

Learner Engagement with Remote Learning

Impact of Covid-19 and Creative Learning and Teaching Solutions

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'Remote learning is learning that is directed by practitioners and undertaken by children and young people who are not physically with the practitioner while instruction is taking place.' (Education Scotland, 2021a)

Background

The Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting national lockdown announced in March 2020 meant that education leadership teams, teachers and staff had to quickly adapt to deliver remote learning. The closure of school buildings and wider lockdown restrictions has had an impact on all of our learners and it is recognised that the experience may have had a particularly negative impact on those children and young people affected by poverty (Education Scotland, 2021b).

Schools returned full time in August 2020, until closures were announced again beginning in January 2021. This second period of school closure provided an opportunity for the delivery of remote learning to be adapted and improved upon based on the experiences of the first closure. Examining the impact of remote learning on teacher and learner experiences provides an invaluable opportunity to capture successful strategies and creative teaching solutions which have been developed over the past year or so to promote learner engagement across a different platform. There is limited research evidence on remote learning to draw on, particularly with school-aged children (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021a) and even less within a Scottish context. Further exploration of this may help educators in Scotland learn from the experiences thus far and explore what can be used to improve practice both in the classroom and on remote learning platforms.

Remote Learning

Remote learning involves learners receiving teaching input outwith the physical classroom setting. The learning is directed by practitioners and undertaken by children and young people who are not physically with practitioners while teaching is taking place (West Lothian Council, 2021). Remote learning solutions to education delivery were adapted by all schools to ensure the continued progress of learners. This situation presented multiple challenges, for example, educational professionals had to work hard to ensure access to remote learning, develop their own digital skills, engage learners on a digital platform, understand

and monitor challenges/needs of learners and their families, provide ongoing family support and develop ways to track and sustain learner engagement (Education Scotland, 2021b). In addition, emerging evidence highlights the negative impact of remote learning on children and young people's mental and physical health and well-being, motivation, engagement and attainment. The closure of school buildings also seems to have had a more negative impact on those affected by poverty and possibly for children and young people with additional support needs (Education Scotland, 2021b)

As well as challenges, several studies have highlighted that there are some benefits to this format of education delivery, e.g. Bubb & Jones (2020) surveyed learners, parents and teachers engaged in remote learning in Norway and reported benefits included creative teaching approaches, increased parental engagement, increased learner independence, improved technology skills and methods for providing feedback.

It is important to note that while this study was conducted in Norway, Education Scotland have been undertaking a National Overview of Practice in Remote Learning to similarly capture the views of schools, learners and families in Scotland. This work has also reported that Scottish learners feel that remote learning is encouraging them increasingly to be more independent in their learning (Education Scotland, 2021c). The situation of the pandemic has challenged educational establishments to think differently and they have developed strategies to engage learners that would not have otherwise been considered.

"School leaders reported that they wanted to implement changes based on the experience of remote learning enforced by the lockdown, so that the crisis has become an opportunity for grassroots innovation." Bubb & Jones (2020)

Learner Engagement

In response to the initial lockdown school closures, a rapid evidence assessment by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (2020) explored existing approaches to remote learning in order to identify successful strategies for supporting learners during the pandemic. This review analysed the findings of 60 meta-analyses and systematic reviews across the topics of general remote teaching and learning, blended learning, computer supported collaborative learning, computer assisted instruction and educational games, and reported a number of key findings (see below).

1. Teaching quality is more important than how lessons are delivered
2. Ensuring access to technology is key, especially for disadvantaged learners
3. Peer interactions can provide motivation and improve learning outcomes
4. Supporting learners to work independently can improve learning outcomes
5. Different approaches to remote learning suit different types of content and learners

(Education Endowment Foundation, 2020)

Finding number 5 (Different approaches to remote learning suit different types of content and learners) was actually the catalyst for this research within West Lothian as some learners seemed to thrive and showed increased engagement with learning since remote learning strategies were introduced:

“We noticed that some pupils were actually more engaged online than they are in the classroom. Some pupils are also communicating more with their class teacher and we’d like to explore why?” (Primary Headteacher, August, 2020)

More recently, the EEF has provided further evidence to support these findings in the current context by highlighting case study examples for each of these findings (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). Strategies highlighted include sharing approaches to ensure live lessons are of a high quality, ways to incorporate assessment virtually, promoting peer interactions, supporting learners to establish a routine and good independent learning habits. An additional factor in promoting learner engagement and participation with learning has been to support parental engagement, and establish processes of two-way communication, where parents can provide feedback to school and see their views being taken into consideration (Education Scotland, 2021d).

West Lothian

What is clear from the existing research is that there is no one model for delivering remote learning that will suit every setting, and this highlights the need to always consider school needs in their own context. Within West Lothian, The Remote Learning Strategy has been developed to set out guidance on a shared understanding and expectations of what remote learning means for our schools, and to share a commitment to an agile learning culture. We have also developed a family learning and parental communication working group to ensure strong home-school links.

We aim to capture teacher and learner views to explore the following questions:

Draft research questions

- What factors underlie successful learner engagement with remote learning?
- What can we learn from those learners who seemed to thrive during remote learning?
- Based on these findings, what can we apply within a classroom environment / blended learning approach?

The pandemic has presented us with a unique opportunity to further explore the potential of remote/blended learning approaches to inform future strategies, improve teaching practice and access to learning within West Lothian.

References

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