

Thematic Report on Primary Schools' Delivery, Monitoring and Evaluation of Effective Remote Learning

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*Please note that references to commercial resources contained within the report are for information only. The ETI does not endorse specific resources.

Introduction

On 6 January 2021, Minister for Education, Peter Weir, MLA, announced that, in light of the Covid-19 crisis in public health, the Northern Ireland Executive had agreed that all mainstream education providers, including pre-school education settings, primary and post primary schools were required to provide remote learning at home to their pupils rather than face-to-face teaching in school, until the half-term break in the middle of February, this was effective from Thursday 7 January. Staff were advised to work remotely where they could do so effectively, but in many schools staff were required to support supervised learning for vulnerable children or those of key workers.

On 5 February these arrangements were extended via a further [Educational Continuity Direction](#) to give legal effect to the operational arrangements in the education system from 5 February 2021. The Department of Education (DE) provided [updated guidance](#) to support schools in the delivery of remote learning and schools are required to have regard to this guidance. Both remote and supervised learning were to continue until 5 March and were to be reviewed as part of the wider consideration of restrictions by the Executive.

Throughout January and February 2021, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) engaged with primary schools to understand their experiences of monitoring and evaluation of the delivery and quality of remote learning provision, and delivering the Engage Programme. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) invited all primary schools to complete an online questionnaire on remote learning that took place in the week beginning 25 January 2021. A total of 616 primary schools completed the ETI [questionnaire](#) (77% of all of Northern Ireland's primary schools) and a summary of the quantitative findings can be found on the ETI website. This report references the quantitative and qualitative evidence obtained from the ETI [questionnaire](#) and includes further information, gathered during focused discussions undertaken by District Inspectors between Monday 25 January and Friday 12 February 2021 with 103 teaching and non-teaching school leaders¹.

These discussions included aspects referenced in the ETI [questionnaire](#) to schools, namely:

- the planning for remote learning;
- the delivery, monitoring and evaluating of remote learning;
- safeguarding, including online safety; and
- professional development of staff.

Case studies from five primary schools detail their self-evaluation of delivering, monitoring and evaluating effective remote learning from March 2020 to February 2021.

¹ Appendix 1- Schools that participated in discussions with ETI District Inspectors.

Planning and delivering remote learning

Schools have transitioned well to remote learning.

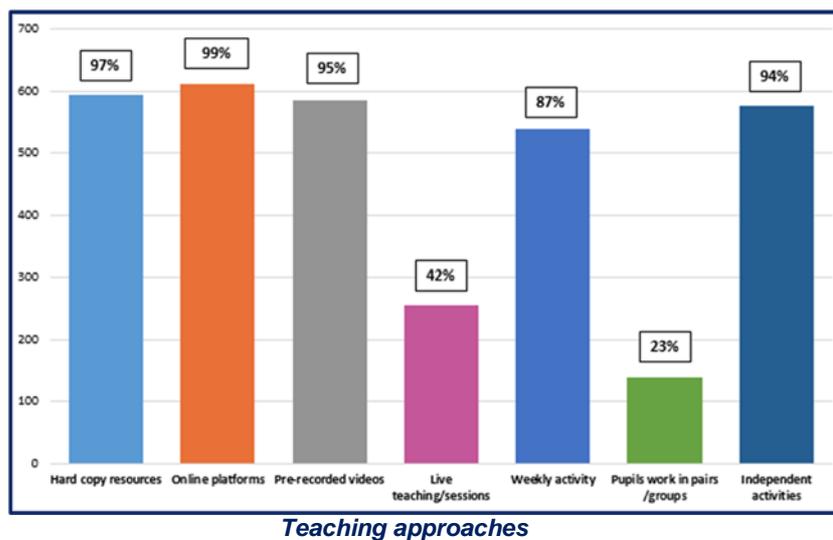
Since the first period of remote learning, from March to June 2020, schools have reflected on their practice through, for example, the circulation and analysis of questionnaires and discussions within the school community. Lessons learned from this period have been used to inform the schools' evolving approaches to the delivery of remote learning. Schools have transitioned well from setting the children paper-dependent work, to providing activities that use technology in a more extensive, balanced and purposeful way.

This phase of Remote Learning is significantly different to the lockdown in March-June. For one, we have been contingency planning, training and preparing for this and that has made the transition to remote learning smoother and more effective. Whilst we provided a good, all round educational experience for our children during the March-June lockdown, we have also learnt many lessons and improved our provision immeasurably.

Principal, February 2021

Most children receive well-structured learning experiences.

Schools understand the importance of a balanced approach to learning and continue to provide both digital and non-digital learning activities. While almost all schools use online platforms, equally almost all schools use hard-copy resources and provide opportunities for independent learning.



Both the ETI [questionnaire](#) responses and focused discussions with school leaders reveal that most teachers plan a weekly timetable of learning experiences to provide structure and routine for the children's learning, very often uploading this information prior to the commencement of the working week in order to support parents and carers in planning for their child(ren)'s learning around their work and other commitments.

Parents really appreciate the timetable given out at the end of the week for the following week. This enables them to prepare ahead.

Principal, February 2021

Synchronous and asynchronous² teaching approaches are supporting children's learning well.

It is noteworthy that a significant minority of schools provide live teaching sessions, mostly to children in key stage (KS) 2. These remote meetings are used primarily for children to interact and connect with their teacher and peers and to support the children's emotional health and wellbeing. A minority of schools use live sessions to support children with specific needs, teach new knowledge and skills, including reading, check children's understanding and provide feedback.

The use of Teams has helped particularly the year 6 children to become more independent in their learning, the children are encouraged to interact among themselves and work collaboratively with each other.

Principal, February 2021

Asynchronous teaching approaches, in particular the use of screencasting³ and pre-recorded teacher videos, are the most frequently used to direct, model and support learning. Teachers have become more adept at creating recorded presentations and video lessons and using online whiteboards, for example, 'Explain Everything' and 'Jamboard', to support the children with their learning. School leaders and teachers report that the flexibility in this approach appeals to parents and carers as it enables the learning to take place at a time that best suits the family context.

² *Synchronous approaches* is where the teacher is present at the same time as the learners through the use of video conferencing and live chat or instant messaging.

Asynchronous approaches is where teaching materials, which may include video/audio clips, are posted online, and learners work through these materials in their own time, communicating with each other and the teacher via discussion forums or email.

³ Screencasting is digital video recording of the computer screen and usually includes audio narrative.

A predominantly asynchronous approach works best for most families as it provides flexibility for families and reduces fears surrounding technology. However, limited amounts of synchronous teaching allow for social interaction between classmates and for a style of teacher/ child communication more in line with what usually occurs in the classroom.

Principal, February 2021

Schools are using online platforms judiciously.

In the more effective practice, school leaders and teachers have evaluated the effectiveness of the apps, which they were using during the previous period of remote learning, in order to prepare for the subsequent lockdown. Schools have used this information to identify further improvements in their delivery of remote learning. Schools have used the wide range of tools available within the C2K network and, where necessary, opting for apps which sit outside of the C2K network in order to meet better the needs of the children, particularly those in the foundation stage.

After the first lockdown, we evaluated the procedures and decided to use SeeSaw as a platform for remote learning. The teachers had been familiarising themselves with this throughout the Autumn term and have found it much more useful during this lockdown. Feedback from parents has been very positive. Due to further evaluations we have decided to purchase the premium version which provides additional functions to assist teachers in remote learning. We are currently trialling Mathletics with KS2 children.

Principal, February 2021

All schools use at least one online platform to communicate with and post work for the children, including those available on the C2K network. School leaders report the most utilised platforms are the school website, which has been enhanced to provide greater functionality to support remote learning, the school app, Seesaw and Google Classroom in that order.

Key areas of the curriculum are being delivered well.

Most primary schools prioritise learning in literacy, numeracy and Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU), particularly in relation to the children's own emotional health and wellbeing. To support curriculum delivery, schools use a wide range of online programmes, such as Lexia, Bug Club, Reading Eggs, myON, Accelerated Reader, Studyladder and Mathletics, to provide adaptive learning activities, interactive content, and access to eBooks. These tools help the children develop their reading skills and understand increasingly complex mathematics concepts. In addition, they provide a mechanism through which teachers can monitor the progress of the children.

Most schools provide learning activities across curricular areas to provide children with breadth and balance. A small number of schools draw on the expertise of a range of external providers to extend the children's learning opportunities, for example, partnering with: Northern Ireland's Creative Learning Centres to develop coding and animation; the local music centre to teach the children the tin whistle; Sentinus to provide online STEM⁴ lessons and challenges; and, PGCE⁵ students who provide online lessons in physical education (PE) and art and design.

There is a consensus among school leaders and teachers that remote learning cannot replicate face-to-face teaching and there are certain areas of the curriculum which are challenging to deliver remotely. Given that the Northern Ireland Curriculum is skills-infused, school leaders cite, as being particularly difficult to develop remotely, the development of children's: play; language; phonics, reading and numeracy in the foundation stage; problem solving; the arts; PE; and, thinking skills and personal capabilities. Despite the fact that children are learning mostly online, a small number of school leaders report that it is difficult to progress the children's information and communication technology (ICT) skills remotely.

Based on evidence obtained through the questionnaires, and engagement with school leaders and teachers within Irish Medium Education (IME), there are insufficient resources available to support immersion in Irish. During this period of remote learning, reduced opportunities for the children to converse and learn through Irish both remotely and, in many instances, in the home environment is leading to a number of children who are losing their fluency in spoken Irish. Consequently, this will have an impact on their learning through immersion in Irish when they return to school.

Live teaching has particular barriers for all schools.

While most schools recognise the need for an online teacher presence, the capacity for schools to deliver live lessons is determined by a wide range of factors, in particular:

- staff availability to provide both in-school supervised learning and maintain an online presence;
- staff confidence and competence in using video conferencing software;
- children's and teachers' access to devices;
- children's and teachers' access to a reliable internet connection;
- the number and age of children in a household; and
- the availability and capacity of parents and carers to support their children during live sessions.

⁴ STEM: Science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

⁵ PGCE: Postgraduate Certificate in Education

DE acknowledge, in Circular 2020/05, “the cautionary note raised by a number of the teaching unions in regard to livestreaming of lessons has deterred many schools from embarking on this method of delivery.”⁶ Individual schools, in conjunction with their staff, determine whether livestreaming represents an appropriate learning approach for their school community.

Many children are impacted adversely by digital poverty.

A number of schools have been successful in securing additional devices, through the Department of Education (DE) scheme, which was announced by the Minister in May 2020 for educationally disadvantaged and vulnerable children. Schools were initially asked to draw upon their existing stock of laptops and many schools have done this where there was scope to implement. To meet additional demand, new devices were procured and data to 5 February 2021 indicates that 5,500 children in priority year groups (years 4 and 7) have benefited from the scheme; however, at that point, applications from eligible primary school children in other year groups were yet to be processed. While these schools appreciate the access for children to additional devices, in focused discussions with school leaders, over one-half reported they do not have enough devices to provide for both key worker and vulnerable children in school and those engaged in remote learning at home. These include families who do not meet the criteria set by DE and those families where there is more than one child which can be a determining factor in whether schools deliver live teaching sessions.

Teachers’ access to suitable hardware and software impacts on the quality of synchronous and asynchronous learning. While the Education Authority (EA) is preparing currently a business case to refresh all teachers’ devices/laptops, existing laptops are at end of life, with a number not having adequate microphones and/or cameras. Schools have been proactive in fundraising to purchase, for example, iPads and laptops for use either by the children or staff. Others have used the school budget or charitable donations to purchase the necessary equipment; in a minority of cases, teachers have purchased their own hardware and software to deliver remote learning. Despite these proactive approaches, a minority of school leaders (18%) indicated that teachers did not have access to the hardware needed to deliver effective remote learning; this has contributed to inconsistency within and across schools.

DE devices have been useful; however, most recent additions were added quite late. Significant investment in ICT and online platforms across NI would be of significant value.

Principal, February 2021

Since March 2020, DE has provided additional funding to the EA to improve the services currently available, such as, upgrading schools’ bandwidth in areas with particularly low bandwidth. Despite these mitigating actions, school leaders report a minority of teachers (28%) and a significant minority (43%) of children remain with either no or poor internet connectivity. The situation is exacerbated further by the significant increase in live teaching

⁶ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Updated%20Circular%20Remote%20Learning%20-%20January%202021%20%28002%29.pdf>

and streaming of pre-recorded videos which is placing even greater demands on the existing network. Where families do not have access to a landline broadband connection, children have been 'hot spotting' from their parents' and carers' mobile devices to gain access to online platforms. Very often this internet connection is too weak or unstable to support the streaming of live-teaching sessions or download pre-recorded videos for remote learning.

Our desktops in school are not equipped for video, even the latest models supplied by C2K in the refresh are not supplied with built in cameras, a necessity in this era. Teachers purchased their own devices for work purposes and the difference between devices means our approach differs from teacher to teacher, for example, some can use digital ink, some can add voice notes, some can download virtual stickers etc. All of our teachers would love to be able to provide this for our children.

Principal, February 2021

In July 2020, the Minister for Education announced that free Wi-Fi and mobile connectivity would be provided to children and young people who did not have access to digital technology. Seven thousand children across primary and post-primary have been issued with Wi-Fi and Mi-Fi vouchers. While schools appreciate and have availed of this scheme, in discussions with school leaders, not all eligible families have received these vouchers which is a barrier to online learning.

Many parents and carers need help to support their children's learning.

Schools recognise and commend the effort and engagement shown by their parents and carers in supporting their children with remote learning while balancing their own work and other commitments. However, schools also acknowledge that there are a small number of parents and carers who need more help to support their children and do not communicate regularly with the school. The barriers these parents face include:

- the number and age of the children they need to support;
- lack of a suitable space within the home for learning;
- parental confidence and competence in supporting their children within the various curricular areas;
- language barriers for those parents who do not speak fluent English or Irish;
- children in families who have additional needs;
- complex family circumstances; and
- illness, including the emotional health and wellbeing of the parents and carers.

During discussions, school leaders reported that a significant minority of parents and carers (31%) do not have the necessary technological knowledge and digital literacy skills to navigate the various platforms; this is leading to increased requests by parents for hard-copy learning packs. In the more effective practice, schools have provided technical support to parents and carers including: setting up laptops and/or a Wi-Fi connection; providing advice and support in changing children's passwords when they expire; developing short videos to show parents how to navigate the various platforms; and, minimising the number of passwords to simplify the remote learning process for parents and carers.

Intergenerational caring responsibilities mean children are not prioritised during the lockdown. This is also due to work patterns and trying to ensure all children in the home are logged on. Asynchronous learning approaches have helped but concerns can still exist.

Principal, February 2021

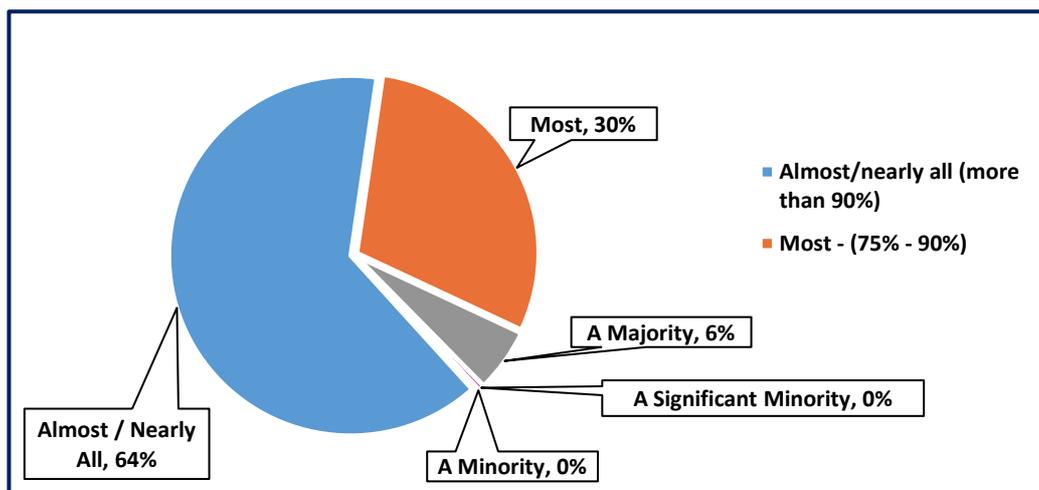
Monitoring and evaluating remote learning

Overall, the children engage and participate well in remote learning.

The ETI [questionnaire](#) responses indicate that most children engage regularly in remote learning, uploading their work and responding to teacher feedback.

Our children love to share their work and they are even uploading videos/photographs of themselves actively working.

Principal, February 2021



Children's registration and logon to online learning

There is improved parental involvement with learning and a greater level of work being submitted each week as parents now appreciate the importance of engagement.

Principal, February 2021

Most schools have robust processes in place to support children who are not engaging.

Schools monitor closely the collection of learning packs by the parents and carers, and online engagement by the children at a whole school, class and individual level. Responses from the ETI questionnaire reveal that almost all class teachers (92%) make contact with the children at least once a week and most teachers (82%) make daily contact with the children in their class. Other approaches include: posting online motivational messages to encourage engagement; and, sending email communication and reminder messages via online platforms to the parents and carers.

Where concerns are identified, school leaders and staff members are vigilant in contacting families, using the translation service where necessary, to discuss the progress and wellbeing of the children and parents and to identify and help resolve any obstacles to engagement. In some instances, staff members have made socially distanced home visits to provide practical support to families.

Assessing children's progress and providing feedback for learning remains an ongoing challenge for staff.

Schools understand the importance of effective feedback in supporting children's progression in learning. Consequently, most schools have documented how and when feedback to children will be provided and have communicated this to both children and parents.

Teachers use both synchronous and asynchronous approaches to provide feedback which include: written feedback through online platforms and/or on paper copies of the children's work; recorded oral feedback through audio and/or video messages; and, oral feedback through live teaching sessions.

In order to make feedback more manageable and effective, teachers often identify which pieces of work are to be submitted for more detailed feedback and place emphasis on the quality of the feedback, rather than the quantity. As a number of parents and carers request paper-based materials, and do not use online platforms to upload the children's completed work, teachers are unable to provide as meaningful and timely feedback to these children as they would in pre-pandemic circumstances.

Schools report that practical and investigative group work, enquiry-based learning, play, the arts and physical education, where progression is often dependent on teacher and peer interaction, are very challenging to assess remotely. In particular, teachers find it difficult to determine the progress of the child as the level of parental input and support received during the learning process is unknown.

Most schools are in the early stages of monitoring and evaluating the quality of remote learning.

Given that the usual processes for monitoring and evaluating the quality of learning and teaching are not currently possible, schools are beginning to consider how they can best adapt their approaches in order to assess the quality and effectiveness of the remote learning provision. In a small number of schools, the principal and senior leaders have enrolled as members of online classrooms in order to monitor the children's engagement and progression in learning. In other schools, weekly virtual staff meetings are used to disseminate teaching approaches that are working well and reflect on those which have been less effective. While school leaders and teachers understand the importance of monitoring and evaluating the quality of remote learning, there is a general consensus that this is at an early stage of development.

The solitude of remote learning impacts on the shared creativity that comes from the classroom setting as children can't feed off each other, impacting on spontaneity.

Principal, February 2021

Professional development of staff

Developing internal capacity, using existing expertise, is making a positive impact on children's learning experiences.

A significant learning curve has been turned since the initial lockdown in March 2020, where all schools had to react to significant restrictions to everyday schooling. Schools have migrated from an initial dependence on paper-based resources to a provision that is better balanced and embeds more purposeful digital connectedness between teachers and children.

Partnership working and the development of professional learning communities and teacher networks, between and across schools, is a key element of DE's [Learning Leaders: A Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning](#). The outworking of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the significant disruption it caused to children's education, set the agenda for Teacher Professional Learning (TPL). School leaders have praised universally the commitment of their staff in undertaking the necessary training and providing collegial support to each other, which is leading to improvement in the variety and quality of the children's remote learning experiences.

We have had more professional development than ever before. Our teachers, classroom assistants and indeed all school staff have had to upskill and learn to teach in a new way in record time. Never before have we been able to roll out an area of school improvement at this rate. Training through C2K, BlendEd NI and Seesaw has been incredible. It is lovely to see the staff proud of what they are doing and every day is indeed still a learning day.

Principal, February 2021

Almost all staff (94%) have engaged in professional development opportunities as part of the schools' ongoing TPL programme. Schools which already prioritised professional development of staff in ICT had a very good foundation from which to extend the school's capacity to support remote learning. Most schools (75%) report that the ICT co-ordinator plays a crucial role in up-skilling and providing support to staff within the school. Staff have also formed collegial support networks to help one another via on-line discussion groups and professionally purposed chat forums.

During this time, we have relied successfully on the expertise of those on the staff, who have all made an effort to ensure that all staff are competent in the use of the online platforms.

Principal, February 2021

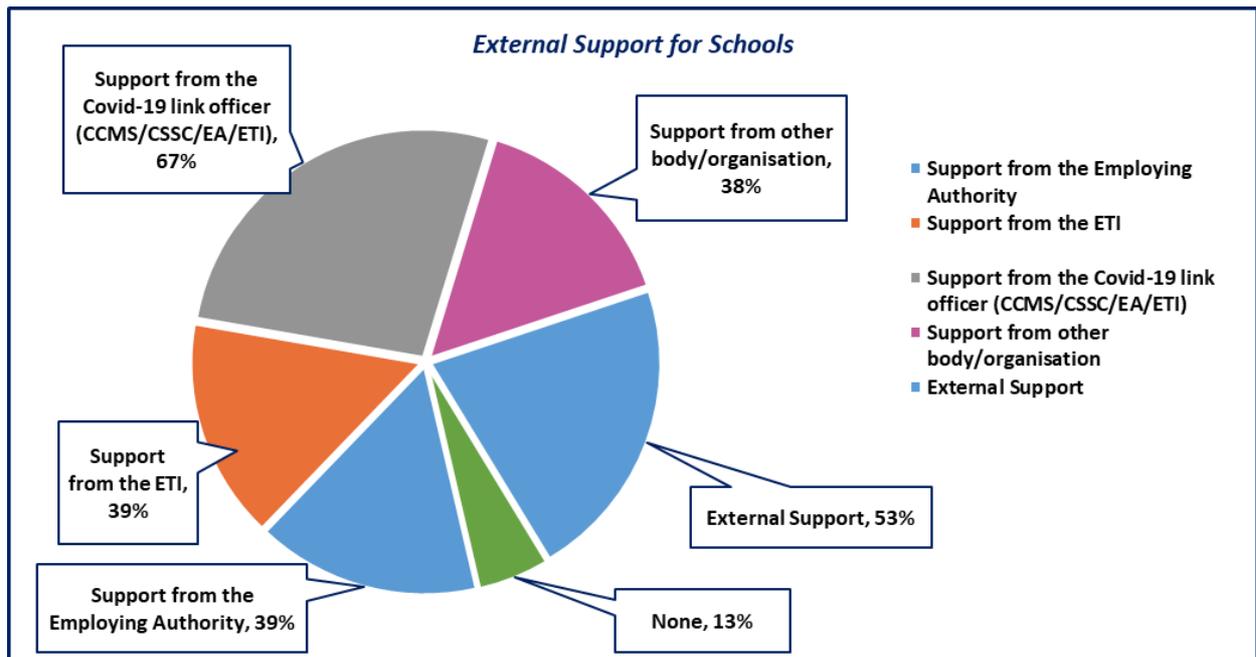
Sharing and learning between schools is more common.

On occasions where expertise is not readily available within the school, a small number of schools draw on the expertise from ICT co-ordinators and heads of department in neighbouring primary and post-primary schools. Existing shared education networks and local clusters are also influential in improving staff competence and confidence.

The use of recently established online teacher forums are an important channel for a minority (15%) of school leaders and teachers to discuss pedagogical issues and share ideas and teaching tips through peer support. Additionally, a small number of schools report using social media to improve their knowledge and understanding of remote learning approaches. Taken collectively, this dialogue contributes well to teachers' and classroom assistants' professional learning and the school's capacity to identify areas for further development.

Schools have drawn well from a wide range of external support.

Managing a range of competing demands has encouraged schools to engage widely with other professionals and stakeholders. Most respondents to the ETI [questionnaire](#) reported availing of a range of external support and help. The majority of schools (67%) expressed high levels of satisfaction with their Covid-19 Link Officers, who comprise of staff from the Education Authority (EA), Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) and the ETI District Inspectors (DI), and provide advice and support on day-to-day matters arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.



The 'good' aspect in all of this is the collaboration and support schools are providing for each other. My Link officer has been an invaluable support as has my ETI DI, who has been the voice of reason and sounding board when I needed a listening ear before implementing something.

Principal, February 2021

Almost one-fifth of schools (18%) have accessed teacher professional learning opportunities through various online platforms, with teachers progressing through the stages and achieving accreditation. Schools have also availed of a wide range of online courses and webinars from the Education Authority, C2K, Creative Learning Centres, and Northern Ireland's teacher training university colleges; alongside additional support offered by commercial providers and non-governmental organisations.

There remains variation in staff competence and confidence in using online learning platforms.

In a digitally dependent society, it is essential that all teachers are competent and confident in their use of technology, and how it can be used to support children's learning. This is reflected clearly in the [General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland \(GTCNI\) Teaching: The Reflective Profession, Competence 11](#).

Despite the immense effort that school leaders and staff have invested in TPL, teachers' levels of competence, confidence and effectiveness in navigating and using effectively digital tools and online platforms remains variable. Barriers to advancing teachers' digital skills include: access to relevant online courses, which are often over-subscribed; a preference for face-to-face professional development opportunities; digital poverty, which has influenced decisions around pedagogy and provision; and, staff attitudes towards the use of digital technology.

Schools need to continue with the momentum of using technology to promote learning, for student teachers to be knowledgeable in digital pedagogy and for the competences outlined by GTCNI to be delivered fully through an Education Technology Service (ETS).

Staff development in ICT skills is a key issue in remote learning. Attitudes of individuals vary within any staff. Some are keen to engage and learn, others can be anxious and feel pressurised. Yet there is great lack of ongoing professional training opportunities and what few there are, are often quickly filled up before one can apply.

Principal, February 2021

Emotional health and wellbeing

Schools are prioritising children's emotional health and wellbeing.

Building on the work undertaken during the Autumn term, 2020, and reflecting the aims of DE's [Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing Education Framework](#), staff continue to prioritise children's emotional health and wellbeing during the period of remote learning, from January 2021, and adopt a holistic and personalised approach to learning. Almost all teachers (95%) upload either pre-recorded videos or audio messages to online platforms, often at the beginning of the day, to prepare the children for the learning. These recordings may guide children to complete, for example, a daily question on how they are feeling, an 'emoji check-in', or feelings tree via Google or MS Forms.

Daily video messages from the class teacher outlining the plan for the school day have had a huge impact and we have received excellent feedback from parents about the value of that connection.

Principal, February 2021

Other teachers use the chat function within the various online platforms to facilitate communication between and with the children.

The mostly asynchronous model seems to be very much appreciated by the parents. We also have a daily 20-minute online class discussion during which children can chat with each other and to the teacher. Teachers can use the discussion time to ask key questions about the learning as well as keeping a watch for pastoral issues.

Principal, February 2021

In response to children's and parents' feedback, a significant minority of schools (42%) now use routinely video conference calls so that children can see and interact with their friends, class teacher and classroom assistant. A small number of schools choose a theme for these pastoral catch-up sessions, such as, dressing up as a character, to create a sense of fun and enjoyment to the online interaction. Other strategies used by schools include: online circle time sessions; scheduling short chat sessions at the start or end of lessons; and, using digital break out rooms for group work. Schools report that these sessions are very well-attended by the children and reflect the importance that children place on connection with their peers, teacher and classroom assistant.

Years 4-7 teachers have found that the children seeing each other during the video conferencing sessions, and being given an opportunity to chat freely to each other, has really boosted their morale. They are clearly missing each other and these sessions have really helped. It has been good to chat to the children about their feelings and emotions, and to let them know we are all feeling the same and that's fine.

Principal, February 2021

Schools provide creative and extended ways to support children's wellbeing, but some concerns remain.

Wellbeing activities are not restricted to online platforms. A wide range of offline activities are factored into the children's learning, including grateful journals, mindfulness activities, and yoga and breathing exercises. Specific days are allocated for wellbeing activities, for example, Mindful Monday, Wellbeing Wednesday and Feel-good Friday. Increasingly, screen-free days are integrated into the school week where children and families are encouraged to engage in baking, physical and outdoor activities and various whole-school fun challenges.

We have been fortunate to have a final year art therapy student (and qualified teacher) working for one day a week in school with individual children from our SBEW register. This has been a highly useful way in supporting children who have displayed anxiety following the first lockdown and as the pandemic continues.

Principal, February 2021

A wide range of commercial emotional health and wellbeing programmes are being implemented, such as, the PATHS, Relax Kids and Fresh Little Minds programmes. Weekly online assemblies are used to share stories of encouragement, celebrate the children's achievements and promote, for example, Children's Mental Health Week and Catholic Schools' Week.

Despite the proactive steps schools are taking to support the children, many school leaders continue to have concerns with regard to the emotional health and wellbeing of a number of children. An online environment is not always conducive to identifying concerns about individual children, such as, heightened anxiety and an insufficient level of support. Schools have identified this as an area which will require careful monitoring when the children return to face-to-face teaching.

Schools also support parents' and carers' wellbeing.

In line with the [Every School a Good School Policy](#), schools continue to value and prioritise the partnership with parents and carers in supporting their children's learning. Schools communicate regularly with parents emphasising the importance of their own emotional health and wellbeing; they share a range of relevant resources and signpost support services to those parents who are struggling, such as, Family Support Workers, the local food bank and counselling services.

We developed a school app at the beginning of 2019-2020 and this has been invaluable for communicating with parents, including providing links to resources for supporting families during the pandemic.

Principal, February 2021

The importance of family time outdoors to boost mood and promote wellbeing has been reinforced by encouraging families to spend time in 'wellbeing gardens' within the school grounds, engaging in the 'Daily Mile' or visiting local National Trust and forest parks.

Creative approaches and strategies are used to support school staff.

A majority of school leaders highlight the significant challenges for staff, teachers and classroom assistants, in the preparation and delivery of remote learning alongside the provision of supervised learning in school, with increased numbers of key-worker and vulnerable children. In discussions with school leaders, they note this new paradigm has impacted adversely on staff morale and on their overall emotional health and wellbeing.

I wish to put on record that I am in awe of the professionalism of my staff, teachers and classroom assistants, in ensuring that no child is left behind and they are willing to go above and beyond to meet the needs of the children and the parents. As a Principal, I am now worried for staff wellbeing, as it is clear that workload has increased even more for them and we must be ready to deal with this when we get to the other side.

Principal, February 2021

In response, school leaders have been proactive in supporting school staff, teachers and classroom assistants, demonstrating compassionate leadership, and implementing a range of strategies and approaches to promote the wellbeing of staff. These include, but are not limited to:

- flexible working arrangements for staff;
- promotion of healthy working practices and periods of limited/no screen time;

- regular communication through memos, What's App staff groups, video conferences, phone calls and online staff meetings to share effective practice;
- shared online classrooms so teachers and classroom assistants can plan together and support one another;
- the creation of a staff library of self-help and lifestyle books; and
- the appointment of wellbeing governors who keep in regular contact with all staff.

As a teaching Principal, we have our weekly online staff meetings to gauge mainly how everyone is. Currently, staff, teaching and non-teaching, have been offered to take a day's reprieve from online learning. This is an option for staff if they feel overwhelmed.

Principal, February 2021

In addition, a small number of school leaders have directed staff to EA's centralised internet based [Wellbeing Hub](#), which includes a wide range of resources, and have accessed training for staff on resilience and relaxation strategies from a range of providers including EA, educational consultants and external agencies.

It is crucial that the EA monitor closely its [Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#) (2019), to ensure it is effective in meeting its objectives, in particular, in relation to school focused support and initiatives aimed at promoting whole school emotional health and wellbeing.

School leaders require support for their own emotional health and wellbeing.

Leading a school during the pandemic, and supporting staff in the implementation and development of remote learning, has taken a toll on the physical and emotional health and wellbeing of school leaders. They acknowledge and appreciate the support of school governors, local school leaders' groups and Covid-19 link officers⁷. In discussions with principals, they report that the additional workload and barriers presented, as a consequence of the pandemic, have left them feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. This has been compounded by disrupted weekends and holiday periods.

I'm too busy supporting the mental health needs of the children, staff and parents that my own mental health and wellbeing has suffered.

Principal, February 2021

Teaching principals, in particular, have the additional challenge of providing strategic leadership, including oversight of operational tasks, alongside teaching commitments, often across more than one year group.

⁷ Inspectors continue to work collaboratively with CCMS, CSSC and EA officers to support individual schools as designated COVID-19 link officers, providing support for COVID-19 related issues and school day guidance.

In small schools, teaching principals are reading all the guidance to manage appropriately the changing situation, while still providing remote teaching and learning for three year groups. As a teaching principal, I am managing staff rotas as well as key workers' requests and rotas which change on a weekly basis with the minimum of secretarial hours (12 hours).

Principal, February 2021

The [Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing Education Framework](#), published by DE, also recognises the need for support to be given to the emotional health and wellbeing of school leaders by the employing authorities.

Safeguarding

Schools understand the paramountcy of safeguarding and child protection, in both home and online environments. Consequently, the outcomes from the [ETI questionnaire](#) show that almost all schools (92%) have updated their children protection and safeguarding policies and put in place protocols for the safe use of technology in the delivery of remote learning, including live lessons and one-to-one sessions. Expectations regarding roles and responsibilities have been communicated clearly to children, staff and parents through, for example, online learning contracts. Most schools (82%) have developed a Remote Learning policy, including addendums for the Child Protection and Safeguarding, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Acceptable Use policies.

Schools report that members of the safeguarding team have attended online safeguarding training by the EA Child Protection Support Service and refer regularly to [EA Safeguarding Children Guidance for Schools and EOTAS Centres During Covid-19 Arrangements](#). Despite ongoing TPL, school leaders state that there has been a decrease in the number of safeguarding referrals during this period of remote learning and there is a growing concern that a number of vulnerable children are not being identified as they are not in school.

While the use of video conferencing has increased from the first period of remote learning, school leaders report that a minority of staff are reluctant to show their faces on recordings and/or live video sessions, mostly in relation to safeguarding and privacy concerns. Although almost all schools have a clear and agreed code of conduct in place for children and parents with regard to live sessions, there are still a number of schools that cite examples of children appearing on screen in their pyjamas or joining a conference call from their bedroom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, primary schools have made significant progress in the quality of their remote learning provision since the first lockdown. They have consulted widely with the school community and used feedback to enhance the children's learning experiences.

Further to the key considerations outlined in the ETI's [Primary Phase Report September 2018 - December 2020](#) and for this period of remote learning, considerations going forward are to:

- ensure the Education Technology Service includes:
 - improving the quality of the digital infrastructure across Northern Ireland;
 - equitable access to suitable digital devices for all children and staff; and
 - a planned, coherent and accredited teacher professional learning programme to build competence and confidence in digital pedagogy;
- review the impact and effectiveness of the [Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2019–2022](#) for school leaders, teaching and non-teaching staff;
- evaluate through first-hand evidence, including observation of practice by the ETI, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on curriculum provision, evaluation of learning and outcomes for the children;
- identify and disseminate effective practice in the pedagogy of remote learning at system-wide level;
- review the use of existing digital platforms within the managed information system to ensure they meet the pedagogical needs of teachers and are user-friendly for the children and parents;
- develop further immersion-specific resources to support learning and teaching in Irish-medium education;
- evaluate the quality and impact of remote learning and take any necessary actions to ensure all children receive consistently high quality learning experiences at school level; and
- integrate the creative learning and teaching strategies, developed and honed through remote learning, into a whole-school blended learning approach that promotes both independent and collaborative learning which is sustainable and improves children's standards.

Appendix 1: List of schools that participated in discussions with ETI District Inspectors

Abercorn Primary School
Andrews Memorial Primary School
Armstrong Primary School
Ballycastle Integrated Primary School
Ballyclare Primary School
Ballymacward Primary School
Ballysally Primary School
Bridge Integrated Primary School
Brownlee Primary School
Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche
Bunscoil Chomcille
Bush Primary School
Carnlough Controlled Integrated Primary School
Carntall Primary School, Clougher
Castledawson Primary School
Christian Brothers Primary School, Armagh
Creggan Primary School
Culmore Primary School
Derrygonnelly Primary School
Derryboy Primary School
Derryhale Primary School
Doagh Primary School
Donacloney Primary School
Donaghey Primary School
Donemana Primary School
Dromintee Primary School
Dromore Road Primary School
Drumachose Primary School
Drumlins Integrated Primary School
Dunclug Primary School
Duneane Primary School
Ebrington Primary School and Nursery Unit
Eden Primary School
Enniskillen Integrated Primary School
Florencecourt Primary School
Forge Controlled Integrated Primary School
Fort Hill Integrated Primary School
Fourtowns Primary School
Gaelscoil na gCrann
Gaelscoil na Speiríní, Draperstown
Gillygooley Primary School
Grange Primary School
Holy Family Primary School and Nursery Unit, Magherafelt
Holy Trinity Primary School and Nursery Unit, Enniskillen
Irish Society Primary School
Island Magee Primary School
Kilbride Central Primary School
Killylea Primary School, Armagh
Kirkistown Primary School
Magherafelt Controlled Primary School
Moira Primary School
Millstrand Integrated Primary School
Milltown Primary School, Banbridge
Mountnorris Primary School
Moyle Primary School
Newcastle Primary School
Omagh Primary School
Our Lady and St Moucha's Primary School
Phoenix Integrated Primary School
Portadown Integrated Primary School
Portaferry Integrated Primary School
Presentation Primary School, Portadown
Randalstown Central Primary School
Roe Valley Integrated Primary School
Scoil na Fuiseoige
Sixmile Integrated Primary School
St Anne's Primary School, Corkey
St Clare's Abbey Primary School, Newry
St Colmcille's Primary School, Omagh
St Colman's Primary School, Dromore
St Columba's Primary School, Kilrea
St Eoghan's Primary School, Draperstown
St Eugene's Primary School and Nursery Unit, Derry
St John's Primary School, Gilford
St Joseph's Primary School, Crumlin
St Joseph's Primary School, Dunloy
St Malachy's Primary School and Nursery Unit, Bangor

St Malachy's Primray School, Belfast
St Malachy's Primary School, Coleraine
St Malachy's Primary School and Nursery
Unit, Kilcoo
St Mary's Primary School, Ballynahinch St
Mary's Primary School, Banbridge
St Mary's Primary School, Cabra
St Mary's Primary School, Killyleagh
St Mary's Primary School, Kircubbin
St Mary's Primary School, Lisbuoy
St Mary's Primary School, Portglenone St
Matthew's Primary School, Drumsurn St
Nicholas' Primary School, Carrickfergus St
Patrick's Primary School, Donaghmore

St Patrick's Primary School, The Loop
St Paul's Primary School and Nursery
Unit, Slievemore
St Peter's Primary School, Moortown
Straidhavern Primary School
St Scire's Primary School
Tandragee Primary School
Tattygar Primary School
Termoncanice Primary School and
Nursery Unit
Towerview Primary School and Nursery
Unit

Appendix 2: Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate and methodology

Reporting 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%

Methodology

Throughout January and February 2021, the ETI has been engaging with primary schools to understand their experiences of monitoring and evaluation of the delivery and quality of remote learning provision, and delivering the Engage Programme.

A [questionnaire](#) issued by the ETI was completed by 616 (77%) primary schools during the week of 25 January 2021. The quantitative analysis was published in February 2021.

District Inspectors engaged in focused discussions with 103 teaching and non-teaching school principals.

ETI's [Primary ISEF publication](#) is available on the ETI website:

Appendix 3: Case Studies

Case Study 1

Ballyclare Primary School – March 2020 to February 2021

SCHOOL CONTEXT

Ballyclare Primary School is a controlled primary school with an enrolment of 558 children. The percentage of children entitled to free school meals is 21% and the percentage of children who require additional help on the special educational needs register with aspects of their learning is 12%. A further 10% of children are involved with an intervention programme.

The Principal and governors invested significantly in information and communication technology (ICT) over the past fifteen years. There are two ICT post holders; one with responsibility for learning and the other for infrastructure. There is a high level of competence and confidence in using ICT among the staff; there are a number of Apple Teachers on the staff team. Ballyclare Primary School is an Apple Regional Training Centre⁸.

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

The school remained open during the response phase from March 2020, providing support for and supervision of a small number of key worker and vulnerable children; this number rose significantly during the second period of school closure in January 2021. Ensuring that all children access high quality learning experiences, whether at home or in school, has remained a priority.

In the immediate period, prior to the first lockdown, the senior leadership team found it challenging to plan for and implement the infrastructure for remote learning within the very limited time frame, as well as maintaining the pastoral care and the well-being of the entire school community.

Challenges included: reviewing the planning across the three classes in each group; organising and structuring a timetable for remote learning; providing adequate planning and preparation time to support staff in the creation of quality learning activities and provision of meaningful feedback; and, monitoring and evaluating progression in learning.

A number of families did not have access to appropriate devices to engage with online learning.

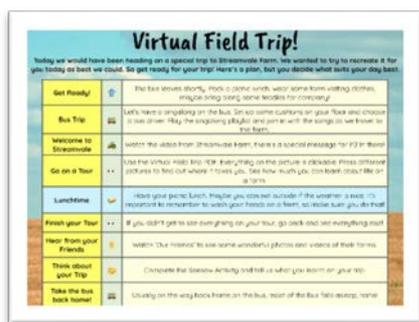
⁸Apple Regional Training Centres are a community of educators and institutions, who provide online and face-to-face training, to build the skills and confidence of educators in using Apple technology inside and outside the classroom.

EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE

March – June 2020

A Remote Learning Policy was developed in March 2020 with agreed procedures for parents, staff and children to follow. Prior to lockdown, the teachers ensured that all children could access and navigate the various platforms. The school had been using Seesaw⁹ for five years as a home school communication app. To support a small number of parents, the school facilitated face-to-face guidance sessions and the lead ICT teacher created a video tutorial in accessing and using the Seesaw app.

Teachers shared a timetable to provide structure to the learning and to adhere to the normal curricular routine as far as possible. Seesaw, the school website and Google Classroom in key stage 2 were used to share learning activities and pre-recorded videos with the children; hard copies were also provided on request. Additional 'catch-up' learning packs were issued at the end of June to support those children who were identified by teachers as requiring additional support.



Virtual Field Trip plan

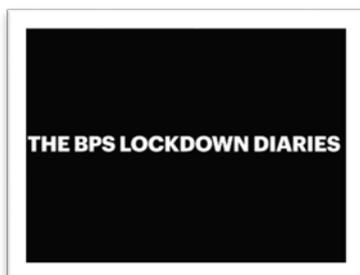


Songs to enjoy on the virtual bus ride

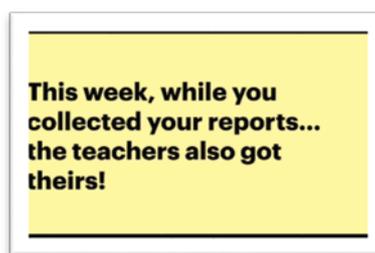


Educational Videos on the farm

Pastoral care and well-being of the whole school community was paramount. The staff maintained a visible presence online through weekly videos, distribution of awards through virtual assemblies, field trips and sports day. The end of June saw a socially-distanced outdoor walk and wave-by.



A lot has changed...but your Teachers have stayed the Same!



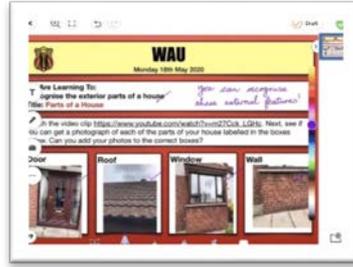
BPS teachers receive their June reports



BPS teachers take on Sports Day

⁹ Seesaw free version for children, teachers and families.

Throughout the period, a range of assessment for learning strategies were used across the key stages, including digital inking, typed and audio comments.



Every week of lockdown, the teachers monitored the engagement levels, the quality of the children's work and feedback from the children and parents/carers. Follow-up contact was made with families in order to support and encourage further engagement.

Staff training, during March to June 2020, focused on developing further the digital skills of classroom assistants and teachers through formal and informal in-house training and support. Classroom assistants were trained in using the tools available on Seesaw. A number of teachers supported their colleagues in how to create, edit and upload videos. All staff received regular up-to-date training in using iPads to maximise children's learning.

August – December 2020

The main priority in August was to 're-group': self-evaluating robustly what had happened during the lockdown, celebrating successes and identifying ways to move forward. The school produced a 'Return to School' booklet and pre-recorded videos related to restart expectations. In addition, a Blended Learning Policy was developed and agreed, taking account of feedback from parents. This policy outlined clear guidelines to manage different scenarios relating to the school's Covid-19 response which included children who were shielding and self-isolating. To ensure that all children and parents were able to access the learning, the school requested additional devices through the Department of Education's scheme and provided training for the children, staff and parents.

The governors made the decision to invest in the Seesaw for Schools¹⁰ in order to provide access to a wider range of tools, including creative and monitoring opportunities and an online reading programme for year 4 to year 7.

When the children returned to school in August, the teachers prioritised key areas of the curriculum which had been identified during teacher transition meetings in June. Teachers' professional evaluations of the children's learning identified outcomes in literacy, including children's standards in reading, were as expected and aspects of the numeracy curriculum which required further development. Standardised tests administered in November confirmed teachers' evaluations.

¹⁰ Seesaw for Schools full version for schools.

January- March 2021

School leadership made contingency arrangements to use a school development planning day led by the ICT lead teacher at the beginning of January to review and update the remote learning strategy.

Learning became even more tailored and personalised for children through the use of pre-recorded videos. The leadership recognised challenges in the delivery of physical development, the World Around Us, ICT and reading and utilised four days in February 2021 to focus on these areas of learning. Others are planned for March.



Weekly plan of activities and daily diary template utilised across each year group.

Peripatetic support, including music and literacy, continues to be delivered either through online platforms or in school. In addition, children requiring counselling and support can access pastoral services.

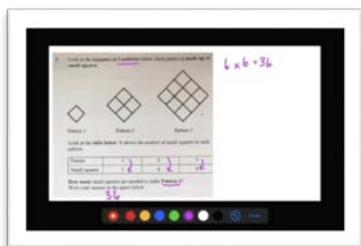
IMPACT

There is a culture of high expectations and tailored support for all.

Throughout the pandemic, the home-school partnership has continued to be strengthened through: meaningful engagement; regular two-way communication and consultation; and, structured support and guidance to sustain the delivery of the curriculum. Consequently, almost all (98%) of the children are engaging regularly with remote learning.

The qualitative information available indicates children's high levels of engagement in their learning. The children are more confident in communicating with their teacher, both online and in school, identifying what they can do well and asking for support, when necessary. The quantitative information indicates that the number of children achieving as expected or above expectation is similar to previous years.

The leadership and staff have reflected upon, monitored and evaluated the quality of remote learning and teaching; they have developed creative and flexible teaching approaches to deliver the curriculum, responding to and meeting the needs of individual children. The staff have enhanced further their skills in using digital technology to progress learning; they continue to access regularly both in-house and external professional development opportunities. Consequently, the school can move seamlessly from classroom-based to remote teaching and are prepared for a range of scenarios, including a blended approach. Continuing to upskill and support all of the staff in innovative ways remains a priority for the leadership team.



Teacher demonstration videos to aid understanding and virtual videos to explore topics in greater details.

The school development plan is responsive to the ever-changing educational landscape with professional development days focused on enhancing further remote learning and teaching. The governors remain highly supportive and cognisant of the challenges and successes of remote learning.

Case Study 2

Portstewart Primary School and Nursery Unit – March 2020 to February 2021

SCHOOL CONTEXT

Portstewart Primary School and Nursery Unit is a controlled primary school located on the North Coast with 252 children enrolled collectively in the primary school and nursery unit. Almost all of the children attending the school come from the town. The percentage of children entitled to free school meals is 36% and the percentage of children who require additional help with aspects of their learning is 13%.

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

The main challenges for the school were to:

- adapt and extend its approach to curriculum delivery rapidly both online and using the school grounds;
- provide supervised learning for key workers' children and vulnerable children each day;
- develop a recovery of learning plan , including mental health and well-being; and
- grow stronger community engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic.

EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE

March – June 2020

In March 2020, the children engaged in remote learning initially through paper-based materials and then moved to a combination of both paper-based materials and online learning through use of Seesaw, Accelerated Reader, MyOn, Mathletics and Fronter. The school had to adapt and extend its approach to curriculum delivery rapidly, while remaining open to provide supervised learning for key workers' children and vulnerable children. These children helped to grow, cultivate and harvest the fruit and vegetables in the school polytunnel, which, prior to lockdown, was an underutilised resource and had been left dormant over the winter season. The seed was planted.

The numeracy co-ordinator identified ways in which outdoor learning and the school polytunnel could improve and enrich the numeracy curriculum across the school and link to World Around Us topics. The governors, aware of the potential of outdoor learning opportunities for the children, expressed an interest to be actively involved in its development. And so, the collaboration began between governors, staff, children, parents and members of the local community on developing and enhancing the school's outdoor learning space.

The school decided to incorporate the use of the polytunnel into the daily routines of those children who attended school over the lockdown period. Governors and staff helped each week to facilitate groups of children to sow and maintain the polytunnel. The emphasis was on growing vegetable and fruit crops to develop children's enjoyment and wonder of nature and to contribute positively to their mental health and well-being. Things grew from here.

The project became more than just the poly tunnel and the garden area as the school decided to transform a waste area into a vegetable patch including over 100 potato plants, cabbage, beetroot, and swede crops as well as a composting area and wildflower garden. This widened the children's experience of gardening and increased their time spent outdoors. Their perseverance, teamwork and sense of self-worth increased knowing they were contributing tangibly to the success of the garden. The children took great pleasure developing their gardening skills and took ownership of the project. They delighted in tasting the first strawberries, finding the first potatoes, weighing the heaviest tomatoes and counting the number of cucumbers cropped.



The school community was kept up-to-date about the success of the outdoor learning project through the use of home learning online platforms, newsletters and through social media. The children in the nursery were tasked with growing seeds at home using pre-recorded videos filmed from the poly tunnel and sent to them via Seesaw.

Parents/carers and families volunteered to help cultivate, water and grow the fruit and vegetables in the poly tunnel. Each family was able to access the school poly tunnel safely as a single family unit to ensure safe social distancing. For each family, this meant a new place to be during the intensive home school learning period and many families reported that their children loved the quality time spent in the outdoor space with their parents. Practically, it also ensured the poly tunnel was tended to much more regularly, including over the summer break. The high levels of parental involvement and shared ownership widened the appeal of the poly tunnel to families and not just the children themselves. It also introduced gardening to some parents and developed their skills and enjoyment as well.

Local companies donated seed potato supplies and local residents provided seeds and plug plants. A local seaweed supplier provided fertiliser to improve plant growth and friends and families of the school provided topsoil to improve the chances of the crops growing.

BBC Radio Ulster's 'Gardeners' Corner' programme featured the work of the school community in developing the school's outdoor area and poly tunnel. Additionally, a well-known local chef and radio presenter also became involved with the outdoor learning project and the school supplied fresh tomatoes and other vegetables to be used in a local food festival event.

In addition to children and staff being able to consume the produce grown, the school was able to reach out into the local community and offer local families some free, fresh food. Produce could be collected or dropped off to families. When school returned in September, there was a regular fresh vegetable stall for parents and staff to take from until harvest ended.



August – December 2020

As school returned the main focus was to develop a recovery of learning plan, whilst continuing to plan for remote learning as contingency arrangements. However, the school remained keen to continue to propagate its outdoor learning project further by extending links with the local community. Consequently, the main priorities for the school in this context, when returning to school, included: building upon the success of the poly tunnel initiative, creating and extending outdoor learning across the curriculum, supporting proactively the mental health and well-being for all in the school community, placing fun and enjoyment front and centre of curriculum planning and provision and extending effective community engagement through strengthening further the links with parents and the wider community.

On return in September, building on the success from the previous term, the school was keen to develop further and enhance its outdoor learning project. A cross-school collaboration project was scheduled to start in September when children returned to maximise the use of the outdoor learning area and the school poly tunnel. A plan was developed for what each class would intend to plant in line with crop rotation with intended learning intentions and cross curricular links/resources. This was planned to develop consistency between year groups and broaden the experiences of the children, deepen their mathematical skills and contribute to the promotion of health and well-being.



The harvest season ended on a high with an exceptional pumpkin crop. The crop symbolised the success of all the children and parents' efforts and growth in the project. The large yield of pumpkin produce was transformed into very tasty muffins and distributed as part of the harvest festival assembly in class. Children created a video including the stages of growth of a pumpkin and the preparation of the food product. The parents provided positive feedback on how interested the children had become in the poly tunnel upon their return to school.

At Christmas time, the school turned the school poly tunnel area and outdoor space into an outdoor Christmas tree festival with the help of the Parent Teacher Association. Families were able to book a slot online to come and visit the outdoor Christmas tree festival and QR Christmas quiz trail. This proved very successful and local residents and members of the local community attended in a carefully managed and safe way within their family bubbles.

January - March 2021

The next part of the project was due to begin in January 2021. It will, however, now start with lockdown children again carrying out the tasks of ground preparation and germination in school in February ahead of a full return of all children. The school has plans to connect all children with the project through the weekly use of video updates by 'Polytunnel TV'. The children will be encouraged to grow at home from produce they have bought, using seeds and materials they have at home.

IMPACT

The high levels of involvement from the wider school community has been a success with enriching experiences brought to the children. The feedback from children, parents and staff has been very positive. The school looks forward to further embedding its work on developing the learning experiences of children through nurturing links with the wider community. There are plans to develop the mathematical links and cross-curricular themes that relate to outdoor learning and for senior children to set up a mini-business that links to crop production and providing food produce for the local community.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought many disruptions to the children's learning; however, Portstewart Primary School has turned challenge to opportunity by growing its community outreach and providing the children (and their families) with fruitful learning experiences that they can enjoy together.

Case Study 3

St Ita's Primary School and Nursery Unit, Belfast – March 2020 to February 2021

SCHOOL CONTEXT

St Ita's Primary School and Nursery Unit is a maintained school on the outskirts of Belfast. The enrolment stands currently at 691 with 60 children attending the nursery. Information and communication technology (ICT) has been a priority in St Ita's for many years and their remote learning journey began prior to the first lockdown in March 2020. Following a trial of the Seesaw platform in September 2016, and appreciating its benefits as a communication tool, it was rolled out to all year groups, from nursery to year 7, in January 2017.

Following a whole-school evaluation of homework, they had already begun the process of providing more opportunities for digital home learning. All partners in the school community were engaged in this evaluation and invited to discuss what constituted effective homework and determine whether it was having an impact on the children's learning.

Google Classroom was used as part of JDO¹¹ participation from 2016. Through the use of Google Classroom, children were collaborating with global partnership schools using iPads and Chromebooks. These skills, developed through online instruction and tutorials from JDO, were then disseminated to all teachers and are embedded in the school's practice from year 4 to year 7.

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

While the staff moved swiftly to build on the use of established digital platforms, the main challenge for the school was to ensure staff members felt confident and were competent in the use of the digital platforms to support learning and teaching in addition to their use as a communication tool.

Additional challenges were to ensure that good communication between home and school would be maintained and children and parents had access to suitable devices to support remote learning.

EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE

March - June 2020

The staff and parents had been familiar with the use of the Seesaw platform and this was used 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 uploaded¹² class novels and big books to support reading.

¹¹ [JDO Foundation](#)

¹² Within copyright laws.

The school agreed that Seesaw would continue as the main forum for communicating with parents from nursery to year 3 and as their main tool for remote learning. Year 4 to year 7 children would use both Seesaw and Google Classroom. Supervised learning for children of key workers was also provided during this period.

The children were signposted to the wide range of C2K NewsDesk articles which, together with Oxford Owl, were used to support literacy. 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/blending. Staff were conscious of screen time and access to available devices so also provided learning activities on worksheets. In addition, across the three key stages, teachers recorded voice messages to maintain contact with the children.

Every teacher was on their own information and communication technology (ICT) journey and for some this was a steep learning curve; they missed the reassuring support of working alongside colleagues and the learning this inspired. Initially, not all staff were confident or comfortable uploading videos and tutorials, therefore all members of staff were provided with a refresher session on technical support and were able to avail of ongoing technical support through the periods of remote learning. Increased communication within and between year groups and key stages resulted in more staff using asynchronous approaches.

With access to the remote learning and feedback from parents in nursery to year 7, the senior leadership team (SLT) and the ICT leaders were able to monitor the quality of remote learning across all year groups. Many pockets of innovative and creative ways to engage the children and parents in the learning were identified in all year groups.

There were many initial technical challenges faced with remote learning. Some were resolved very quickly and some are part of the school's interim development plan for 2020/2021.

September - December 2020

The return to work for staff in August began with a celebration of the remote learning which took place during lockdown. The ICT leaders produced a PowerPoint presentation with videos of good practice, celebrating the remote learning throughout the school. This was shared with staff; members of staff, who were slightly nervous about embracing aspects of remote learning, were inspired by this dissemination of good practice to maximise their own skills.

On seeing the quality and variety of remote learning experiences, the school began to develop a remote learning policy and revisit and enhance the technical skills needed for all staff to give their children the best experiences of online learning. Staff agreed, while every teacher has their own unique teaching style and delivery, it was important to establish a consistent approach to remote learning in all classes. This approach would not only ensure consistency across year groups but also provide parents with clear guidance in relation to the delivery of remote learning.

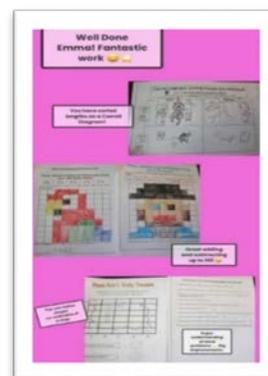
A further priority on return to school was to provide training on Microsoft Teams and examine the potential for Google Meet as a means of communicating safely with children outside of school. Developing confidence in Microsoft Teams has enabled staff and children to collaborate in school in a safe manner, for example, with assemblies and liaising with other people to enrich curriculum experiences. Parents who previously were invited in to classes or assemblies to share their expertise, such as, medics for the year 4 'Ourselves' topic, are now presenting through Microsoft Teams. This has enabled staff to think creatively about enriching learning and teaching.

January - March 2021

From their return to school in August 2020, in anticipation of further lockdowns and to reduce the carrying of material to and from school, staff provided homework activities for children through Google Classroom. This practice enhanced children's skills and supported a smooth transition to remote learning in January 2021. The agreed approaches to remote learning and marking, established in October 2020, ensures a consistency of approach across all year groups; and, teacher tutorial videos, assessment guidance and pastoral videos are all provided weekly. These have enabled the children to be much more independent in their learning resulting in a greater engagement in remote learning. Teachers' confidence and competence in employing online platforms has increased. Staff continue to plan and produce material collaboratively which helps to ease work load but also supports consistency. A particular focus is continuing to support children's emotional health and well-being through, for example, 'Well-being Wednesday' and 'Feel Good Friday' during which children are encouraged to participate in the arts, creative activities and exercise. During Children's Mental Health week, the senior leadership team (SLT) began 'pastoral check-in' sessions with years 4 to 7 through Google Meet. Feedback has been very positive from the children, parents and staff and the SLT intend to roll this out to all year groups.

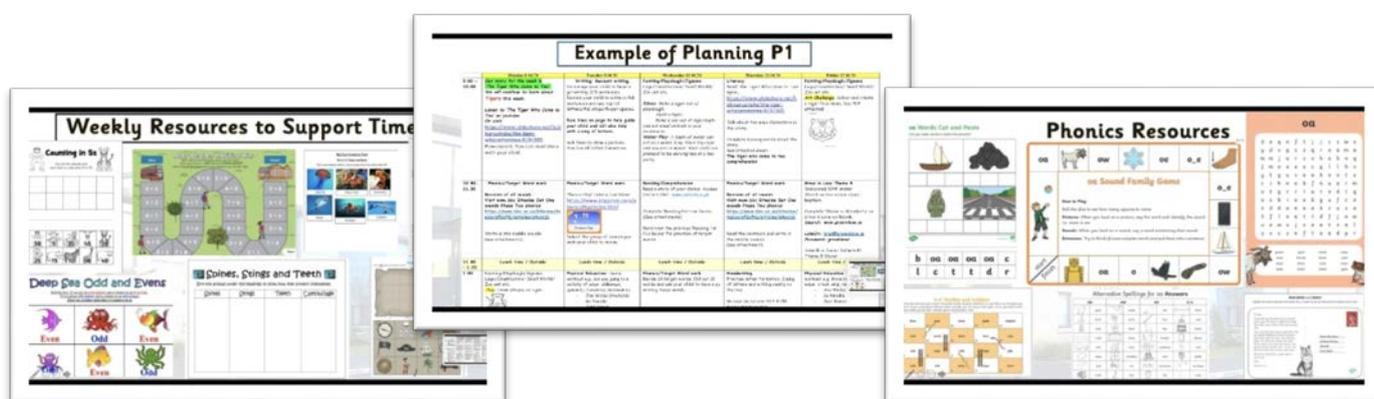
IMPACT

The regular communication with children and parents allow teachers to reflect, modify 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 provides assessment for learning (AfL) opportunities. The staff report positive interaction and feedback from children and parents through the use of a wide range of motivational strategies which keep the children engaged. Such strategies include personalised virtual stickers (which include the teacher's voice), virtual celebrations and Eco Committee class representatives post reminders to their peers.



Examples of feedback

Teachers across all year groups have embraced more interactive remote learning practices. Tasks set are more innovative and, of particular note: the uploading of video and audio clips; iMovies of children's work; tutorials through Seesaw Draw to support parents and children; and, teachers' motivational recordings to individual children. The staff recognise the need for children to see and hear their class teacher's voice and parents appreciate the direct input to keep their children motivated. Videos uploaded by teachers to set out the learning at the start of the week, and to review the work again at the end of the week, are a great motivation for parents/carers. They welcomed the increasing amount of tutorials staff were uploading to explain, for example, mathematical concepts, challenging problems, and phonological awareness. With the younger children, parents became involved in uploading video clips of their child's research, for example, year 1 researched their favourite zoo animal which the teachers collated in to a class video. Similarly, with the older children, competitive quizzes continued to keep motivation levels high.



Examples of support and guidance for parents

Teachers use more innovative and creative ways to mark work and give feedback online, while making this a manageable and sustainable process. Virtual stickers and private messages on Seesaw with constructive feedback are very effective. From year 4 to year 7, teachers monitor the tasks being completed on Google Classroom. The online collaboration between children is facilitated through Google Classroom where children are given the opportunity to communicate with their peers and assess each other's work.

Best practice is disseminated and skills shared; online marking and monitoring of children's work led to much discussion within the school and has resulted in an agreed and consistent approach to feedback on learning.

Provision for children with specific needs was a concern as some were missing out on specialist support from outside agencies. Therefore, regular support provided by the special educational needs co-ordinator, teachers and classrooms assistants is effective in maintaining pastoral support and ensuring continuity of personalised and tailored learning. Teachers' use of telephone and video meetings to explain the week's differentiated learning and reinforce specific concepts was welcomed by parents and children, and had a positive impact on their motivation and learning.

Case Study 4

St Mary's Primary School, Dunsford – March 2020 to February 2021

SCHOOL CONTEXT

St Mary's Primary School, Dunsford is a maintained school approximately two miles from Ardglass, County Down. The enrolment stands currently at 92 children across four composite classes. At the time of this case study, 27% of the children enrolled in the school were entitled to free school meals while 16% of the children in the school avail of additional support to support their learning. Since September 2017, the staff have utilised extensively Seesaw and other platforms as an integral part of learning and teaching.

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

At the beginning of the initial lockdown (March 2020 – June 2020) the staff transitioned easily to remote learning, building on the use of these already established platforms.

From September 2020 to December 2020, the main challenges for the school were to:

- develop and implement an effective remote learning model to: include supporting children who were shielding/self-isolating; and, provide meaningful home learning opportunities;
- create a new approach to the delivery of homework to reduce the likelihood of transmission of the COVID-19 virus between the home and school setting;
- prioritise the mental health and well-being of the children in curriculum delivery and through other aspects of school life;
- amend planning to focus on the progression of skills in both class-based and online learning contexts in light of COVID-19;
- develop and implement creative approaches to capture the voice of the child whilst adhering to the Public Health Agency (PHA) and DE guidance; and
- maintain a sense of school community while operating in 'bubbles.'

In the second lockdown, from January 2021, the school was required to provide supervision for key worker and vulnerable children, comprising 18% of the school population, as well as provide remote learning for the remainder of the school population.

EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE

Developing and implementing an effective remote model to provide meaningful home learning opportunities.

Staff use Seesaw to deliver classroom teaching and activities, thus ensuring that children working remotely have a similar learning experience to those being supervised in school. Lessons, which under normal circumstances are delivered in the classroom, are sent via Seesaw with: annotated notes attached; teachers' voice notes, for example, explaining new concepts within PowerPoint presentations; and, recorded videos. Lessons are timed to be delivered to the children at the same time numeracy, literacy or Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) are taught in the normal school day, thus ensuring that children working remotely have a structured timetable of lessons throughout the day comparable to what they would experience in school. Class novels are read by teachers and uploaded to Seesaw for children to follow at home while teachers engage with smaller guided reading groups twice weekly through Collaborate Ultra. Assessment for Learning is integrated into Seesaw activities and children submit work upon completion to enable teacher assessment and feedback to be provided.

Creating a new approach to the delivery of homework to reduce the likelihood of transmission of the virus between the home and school setting.

To mitigate the risks involved with homework, staff transferred most homework to the forum of virtual classrooms where daily and weekly scheduled tasks are located.

Teachers 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. This system



Virtual classroom

has worked seamlessly since August 2020 and has ensured continuity of learning for all children in homework activities. Children who have been self-isolating also avail of their virtual classroom to ensure learning is reinforced in the home environment.

From January 2021, the school continued to use virtual classrooms across the year groups to deliver homework tasks and activities. Hyperlinks attached in each virtual classroom provide the children with access to The World Around Us, PDMU, literacy and numeracy learning activities, class novels, and numeracy and literacy development tools, such as, IXL and Accelerated Reader.

Prioritising the mental health and well-being of the children in curriculum delivery and through other aspects of school life.

The impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and well-being of the children has been at the forefront of all decisions taken since reopening in August 2020, noting a wide range of negative impacts.

Children have had increased opportunities to talk with each other and trusted adults about their experiences of lockdown through increased focus on: PDMU; resilience workshops; mindfulness-led programmes; PE; art; religion; Circle Time; and 'ice-breaker' activities. Parent/carer volunteers have been involved in leading the children in gardening and eco-activities and these have provided the children with opportunity to re-establish friendships.



There are regular opportunities for the children to provide their views on school life, COVID-19 and their worries through the capturing of children's voice on Seesaw and the use of Google Forms at the end of each half-term.

Since January 2021, the school has continued to prioritise children's mental health and well-being with daily teacher-led discussions using Collaborate Ultra about how children are coping on a day-to-day basis and what they are finding challenging. This has provided the children with the opportunity to continue interactions and maintain relationships with their friends. Teachers have continued to deliver live activities through Collaborate Ultra since January 2021, engaging in PDMU, Circle Time, religion and daily prayer.

Amending planning to focus on the progression of skills in both class-based and online learning contexts in light of COVID-19.

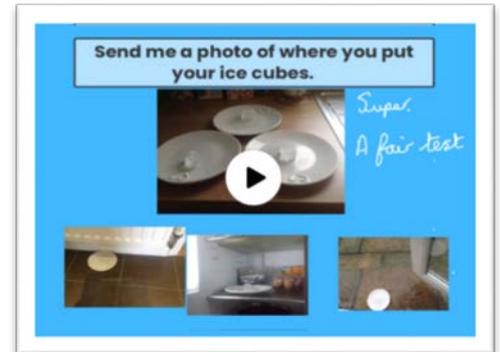
School planning transferred from traditional C2k network drives to Google Drive since 2018/2019. The use of Google Drive enabled teachers to continue to adopt a collegial approach to planning since August 2020 across the school. The teachers plan simultaneously on the same document whilst adhering to PHA and DE guidance on social distancing.

Since August 2020, planning across the school has been altered and 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 from COVID-19. A lot of emphasis has therefore been placed on developing key skills, such as:

- *experimenting with ideas and questions;*
- *learning from and valuing other people's ideas;*
- *making ideas real by experimenting with different designs, actions, and outcomes;*

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

From January 2021, planning has continued to develop Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities (TSPC); they are infused into the children's remote learning opportunities that enables them to apply ideas, create and design as well as set their own targets.



Developing and implementing creative approaches to capture the 'voice of the child' whilst adhering to PHA and DE guidance.

The staff use Collaborate Ultra to conduct school council, eco-council and digital leader meetings. Digital leaders in respective 'bubbles' were given training on the use of Collaborate Ultra and they have cascaded this to the school council and eco-council teams. These meetings are operating very successfully on a weekly basis across the school and has ensured that the children's voice continues to have the opportunity to have a meaningful and decisive role to play in the school improvement and decision-making process.



A virtual school council meeting in action

Maintaining a sense of school community

Weekly school assemblies take place through Collaborate Ultra so children are informed fully of what is happening throughout the school and their achievements can be acknowledged and rewarded. The Seesaw blog feature is also used to link classes together so that children in different 'bubbles' can view and comment on their friends' work and activity online, thus helping to maintain some of their normal social interactions.

IMPACT

The benefits of the educational response have been widespread, with positive feedback from key stakeholder groups including children, staff and parents.

Children report that their use of Seesaw has ensured that remote learning opportunities have been extremely engaging with new teaching clearly explained through the increased use of annotated notes, voice notes and visual teaching methods. Parents have confirmed that children have a more comprehensive understanding of new learning and that the delivery of lessons at set times has created structure and routine for children when working from home. Remote learning is working better and the children are making greater progress.

The creation of virtual classrooms has provided continuity of learning whilst adhering to DE and PHA guidance. Virtual classrooms pages are vibrant and visually pleasing and have provided regular assessment and feedback opportunities for teachers whilst giving parents insight as to what work children are focusing on each day in school. Parents have reported that they feel involved in their child's learning through the medium of Seesaw and in virtual classrooms.

The school has continued to prioritise the mental health and well-being of the children since their return to school and experiences provided across the curriculum and staff have noted reduced anxiety levels amongst children, increased empathy and emotional understanding and the redevelopment of key social interactions skills. This was confirmed through end of term feedback received through Google Forms. Friendships have blossomed since August and with the children engaging in a wide range of activities to develop their emotional and social well-being learners, they have undoubtedly become more engaged as the term has progressed.

Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities have flourished as the term has progressed with the ability to work with others and thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills having been areas of particular development. Through providing the children with increased opportunities to thrive in these areas, the children's work in all curricular areas has improved significantly.

The role and use of Collaborate Ultra since school re-opening in August 2020 has been of paramount importance in ensuring that the children's voice has continued to be heard across the school and that school leaders have had a vital role to play in the school decision-making process. It has facilitated the continued focus on providing all of the children with leadership and development opportunities while also advancing self-esteem, self-confidence, decision-making abilities and communication skills.

The school community has continued to with school events disseminated through Collaborate Ultra and social friendships across 'bubbles' being maintained and developed through the use of class blogs on Seesaw. This has led to the strengthening of friendships and a sense of school community amongst all the children.

Case Study 5

St Paul's Primary School and Nursery Unit, Slievemore – March 2020 to February 2021

SCHOOL CONTEXT

St Paul's Primary School and Nursery Unit is situated in an area of high socio-economic deprivation in the Galliagh area of Derry City; there are currently 205 children enrolled in the school and in the full-time nursery unit. The school has currently 68% of their children in receipt of free school meals and 30% requiring additional help with their learning.

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

Prior to the first lockdown in March 2020, the school used Seesaw and Class Dojo throughout the school; during March 2020 staff development and training moved quickly to build on the use of the already established platforms to enable all staff to engage with children online. The main challenge for the school was to ensure the children were engaged with their learning across the multiple learning platforms and that all families were supported and guided with regards to online and remote learning.

EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE

During the first lockdown of March-June 2020, the school provided remote online learning via Seesaw, Class Dojo and Google Classroom. Paper-based learning activities were also provided for all children. Class teachers were able to monitor engagement and, where there was evidence of lack of engagement, follow up with a phone call, when necessary. Parents were helped to support their child's learning through materials that were made available on the school website, Facebook page and through phone calls. The school received positive interaction and feedback through a wide range of staff, children's and parent voice opportunities. The 'Say Hi' programme, which allows parents and children to request a pastoral or academic call from a member of staff, has been identified as a particular strength.

The school has very good links with local community groups and businesses which provided a range of resources and online schemes for children and families. Such examples include: 10 school iPads were delivered to those children without a device; children were given opportunities to engage in music through the 'Music Boxes' initiative where live music lessons were provided; the 'Time to Count' strategy was established in conjunction with 'Business in the Community'; and, staff and members of the local community hub made home visits with food parcels and practical learning resources. The families and children involved were delighted and very much appreciated the resources, particularly in light of the challenging situation.

In term one, August-December 2020, all of the children returned to school and they adapted positively to the new routines, such as, the break and lunch times and the revised beginning and end of day routines. The school produced a restart action plan and a school development plan, both were informed by self-evaluation and a whole-school policy adhering to all of the

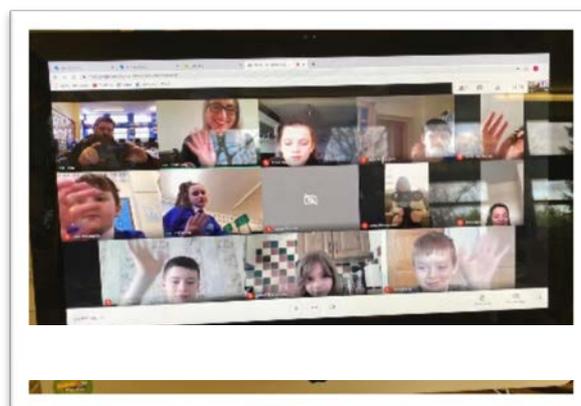
relevant health and safety, and education guidance. This included providing staff with a range of professional development opportunities in mindfulness, training from Aware NI and the NSPCC. This training was used by staff to engage all classes in mental health and well-being initiatives in order to prepare the children to be able to cope well if there were future school closures or periods when individual children or 'bubbles' would have to self-isolate.

Following staff consultation, the school streamlined the online learning platforms by moving all classes to Seesaw; senior leadership led staff development. All homework was set via Seesaw and, as a result, the children from the Nursery Unit to key stage 2 were able to access Seesaw from home and complete their homework, and parents were given opportunities to provide feedback directly to teachers via the Seesaw App.

During the current lockdown from January 2021, the school provided remote online learning supplemented with learning packs. In the nursery unit, reading books and physical resource packs were provided which included scissor activity packs, packs with various sized balls, and shakers for children to develop fine and gross motor skills. The school reports that engagement and levels of motivation increased significantly.



The children and parents were familiar previously with the online learning platforms. The staff have daily check-ins with the children and follow-up with any children not able to engage online whether it be owing to connectivity or other issues.



Parents were encouraged to listen to their children's teacher's morning message and to use the 20:20 approach, that is, complete 20 minutes of work followed by a 20 minute break repeated throughout the day. Some vulnerable children who were not engaging at home attend the school and appreciate the support they receive. Intervention strategies, such as, play therapy, have continued by following the current health and safety guidance for schools. The children who attend the Nurture Sunflower class have continued with their routines and meet face-to-face with their teacher at least three times per week. In addition, these children benefit from the 'Fun Fridays' live sessions. The nurture teacher has delivered iPads and class packs to all children in this group.



Nurture Sunflower class packs ready to go



All ready for Play Therapy

In addition, the school has employed a wide variety of motivational strategies to keep all children engaged with remote learning. These strategies include: regular hints and tips on the school Facebook page; socially-distanced home visits; the meeting of class groups or individual sessions on Google; art packs; and, the 'Say Hi' programme has continued. The school now uses Google Classroom to engage with individual children during live lessons; these children are identified predominantly through the feedback from class teachers who report on engagement levels and then they work on a 1:1 format with senior leadership as part of the Engage Programme.

IMPACT

Daily communication with senior leaders ensures staff monitor both the academic progress and pastoral well-being of the children. Most recently, the senior leaders have developed a shared tool to track daily engagement which is completed each day by all teaching staff. This provides the school with vital data enabling staff to record and track engagement across all classes. As a result, almost all families are engaging currently with remote learning and most children participate on a daily basis, these are significant increases from the first lockdown.

The school has worked to break down barriers and engage children with online and remote learning. As a result of live teaching, the staff report increased engagement, positive interaction and feedback from both children and parents. The regular communication with children and parents has allowed teachers to reflect, modify and amend planned learning and, where necessary, provide additional support on a case-by-case basis. Staff employ a range of strategies to care for the mental health and well-being of the children, including the use of outside agencies and community groups. Intervention strategies, such as, the Engage

programme, Nurture Sunflower class, music boxes and play therapy, have continued and the progress of individual children is being monitored closely. 'Doorstep visits' have become commonplace practice for the school leadership as well as the nurture staff as a way of keeping in touch with those who need additional support; this approach has been received well by parents.

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