

Infants of the Pandemic:

Teacher Perspectives on the Early Development and School Readiness of Children Starting School in September 2024

Children are far less independent coming to school than before the pandemic.

It has been the most challenging class I have had in 27 years of teaching.

I don't know what is going on this year.

Have taught infants for many years and there is a huge change in their lack of independence, tidying up, attention span, eagerness to learn and a massive increase in children with sensory issues.

There are certainly more children with emotional & behavioural issues than previous year-groups.

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About the Study

This study explored teacher perspectives on the skills, early development, and a range of indicators of school readiness of children currently in junior infants. These children spent the early months of their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, with the resulting lockdowns and social restrictions. Previous research shows that many children were affected in many ways during the pandemic, both positively and negatively. The current study asked teachers of junior infant classes how their current class of junior infants (aged 4-6 years) were faring, and how they compared with previous classes they taught before the pandemic.

About the Survey

The data were collected in December 2024, after the children's first few months in primary school. An anonymous online survey, designed for Junior Infant teachers was sent to a random selection of primary schools within every county in Ireland. The questions on the survey were mainly drawn or adapted from questions asked of teachers previously used in large scale studies. Teachers in the current study were asked a variety of questions related to children's abilities such as managing personal care, language and communication skills, sharing with others, attention and emotional regulation. Teachers were also asked about numbers of children in their class with difficulties that are emotional, behavioural, intellectual, physical or sensory, and whether they have more, fewer or about the same number of students with these difficulties, compared with before the pandemic. There was also the option to provide open ended comments and responses, allowing teachers to share their insights and experiences.

About the Participants

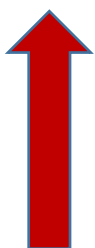
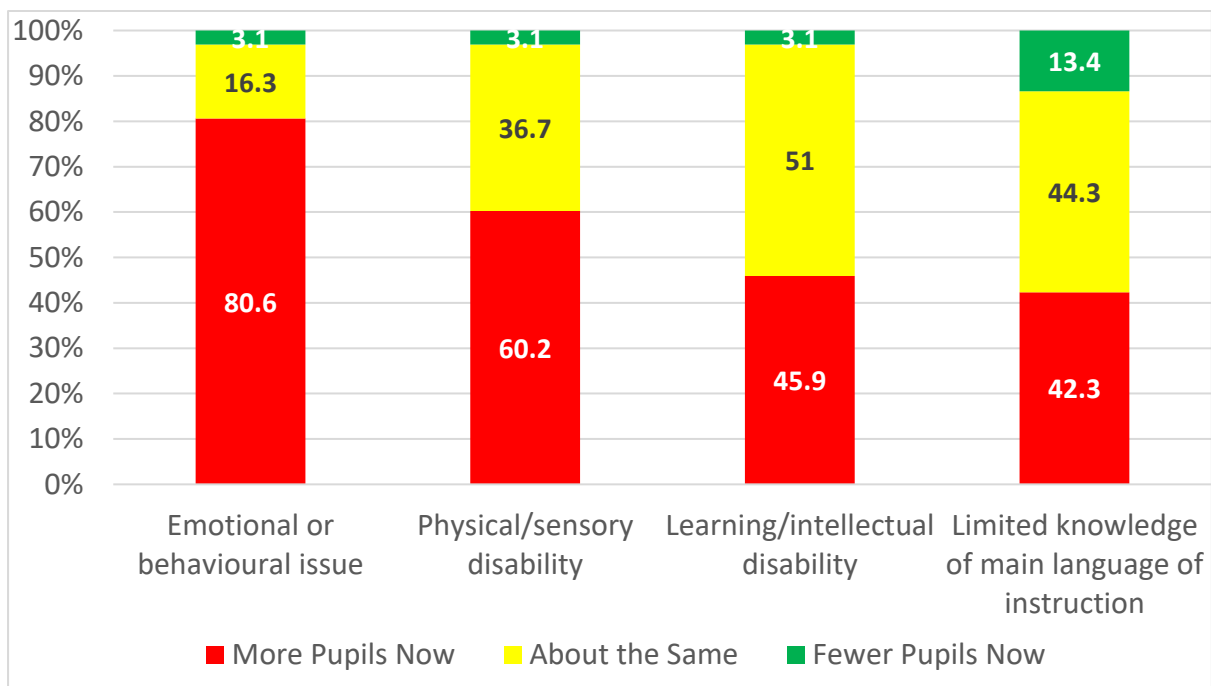
107 teachers responded to the survey (102 female, 5 male) ranging in age from 22 to 58 years old, and represented a broad range of years teaching experience, including up to 35 years experience. Their class sizes of junior infants varied, ranging from 4 to 31 junior infants in the class. Overall, this represented over 2,000 children who were being currently taught by these teachers. In terms of school locations there was a mix between urban (32%), suburban (30%) and rural (38%) schools, and similarly a mix between DEIS (30%) and non-DEIS schools (70%). 90% of the schools were co-educational, with school sizes ranging from having fewer than 20 pupils in total, to others which had over 700 pupils.

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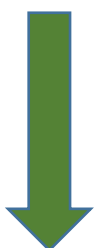
Findings

Overall, the findings from the teachers in this survey suggest there may be differences in the skills and capabilities of children starting school in September 2024 compared with those who started school before the pandemic. While many teachers indicated similarities in various skills between classes they taught before the pandemic and their current junior infant class, many teachers highlighted differences too. Where differences were indicated they tended to be negative, suggesting that many of the current cohort of junior infants were less 'ready' overall to start school than previous cohorts, across a range of indicators.

Figure 1: Percentage of teachers indicating, in general, changes in the amount of children in their class now with long term difficulties, compared with classes they taught before the pandemic



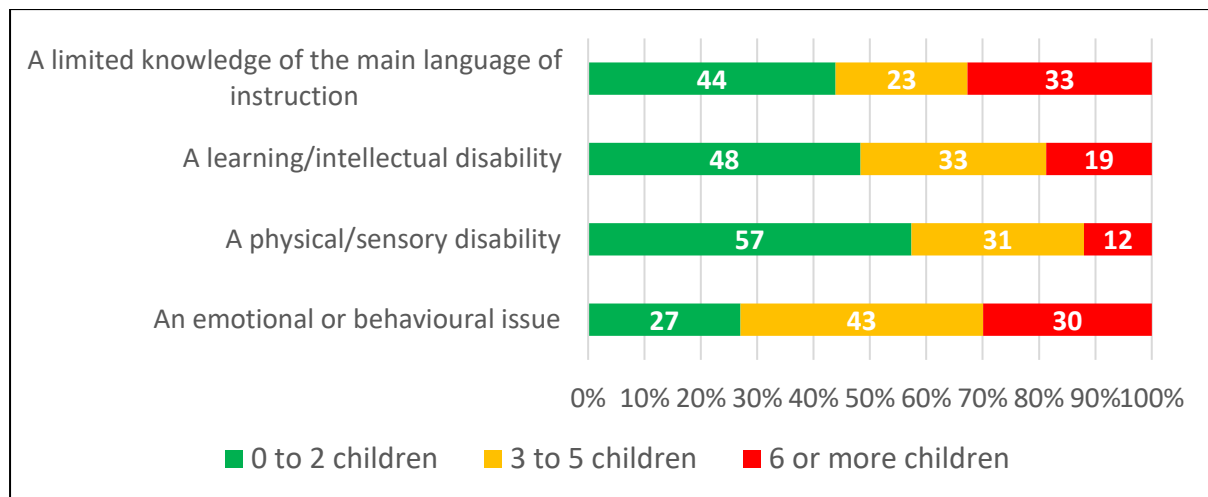
- 80.6% of teachers indicated they have more pupils now with an emotional or behavioural issue (see Figure 1 above)
- 60.2% have more pupils now with a physical or sensory disability
- 45.9% have more pupils now with a learning or intellectual disability
- 42.3% of teachers indicated that they have more pupils now with a limited knowledge of the main language of instruction



- 42% of teachers indicated they now have fewer pupils now who can manage personal care
- 58.2% of teachers indicated fewer pupils now take turns and share or are sensitive to other children's feelings
- 59.6% of teachers indicated pupils are worse now in terms of classroom behaviour
- 74.5% of teachers indicated that fewer children now could sit still and pay attention
- 53.1% of teachers indicated that they have fewer pupils now that play well with others

The findings also highlight some of the challenging classroom circumstances many junior infant teachers are currently facing. At least half of junior infant class teachers have three children or more in their current class with considerable long-term difficulties, with a significant minority of teachers having 6 children or more with these difficulties. As Figure 2 below shows, 73% of teachers have at least three children in their class with an emotional or behavioural issue, while 52% have at least three children in their class with a learning or intellectual difficulty.

Figure 2: Percentage of teachers indicating how many children in their class have a long term difficulty



Teachers' descriptions of their current junior infant classes, and how things have changed compared with before the pandemic, highlighted a number of issues. Teachers described this year's junior infants as having more separation anxiety from their parents, more anxiety in general and less emotional regulation and independence:

- *I feel that the children this year did not have the emotional readiness of previous years.*
- *This year I found that the separation from their parent coming into school was quite an ordeal for more than half of the class. Children cry in class far more than other years and are overly sensitive to others*
- *Children's levels of anxiety have massively increased and I feel their listening skills and attentiveness have really disimproved in comparison to children of a similar age pre-pandemic.*
- *Communicating needs and wants is a big issue this year. For the 1st time many of the children cry 1st before explaining the issue or reporting a problem.*

Teachers also noted considerable speech, language and communication difficulties with the children, as well as some difficulties with fine motor control and with attention:

- *I have noticed a lot of speech difficulties since the Pandemic. I don't know if it is a coincidence but each year since Covid it seems to be quite obvious.*
- *We are experiencing an increasing number of our children with serious speech delays and expressive and communicative language difficulties.*

- *Children have a lot of speech production issues. I've never seen so many in one class that need a speech and language assessment.*
- *Children who should have been assessed before entering school were not assessed and are entering schools without the supports they needed at a younger age.*
- *There are lots with undiagnosed needs, particularly with sensory/emotional difficulties. Fine motor skills are poor. Paying attention, following instructions and listening are all difficult for over half the children in my class.*

However, teachers are trying to support the children where they can:

- *I never expect children to be able to sit still and recognise the need for regular movement in an Infant's room*
- *While every group of children has their own dynamic, it was clear that the disruptions caused by the pandemic had a noticeable impact on their early development. This experience has made me even more mindful of fostering social and emotional skills, alongside academics, to support their overall growth.*

Considerations and Implications

While many teachers highlighted issues of concern, both in terms of child development and the challenging classroom circumstances for the teachers, it is important to note that not all teachers are experiencing these difficulties or have noted negative changes (see Figures above). Some teachers have reported no change in the number of children experiencing difficulties, compared with before the pandemic, while a minority have also reported positive changes.

Additionally, while the findings indicate the current cohort of junior infants were less 'ready' to start school than previous cohorts, the exact cause cannot be pinpointed at this time. It may be that the changes in social contacts or family life in the early months of children's lives, and since the pandemic, have contributed to the situation. Potentially, missed or delayed developmental checks could also mean that issues were not detected as early as they might have been. More research is needed to fully understand the nature and extent of the issues, and to determine possible causes.

Conclusion

The findings in this study highlight the potential long lasting and wide-ranging effects of the pandemic for young children. Without early interventions and supports, gaps can widen and developmental delays can worsen over the course of childhood. The teachers in this study have expressed significant concerns and challenges that require further investigation, investment and supports.