

Stepping Up and Stepping Forward

Learning Insight 4

Teachers' commitment and innovation enabled learning to continue through the lockdowns; we need to invest further in their professional learning



What do we know?

Teachers are our most important and valuable educational resource; the experiences and outcomes for learners are dependent on the quality of the classroom and remote learning practice. Teachers have always responded well to ongoing challenge, change and policy direction. In addressing the disruptions created by the Covid-19 pandemic, leaders, teachers, support staff, parents and carers did a remarkable job in helping learners. We know our teachers have always had to adapt effectively to change and we know that they care for and work tirelessly for children and young people.

The vision of DE's [Learning Leaders](#) strategy (2016, p.4) is that 'every teacher is a learning leader, accomplished in working collaboratively with all partners in the interests of children and young people'. We know that our teachers are well-qualified, experienced in working collaboratively and can adapt extremely well in addressing the many challenges that society leaves at their classroom door. They deserve high quality professional learning opportunities to sustain their motivation, talent and commitment to the learners in their care.



What have we learned?

The disruption of Covid-19 has let the public see much more explicitly the levels of commitment and dedication of the teaching profession and has allowed society to appreciate openly all that teachers do for children and young people.



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During the first lockdown, in spring 2020, many teachers adapted their lessons to provide remote learning through gradually introducing some elements of synchronous and asynchronous¹ approaches. Despite their best endeavours to provide engaging and enjoyable remote learning, schools noted variable levels of learner engagement and reported that remote learning is not as effective as face-to-face lessons. The challenges that some teachers faced included: not initially possessing the e-pedagogical skills to provide digital lessons; providing effective feedback remotely; and ensuring that learning was well-paced and effective. There was an acceptance that remote learning was exceptionally challenging and does not suit all learners.

On returning to school in August 2020, teachers reported that they were better placed to provide a more balanced approach to learning through both remote and face-to-face learning.

The teachers had identified and addressed their own learning needs, which were met by individual learning, in-house professional development and through teachers sharing practice locally and regionally.

In discussions with inspectors, early years providers and schools reported significant levels of collaboration including peer support and inter-organisational sharing. New networks such as 'BlendEd NI' responded quickly, while existing Area Learning Communities developed further approaches to professional learning such as webinars for teachers. High levels of trust and mutual support amongst practitioners transformed individual professional growth to systemic growth that has benefitted many thousands of learners and ensured our system was resilient and robust throughout the school closures. Arrangements such as the cross-organisational link officer provision, and the support of our local initial teacher training institutes in providing professional learning opportunities and advice, also helped with the provision of effective collective support for schools during these challenging times.

What will help us move forward constructively?

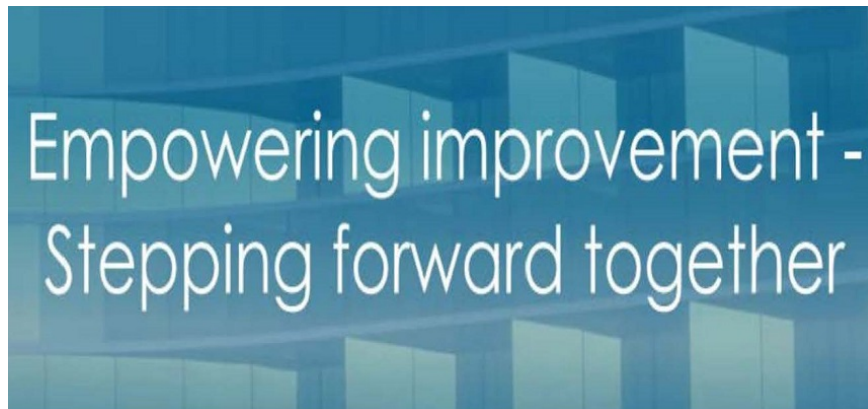
Teachers are our most valuable asset in improving the quality of learning our young people experience and consequently, their life-chances. Teachers' readiness to upskill themselves allowed for the continuity of learning during the pandemic through establishing new and innovative ways of teaching. Some of the methods used in the remote learning environment have the potential to enhance learning in face-to-face classrooms. For example, asynchronous activities support children in consolidating their learning at their own pace at home and enable parents to engage more closely with the learning process.

¹ In the context of remote learning, synchronous learning requires learners to attend live lessons at a designated time. Asynchronous learning allows learners to access pre-recorded and uploaded materials at any time.

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We need to show how much we value teachers by investing further in their personal and professional learning through greater access to high quality and relevant learning opportunities. We are now in the sixth year of a ten year strategy for supporting teachers' professional learning (TPL) through DE's Learning Leaders strategy. The ETI is particularly interested in identifying how the system can best integrate the self-generated professional learning developed by teachers, for teachers, into the wider DE Learning Leaders strategy, without stifling the innovation, independence or risk-taking that was evident during the periods of lockdown. Going forward, it will be important that teachers can avail of a good range of high quality, sustained professional development and have opportunities to share effective practice.

The ETI will support TPL and building capacity at middle management level in schools through its [Empowering Improvement - Stepping Forward Together](#) project.



This initiative will focus on the project will focus on self-evaluation leading to whole-organisation improvement for middle leaders. It will also look at self-evaluation of learning and teaching, encompassing digital learning, in order to help schools deliver the best possible provision and outcomes for all learners.