Digital learning lessons for leadership
Supporting schools to adapt

Virtual panel event | Tuesday 24th November

Summary notes

On Tuesday 24th November, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) hosted a virtual panel event bringing together school leaders from across the sector, to share their perspectives on how schools can utilise technology within their remote learning offer both during the pandemic and in the longer term. This document summarises the discussion that took place.

Context

The Prime Minister declared on Monday 4th January that all schools in England would close for an initial period of six weeks, with possible extensions if the virus continues to spread rapidly throughout the country and hospitals remain close to capacity. This required all schools to recommence operating remotely for most pupils (apart from vulnerable pupils, children of key workers and those without device and internet access).

This disruption follows an Autumn term in which many schools experienced partial closures, with many pupils needing to learn remotely. Indeed, government data published on 1st December showed that school attendance across the country stood at 83.5%, with rates of 88% at primary and 78% at secondary. There was significant variation in pupil attendance between local authorities, with attendance levels in secondary schools as low as 61% in Knowsley, for example, as found in a recent EPI report. The same report found strong evidence of a link between higher levels of pupil disadvantage and school attendance levels.

Despite so many pupils needing to learn from home last term and in the coming weeks, limited detail has been shared on *how* schools are expected to operate remotely and minimise learning losses (beyond the funding of central resources, like the Oak National Academy), as well as how schools can integrate technology within their longer-term offer.

Given the pressures that schools faced in 2020 and continue to face in this new period of closures, many schools have now either accelerated implementation of their digital capabilities, adapted their approach to reflect current demands or begun forming a detailed approach to how technology can be integrated within their offer.

Event structure

This virtual panel discussion from the Education Policy Institute (EPI), in partnership with the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) the Confederation of School Trusts (CST) and Apple, explored how schools should shape their approaches to digital learning.

The notes below reflects the points made during the event and does not necessarily reflect the views of host organisations.

This event, chaired by EPI Executive Chairman **David Laws**, brought together leading representatives from the sector to share their views on digital learning, sharing both their experiences with and approaches to forming digital strategies.

Speakers included **Geoff Barton** (ASCL), **Steve Rollett** (CST), **Dr Kate Chhatwal OBE** (Challenge Partners), **Dawn Haywood** (Windsor Academy Trust), **John Murphy** (Oasis Community Learning), **Stephen Munday CBE** (The CAM Academy Trust and Chartered College for Teaching), and **Jenny Dunne** (New Bridge Group).

Each speaker presented for 6-8 minutes before a short question and answer session.

We hope that attendees benefited from these insights and consider implementing some of the suggestions shared by the expert panel.

Documents referenced by speakers will not be detailed in the following summary.

Discussion themes:

The leadership experience

With such a rapid shift to remote teaching and learning in March (and again in January 2021), school leaders have been required to develop and refine practices on an accelerated timescale. Years of progress in integrating technology within teaching and learning practices were and continue to be made in a matter of weeks.

Speakers were keen to stress the importance of responding both **tactically** (responding to the current environment and current requirements) and **strategically** (considering how effective practices today can be introduced and carried forward after the full return to classrooms).

One of the key themes emerging in the presentations was the **importance of evidence gathering** prior to key curriculum and procurement decisions- all interventions should be grounded in the evidence available, with proven theories of change and evidence of impact.

One speaker described how their school group undertook an **international literature review on the most effective, proven uses of technology in education** (shared with attendees). This enabled the group to drive integration in a 'laser-focused way' in three areas:

- **Curriculum**- focusing on technology that can ensure that threshold concepts are moved effectively into long term memory
- **Teacher effectiveness**- considering the most effective models of teaching and learning cycles and how to support young people to model and scaffold their learning
- **Learner effectiveness**- building children's metacognitive skills and their understanding of how new delivery models (particularly if using technology) supports development of their skills and knowledge

Speakers were keen to stress the importance of having **high expectations of themselves, their staff, their pupils and parents**. It was suggested that expectations of pupils can in fact rise in some circumstances, when pupils have access to improved, more tailored resources- for instance, if using a device, a teacher might expect a pupil to access and utilise immediate, flexible internet access to enhance the quality of their work e.g. use of a digital thesaurus when undertaking an English language task.

Some of the speakers discussed using a **summer series of events for teachers to help build their expertise and confidence in managing remote learning and teaching practices** and provide guidance on managing the adjusted relationships with pupils and the home.

Central to an effective approach is developing **good, reliable means of communication between the school and the home**. In most cases, where possible, this takes the form of email or communication via learning management software. This requires device and internet access and is why access to devices is seen by many school leaders as a central part of their approach to remote learning. They enable learners to access content and submit work for feedback and review, and teachers to design and deliver content either via live lessons or via content loaded on to a platform for pupils to manage themselves. They also enable parents and teachers to liaise at their convenience.

Some speakers argued that the strategic response to the current operating environment might entail **procuring devices and addressing other connectivity issues in a way that the school or group would like to carry forward in the longer term**. Despite the immediate concern of budgetary constraints, speakers encouraged attendees to consider the varied procurement models available when purchasing devices- whether rented, co-owned or purchased outright. As was highlighted, in schools where these devices were already in place, schools were able to more seamlessly shift to working entirely online and minimised missed lessons. Though in many cases the devices are not typically sent home with pupils, speakers commented that it made sense during this period to send the devices home, to ensure that all pupils were able to access content and contact their peers and teachers, eradicating the disconnect between those with access to technology and those without and making lesson planning and delivery more straightforward for teachers, minimising duplication of work.

Safeguarding issues were raised around the use of devices, particularly when making the decision to send children home with products. Concerns regarded supporting children, particularly those with learning difficulties, to use the devices appropriately, especially in cases where parents and carers might not be familiar with the device and how to monitor the use of the device. Some speakers from school groups with a device for every pupil **took the decision to shut down access to new applications, so that only staff could set the materials and applications that could be downloaded** and used by pupils. This creates both a safer environment and one more closely choreographed with the priorities of the school and its teachers.

On the curriculum side, speakers were keen to stress the **importance of standardising the curriculum across the school or group** as much as possible, to make content sharing easier between teachers, minimise variation in learning between and within learner groups and make progress through the curriculum easier to monitor. In groups of schools, **lead practitioners would organise and set the scheme of learning across the group**, to standardise this approach where appropriate and help provide central packs of resources for teachers to access and reduce workloads. Speakers highlighted the role of centralised resource pools like Oak National Academy and BBC Bitesize for smaller school groups and where online, interactive lessons were preferred to live or recorded lessons from teachers.

Speakers were keen to stress that remote learning should and **does not involve trying to replicate what teachers and pupils would be doing in the classroom**- rather, the pedagogy should be adapted to facilitate effective learning conditions for pupils. Naturally, some subjects and topics within subjects are better suited to remote learning than others. **Schools should consider adjusting the curriculum (both sequencing and delivery method)** to reflect this, where appropriate. In the context of partial or localised closures, this could be divided into what is going to be delivered at home and

in school, and whether via live lessons, recorded lessons, interactive content or prescriptive content. Speakers commented on the **higher attendance and improved engagement of live lessons over recorded lessons**, **particularly when consolidated by wellbeing checks** either immediately before or after the scheduled lesson. Some speakers noted that they had added a period to the end of the day for teachers to deliver live lessons to pupils unable to attend the class in person which proved effective with high rates of participation.

Speakers highlighted how far schools have come in developing and integrating digital learning practices within their offering. Many have made significant changes at huge pace. There will be much to reflect on when schools are open as 'normal'.

One of the final remarks centred on the role of school leaders in driving this integration of digital learning within schools' offerings. **"There isn't a cavalry in government leading this or that we can expect to form our key reflections for us- this needs to be led by leaders in the profession."**

The curriculum should come first

The key theme of speakers' remarks was the **importance of centring any application of digital learning on the curriculum**. Speakers were keen to stress that approaches should be 'learning strategies first and digital learning strategies second'. As one presenter mooted, this is **a learning strategy, powered and facilitated by technology** – we should be asking "what is it that we want our pupils to learn?". The focus should be on facilitating access to and guiding students through learning.

Speakers were keen to highlight that when making technology procurement decisions, **the focus must be on the 'purpose' of the technology** they are considering- the technology is the means of delivering content, rather than the focus of the content. The focus should be on 'getting the right tool for the job', and ensuring those tools are able to support all young people.

This is not to say that teachers and leaders should obstruct the use of digital learning - more that **schools should only introduce evidence-based interventions with proven positive impacts on outcomes and / or efficiencies**. It is important to remember that decisions should not just be based on delivery models- they should consider the quality of learning and engagement by different pupil groups within a given model.

Speakers were keen to stress that in considering use of technology in the curriculum, school leaders and subjects leads need to **consider how to carefully sequence the curriculum and flex it in places so that the technology enhances teaching and content delivery**. This is particularly important where pupils have missed key parts of the curriculum (perhaps due to needing to isolate). Speakers noted that in some more linear, horizontally structured subjects, no single part of the curriculum unlocks other parts (like History) while in more vertical, hierarchical subjects (like Maths) some parts of the curriculum play an important role in unlocking further, more challenging parts of the curriculum. It can be necessary for pupils to have learnt particular parts of the curriculum in a precise order. Further, depending on the delivery model and circumstances of the pupils, it can be difficult to assess what information pupils have actually received and which lessons or content they have completed. Focusing on the 'building blocks' of subjects, particularly in the aforementioned hierarchical subjects, will ensure that in the classroom, teachers can move through the curriculum knowing that these core concepts have been covered by their pupils.

Speakers also noted feeling able to strengthen and broaden their curriculum offers available to pupils- moving forward, **digital learning practices might be able to guarantee the place of minority**

subjects within schools, particularly if consolidated with centralised content. This might include languages provision (including languages not previously provided) and further subjects for which schools can find it difficult to find a specialist or are particularly expensive.

In summary, speakers were keen to stress that when forming approaches to digital integration, they must **prioritise the curriculum first, pedagogy second, and use of devices and other evidence-based technologies third**.

The teacher and learner relationship

As noted above, speakers stressed that **device and internet access is central to connectedness** between schools and pupils when operating remotely. As such, it is important that both sides have a good understanding of how to use such equipment effectively and efficiently.

As one might expect, speakers found that **many pupils already had an excellent grasp of the capabilities of devices, relative to many teachers**, to whom some of the applications and programmes were new. Speakers highlighted that many pupils relished the opportunity to share insights or informally guide their teachers on particularly effective or useful applications. This was also true of pupils that might normally be relatively quiet and less engaged in a classroom setting. Many teachers are now considering a longer-term blended, or hybrid approach to learning, capitalising on some of the benefits they have realised during this period and aspects of learning and delivery that have been enjoyed by their pupils.

Speakers stressed that having **clear expectations of pupils and teachers proved central in their more effective responses** to the remote learning requirements. It meant that pupils were clear on how much time they should be spending on given subjects, that they should be submitting their work for review and that they were expected to attend live lessons where they were provided. Teachers were clear that they were expected to contact pupils regularly, facilitate and signpost learning as effectively as possible, and ensure that parents were aware of the help they could provide to children in their care. Speakers stressed that setting such clear expectations during this time has inspired them to adopt similar sets of formalised expectations on the full return to classrooms.

In some cases, **where devices have not been readily available, teachers have varied their approaches to teaching particular groups. Some have provided a combination of face-to-face lessons, classroom chats, work shared via online platforms and paper packs.** Variation in delivery models can also be caused by the 'bubbling' system. Staff are clearly limited in their ability to move between classrooms and teach varying groups- so in some instances a teacher might deliver a lesson live and in person, but then deliver a virtual lesson to a separate bubble in a separate classroom.

Separately, speakers also noted that **flexible delivery models can benefit both sixth form pupils and teachers** – sixth form study already often provides greater flexibility for learners to learn at their own speed and in their own time. But this new model of remote working has led some school groups to make permanent changes to their expectations of pupils in this education phase. It was also suggested that remote learning makes smaller sixth forms viable, given that pupils can undertake more of their study remotely than was previously considered.

The learning experience

Speakers noted that **some pupils will have been 'liberated' by the freedom of remote learning**, being able to tailor their learning routines to their own preferences, including viewing and considering content more slowly, pausing and rewinding key messages and collaborating with their peers remotely and at their own pace. Others will have found the experience quite difficult, particularly if they are less effective independent learners.

In order to learn independently, speakers were keen to highlight the importance of helping pupils to build up their <u>metacognitive skills</u>:

- Remembering
- Understanding
- Applying
- Analysing
- Evaluating
- Creating

Speakers quoted organisation skills, becoming unstuck, self-quizzing, receiving and applying feedback, teamwork and effective communications as key to being able to work well remotely. Accordingly, some suggested that building these skills forms a key part of an effective approach to working remotely and within a wider learning strategy.

Speakers were keen to stress that **successful combinations of delivery models vary both within and between pupil groups**. The remote learning experience has brought varied experiences for different groups of learners. Some pupils normally quiet in the classroom have shone in the remote learning environment and become more confident. Other pupils, such as some groups with SEND, have also found benefits in the remote learning environment, particularly where devices have unlocked delivery mechanisms that have suited their learning preferences more closely than the conventional classroom approach.

The teaching experience

Teachers have faced many challenges in recent months. They have made significant adjustments to the way they deliver lessons to their pupils, some of which involved delivering lessons remotely and virtually for the first time. One of the many issues that teachers have faced is **understanding what learning has taken place and where there are discrepancies in learning rates within pupil groups**- this could be due to challenges accessing content, learning environments not being conducive to learning or pupils not completing work they have been set. This variation is one of the reasons why some school leaders and teachers have been advocating **minimum numbers of learning hours for pupils**. This might lead to more time studying the core subjects, but it could reduce some of the challenges associated with catch-up, given the assurance that all pupils would have had a chance to cover the core material. This policy has been pursued in a number of other countries, including in <u>Croatia and China</u>.

Speakers advised that teachers should consider whether digital learning would enhance what they are planning and would like to happen in their classrooms- whether digitally or in person- before considering appropriate mediums to facilitate this as effectively as possible. The focus should be **'quality-first teaching', with CPD on how to deliver effective lessons using the technology** so that teachers can gain confidence that lessons delivered via this model will be of high quality. Some

speakers utilised the summer period to build staff proficiency with devices and build understanding of the pedagogy. In some cases, this involved staff accessing devices and other platforms and technologies for a number of weeks prior to pupils gaining access. Teachers would lead sessions on particularly useful applications for other teaching staff, reducing the formality of the training and providing a point of reference within the school or group for teachers wishing to further explore a given technology. Speakers stressed the importance of both **clear training and accessible support for their staff so that technology and devices reduce workload and anxiety, rather than become a source**. This improves the receptiveness of staff groups to new technology and new training to build on their expertise- it makes it less intimidating and staff might feel liberated rather than anxious.

However, time, as ever, has been a precious and rare resource for the profession in recent months. Professional learning time must be prioritised if delivery models are adjusted. As mentioned, speakers suggested that **pooling of resources and training** has been particularly helpful, both within trusts and outside of trusts. This includes effective use and signposting of external centralised resources like the Oak National Academy.

As described, speakers noted that teachers have found collaboration both with and between pupils to have improved, given the ease with which 'connected' pupils (those with devices) are able to communicate with one another. For instance, **collaborating on group projects** where pupils are able to work from the same virtual document and communicate via online platforms allows pupils more flexibility but also more accountability when work can be more easily tracked.

The parent experience

Parents and carers always play an important role in the education of their children. But their role became more prominent during the first period of school closures and during local lockdowns and this prominence is set to continue during this further period of remote learning.

Speakers highlighted that examples of effective practice they had seen in their school included **guides for parents in each education phase, regular phone calls home to make sure parents were aware of the learning that their child should be undertaking at home and virtual parents' evenings** for more thorough feedback and discussion of their child's progress. Speakers suggested that this is far more engagement than usually takes placed between the school and the home and in many instances, relationships have improved significantly given the more openly collaborative environment that remote learning has created between parents and teachers. In some cases, this communication would occur via email or a learning management platform. Speakers stressed that the focus was **forming a meaningful partnership with parents and adjusting approaches depending on the learning style of the pupil, and where possible, facilitating a more individualised learner journey** than might be possible in the classroom.

Speakers noted that **guidance for parents could include sharing curriculum mapping and sequencing, and details of core concepts** so that parents can effectively target the key areas of learning that their children should be addressing at home. If done effectively, this would minimise variation in learning rates between pupil groups.

Summary

All speakers keenly made the point that all use of technology must be evidence-based, with proven impact, targeting a specific outcome. The curriculum should be at the centre of decisions to utilise technology and thus all procurement should be thoroughly evaluated and understood prior to purchase. This ensures that the impact of the technology is targeted, focused on improving delivery of particular aspects of the curriculum or enabling a more personalised approach to learning than might normally be possible in a classroom.

Speakers were unanimously optimistic that technology can, if selected and implemented effectively, improve standards and outcomes for all children, but particularly for those that don't flourish in classroom learning environment and require more individualised approaches.