

Staying Connected: the informal learning of primary teachers during the Covid-19 lockdown to meet the challenges of emergency remote learning

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This paper presents findings from a research study with primary school teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic. The school closures caused by the pandemic sparked an unprecedented move to emergency remote learning which Hodges et al (2020, p.9) define as 'a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances', of which the majority of teachers had little experience. Our study therefore explored how teachers developed the skills and knowledge they needed to teach remotely during the first wave of school closures in England from March 2020.

Over the last twenty years, the way we access information through the internet and technology has rapidly changed. Siemens (2005) identified this trend and argued that **how** we learn would become more important than **what** we learn. He proposed the digital learning theory of connectivism, where 'the connections that enable us to learn more are more important than our current state of knowing' and where the focus is on 'connecting specialised information sets' (Siemens, 2005, p.5). This can be seen in practice through professional learning networks (PLNs) in education, defined as a 'system of interpersonal connections and resources that support informal learning' (Trust, 2012, p.133). PLNs are evident in teacher networks on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. These online connections with other educators create possibilities for linking with new sets of knowledge in a remote learning environment. However, using social media in this way can also result in teachers spending more time both producing and consuming work-related content, beyond their usual working hours (Bergviken Rensfeldt, Hillman and Selwyn, 2018), with a potentially detrimental impact on work-life balance.

We therefore explored how teachers used PLNs as part of CPD for learning to teach remotely, and the implications of this for fostering effective CPD in primary schools.

Methodology

Our study was conducted in two stages. The first stage was carried out in June 2020, and involved an online survey to primary school teachers in England, exploring their experiences of teaching during the pandemic. Participants were recruited through the use of social media (Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn) and by emailing the survey to contacts in primary education who were asked to share the survey. The survey also asked if participants would be willing to participate in a follow up interview, to be carried out via telephone or Zoom. The survey was completed by 271 primary teachers, from state schools, private schools and academies. The second stage of research involved semi-structured interviews, with participants chosen from amongst the survey respondents who provided their details for an interview. Participants were selected to ensure that the study captured the experiences of teachers at different stages in their careers, and serving a range of different communities. We carried out twenty-four interviews with teachers and transcribed the recordings to facilitate analysis. A thematic analysis was undertaken to identify key themes in the data

regarding how teachers learnt to teach remotely, and to draw out the implications for teachers' professional development.

How primary teachers learnt to teach remotely

Our findings showed that most teachers had not received any training on using technology for remote teaching, either before or after the pandemic had started (see Figure 1). Many teachers therefore felt that they were not adequately prepared for supporting children's learning remotely. One interviewee summarised this - 'The learning experience for me about doing the online stuff has been pretty steep.'

Have you received training in using technologies to support children's learning remotely?

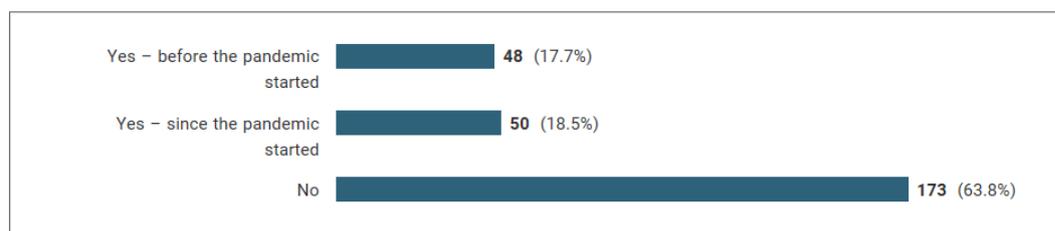


Figure 1: Training in supporting remote learning

Of the 17.7% of teachers who had received training before the pandemic started, use of remote learning technologies was restricted to certain teachers and groups of students within the school. The school closures triggered the spread of this practice within the school, as a Year 2 teacher explained:

'We already used Class Dojo down in early years and our autism base used it. So it was like, right, we'll take this, we're going to spread it to the whole school. And it was very much here's some training sessions if you're still in and if you're not still in, here's a video which will tell you how to do things.'

This example also illustrates how some schools used a blended approach to train teachers in the most expedient way, according to whether they were working in school or at home. Where schools did not already use learning technologies, these were often rapidly introduced in light of the school closures. Training then tended to be narrowly focused on the functions of the technology for remote teaching. Another Year 2 teacher described the roll-out of Google Classrooms in her school:

'Here's your hour training session, how to use it [Google Classrooms] now. And so I think we had this on the Tuesday before we closed on the following Friday.'

In some cases, school leaders used their online professional learning network to identify lesson resources and ideas to support home learning across the school. One Year 5 teacher reported that '[The senior leader] spent a lot of time researching the best materials that were

out there.’ This ensured that all teachers received the same guidance and materials, and facilitated consistency in the remote learning provision across the school.

Alongside this top-down approach to staff development, many primary teachers drew upon connections with colleagues in the school to develop their skills in remote teaching. The comment below from a Year 6 teacher demonstrates how these informal communities of practice supported teachers’ CPD, in this case facilitated by WhatsApp:

‘One person would look and discover something and all of a sudden, you know, the school’s WhatsApp would say look what we’re able to do...And everyone, you know, kind of joined in and one person learned how to do one thing and shared it...some of us were further forward at the beginning, but I could say now that everyone has probably got all those skills...so we kind of tried to keep supporting everyone with upskilling themselves’.

This sustained collaborative approach enabled ideas to spread throughout the school. Many teachers drew upon professional networks beyond their school for support during the pandemic. One teacher noted:

‘I follow education lists on Twitter [...] and I just think the amount of support and camaraderie for colleagues that you’ve never even met, you know, who stick together and keep you going. I think that Twitter has really made me feel like I’m part of something when I felt very isolated.’

Social media also helped teachers to develop subject knowledge and teaching skills, for example through finding information about courses and materials available online. This was described by one Year 5 teacher:

‘So I’d actually already compiled one [a list of online courses] because Twitter is a great resource for this sort of thing. So whilst inevitably I’m going to forget bits of that, actually, I’ve got a really nice long list of very specific things I want to try and apply.’

These examples show the range of CPD activities undertaken during the pandemic, both formal and informal, and how some teachers seized the school closures as an opportunity to develop their subject knowledge and ideas for teaching in the classroom, as well as enhance their remote learning skills. However, this was not always feasible. One teacher, who was her school’s PE Lead, commented:

‘I am on some social media groups for PE leads, and they have just been producing ream after ream of lessons plans [...] And I’m just sat there going, “I’m not doing anything, I’m trying to teach my [own] kids”.’

It is important to note that PLNs could be a source of pressure for some teachers, who were struggling with their usual workload, let alone spending time on CPD during the pandemic. This reinforces the need for schools to integrate CPD into teachers’ working days, rather than expect it to be an additional activity.

Implications

The rapid move to emergency remote learning during the first lockdown in England was an unprecedented challenge to primary teachers and schools. Whilst some schools were able to provide limited training on new systems before lockdown, most schools were not, and traditional forms of formal CPD, such as face to face training sessions, were not always possible during the pandemic. Many primary teachers therefore had to use informal opportunities for professional development to help them meet the demands of teaching remotely.

Our findings showed that the informal learning undertaken by teachers through PLNs during the first lockdown met the hallmarks of effective CPD set by Hunzicker (2009). Hunzicker (2009, p. 177) argues that effective CPD, whether formal or informal, is 'supportive, job-embedded, instructionally focused, collaborative, and ongoing'. Teachers were supported in their learning by colleagues in their own schools as well as further afield. Support was job-embedded as teachers were able to identify specific, personal training and information needs as they transitioned to emergency remote teaching, and much professional learning was instructionally focused as teachers sought effective ways of enhancing outcomes for students. Through PLNs, educators could collaborate and share ideas with others. Professional learning was ongoing as teachers could revisit topics and challenges over the remote teaching period, and return to their PLN for further advice.

The findings of this study have practical implications which go beyond the pandemic. Firstly, informal learning through PLNs has had an impact on the professional development of teachers and this should be acknowledged and valued by schools. Part of this means providing time for teachers to engage in informal learning through PLNs, rather than this becoming another task that extends beyond the school day. Secondly, some teachers will be further along in the journey of developing a PLN, so support and mentoring should be provided to teachers who would like to develop their abilities to connect professionally with others. Thirdly, a whole-school approach to PLNs would increase the value of informal learning activity. Teachers may have their own individual PLNs, but there needs to be regular and inclusive opportunities to share knowledge and insights with colleagues across the school. Providing staff meeting time to share information, and encouraging contributions from a variety of colleagues, would start to embed the value of PLNs within the school.

The study emphasises that CPD through PLNs can meet the needs of both teachers and the school. For teachers, PLNs offer flexibility, enabling them to engage in CPD at home, at times that suit them, and in the areas they wish to develop. For schools, PLNs can enable staff to take ownership of their own CPD, rather than this being driven by school. Whilst some schools adopted a top-down approach to CPD during the pandemic, PLNs offer a more collaborative approach, both within the school and as part of wider networks. This has greater potential for engaging teachers in their professional development, both individually and collectively.

Teachers have experienced many challenges during the pandemic, but the skills and knowledge they have developed will have value beyond the emergency remote learning period. Our insights illustrate how schools should support staff CPD through PLNs, and the opportunities this offers for enhancing teaching practice and pupils' learning experience.

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