

Primary Phase Report

September 2018 - December 2020



Providing Inspection services for:
Department of Education
Department for the Economy
and other commissioning Departments



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***Editorial Note**

Please note that references to commercial resources contained in the case studies are for information only. ETI does not endorse specific resources.

Foreword

The last year has brought challenges to education and training in Northern Ireland unlike anything we could have imagined. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) along with many others, had to re-think priorities quickly in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, including pausing inspection indefinitely.

Successful responses to the pandemic both, here and across the world have required understanding, adaptable and flexible leadership, underpinned by technological creativity; testing to the extreme the very attributes our education and training curricula endeavour to foster. Personal resilience is at a premium.

Maintaining operational integrity within and across the education and training system, continues to be a demanding, and increasingly exhausting undertaking for individuals and organisations. The long held ambition of providing access to education online had to be put in place virtually overnight.

Since March 2020, inspectors have been focusing largely on supporting leaders and practitioners to provide continuity of learning for children and young people and to support their wellbeing. Inspectors have shared their expertise and worked collaboratively with other key education and training stakeholders, to develop advice and guidance for a range of sectors.

This report is one of a series of seven individual reports (for Pre-school; Primary; Post-primary; Special; Education Other Than At School; Youth; and, Further Education and Work-based learning) covering the period September 2018 to December 2020, replacing the previous biennial Chief Inspector's Report.

This series of reports sets out: to help to promote improvement in the interests of all learners; to identify, affirm, and share evidence of effective learning, so that all learners can benefit; and, to provide a basis to continue the professional educational discourse between inspectors and educators, for the benefit of all children and young people.

The reports are intended to stimulate debate and discussion on what we are discovering about the nature of effective learning and teaching, that can not only support a swifter recovery but that can influence and shape the future of education in Northern Ireland.

The immediate future continues to be uncertain, but I feel privileged to lead ETI, in continuing to contribute our impartial and objective analysis, evaluation and expertise to the collective work of addressing the challenges facing the education and training system in Northern Ireland.

These reports mark a change of direction and a fresh start to our organisation and our work. I welcome your thoughts and contributions as to how we can continue to support learners and educators to adapt flexibly and quickly to changing and unforeseen circumstances, in the future, through capturing and building on the experiences of educators before and during the pandemic.



Faustina Graham
Chief Inspector

Inspection findings: September 2018 - March 2020

Context

The findings that follow are based on the available evidence gained in the primary sector of education through: inspections that were not impacted by industrial action; inspections impacted by action short of strike in which there were varying levels of engagement with ETI; and, all other district and survey/evaluation visits to schools. Inspection was paused on 18 March 2020.

Wider skills and dispositions

Children continue to develop their inter-personal skills and contribute confidently to the life and work of schools through having opportunities to lead some of their own work. For example: ‘digital leaders¹’ are designing and facilitating coding clubs for younger children; and, older children, through their work as anti-bullying ambassadors, are raising awareness of how to stay safe and respect diversity.

Children articulate their views confidently and speak positively about their learning experiences across the curriculum and through extra-curricular activities. In the most effective practice, children have opportunities to take a lead role in their own learning; and, the contributions they make to inform the development of whole-school policies and practices are valued by staff and the children themselves. Furthermore, the children in Irish-medium settings speak fluently and confidently in Irish and express their pride in being able to speak more than one language.

Increasingly, the children refer to enjoying learning with children from other schools through shared education programmes and can identify, reflect on and describe how they are improving their skills in areas, such as, problem-solving, decision-making and resilience.

Learning and teaching

Across all inspections during action short of strike, the quality of provision in almost all of the 204 lessons observed, was good or better (95%), with the majority being very good or outstanding (69%). Most of the lessons observed were literacy or numeracy. Strengths included: the development of writing skills across the curriculum, including free writing in a range of genres, forms and real-life contexts; and, the opportunities to apply problem-solving skills to meaningful, real-life experiences, linked to STEM² and also through outdoor learning.

¹ A digital leader has the role of supporting their peers in using digital technology. Digital leaders are given training and support to develop their expertise in using digital technology.

² STEM is an acronym for science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

World Around Us

The World Around Us (WAU)³ provides an important opportunity for the children to connect and apply their developing skills and knowledge across the curriculum. Schools continue to be at different stages of developing their provision in the WAU. The emphasis on developing scientific enquiry skills was the key feature of the outstanding and very good science and technology lessons. In comparison, the teaching of the geographical and historical elements of the WAU is not developed sufficiently.

In the most effective WAU practice, teachers develop the children's understanding including concepts, skills and knowledge in interesting, real-life contexts, including the locality. Learning is enhanced by enquiry-based approaches and incorporates meaningful opportunities to develop further the children's literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills.

Using Information and Communication Technology (Using ICT)

While schools continue to prioritise and develop the investigation and solving of problems through a range of digital tools, the children's capacity to research, select, process and interpret information is less well-developed. In less effective practice, children are copying and pasting extracts from internet sources rather than selecting and editing text from teacher-selected sites and using these in a way that enhances learning. Through the safeguarding and wellbeing discussions ETI held with children, it is evident that they are increasingly aware of how to keep safe online.

FOCUS: USING ICT TO RAISE OUTCOMES FOR THE CHILDREN

CHALLENGE

Through a range of audits and extensive consultation, the Primary school's leadership team identified the need to prioritise the development of using ICT to: enhance and extend the children's learning opportunities; capitalise on the children's natural interest and motivation in using ICT; and, prepare the children for living and working in the 21st century.

RESPONSE

High priority was placed on staff training with staff development days focused on improving all staff and governor knowledge of a range of software packages and digital tools. The staff developed a whole-school progression framework on computational thinking and coding and were given time to consider how to integrate ICT into planning for learning to promote the children's thinking skills and personal capabilities, in

³ World Around Us (WAU) Survey 2015 and the Chief Inspector's Report 2016-2018.

particular, problem-solving and creativity, and connect the learning across the curriculum.

Importantly, the school prioritised strengthening further the home-school partnership. The school hosted an annual 'Digital Thinking Week' where all parents were invited to learn, using educational technology, alongside the children. A 'Confident Coders Learn Together Project' was devised and implemented where family members could enrol and learn about coding and computational thinking alongside their children. A series of instructional videos for parents was also created and uploaded to the school website to support parents in the use of online platforms which their children were using.

IMPACT

Through surveys, the children report that ICT has supported them in developing their communication, numeracy and thinking skills. The further integration of ICT has afforded children with opportunities to take on leadership responsibilities and connect their learning across the curriculum. For example, a group of children in key stage (KS) 2 planned, organised and delivered a 'Coding Club' for younger children. This was connected to their learning in literacy where the children had to write risk assessments, devise learning plans for each week and complete an evaluation of the programme. The school's evidence indicates that there has been an increase in the number of children achieving level 4 or above in communication, using mathematics and using ICT.

Physical Education

The [2016-2018 Chief Inspector's Report](#) highlighted that children need to be physically fit to learn, yet more than one-in-five enter primary school already overweight or obese, a figure which rises to over one-in-four by Year 8⁴. Medical advice to increase activity levels and eat healthily reinforces further the Department of Education's (DE) recommendation for schools to provide at least two hours of physical education (PE) per week. This is in stark contrast to the evidence from the 2018 Omnibus Survey⁵ which reports that, on average, just under one-half of the children in the Foundation Stage, decreasing to one-quarter of children in KS2, were timetabled for PE less than one hour per week. In going forward, schools need to review the allocation of time for PE and increase the breadth of the statutory curriculum.

⁴ Health Inequalities Annual Report 2018: Public Health Information & Research Branch, Information Analysis Directorate, Department of Health, Belfast. [Health inequalities statistics](#)

⁵ [School Omnibus Survey 2018](#)

Assessment in the Foundation Stage

Where learning in the Foundation Stage is evaluated too narrowly, this is often due to an over-reliance on the use of standardised English and mathematics tests which are intended primarily for diagnostic use⁶. Current approaches do not always make effective enough use of qualitative information from pre-school providers alongside the school's own planned and regular observations, when assessing the outcomes for children.

FOCUS: USING QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE DATA CREATIVELY TO ADDRESS POTENTIAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT

CHALLENGE

Rigorous analysis of whole-school assessments used to identify the children's perceptions about their learning and attitude towards school revealed a core group of year 5 boys who were disengaged in learning and had poor levels of motivation. The challenge was to design and implement a bespoke programme to support prioritised children to become more self-confident learners, improve their motivation, develop a more positive attitude to school and see the value and relevance of learning now, and in the future.

RESPONSE

Observations of this group of children, combined with an audit of their needs and interests, identified their enjoyment in outdoor active learning with the children expressing a desire to make a den. This interest formed the basis of a project which was cross-curricular and challenging in design, providing opportunities for the children to engage in practical mathematics, literacy, Art and Design, PE, Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) and the WAU.

The skill sets of the staff were considered and a member of staff identified so that his expertise was utilised to best effect. There was a conscious drive to develop the children's communication, using mathematics and thinking skills and personal capabilities through 'Project Y' where the boys were involved in project-managing the design, financial management and building of an outdoor arts room in the grounds of the school. The children set up a company, pitched their ideas and plans to the governors to fund the project, undertook risk assessments and met with health and safety officers. They discussed their plans with an architect and purchased equipment and materials to undertake the project. The children were involved in the practical building work over a number of weeks.

⁶ ETI Foundation Stage Survey (Draft) 2019

IMPACT

This has transformed positively the children's engagement in learning and their understanding of the relevance and importance of acquiring literacy and numeracy skills for future employment. The children's confidence soared over the course of the project as they became engrossed in applying their mathematical understanding to the practical activities while advancing their communication and geographical skills. Their self-esteem grew as other children in the school community could see the build progressing and questioned the boys about the project. Analysis of assessment and other data confirmed the project had a positive impact on the children's self-esteem, motivation and capacity for learning. This was confirmed by teacher observations which noted the children's enthusiasm for learning and positive attitudes towards school.

Health and wellbeing of staff

An emerging finding from inspection and district activity is an increasing number of senior leaders whose health and wellbeing is impacted adversely by a range of factors. Senior leaders, including newly appointed principals, are citing: financial pressures, but, at the same time, increasing numbers of children with complex special educational needs; and, perceptions of limited professional learning opportunities.

FOCUS: IMPROVING THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF STAFF

CHALLENGE

A whole-school audit revealed the need to focus on staff health and wellbeing, due to a range of work-based and personal challenges. Appropriate support mechanisms and pro-active, strategic measures were agreed and implemented to improve work-life balance for all staff. The initial focus on staff wellbeing developed organically into considering how best to promote and extend the positive approaches to supporting the children and their families and their health and wellbeing.

RESPONSE

It was agreed that a whole-school focus on wellbeing and mindfulness would be one of the main priorities for improvement in the school development plan. A 'Personal Wellbeing Committee' with representatives from the teaching and support staff was established. It was agreed that the committee would: facilitate open communication between staff members on matters of wellbeing; be an available point-of-contact for any staff member with a particular concern; listen to concerns and signpost additional support if required; and, plan a whole-school calendar of events for staff, children and

families, to introduce and deliver the 'Take 5 Steps to Wellbeing'⁷ initiative. Staff development days were used for relevant whole-school training and various changes were gradually introduced. These included: replacing written homework once a month with an activity from 'Take 5 Steps to Wellbeing'; highlighting the value and positive impact of high quality verbal feedback for children; senior management prioritising work to support staff to manage better their time and maintain a healthier work-life balance; and, making time for treats, time-out and celebrations for all. Partnerships were formed with a range of support agencies, including: the South Eastern Trust; the Public Health Agency; Action Cancer; and, the Education Authority, to source training, support and guidance on a range of matters as appropriate.

IMPACT

From prioritising the health and wellbeing of staff to focusing on the children, whole-staff training was provided on 'The Attach Project'⁸. Staff report a more consistent whole-school understanding of the impact of even 'small' traumas on children's behaviour, mental health and fitness for learning. Two teachers availed of additional capacity-building and established nurture sessions to support individual and small groups of children; staff, parents and the children report the significant benefit of these sessions. There is a more open culture and understanding of the importance of mindfulness and wellbeing. Senior leadership facilitate actively staff in achieving a healthy work-life balance. Staff, at all levels, have developed a shared awareness of one another's needs and provide mutual support; planning is in place to embed this further through supporting children to develop similar mutual understanding. Feedback indicates that the wellbeing of the wider school community has benefitted from the monthly mindfulness focus. The very active Personal Wellbeing Committee meets regularly and ensures that the wellbeing of all remains a priority through, for example: facilitating staff to learn something new (sewing, knitting, sign language); planning a whole-school calendar for mindfulness; placing a 'we-are-here-to-help' box in the staff room to invite suggestions prior to meetings of the committee; and, promoting the importance of shared, physical activities, such as, morning walking and yoga groups.

⁷ [Take 5 steps to wellbeing: looking after your mental health during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#)

⁸ 'The Attach Project' (TAP) followed on from the EA/DE 'Children Looked-After Education Project' to develop understanding of the impact of trauma on children's development and learning.

Safeguarding

Arrangements for safeguarding were evaluated in 371 primary school inspections during this reporting period; at the point of inspection, the arrangements for safeguarding in almost all of these schools reflected or reflected broadly the guidance from the Department of Education (DE). In 11 of the inspections, the school did not provide evidence that the arrangements for safeguarding reflected or reflected broadly the guidance from DE; in all of these instances, ETI returned to the primary school within six weeks to follow-up on safeguarding and the issues were subsequently addressed. The areas that most often require improvement are risk assessments and child protection training for governors.

Lessons learned during the Covid-19 response phase including a focus on remote learning: March - August 2020

Home-school partnership

Schools understand the importance of ‘being connected’ with the children and their parents. During the first lockdown, increased communication through regular contact and provision of accessible guidance for parents, such as, short training video clips or written information, enabled many parents to navigate the various platforms being used to deliver remote learning.

Being connected also extended to principals and teachers having increased levels of pastoral engagement with families and the local community and being responsive to developing various support solutions. This was highlighted as a particular concern for children with special educational needs, who would normally benefit from individual or small-group learning interventions and strategies. Support was provided in many forms, including: pastoral phone-calls and online contact with children and parents; socially distanced home visits; and, the provision of digital devices and suitably adapted paper-based learning packs and practical equipment. In some contexts, where schools knew families were struggling financially or with other aspects of their wellbeing, pastoral support often included the provision of food boxes and/or guidance on how to connect with other relevant support services in the wider community.

Use of digital technology to promote learning and teaching

Those schools that had previously prioritised professional learning opportunities for their staff in using digital technology were better placed to implement and deliver remote learning. A significant number of schools enlisted the support of C2K to upskill staff in the functionality of Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, Collaborate Ultra and C2K Newsdesk and to increase their understanding of how these platforms could be used to support remote learning. During this period, staff engaged in additional online

professional learning opportunities and training programmes provided by, for example, Microsoft, Google and Seesaw, to expand their working knowledge of the functionality of various learning platforms and online pedagogy. A small number of teachers achieved certification, for example, becoming MIE experts⁹, Google Educators¹⁰ and Seesaw Pioneers¹¹.

FOCUS: REMOTE LEARNING DURING THE PANDEMIC

CHALLENGE

Prior to lockdown the school employed Google Classroom and Seesaw¹² platforms on a regular basis. Google Classroom was used as part of JDO¹³ participation and the school employed Seesaw across all year groups as a means to communicate with parents. At the beginning of lockdown, the staff moved swiftly to build on the use of these already established platforms. The main challenge for the school was to ensure staff members felt confident and were competent in the use of the platforms to support learning and teaching in addition to their use as a communication tool.

RESPONSE

The Foundation Stage teachers continued to utilise Seesaw. The staff and parents were familiar with its use and this has been built upon not only as a means of communication but also in order to share weekly planners and suggested timetables for activities/learning which were posted on a Sunday night. Parents were also provided with word documents incorporating embedded links to, for example, YouTube videos which staff had previously sourced and evaluated. Seesaw was also used to present scanned and uploaded class novels¹⁴ and big books to support reading.

Google Classroom and Seesaw were used across key stages 1 and 2 and the children were signposted to the wide range of NewsDesk articles which together with Oxford Owl were used to support the development of literacy. In addition, teachers across the three key stages recorded oral messages to maintain contact with the children. As staff confidence developed, they used the Seesaw 'draw facility' to create support tutorials, for example, a step-by-step identification and pronunciation of diagraphs; dictation; and, segmenting and blending. Staff were conscious of screen time and access to available devices and also provided learning activities in paper-based formats.

⁹ [Microsoft Innovative Educator \(MIE\) – Programme: MIE Expert](#)

¹⁰ [Google Educator](#)

¹¹ [Seesaw Pioneer Program](#)

¹² Seesaw is a platform for learner engagement where learners use creative tools to take pictures, draw, record videos and more to capture learning in a portfolio. Teachers can share activities and information with the learners and parents.

¹³ The JDO Global Partnership Program facilitates global classroom collaboration enabling children to become accomplished, well-informed digital citizens. It matches international partner teachers and provides a framework to co-design curricular lesson plans that will inspire creative and innovative collaborative learning experiences for children. The partner schools collaborate weekly through email and Google Classroom and connect monthly in a live session [JDO Foundation](#)

¹⁴ Within copyright laws.

IMPACT

The regular communication with children and parents allowed teachers to reflect on and amend planned learning and, if necessary, provide additional support on a 1-1 level through the 'private message' facility on Seesaw. The use of Google Classroom in particular provided assessment for learning (AfL) opportunities. Intervention strategies, such as LEXIA,¹⁵ were still used and the progress of individual children was monitored through the LEXIA portal.

The staff reported positive interaction and feedback from children and parents and also employed a wide variety of motivational strategies to keep children engaged in remote learning. Such strategies included: personalised virtual stickers (which included the teacher's voice); virtual celebrations; and, Eco Committee class representatives posting reminders to their peers.

FOCUS: REMOTE LEARNING DURING THE PANDEMIC

CHALLENGE

To support remote learning during the first lockdown.

RESPONSE

Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams and Seesaw were all utilised to support remote learning during lockdown which featured weekly teacher welcomes, tutorials, and daily guided activities. The staff and parents were familiar with their use and this was built upon in order to: share weekly planners and timetables; touch base with children through voice recordings; and, provide support tutorials particularly for children with additional needs. Year 7 children were able to access Microsoft Teams through their smart phones thus releasing devices for use by other family members. They were able to photograph samples of work, upload and add to their portfolio. Members of the senior leadership team (SLT) were members of classroom groups which allowed the monitoring of work.

IMPACT

Weekly SLT, year group and key stage meetings were conducted through Microsoft Teams which ensured staff could monitor both the academic progress and pastoral wellbeing of the children.

Regular communication with children and parents allowed teachers to support, guide, monitor, mark and provide feedback on completed work both to a whole group or by using the 'private message' facility on Seesaw, where appropriate. As a result of reflecting on the remote learning process and monitoring of the level of engagement, work completed and teacher feedback/marking, the staff are now reviewing and amending their marking policy.

¹⁵ [Lexia](#) is a computer-based programme which provides explicit, systematic and individual learning in reading and comprehension skills for learners at all levels.

Creative solutions to promote learning and teaching

As lockdown continued, teachers showed flexibility and creativity in the range of approaches they developed to meet the requirements of the curriculum, for example, making demonstration videos to support asynchronous teaching and communicating through live platforms to interact with the children and teach a range of concepts. In addition, most schools used Art, PE and learning outdoors as ‘therapeutic’ ways to engage the children and connect aspects of their learning through active learning experiences. In Irish-medium settings these creative approaches were also used to provide the children (and their parents) with direct exposure to the Irish language. The infrastructure, hardware and digital connectivity available to the children, teachers, support staff and parents, underpinned by a realistic view of what was achievable in the current context of the school, informed the approaches used.

Children would return to school at different stages in their learning

While some children had a positive remote learning experience and were able to make the most of home learning as well as additional family time, there was widespread recognition that not all children were able to access and engage fully with remote learning for various reasons.

Despite schools’ best endeavours, there were aspects of the curriculum which were more challenging for parents to support through online learning: for example, early language and reading skills, including the children’s phonological awareness and application of phonics; the development of mathematical concepts; and, gross and fine motor skills.

For many children in Irish-medium education and those who have English as an additional language, staff reported their early acquisition and subsequent development of Irish/English was impacted as a result of reduced exposure to the language during the period of lockdown.

The provision of feedback for learning was variable across the primary sector.

Digital poverty

Digital poverty is a barrier to enabling remote learning in areas, particularly where there are high levels of social deprivation and connectivity issues in rural areas. Specifically, schools reported: an absence of, or an inadequate number of, appropriate digital devices for learning within the household; an absence of, or reliable access to, broadband or wi-fi within the household; and, a lack of digital literacy skills within the household. Regular engagement in online learning was a challenge with schools reporting up to one-third of children not engaging regularly with online learning or experiencing digital fatigue. Schools were responsive to the economic and

accessibility challenges for families by providing practical tasks and paper work packs alongside digital resources. During this period, DE responded to the identified need through a lending scheme of digital devices to disadvantaged and vulnerable children in years 3 and 6. The first devices were distributed to schools in July 2020.

Lessons learned during the Covid-19 recovery phase including a focus on remote and blended learning: September - December 2020

Return to school

Schools reported that most children have experienced positive transitions and are settling well into school life and their new routines. Schools' increased emphasis on pastoral care and wellbeing, including the use of circle time and mindfulness approaches, such as, using various wellbeing apps and children's yoga, are supporting effectively the children's wellbeing.

Extended use of play in the Foundation Stage and developing further learning opportunities outdoors across all key stages is supportive of the children's social, emotional and physical wellbeing and increasingly, the development of their literacy, numeracy and WAU skills. In Irish-medium settings, the benefits of learning through play and The Arts provide natural and organic opportunities to facilitate the children's acquisition and development of the Irish language.

There has been further improvement in the children's and teachers' digital competence and confidence in using a wider range of platforms to complete tasks, share learning and teaching and communicate safely with others. Many principals confirm the rapid development of staff skills and creativity through increased teacher professional learning, including online collaborative learning hubs established recently by teachers. This is enabling teaching and non-teaching staff to respond more effectively to the changed learning and teaching context; share expertise and ideas to support children's learning; and, communicate more effectively with children and parents. Teachers are also encouraged by the uptake and use by children of online programmes to support the development of the children's reading and numeracy skills.

Most schools report positive engagement, collaboration and consultation with parents in relation to online learning. They are using online questionnaires with parents and children to gain feedback on digital learning and emotional wellbeing. Many schools are also providing guidance for parents to enable them to support their children online and have refined their protocols for communicating with parents to manage staff's use of time and also parental expectations.

Continuing creative approaches to address new challenges

In the Foundation Stage, teachers have identified restricted receptive and expressive language in some year 1 children and a dip in the attention and listening skills of year 2 children. Staff are prioritising these important areas, alongside: early and emerging reading skills including book handling, developing comprehension, phonological awareness and phonics; the re-immersion of all children in linguistically-rich learning environments, including those in Irish-medium schools; and, in early numeracy and the operation of basic number bonds. At KS2, initial teacher observation and assessments highlight several gaps in key mathematical concepts, such as, shape and space and handling data. In addition, schools have made huge efforts to support the continuity of learning and emotional health and wellbeing of year 7 children, particularly given concerns in relation to transition to KS 3.

Almost all schools report that managing remote learning presents a significant challenge and there is more to do to address variation in staff capacity and confidence. It is timely that schools are beginning to discern the differing pedagogies required for successful remote learning; teachers require adequate planning and preparation time to develop effective remote and blended learning models. In particular, most schools report the need to improve further their provision of timely high-quality feedback to children in an online learning environment.

In some instances, approaches to play- and activity-based learning have been impacted by space and/or movement limitations indoors and insufficient resources. As teachers become more confident with appropriate safety arrangements and risk assessments, many are re-establishing aspects of collaborative group work and investigative tasks to develop the children's thinking skills and personal capabilities and support their personal, social and emotional wellbeing and development.

While Covid-19 safety measures, such as, restricted movement about the school, social distancing and protective 'bubble' arrangements, have impacted on many of the traditional opportunities to develop children's leadership roles, staff are responding creatively by developing digital solutions to replace face-to-face activities. Examples include: online assemblies and presentations; the use of video-conferencing for school council and ECO council meetings; and, virtual school visits. There is an increased focus on child involvement through, for example, children making their own video clips to showcase the school.

The provision for children with additional needs has been affected, in some instances, due to, for example, the impact of social distancing guidelines on supporting individual children effectively and availability of staff. As the term has progressed and the staff have established the extent of children's learning, they are implementing strategies to enable the children to make the expected progress across all aspects of their learning and development. As part of the Engage Programme¹⁶, schools are designing and

¹⁶ The aim of the [Engage Programme](#) is to limit any long-term adverse impact of the Covid-19 disease lockdown on educational standards by supporting pupils' learning and engagement on their return to school through provision of high quality one to one, small group or team teaching support in every school in Northern Ireland.

delivering a range of bespoke interventions to support identified needs of children, through for example, curriculum or health and wellbeing provision.

In some instances, the focus on, and priority given to, literacy and numeracy is impacting negatively on other curricular areas, such as, Art and Design, Music and PE. The impact of Covid-19 has led an increasing number of schools to recognise the importance of PE to the children's overall health and wellbeing.

Strategic leadership and collaboration

There is increased and productive collaboration among staff (within schools and, through local and wider networks), parents and local community partnerships in supporting and learning from one other during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Transitional school development plans have been created in response to the current context. Interim action plans feature appropriately a reduced number of succinct targets, which are mostly child-centred. These plans, which reflect the DE Letter¹⁷ on school development planning (June 2020), are flexible and responsive and focus largely on the mental and physical health and wellbeing of children and staff, literacy, numeracy and developing ICT capacity to provide blended learning. Where previous action plans and improvement actions are incomplete and staff are unable to evaluate impact, schools are adopting an incremental approach to prioritising key improvement actions, in the best interests of the children.

Overall, schools are now better placed to provide blended learning than during the first lockdown; most schools report having contingency plans in place to switch to remote learning as the need arises. However, there is widespread acknowledgement that blended and remote learning need further development and that face-to-face learning and teaching strategies, which are of critical importance for the social and emotional development of children, cannot be replaced or reproduced easily in a virtual learning environment.

Leadership challenges

The predominant challenge that all schools are facing currently is recruiting teaching and non-teaching staff with the necessary experience to provide a safe and secure learning environment for the children. Schools report that teaching is impacted when members of staff are required to self-isolate; substitute teachers (particularly in the Irish-medium sector) are not available; and, the NISTR¹⁸ register does not reflect accurately teachers' current availability. Schools also report difficulties in recruiting (and retaining) learning support assistants, administration and canteen staff and building supervisors.

¹⁷ [DE Letter](#) published on 3 June 2020

¹⁸ Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register (NISTR) is an on-line web based facility which provides a real-time booking system and a regional centralised database for all substitute teachers in Northern Ireland.

During this time, all principals are facing increased demands across all aspects of their leadership responsibilities. In particular, the role of a teaching principal is subject to additional demands and requires additional support to facilitate time to fulfil appropriately their various teaching and leadership responsibilities.

In response to a growing number of families in need and in mental health crises, schools have increased communication and engagement with local community partnerships and charities to support the needs of local families.

FOCUS: ADAPTING THE SCHOOL'S APPROACH TO ONLINE LEARNING

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE:

In September, the main challenges for the school were to:

1. Develop and implement an effective online learning model to include support for children who are shielding/self-isolating and provide meaningful home learning opportunities.
2. Create a new approach to the delivery of homework to reduce the likelihood of transmission of the virus between the home and school.
3. Prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of the children in curriculum delivery and through other aspects of school life.
4. Amend planning to focus on the progression of skills in both class-based and online learning contexts in light of Covid-19.
5. Develop and implement creative approaches to capture the 'voice of the child' whilst adhering to PHA and DE guidance.
6. Maintain a sense of school community while operating in 'bubbles.'

RESPONSE:

Lessons delivered in the classroom are sent to children who are shielding/self-isolating through Seesaw with: annotated notes; teachers' voice notes, for example, explaining new concepts within PowerPoint presentations; and, recorded videos. Consequently, children working remotely have a structured timetable of lessons throughout the day comparable to what they would experience in school. Assessment for Learning (AfL) is integrated into Seesaw activities and children submit work upon completion to enable teacher assessment and feedback to be provided.

To mitigate the risks involved with homework, staff have transferred the vast majority of homework to the forum of a virtual classroom where daily and weekly scheduled homework tasks are located.

Teachers have created virtual classrooms through Google Slides and children access these virtual classrooms through Seesaw, complete homework tasks and submit these to their class teacher for assessment and feedback.

The impact of Covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of the children has been of paramount importance and at the forefront of all decisions taken since reopening the school in August 2020.

Children have been presented with increased opportunities to talk with each other and trusted adults about their experiences of lockdown through the medium of increased focus on PDMU, resilience workshops, mindfulness-led programmes, PE, Art, Religious Education, circle time and 'ice-breaker' activities. Parent volunteers have been involved in leading the children in gardening and Eco-activities and these have provided the opportunity to re-establish friendships.

There are regular opportunities for the children to provide their views on school life.

The use of Google Drive has enabled teachers to continue to adopt a collegial approach to planning since August 2020 across the school.

Planning, since August 2020, has been amended to focus on the progression of skills and presenting the children with opportunities to develop their thinking skills and personal capabilities through group work in 'bubbles.' Many of these opportunities were denied to the children in light of school closure due to Covid-19. A lot of emphasis has therefore been placed on developing key skills, such as:

- *listening actively and sharing opinions;*
- *developing routines of turn-taking, sharing and co-operating; and*
- *taking personal responsibility for work with others and evaluating their own contribution to the group.*

The school use Collaborate Ultra to conduct School Council, Eco-Council and Digital Leader meetings to ensure the children continue to have a meaningful and decisive role to play in the school improvement and decision-making processes.

Weekly school assemblies also take place through Collaborate Ultra. Furthermore, the Seesaw blog feature is used to link classes together so that children in different 'bubbles' can view and comment on their friends' work and activity online.

Whenever possible, whole school events take place outdoors so that the children have the opportunity to see their friends in other 'bubbles,' whilst continuing to adhere to the Northern Ireland Executive's, Public Health Agency (PHA) and DE guidelines.

IMPACT

The benefits of the school's educational response have been widespread, with positive feedback having been received from children, staff and parents.

Children report that new teaching is explained clearly through the increased use of annotated notes, voice notes and visual teaching methods shared through Seesaw. Parents have confirmed that the delivery of lessons at set times through Seesaw and the creation of virtual classrooms has created structure and routine for children when working from home. Staff have also reported that children who have been working remotely have a more comprehensive understanding of classroom teaching that was delivered in their absence.

The prioritisation of mental health and wellbeing of the children, since their return to school, and the opportunities provided across the curriculum has led to reduced anxiety levels amongst children, increased empathy and emotional understanding, the redevelopment of key social interactions skills and increased levels of engagement as the term has progressed. The home/school partnership has also been strengthened.

The teachers' effective use of Collaborate Ultra has been of paramount importance in ensuring the 'voice of the child' has continued to be heard across the school and that the children have had a continued role to play in the school's decision-making process.

Considerations for all in primary schools going forward

Learning and teaching is recovering as the disruptive impact of Covid-19 continues; school leaders and staff are adapting and developing professional solutions to a wide range of educational challenges. There is widespread recognition that the enhanced use of digital technology will continue to be an integral aspect of the provision, both in the current Covid-19 context and beyond.

Key considerations going forward include:

- The effectiveness of the range of learning experiences across all areas of the Northern Ireland Curriculum and how they can best be utilised to contribute to improving standards in practical and achievable ways.
- The impact of remote and blended learning, including online and practical learning approaches, in contributing to progression in the children's learning.

- The quality and impact of support at all levels for school leaders, in particular teaching principals, staff, children and parents in relation to their emotional health and wellbeing and in building their resilience for the future.

The ETI will continue to focus on these areas and build towards an evidence base that will support the development of effective solutions.

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