Living and learning with Covid-19: re-imagining the digital strategy for schools in Ireland

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This article explores how the digital strategy for schools policy 2015–2020, Ireland’s national digital technology in education policy and its enactment in schools prepared them for school closures as part of the Covid-19 response. The educational, economic and social context in which the digital strategy for schools was published in 2015 was vastly different from the current living with Covid-19 context. When schools eventually recalibrate, lockdown induced school closures will have provided a collective perspective and richer evidence base for the triumvirate of student, teacher and parent to contribute to the technology in the education debate. This paper utilises Ball, Maguire, and Braun’s concept of context as a heuristic tool to illuminate the enactment of the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015–2020. The approach taken is discursive drawing on the digital strategy for schools policy document and the corpus of national and international reports and literature that have been published during Covid-19. Findings are fused with a detailed theoretical discussion about what we understand by digital learning for a post-pandemic society, how the current digital strategy speaks to this new reality and where attention should be directed in future reviews and strategy documents.

Keywords: Covid-19; policy enactment; policy actors; school context; online practices

Introduction and background

As the grip of the most significant health crisis of our time has tightened around the pillars that symbolised our sense of ‘normalcy’, a pandemic that has shown no respect for borders, separating families, and demanding a wartime response from the public health system has also created the conditions for a huge Covid-19 natural educational experiment. In this experiment, conventional schooling has been interrupted by a supernova (Azorín 2020) that has shaken the very fabric of what was understood as education. A broad spectrum of school responses was evidenced in Ireland and has placed the digital strategy for schools under the microscope. Multiple stakeholders eagerly look for evidence of how it had prepared schools for these requirements. The strategy itself primarily focuses on the schools’ sector and indicated a government action plan for the integration of ICT into teaching, learning and

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assessment practices. The strategy was developed around four themes, Teaching, Learning and Assessment using ICT, Teacher Professional Learning, Leadership, Research and Policy and ICT Infrastructure. These themes are interdependent with the overarching principle of all teachers having a constructivist pedagogical orientation as the policy aspiration and cornerstone.

Context in the theory of enactment

In analysing policy, Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) called for a context-sensitive analysis of policy, challenging the instrumentalist narratives that pervade theorisations of policy analysis. It is an approach to policy that considers the contexts in which school actors transfer and adapt policy to their practices. Enactment is based on the premise that policies do not normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set (Ball 1994 cited in Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012) and that putting policies into practice is a creative, sophisticated and complicated process similar to what Foucault termed as a complex ‘micro-physics’. Enactment is deeper than linear implementation and better illustrates how school actors recast policy texts into concrete practices as part of collective sense-making. While policy creates context, context also precedes policy and arguably now possibly supersedes policy.

Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) identified four contexts that contribute to policy enactment, the situated, professional, material and external contexts. Policies are set against and alongside existing commitments, values, experiences and environments, some of which have now been turned on their head. By taking context seriously, Braun et al. (2011) argue that policies are intimately shaped and influenced by school-specific factors; each school has different capacities for ‘coping’ with policy and assembling policy responses. Within each unique context, policy is not static or singular but rather iterative and part of a broader policy melange. Its mediation is determined by school culture or ethos, as well as on situated necessities to produce, to some extent, their own ‘take’ on a policy (Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010). Ball et al. (2011) conceptualise and group these institutional factors as situated, professional, material and external contexts, aspects of context that are independent but interconnected and often make most sense when overlapping. For example, school intake is presented as ‘situated’, but the intake, in turn, can shape professional factors such as values, teacher commitments and experiences, as well as material factors such as human resources.

Situated context

Situated factors refer to those aspects of context that are historically and locationally linked to the school, such as a school’s setting, its history and intake (Braun et al. 2011). Ball et al. (2011) revealed the impact of place on a teachers’ ability to enact policy as environment tends to accommodate policy, shaping this contrast between written policy and the policy as practiced. In Bourdieusian terms, the habitus of teachers tends to favour previous practices.

Place, as described and understood in this way, has experienced the pandemic shockwaves unequally. Indeed, the differences in these experiences have brought equity into even sharper focus … many of these issues have always been there, but a light is now shining more brightly on the inequities between schools, families and
students (Netolicky 2020). Covid-19 has exposed the hard, cold fact of the digital divide and gross inequities across and within nations (Berry et al. 2020). In Ireland, in DEIS schools, schools with high concentrations of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, Bray et al. (2020) found that students in these schools were three times more likely than their peers in non-DEIS schools, to have low online engagement during the school closure period. There were similar findings in a study conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute in Ireland across all schools with 86.4% reporting a detrimental impact of school closures on low-income students (Mohan et al. 2020). As Azorín (2020) reports, many students are literally ‘out of the system’ because they do not have access to the remote learning tools and materials … (and) are falling into a black hole as a consequence of the digital gap.

Looking within an intake, learning for students with additional needs has also been seriously impacted by school closures, with 89.3% of schools reporting a detrimental effect (Mohan et al. 2020). Bray et al. (2020) found that parents of children with a disability and those in the older primary classes were more likely to report their child was no longer learning (2). Similarly, at primary level in the findings from a report commissioned by an educational stakeholder group in Ireland that included the Department of Education, there was a worry about SEN pupils, with school leaders reporting on the added individual support required for SEN pupils leading to more pressure on schools and that many EAL pupils were not receiving any additional support (Dempsey and Burke 2020).

While there is mention of diversity and inclusion in the strategy, ICT plays an important role in supporting inclusion and diversity for all learners by enhancing learning opportunities for all students in the strategy (DES 2015, 8); the bitter reality is that the pandemic has placed the uneven impact in stark relief and has aggravated and exposed a gap in understanding as to the nature of inequities and gaps that exist in terms of ICT provision and access. Looking ahead to schools reopening, Chapman and Bell (2020) warned that pupils from high poverty backgrounds will continue to be disadvantaged by the digital divide during partial reopening of schools, so-called blended learning, unless mitigating measures are put in place. Future digital education policy will have to ensure that exposed inequities are deeply reflected upon and that steps are implemented to ensure that the chasm does not extend further within and across schools.

**Professional contexts**

Professional dimensions refer to somewhat less tangible ‘context’ … examining teachers’ values and commitments and experiences and policy management within schools, asking whether and how they feed into policy enactments (Braun et al. 2011). In terms of policy management and leadership, the strategy recognised ‘a need for distributed leadership in order to truly integrate ICT across our education system’ (DES 2015, 7). In observing the Covid-19 response, Berry et al. (2020) stated that the fact that there has been no rulebook for how to deal with this crisis has helped scale a concept in the education space that other professions have known for some time: authentic leadership emerges from collective action and good ideas, not just positional authority. Leadership is not a title but an action, a behaviour, a practice, a doing and a way of being, and the current scenario has provided
a crucible for teacher agency, agility, resilience and innovation (Netolicky 2020). This crucible has provided a space for teacher leaders to incubate novel pedagogical and policy ideas, test them for effectiveness, pivot when needed, and spread them to their colleagues (Berry et al. 2020) underscored by Gurr (2020), who stated that there has been a need for teachers in all education sectors to be more collaborative and for leadership to come from many.

Teachers in this more agentic space have discovered that transitioning from offline to online teaching is complex, problematic and evolutionary. It can be successful, however, by managing the unrealistic expectations that you will be doing substantially the same thing with time, space and material artefacts as you did in face-to-face teaching (Williamson, Eynon, and Potter 2020). Teachers and school leaders have been engaging in deep job-embedded learning, trying, iterating and refining practice as they go (Netolicky 2020). In the eye of this educational storm, teachers have moved with fidelity through the various identities of classroom pedagogue, pandemic pedagogue and online pedagogue. For the latter, almost every educator (and parent) is quickly finding out that distance learning is not as straightforward as repositioning a course or class on a Learning Management System or Video conferencing website – especially as the expectations shift from rote learning of the basics to more personalised, competency-based, student-led learning and critical thinking (Berry et al. 2020). Our understanding of teacher professional digital competence has been permanently reshaped with dexterity to move seamlessly between learning places, now an essential requirement. So too, a more sophisticated understanding of instructional design and the use of both synchronous and asynchronous learning that moves the debate from ‘which learning process’ to ‘which one and for what purpose’. Together they can attend to the need for community and belonging while at the same time facilitating necessary flexibility, variety and personalisation.

**Material contexts**

Material context refers to the ‘physical’ aspects of a school: buildings and budgets, but also to levels of staffing, available technologies and surrounding infrastructure (Braun et al. 2011). The location of learning in the strategy focused on the school as the singular site of learning with attention on broadband connectivity, improved connectivity to primary schools will commence during the lifetime of this strategy so that all schools have improved access to the internet (DES 2015, 7), on internal connectivity, wi-fi access would provide new opportunities to increase access to online resources for learning throughout a school (DES 2015, 42), and technical support, the strategy will evaluate a number of technical support options with a view to providing guidance on the best technical support solutions for schools (DES 2015, 7). The variable in this fixed infrastructural trifocal approach being reference to 1:1 programmes and BYOD. The notion of school and learning solely focused and conducted in a physical place has been irreversibly disrupted, with the Covid-19 experience illustrating that technologies theoretically allow for ‘anytime-anywhere’ learning to occur (Scully et al. 2021). Classroom space–time has travelled in the other direction, into the home environment, introducing the polysynchronous world of learning in the digital age into the rhythms of family life, what might be called the Bring Your Own School Home (BYOSH) movement (Williamson, Eynon, and Potter 2020).
As aforementioned, in this anytime, anywhere learning relationship, the challenge of equity is exacerbated, and myriad issues present. A narrow fixation with ensuring device and internet access will prove only part of the solution as although digital connectivity is important, it does not overcome all inequalities (Williamson, Eynon, and Potter 2020). There is no quick solution, and in a rush to place a plaster over a cut that sinks much deeper beneath the surface, devices have been borrowed, and internet connection provided free of charge for a short period of time. However, the uncertainty over ownership and responsibilities stymies use and often causes a great deal of stress as families feel under pressure to begin paying for the internet once the initial ‘free’ period is over (Williamson, Eynon, and Potter 2020).

While many references were made in the strategy to ‘outcomes’ developing critical thinkers:

actively engaged in learning – both in and out of school… in teachers taking a more facilitative role, providing student-centred guidance and feedback) … towards teachers accepting ownership of their own professional learning and, where appropriate, designing and participating in learning communities that make extensive use of technology (DES 2015, 13)

no-one could envisage the critical role platforms would play in influencing the process. The lifeline provided by platforms and tools to maintain synchronous and asynchronous learning has acted as the aortic valve for the school community ecosystem. For those who had deployed a platform at post-primary, the ESRI Research confirmed that the transition to distance learning was ‘more straightforward for schools who were using existing systems of online learning rather than creating new ones’ (Mohan et al. 2020, 80). Similarly, when exploring the landscape at primary, most respondents mentioned how they either started or enhanced their use of online platforms and have continued to use these platforms when schools re-opened (Dempsey and Burke 2020). As more and more schools embed a digital platform to support the continuity and enhancement of learning in a blended, online or hybrid environment optimising its potential to enrich teaching, learning and assessment while ensuring security and data privacy issues are satisfied will be key policy considerations.

**External contexts**

The last contextual dimension external contexts focuses on the impact of broader local and national policies, pressures felt from management bodies and the inspectorate, as well as the quality of local authority support and relationships with other schools. Macrosystem alignment and unidirectional system drivers are a hallmark of a digital strategy policy document that is whitewashed with statements such as:

the department will continue to include clear statements regarding digital skills and learning outcomes in new curricula throughout the lifetime of the strategy and beyond (p.6) … and will facilitate schools to create linkages with existing school policies, for example School Self-Evaluation, so that ICT is embedded deeply within the school. (DES 2015, 7)

Within the policy commitments, an enabling framework, the digital learning framework, a localisation of the UNESCO ICT Competency Framework for Teachers to the Irish context that would make explicit the features of quality digital teaching
and learning was a priority. Although the print is still relatively fresh on its copy and cognisant of the change cycle and the time required to penetrate to practice, findings from a sample of post-primary schools at least indicate that schools are looking at the architecture needed to enable change within a school with 70% reporting that they had a Digital Learning Team in place to develop the content of their plan, and that leadership motivational practices were also evident, with 93% indicating that they encouraged their teaching staff to incorporate digital technology into their practice (Scully et al. 2021). However, as Fullan and Quinn (2020) noted, not everyone or every system had the same experience facing this abrupt change. Some systems had stronger collaboration and technology infrastructure, which assisted them in a more rapid response, while others were struggling to find the right pathway (3).

Conclusion

Findings from the impact of Covid-19 related school closures indicate that while every setting experienced disruption, this experience was not uniform. DEIS schools and their cohorts suffered more than most. A complex array of factors impact them. Still, any future policy in the digital domain must ensure that its part of a coordinated policy response to a wicked educational problem. Efforts to minimise within cohort differences should focus on developing student digital competence and preparing all learners to participate across spaces, in-person, online, hybrid or blended. The realisation that teaching takes place in time, but learning occurs over time, provides schools with an opportunity to harness this greater spatial and temporal flexibility to support more personalised learning needs, experiences, and outcomes. Teacher professional digital competence needs to be further supported so that opportunities for collaboration that have emerged through more porous classroom walls can crystallise into sophisticated whole-school digital learning planning and classroom practice. While policy enactments are always context specific and situational (Ball et al. 2011), attention to these elements would have universal merit and better enable teachers in the complex and sometimes messy process (Braun and Maguire 2020) of putting policy into practice.

Note

1. DEIS (Delivering equality of opportunity in schools) is a national programme that was launched in 2005 to address the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities. Schools in the programme receive a range of additional resources including staffing, funding and access to literacy and numeracy programmes.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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