

To Explore Post-Primary Teachers' Perspectives of the Effects of Distance Learning on Formative Feedback

Elisha Dore, Mary Immaculate College Thurles

ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with exploring post-primary teachers' perspectives of the effects of distance learning on formative feedback. While feedback is well researched, research lacks on the effects of distance learning on formative feedback, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, in Irish post-primary schools. Using a qualitative methodology, this study interviewed 4 post-primary teachers regarding their experiences of the effects of distance learning on formative feedback. The data was analysed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The main findings of this study demonstrate both positive and negative effects on formative feedback throughout distance learning. Distance learning had a positive effect on formative feedback as it developed teachers' technological skills and inspired a more blended approach to effective formative feedback in the future. However, this study discovered challenges surrounding the social limitations of distance learning and the time-consuming aspects of implementing strategies for formative assessment and feedback.

INTRODUCTION

This research explores Irish post-primary teachers' perspectives of the effects of distance learning on formative feedback. The concept of formative feedback is well documented, however this research aims to explore the concept of formative feedback and how this practice may have been affected, as a result of the move to distance learning for schools in Ireland, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The rationale is to explore the effect distance learning had on formative feedback in order to ensure students can succeed and achieve in all school settings (ncca.ie 2015). This research is meaningful and relevant to Education Policy and Practice as schools had to adapt to distance learning throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, which prohibited face-to-face interactions in schools, but as outlined by The Teaching Council (2016), teachers should maintain high standards of practice in relation to pupil/student learning, planning, monitoring, assessing, reporting and providing feedback. The policy report *'The Framework for Junior Cycle 2015'* presented a new emphasised dual approach to assessment, classroom-based assessment and formative assessment (Department of Education and Skills 2015). This change of emphasis arose as it was acknowledged "that students learn best when teachers provide feedback that helps students to understand how their learning can be improved." This policy document also notes that feedback is a 'vital part of formative assessment' (Department of Education and Skills 2015, p.29) As formative assessment and formative feedback are fundamental parts of education policy, the change in school setting from face-to-face to distance learning must be explored, as it is important to identify any effects on formative feedback in post-primary schools as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Qualitative research seeks to understand individuals' perceptions of the world (Bell 2014). As this research was focused on capturing teachers' experience and perspectives of formative feedback throughout distance learning, it was decided that a qualitative rather than a quantitative methodology was more appropriate, as experiences and perspectives are difficult to quantify, and allows teachers to explain their views and opinions. Semi-structured interviews of four post-primary teachers was the chosen method and the researcher had scheduled these interviews to take place face-to-face, but as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions on movement and social interaction to safeguard public health, it was not possible to undertake them in this manner. As an alternative, interviews were carried out on an online secure video conferencing platform such as Microsoft Teams and Google Meet. This was a small-scale research study and due to this, the findings cannot be labelled as a representative of all post-primary teachers' experiences and as a result the participants' perspectives are not generalisable.

The following embedded questions were asked during interviews with participants of this study in order to answer the research question;

- What are the differences, from a teachers' perspective between providing formative feedback in an online school setting and in a face-to-face school setting?
- What are teachers' perspectives on their ability to provide effective feedback throughout distance learning?
- Are there any learnings from distance learning, regarding formative feedback, that teachers will incorporate into a face-to-face school setting in the future?

FINDINGS/ RESULTS

More Frequent Accessible Feedback for Students

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Participants noted that there was an increase in the amount of individualised written and oral feedback throughout distance learning in comparison to a face-to-face school setting. Participants outlined the increase and benefits in the ability for students to access feedback as it was saved on educational software.

Concerns Regarding Student Engagement with Feedback:

This research uncovered that although teachers had the ability of providing formative feedback to students throughout distance learning, there were concerns regarding student engagement with that feedback in comparison to a face-to-face setting. A lack of engagement with feedback may inhibit the effectiveness of the feedback thus affecting students' learning and progressing.

Technological and Pedagogical Learnings from Distance Learning

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Participants noted the increase in their technological competence throughout distance learning and the wide range of resources used in order to teach throughout distance learning. Participants noted criteria to make pre-recorded lessons effective and the benefits of pre-recorded lessons for students.

A Blended Approach to Formative Feedback in the Future

Participants discussed the positive learnings of providing formative feedback throughout distance learning, such as using voice recordings to give oral feedback through online educational platforms. Participants were willing to integrate these learnings into a face-to-face classroom in order to enrich the feedback provided by teachers in the future.



Image Source:
<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/online-learning-should-make-education-open-to-all-so-why-hasn-t-it-happened-1.4577088>

The Challenges of Social Limitations throughout Distance Learning

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It was evident that social limitations throughout distance learning provided challenges and the lack of cameras resulted in a lack of ability to see and observe students, which resulted in difficulties to formatively assess students and create formative feedback opportunities for both students and the teachers.

Time Consuming Peer-Assessment

Participants deemed formative assessment strategies such as peer-assessment time-consuming throughout distance learning as teachers had to move from breakout room to breakout room. Concerns were raised regarding the lack of control, monitoring and scaffolding teachers had surrounding the feedback being received and given by students in the unsupervised breakout rooms.

Student Wellbeing

Student wellbeing was a concern throughout distance learning as participants had to be aware of students' home environments. Participants discussed the changes in students' abilities that occurred and the adaptation of feedback they provided, as a result of students being at home in a different learning environment.

DISCUSSION

In reviewing the research findings, the researcher recommends; Further research into the effects on A/L and formative feedback throughout distance learning and how this affects AoL upon return to face-to-face schooling.

The Department of Education and Skills implement continuous professional development workshops for teachers to incorporate the key learnings from distance learning into a face-to-face classroom, in order to enrich teaching and learning for all.

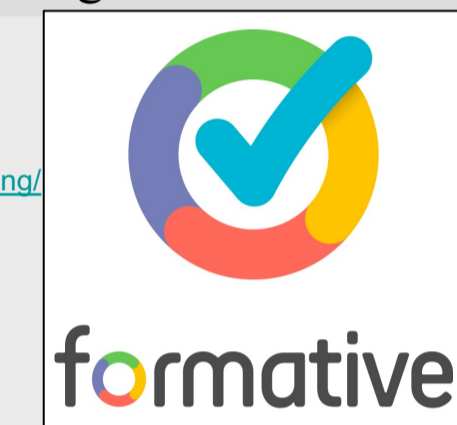


Image Source:
<https://www.pdst.ie/DistanceLearning/AssessmentandFeedback>

CONCLUSIONS

This research study investigated the effects of distance learning on formative feedback in post-primary schools throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. This research will help the researcher and other educators to identify areas of benefit and concern for both students and teachers when giving and receiving feedback throughout distance learning. As the findings suggest that teachers were open to a more blended approach to providing formative feedback in the future, the researcher and other educators must ensure continuous professional development in relation to technology as we continue in our careers as lifelong learners. The findings conclude that there were both positive and negative effects in relation to formative feedback throughout distance learning. Distance learning had a positive effect on formative feedback as it developed teachers' technological skills and gives insight into a more blended approach to effective formative feedback in the future. However, this study discovered the challenges to providing effective formative feedback in comparison to a face-to-face school setting. This study displayed the challenges of social limitations throughout distance learning and the time-consuming aspects of implementing strategies for formative assessment and feedback in a distance learning environment.

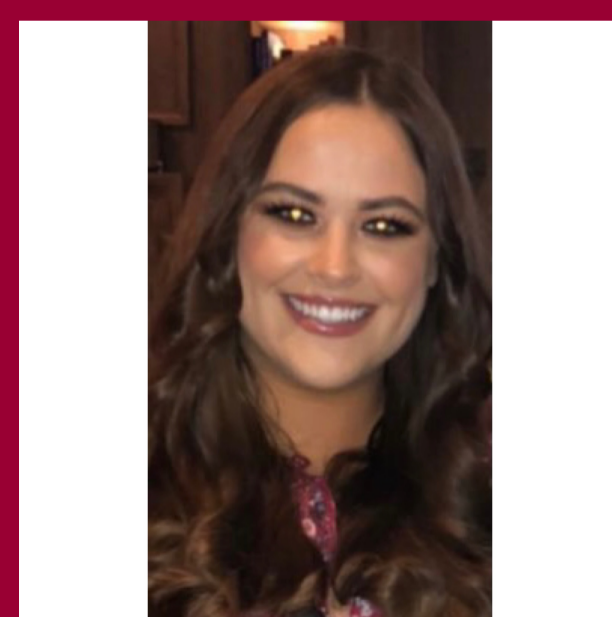
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CONTACT

Elisha Dore
Mary Immaculate College, Thurles

Email: 11135271@micstudent.mic.ul.ie