Title of research:

Providing opportunities for young people not attending school full time through remote and digital learning

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the delivery of education with more than 1.6 million children and young people being unable to attend school across 161 countries (Saavedra, 2020). Subsequently, education systems had to adapt quickly and find alternative methods of delivery with many opting to adopt remote and digital learning (Chawla et al., 2020). As this method of learning is still a relatively new approach to school education, the literature is sparse on how it is used and what is seen as best practice by teachers. However, with significant amounts of learning taking place using remote and digital approaches through the pandemic it is likely this research topic will gain momentum and be of increasing relevance in the coming years.

Online Learning

Remote and digital learning is undertaken online by children and young people who are not physically with their teacher whilst instruction is taking place. Online learning can be delivered in a variety of ways: teacher led instruction delivered to pupils synchronously, pupils encouraged to complete work independently, educational games and approaches which support peer interaction (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020, p. 3).

Regardless of the delivery method chosen, it is important that the learning is as effective and efficient as possible by ensuring the pupil's four basic learning needs are met: arousal, autonomy, relatedness and competence (Ormrod, 2011). Online learning has been evidenced to support a young person develop autonomy and agency over their learning (Suzuki, 2013) and, when asked directly, young people reported that their basic learning needs of autonomy and competence were met through online learning, but it lacked relatedness (Wong, 2020). Conversely, some studies have found that young people prefer the interaction with peers via a virtual classroom chatroom compared with face to face (Harvey et al., 2014).

There are many factors which can impact the effectiveness and enjoyment of online learning. For example, some children and young people affected by poverty may only have access to internet and technology facilities during school time. This puts those from certain socio-economic backgrounds at a disadvantage in online learning as they are likely to have a lower level of digital competency than their peers due to their reduced access to technology (Omotayo & Haliru, 2020). This effect has been seen in the pandemic as children and young people with no or limited internet access were more likely to be disadvantaged relative to their peers (Fishbane & Tomer, 2020).

Non-attendance

There are numerous reasons and terms that describe prolonged absence from school e.g., illness, school refusal, caring responsibilities, and truancy. This literature review and research will use the term non-attendance as an umbrella term which encompasses all the aforementioned terms as it is descriptive yet neutral (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Non-attendance has been associated with increased episodes of mental illness and unemployment, as well as gaining fewer qualifications (Tobias, 2019). Gottfried (2014) found that young people with non-attendance issues had lower levels of educational engagement as well as lower attainment and achievement outcomes for maths and reading than peers who were attending school. According to Finning et al. (2018), a young person's academic and social development relies upon effectively engaging in formal education.

Ready (2010) found that non-attendance had negative effects on literacy outcomes, and more so for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This was further supported by Gershenson et al. (2014) who found that the effects of non-attendance on reading achievement levels was greater for young people from households affected by poverty. Similar evidence was stated in the Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland (National Statistics Publication for Scotland, 2021) which reported that higher levels of deprivation were found to mostly equate with higher levels of absence. For example, pupils living in the most deprived areas had an attendance rate of 88.7% compared to 95% for those living in the least deprived areas.

Aims and research questions

Given the advances in technology and the unprecedented experience teachers have gained during the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning has the potential to be a bridge to education and to learning itself. A solution may lie in not viewing physical school attendance as a prerequisite to learning and investigating an alternative. The aim of this research is to develop a model of online learning through the application of what has been learned to provide ongoing flexible learning opportunities for those who do not attend school full-time.

The research questions are:

- What factors support young people's engagement in online learning?
- What factors are necessary to support young people to demonstrate progression in their online learning?
- What are the barriers and opportunities in developing online learning as an ongoing and sustainable element of the education offer for young people who do not attend school full-time?

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Link to infographic - https://create.piktochart.com/output/54014016-eps-online-research