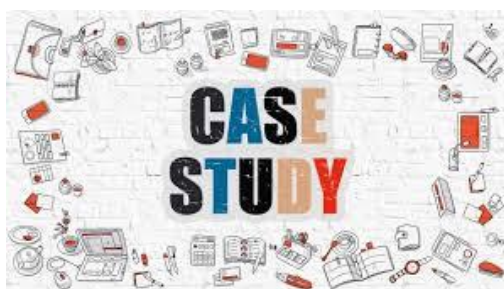# Reflecting on home learning, for school leaders

Introduction

During the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, school leaders and staff teams have had to move to a very different way of providing an educational offer in a very short space of time. This they have done remarkably well, while taking into account the very challenging circumstances in which teachers, children and their families now find themselves. Thank you.

There is little in the way of robust research evidence of what the best approaches are to home learning; this document does **not**, therefore, promote one approach over another. With the lack of central government expectations or 'statutory guidance' on what home-based learning should look like, or what curriculum should be covered, decisions remain local ones. The Local Authority's *School Improvement Service* supports this.

While education professionals prepare for the **conditional** phased reopening of schools and academies from the 1st June, in the full knowledge that pupil attendance will **not** be mandatory, it is clear that home learning will remain an important feature of schools' work for some time to come. The purpose of this document, therefore, is to support school leaders, including governors, in their ongoing evaluation and review of curriculum content and 'distant-learning' approaches, and how these might sit alongside the educational offer to those pupils who continue to attend school, or who might return soon.

The document is accompanied by a possible reflective audit tool and collection of **case studies** from over twenty of the county's primary and secondary schools, as well as a number of federations. These illustrate the many ingenious, yet different ways, that schools have responded to the 'new normal'. All these school case studies describe strategies, resources and ideas that have worked for them. They have been set out according to the phase and size of school, allowing the user to quickly find schools similar to their own.

At the time of writing, there has been a relaxation over the statutory requirement of maintained schools to teach the National Curriculum as well as the suspension of all statutory assessments and tests. It is for school leaders to agree what their curriculum offer should be at this time, taking into account the local context and guided by their school's vision and values. This document presents the many aspects requiring consideration in this tough task so that the 'offer' is as effective as it can be.

New content v consolidation of past learning: considerations

The decision to teaching new curriculum content or not

Whilst a number of comprehensive online teaching and learning packages exist, they are rarely used by schools. Most education professionals would assert that teaching new content to a class of up to 30 or so children requires significant pedagogical skill, or teaching craft, in which approaches are differentiated according to pupils' need and teaching is adapted through formative assessment. It is very hard to do this using home-based learning approaches or online tools. In fact, it could be argued that teaching new content solely in this way would be very second-rate; it even supports an argument that teachers are not needed!

Nevertheless, for students in key year-groups preparing for public examinations, there is a much stronger argument for covering new content, particularly the longer the current situation goes on for. For this reason, secondary school staff may be appropriately focused on the teaching of new content for their Year 10 and 12 students.

Consolidation and deepening of prior learning

For younger children, particularly those in primary schools, there is a case to support a view that home learning should be more about consolidating previous learning than teaching new material. In terms of a mastery approach to the curriculum, the three key reasons why many pupils do not achieve age-related expectations at the end of the year are that they are:

- not sufficiently fluent;
- not sufficiently independent;
- not sufficiently resourceful and resilient.

It could therefore be argued that home learning approaches that focus on addressing these three factors are preferable to delivering new content, as they embed learning and rely more on teachers being guides and facilitators than instructors. For higher attaining pupils, tasks that challenge pupils' thinking and tasks that expect more fluency, independence and resourcefulness from them, particularly in less familiar contexts, thereby enrich their learning.

Perhaps it is not realistic to base a home learning programmes on an expectation that most children will learn new content effectively, if at all. More important, perhaps, is that children do not forget what they already know, so that when they are back in school they can move forward as soon as possible.

If, when your non-attending children return to school, they have not forgotten what they were taught before the lockdown your staff will have done a fine job!

Working with parents

For home-based learning approaches to be successful, careful thought needs to be given to the role of parents. This section aims to present an overview of what might need to be considered.

Parental Load Theory

Cognitive Load Theory is the instructional design theory that reflects our "cognitive architecture" or the way that we process information. During learning, it is claimed, information must be held in our working memory until it has been processed sufficiently to pass into our long-term memory. The cognitive load produced by learning tasks can impede children's ability to process new information and create long-term memories. Therefore, in designing materials and teaching approaches, the goal is to reduce the load that is extraneous to the task and carefully manage the load that is intrinsic to the task, in order to ensure that pupils' working memories are not overwhelmed. Cognitive Load Theory is relevant to all learning, whether it takes place at school or at home.

Becky Allen, education writer, researcher and former Professor of Education at UCL Institute of Education, introduces a new theory of Parental Load Theory in a blog published on the 29th April https://rebeccaallen.co.uk/2020/04/29/parental-load-theory.

'Parental Load Theory starts with the insight that nearly all parents have limited time capacity, and so the parental load produced by learning tasks can impede (younger) students' ability to process new information and create long-term memories. In designing resources and instructions, the goal should be to reduce the parental load that is extraneous to the task and carefully craft the load that is intrinsic to the task to ensure that parents are not overwhelmed. This theory is equally relevant to time-poor parents and to time-rich parents who do not feel confident in supporting their children's learning.'

Reflecting on what many learning tasks primary school teachers, in particular, are sending home, she considers that many seem to score well on enforcing engagement load, with lots of interesting activities that encourage learners to start and then persist at them. However, tasks typically score quite poorly on parental administrative load (e.g. instructions are often unclear to parents who turn to others for their interpretation; worksheets that are designed for the classroom don't always tell parents and children to do; websites frequently require passwords that are not clearly sign-posted or child-friendly; and tasks regularly require something other than a pen and paper). She claims that learning tasks are also often very demanding of parental load that is intrinsic to learning. For example, whilst interesting and educationally valuable, she argues that most primary children can't complete extended writing, explore complex ideas, take an enquiry approach, pursue creative ideas, investigate something without an adult helping them move forward throughout the task.

Consequently, Allen is of the view that as unpalatable as it may sound, the profession needs to deliver new resources to parents that are created with parental load in mind, limiting the parental role to meaningful interactions for learning in a limited number of tasks rather than burdening them with activities that have high extraneous parental load

Guiding Principles and supporting parents

Cathy Cresswell, professor of developmental clinical psychology at Oxford University, is currently leading a study of how more than 10,000 families are managing during lockdown. Based on questionnaires completed by families every week, a key conclusion reported on the 26th April is that **over 60% of parents reported struggling with trying to work from home** as well as look after and

teach their children at the same time. This adds weight to the parental load theory referred to above.

This ongoing study also gives a clear indication of how much work children are doing according to their parents, compared with how much schools are expecting children to do. For primary-aged children, about half of the schools involved expect between 1 and 3 hours a day of home learning, but about a third of parents are not clear what work is expected. Variance is huge, with many children doing less than an hour a day (about 25%) whilst a small proportion are doing over 4 hours a day. Cresswell provides a set of 'ten top tips' for home-schooling, especially for parents, with her number one being to create a daily routine which preserves family harmony and minimises stress for all. She argues that parents (and therefore teachers) should be more concerned with keeping their children occupied and engaged with study 'so that those habits do not disappear' than keeping their children up to date with all the learning that would have been done were they still attending school.

School leaders may also find it helpful to agree on their own set of guiding principles for parents and home learning, perhaps to include:

- Creating a clear routine which does not place too great an expectation on parents (The Education Endowment Fund has a helpful Supporting home learning routines checklist that parents can discuss with their children to help them set their own routines – see the link below.)

- Using online resources from teachers before trying to teach new content themselves

- Ensuring family harmony is maintained to reduce stress

- Breaking the day into manageable chunks

- Ensuring some activities can be accessed unsupervised allowing parents who are working from home to manage this

- Prioritising reading together

- Facilitating self-study and exploration of things a child shows a real interest in

EEF support materials

The EEF has published a range of materials specifically to share with parents, to support home learning. These can be downloaded from here: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-resources/support-resources-to-share-with-parents/

Evaluating home-based learning

A framework for reflection

Below is a set of questions to support reflection on current practice and on its effectiveness. Of course, no system will be ideal and all will involve compromises: some of the aspects are in tension with each other, and there will be trade-offs to be made – between realism and impact, for example, or between challenge and autonomy, and so on.

Accompanying this document is a 'form' version which can be used by a school, subject or year team to discuss their own confidence in the home learning they have set up and are providing. This is an editable *Word* document, so that it can be adapted for use as required.

It should be stressed that the intention of any evaluation or audit should NOT be to add to the pressure on teachers, by setting unrealistic expectations or by emphasising what is missing from provision. It is to support leaders in thinking about how they can work as effectively as possible within the current constraints.

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Accessibility	How accessible and navigable are the materials, for pupils and parents? Are there as few technical obstacles as possible? Is there consistency in user 'interface' across subjects/days/lessons?
Autonomy	How easy is it for pupils to work independently, with minimum parental input? How intrinsically motivating are activities and materials? How well is cognitive load managed, so that pupils are not overwhelmed?
Realism	Are the expectations on pupils realistic and non-intimidating? Are the expectations on parents also realistic and sensitive to circumstances? Is there enough flexibility?
Impact	Are the design of activities and the quality of instructional materials likely to mean that pupils' learning is moved on or, at least, consolidated and reinforced?
Breadth	Are children receiving a 'broad and balanced' curriculum, while securing their learning in in core subjects?
Challenge	Is the learning appropriately challenging? Are pupils being encouraged to think hard? Are they encouraged to extend themselves?
Coherence	Is the learning kept purposeful, connecting to what pupils have done and will go on to do? Does it relate to significant subject content? Is this consistent across subjects?
SEND	Is learning designed and differentiated appropriately for SEND pupil? Is it related to individuals' EHCP targets and support plan? Do parents have the understanding and resources to help their children?

Feedback	Do teachers provide a reasonable amount of feedback to pupils on their learning, so that they feel accountable, encouraged and valued?
Wellbeing	Is there a strong focus on pupils' well-being in their home learning, including through any PSHE element? Is there enough emphasis on health and on physical activity?
Community	Is there a sense that pupils are working as part of a community of learners, achieved through the tone of messages and through the sharing of outcomes?
Monitoring	Is there a straightforward system in place to monitor pupils' engagement with home learning? Is this being recorded? How well is non-engagement followed up?
Workload	Is teacher workload managed thoughtfully, accounting for the different circumstances, pressures and responsibilities they will be facing?

Surveying parents, staff and pupils

Many schools are also using a range of parental and pupil surveys to inform their approaches. This is encouraged, so long as the findings are then acted on and are sufficiently representative of the school community. Finding ways to gather the views of parents of the most vulnerable pupils should also a key consideration.