



Whitehill Junior School, Hitchin

Be bold - courage and reflection can shape our future

Educating children remotely has raised some difficult questions that have had to be answered quickly. I've heard this process referred to as the 'dash for innovation': schools had to act swiftly to make big changes to teach children who weren't physically present. As with other races, there have been times it has felt exhilarating; at others it's felt like seeing a steep hill just as exhaustion has set in. While the comparison to a race is helpful to some extent, there are important distinctions. A race offers no time to stop and reflect; it assumes there is only one course and that we all agree on the finishing line. Even with no pandemic, it is all too easy in schools to get caught up in the action and stop asking questions. As we fling ourselves into the minutiae of how and when pupils return, we should give ourselves permission to slow down a bit. Asking the right questions and listening to answers from a broad range of stakeholders will secure the best possible experience for our pupils and parents now and in the near future. Even more significantly, it allows us to deepen our understanding of our school and begin to think about how we might want to shape education in the future.

So what questions should we be asking if we want to evaluate our distance learning?

They could be summarised as:

- What are we trying to achieve?
- Is it successful? Why/why not?



- How can we improve?

The first question has been one we have asked at various stages; the answer is different now from what it was at the start of this process. To answer the second and third questions, we needed to include the experience of parents and pupils. This would go some way to helping us take a view of the effectiveness of our virtual classrooms, but we would need to find additional sources to triangulate our impression. Traditional methods of learning walks and book looks were not an option. We also had to bear in mind that we are living in a time of acute:

- Uncertainty and change
- Separation and isolation
- Division and inequality

We had to understand these in relation to our school and to use this understanding to guide and inform our practice.

Scrutiny of any kind can raise anxiety. When conducting a review at this particular time, we needed to be clear that lots of us are feeling more fragile and that separation also causes an erosion of trust. I was reminded of this listening to Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner's *Thought for the Day*, who explained how 'it's hard to trust each other when we don't see each other in 3D'. She referred to trust being 'society's glue' saying it was 'corroded when people are uncertain and anxious'. When school is running as normal, we work hard to establish and maintain trust by physical interactions. Catching parents on the playground, reading facial expressions and gauging tone of voice builds this trust and creates a climate in which issues can be addressed constructively. The same is true for adults in school. Even as school has slowly started to reopen, the nature of social distancing requires limiting the kinds of interactions that secure trust. As well as being sensitive to this when shaping the nature of monitoring activities, we also needed to remind ourselves that, in Janner-Klausner's words: we must be 'willing to experience the pain of someone disagreeing with us without branding them a bad person. Willing to express doubt and admit to being wrong when we are.'

What were we trying to achieve?

Usually we rely on certainty and continuity when setting an aim. Ordinarily, it's something we establish over time, listening to a range of stakeholders and looking at examples of best practice. It remains constant and everyone is agreed. For remote provision, lots of things are unclear. Are we keeping children occupied while parents get on with their own jobs? Keeping things ticking over – so children don't slip backwards in their learning? Exposing them to new content and challenges, that somehow replicates the experience in school? Therein lies the rub: people had different answers to these questions and indeed the answers to those questions have changed over time.

The purpose of the work that was set initially is very different to that set now and will be different again if this situation carries on into the next academic year. We have all had to expose ourselves to a pace of change and living with uncertainty that has, at times, been uncomfortable.

Was it successful? Why? Why not?

Taking a view on effectiveness is not straightforward when in a state of flux and working so separately. To evaluate practice, surely we would need to have and share clear expectations for what work should look like, the level of engagement and how it is responded to? If the purpose of the work set has evolved, so too have these expectations. This is a difficult message for teachers, especially when working in physical separation. They have had to be resilient, ready to adapt and agile in their thinking. The usual ways of gauging an impression and sharing practice were missing. Our monitoring had to reflect the complexity of the situation. We used three key sources:

- **Parent and pupil survey** - this provided opportunities to rate key aspects of remote learning, identify barriers, respond individually with best/worst aspects of remote learning as well as make suggestions. We wanted to be able to draw broad conclusions about aspects of home learning such as pitch and quantity of work as well as get a clear picture of the percentage affected by specific barriers (such as access to technology). However we also wanted to capture the very individual experience of our different families and to hear from our pupils as well as our parents. This required carefully constructed questions and being prepared to take time to collate individual answers.
- **Learning reviews** – working groups are a key part of our monitoring and improvement cycle and we recognised that any scrutiny should continue to follow a model that was collaborative and constructive. For this reason, these reviews were teacher-led and in year group teams. Teachers provided a virtual walk around their classrooms, sharing tasks set, pupils' work and feedback. Discussion points included ways to increase engagement from hard-to-reach pupils; what had been learnt about working in this way (this was as various as specific technical know-how to deeper curriculum understanding); and how this situation would impact practice in the future.
- **Observations of what was happening in the key worker pod** – insight into what might be happening at home could be found by watching how key worker children approached work in school.



How can we improve?

With well over a third of our parents and pupils responding to our survey and their level of positivity, alongside the impressive practice seen in the learning reviews, we could celebrate the achievements of our teachers in rising to this extraordinary challenge.

Whitehill has been exceptional throughout in dealing with COVID -19 and we wouldn't expect anything less. Clear information, lots of support and the right balance of work for students. From the bottom of our hearts we are so grateful our son is part of this school. Thank you to everyone for their continued hard work to provide a safe environment for our children.

Information flow has been excellent. The amount of home learning material has been good as well. The messages around not getting upset if families can't complete it all has helped the general stress levels.

I think the school has had a massive task to deal with and has set an example as to how many other sectors and businesses could have dealt with the situation. Over the last few weeks I feel that the school has got the set work balance just right.

We were also able to identify ways we could do even better. It was always going to be hard to offer something that would meet such a myriad of needs and contexts. A stark example of this comes in the form of responses we had from some of our separated families. In a number of cases, we found that barriers that existed in one household (for example parent workload, access to technology) did not affect the other. Remote learning might happen relatively smoothly for a child in one place but was causing problems in another. This does not mean we ignore or dismiss the barriers for one of the two households but it does exemplify the extent of the challenge. Using our findings from the survey, reviews and observations, we prioritised a number of actions. These included providing:

- A host of different ways to engage with the learning - the biggest challenge is getting children into the 'classroom'.
- More opportunities to collaborate – teachers are facilitating these remotely for now and we will continue to build the sense of community and connectedness by undertaking whole school projects this autumn.
- Signposting for parents – with information about how to navigate the virtual classroom and see feedback; and where they can access materials for additional challenge, breadth and enrichment, accessibility and support.
- Contact for parents and pupils who were struggling or had a particular concern.

What are the lessons for the future?

Dan Nicholls, in [Rising to the Challenge](#), outlined the possibility for significant and accelerated change as a result of this pandemic. It is our chance, as schools, to rethink and be bold. He warned against a return to the 'old normal'. Having seen their benefits, we intend to retain:

- The close relationship we have built up with parents over this time - never before have we worked so closely in partnership.
- Aspects of our virtual classrooms - no more excuses of lost homework.
- Aspects of the collaborative model for evaluating learning provision.
- Increased virtual training opportunities for staff, particularly support staff.
- Better use of technology to join schools together for transition purposes.
- Transition tours for our new intake – conducting the first visit differently in smaller, more personal tours.
- Using technology to include part-time staff more easily in staff meetings/planning.
- Broader use of assistive technology for pupils.
- Form time – to celebrate successes as a matter of routine (previously this would be done in whole school assemblies but it meant certain 'smaller' successes or some children were reluctant to share).

It seems to me, though, that Nicholls was referring to something more when he urged courage. It is exciting to imagine that, despite all the sadness of this situation, there is a possibility it could bring about significant cultural change. Perhaps after having foregone certain practices that it would have been unthinkable to miss, having adapted so quickly to a whole new way of teaching and learning, we are in a good place to ask really big questions about education's future.

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