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# Deconstructing the challenges and opportunities for blended learning in the post emergency learning era

Martin Brown , Craig Skerritt , Patrick Shevlin, Gerry McNamara  and Joe O'Hara 

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## ABSTRACT

This paper, as part of a European Commission-funded project entitled REBEL (Repurposing Education through Blended Learning), deconstructs school communities understanding of the challenges and opportunities for blended learning in the school sector in Ireland with perceptions shaped by experiences of enforced school closures during the pandemic. It provides an overview of five case studies in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland. The findings from this research indicate that the emergency remote teaching experience has cast an unhelpful shadow on blended learning. To avoid stigmatising online teaching and learning based on less than ideal experiences, in spring 2020, Hodges and co-authors referred to this period as 'emergency remote teaching.' (Hodges et al., 2020). Perhaps blended learning is also the victim of a similar stigmatising effect. The paper makes several contributions, including a need to differentiate between blended learning, emergency remote teaching and the suite of additional factors that impacted the school closure experience for teachers and schools. In addition, the findings signpost some succinct questions for consideration, that is, what conditions, social, cognitive, and teacher presence, resources and supports are necessary for effective intentional blended learning in schools.

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hybrid learning;  
asynchronous learning;  
synchronous learning

## Introduction and background

On 12 March 2020, then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar announced the closure of all schools until 29 March. However, this was later extended until the next academic year. During this period of unprecedented societal upheaval, schools would, for the remainder of the 2019/2020 academic year, support learning from a distance using a model of online remote teaching and learning, what Hodges et al. (2020) referred to as 'emergency remote teaching'. During this initial phase of the pandemic, a steep learning curve for school communities occurred to invoke various modes of asynchronous

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and synchronous teaching and learning strategies. However, as Sahlberg (2020) reminds us, most countries' education systems were unprepared for remote teaching and learning with, in the case of Ireland, for example, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey of school principals revealing that prior to the pandemic, '47% of students in Ireland attended a school whose principal 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that effective professional resources designed to help teachers learn how to use digital devices were available, which is lower than the average across OECD countries (65%)' (OECD 2020a, 2).

Nonetheless, schools in Ireland and many other countries reopened for the 2020/2021 academic year, and despite a national lockdown imposed in October, most schools remained physically open until December 2020, with a small number of schools having to close early due to increases in cases among students. After restrictions were eased, another surge in cases in late December meant that another national lockdown began, signalling the further closure of school buildings with schools only physically opening to all students in April 2021. This was followed by a phased reopening with special schools opening in February at 50% capacity, with special classes in mainstream schools also resuming.

Unsurprisingly, during the initial phases of the pandemic, an extensive body of research relating to the challenges for 'emergency remote teaching' has been accumulated and extensively reported on in the literature (See, for example, Burke and Dempsey 2020; OECD 2020b). However, what has not been reported on as extensively in the literature in comparison to 'emergency remote teaching' (Hodges et al. 2020) relates to the Challenges and Opportunities for Blended Learning that, by all accounts, is very readily becoming the new narrative for teaching and learning in the modern era. Indeed, for the 2021/2022 academic year and into the future, despite the continued presence and disruption of the pandemic, schools have now physically reopened and in times of uncertainty are still required or strongly encouraged to use digital tools for asynchronous, synchronous learning and what is commonly referred to as 'Hybrid' or 'blended learning' (Austin and Hunter 2020).

In this regard, this research paper, as part of an Erasmus+ funded project titled 'Repurposing Education through Blended Learning' (REBEL), provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities for blended learning as experienced by school principals, teachers, parents, and students in five case study schools in Ireland. Within this, a number of themes from the qualitative data are presented. The paper begins with a review of existing literature on pandemic education in Ireland. This is followed by a description of the Methodology with a summary profile of the five case study schools involved in the study. Leading on from this, an analysis of the qualitative data derived from the case studies is presented. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the research findings and signposts ways and means in which various stakeholding groups such as policymakers can harness the potential of blended learning in schools into the future.

## Literature review

As previously stated, a great deal of research on the pandemic has been accumulated in the past two years. However, much of what we currently know relates to the initial period

of schools working remotely from March 2020 until the end of the academic year (See, for example, Roulston, Taggart, and Brown 2020). Online videos and the use of virtual platforms appear to have been the preferred methods of teaching and learning at the post-primary level during this time (Mohan et al. 2020). In a small-scale survey of teachers at both primary and post-primary levels, Winter et al. (2021) have reported that, inter alia, students' access to technology at home, the knowledge and skill of colleagues, and the availability of training influence teachers' use of technology. Indeed, in addition to barriers at home, Devitt et al. (2020) found that post-primary school teachers used support from colleagues as a source of technology advice and as a way of sharing information on teaching approaches but that there was a desire among teachers for professional development on pedagogy in the online world.

A range of studies also points to reduced student engagement during this period. In an online survey of parents and children at both primary and post-primary levels, Flynn et al. (2021) found that students' reported levels of engagement had declined over the first period of schooling at home, and a novel finding of this study was that students reported learning less during this time relative to when they are in school. At the post-primary level, more than three quarters of school leaders surveyed in Mohan et al.'s (2021) research reported that school attendance decreased while 70% reported reduced student engagement across the whole school. Bray et al. (2021) similarly found post-primary teachers to also report a drop in student engagement. In a survey of parents of children between the ages of one and ten, Egan and Beatty (2021) found that most parents reported their children spending more time on screens during the crisis but that their children also spent less time doing schoolwork or homework.

There are multiple reasons for this reduced engagement, but these reasons appear to interconnect around disadvantage and, in many respects, highlight issues relating to the digital divide that existed long before the pandemic. For example, Poole et al. (2018), exploring ePortfolios in Irish Secondary schools, found that a significant resistance to the use of digital technologies in education related to structural issues and the multifarious aspects of the digital divide.

Given other factors outside of the school, such as equity of access to broadband and the disconnect between ePortfolio functions and the Irish Curriculum, the admirably intended Digital Strategy which aims to promote the use of student owned ePortfolios within 5 years is perhaps a little unrealistic. A more conservative forecast for the full integration of ePortfolios into teaching and learning would reflect Fullan's (2007) estimation of complex change in a system, that is, anything between 5 and 10 years.

Towards 2021, although every school setting experienced disruption, experiences were not uniform, and DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools and students in these schools suffered the most (Kilcoyne 2021). According to post-primary level teachers, for example, the key barriers to student engagement with online learning included a lack of interest from the student and a lack of support from the home, as well as factors relating to the availability of devices and technological know-how (Bray et al. 2021). At the same time, the main determinant for low engagement appears to be the socio-economic context of the school, with teachers in DEIS schools significantly more likely to report low student engagement (Bray et al. 2021). Mohan et al. (2021) make the critical point that families have differential access to suitable devices and broadband and varying degrees of appropriate space shared between different numbers of

children, and the school leaders interviewed in DEIS schools stressed the financial and personal difficulties encountered by parents/guardians, outlining how this impacts their capacity to support students (Mohan et al. 2021). Other studies during this period focused on connectivity issues, such as broadband. Based on data emanating from a representative sample of post-primary school principals, Mac Domhnaill, Mohan, and McCoy (2021, 16) reported that ‘a perceived reduction in engagement was more likely among schools located in areas characterised by lower coverage of high-speed broadband’. Elsewhere, these authors and their colleagues have reported that issues such as those relating to student participation and engagement appear to have been more pronounced in schools in areas with lower availability of high-speed broadband, DEIS status and schools in areas of lower household income (Mohan et al. 2020).

According to Mohan et al. (2021), the gap between vulnerable students’ school and home environments was therefore made even more pronounced by the fact that many of the supports that they are usually able to avail of in schools could not be provided effectively if at all, through distance education. Students experienced less collaboration and communication with their peers during this time (Bray et al. 2020), and some school leaders highlighted the absence of the social aspect of school as being harshly felt by at-risk students (Mohan et al. 2021). Overall, the importance of this social dimension should not be underestimated. In their survey of parents and primary and post-primary level students, Flynn et al. (2021) found that social interaction was highlighted by the vast majority of both primary and post-primary respondents as something they greatly missed, most notably with their friends, but also with their teachers.

Notwithstanding the significant challenges that occurred; on a more positive note, it is likely that collaboration among teachers has increased (Brown, O’Hara et al. 2021; Darling-Hammond and Hylar 2020). As this teacher in Indonesia explains, knowledge sharing has come to the fore: (Azhari and Fajri 2021, 11).

Because my knowledge is less relevant to the demands of distance learning, I find information and also learn independently and together with the teachers at my school. We share information and knowledge in this distance learning

Furthermore, Ewing and Cooper (2021) highlight how the online classroom also suits certain groups of students, and particularly those struggling in a traditional schooling context. As this teacher explains,

Students who would normally find school difficult, whether it was engagement, school rules, personality clashes, not a lot could be done to engage them. I found this a lot with my year 10 students. My communications with some of my colleagues was very similar (Ewing and Cooper 2021, 47).

## Current practices

In terms of current practices, since schools returned to face-to-face teaching and learning, they were mainly operating in a similar way to how they had before the pandemic. However, it was common for schools to retain some aspects of what they had been doing while operating remotely, while some had always been incorporating ICT into their practices:

After remote learning, we might have carried on a little of what we were doing. (Teacher 2, primary school 2)

I was using blended learning before this ... I write in OneNote and my students can access those in the evening. I was doing that already. (ICT coordinator, community college)

Various examples were given of how blended learning with a particular focus on content creation is used in schools:

We would be given tasks and assignments by teachers, and we would have the option to submit a video recording, an audio recording or a collage of images and it helps different ways people learn. (Student 1, secondary school)

They can record themselves talking and upload it and it makes learning the likes of Irish fun ... Children today are able to use iPads. (Mainstream teacher 1, primary school 1)

While blended learning was often talked about in the past tense, schools did speak of various supports they put in place for students, such as ensuring that they had access to devices and materials:

If a student didn't have a device, we had devices for them. Provided laptops. iPads. We also provided support to students around how to use the software and the different technologies. (ICT coordinator, community college)

We'd post out materials to some children. (SEN teacher, primary school1)

## The benefits of blended learning

It was frequently stated that online teaching and learning served some students very well:

We have had some students that absolutely thrived during lockdown. (ICT coordinator, community college)

I saw some children really blossoming with the blended learning approach and you wouldn't see it so much with them in the classroom but when it came to blended learning they did shine. (SEN teacher, primary school 1)

My girl used her own initiative and got on with it and did it. She saw it as an achievement submitting the work to the teacher. (Parent 2, primary school 2)

I think it gives students and teachers a lot of autonomy: where we get our information from, what we like, share with each other essentially. (Student 1, secondary school)

Students reported a range of benefits:

I really like recorded lessons because you can go back and watch them again. (Student 1, community college)

Something I noticed is my grades improved significantly. I don't know if that's just me but it's something I noticed when I got my grades back from teachers so that's interesting. (Student 1, community college)

Yesterday I sent work to a teacher, and she sent it back to me with corrections and I didn't even have to walk around the school to find her. (Student 1, secondary school)

When you're at home you can work at your own pace. (Student 1, primary school 2)

We got to show off. Show off things we wouldn't usually get to. We got to show off our pets and stuff. (Student 1, primary school 2)

A widely held view at the post-primary level was that online teaching and learning was a solution to emergencies and circumstances that typically prevent face-to-face teaching and learning:

All the content we have is all up online so if a student is not in school, they still have access. (Classroom teacher 1, secondary school)

I think the days of getting snow days are gone. (Classroom teacher 2, community college)

Because of blended learning, when students are at home, or for some reason they can't come to school, maybe they're in hospital or they're somewhere else, blended learning almost eliminates the boundaries ... I guess it's bad for us students if we want to be lazy! We don't have an excuse to not do homework a lot of the time so it's good for education. (Student 2, secondary school)

Where there's a student with a broken leg, they can join. (Parent 2, community college)

## Methodology

Data collection of all case studies was conducted between March and October 2021. Within this, five schools were selected for the analysis. In total, 59 people were interviewed: school staff, students, and parents (Table 1).

The interviews were based on semi-structured interviews that were based on two overarching themes: Present and Future Challenges and Opportunities for Blended Learning; Present and Future Policies, Practices and Supports for Blended Learning (Tables 2 and 3), together with agreed case study protocols that were devised as part of the Erasmus Plus Project 'Repurposing Education through Blended Learning' (REBEL).

Following this, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed to form an overall interpretation of the findings following Yin's (2014) procedures for case study analysis.

## Challenges for blended learning

It was commonly stated that while many teachers adapted well to the online environment, this was not the case for all teachers.

A lot of the platforms were new to a lot of teachers. (ICT coordinator, community college)

There's a continuum of staff here. Some real digital champions and one teacher who didn't even have a smartphone and we gave her a MacBook and iPad here on her first day. (Principal, secondary school)

Some of the teachers were very good but there were challenges with others. (Parent 1, primary school 2)

A key challenge of online teaching and learning, however, related to socio-economic context, internet provision and the availability of digital devices.

**Table 1.** Summary profile of case study schools.

School	School context	Participants
Primary School 1	The school is co-educational and has approximately 200 students. The school does not have DEIS status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal (male)</li> <li>• Special Education Need (SEN) teacher (female)</li> <li>• Mainstream teacher 1 (female)</li> <li>• Mainstream teacher 2 (female)</li> </ul>
Primary School 2	This is a co-educational primary school attended by approximately 400 students. The school does not have DEIS status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal (male)</li> <li>• Deputy principal (female)</li> <li>• Assistant principal (female)</li> <li>• Teacher 1 (male)</li> <li>• Teacher 2 (female)</li> <li>• Teacher 3 (female)</li> <li>• 3 students (all female, all 5th class)</li> <li>• 3 Parents (one male, two female)</li> </ul>
Primary School 3	This is a co-educational primary school attended by approximately 500 students. The school has DEIS status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal (Female)</li> <li>• 2 SEN Teachers (Male and Female)</li> <li>• Mainstream teacher 1 (Female)</li> <li>• Mainstream teacher 2 (Female)</li> <li>• Mainstream teacher 3 (Male)</li> </ul>
Community College	This is a co-educational multid denominational post-primary school catering for approximately 1000 students. The school does not have DEIS status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deputy principal 1 (male)</li> <li>• Deputy principal 2 (female)</li> <li>• ICT coordinator (male)</li> <li>• Classroom teacher 1 (female)</li> <li>• Classroom teacher 2 (male)</li> <li>• Year Head (male)</li> <li>• 8 students (3 male, 5 females, all 3rd years)</li> <li>• 3 parents (1 male, 2 female)</li> </ul>
Secondary School	This is a co-educational post-primary school catering for approximately 750 students. The school does not have DEIS status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal (female)</li> <li>• Deputy principal (female)</li> <li>• ICT coordinator (male)</li> <li>• Classroom teacher 1 (male)</li> <li>• Classroom teacher 2 (female)</li> <li>• Subject coordinator (female)</li> <li>• Year Head (female)</li> <li>• Apple distinguished educator (male)</li> <li>• 8 students (4 male, 4 female)</li> </ul>

Some kids wouldn't have access to technology or wouldn't have Wi-Fi in their area. (Mainstream teacher 2, primary school 1)

It's a rural area here so a lot of them might not have good broadband at home. (Assistant principal, primary school 2)

**Table 2.** Interview questions – present and future challenges and opportunities for blended learning (staff, students and parents).

Interviewees	Questions
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In your experience what are the benefits of Blended learning in your school? What are the challenges?</li> <li>• In what ways were you able to offer support for staff in blended learning</li> <li>• How did your school support children's learning during school closures lockdown?</li> <li>• Has the school used the terms blended/remote learning to describe this work?</li> <li>• What do these terms mean for you?</li> <li>• How did your school implement blended /remote learning?</li> <li>• What were the main hindering/facilitating factors in the use of blended learning?</li> <li>• In what ways were you able to offer support for staff in blended learning?</li> <li>• Has the implementation of Blended Learning changed the atmosphere/climate in your school? If yes, what kind of change happened?</li> <li>• In what ways has the experience of blended learning caused you to re-assess policies around teaching, learning and assessment and your links with parents?</li> </ul>
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was your experience of learning during lockdown?</li> <li>• What do you understand the term blended or remote learning to mean?</li> <li>• Do you feel that your voice is included in decision making and planning in your schools? What are the good sides and the awkward sides of Blended Learning in your school?</li> <li>• How is Blended Learning usually done in your school?</li> <li>• How do you experience typical situations when you are asked to give an opinion on the quality of Blended Learning in your schools? Is it easy or difficult to do this? Can you give an opinion to the school on what can be improved?</li> <li>• Are teachers interested in what you have to say? Do teachers respect what you have to say?</li> <li>• Which aspects of blended learning would be worth retaining in the future when schools return to face-to-face teaching for all students?</li> </ul>
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What were your experiences of your child's learning during lockdown?</li> <li>• What do you understand the term blended or remote learning to mean?</li> <li>• What factors helped or hindered their remote/blended learning?</li> <li>• Do you feel that your voice is included in decision making and planning as it relates to blended learning in your school?</li> <li>• What are the good sides and the awkward sides of Blended Learning in your school?</li> <li>• How is Blended Learning usually done in your school if at all?</li> <li>• How do you experience typical situations when you are asked to give an opinion on the quality of Blended Learning in your schools? Is it easy or difficult to do this? Can you give an opinion to the school on what can be improved?</li> <li>• Which aspects of blended learning would be worth retaining in the future when schools return to face-to-face teaching for all students?</li> <li>• Do you feel that the relationship between school and parents has changed because of the use of blended learning? If so in what ways? Are there aspects of this that should be continued when pupils are fully back in school?</li> </ul>

Digital divide stuff. Not having broadband at home, not having a device at home or sharing devices with siblings or not having space at home or whatever accommodation they are in. (ICT coordinator, community college)

Engagement was also a significant issue for all schools. However, it appeared to be a greater challenge at the primary level:

5% didn't engage at all whatsoever, despite no problem with broadband or infrastructure because we provided them with devices and I know they have broadband. They chose not to engage. (Principal, primary school 1)

Lack of engagement for whatever reason. It wouldn't necessarily be bad Wi-Fi. Due to home situations or just the children themselves. (Teacher 2, primary school 2)

**Table 3.** Interview questions: present and future policies, practices and supports for blended learning (school staff).

Theme	Questions
Supports for blended learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there material for school staff which is helpful for the enhancement of Blended Learning? Who is providing / producing this material?</li> <li>• Have teachers found that online courses have supported their professional development.</li> <li>• In the future, do you anticipate blended learning being a key aspect of future staff development?</li> <li>• Are there other support measures (e.g. professional development, consultants etc.) which are helpful for the enhancement of Blended Learning? Who is providing / producing support measures?</li> <li>• Is there material for minority groups which is helpful for their inclusion in Blended Learning? Who is providing / producing this material?</li> </ul>
Practices for blended learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there special collaboration among staff with respect to Blended Learning? What are the focus and the results of this collaboration?</li> <li>• How can schools best be positioned to enhance Blended Learning? Can you give some practical examples for what you are doing to enhance Blended Learning?</li> <li>• Which aspects of blended learning do you think that the school will retain (prompts; online assessment, use of asynchronous discussions for work outside the classroom etc)?</li> </ul>
Policies for blended learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What examples of blended learning resources /communications/artefacts do you have available? Policies/strategies?</li> <li>• Is Blended Learning and the material that is used, evaluated? If not, why not and if yes in what way is Blended Learning and the material used evaluated?</li> <li>• Does your school have an explicit policy on Blended Learning? Or an agreement within staff and parents? If yes, what are the main ideas?</li> <li>• In what ways has the experience of blended learning caused you to re-assess policies around teaching, learning and assessment and your links with parents?</li> </ul>

I think they thought it was a holiday sometimes. (Teacher 3, primary school 2).

Indeed, it was common for primary school students to report that they could struggle when working from home.

I found it a bit hard to concentrate at home. (Student 2, primary school 2)

I found if I got stuck on work it wouldn't be as easy to put up my hand and ask the teacher. I had to try figure it out or ask my parents for help. (Student 1, primary school 2)

The lack of social interaction was stressed as a significant issue, and, again, particularly at the primary level:

I'm in primary school and they require a lot more attention. The younger the child is, the more help they need. (SEN teacher, primary school 1)

Some kids need to be in the classroom, they need the support of friends and teachers. (Main-stream teacher 2, primary school 1)

Especially at primary school, they need that face to face at the end of the day. There's not substitute no matter who tells you there is. (Assistant principal, primary school 2)

Teenagers could manage themselves and be online and parents don't need to sit in on Zoom calls ... It's not very feasible for young kids. (Teacher 3, primary school 2).

My girl needed the companionship of other people. At no point was her education going to suffer but socially and emotionally she was going to suffer. (Parent 2, primary school 2)

Despite issues with engagement, a key issue for school staff related to the lack of structured hours:

I got an email on a Friday night at nine o'clock about something for Monday morning. (Classroom teacher 2, community college).

There's an opening for parents to pop things in at any time of day or night so there's teachers getting work in at 4:30 in the morning. (Deputy principal, primary school 2)

## The future for blended learning

While many saw the value of online teaching and learning, it was mainly seen as a backup for when it is needed, such as during a pandemic:

We would only view it as a last resort ... I would never see blended learning or remote learning as a preference ... It's not preferable to have blended learning in primary classes, as opposed to face-to-face. (Principal, primary school 1)

Blended learning is a great resource when Plan A is not available, but it shouldn't be first choice. (Parent 2, community college)

I don't feel that there's a need for it. If it was a necessity. I think children need to learn in a school environment in the classroom with their peers. (Parent 3, primary school 2)

Overall, the strong preference was for face-to-face teaching and learning:

I don't think you can beat face to face teaching if I'm honest. I think you lose something. A lot of things get lost. (Deputy principal 2, community college)

I think the biggest thing is, the kids didn't want it ... They'll openly tell me in the classroom that they never want to go back to remote learning again. (Teacher 1, primary school 2).

I didn't like it much anyway. No particular reason. I just don't really like doing work from home, I guess. (Student 3, primary school 2)

## Discussion and conclusion

Research derived from this study suggests that, despite the extraordinary amount of professional learning that has occurred during the pandemic, in terms of current practices, schools having reopened were mainly operating in a similar way to how they had been operating prior to the pandemic. Although schools ensured that students had access to devices and materials during the school closures, and it was reported that certain features of their remote operations were retained after they had recently returned to face-to-face teaching and learning, the clear focus was on traditional face-to-face teaching and learning. Indeed, it was frequently stated that online teaching and learning only serves some students well despite the well-documented benefits of blended learning (Austin and Hunter 2020). In most cases, online teaching and learning was now seen as a solution to emergencies and circumstances that would usually prevent face-to-face teaching and learning from occurring.

There were many challenges. While teachers adapted well to the online environment, this was not the case for all teachers. Teachers also reported that the lack of structured hours in the online world brought about issues such as receiving emails when they were not working. A key challenge, however, was the socio-economic context and/or internet provision as there could be issues with, amongst other things, devices, resources, and facilities.

Despite schools' efforts, the varying levels of engagement was also a significant issue, especially at the primary level, due to the age of the students. In addition, the lack of social interaction was also stressed as a major issue, and again, particularly at the primary level.

Furthermore, while the value of online teaching and learning was acknowledged by many, it was also predominantly seen as a temporary measure within the context of the pandemic. In this regard, while the well-trodden ground of issues such as the digital divide and teacher and student competencies as they relate to, for example, the use of digital tools has been well documented prior to and during the pandemic (Huber and Helm 2020; Zhang et al. 2020); it would be reasonable to suggest that the steep learning curve and increased competencies that have been developed in school communities during the pandemic has, on the one hand, put in place the foundations for blended learning in schools.

However, the findings from this research also indicate that the emergency remote teaching experience has cast an unhelpful shadow on the potential benefits of blended learning. Indeed, a review of the literature on blended learning (See, for example, Austin and Hunter 2020) together with an analysis of research findings derived from this study highlights the fact that, what is absent from many education systems, including that of Ireland, relates not so much to the necessity for effective resources and professional learning opportunities for digital education that has been well documented in the literature but rather, the pressing need for a reconceptualisation of the pedagogical value, standards, requirements and subsequent professional learning opportunities for school communities that specifically relate to blended as opposed to compartmentalised digital learning. To concur with Schleicher, 'In a better normal, decisions about the mode of educational delivery need to be proactive, not reactive, and truly hybrid, not binary, based on knowledge of pedagogical value' (2020).

However, in the absence of, at the very least, loosely bound indicators for effective blended teaching and learning, this 'better normal' could be viewed as a somewhat opaque challenge for many schools.

In this regard, given the often at times, varying perspectives, and practices for blended learning as highlighted in this and other studies; to concur with Brown (2020a, 2020b), the absence of evaluation frameworks and standards for blended learning are undeniably related to the varying blended teaching and learning strategies that are used in schools, and we would suggest across the continuum of education.

In conclusion and drawing on previous research (Brown, Gardezi et al. 2021), one of the most significant success stories of the Irish Education system at the compulsory level of education over the course of the last number of years has related to that of the development of quality standards for teaching and learning (Department of Education and skills 2016) that by all accounts has enhanced various aspects of teaching and learning such as the quality of assessment feedback provided in schools. Prior to, this it would be reasonable

to suggest that there were multiple perspectives on what constitutes effective teaching and learning in schools. The same can also be said for blended teaching and learning, and in the absence of clearly defined quality standards and frameworks, history has in many respects repeated itself whereby similar issues and questions asked by schools prior to the development of quality standards for teaching and learning will abound and as a result, many schools; will not be aware of what constitutes and/or is expected of blended teaching and learning; will ask if they are going in the right direction; will ask what professional development opportunities are needed for effective blended teaching and learning, often eulogised in policy but presently not as frequently in practice.

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