

Consultation with Year 6 to 14 pupils about their learning experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown, from January to March 2021

November 2021

Introduction

The second COVID-19 lockdown took place from January to March 2021, resulting in most pupils learning remotely from home. Between 1 June and 11 June 2021, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) invited all pupils in school, from years 6 to 14, to tell us more about what it was like undertaking learning during the second lockdown.

A total of 28,790 year 6 to year 14 pupils completed the online questionnaires. Of these responses: 14,256 were year 6 and year 7 pupils from 45% of all primary schools; and, 14,534 were pupils from 77% of post-primary schools. The majority (71%), of the post-primary responses were from key stage 3 pupils, largely because of the time of the school year that the survey took place.

The main findings from the online questionnaires are outlined in this report. In addition, ETI has also published detailed pamphlet summaries of the returns for the pupils to read. We want to thank all of the pupils who responded so openly and honestly to the questionnaires. We are deeply appreciative of the school leaders and teachers, who supported ETI through both piloting the questionnaires and encouraging and allowing time for the pupils to complete them. We hope to build further on this work with their continued co-operation.

Summary of key messages

Primary

The following key messages emerged from the responses by the year 6 and year 7 pupils.

- Around 88% of the pupils reported that they enjoyed learning during lockdown all, most or some of the time; 43% of them enjoyed learning for all or most of the time.
- The pupils' responses show that their learning was helped most by the following approaches: referring to a planner or timetable in organising their learning (52%); keeping active doing PE and other physical activities (54%); working independently on projects (45%); completing online tasks (47%); completing tasks using booklets, worksheets and exercise books (46%); and,



Consultation with Year 6 to 14 pupils about their learning experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown, from January to March 2021

November 2021

videos from teacher or classroom assistant (51%). Around 33 percent of pupils reported that they were helped by live lessons but just 13% through opportunities to work online in pairs or larger groups.

- Around 74% of the pupils reported that they had difficulty completing work all, most or some of the time; 15% of them had difficulty all or most of the time. The pupils relied mainly on parents/carers (80%) and their teachers/classroom assistants (47%) for help.
- The pupils received feedback (93%) on their work with 83% of them reporting that written comments was the form of feedback they found most useful.
- The pupils reported that access to equipment was mostly good; less than 5% reported they did not have the correct equipment or resources they needed. The pupils reported that the main difficulties they faced in completing school work were: being unsure about how to do the work (31%); the internet connection did not always work (29%); lack of a quiet place to work (28%); and, feeling they had too much work to complete (21%).
- The pupils reported that teachers (86%) and parents/carers (74%) taught them about staying safe online. Around 1% of the pupils reported that they had not been taught about staying safe online.



- It is noteworthy that 86% of the pupils reported that their information and communication technology (ICT) skills improved during lockdown.
- In terms of the pupils' viewpoints on which aspects of remote learning should be retained while back at school, 50% of them wish to continue doing projects and research activities, 49% would like to choose when they undertake learning and 44%

would like to have time to do activities and learn new skills with their family and would like to continue with online/paperless homework.

- After lockdown ended, almost all pupils enjoyed being back in school. They particularly enjoyed seeing their friends (94%) and being taught by their teacher in person (65%).

Consultation with Year 6 to 14 pupils about their learning experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown, from January to March 2021

November 2021

- It is noteworthy that, on return to school, the pupils reported that they enjoyed those areas of learning which had a practical or creative focus, such as, art (62%), physical education and sport (75%) and playtime (78%). By contrast, they enjoyed literacy (29%) and numeracy (37%) to a lesser extent. It was clear that pupils attending an Irish-medium primary school/unit enjoyed hearing and speaking Irish (51%) again.

Post-primary

The following key messages emerged from the responses by the post-primary pupils.

- Around 79% of the pupils reported that they enjoyed learning during lockdown all, most or some of the time, although this dropped to 35% of them for all or most of the time.
- The pupils' responses show that the following approaches to learning worked well for them: participation in a morning registration with a form teacher/tutor group (53%); participation in live lessons/sessions (73%); completing online tasks using digital resources (82%) uploaded notes/work (88%); making use of videos (75%); and, use of textbooks (64%). In addition, 74% of them reported that working independently on tasks, such as, research worked well, although just 31% reported positively on opportunities to work in pairs/groups with other pupils.
- Almost 37% of post-primary pupils reported feeling connected to their school community during lockdown, with 42% of them reporting no access to online assemblies.
- Around 76% of the pupils reported that they had difficulty completing work all, most or some of the time; this was just 22% of them, however, for all or most of the time. Related to this, 58% of post-primary pupils reported that self-motivation was the most common reason why it was difficult to complete schoolwork, 47% reported having too much work to complete and 38% of them reported that they found it difficult to understand the work.
- Around 18% of post-primary pupils indicated they did not have a routine for completing schoolwork at home on any day. The pupils also reported that they relied most on their class members/friends (62%) for help, but also on parents/carers (58%) and their teacher/classroom assistant (47%).



Consultation with Year 6 to 14 pupils about their learning experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown, from January to March 2021

November 2021



- Around 64% of pupils found feedback on their work during lessons useful with 87% of them reporting that written comments on their work was the form of feedback they found most useful; almost 55% of them reported that spoken feedback on their written work was useful with 65% of them reporting that the feedback from the online quizzes was also useful.
- There was variation in the extent to which pupils reported improvements across a range of important wider skills during lockdown. Just over 70% of them reported that their ICT skills improved, 77% their independent working skills, 59% managing information, 58% problem-solving and 54% their organisational skills. By contrast, just 26% of the pupils reported they had improved their working with others skills and only 36% their communication skills.
- Around 71% of the pupils agreed or strongly agreed that they looked after their physical health when learning from home; the responses for looking after their emotional and mental wellbeing were much lower at 53%.
- The pupils reported that teachers (79%) and parents/carers (74%) taught them about staying safe online, with just 3% of them reporting they had not been taught about this.
- Clearly, the pupils enjoyed their return to school at the end of lockdown. They particularly enjoyed seeing their friends (92%) and being taught by their teacher in person (57%). They also reported enjoying break and lunch time (61%) and working in person with other pupils again (49%).

Commentary

Learning and teaching

Pupils learn best when learning is interactive and practical, and when teachers make use of a wide range of teaching methods to engage and motivate them in their learning.

Almost 84% of pupils from years 6 to year 14 reported that they enjoyed learning all, most or some of the time. In primary, the pupils indicated that they enjoyed a range of approaches, resources and learning experiences, which included: working independently on projects through research tasks; working in pairs and groups through online reading activities; completing physical activities that could be organised at home; and, online assemblies and quizzes prepared and delivered by their teachers. Approximately 28% of year 6 and year 7 pupils indicated, however, that they did not have a quiet place to work.

Consultation with Year 6 to 14 pupils about their learning experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown, from January to March 2021

November 2021

In post-primary, the pupils found that teacher presence, either through 'live' lessons (73%) or recorded lessons (67%), worked particularly well for them. In primary, taking account of the age and stage of development, year 6 and year 7 pupils found that teacher presence, either through 'live' lessons (33%) or recorded lessons/videos (51%), worked well for them. While acknowledging the benefits of the virtual learning environment and digital resources, 65% of all pupils also reported that paper-based work and resources, including textbooks in post-primary, were of particular benefit to their learning. To secure high levels of motivation and engagement in learning, schools need to consider the balance of virtual and physical learning resources.

Overall, the pupils were glad to return to school after the lockdown; they particularly enjoyed: being taught in person by their teachers; seeing their friends; and, socialising at break and lunchtimes.

Feedback

Inspection evidence clearly shows that quality feedback for improvement is important in consolidating the pupils' learning and improving the quality of their work by informing progress over time; most (85%) pupils, across primary and post-primary, report that written comments on their work was the form of feedback that they found most useful. In addition, a majority of pupils in post-primary found online quizzes (65%) and spoken (audio) comments (55%) helpful; also, 29% of primary pupils received useful feedback through spoken messages.

Information and communication technology/wider skills

Just over 86% of year 6 and year 7 pupils and 70% of post-primary pupils reported that their ICT skills improved during lockdown.

In going forward, schools may wish to explore if this is due solely to increased ability and confidence in using digital devices and communication technology to participate in lessons, or the application of their ICT skills in problem solving, and creating digital content to support their work across the curriculum.

Consultation with Year 6 to 14 pupils about their learning experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown, from January to March 2021

November 2021

The responses from the pupils show that most had access to equipment and resources which allowed them to access remote learning; less than 2% of the pupils, for example, indicated that no digital devices were available or used to complete schoolwork. The most commonly used devices were laptops or Chromebooks, tablets or iPads and smartphones; the use of smartphones was much higher in post-primary (65%) than primary (42%). There are some drawbacks to accessing remote learning through a smartphone. ETI experience and evidence gleaned from the observation of online learning shows that the use of smartphones by pupils, as opposed to using laptops, Chromebooks or tablets, can limit their capacity to engage and participate fully as it proves difficult for them at times to move between applications and to access a fuller range of tools and functionality.

The evidence from the pupils, however, shows clearly that many of them faced significant difficulties in completing school work during the period of lockdown. The main constraints included: lack of self-motivation, particularly in post-primary; unreliable internet connectivity; lack of a quiet place to work; feeling they had too much work to complete; a lack of understanding about how to do the work set; and, sharing a device with someone else at home.

There is no doubt that the significant reliance on digital skills and the use of a range of digital devices to access learning increased the pupils' confidence and competence with technology enhanced learning. There was variation, however, in the extent to which post-primary pupils in particular reported improvements across a range of other important wider skills during lockdown. While pupils reported improvements in independent working (77%), managing information (59%) and problem-solving skills (58%), the proportions reporting improvement in communication skills (36%) and working with others (26%) were much lower. Across all of the responses in primary and post-primary, the evidence shows they did not have enough opportunities to work in pairs or small groups with their peers. This is an area that schools should pay closer attention to in the professional learning opportunities provided to staff.

Safeguarding/wellbeing

Schools give a high priority to safeguarding and wellbeing. Almost 98% of pupils report that they have been taught about staying safe online, mostly by their teacher, parent or carer. Increased remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for schools to further protect their pupils by ensuring that digital learning platforms, ICT systems, and updated, relevant codes of practice keep pupils safe.

Around 71% of the post-primary pupils agreed or strongly agreed that they looked after their physical health when learning from home; the responses for looking after their emotional and mental wellbeing were much lower at 53%.

Consultation with Year 6 to 14 pupils about their learning experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown, from January to March 2021

November 2021

Learning points going forward

In order to be better prepared for potential future lockdowns, but also to continue to realise many of the clear benefits that can accrue from effective remote learning, the following areas should be given consideration by schools:

- monitoring on a regular basis the amount of work expected from pupils while working remotely, particularly in the post-primary schools where several subject teachers may be making demands of them at the same time;
- strategies to increase the level of pupils' connectivity with school, through, for example, participation in regular assemblies, class 'get togethers' and more opportunities to work with their peers in small groups;
- continue to develop the digital skills of pupils and staff, to ensure they are well-equipped to use to best effect the functionality of the available digital platforms;
- encourage pupils to access remote learning through devices with sufficient functionality to engage and participate fully in all aspects of the learning process; and
- review the impact of the learning and teaching strategies deployed during lockdown, with a view to discerning those that work best for developing and consolidating the pupils' wider skills.

Conclusion

The response rate from almost 29,000 pupils is substantial. The views of the pupils are crucial in underpinning effective practice and improving provision. It will be beneficial for leaders at all levels to reflect on the range of responses across the online questionnaires and interpret the detail in the context of their own school in order to inform the life and work of their school and the wider community.