($n = 196$) years. Separate surveys were distributed to teachers and students using Microsoft Forms. Completion of the surveys was entirely optional, and participants were given two weeks to submit their responses. Of the 402 students, 130 completed the survey (74 Junior Certificate and 56 Leaving Certificate), representing a response rate of 32%. Of the 148 teaching staff, 49 completed and returned the survey, representing a response rate of 33%.

3.2. Description of Process

This study focused on gathering the experiences of teachers and students who engaged in online learning during the COVID-19 lockdown (March 2020 – May 2020). The school in question had previously been using a range of tools within the Microsoft Office 365 suite and, as such, teachers used Microsoft Teams to communicate with and engage students throughout this period. Teachers were advised to engage students through a blend of synchronous and asynchronous methods. A number of support measures were put in place by middle leaders who held responsibility for teaching and learning and technology in the school. These supports were focused on ensuring the successful continuation of teaching and learning activities. Supports made available to staff and students included step-by-step narrated and annotated video tutorials on topics ranging from hosting

a Teams meeting to uploading materials for students. Optional lunchtime clinics and meetings were also held, where teachers could seek assistance, advice, and support about a range of platforms and tools. Additional webinars were held for parents/guardians on how to support their children during the period of online learning. A specified email address was available to students, parents and teachers who required technical assistance.

3.3. Instruments

Data collection was carried out using two anonymous online surveys; one for teachers and one for students. Quantitative data were gathered using a series of questions where teachers and students selected from predefined options. Qualitative questions were designed to gather teacher and student opinions and feelings on various aspects of the experience of teaching and learning online. The student survey contained questions under the following themes: (1) online participation—access and engagement; and (2) experience of online learning—likes, dislikes, benefits, and challenges. The teacher survey contained questions under the following themes: (1) experience of online teaching—likes, dislikes, benefits, and challenges; (2) teacher–student engagement online—interacting with students online; and (3) training and support available—coping with the challenge.

3.4. Procedure

Surveys were distributed to students at the end of March and to teachers at the end of April 2020. Before the surveys were completed, the participants were informed about the purpose of the research and relevant ethical procedures. Participants were provided with a plain language statement, research information sheet, and informed consent documents. Data were not collected from participants who did not agree to participate on this basis.

3.5. Data Analysis

The data for this study were gathered using a Microsoft Forms electronic survey. The data were gathered using Choy's [37] survey design approach, whereby responses collected were primarily quantitative in nature, consisting of closed questions. Some open-ended questions were asked to give participants the opportunity to further explain and develop their answers and opinions, and give context to their experiences. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive analysis, and while this form of analysis cannot make inferences for general populations, it is useful for presenting patterns from within individual studies [38]. Choices were manually exported to Excel for further interrogation. Qualitative responses were analysed using thematic analysis [39]. As little research existed on online learning at the post-primary level, Hseih and Shannon's [40] conventional content analysis approach was employed, where codes were inferred from text answers with the aim of describing the phenomenon. Answers were read, and as categories emerged, answers were given appropriate codes. Weight was assigned to codes by ascertaining the number of occurrences within them, reflecting the pattern of opinions within the data. For example, in the question 'what do you dislike about online learning' one student said, 'I can't concentrate and prefer using pen and paper'. Another student responded by saying 'I find it very hard to concentrate as there are more distractions at home'. The initial code assigned to these students was ED 'Easily Distracted'. Another student said, 'I find it hard to motivate myself'. The initial code assigned to this case was MOT 'Motivation'. These initial codes were later combined to form the theme of 'Academic maturity.'

4. Findings and Discussion

Key themes and findings are now presented using the data gathered from teachers and students through the online questionnaires, followed by overall conclusions. The data revealed three key themes: (1) through professional learning opportunities, teachers bridged the gap between policy and practice; (2) from pandemic to potential—teachers enhanced their teaching and learning practices

with technology; and (3) distracted and disconnected—the challenges of online teaching and learning.

4.1. *Through Professional Learning, Teachers Bridged the Gap between Policy and Practice*

For many years, educational policy in Ireland has emphasised the incorporation of technology into teaching, learning, and assessment [6,8–10]. However, researchers have commented on teachers' general lack of proficiency in this area [15,16] and the need for professional development and ongoing support [41]. The data from this study suggest that teachers had not received adequate training prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and found the transition very difficult. From a list of options provided, 68% of teachers identified the transition as either 'challenging' ($n = 13$) or a 'steep learning curve' ($n = 19$) (see Table 1). The changed environment highlighted the need for professional development, and for teachers to adapt their practice quickly. Teachers' comments included: 'It personally highlights the need for CPD in the use of technology in the classroom' and 'I've learned a lot because I've had to'. Many teachers took advantage of the professional development opportunities provided to them by middle leaders in the school, in order to reimagine their practice [42] in this new environment. Overall, 94% ($n = 46$) of teachers availed of professional development opportunities, including support videos, recording and sharing of content, and lunchtime drop-in clinics. Teachers' comments regarding this professional development indicate a great deal of learning in terms of their digital skills. Their comments focused on two areas. First, they commented on the acquisition of new technical skills. Teachers said they were 'learning new skills, using resources I might not be otherwise using' and that the pandemic offered the 'time and excuse to trial new ICT' and 'enhance my skills'. Second, they remarked on the opportunity it provided to explore new ways of teaching and learning. They said it was 'enjoyable learning new ways to work with students' and that they were 'learning new ways to teach'. They spoke of 'learning a different medium' and 'new ways to make resources' which contributed to a 'different medium of teaching' and 'varied ways of delivering content to classes.' When reflecting on the support provided by the middle management team and support from colleagues, teachers said 'It is a great method of professional development'. When they encountered a challenge that they were unable to solve, they had collegial support to draw upon. For example, one teacher said, 'If I don't know how to do something or if something doesn't go as planned, I seek possible solutions and support from colleagues.' This was echoed by another teacher who stated, 'The impact of departmental sharing and discussions cannot be overemphasised'. The sentiment is summed up well by one teacher's comment:

What I am also enjoying is the fact that through the online communication from staff, we all get kept up-to-date and are learning from each other. E.g., if someone asks a question, we all see it and therefore learn from it. Unlike in the staffroom/ through emails when someone asks someone for help in person, we miss out on the learning!

The changed environment presented teachers with not only a complete change to their practice, but a significantly increased level of work [43]. Teachers commented that there was 'no cut-off point in online teaching' and that they felt they were 'available to each and every student at all times of the day and night' receiving a 'constant stream of emails', contending that there was a 'never-ending to-do list when teaching online' and when it came to teaching preparation and delivery there was 'lots more involved'. Teachers also commented on the blurring of boundaries between their personal and professional lives and the challenges this entailed. They said it was 'difficult to work at home due to family and lack of privacy', finding it hard to 'juggle family life with kids and teach online at the same time'. They felt 'always under pressure' and found it 'difficult to know where to draw the line'. Nevertheless, teachers displayed an overriding concern for the provision of high-quality learning experiences for their students [44], which drove their desire to learn from and support each other through the transition [13].

Table 1. Teachers' perceptions of transitioning to online teaching.

Transition Comments	No.
I'm adapting but it's a steep learning curve	19
Challenging	13
Lonely	5
Tiring	5
Interesting	4
Enjoyable	2

The data in this section suggest that on the one hand, despite decades of Irish education policy on the integration of technology into teaching and learning at the post-primary level [6,8–10], the traditionally ad hoc nature of engagement with CPD [14,45] by those that have an interest in technology meant teachers felt unprepared to deal with the technology-led environment presented by the pandemic. However, it is encouraging to note that when provided with in-house, targeted professional development opportunities and support, teachers in this study took the opportunity to upskill in this area and develop skills which may be of benefit far into the future. The collegial nature of the support provided also fostered a sense of community and shared understanding. In addition to the challenge of transitioning online, teachers also began to experience difficulties around workplace boundaries, with the introduction of online tools blurring the traditional lines and scope of teacher–student communication. The challenges of managing student–teacher communication coupled with the constant juggling of family and work obligations began to show early signs of potential teacher burnout [46] and highlight the unsustainable nature of the expectations placed on teachers during this time [29]. This may have implications on the need for codes of conduct relating to online communication and interaction between teachers and students, and the levels of support available to teachers to manage their work–life balance and professional wellbeing.

4.2. From Pandemic to Potential: Teachers Enhancing Their Teaching and Learning Practices with Technology

Many authors [47,48] and indeed numerous policy documents [8,10] have highlighted the potential benefits associated with the integration of technology into day-to-day teaching and learning activities. The data obtained from the teachers in this study suggest they experienced significant benefits, especially in relation to assessment and feedback. Overall, 73% ($n = 36$) of teachers referenced Microsoft Teams for managing student work, with 18 of those specifically mentioning the assignment features of Microsoft Teams as being invaluable for assessing students and monitoring their progress. The self-correcting nature of these resources and their ability to track student progress and learning [13] were noted as particularly beneficial. They commented that it is 'very easy to track students' work' and 'highlight any delays in submitting'. Teachers specifically mentioned that it helps 'cut down on the time we spend correcting' as 'you can bulk correct answers.'. Teachers also spoke about improvements in feedback provision, saying it is 'easier to assign feedback' and 'keep the students engaged' by providing 'formative assessment in a way that is straightforward'.

Teachers and students also highlighted the benefits in providing a variety of assessment tools and approaches. Teachers ($n = 11$) felt that online quiz tools allowed them to facilitate 'online assessment in my subject', providing an 'easy way to give homework', which was 'good to assess learning'. EdPuzzle was noted as being particularly suitable for language learners, with teachers saying it was good for 'aural practice', where students could 'improve the oral aspect of the language', 'pick up new vocabulary', and 'listen to the pronunciation.' Students also appreciated the ability to self-assess through these tools. In total, 37 students highlighted online quizzes as a benefit when learning online, with 9 specifically mentioning EdPuzzle. Students stated that they were 'properly engaged' because they would have to 'answer the questions along with' the video.

We know from previous studies that, once teachers get over the initial technical hurdles of creating digital resources, the advantages begin to become apparent [14,49]. Outside of resources directly linked to assessment and feedback, teachers in this study noted the benefits of creating and

delivering asynchronous content for their students. Many teachers ($n = 28$) spoke of using Loom and recorded PowerPoints to create, recycle, and edit content which, once recorded, could reduce their workload when designing supplementary support or revision resources for students. Teachers said that this software was 'quick and easy to use' and they really 'enjoyed using [it] for pre-recording explanations.' The presence of the teacher [50] was still facilitated through the picture-in-picture and teachers commented that this 'still gives the student your face throughout the explanation which makes it easier for them to relate to'. Loom allowed teachers to explain things in detail. For example, one teacher said it was 'very useful for speaking over worked exam questions.' Students ($n = 59$) also commented on the benefits of asynchronous tools such as Loom. They were particularly impressed with the ability to pause, rewind and re-watch content to increase their understanding. Students said, 'I can rewind videos if I don't understand certain areas', they could 'pause the videos and replay them when stuck on a concept', and they could 'go back to the video and watch how they [the teacher] answered a similar question'. Similarly, students commented on the flexibility that asynchronous content offered [51], meaning they could engage with content when they needed to. For example, one student said, 'I like that the videos are there forever, and you can re-watch them at any time compared to a class [where] you can't.'

These data support calls in national policy and the international literature for opportunities for technology integration. The data here suggest that when provided with the opportunity, or, in the case of this study, the necessity to integrate technology into their day-to-day teaching and learning practices, teachers find many benefits. Digital tools help them to not only find efficiencies in the deployment and corrections of assessments [13], but also provide variety in the style of assessment tasks that are provided to students, leveraging the range of tools at their disposal to create innovative and engaging quizzes and assessments for their students. The move to online learning also appears to have opened the teachers' eyes to the potential benefits of asynchronous content delivery, where recordings can be used to enhance and support material that is presented to students in a live manner. These tools provided teachers with new ways of explaining content and concepts, and provided students with flexible resources that could be watched and rewatched to check understanding.

4.3. *Distracted and Disconnected – Students' Challenges Learning Online*

In this section, data are presented which detail the challenges students faced in staying engaged with learning online and the social disconnect that online learning presented. Previous studies have discussed the importance of self-discipline for successful online learning [24,52] and questioned if post-primary students have the requisite maturity to excel in such environments [34]. Students in this study pointed to a range of issues related to motivation and discipline. They spoke of being easily distracted ($n = 43$), having difficulties focusing ($n = 54$), and holding a preference for teacher supervision in the classroom ($n = 53$) (see Table 2). Student comments indicated that they found concentration difficult when learning online, and at times they felt overwhelmed. Some comments spoke of concentration and motivation generally. For example, one student said, 'It's hard to stay focused and motivated for a long period of time', while another said, 'it's hard to motivate myself to do it [the work]'. Others specifically mentioned distractions. For example, one student said, 'I find it very hard to concentrate as there are more distractions at home', while another noted, 'There are so many distractions with Netflix, YouTube and Instagram, it's hard to have a routine and get up and do the work by yourself'. Other comments spoke to the fact that students felt overwhelmed and somewhat isolated working online. Students said, 'It takes me longer to do the work assigned to me and it's a bit overwhelming' and 'I start to get overwhelmed as I feel like I am on my own'.

Table 2. Student challenges with online learning.

Challenge	No.
I prefer being in the classroom as I like the interaction with my teacher and classmates	82

I find it easier as there are less distractions and interruptions	20
I am easily distracted by my phone, TV, other people, etc.	41
I find it difficult to focus and engage without the teacher present	53
Other	8

This feeling of being overwhelmed may have been exacerbated by feelings of isolation. We know from previous work that school is about more than learning. Instead, it is a complex mix of learning and social engagement with peers and teachers [19,21,34,53]. Data from the students in this study support the notion that students need structure and a sense of community to thrive. The majority of students (82%, $n = 106$) held a strong preference for traditional classroom approaches as they missed this peer and teacher interaction. The general sense of disconnection is captured well by students who said, 'I dislike that you can't see your friends in school', 'I miss my friends and teachers and it's much harder doing school at home', and 'I prefer being in the classroom as I like the interaction with my teacher and classmates'. Feelings were not confined to purely social ones. In fact, students commented on missing the support provided by their teacher and their peers. They said it is 'hard to learn without the teacher in person to stop and ask questions' and 'no face-to-face interaction. No help from peers. Mentally exhausting'. It has long been argued that for teachers, too, school is more than a place for knowledge dissemination [17], as they also feel a sense of social connection with their students [20]. All the teachers ($n = 49$) in this study missed this classroom connection and commented that 'I miss the connection that you have with the students in the classroom' and 'missing the energy of the classroom' and 'not being able to see the students and have a bit of humour/fun in the classroom'.

These data suggest that, notwithstanding the benefits of online teaching and learning outlined in previous sections, challenges remain in the delivery of post-primary education online. This study supports previous assertions [24,34,52] that students at this stage of life experience challenges with regard to motivation and engagement in online settings. Students were easily distracted in their home environment, with many other applications available to take their attention. This issue was exacerbated by the absence of the teacher to bring their attention back to the task at hand. These challenges will need to be considered, should future school closures arise, or in the delivery of blended learning interventions. Tools and strategies may need to be employed by schools, teachers, parents, and students themselves which support students in staying on task. The data also suggest that simply swapping in-class timetables for an online schedule may be inappropriate as students find it difficult staying focused online for long periods of time. This presents both challenges and opportunities for the structuring of online and blended learning opportunities for this cohort into the future. The data also highlight the importance of social interaction and connection for both teachers and students and presents challenges for designers and facilitators to create spaces where teachers and students can connect and build relationships and meaningful interactions, outside of knowledge transfer.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to explore the experiences of teachers and students in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in a school in Ireland. Data were gathered separately from teachers and students using two online surveys. The student survey collected responses around online participation and engagement, and their experiences of online learning. The teacher survey collected responses around their experiences of teaching online, teacher–student engagement, and the training and support available to cope with the challenge. The findings, which are discussed further below, can be summarised as follows:

- Further professional development opportunities are required for teacher proficiency in skills pertinent to online teaching.
- In situ professional learning in this case study school positively influenced collegiality, knowledge sharing and teaching and learning.
- Teachers both witnessed and experienced the benefits of the incorporation of ICT into practice.
- Online teaching and learning presents a challenge in the maintenance of work–life balance and workplace boundaries.
- Students potentially lack the high levels of academic maturity required for positive online learning experiences.
- Positive educational experiences for students are heavily reliant on social interaction and connectedness.

Our study suggests that despite decades of ICT policy, a lack of focus on professional development opportunities in this area resulted in most teachers feeling underprepared for the shift to online teaching. In light of this, policymakers should consider the mechanisms for translating policy into practice at post-primary level. In this study, it is evident that the provision of targeted learning opportunities at a school level not only allowed teachers to modify their practice and adapt to their new reality but did so in a way that fostered a sense of shared understanding and collegiality. Many teachers began to recognise the benefits of using digital tools, especially in relation to assessment and the development of asynchronous resources. This kind of targeted CPD is a policy area worth investigating further. However, the breaking down of traditional classroom and school boundaries also highlighted challenges around managing workplace boundaries. Online tools began to blur the lines of teacher–student communication and placed an increased burden on teachers to be available to students outside normal working hours. The findings also suggest that post-primary students may lack the motivation and maturity required to engage in the more self-directed, less controlled environment of online learning. Students frequently felt distracted and disengaged from their teacher and their classmates. They not only needed their teacher in-person to help them stay on track with their learning, but also missed both the social interaction and connection with their teacher and their peers. Together, these findings suggest that more needs to be done to prepare teachers for teaching in the digital age so that, should school closures be required again, they will not need ‘just in time’ learning, but will have built a wealth of experience and possess a range of tools to engage their students. The findings also more broadly suggest that more attention needs to be paid to the social and motivational dimensions of online learning when considering this for students at the post-primary level. This may have knock-on implications for initial teacher education and CPD programmes for teachers.

6. Limitations

This study has some limitations which should be noted in relation to the findings and conclusions described above. The research sample which was used for this study was relatively limited in size, focusing on teachers and students from one Irish school. While the intention of this study was to capture the experiences of this cohort during the COVID-19 pandemic, larger-scale studies may be needed to explore and develop the findings further. Second, the data were obtained from two online surveys disseminated during one academic term. Alternative themes may have arisen from other methods such as interviews or focus groups. Finally, while the literature on online learning is relatively developed in higher education settings, it is limited at the post-primary level and, as such, as research in this area continues, alternative areas for investigation may emerge which were not addressed in this study.

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