

EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE

An evaluation of the curriculum, with a particular focus on life skills and play in special schools

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Abstract

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic reaffirmed for leaders of special schools the need for a flexible, pupil-centred curriculum that was informed by teacher, pupil and parental feedback. Pupils learning at home was a challenge for both teachers and parents and the success of this depended on the pupils' capacity to learn remotely, the parents' capacity to support their child with their learning and the teachers' management of learning in a new and ever changing environment.

Across the special schools sector, the confident and competent leadership addressed appropriately the challenges of the differing learning contexts, new learning experiences and differing pupil needs. The leaders emphasised the importance of face-to-face learning and keeping their schools open.

A key feature of the work of the leaders is their collegial support for one another. In all areas, groups of school leaders met regularly, discussing the challenges they were facing to co-design creative and effective responses. A key issue reported by principals was that much of the indoor and outdoor accommodation is in a poor state of repair or insufficient to accommodate the pupils purposefully. All of the schools highlighted the value of play as an effective method to help pupils process their emotions during the challenges of the pandemic. Staff were keen to get pupils outside into the fresh air as much as possible to help them socialise and exercise. The teachers' effective use of play activities helped the pupils to feel secure, safe and happy in their learning. Recognising the benefits of pupils having more time spent in play, almost all of the principals were keen to integrate more play into the curriculum going forward. The benefits of 'fit for purpose' outdoor spaces for these highly vulnerable pupils to learn, exercise and interact with others is particularly crucial, and going forward needs to be a priority for improvement. In September 2021 the Department of Education announced that £800,000 would be made available to special schools to increase opportunities for physical play and support the social and behavioural development of pupils.

Across all of the special schools, principals emphasised the importance of face-to-face learning and keeping their schools open. The initial focus for leadership in reopening schools was to shape the curriculum to support the rebuilding of relationships among staff and pupils. Schools prioritised appropriately the emotional wellbeing of their pupils, as well as maintaining the teaching of literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the learning and teaching of life skills. Life skills learning and teaching has benefited from being available in the pupils' homes as well as in school through activities, learning strategies, and resources being shared online and with parents directly. Pupils are significantly curtailed in developing new skills when they are restricted to replicating life experiences within the confines of their classroom due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

Staff in special schools highlighted the emotional regulation required for some pupils as critically important. Some pupils needed additional support to manage their fears about the pandemic and the challenges they faced by not being able to engage socially in their friendship groups. Most special schools reported that much of the previous

work which they engaged in with external organisations has been suspended during the pandemic. Pupils have not been able to socialise outside school, as their usual clubs and activities have been suspended. Where work with external organisations is continuing, such as the youth service, it is mostly through online platforms or social media.

Special schools reported that going forward they will continue to learn from the challenges and opportunities which they have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

The following report draws on engagement with school leaders and teachers during February and March 2021, regarding their views on how they have managed the curriculum in their schools, with a particular focus on play and life skills during the COVID-19 pandemic. The evidence draws on district inspector knowledge of the experiences across all special schools during the pandemic. Six special schools were involved in more detailed, focused discussions; most of these schools had or were in the process of reviewing or revising their curriculum either prior to or during the COVID-19 pandemic. The experience of the pandemic reaffirmed for leaders and school staff the critical need for a flexible, pupil-centred curriculum.

The challenges for special schools during the pandemic

The pupils in special schools are recognised as some of the most vulnerable in our society, and the staff working with them understand that they need learning and teaching strategies very closely matched to their individual needs and abilities. The pandemic presented new challenges for the school leaders in special schools to provide a flexible, bespoke curriculum adapted to the pupils' home and school learning environments. The challenge of pupils' learning at home, for a short or sustained period of time without their teachers being present to support and enable them, impacted on the choice of pedagogy of the teacher and the learning progress of the pupils.

The uncertainty that school leaders have regarding how long and in what form the current pandemic will progress, has created a determination among these leaders to use the challenges they have faced to explore new ways of working. Special schools have had to respond to issues which have had an impact on the curriculum, such as higher than average levels of staff absences and significant accommodation limitations due to social distancing requirements. The challenges of the differing contexts, experiences and pupil needs have been able to be addressed through confident and competent leadership. For some leaders, this has meant trying to manage, for example, an 80 percent attendance rate for pupils alongside a 50 percent attendance rate for their staff.

As a consequence, due to these attendance challenges, since special schools reopened in January 2021, there has been a restricted curriculum available in some schools, which has also been impacted by the necessity to facilitate home learning as well as face-to-face learning in school.

A key feature of the work of leaders across the special schools sector is their collegial support for one another. In all areas, groups of school leaders met regularly, discussing the challenges they were facing to co-design creative and effective responses. Most of the principals raised concerns that their school accommodation was designed for considerably fewer pupils than their current cohort. Furthermore, principals reported that much of the indoor and outdoor accommodation is in a poor state of repair or insufficient to accommodate the pupils purposefully. The issue of a lack of space has been exacerbated further by the social distancing and social bubbles requirements put in place by the Executive to ensure the health and safety of staff and pupils.

Practical subjects such as technology and vocational subjects were affected adversely by the necessity of the system of bubbles which restricted the use of the specialist areas and the specialist teachers from providing classes as usual. In one school, the principal described how their teachers of the technical subjects were supporting other colleagues to upskill in those areas in order that the pupils could be taught within their own class bubbles to limit movement around the school. In some schools, due to the difficulty of providing practical experiences, for example in technology and vocational subjects, there were added issues regarding accreditations in these specialist subjects that are usually overseen by teachers. When pupils were educated at home, parents did not have the same level of expertise as teachers to provide clarification and exemplification of the assessment objectives and criteria associated with assessments set by an awarding organisation.

What special schools did on reopening in response to the impact of COVID-19

In reopening schools, the initial focus for leadership was to shape the curriculum to support the rebuilding of relationships among staff and pupils. Schools prioritised appropriately the emotional wellbeing of their pupils, as well as maintaining the teaching of literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT). All of the schools involved in the discussions for this report planned comprehensively and carefully for the safe and successful return of their pupils following the sustained periods of lockdown. One principal highlighted that the priorities at this time were to keep the school open, keep everyone safe and focus on learning. The core learning areas identified by this principal were literacy, numeracy, ICT and multi-sensory learning.

Across all of the special schools, staff and leaders have been creative in their design and management of the curriculum, constantly exploring and trialling new ways of working to benefit their pupils. When special schools reopened, creating a safe and secure school environment was crucial to build staff, parental and most importantly, pupil confidence. Across all of the special schools, principals emphasised the

importance of face-to-face learning and keeping their schools open. One principal stressed that work given to pupils who were learning at home should be as similar as possible to what they get in school; and that it was important to promote “the expectation among parents that the best place for the children is at school”.

Another principal spoke of the need for a supportive and gradual reintegration for the pupils back into school life, trying to have as little change or disruption as possible. Staff in this school were well prepared and made their curriculum and the pupils’ experiences appealing and enjoyable. The principal stressed the importance for the pupils to see school as a good place to be, a place where they feel safe and secure. This principal started every morning with a warm greeting for the pupils as they moved into school from their transport. The initial face-to-face warm welcome was extremely important and enabled the principal to be available to hear first-hand the pupils’ concerns, as well as to gauge how well each pupil was settling in. Early in the school day, the staff were able to gauge which of their pupils were anxious, hesitant or overwhelmed, and consequently how ready they were to learn. As the pupils were reassured and supported, the staff could observe first-hand how they were growing in confidence. For those pupils who have no verbal communication skills, they were reaching out to or communicating with staff through, for example, smiling or seeking them out with their eye contact.

Curriculum development and the changes across special schools during the pandemic

The curriculum has changed in response to the changing needs of pupils and feedback from parents. Special school leaders reported that throughout the pandemic, staff sought regularly the views of parents through, for example, questionnaires or telephone conversations. The views of parents were used, and continue to be used, to shape and improve the learning experiences for the pupils. One principal reported that the communication with parents gave the school invaluable information, for example, the impact of sleep deprivation and lack of routines on those pupils who cannot communicate verbally. Similarly, during this period, the emotional regulation required for some pupils was highlighted by staff as critically important. This was very challenging when trying to help these pupils to learn differently, for example, through blended learning, or having to learn full-time at home. Furthermore, some pupils needed additional support to manage their fears about the pandemic and the challenges they faced by not being able to engage socially in their friendship groups. Schools worked creatively to facilitate the online sharing among pupils of their achievements.

The procedures in special schools changed dramatically over the last year, with previous routines needing to be re-established, as well as the introduction of new routines such as social distancing and more frequent handwashing. The environment and layout of rooms also had to change to allow bubbles to operate as effectively as possible; again this impacted on the availability of specialist rooms and learning environments. While this was unsettling for the pupils, many of whom struggled to understand the new rules and the changes to their well-established routines, the staff reported that pupils adapted very well on their return to school.

In one school, the principal described the “creative deployment of staff to support the context and manage the pupils’ learning in bubbles”. This was achieved through, for example, team-teaching and teachers taking individual responsibility for curricular areas. Facilitating the teachers to work together on thematic areas generated new ideas and learning strategies which a principal described as, “the vibrancy of learning in a hub”. The principal stated that the staff, “felt empowered and accountable to one another.” An additional benefit to team-teaching was the flexibility that it allowed to release teachers to support those pupils learning at home.

One school highlighted how they have reviewed and renamed their curriculum as ‘Curriculum 2020’. As part of their curriculum review process they engaged in a joint school development day, involving five nearby schools who worked collaboratively drawing on the expertise of external inspirational speakers. In this review process, the school staff examined what it was that each individual pupil needed to know prior to leaving school, to enable them to function as independently as possible. The principal stated that this journey starts from the pupil’s entry to school, and is adjusted as appropriate as they progress through school. The school has adjusted their curriculum dividing it into four sub-sections which the staff have aligned to the Northern Ireland (NI) Curriculum:

- **My Communication**

NI Curriculum: Language and Literacy, The Arts, Using Information and Communications Technology.

Pre-requisite skills include: sitting, engaging, attending, looking, shared attention, turn-taking.

- **My Thinking**

NI Curriculum: Maths and Numeracy, The World Around Us, Environment and Society, Science and Technology, Learning for Life and Work.

Developing Thinking Skills & Personal Capabilities and Play-based Learning

- **My Body**

NI Curriculum: Personal Development and Mutual Understanding, Physical Education.

Developing self-help skills, feeding (including specialist diets), personal care and dressing skills.

Involving occupational therapy, self-regulation, sensory circuits, fine motor skills, and touch-based programmes including: story massage, functional reflex-therapy.

Additionally including physiotherapy and outdoor play.

- **My Wellbeing**

NI Curriculum: Physical Development and Movement, Personal Development and Mutual Understanding, The Arts, Religious Education.

Developing positive mental health, self-regulation, yoga, outdoor play, and benefitting from the sensory garden and nurture provision.

The principal reported, “Parents will not see huge changes; however, the way in which teachers think about and approach their planning for learning should change significantly.” Similarly, the work on the assessment of pupils’ learning is being progressed to align with this new model. The reshaping of assessment is a piece of joint work with other local special school assessment co-ordinators, trialled from January 2021.

One school leader highlighted the need in the current situation to have an enhanced focus on monitoring and evaluation and therefore they allocated a senior teacher to monitor the progress in learning for each class. The impact of this was supportive for staff and gave the leadership first-hand information on the outcomes for pupils in this challenging period. The benefits of online homework was another consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic that one school highlighted and going forward intend to retain. The school reported that not only was this environmentally friendly by using less paper, but also coordinators found online homework easier to monitor. However, it was stated by staff that marking and feedback can be challenging when the pupils are not in school; staff report that, “Teaching self-correction is difficult, as is giving immediate feedback.” Therefore, this school has recognised the need to look further at the monitoring of progress.

Furthermore, it was stated by one principal that conducting online annual reviews and transition planning are difficult, as not all professionals operate on the same platforms and parents may not be skilled in their use of the internet. One principal stated that their school will continue to provide an annual online careers week following the pandemic, as parents and pupils valued that they could access it whenever they wanted to.

Most special schools reported that much of the previous work which they engaged in with external organisations has been suspended during the pandemic. This has included visits from outside agencies for example, agencies who address domestic violence, and consequently pupils have not had access to these programmes. This has had a detrimental impact on the informal and formal curriculum offered to pupils, and additionally on their academic, personal and social development. Pupils who usually attend further education colleges for vocational courses have missed their regular sessions which helped to prepare them for training or education when they leave school.

The curriculum and remote learning

Special schools have continued to provide remote learning since returning to school in January 2021 for a variety of reasons. Pupils who are assessed as being extremely clinically vulnerable have had to remain at home, rather than attend school. Other pupils have had to remain at home for periods of time in accordance with Public Health Agency guidelines when they have been in contact with those suffering from COVID-19. In addition, mainly due to staff shortages, schools had to move to a reduced timetable for short periods of time to manage the challenges of self-isolation during the pandemic.

The special schools who were very well prepared for learning remotely, undertook extensive relevant professional development for their staff prior to the pandemic. Other schools had varying amounts of ICT expertise within their staff teams and quickly provided appropriate opportunities for their staff to develop further their skills in teaching remotely. Schools also prioritised the need to support and develop further the pupils' online learning skills. While online learning is not suitable for all pupils, a minority of those pupils, for whom it is appropriate, progressed to be able to access, work through and record their progress in learning tasks. Remote learning is less appropriate for pupils with more severe learning difficulties and parents of those pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties report that their children benefit from sensory activities and personal interaction, as opposed to remote learning.

The use of online platforms and social media as a means of communication and to support learning across the curriculum improved greatly during the pandemic. One school leader reported, "Parents and staff love this as it is a much more effective way to maintain contact. Parents can receive photos or videos of what their child is doing each day, as well as information on how the day has gone." For some pupils, however, their parents did not have the skills or interest to use online platforms, but, over time, some senior pupils developed the skills to use the platforms themselves and were able to upload their work independently, therefore, taking responsibility for their own work.

One principal reported that providing remote access to weekly assemblies proved to be very successful, with almost all pupils, parents, other relatives and friends viewing the school assemblies on multiple occasions. In addition, the school developed a remote library of lessons and activities which are proving to be very popular. As a result of parental feedback, the school intends to continue with providing online access to their recorded resources.

The increased focus on online learning encouraged staff to research new resources, as well as design their own interactive resources. One school reported that they trialled new reading programmes including an accelerated reading programme. The pupils access their books through an online library and read their books in school or with their parents at home. The school aims "to develop these reading initiatives further, in order for all pupils to have access to thousands of books at school or at home." Additionally, this benefits the pupils as they can continue their reading at weekends or during holidays. A key finding for this school was that even when the pupils were not reading in line with their age, the amount that they were reading and their enjoyment of reading had increased significantly.

Supporting parental engagement in curriculum delivery

Engaging parents in supporting their children's learning has been a challenge for both parents and teachers. The evidence base indicates that all school leaders and teachers responded confidently and pastorally to the range of issues faced by parents, supporting them and their children when they had to learn in their home environment. The teachers gave practical support to parents, for example, through delivering learning support packs or lending practical resources. Schools engaged with parents to find out what they wanted and what worked best for them and their children. Some

parents wanted online resources, others preferred physical resources and some a combination of both. A minority of parents did not want any resources; however, the schools continued to send them out and suggested activities and resources which would develop further the independence skills of their children. Activities included gardening, cookery and household tasks such as making beds and using the washing machine.

School staff were sensitive to the need to work with parents and not add to their pressures. They reported that parents were often unable to have strict routines at home, as some were homeworking and struggling to manage all of their children learning at home. One school leader raised the point that, "At home, there are not enough peers at the same or a similar level to make good play-partners for our pupils. Adults support, but are not play-partners."

Due to restricted school finances, staff worked creatively developing and making resources, or directing parents how to make the resources with their child. The home learning packs that schools provided included sensory items such as shaving foam. Where possible, staff tried to generate tasks that used everyday objects found in most homes. This made the learning tasks for the pupils and parents accessible, fun and easily resourced.

Group activities such as school choirs have been mostly suspended, which has led to reduced opportunities for developing social, organisational and interpersonal skills. However, some school youth clubs proceeded successfully using online platforms and attracted new members who, because of the distance they live from their school, could not previously have accessed this provision. The schools will continue to offer this provision.

The impact of COVID-19 on the learning and teaching of life skills

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the learning and teaching of life skills. Life skills in special schools are incorporated into the curriculum from when the pupils first begin school, usually in pre-school. Preparing pupils for their current lives and futures has always been at the core of the curricula delivered across special schools. During the current pandemic, life has changed dramatically for pupils, parents and the communities within which they live. Changing routines and new societal norms have all impacted on how pupils are taught life skills, and have had an impact on their emotional wellbeing.

One school reported that the professional development work which they previously completed on attachment and trauma issues over the last two years was highly beneficial in their response to the emotional needs of the children and their parents during lockdown. Similarly, all of the special schools recognised the need to focus on emotional wellbeing as paramount to help support their pupils and their parents. Principals highlighted the challenges of managing the learning experiences for pupils, with autism for example, in the current pandemic. It was emphasised that pupils with autism often require settling sensory experiences, for example, through short bursts

of physical education, deep pressure activities such as self-hugs or hand pulls, and exercises to develop their core strength such as donkey kicks or bear crawls. The schools have worked hard to manage the challenges of timetabling and organising this in socially distanced environments.

During the pandemic when there were smaller numbers of pupils in school, one principal highlighted that those present had more individual attention to work on all curricular areas, including life skills. Another principal noted that smaller classes resulted in decreased sensory stimulation and distractions, making the learning environment much more productive for many pupils. Additionally, due to smaller classes, it was observed by one member of staff that, “The pupils present needed to make new friends within the class, as their usual friends were not attending”. They also stated that less confident, shy pupils excelled in the smaller classes. Similarly, where smaller practical classes, such as home economics, have taken place, staff report that this allowed them, “to focus on developing individual skills, and also all pupils were able to fit around the cooker to help cook items on the hob rather than taking turns.”

One principal described how important it is that the teaching of life skills focuses on developing independence through experiential learning, “This might simply mean a pupil placing their empty plate in the sink after break. In senior school, it is about continuing to learn new life skills, but it is also about learning how to incorporate them into everyday life.” The principal stated further that pupils take responsibility for the planning of a task, as well as actually doing it. For example, a pupil has to organise their free time, outside of taught classes, to go and deliver milk to the other classes. Therefore, the responsibility for the planning and completion of the task rests with the pupil. In addition, with less movement around a school due to the public health restrictions, pupils have been restricted in the development of their independence skills; for example, they can no longer go to another classroom or the school office with a message, or use the school photocopier.

In almost all special schools it has not been possible for pupils to carry out their work experience either in school or in the community; therefore, this has had a detrimental impact on the pupils learning, for example, through Education for Employability¹. Other learning opportunities which have been drastically reduced include the showering and dressing skills associated with going to a leisure centre, and the organisational skills required when going to the school dining room, for example, requesting items for dinner and carrying a full tray to the table.

Life skills learning and teaching has benefited from being available in the pupils’ homes as well as in school through activities, learning strategies, and resources being shared online and with parents directly. While schools can replicate to some extent a bedroom, or kitchen, to provide a suitable environment for learning to make a bed, or prepare a snack for example, schools cannot reflect fully the pupils’ own home. Pupils, with parental guidance to varying degrees, have been able to extend their learning further through use of their home environment. School staff, parents and pupils have expressed their satisfaction with these opportunities. Staff report that the pupils have enjoyed recording and sharing their achievements through photographs or video capture.

¹ Education for Employability is one of four elements within Learning For Life and Work in the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

One principal spoke of how the pace for pupils had slowed down within school and consequently they have benefited from a calmer learning environment, and less frequent movement and changes within school. This change of pace has suited pupils and has helped their emotional wellbeing. In addition, the recording of lessons and school or class activities have enabled pupils to consolidate their learning through viewing the lessons whenever, and as many times as they wish. It has also lessened anxiety and increased enjoyment through the predictability of the recorded lesson or activity.

In one school, pupils raised concerns about, and then initiated a greater focus on recycling. They were concerned about the level of takeaway food packs, and as a result, one school reported a 50 percent increase in recycling. In another example, the principal stated that, "We have not been able to run our healthy tuck shop around the school and so pupils are missing out on functional money skills and some have also reverted to bringing in not so healthy alternatives for break." In other schools, it was reported that pupils were able to engage and progress in purposeful activities, such as making their own lunches or growing their own vegetables, thereby taking more responsibility for their own healthy eating.

In one school, the life skills area, which has a teaching kitchen, bedroom, bathroom and café area, has had to be reconfigured, as has the Physical Education space to provide additional classrooms to support adherence to the social distancing requirements. All of the life skills teaching in this school is now in the pupils' classrooms or at home. Through the emphasis on health and hygiene, pupils have become adept at washing their hands regularly throughout the school day and taking responsibility for cleaning their own desk and work areas.

Educational outings have ceased and pupils are unable to participate in travel training or develop independence skills whilst shopping, such as using self-scanners in supermarkets. Some adjustments have been made by teachers, such as online shopping, or the use of roleplays, but for pupils this is not what they understand to be real life experiences. Parents have supported the development of life skills at home through functional skills, such as laundry sorting, organising their own belongings, or emptying the dishwasher. Pupils are significantly curtailed in developing new skills when they are restricted to replicating life experiences within the confines of their classroom due to COVID-19 restrictions. Furthermore, it is difficult for teachers to assess the progress of the pupils' targets when much of the work is undertaken under parental guidance and supervision at home.

Pupils have not been able to socialise outside school, as their usual clubs and activities have been suspended. Some parents have reported to principals that this had a negative effect on their son or daughter's emotional health and wellbeing, and their personal development. Where work with external organisations is continuing, such as the youth service, it is mostly through online platforms or social media. Schools have identified the benefits of using social media to reach out to new audiences and engage new young people and are keen to retain new methods of communication and learning experiences going forward.

Learning through play

All of the schools highlighted the value of play as an effective method to help pupils process their emotions during the challenges of the pandemic. Emotional regulation and having fun were key components of the curriculum during this time. Planning for re-engagement incorporated play more fully as a means to meet the individual and collective needs of the pupils. Staff were keen to get pupils outside into the fresh air as much as possible to help them socialise and exercise. The teachers' effective use of play activities helped the pupils to feel secure, safe and happy in their learning. One principal stated, "COVID has encouraged us to look creatively at how we use our shared spaces, for example, our sensory spaces. For some of our older children with autism work is play and play is work."

Another school reported how they benefitted from a teacher who was trained in play therapy supporting the pupils and their parents. They reported the positive impact on the quality of the play experiences and the enjoyment of the pupils. A significant number of principals reported that behavioural incidents in the playground were greatly reduced as a consequence of timetabling separately the key stage cohorts, and they plan to continue with this system.

Recognising the benefits of pupils having more time spent in play, almost all of the principals were keen to integrate more play into the curriculum going forward. For example, in one school, 'Play Planners' are now a feature in all junior classes and have a much clearer focus on the planning and the critical reflection by the staff. In this school, the staff value the importance of play and how regular physical movement breaks can impact positively on learning. One principal highlighted how their school planned to develop further their outdoor play by expanding the time spent outdoors and continue giving opportunities for parallel play to develop further the pupils' communication skills.

There have been difficulties for schools using soft play balls or Jacuzzi pools due to the risks of passing on infection. Consequently, the opportunities to help pupils with their motor skills and other movements are restricted. Staff reported other adverse impacts from the pandemic on play. For example, they stated that, "Prior to COVID-19, the Junior School ran regular Big Play Days – these allowed all classes in Junior School to plan together and play together, with two to three classes participating at a time. These days also ran to a particular theme and some of the play would have taken place indoors and some outdoors. Due to COVID-19 and the need to keep bubbles separated, these have not been happening."

Outdoor learning

In a time when staff wanted to encourage pupils to interact and enjoy the outdoors, this was often curtailed. A regular feature in many of the school timetables was the daily walk, and some schools promoted this when pupils were being educated at home. Pupils were encouraged to record or photograph aspects of their walks and share this with their peers in school; this captured the pupils' learning and maintained their connections to one another.

While the use of playgrounds was timetabled creatively, sufficient space is a huge issue, with one principal expressing concern at having to use the school car park for play. Across the special schools in Northern Ireland, there is variation in the quality of outdoor spaces. A minority are well resourced with, for example, outside gyms, while others are inadequately resourced with very poorly maintained and resourced areas which do not have sufficient spaces for pupils to play and socialise. The benefits of 'fit for purpose' outdoor spaces for these highly vulnerable pupils to learn, exercise and interact with others is particularly crucial, and going forward needs to be a priority for improvement. In September 2021 the Department of Education announced that £800,000 would be made available to special schools to increase opportunities for physical play and support the social and behavioural development of pupils.

For most special schools within cities and towns, there is a small and finite amount of space for outside play. In a growing number of schools, outside space is becoming more restricted owing to the additional temporary classrooms to accommodate the growing pupil numbers in special schools. However, in schools where play space is very limited, school staff are creative in their use of the limited resources. Staff in one school noticed that their pupils enjoyed spending time walking around school and they wanted to make this a more exciting and enticing experience for them. The school therefore, invested in items and equipment that the pupils could stop, investigate and engage with, such as quirky mirrors, cable tied pots, beaters and chimes.

In one school, the principal reported that they now recognise that, "for some pupils before COVID-19 there was too much going on, the pupils were too busy", whereas now the teachers have realised that they can do a lot more close to home. They have discovered creative ways of using and exploring appropriately the outdoor spaces available and close to them, for example local parks.

Going forward

Special schools reported that going forward they will continue to learn from the challenges and opportunities which they have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The confident leadership and management demonstrated by principals and staff is reshaping the curriculum across many special schools to one that continues to be flexible and responsive to the changing needs of our most vulnerable pupils. The willingness of leaders to meet regularly to discuss the current challenges and exchange practices within their schools has resulted in enhanced professional working relationships, and the further development and effective sharing of good practice. The priority for all is to create a safe, nurturing learning environment, which engages all pupils and prepares them with the appropriate life skills they need to support them and to prepare them as much as possible for the future.

Appendix A: Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

Quantitative terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

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