



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Evaluation of Remote Teaching and Learning

Submission on behalf of the INTO

Bealtaine 2021

Introduction

The INTO welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Inspectorate on its proposals regarding the evaluation of remote teaching and learning. However, in the interests of cooperation and collaboration the INTO would like to have been consulted prior to designing the piloting of the evaluation process.

School closures due to the pandemic meant that teachers had to support the continuation of pupil learning remotely. Both teachers' experiences and pupils' experiences differed depending on local contextual issues. The diversity of experiences during school closures in Spring/Summer 2020 have been captured in many research studies, including the INTO's study¹. The Professional Development Support Service (PDST) provided excellent professional development opportunities for teachers regarding the adjustment to remote learning – both digital and non-digital. However, such support was remote and on request. There was no coherent overall strategy for the professional development and learning needs of teachers regarding the facilitation of the continuity of learning remotely. Having learnt from the first experience of school closures, teachers were in a better position during the most recent closures to continue to support their pupils' learning remotely, though again they relied heavily on their own resources. It must be borne in mind, however, that remote learning does not equate to digital learning.

The emergence of remote teaching and learning was a response to a pandemic, for which there was no preparation. Teachers rose to the challenge of supporting the continuation of their pupils' learning, drawing on whatever resources were available to them, demonstrating agility in the manner of their response. The tremendous work done by schools in adapting to remote learning and the creativity and ingenuity shown by teachers has been incredible. Remote teaching and learning should not be seen as a new approach to education, therefore, the INTO questions whether there should be any formal evaluation framework to evaluate what is an emergency response to ensure the continuation of pupil learning. It may reasonably be anticipated that any further periods of remote learning would also take place in some kind of emergency, which would bring their own unique challenges.

Bearing in mind the emergency nature of remote teaching and learning, we believe this process should more accurately be termed 'Support for Remote Teaching and Learning' and should aim to look in a holistic manner at supports for teachers, resource development and approaches to remote learning. The process should aim to look at what went well and what needs development or improvement across the spectrum, taking into account the role of the Department of Education, PDST and other support services, in addition to the experiences at the individual school level.

Department Guidance

The publication of the Department's Guidance on remote learning has been useful for teachers in planning to support the continuation of their pupils' learning during school closures and in devising their contingency plans. The Guidance documents were sufficiently flexible in recognition of the varying contexts in which teachers and pupils find themselves. The INTO welcomed the opportunity to engage with the Department prior to the issuing of the various guidance documents. The INTO notes the requirement for schools to have contingency plans to enable teaching and learning to continue during emergency school closures.

Supporting Schools

The INTO acknowledges the Inspectorate's collaborative approach to working with teachers and school communities in developing and co-constructing its approaches to evaluation and inspection.

¹ Irish National Teachers' Organisation. (2020). *Digital, Distance and Remote Learning: Lessons learned from (Covid-19) school closures*. Dublin: INTO

Teachers welcomed the Inspectorate's advisory role and their availability to offer real time practical advice during periods of remote learning. The dissemination of exemplars of good practice are a useful addition to the Department's Guidance., though we must be mindful that good practice is contextual.

Aims of the Model

It is important for the Department to support the continuity of teaching and learning in schools during emergency responses. The public should have confidence that pupil learning is continuing during emergency periods of school closures. Gathering data on how schools are engaging with pupils and supporting their learning is a useful exercise to inform policy. Providing real-time advisory support for schools is a valuable support for teachers and principals as is the sharing of experiences in how curriculum is mediated during remote learning in the context of an emergency response.

The Evaluation Framework

The domains and standards as laid out and the questions that accompany the diagram on page 4 reflect the relevant aspects of remote teaching and learning, such as pupil engagements, pupil motivation, teachers' planning, preparation and assessment and the overall approach of the school, however, collaborative work among teachers may be impacted in remote environments. The INTO acknowledges the importance of regular engagement with pupils, giving regular feedback to pupils, the need for inclusive and differentiated approaches to supporting pupil learning. However, the Department should recognise that direct teaching in remote environments is very difficult particularly with younger children and with children with complex needs and that barriers may exist in achieving this (children's individual access to technology, broadband connectivity, etc).

The inspection activities outlined make the process very formal and we question the need for such a formal process where remote learning will only be in place in limited emergency circumstances.

Overall Comments

Supporting the continuity of pupils' learning remotely is an emergency response to school closures arising from a pandemic. Any evaluation of the remote work of teachers and their pupils' learning must reflect the contingency nature of educational provision during such school closures. Normal evaluation expectations and processes must be modified as the infrastructural supports that apply when schools are open and fully operational do not apply during contingencies.

Working from home is challenging for teachers as it is for many workers. Home environments are not always conducive to working. Not all teachers have a dedicated space from which to work. Some teachers live in shared accommodation, many others have caring responsibilities, and some are also home-educating their own children. The normal infrastructural supports that enable teachers to work are also impacted during the pandemic – childcare, elder care, working space. Teachers rely on their own personal equipment (laptops, printers etc), rarely provided by the school, and/or funded by the Department, and may have limited specifications in relation to online learning. They also rely on their own broadband, at their own expense, the quality of which varies, depending on location, and on how many in a household are using broadband at any one time.

Pupils' home environments are not always conducive to supporting the continuity of learning. Depending on their age, pupils need active support from parents to support their learning at home. Some pupils have no access to broadband or to digital devices. In other cases, there may be many users of one or two digital devices. Some pupils' parents may also be working from home, and not in a position to support their children's learning at all times. Pupil engagement, therefore, varies significantly across different contexts. The expectation that a full class of primary school children would be able to follow a fixed timetable, or that parents would be available to support this is unreasonable, and not possible in many cases. Pupils who live in overcrowded accommodation, in

Direct Provision, or in homeless accommodation are doubly disadvantaged in this regard. For pupils in socially disadvantaged communities, the maintenance of any level of contact between the school/teacher and the pupil can be hugely difficult but of enormous benefit. It is important that any process captures the social importance of the work done by teachers in this regard – even if some of it may not be covered by any narrow assessment of learning.

Teaching and caring for young children and children with complex additional needs remotely is challenging. The guidance and support provided to teachers and SNAs was insufficient to equip them for these challenges.

Until such time as the State invests in the infrastructure to support remote teaching and learning – nationwide high-speed broadband in all homes, high-spec digital devices for all teachers, digital devices for all pupils, childcare support, home equipment such as ergonomically suitable tables and chairs – expectations of what is possible during remote teaching and learning during an emergency must reflect the realities of the daily lives of teachers, pupils, and parents. Investment in infrastructure must be accompanied by investment in comprehensive professional development for all teachers.

The Inspectorate plays a key role in supporting and advising principals and teachers regarding remote teaching and learning. The evaluation framework will assist in this process. However, the INTO is of the view that the evaluation of emergency responses to ensure the continuity of pupil learning during school closures should not be a formal process in the same manner as other evaluation models. A flexible approach, that acknowledges the emergency nature of remote teaching and learning, should underpin the evaluation of remote learning provision.

Without prejudice to the above the INTO submits:

Procedures

Before the Visit

A two-week notice should be given to schools where it is intended to carry out an evaluation of remote teaching and learning.

It should be clearly outlined to the principal and teachers what the virtual visit will involve.

Inspectors should seek a copy of a school's contingency plan for supporting the continuity of pupil learning. The extent to which schools use digital technology to support remote learning varies. A school's digital plan is not the same as a school's contingency plan but may also be relevant.

Issuing questionnaires / surveys to schools for circulating to staff and parents in advance is a useful exercise. Online surveys of parents, pupils and staff can provide useful data, but the language of questionnaires must be appropriate and easy to understand. In many schools, the parent community may be multi-lingual. It should also be borne in mind that parents' experience of remote working and lockdown and having to grapple with unemployment may also influence their experience of remote learning.

Seeking a copy of timetables is problematic. Individual teachers are likely to have their own timetables that reflect their own circumstances. Pupils will have timetables that reflect their home environments, and it is not reasonable to expect that primary school children and their parents would be able to adhere to a timetable. Indeed, having a timetable that all pupils and/or teachers would be expected to adhere to may in some cases exclude rather than include pupils in remote learning. Allowing flexibility for pupils to engage with a learning platform allows parents to juggle their own online working with the learning of the pupils and their siblings. Supporting the

continuation of pupil learning remotely creates additional challenges for teachers. We know from our own study that many teachers found that their working time increased inordinately during periods of school closures as they endeavoured to respond to the needs of all their pupils. In this regard teachers would greatly benefit from guidance on how to appropriately disconnect from their work during emergency response periods. Seeking a school's overall plan should be sufficient for the inspectorate during such emergencies.

During the Visit (virtual)

It should be made clear to the principal what is expected from a review of the Child Safeguarding Statement in the context of remote learning and what a modified level one of child protection checks means in a virtual context.

The inspectorate should review a schools' contingency plan. A school's digital plan is not only about remote learning but is a separate plan and applies to in-school teaching and learning also.

Rather than focusing on timetables, conversations with the principal and teachers should focus on the organisation of remote teaching and learning experiences as an emergency response to school closures.

Survey / questionnaire data should be shared with principal and teachers, preferably in written form.

It should be explained to principals and teachers how the inspectorate will review a range of teaching, learning and assessment resources.

Virtual conversation and dialogue should take place with the principal and deputy principal and with some or all teachers, depending on the size of school.

Teachers' and parents' consent should be sought prior to any observation of live sessions involving teachers and pupils. Observations of live sessions, where they occur, should be voluntary. Not all teachers are comfortable with live sessions and live sessions will not be used by all teachers.

After the Virtual Visit

A written report should be provided to the school following a virtual visit for factual verification and to invite a school's response/comment.

The INTO is of the view that publication of school reports of evaluation of remote teaching and learning, which is an emergency response to school closures, is not necessary,

Concluding Comment

It must be noted that the Department of Education has reaffirmed its understanding recently to the INTO that co-operation with emergency remote teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic was solely based on a commitment by the Department that these measures were not setting a precedent. Pupil and teacher well-being should be the priority consideration of the Department in its support, advisory and evaluation work during emergency periods of school closure, rather than focusing on attainment or achievement. The INTO notes the positive experience of schools that participated in the piloting of the Evaluation Framework. The professional conversations and dialogue that took place during the process and the feedback offered to teachers was very re-affirming. In general, teachers welcome advice and support from inspectors and appreciate opportunities to learn from good practice and experiences in other schools. Affirmation of their efforts and achievements is also appreciated. A composite report, drawing on experiences in schools and on the role played by the Department and other agencies might be a useful exercise.