



**IPPN Submission to the Inspectorate of the
Department of Education**

Evaluation of Remote Teaching and Learning

May 2021

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1 INTRODUCTION

IPPN's observations in this submission are limited to those of the leadership team who were involved in the Inspectorate briefings on ERTAL and the collation of member feedback, as well as seven of the primary school leaders who were involved in the ERTAL pilot inspections. We invited all 24 schools involved in the pilot to provide feedback and were delighted that almost a third of the schools responded with their feedback, given the tight timescales and the ongoing challenges posted by COVID-19 in schools in recent months.

Of course, 24 primary schools are a tiny fraction of the 3,250+ primary schools. Of those 24 schools, 14 are led by administrative principals and 10 by teaching principals. While this is not entirely reflective of the 56% representation among teaching principals across primary schools, it is a very solid representation considering the additional pressures these school leaders are dealing with on top of already heavy workload. We feel that their involvement in the pilot project is critically important, as there will be challenges and opportunities specific to the context of remote teaching and learning in smaller schools that will be important in any future roll-out of the inspection model.

Given the small cohort involved in the pilot project, and the smaller cohort reflected here, this submission will not fully reflect the potential benefits nor the issues and challenges arising from the ERTAL model that will become evident when it is fully rolled out. A further review may be warranted to ensure that the model is fit for purpose across all school contexts.

2 FEEDBACK FROM SCHOOL LEADERS INVOLVED IN PILOT ERTAL INSPECTIONS

2.1 WHAT WORKED WELL

The following are the benefits of participation in the pilot inspections, and an overview of what worked well, as fed back to us by the seven school leaders involved:

- The experience was generally considered to be positive, cordial, courteous and thorough by the relevant inspectors and this was very much appreciated by schools – *‘Cigiri very supportive and professional, explained process very well’, ‘It was a collaborative approach by school and inspectorate’ ‘All in all, a worthwhile experience for our school, and a vindication and affirmation of the work being put in by teachers in a very difficult and challenging situation’, ‘All staff commented on the value of such an inspection and how it enabled us to self-assess and peer assess our digital teaching and learning’*
- Sufficient notice was provided to the school in most cases, with two schools having a week’s notice or less to set up for the inspections
- It was felt that the inspectors had a good overview of schools’ remote learning programmes by the end of the evaluation period
- The inspectors generally showed understanding of technical difficulties (e.g. dropped broadband, families refusal to engage with remote learning despite repeated efforts)
- Both mainstream and special education settings were observed, including both live and pre-recorded lessons
- The post evaluation meetings were affirmative, and recommendations were generally sensible and fair
- The approach was based on the six sub-headings contained within the Covid Response Distance Learning Plan Sept - December 2020 document released by the Department. Schools had based their response plans on those headings
- One school commented that their experience of Remote Teaching and Learning has *‘reinforced their Vision, Values and Aims’*. Another that it had *‘enabled us to build on our strong partnership approaches which has improved outcomes for learners and has allowed continued self-improvement for the school and school community’*

- Several schools mentioned that the process helped them to affirm that the activities they engaged in during school closure were appropriate to the inspectorate's evaluation standards and others that it had provided positive feedback and useful tips and strategies for enhancing their practice *' We wanted to affirm practices, identify strengths and areas of improvement and contribute to shaping the model - we achieved all of this in the ERTAL process', 'The Inspectorate very respectful of the school's efforts to implement remote learning. Very affirming – there was appreciation that it was a developmental process for primary schools', 'The process recognised where the school was 'at' in terms of our focus on distant learning – we placed a huge emphasis on literacy, numeracy and wellbeing'*
- The process itself was not considered overly intrusive in most cases, in terms of time or additional demands, on the principal or the staff
- A few schools commented that they were glad they had participated and felt they had contributed to the process

Other positive feedback from individual schools:

- The process got the schools to 'reflect' on how we knew the children were progressing during distant learning, which consolidated our thinking on how all teachers might assess the children on their return
- There was regular and easy contact with the two inspectors throughout the process – by phone and email. They were flexible in meeting the school's needs, which was appreciated
- Inspectorate emphasised that they were also learning from the process. This helped to put everyone at ease – they weren't out to 'catch the school out'.
- It was good to have outside eyes to look at what we were trying to achieve. The evaluation affirmed that our Remote Teaching Plan was good, despite some misgivings among staff, and criticism from some parents. The methodology of the evaluation was strong: there was a combination of focus groups - leadership team, class teachers and SETs - as well as observations of live lessons. Both inspectors were professional in their approach.

Overall, the engagement with schools from the inspection teams was considered to be very positive.

2.2 WHAT SCHOOLS FOUND CHALLENGING

The following were mentioned by several of the schools involved in the pilot evaluations:

- The main challenges related to organising teachers to facilitate other classes when they were engaging in online meetings with the inspectors
- Some commented that observing on-line live lessons has the added concerns that the technology will work etc. over and above the usual stresses of any inspection process
- A number of schools found it challenging to explain to the inspectors remotely how their learning platform operated
- A few schools were approached the week before the inspection or had the visit confirmed the week of the visit. Ideally, more time would be given for all schools to make all of the arrangements e.g. as staff had to combine participation in reviews with continuing support for online teaching, planning reopening of their schools for in-class teaching and doing Parent/Teacher meetings via Zoom in some cases.
- Several commented that the technology the Inspectorate used – Webex - was challenging and suggested that their own systems be used instead e.g. Microsoft Teams, Google Meet etc. that the teachers are familiar with. Specific issues cited include audio quality and the fact that teachers couldn't share their screens to show materials etc. In some cases, a workaround was agreed and schools sent links to Google Meet and Zoom meetings to join the classes and this worked a lot better.
- More details were provided in relation to this last point:
 - Seeing copybooks, displays etc. is part of a normal inspection; schools tried to replicate this online through Google Classroom or SeeSaw. Access to these platforms would also allow the inspectors evaluate the frequency and quality of teacher feedback provided to pupils. However, the Inspectorate was unable to look at these tools, as they didn't have software access and Webex precluded screen sharing by the school – teachers were very disappointed. A workaround was agreed that ended up getting around this.
 - Online lesson observations - for some of the teachers, this could have been more interactive with the inspectors engaging with the pupils – although, with people working from their homes, this may be difficult. It was felt that this would have been another dimension for the inspectors to assess how pupils were learning.
- A couple of schools mentioned post-evaluation feedback. While it was signalled at the start of the inspection that the process would not include the provision of feedback to individual

teachers, teachers indicated that they would have liked to have had some kind of one-to-one engagement with the inspector.

Individual schools found that there were other challenges, as follows:

- We feel we were asked to participate as we have very well developed Digital Learning Plan and practices and we are a Digital School of Excellence. It would have been a much more challenging/stressful experience for some schools.
- The inspectors were not in a position to provide practical support to overcome issues with poor broadband connectivity and with parents and families that did not engage on line. The principal found this to be an added stress in what was an already stressful situation.
- Administration of the school meals programme was challenging to implement, and while this may not have a direct bearing on remote teaching, it has a significant impact on pupil learning as well as on the school's overall management workload.
- Five of the six areas of evaluation had a direct focus on learning; one had the focus on feedback between home and school. One school suggested a seventh area on the effectiveness of whole-school initiatives to support distant learning. There was a significant amount of work involved in putting together the infrastructure to facilitate distant learning and this was not reflected in the evaluation in a structured way. While the school understood that the inspection process is not there to serve as an affirmation tool for school leaders and teachers, the inclusion of this seventh area of evaluation would highlight for other school initiatives what may be required to promote pupil engagement in distant learning in some circumstances. While the inspectorate team verbally acknowledged and positively commented on such initiatives in the feedback to the school leadership representatives, the six evaluation areas included in the pilot were limited in their ability to report on them. Examples of the initiatives provided by the school (IPPN is aware that many other schools did very similar work) include:
 - The school's 5-point intervention plan to increase the overall pupil engagement. Almost 20% of pupils did not engage or sporadically engaged in the first week of January. The school's Principal, Home-School Community Liaison Co-ordinator and the School Completion Support Person led the school's intervention plan to increase the overall pupil engagement figure to 97%; Regular liaison with external agencies including Tusla and the local Education Welfare Officer was required.
 - Coordination of lending the school's devices loan to families

- The school's annually updated Digital Learning Plan was pivotal in building sufficient confidence and capacity in teachers and pupils alike to move to online distant learning.
- The school's engagement with PDST Technology before and during the school closure period in response to emerging CPD needs identified by the teachers. These supports worked very well as they were tailored to the teachers' needs – great support and guidance was provided by the tutors.
- Regular online staff meetings and teacher support groups to trouble-shoot and learn from each other during the period of distance learning
- Devise, administer and analyse a parental survey. Findings enabled the school to identify and respond to areas in need of attention e.g. more pre-recorded video support for the teaching of Gaeilge.

3 IPPN SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

IPPN stated in a recent submission to the Inspectorate (re. Child Protection Inspection Model), and on many previous occasions, that a shift from 'inspection' to 'co-professional evaluation' is vital to respect both the professional leadership and engagement of schools and the expertise the inspectors bring to schools. From the feedback received from the seven schools involved in the ERTAL pilot process, it would seem that this co-professional approach was very much in evidence, particularly with the inspectors' comments that they themselves learned a lot from the process. This is very heartening and we applaud the Inspectorate on its positive engagement with schools, and its affirmation of schools' efforts during the pandemic.

Other recommendations:

1. In relation to any requirement for further school closures, principals and teachers need **simplicity and clarity from education system leaders** and their colleagues in health. Authentic, calm, reassuring and affirming leadership is needed from everyone, at system level as well as in schools.
2. If the Department wants to assess 'distance teaching and learning' in the future, it is critically important to **review and fully resource the Digital Strategy** - to pair expectations with support – to ensure all **staff** have access to high quality digital devices, adequate broadband, appropriate software, as well as IT support to trouble-shoot technical issues. In some schools, teachers took home their class desktop prior to the Christmas break. School laptops for teachers would be far better and a more flexible option. Likewise, funding for digital devices and broadband access in the homes of families who need them is crucial, if there is to be equity in the provision of teaching and learning opportunities for all **pupils** in all schools.
3. A number of **learning platforms** (Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Class Dojo, SeeSaw etc.) are in use by schools. It would be beneficial for the Department to provide **training for inspectors** in the use of the most commonly-used systems, so as to avoid technical issues during inspections.

4. **Definitive guidance for remote teaching and learning** is required for schools to ensure clarity and equity across schools in the event of further mandated closures. The DE looked for an agile response from schools. The Inspectorate mentioned all the tutorials on PDST and PDST support but these require teachers to do in service at home. Anecdotally, it is clear that there was a wide variety of responses from schools. Some parents looked for less live interaction with classes and more recordings; others wanted more live interaction and no pre-recording. Not all teachers have the same skills in the use of digital technologies. So, a **consistent set of guidelines backed up by a structured CPD plan** for all teachers will be essential.
5. The Inspectorate could assess the benefit of including an **evaluation of the effectiveness of whole-school initiatives to support distant learning** as noted above. It should not be assumed that schools have the capacity, skills and resources to implement a high-quality environment for remote learning. Significant work and investment in time and resources is involved, and this should be reflected in inspections, along with recommendations to the Department about the minimum and optimum levels of support, equipment, and resources to be provided to schools to facilitate remote learning.
6. Clarity around what is **expected of parents** and what to do when they don't engage. It was felt that clarity is needed regarding what supports are in place for parents and schools where there is a lack of engagement from families.
7. A number of the schools commented that the **technical infrastructure in the school** is so poor, especially relating to **broadband**, that the schools progressed more with digital learning when everyone was at home! The point was also made that teachers are more inclined to engage with digital learning where the infrastructure/broadband is stable.
8. It would be very helpful if there were **smaller numbers in class** to properly facilitate remote learning, particularly to support pupils with additional needs
9. The **work demands on teachers** during periods of remote learning were extremely high. Long days and up to six days per week of working were needed to accommodate the preparation for timetabled video lessons; the need to provide multiple video lessons across small groups of pupils in place of one lesson with full entire classes; assigning work and providing feedback on a daily basis to up to 30 or more pupils on Seesaw or a similar platform; pre-recording videos for sharing with pupils; attending online CPD; researching suitable apps in response to emerging needs. It needs to be acknowledged that many teachers struggled to balance their work with the necessity to mind their own children and other relatives who needed support during the pandemic; others also had partners working

on the front line. Flexibility around what is expected of teachers in this situation would be appreciated.

10. It would be beneficial to more clearly outline a pragmatic approach to the **evaluation of students' learning** during periods of remote learning, as well as after the return to school buildings, given all of the constraints outlined.
11. We would suggest that the **language in the questionnaires** sent to pupils and parents be amended. The language used does not take account of the countries of origin of many of our parents. Also the pupil language could have been simpler and clearer.
12. While there is a plethora of resources available to support the curriculum, it is challenging to navigate and assess the merits of each set of resources. A few schools commented that **Irish language platform/school community** needs to be established (or an Irish Twinkle/SeeSaw platform) to allow teachers to share resources relevant to the Irish curriculum on-line in one place. Scoilnet is considered useful but difficult to navigate. learnetic.com and hwb.gov.wales were mentioned as good examples. PDST support will be needed to improve this.

4 CONCLUSION

The feedback provided by the schools involved in the pilot who fed back to IPPN indicates that the process was well designed and implemented with the pilot schools. The recommendations listed above, if implemented in full, would give confidence to all schools that the challenges they have faced are taken into account by the Department, and that they have the support, resources and capacity to return to remote teaching in the future, should the need arise.

We hope that the feedback provided in this submission will help inform future engagement with schools by the Inspectorate, both in relation to remote teaching and learning, and other forms of co-professional evaluation. IPPN would be delighted to facilitate engagement with the school principals involved in the pilot and the Inspectorate to discuss this submission, and with the IPPN leadership team in relation to any other aspect of schools' leadership and management work.