INSPECTION SUPPORT MATERIAL

PRE-SCHOOL

Remote and blended learning: curricular challenges and approaches

June 2020

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 relative balance between classroom-based teaching and learning combined with a range of remote learning approaches will vary between individual pre-school 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 pre-COVID-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 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.

	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.

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[1] In this instance, this refers to all DE funded 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 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.

The DE publications provide guidance and support for settings and schools as they plan for reopening 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 the 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 potential challenges and approaches that have been discussed by the pre-school reference groups with the ETI.

The context for pre-school settings

The pre-school curriculum is a holistic /play based curriculum that all children learn though discovery, investigation and imagination in collaboration with the staff and their peers. In the current circumstances, staff face challenges in the delivery of the Pre-School Curriculum and the implementation of a blended learning approach in the home learning environment. These challenges are non-specific to one curriculum area due to the inter-connectedness of the six areas of learning and are common across the range of pre-school settings.

The challenges faced by staff in delivering the pre-school curriculum are all linked directly or indirectly to two key areas:

1. The tensions between adhering to current guidance to keep children physically safe, whilst maintaining a robust early year's pedagogy which allows young children to flourish mentally, physically and emotionally thereby promoting positive dispositions and attitudes to their current and future learning; and

2. Managing and planning for a blended approach to the children's learning and development; combining their experiences within the setting and supporting the parents to build on this in the home learning environment.

Some pre-schools may need to implement a blended learning approach. A blended learning approach has specific challenges within pre-school as it is solely reliant on the input and support of parents in order to be implemented. While supporting parents with a blended approach to learning, sensitivity is necessary for parents who are feeling vulnerable or overwhelmed by having limited resources, mental health issues or managing other children, family and work commitments. Good communication is key, with clearly identified learning intentions to ensure that parents understand the learning that takes place during play, in order to be able to support their children in the home learning environment. For blended learning to be as effective as possible, pre-schools will need to consider a method for parents to feedback/evaluate the activities to inform the staff review and revision of planning.

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[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).

The implementation of a blended learning approach is dependent on the management of staff roles and responsibilities. Management considerations include:

- ensuring sufficient staffing in line with the appropriate child/staff ratios and being able to find and induct a suitable replacement if a member of staff is shielding at home or becomes sick;

- providing staff development, as required, to build staff capacity in supporting children's emotional and mental well-being and resilience and in the use of on-line learning platforms;

- ensuring staff well-being and managing staff anxieties about safety;

- developing a shared expectation between the staff and parents of assessing children's progress; and

- explaining and organising staff roles within smaller dedicated 'bubbles'.

Challenges for delivery of the curriculum

Key challenges

- Some pre-schools may face challenges due to restricted opportunities for social interaction because of smaller 'bubble' groups and possibly fewer hours in pre-school to engage with others which would impact on all aspects of the pre-school curriculum particularly Personal and Social Development and Language and Communication.

- Balancing young children's need for their parents to support them during transition and settling in, with advice on social distancing for adults and limiting footfall in the pre-school.

- Building and maintaining relationships between the staff and the children in settings where the children may be only attending for part of the week.

- Managing induction for parents in the absence of group meetings and trying to keep adults from coming into the setting.

- Developing collaborative play in a learning environment where socially distanced bubbles operate, which is key for developing an investigative and problem solving approach to play-based learning.

- Providing opportunities for children to develop emotionally and socially, take turns, show empathy, share and regulate their emotions with a larger group of peers than the children in their 'bubble'.

- Supporting children to make friendships and responding to children experiencing personality clashes within the limits of their 'bubble' grouping.

- Limited social interaction between staff/children and children/children if there are reduced hours resulting in fewer language opportunities for staff to use open-end questioning and model language during play.

- If there are reduced hours, less continuity of language development for children who have speech difficulties, children in Irish Medium settings and for newcomer children whose parents speak in their home language outside of pre-school.

- Supporting staff to focus on and respond to learning opportunities as they arise within play, as opposed to focusing on the health and safety requirements; although extremely important, they could become such a distraction that learning is missed.

- Management of resources within 'bubbles' while still being able to encourage and facilitate independent choices for play.

- Managing outdoor learning and ensuring that children have a variety of resources during outdoor play which can be easily cleaned, to stimulate their play experiences.

- For settings with a smaller outdoor area and operating social 'bubbles' there will be challenges in managing social distancing for adults and between 'bubbles'.

- Challenge in providing safely sand, water and play dough to ensure that the children are getting a rich and varied learning experience and developing their fine motor skills while maintaining hygiene.

- Potentially reduced opportunities to go on visits or have visitors into the setting, particularly in term 1, to enrich the children's learning experiences particularly for World around Us, Music and Dance.

- Providing children with access to a range of resources and materials within time and budget available.

- Limited interactions and role play in certain areas due to infection control.

- Developing the children's imagination while limiting the use of items that cannot be easily cleaned such as dressing up clothes, soft furnishings, puppets etc.

Challenges in supporting the continuity of learning at home

- Some staff feel anxious/concerned/overwhelmed about how they will have the time and capacity to deliver a blended curriculum.

- Irish medium settings emphasised the importance of staff providing online modelling of Irish language.

- Maintaining contact with parents, especially those who are most vulnerable and may not respond.

- Maintaining confidentiality and ensuring GDPR for sharing of information through online platforms.

- Monitoring parents' engagement in home learning with their child and assessing and recording the learning taking place at home.

- Having sufficient access both in school and at home to iPads/computers/ Wi-Fi to support home learning.

- Making expectations clear so that parents don't experience added pressure and providing structured activities that the child could do independently as well as with the parent.

Approaches taken or planned

The approaches are reflective of the developing guidance.

Getting started

- Begin to establish relationships with parents, checking that they have internet access and provide an online induction e.g. create an online platform for new families. Will provide information in August on what to expect using a video of staff giving information and a virtual tour of the setting.

- A staggered induction with one child and one parent using a one way system, maintaining social distancing and encouraging parents to take photos of the setting and talk with their child over the summer.

- In a Nursery Unit planned use of links with older siblings in the adjacent school to bring emotional security and practical help e.g. washing hands. A Buddy system for children without siblings to continue contact online at home.

- Have a dedicated safe space for parents on a child's first day where they can see the child or the child and parent can sit together, preferably outdoors. Providing a calm area for parent and child.

Personal Social and Emotional Development

- Allow socialising within a bubble/group of children with one member of staff. In line with a risk assessment, review periodically as the children will only get to know the children within their bubble well and also in response to personality or social differences which are not working well. Consideration will be needed as to how flexible can it be and how often changes can be safely made.

- Use of social stories/story books/puppets and songs and natural opportunities inherent in the day e.g. snack-time to talk about feelings and emotions and promote good mental health and well-being. These opportunities can be used to indicate to staff how well the children are coping with the new routines.

- Use the range of resources from RISE/Getting Ready to Learn to support learning and PSE development, such as, sensory resources or Calm jars in areas of play.

- As they are working consistently with a smaller group of children, adults will need to ensure they do not dominate play or become over directive and build dependency.

Language and Communication

- SEN children are given a range of resources to help with their communication and to voice their needs/emotions/support their learning.

- Children are able to share their experiences from home, community and wider family circle.

- Photos exchanged through two-way online communication to stimulate discussion between staff and children.

- Stories read in 'bubble' groups or individually throughout the session.

- Staff listen to the children and match their interactions and engagements with the child's stage of development. Some children will want to talk about their home experiences or ask questions about what is happening.

Outdoor learning and the World Around Us

- Ensure children come prepared for outdoor play in all weathers so there is no sharing of clothing.

- Small outdoor equipment washed frequently and a risk assessment undertaken for cleaning and management of the use of large fixed equipment. More use of natural resources that can be regularly changed e.g. twigs, leaves and small stones.

- Maximise the use of the outdoor learning environment to develop an interest and understanding of the World Around Us.

Physical Development

- Use of action rhymes to combine both physical activity and messages to support safety/emotions.

- Children freely explore the designated areas indoors and outdoors (that their group has been designated within their 'bubble').

- Outdoor growing and exploring the outdoor environment.

- Sand in individual trays.

- Water changed and equipment washed after each 'bubble' group.

- Individual dough (stored in sealed named boxes and replaced regularly).

The Arts

- Increased use of natural/junk materials that can be disposed of and replaced easily.

- Children are still given access to a wide range of creative materials to express their creativity/imagination/independent choices with resources divided within 'bubble' groups.

Early Mathematical

- Early mathematical concepts and experiences are developed naturally across all areas of play and should not need specific approaches in addition to the washing and general hygiene of the resources across the playroom.

Supporting the continuity of learning at home

- Staff provide weekly/bi-weekly activity sheets with ideas of what parents can do at home in learning packs and/or through online platforms. Parents need encouragement and reasonable expectations of materials and activities sent home.

- Providing activities for home that use every day materials that are cheap and readily accessible.

- Ensure all new parents have access and are signed up to a secure online learning platform during induction process. Provide hard copies of activities for those parents who do not have online access.

- Making videos of staff telling stories for those children not in the setting. Importance of helping parents establish a daily routine at home and using outdoors.

- Provide guidance for parents on developing language skills e.g. providing examples of open-ended questions/thinking questions/modelling language.

- Use an online platform that enables staff to note who is not engaging and follow up personally with parents who do not respond.

- Important to have everyone's direct contact details with their agreement. All parents texted and provided with the setting's email address.

- Get regular feedback from parents to review and update the approaches in order to be effective and to match to needs of families. Parents need to communicate their needs so that the setting can address them. Setting up a parent working group made up of a diverse range of parents will help with this communication.

- The children's achievements at home are shared with the setting so that the children feel a sense of pride in their activity where possible. Use of photographs or short videos from parents shared electronically, for example, through social media.

Equity of access for all children

- Consideration of particular support for newcomer parents; may need a translator or materials adapted for home learning. Need sensible and sensitive approaches for refugee parents who may be already overwhelmed with trauma. Personal contact with follow up phone calls.

- Engagement of all parents, especially hard to reach parents, to be monitored and followed up when child is in the setting with face-to-face meetings.

- Carry out a risk assessment for children with special educational needs in liaison with the parents to identify additional needs and vulnerability.

Conclusion

Pre-school settings need to consider the guidelines from the Department of Education (and the Health and Social Care Trust in the case of voluntary and private pre-school settings) to establish their management of:

- the settling in period –staggering the settling in period and how it will be managed;

- group sizes – considering the number of children that they can accommodate safely at one time in the setting. For some voluntary settings who take younger children this may have major implications for the financial stability of the pre-school setting as they rely on the fees paid to pay staff;

- children in their penultimate pre-school year – the arrangements for penultimate children as they have been allocated placements; and

- providing a learning environment which adheres to safety guidance while supporting all aspects of children's learning and development.

Personal, social and emotional development is an area of the curriculum that will take precedence in planning because all children need the interaction of staff and peers to play collaboratively together and develop social skills with one another.

Learning at home is necessary to provide the children with continuity of learning and parents require support and guidance as well as access to suitable IT equipment. Good communication is key in establishing successful home-learning. Parents need to understand the learning that takes place during play so that blended learning is effective. Feedback from parents is essential as part of the setting's self-evaluation processes to ensure that settings are aware of the impact of blended learning and can amend and adapt their approaches accordingly.
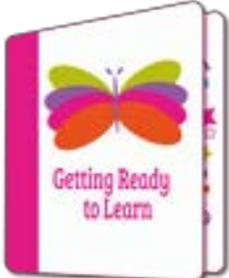
Pre-school and school leaders, in consultation with their management groups/boards of governors, know the context and unique circumstances of their setting or school, and are best placed to make the detailed decisions required when it comes to the safety of their setting/school and how they can best deliver the curriculum to their children and young people.

There are a number of factors that will inform making provision for the pre-school curriculum in a way that meet the needs of the children 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 prominently in curriculum delivery.

- The need to consider the six areas of learning in the pre-school curriculum; 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 pre-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: Curriculum Planning 2020/21, The New School Day Guidance, Guidance for Schools on Supporting Remote Learning and Guidance on School Development Planning for 2020/21.
CEA Rewarding Learning	All pre-school settings, both statutory and voluntary and private settings with funded places, are expected to adhere to the 'Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education': Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education
ea Education Authority	The Early Years Inclusion Service has practical resources for early years in transitioning from home to school and early years to primary plus videos for transitioning: https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-support-services/early- years-inclusion-service-sen-eyis
Getting Ready to Learn	The Getting Ready to Learn (GRtL) programme aims to assist staff in pre-school settings to engage effectively with parents, to help parents create and sustain positive home learning environments, and support their children's learning at home. https://gettingreadytolearn.co.uk/