PRIMARY

Remote and blended learning: curricular challenges and approaches

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The Education and Training Inspectorate
Promoting Improvement

Contents

Introduction

On 20 March 2020, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, pre-school settings[1] and primary, post-primary and special schools across Northern Ireland closed to children and young people[2]. In the interim, children and young people have engaged in remote learning at home either through paper-based materials provided by their setting or school, online learning materials or a combination of both.

Currently, the situation in regard to the COVID-19 is changing rapidly and pre-school settings and schools are at various stages of devising safe, effective and efficient arrangements for the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year. It is anticipated that the balance between classroom-based teaching and learning combined with a range of remote learning approaches will vary between individual preschool settings and schools, as well as for individual year groups, and change as the academic year progresses, with school attendance, dependent on medical and scientific advice, returning to preCOVID-19 patterns.

The planning for blended learning approaches is dependent on factors, such as: the number of staff and children and young people; the size and layout of the pre-school setting or school; subject uptake; and, the availability of suitable teaching and learning spaces for each curriculum/subject area. The leadership and management of change is crucial in planning for blended learning approaches, a number of considerations need to be taken into account, including: the well-being of the children and young people and staff; the curriculum; the uncertainty of the arrangements for examinations and assessment; and, health and safety.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was commissioned by the Department of Education as part of the Continuity of Learning Programme, to provide guidance on effective ways in which the curriculum could be tailored (planned for, implemented and assessed) across the range of areas of learning for a phased return for children to full-time education. The Department asked for a series of pieces of work which would reflect the changing circumstances in which schools are working to provide up-to-date advice and guidance on an ongoing basis. This publication represents the first phase of that work. Across June 2020, the ETI met with reference groups of curricular coordinators, Heads of Departments and leaders on a cross-sectional basis from across Northern Ireland to seek their views on the challenges of remote learning and teaching, and what approaches they might take in moving towards the return to school with as many children and young people as possible, complemented by blended learning where necessary.

The Curriculum, Qualifications and Standards Directorate of the Department of Education (DE) has initiated a number of projects to ensure that appropriate action is taken to secure, as far as possible, the learning of pupils at home and in school, during the current pandemic and beyond.

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[1] 1 In this instance, this refers to all DE funded pre-school settings, nursery schools, nursery units, private pre-school settings, voluntary pre-school settings and Irish medium pre-school settings.
[2] Other than the children of key workers and vulnerable children who continued to attended their own school or a C-19 cluster school.

Supporting Learning

The Department of Education's Continuity of Learning Project, *Supporting Learning* provides support for teachers and parents working together so that pupils continue to learn at home and through school.

The DE publications provide guidance and support for settings and schools as they plan for reopening and the 2020/21 academic year; this is supplemented with more detailed Supporting Learning[3] guidance which includes resources, guidance materials and case studies to support blended learning. There is also the Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education and the CCEA curricular guidance to support curriculum delivery of the statutory Northern Ireland curriculum in schools.

Within the sections that follow, a summary is provided of the challenges and potential approaches that have been discussed by the reference groups with the ETI.

The context for primary schools

In the ongoing COVID-19 emergency period, primary schools have had to adapt rapidly and in some cases, extend considerably their range of approaches to providing the curriculum. There are some concerns being reported that in the time since school closures, there has been a decline in children's motivation and engagement with remote learning. Schools also report increasing popularity of the provision of hard copies for parents as children become 'screen-saturated'.

In planning for returning to school, primary teachers, who know the children well, are best placed to recover, assess and take forward their learning. Many are already considering how best to move forward into the 2020/21 academic year with a blended approach of in-class learning and remote learning.

Challenges for delivery of the curriculum

Key challenges

- Gaps in learning/difference in progress between children who engaged in remote learning and those who did not; a need to secure progression in planning for learning experiences in school and at home.

- Concerns about maintaining connected learning and applying skills in a range of learning and real-life contexts, that social distancing will impact negatively on the practical, collaborative and Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities (TSPC) learning approaches and skills in the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC); for example, how to work in groups in classrooms.

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[3] This project involves the Department working collaboratively with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CNaG), the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA), the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC), the Education Authority (EA) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

- Supporting children with special educational needs in literacy and numeracy through blended learning approaches. Children needing an immediate response or learning support which may not be possible remotely.

- Supporting children attending Irish-medium education (IME), the majority of whom will not have heard or spoken Irish regularly for six months, through the provision of language specific bespoke, high quality resources and support.

- Foundation Stage: developing, for example, early reading skills, phonological awareness/phonics, early language acquisition (in Irish-medium schools), gross and fine motor skills through play-based learning and outdoor learning, developing letter formation, early writing/early mathematical concept and process learning and related practical mathematical learning experiences. Providing literacy and numeracy learning through play-based learning; potential targeted focus on literacy and numeracy within small groups.

- Key stages (KS) 1/2: guided reading and numeracy are both concerns as many parents may not be able to support/develop at home. Phonics, the conventions of grammar, shared/modelled and guided reading approaches and forms of writing and comprehension skills need to be taught in school. Writing: handwriting may need developed due to the amount of task completion online. Consideration will also be needed for immersion-specific approaches to supporting parents of children in Irish-medium settings.

- Numeracy: Securing the development of key mathematical concepts and processes across Foundation Stage, KS1 and 2

- Access to devices, connectivity problems and/or need to improve Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills of staff, children and parents impacting on curriculum delivery.

- Increased budget implications, for example, extra photocopying costs for providing home learning packs.

- Planning for the delivery of safe and effective Physical Education (PE). The use of equipment and social distancing rules will limit significantly the PE curriculum; non-contact activities are likely to be viewed as the only current safe option. Swimming and paired or group games involving contact are not possible.

- Implications for the availability and use of practical equipment and resources on teaching of literacy/numeracy/World Around Us (WAU)/ other collaborative activities in school.

- Restrictions imposed on learning activities by social distancing rules. For example, how closely teachers and classroom assistants may work with children due to social distancing in foundation stage play-based learning, KS1/KS2 activity-based learning, STEM[4] activities/WAU and providing learning and social, emotional and behavioural support.

Approaches taken or planned

General considerations

- There is agreement that the initial stage of recovery needs to focus on securing key structural, pastoral and organisational aspects of school life, including: establishing new routines and protocols; building the children's trust and confidence; and, increasing their social and emotional readiness to engage with learning and potentially with some degree of blended learning. In Irish-medium schools, there will also be a focus on re-immersing the children in Irish, to enable them to access fully all areas of learning. At the heart of the curriculum lies an explicit emphasis on the development of skills and capabilities for lifelong learning. Being conscious of the need to provide a broad and balanced primary curriculum, schools stress the importance of 'being connected' with the children and securing (transferable) learning skills as key drivers of subsequent successful curriculum and learning recovery. Teachers have considerable flexibility to make decisions about how best to interpret and combine the requirements of the curriculum and as much as possible, should continue to integrate learning across the six areas and make relevant connections for children.

- There is recognition of the need to establish the children's level/standard to ascertain gap(s) in attainment and agree aspects to be provided in school or home in a blended approach. Teacher observation and review of children's work will help schools to establish initial return standards. There is general agreement that formal testing is not appropriate when the children return initially and that standardised tests, informal assessment, CVC[5] words, high frequency words, reading running records should be left to when staff agree the children are all well-settled. Some schools are giving consideration to re-visiting planned work from term 3, 2019/20 or key aspects of literacy and numeracy to reduce any potential gaps, with provision of differentiated/ consolidation work for children supplemented by further challenge activities. It is also acknowledged that some children may be ahead of the expected standard when they return and their needs will need to be met.

- As they plan for the new academic year, many schools intend to use the wider curriculum areas of Art, Drama, Music and PE as 'therapeutic' vehicles for engaging and as necessary, healing the children, enabling them to work 'together-apart' in school and at home on collaborative and creative learning activities and projects. In addition, and as much as possible, an increased element of learning will take place outdoors.

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[4] STEM: science, technology, engineering and mathematics.
[5] CVC words: are three letter words that follow a consonant/vowel/consonant pattern.

- Planning for PE, including changing and establishing good hand and equipment washing routines, within the PHA guidance will require a staged approach with adaptations. The use of outdoor spaces will become a priority and schools should consider permitting children to come to school in appropriate kit on days when they are timetabled for PE. Suitable activities may include walking; running; shuttle relays; standing long jump; orienteering; individual gymnastic activities, for example, to develop core strength and balance, for the first term in PE. Group aerobic activities, such as dance and daily health-related fitness including stretching and toning through yoga or Pilates are also suggested to be key features of primary PE in the new term. Schools should look to provide the recommended two hours per week of quality PE.

- Many schools are planning to build up the curriculum 'incrementally' using a thematic approach to blending learning. For example, developing literacy and numeracy through World Around Us topics alongside a continuing core emphasis on personal development and mutual understanding and supporting the children's mental and physical health and wellbeing.

- If in some schools, smaller class groups are attending, this may increase staff time to give individual targeted support.

- Using learning platforms such as Google Classroom to create 'break-out rooms' to enable children to collaborate on research and investigation activities in groups and also to post and share their work.

- Consideration is being given to resource provision for home use, including homework, for children who are attending school and preparation of work for those at home working remotely.

Practical considerations

- Children having their own container of books, materials for sole use.

- Sharing equipment within restricted 'group bubble' of children - agreed 'lower risk' cleanable equipment and resources for collaborative tasks - quarantine and clean properly between uses.

- Reading materials (for example, schemes, library books) for shared use stored separately for 72 hours quarantine before use by a different child.

- Use of online reading books (would require tablet/device per child).

- Maximising use of single use and/or recyclable junk materials which can be disposed of afterwards/ do not have to be cleaned.

- Differing views as to whether staff will mark work brought from home (hard copies) due to COVID-19; however, all staff are prepared to mark work completed in school or online.

- Staff to work at appropriate social distance.

Suggested approaches

- Share weekly planners, post in advance to give children and parents structure which they can plan for at home across the week.

- Suggested timetable with allocated times for activities/learning shared with parents provided as a guide.

- Teachers provide parental guidance on how to respond to their children's work at home and give helpful and supportive feedback.

- Where possible, and within defined parameters, teachers may reply to posted messages.

- Teachers using online feedback to garner further parental responses.

- Initial parental suggestions - a small number of schools have indicated that they are considering providing online videos and creating simple two-way communication systems such as online message-boards.

- Staff provide team teaching to support children and colleagues through blended learning.

- Talking and listening - whole school approaches through Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU), focusing on emotional well-being and helping children feel safe, happy and secure in their new school routine.

Blended approaches for learning at home being considered

- Safe practical learning activities planned for and completed in school. Staff develop activities to reinforce and extend literacy and numeracy learning at home, including guidance for play and scenarios to reinforce learning in real-life contexts.

- If children have access to devices they can use, for example, Accelerated Reader/Bug Club/Maths Mastery/White Rose Maths/Accelerated Maths/Power Maths/Use of C2k Newsdesk alongside CCEA guidance on Newsdesk, etc.

- Teachers create video clips modelling skills and concepts as part of home learning tasks, or practical demonstrations of concepts taught in class, for example, how to form letters, teach phonics, mathematical concepts and processes, science experiments. This approach will also be useful for teachers in Irish-medium settings to provide the children with exposure to Irish.

- Provision of parent booklets/guidance explaining how to reinforce/support literacy/numeracy learning concepts and how to support their child complete work at home (online or hard copies).

- Support tutorials - phonics (using e.g. Seesaw draw facility) - step by step guidance, for example Stage 5 phonics - step by step identification and pronunciation of diagraphs - 'ou'/'ow'/segmenting and blending/ dictation, etc., and balance with worksheet activities.

- Scanning, sharing and uploading of class novels and big books (Within appropriate copyright limitations and guidance).

- Parents provided with word document incorporating embedding links, YouTube videos (sourced and evaluated).

- Encourage free writing and use of numeracy skills in a variety of suggested contexts at home and 'out and about'.

- Some larger schools are favouring the pod model of blended learning where the focus is on differentiated groups.

- Video message at the beginning of each week for pupils and/or parents as agreed by the school.

- Oral sharing of learning intention and outline of the week.

- Virtual certificates to recognise and reward the children's efforts and achievements.

- Personalised virtual greeting, reward and feedback stickers, some of which include teacher's voice.

- 'Show and tell' participation sessions to share children's presentations as a blended learning approach.

- Class meet-ups/break-out rooms etc. via trusted learning platforms.

- Classroom assistants posting pastoral messages to individual children and groups as agreed by the school.

- Sharing children's work and online peer assessment.

- Eco-Committee class representatives providing reminders to their peers.

- PDMU - Kahoot, Quizlet and Google Forms provide opportunity for assessment for learning and feedback.

- 'Live' quizzes, e.g. mental mathematics quiz, at a time most popular for parents and families.

- Regular contact with children/virtual day trips/sports days/ assemblies etc.

- Google Classroom, stream facility provides assessment for learning opportunities.

- SLT monitor all classroom platforms and also post encouraging responses, messages, videos, within agreed parameters.

- Teachers evaluate impact of remote learning and engagement levels. Use parental feedback (audits, questionnaires, video conference focus group) to inform future learning and teaching home/school balance, content and practice.

Conclusion

In summary, the recovery of learning and teaching will be evolved through an 'organic' curriculum which sits appropriately with the vision, aims and objectives of the NIC. It is particularly helpful in the current context that teachers are afforded professional flexibility and control to develop the learning experiences and topics to be relevant and engaging in order to meet the specific needs and interests of the children.

There are key principles and ideas which have emerged from this consultation which will assist schools as they plan for the restart process.

These include:

- new and core literacy and numeracy concepts and skills to be covered in school and consolidation of learning being completed remotely on 'home-school' days; (For example, Geoff Petty's PAR[6] model (Present Apply, Review- Present element in school with Apply and Review aspects carried out at home);

- teachers using their professional knowledge of the children and observing learning behaviour and outcomes when the children return to gauge where they are currently in their learning. Where appropriate, literacy and numeracy targets in individual education plans to reflect blended learning approaches;

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[6] PAR stands for Present, Apply and Review. It is a suggested model found in Geoff Petty's book, 'Teaching Today.' It is based on research collected from many experiments on which type of teaching promotes the most effective learning for children.

- for many children in Irish-medium education, their acquisition (in early years) and subsequent development of Irish will have been impacted upon as a result of the greatly reduced exposure to Irish over the period of lockdown. In order to mitigate the impact that this may potentially have on the children's future learning and achievement across the curriculum, it is important that child-centred, language-rich resources are developed to support schools in identifying and addressing the potential language loss. Where possible, the provision of online classes, reading with children as in the classroom and bespoke lessons for phonics/grammar/language, etc, and Seomra Nuachta/discussions would be beneficial. This could include the:

  - creation of sound files for spoken Irish;
  - creation of sound files for comprehension;
  - provision of electronic reading resources in Irish; and
  - provision of specific support for children/parents/teachers in the IM sector;

- completing WAU topics in connected, topic-blended ways and amending planning to maintain emphasis on developing progression of skills and to fit with class-based and online learning contexts. Introducing topics and themes in school and extending through home learning; facilitating appropriate child-led investigations which incorporate children blending their skills, including ICT, Communication, Literacy, Numeracy and TSPC;

- providing teacher professional learning (TPL)) to support teachers' ICT skills in a learning environment with blended learning approaches (in relation to both functionality and online pedagogies);

- filming/providing short training clips for parents to help improve their ICT skills relating to curriculum tasks, links and websites, as well as EA C2k TPL for staff and schools to support parents with training;

- deploying and training classroom assistants for children with special educational needs to maximise direct support in school and remotely; communicating regularly with children and parents to allow teachers to support, guide, monitor, mark, provide feedback on children's work through the 'private message' facility on Seesaw/other media in use, where schools have access;

- avoiding 'screen-saturation[7]'; and

- providing simple practical equipment from school/suggest home equipment lists for children to use at home with parental permission.

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[7] The NHS recommend that 8 to 11 year olds have no more than 2 hours a day screen time (including television, smartphones, tablets and video games).

School leaders, in consultation with their boards of governors, know the context and unique circumstances of their school, and are best placed to make the detailed decisions required when it comes to the safety of their school and how they can best deliver the curriculum to their children.

There are a number of factors that will inform the delivery of the Northern Ireland Curriculum for schools in a way that meet the needs of the children and the context within which it is being delivered.

- Whilst we know that many children are incredibly resilient, their mental health and well-being is, and will continue to be, a priority for us all; therefore, mental health and well-being will need to feature appropriately in curriculum delivery.

- Planning for learning will need to take account of the learning of the children during the period of solely remote [distance] learning, thereby re-dressing and maintaining standards – whilst the context will be different, the principles of effective assessment for learning are the same.

- The need to consider the six areas of learning in the pre-school curriculum and the minimum entitlement of the Northern Ireland Curriculum for schools, including the development of wider skills and dispositions; therefore, organisations will need to think about what aspects need to be delivered face-to-face in the classroom environment, what aspects can be delivered remotely online or supported by parents in the home learning environment, and what aspects may not be able to be delivered owing to the context within which the school is operating.

The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework provides a framework to support the organisation's discussions and reflections which are continuing and will evolve in planning to address the specific challenges and priorities that will be faced in the next academic year as a result of COVID-19.

Resources

Publications include: Curriculum Planning 2020/21, The New School Day Guidance, Guidance for Schools on Supporting Remote Learning and Guidance on School Development Planning for 2020/21.

A CCEA video that can help explain to parents what the Northern Ireland Curriculum is all about, how it is a framework that covers all 12 years of compulsory education from age 4 to 16.

Moving to Blended Learning in the Primary School

The Northern Ireland Curriculum - Primary

Primary Science Teaching Trust – curriculum materials

Explorify – Primary Science

The Association for Science Education – Primary Remote Learning Resources

STEM – Primary Science

The Royal Society – Resources for Teachers

CCEA – Science and Technology Progression Guidance

EANI – Irish-Medium Education Resources

EANI – Primary School Education Resources

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