

EXPERT PRACTITIONER PANEL RESPONSE: 2021 COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

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EXPERT PRACTITIONER PANEL

The Expert Practitioner Panel (EPP) was created by the Robert Owen Centre (University of Glasgow) to enable cross- local authority information sharing and collaboration opportunities. It involves Head Teachers, Principal Teachers and Classroom Teachers from four local authorities in Scotland (Inverclyde, Glasgow, East Renfrewshire, and West Dunbartonshire)). A key element of the EPP are the roundtable discussions, where members are asked about their experience of ongoing developments in Scottish education.

The EPP roundtable discussion on Covid-19 took place in February 2021, and focused on issues of teacher wellbeing, innovation, relationships with parents, and what they believed would change as a result of Covid-19. Twenty-two staff members participated, including both primary and secondary teachers. Below is a summary of the discussion.

TEACHING DURING LOCKDOWN

There was a consensus in the group that the past year ripped up the rule book with regards to what teaching was and was expected to be. One teacher described senior staff in their school feeling as if they were newly qualified teachers (NQTs) and were experiencing high levels of stress as a result of reacting of the changing Covid-19 landscape. This feeling of stress was echoed by many within the group. Another reflected that feeling like you are constantly responding in real time to changing situations, rather than relying on plans and existing practices, was challenging as education was not designed in this way. For some, they described feeling that their school was ‘more prepared’ to go into lockdown this year, as they had begun to skill-up and were more experienced in running the Hub Schools.

The consensus across the group was that overall Covid-19 had created new and different pressures which added to the already increased workloads of staff. This was coupled with the uncertainty with regards to when this current arrangement would end, with participants agreeing that this should be done in accordance with scientific advice.

The workload of teachers during the current lockdown was exacerbated by their time between face-to-face learning (in Hub Schools), and also being available for those learning online.

HUB SCHOOLS

The current lockdown (Jan-Feb 2021) redesigned the face-to-face offer in ‘Hub Schools’. While the Hub School still supported the children of keyworker or vulnerable families, this was done within individual schools (rather than creating a ‘community hub’ which incorporated pupils from various schools). Also, rather than focusing on health and wellbeing, the Hub School now focused on learning and teaching. Staff in the schools ‘bubbled’ and worked to a rota that assigned them different portions of the week for face-to-face work (e.g. Mon-Wed, Thurs-Fri).

Teachers agreed that working in the Hub Schools brought associated risks, of exposing them to pupils who may have been in contact with adults who have symptoms of Covid-19. It was described by one participant as “people putting themselves on the front line”, with the acknowledgement that this extends beyond teaching staff, to include PSA and office staff. There was a consensus that there was a sense of the Hub School was walking into ‘the unknown’, both in terms of the risk of Covid-19 but also in terms of what the pupils and staff expect.

Similar to the previous lockdown, participants reflected that not all pupils who could be defined

as 'vulnerable' could be offered a place. Teachers mostly agreed that the term 'vulnerability' was a wide umbrella term, and could reflect parental addiction, bereavement, additional support needs, English as a Second Language. One participant stated "vulnerability is not a binary issue, there is a lot of depth and complexity. Children are vulnerable for a multitude of reasons". One strength of the latest lockdown is that many agreed that they were able to reflect on their previous experiences to better identify what pupils would benefit from additional support. Where pupils did not take up a hub school place- some participants described offering focused learning support, to enable pupils to receive more guidance. There was also an acknowledgement that many vulnerable pupils who had been offered hub places do not attend or engage despite weekly attempts to encourage parents to bring their children in.

Some teachers described the location of the Hub Schools, as being the same as those where pupils usually attend, as offering the benefit of familiarity. In a few instances, teachers reported this familiarity as very important for some ASN children. In one instance a teacher reported that children with sensory disorders had refused to attend a Hub School but were now quite happy to attend their local school. For others, they described better engagement and easier to get pupils into school- particularly as issues surrounding transportation had been addressed. However, others reflected that the pupils were disappointed by the changes to the Hub School- that the 'fun' elements of the Hub had been taken away. One teacher described their pupils feeling demoralised because they know their friends are doing the same work as them, but at home and potentially with more opportunities to play outside. This led to a reduced number of pupils attending the school, and instead opting to take paper packs home.

ONLINE LEARNING

For those pupils not attending the Hub Schools, they were offered online learning. The delivery of this offer differed from school to school, but many of the issues and positives associated with online learning could be seen across the different local authority areas. There was consensus across the group that Covid-19 has led to a massive change in education, and this has demanded a lot of training and upskilling of teachers. As a result, teachers have now gone through extensive learning with reference to technology, which should be a benefit to children. Some teachers reflected that they were in a 'much better position for this lockdown' due to the training given to staff on the use of digital technology (such as Microsoft Teams and Google classroom). This was offered through Government initiatives as well as training by Microsoft. Others reflected some initial feelings of stress and the fear of the unknown regarding teaching online- particularly with regards to teachers feeling 'exposed' as pupils could see their home environment, but also were aware that the parents and family members of the pupils were likely to be listening in on lessons.

Given the 'new' nature of the online offer, teachers were in agreement that it had a negative impact on their workload, with some citing needing to work evenings and weekends to create and upload new work for their pupils, and the negative impact this had on their mental health. In response to staff experiences of burnout, one school leader described they revisited the school timetable, to ensure teachers were not overworked. This meant on Fridays, teachers were asked to plan a small activity, with the rest of the day focused on physical activity, arts and crafts, reading, and then an encouragement for pupils to go outside. In terms of the utility of online learning for pupils, there were mixed reactions.

Some suggested that by enabling asynchronous working (via recorded lessons) it allowed

pupils to proceed at their own pace, and in their own environment. It also allowed staff to adapt pedagogy to fit individual need. For one teacher, they suggested that using recorded lessons also offered opportunities for accessibility to be improved- with subtitles or translation to be included to support both the learner and their parents. Others suggested that the ability to do one-to-one check ins was a valuable resource for them. However, others suggested that online learning was very impersonal, it was difficult to reach out to pupils who were not engaging online, and was a challenge when teaching early years in primary school. Also, the asynchronous nature of some of the resources meant that pupils were able to contact teachers outside of school teaching hours, and two reported receiving emails/phone calls late in the evening. They described this blurring of home/work as difficult to manage.

PARENTS AND THE DELIVERY OF ONLINE TEACHING

The relationship between teachers, the school community, and parents was raised by many of the EPP members. For some, there was a need to ‘manage parent expectations’, particularly where parents believed online teaching should mirror classroom timetables of 9am-3pm. There was a feeling in the group that some parents did not appreciate the time, planning and commitment required by teachers in delivering the online offering. Within this minority of parents, there were demands for more work to support their individual child, and demands for all work to be uploaded on a Sunday evening so pupils could work at their own pace. These demands were seen as having a detrimental impact on staff workloads, with many staff members working nights and weekends to keep up with demand.

However, these demands also had an impact on other parents. One teacher described parents reporting anxiety as they couldn’t keep up with the amount of work that was being put online, and the associated demands being placed on them as ‘home educators’. They described parents feeling like they were ‘falling behind and struggling’. A related point connected with parents and online teaching was the need for equity. This both relates to the impact of homes not having access to a digital device but also the parents’ skill sets in relation to online learning. One teacher suggested that ‘we can’t deliver an offer if it’s not built on equal access- if pupils don’t have a computer, they can’t participate’. Several teachers described instances where their parents struggled with online skills, which had a negative impact on the ability of their children to get online. One teacher described receiving phone calls from parents all day requiring IT support. They described creating ‘step by step’ guides to support parents in accessing resources, and uploading documents, but with little impact. Instead, they reverted to paper homework packs, to ensure pupils were able to access learning.

However, others suggested that the current situation had afforded them better insights into the lives of their children and families. This insight could be useful in developing better opportunities to improve relationships with families and communities out with the traditional school gates/ parents’ night context. Some suggested that one useful way that this has developed has been through the creation of resources to support parents in at home learning, particularly creation of videos.

IMPACT OF THE PAST YEAR ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF TEACHERS

Throughout the discussion, teachers referred to the strain of their own, and their colleagues’ mental health and wellbeing. They referred to the ‘debilitating’ nature of the work, the increased stress of having to manage both online teaching and also attending a hub where there was a

risk of infection. Some staff reflected that the current lockdown was different to the Summer 2020 lockdown, particularly as there was no 'end date' to plan towards, which led to difficulties in motivating staff.

The long hours put into developing new materials and supporting both pupils and their parents meant many staff described 'unmanageable' workloads. In addition to issues of workload stress and high demands, teachers also discussed personal stressors relating to their own family experiences of lockdown, and experience of ill-health, and staff requiring to shield due to underlying health conditions.

THE RETURN TO 'NORMAL': CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Teachers were asked about what they believed were the lessons learned from this past year, what the challenges may arise as schools returned, and whether any of the activities and strategies would endure as face-to-face teaching restarted in Scotland.

CHALLENGES

One of the most cited challenges for the teachers was the feeling of uncertainty surrounding when schools would return. A few participants described knowing how hard they would need to work over the next few weeks with the hope that schools would gradually reopen, but acknowledging that this would be dependent on scientific evidence relating to the spread of the virus. For teachers not involved in primary 1-3 or senior stage of secondary school, there was a discussion of feeling demoralised as they saw their colleagues begin to prepare to return to school, while they continued to offer online and Hub support. This was summarised by one teacher who said 'the teachers of infants were told you only need to plan for one more week while the rest of us are on our knees'. This challenge could be met by good communication between Scottish Government, Local Authorities, and schools, to ensure good planning time to enact changes and prepare for any policy change.

An associated challenge focused on the ability of parents to manage where they may have one pupil in infants, and another in middle stage primary school. This may lead to them sending one child to school, while having to continue monitoring the home learning of their older child. This was seen as potentially a difficult situation to manage for working parents to juggle these very different learning contexts. One teacher suggested that this may lead to more working parents asking for Hub places for their older children. While a solution cannot be to ensure older siblings automatically return to school at the same time as the younger pupil, there should be a discussion between Scottish Government, local authorities, and schools with regards to how to support parents during this transition stage.

Another challenge focused on assessment. Several teachers felt the current situation had encouraged them to think about what they were doing, indicating that teaching and learning had been driven by the demands of SQA and assessment. One teacher said that 'assessment and the SQA are driving teaching'. This was exacerbated by the consistent drive to gather evidence that pupils require to generate for assessment, and the feeling that this was 'no longer fit for purpose'. There was a discussion that this challenge could be met by having a critical discussion regarding how to better implement equity and excellence into assessment systems.

Finally, there was a discussion of the need for a national roadmap to ensure learning and recovery to meet the challenges faced by pupils. This was particularly discussed by teachers

in secondary schools- where pupils had lost opportunities for practical knowledge (e.g. in technology and design, or science), or where pupils were facing their 6th year exams after not having sat their National 5s or Highers. It was also raised in the early stages of primary school, where much of the learning is experiential but not translatable to the home environment.

OPPORTUNITIES

The impact of developing online resources, and digitally upskilling the teaching workforce is one of the biggest opportunities discussed by the group. In particular, there was agreement between teachers of the possibility for digital learning to continue to be an integral part of schooling, through supported study. They suggested that, having recorded videos and created online worksheets, this has ensured the development of an online revision resource, and would allow the continued support of parents with children's homework. They described the ability to reinforce learning at home, and to continue to build up parents' digital skills was one of the successes of lockdown.

The development of videos and resources were also discussed as having the potential to feed into a national strategy. Some suggested that Scottish Government could gather online resources from different schools and create a national repository of resources, to enforce the digital offering for schools without adding to workload.