EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE

SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Remote and blended learning: curricular challenges and approaches

June 2020

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE ®
CSE

eti
The Education and Training Inspectorate
Promoting Improvement

Contents

Introduction

On 20 March 2020, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, pre-school settings[1] and primary, post-primary and special schools across Northern Ireland closed to children and young people[2]. In the interim, children and young people have engaged in remote learning at home either through paper-based materials provided by their setting or school, online learning materials or a combination of both.

Currently the situation in regard to the COVID-19 is changing rapidly and pre-school settings and schools are at various stages of devising safe, effective and efficient arrangements for the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year. It is anticipated that the balance between classroom-based teaching and learning combined with a range of remote learning approaches will vary between individual preschool settings and schools, as well as for individual year groups, and change as the academic year progresses, with school attendance, dependent on medical and scientific advice, returning to preCOVID-19 patterns.

The planning for blended learning approaches is dependent on factors, such as: the number of staff and children and young people; the size and layout of the pre-school setting or school; subject uptake; and, the availability of suitable teaching and learning spaces for each curriculum/subject area. The leadership and management of change is crucial in planning for blended learning approaches, a number of considerations need to be taken into account, including: the well-being of children and young people; the curriculum; the uncertainty of the arrangements for examinations and assessment; and, health and safety.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was commissioned by the Department of Education as part of the Continuity of Learning Programme, to provide guidance on effective ways in which the curriculum could be tailored (planned for, implemented and assessed)' across the range of areas of learning and subject areas for a phased return for children to full-time education. The Department asked for a series of pieces of work which would reflect the changing circumstances in which schools are working to provide up-to-date advice and guidance on an ongoing basis. This publication represents the first phase of that work. Across June 2020, the ETI met with reference groups of curricular co-ordinators, Heads of Departments and leaders on a cross-sectional basis from across Northern Ireland to seek their views on the challenges of remote learning and teaching, and what approaches they might take in moving towards the return to school with as many children and young people as possible, complemented by blended learning where necessary.

The Curriculum, Qualifications and Standards Directorate of the Department of Education (DE) has initiated a number of projects to ensure that appropriate action is taken to secure, as far as possible, the learning of pupils at home and in school, during the current pandemic and beyond.

	Supporting Learning The Department of Education's Continuity of Learning Project, *Supporting Learning* provides support for teachers and parents working together so that pupils continue to learn at home and through school.

[1] In this instance, this refers to all DE pre-school settings, nursery schools, nursery units, private pre-school settings, voluntary pre-school settings and Irish medium pre-school settings.
[2] Other than the children of key workers and vulnerable children who continued to attended their own school or a C-19 cluster school.

The DE publications provide guidance and support for schools as they plan for the reopening of schools and the 2020/21 academic year; this is supplemented with more detailed Supporting Learning[3] guidance which includes resources, guidance materials and case studies to support blended learning. There is also the Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education and CCEA curricular guidance to support curriculum delivery of the statutory Northern Ireland curriculum in schools.

Within the sections that follow, a summary is provided of the challenges and potential approaches that have been discussed by the reference groups with the ETI.

The context for special schools

School staff have varying levels of skill, for providing blended learning. The change to blended and online working came very quickly with little time to prepare. Pupils in special schools have a wide range of skills for using technology, with some able to use laptops independently and others needing support for any use of any device.

Schools are ensuring that parents are aware that staff are available to talk to parents and that the school is there to support them. Preparing individual learning support packages, including equipment to support learning in pupils' homes, and delivering it to the homes of individual pupils is very time-consuming for staff, but they recognise that it is essential for pupil's learning. The Middletown Centre for Autism remote training and resources are found to be very helpful to schools, parents and pupils.

In one special school blended learning is defined as having the added dimension of learning in partnership with home where the pupil has lessons and guided learning in school with learning activities that continue at home. These home learning activities are under the assessment, moderation and guidance of the teacher during each pupil's in-school lessons.

Schools are finding it a challenge to provide the consistency of practice, essential for many pupils but difficult between home and school, and with the additional dimension of major changes in routine, timetables, and staff working with the pupils. In addition, the materials used for learning tasks may vary from those the pupil normally uses, placing additional demands on the pupil.

Support and advice from school-based therapists and counsellors has proved highly positive, with therapy advice on school websites, and therapists providing individual specialised resources to families.

The use of the school web site to deliver messages to the school community is proving highly effective. Schools are sharing remotely, celebrations of home learning and videos to remind the pupils and parents of their school community. School social media sites have proven to be most successful in getting parental engagement during this time.

---

[3] This project involves the Department working collaboratively with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CNaG), the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA), the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC), the Education Authority (EA) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

There is a wide range of parental needs, and abilities to support their child's learning. Increasing levels of support from school staff has been required for parents as the C-19 period continues. This has led to increased workload for all staff; the workload for the school senior leadership team has increased substantially in the present crisis. Additionally, some schools report there have been inconsistencies and miscommunication by some external agencies with schools and parents, which has led to increased workload and stress for both families and school staff.

Some families do not have computers or tablets, printers, or internet connection. Schools have lent out school computers, however getting them working in homes has proved difficult in some cases.

The school leadership teams are concerned with the well-being of staff with their own health concerns, the need to shield family members, and home learning for their own children.

Challenges for delivery of the curriculum

- It is challenging to have pupils in school, and deliver home learning at the same time; school staff have identified a need to embed routines, time-management and processes.

- There is a negative impact of change on many pupils, some of whom are also dealing with loss, grief and trauma. A return to school will also involve further changes for pupils from home and expected school routines.

- The effect on individual pupils of the changes they have experienced will vary greatly and will require careful consideration and planning by the school staff.

- Risk assessments for pupils and staff need to be completed quickly, yet may take considerable time given the complex needs of some pupils.

- Staff are aware that their pupils may regress in curricular, communication and social skills, however there may have been enhanced opportunities for pupils to practise their skills in a variety of situations in the home. All of these factors need to be taken into consideration for each pupil with individual education plans adjusted accordingly.

- Assessments and provision from school therapists or counsellors may need to be updated for each pupil receiving such support. Changes and updates will require the teacher to consider how the advice impacts on the pupil's learning and physical abilities and address these in their revised planning.

- Whilst the curriculum may be limited, schools acknowledge that things will not be 'right' until all pupils and staff return to the full school week.

Approaches taken or planned

- Schools are providing a nurture-based NIC for pupils when they return to school, in order to settle and reassure the pupils thereby enabling better well-being and effective learning.

- Schools are planning for blended learning approaches for the NIC to focus on Literacy/Communication, Numeracy/Using Maths and Using ICT with many opportunities for multi-sensory learning. The pastoral curriculum will be based on the needs of each pupil.

- Teachers working together to plan and post ideas for different curricular areas has proved to be time efficient for schools, for example a group of teachers working specifically on a bank of resources for communication.

- Highly individualised support for each pupil, involving favourite activities and toys/equipment is proving to be particularly engaging for pupils.

- Schools are storing banks of remote videos on the school website (for example circle time, sensory circuits or Attention Autism) for use by all staff. The most engaging for pupils and parents are reportedly 'follow me' and 'show me' activities.

- Effective remote video lessons from the teacher at home engage well pupils and parents, for example a teacher posted videos of reading a story to her child, whilst another teacher produced a horticulture lesson from her garden.

- The assessment of pupil learning is being addressed through enhanced communication with parents and pupils, uploading work completed, and, with the help of parents/carers where required, pupils are asked to post photographs or videos of themselves completing tasks.

- Schools are using a range of media tools including: Seesaw online which is proving very useful for schools replacing the home school diary for communication with parents, Evidence Me is being used successfully by one school and Zoom lessons are working well for a number of schools. Schools are monitoring what goes on Facebook is essential to ensure that content uploaded about their schools is appropriate.

- Professional development for all school staff on providing remote learning has been highly beneficial. Parents have joined training on remote learning with a school; this has raised their skills and they reportedly have appreciated the opportunity.

- Some schools are providing regular governor updates to keep planning on track.

- Some schools plan to keep class and staff teams together in the first term of 2020/2021 to allow teachers with the knowledge of the pupil's attainments pre-C-19 to make more accurate assessments and plan effectively.

- Some schools plan for pupil baseline assessments to include the attention span of the pupil, ability to engage, work with others, use of their communication system/s, behaviour needs, and the need to regulate their emotions and sensory responses.

Conclusion

The pupils in special schools will need time to settle and accept calmly the changes in their home and school environments therefore schools envisage that their personal, social and emotional wellbeing will take precedence. The pupils will all have had individual experiences of home learning and may have developed or lost skills. Detailed planning by staff will be crucial as each pupil returns to school.

- It is recognised that preparing policies and procedures to enable the change from classroom to remote learning, blended learning and face to face classes takes considerable time.

- Sufficient time is required for staff to plan and prepare face to face learning, blended learning and remote learning. Schools including training for staff and parents in how to use the technology have found this to be particularly helpful.

- Sufficient time to enable the pupils to become used to their new school day and routines will be essential, school staff can enable this by providing individualised familiar and preferred routines and activities.

- Risk assessments will be important to guide staff in consistent and appropriate support for pupils.

- Schools may wish to consider enhanced communication with parents in a variety of formats so that parents gain confidence in sending their child to school, and develop improved insight and knowledge into what works well for their child in order to provide effective home education.

Special school leaders, in consultation with their management groups/boards of governors, know the context and unique circumstances of their setting or school, and are best placed to make the detailed decisions required when it comes to the safety of their setting/school and how they can best deliver the curriculum to their children and young people.

There are a number of factors that will inform the delivery of the Northern Ireland Curriculum for schools in a way that meet the needs of the children and young people and the context within which it is being delivered.

- Whilst we know that many children and young people are incredibly resilient, their mental health and wellbeing is, and will continue to be, a priority for us all; therefore, mental health and wellbeing will need to feature appropriately in curriculum delivery.

- Planning for learning will need to take account of the learning of the children and young people during the period of solely remote [distance] learning, thereby re-dressing and maintaining standards – whilst the context will be different, the principles of effective assessment for learning are the same.

- The need to consider the six areas of learning in the pre-school curriculum and the minimum entitlement of the Northern Ireland curriculum for schools, including the development of wider skills and dispositions; therefore, organisations will need to think about what aspects need to be delivered face-to-face in the classroom environment, what aspects can be delivered remotely online or supported by parents in the home learning environment, and what aspects may not be able to be delivered owing to the context within which the school is operating.

The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework provides a framework to support the organisation's discussions and reflections which are continuing and will evolve in planning to address the specific challenges and priorities that will be faced in the next academic year as a result of COVID-19.

Resources

Department of **Education**	Publications include: <u>Curriculum Planning 2020/21,</u> <u>The New School Day Guidance, Guidance for Schools on Supporting Remote Learning</u> and <u>Guidance on School Development Planning for 2020/21</u>.
cea Rewarding Learning	A <u>CCEA video</u> that can help explain to parents what the Northern Ireland Curriculum is all about, how it is a framework that covers all 12 years of compulsory education from age 4 to 16.
	<u>Home Learning – SEN</u>: This list of resources may be helpful for schools and parents/carers of learners with SEN at home. Most CCEA materials are designed for teachers delivering the Northern Ireland Curriculum in schools, including the ones listed below. However, the resources selected include many activities that can be adapted to use at home with learners with SEN.
	<u>'Every Sport for Everyone'</u> means that every sport can be adapted in some way to include all players, with and without a disability. A disability can refer to an intellectual disability, a sensory disability or a physical disability. It is important that every individual is included in sport and this can be achieved across all sports.
	<u>Quest for learning</u> is a guidance and assessment resource to support teachers and classroom assistants of learners with profound & multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), providing ideas for and pathways to learning.
	<u>The Prerequisite Skills</u>, or more commonly known as Q Skills, are an assessment resource to support teachers and classroom assistants. The skills described in the resource build towards Level 1 in the cross-curricular skills for Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT.
	<u>Inclusion & General Strategies</u>: Advice on Learners with Additional Needs; Hearing Impaired (HI); Inclusion; Physical Difficulties; Specific Learning Difficulties; Speech & Language; Visually Impaired.
CENTRE FOR AUTISM	<u>The Middletown Centre for Autism</u> has a range of resources for learning, support and assessment, including remote training and resources are found to be very helpful to schools, parents and pupils.