

## Some thoughts from Dr. Johanna Fitzgerald (MIC, Limerick) on Inclusive Education during these challenging times,

Over the past few weeks and following numerous interactions with SENCOs and SETs, I think the greatest challenge of all will be to engage some of the students with EAL, SEN and their parents/ carers in online learning for all sorts of reasons.

There are so many excellent online resources available to teachers at the moment. This is also part of the problem. It is overwhelming for teachers, students and families, at a time when we are experiencing the biggest crisis we will ever know. So, with this in mind I am sharing some of my personal thoughts on the role of schools and SETs in supporting vulnerable students. This article offers a great perspective and my own thinking aligns with this: <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/a-trauma-informed-approach-to-teaching-through-coronavirus>

It may be helpful to school leaders in deciding how to navigate this current situation and prioritise what is important to the school. Do schools have a shared understanding of what the core values are in this changed landscape? It could be used to support leaders to reflect on what is of critical importance right now.

Thoughts:

- What do we want students to be able to do when they leave school? Ultimately, we want our students to be as independent as possible. Students have access to plenty of academic content. More is not necessary. Learning isn't dependent on the individual 'waves' of content delivered to students; it is more about the tide they rise on. Affirm students' efforts to engage in 'life' lessons- chores, baking, cooking, exercising, maintaining hygiene, managing a routine, looking after younger siblings etc. Acknowledging and affirming development of key life skills will support all of us in achieving the ultimate goal for students- inclusion and maximum levels of independence in their communities post school.
- Student engagement with learning is critical but herein lies the challenge, particularly for those unable to access learning for a multitude of reasons. Teaching and learning is ALL about the relationship. This relationship is even more important to the most marginalised in the school community. Staying connected with students is critical. As a school, develop a system to identify students not engaging with online content. Find alternative ways to reach them- phone, letter, free *An Post* postcard! The SET/ SENCO can have a key role here in mediating learning (academic, social, emotional) for the student and teachers.
- Academic learning is dependent on student's possessing non-academic skills to promote access and engagement. SETs/ SENCOs are well positioned to support the development on non-academic skills such as organisation, study skills, social skills, self-regulation, life skills etc. Working with home and the student to put in place a structure to scaffold academic learning might be a useful exercise. A conversation with the student/ parent in relation to key priorities for the student and implementing a feasible plan of action with due consideration to the home context may alleviate the sense of disconnection and powerlessness some may be feeling. It will also facilitate the student's voice. If schools are engaging with Student Support Plans, the SSP may be a good starting point.
- Teaching has, all of a sudden, become a very public affair. When I look on social media platforms, there can be a tendency for some to 'showcase' the amazing technological approaches adopted by many teachers. These are all wonderful and I am not critical of these. However, learning cannot be judged on this basis. School contexts and students radically differ. In supporting students with additional needs, learning needs to be individualised for them and tailored to their needs. Using technology and approaches to online learning as a yardstick to measure quality of

teaching and learning is not an accurate measure. Moreover, I think it may be harmful to the teaching profession as it has the potential to oversimplify the complexity and nuance of effective teaching and learning.

- Finally, this is a crisis situation. ANY efforts made by schools and teachers to support students at this time are heroic. None of us will be able to work as well as we always have done. It's a 'make-do' situation so ease up on the self-criticism and acknowledge that we are all feeling some level of futility and helplessness in this.

As I hear often enough in the corridors of Mary Immaculate College, 'Ni neart go cur le cheile!

One final point. I did come across this American site that has some very useful links and it was accessible without being overwhelming:

[https://sites.google.com/view/distance-learning-specialied/home?fbclid=IwAR01f5F6MVoh0dZZUr4pwDcmlo5cUUtYIADtwHfAYQNXgH\\_bcYiHfhf9XBw](https://sites.google.com/view/distance-learning-specialied/home?fbclid=IwAR01f5F6MVoh0dZZUr4pwDcmlo5cUUtYIADtwHfAYQNXgH_bcYiHfhf9XBw)

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