An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Return to school: Report on focus groups with pupils and students
September and October 2020

Inspectorate
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Contents

1. Introduction

This report provides an account of the outcomes of focus groups with pupils and students that the Inspectorate carried out in a small sample of schools in late September and early October 2020. It is one of a number of reports provided as part of the Inspectorate's research activity in schools during the 2020/21 school year.

2. Overview of the Inspectorate's focus group research project

2.1 Project background

The purpose of convening the focus groups at this time was to listen to and understand children's and young people's experiences with a view to:

- informing policy decisions and the provision of further guidance and supports for schools, teachers and learners.
- recognising good practice in schools through the lens of pupils' and students' experience of being back at school.
- realising the Inspectorate's commitment to student voice and the principles of the Lundy Model of Child Participation - Space, Voice, Audience and Influence. The Lundy Model is underpinned by the belief that before anyone can express a view, they must be given opportunities to form that view (See Appendix A).

This report examines the key learning points from the focus groups. A brief rationale for the use of focus groups is provided in Appendix B.

2.2 Schools that participated in the focus groups

The focus groups were held in six schools in late September and early October 2020:

- Three primary and three post-primary schools participated.
- The schools included DEIS[1], rural and urban, small and large, single sex and co-educational schools.
- All primary focus groups and one post-primary focus group took place in the pupils'/students' school; the remaining two post-primary focus groups took place remotely, with senior cycle students only.
- All schools were requested to inform their board of management and/or senior management teams that the school was participating in the focus group project.

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[1] DEIS schools are those schools participating in *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS), the action plan of the Department for educational inclusion.

2.3 Conducting the focus groups

COVID-19 regulations and school protocols

COVID Regulations and School Protocols	Separate Junior and Senior Focus Groups	Assent and Consent	Broadband and Remote Meeting Platforms

COVID-19 regulations, health and safety guidelines and the schools' protocols were paramount in the organisation of the focus groups. The Inspectorate's guidance for Supporting Safe Provision of Schooling (SSPS) visits and the Inspectorate's Safe Return to Onsite Work protocols were followed to ensure that there was appropriate provision for the safety of focus group participants, school personnel and the inspectors.

Separate junior and senior focus groups

Interestingly, some of the restrictions associated with COVID-related preventative measures resulted in a better environment for the focus group and enhanced levels of engagement. For example, the decision to divide into junior and senior focus groups, in both primary and post-primary schools, was to some extent dictated by social distancing requirements and the need to respect bubbles and pods. This provided a better experience for interacting, with a smaller number of participants in each group, typically about six, and a greater likelihood of shared experiences among the participants.

Primary Junior Focus Group	Primary Senior Focus Group	Post-Primary Junior Focus Group	Post-primary Senior Focus Group
• 3rd Class • 4th Class	• 5th Class • 6th Class	• 1st Year • 2nd Year • 3rd Year	• TY • 5th Year • 6th Year

Assent and consent

In line with best practice for working with children and young people, and in recognition of their right to choose to participate or not, schools were requested to ensure that both pupil/student assent and parental or guardian consent was received in advance of meetings.[2]

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[2] It was made clear to pupils/students and their parents that pupils/students had the option of discontinuing their participation in the focus groups at any time during the process.

Broadband and remote meeting platforms

Interacting with remote meeting platforms and broadband issues were challenging for the organisation of the two remote focus groups. "Trial runs" were carried out with the co-operation of the school and some issues were identified and eliminated. The schools attempted to optimise broadband capacity by restricting access for teachers and children for the duration of the focus groups. Thanks to the preparatory work and planning, apart from a small number of minor technical issues, the meetings proceeded smoothly.

2.4 Focus group discussion topics

Each focus group was carried out using the same key discussion topics supported by a small number of guiding questions. The time allocated to specific areas and the details of the questions addressed differed between groups depending on the interaction with the participants in line with focus group best practice.

Back to school	• How did you find going back to school for the new school year? • What helped you to feel comfortable about coming back to school? • What was difficult about coming back to school? • Were there other things that would have helped?
Schoolwork and learning	• What is it like being back doing school work in school? • What is happening in lessons to help everyone to learn and do schoolwork? • What is difficult about learning and schoolwork now that you are back in school? • Are there things that would make it better?
What did we forget?	• Can you think of anything that has been forgotten? • Is there anything that should be done differently? • Anything else that should be happening to help you learn and get on well in school?

The main topics and the supporting questions were addressed through the rubric of discussing what is working well, and identifying the challenges.

2.5 Selection of focus group participants

School principals were requested to nominate a representative and inclusive group of participants for the focus groups. Criteria for selection included:

- Positive engagement during schools closure
- Lack of, or poor, engagement during schools closure
- A range of achievement levels
- All school programmes, for example, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Transition Year (TY).

To facilitate the widest range of voices to be heard in the focus groups, participants were encouraged to share the experiences of their friends and classmates where appropriate and relevant.

3. What the children and young people said

In line with the focus group methodology (see Appendix B), the feedback from focus groups did not reflect a linear path through a pre-defined sequence of questions and topics. Rather, focus group participants engaged in an organic and reflective process that was guided by the main discussion topics which considered experiences of school closure, returning back to school and learning in the changed environment. Observations and reflections emerged through this process and are discussed below.

The final discussion topic looked at the question of "What did we forget?" In general, most items noted in this area fitted comfortably within one or other of the main discussion areas. That said, all participants appreciated the opportunity to reflect on what they had already shared during the meeting.

The focus group process did not explicitly seek participants' suggestions for change; rather it sought to reflect on the experience of school since re-opening. Much of the feedback implicitly identified areas for change. However, some specific suggestions were also recorded:
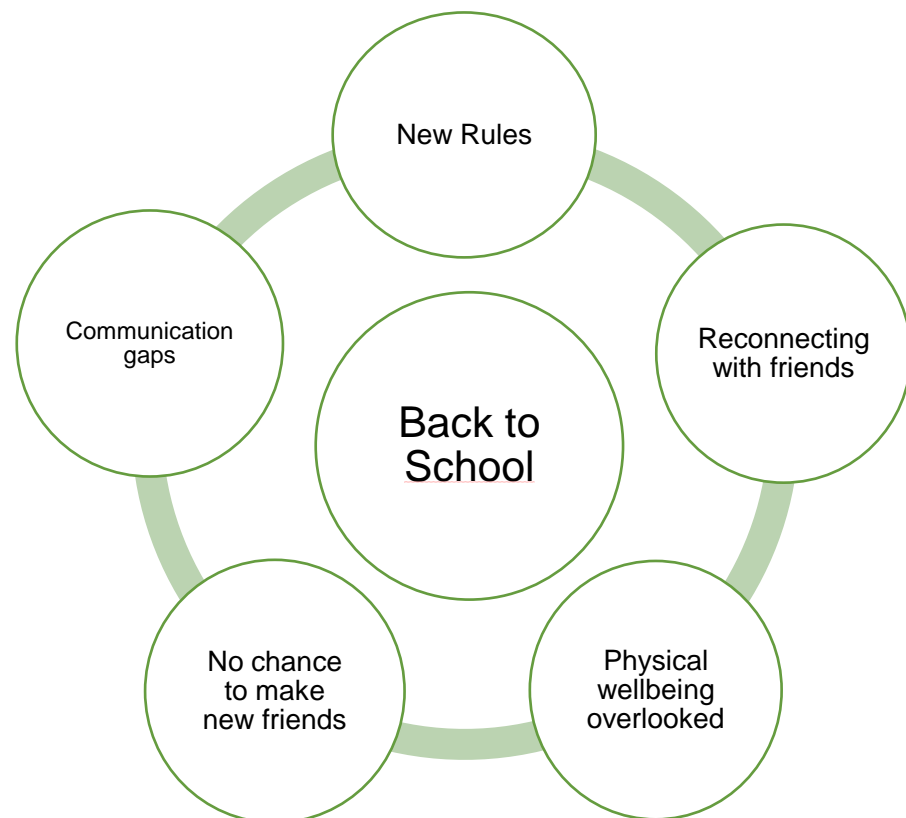
- Children and young people would like to be kept more informed about what is happening in the school, for example the changes to school rules.
- It was suggested that time to talk about worries would be helpful. One group spoke of the usefulness of a "drop everything and talk" initiative in their school.
- More air breaks and more time outside would be good, especially in the afternoon. Post-primary students talked about breathing in their own air all the time: "It's not great."

4. Back to school: Key messages

This topic considered pupils' and students' overall experience of school and the health and safety guidelines that have been in place since schools re-opened for the 2020-2021 school year.

Pupils and students generally spoke of being very happy to be back in school.They appreciated the amount of work their principals, teachers and other school personnel had done to make it possible for them to have a safe environment. In some cases, they found it hard to understand why specific rules had been put in place.

Typically, the experiences of primary (P) pupils and post-primary (PP) students mirrored each other.

New Rules

Communication gaps

Back to School

Reconnecting with friends

No chance to make new friends

Physical wellbeing overlooked

The key points emerging were:

- Overall, focus group feedback indicated that participants were very pleased to be back in school and were happy to be reconnecting with friends.
- In some cases, gaps in communication were evident and these participants felt that they were not being included in the consultation and information process related to school rules and new protocols.
- Some of the new rules engendered disappointment, anger and upset; typically, these reactions seemed to relate to the rationale for the rules not having been fully communicated. The impact of wearing face coverings on communication both inside and outside the classroom was noted repeatedly.
- Participants expressed empathy with younger students and those new to the schools as they do not have the opportunities to make friends outside of their own bubbles and pods.
- Participants highlighted how more attention needed to be given to pupils'/students' physical wellbeing, for example by being allowed to wear (non-uniform) warm clothes and in the case of post-primary students, by having more air breaks.

4.1 Back to school: Reflections and observations

While primary and post-primary observations and reflections are identified as such, it is worth noting that the experiences of primary pupils and post-primary students mirrored each other in many aspects.

Feelings about being back in school
Feelings ranged from across the full gamut from happiness and excitement to anxiety and fear. The impact of physical infrastructure and external factors such as media reports including television and social media, was striking in some cases.

Primary pupil	Post-primary student
The school was different when we came back - we now have a pond and bug hotels.	Glad to be back.

Post-primary student	Post-primary student
We are not as isolated as before (when school was closed).	(It is) good to get up at the same time every day and start school early.

Primary pupil
Being compared to the younger groups and being told we are role models is very stressful.

Post-primary student
We hear young people are causing the spread of COVID but we are limiting interactions with family and friends...it doesn't make sense: we are in school.

Communication about school re-opening

Both positive and negative feedback around communications was reported from all focus groups; gaps in communication were evident where pupils and students were not included as partners in the school communication process. The important role of parents and guardians as mediators of information was referred to particularly by primary school pupils.

Post-primary student
We are asked our opinion about what could be done differently and what we need, but we don't get updates about what is happening.

Post-primary student
Notes, news and videos on the school website were helpful; students knew what to expect when school started again.

Primary pupil
The principal wrote to our parents and my mum explained the changes to me.

New rules: ensuring schools are safe

School staff and communities have made extraordinary efforts to ensure that schools are safe and have followed guidance issued by the Department of Education, based on the advice provided by health authorities, including the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and the Health and Safety Authority (HSA). Pupils and students indicated that while they appreciated the efforts made by schools to ensure that they felt safe, the implementation of the guidelines has had a major impact on their everyday school life, and that of the whole school community.

Post-primary student
Teachers can't see our expressions and not being able to see each other's expressions is difficult.

Primary pupil
Sometimes with handwashing, there's not enough time to eat, especially if you're at the back of the line.

Post-primary student
The personal space that is associated with lockers is missed.

Post-primary student
Being in school is stressful; I am questioning myself if I forgot to sanitise, to sanitise books, and I am constantly worrying.

Primary pupil
...routines (are) well thought out...alarm goes 10 minutes before...to go out for break, to allow (pupils) to wash hands and sanitise on the way out.

School as a social and developmental experience

Schools are social spaces where personal and emotional development are key to children's and young peoples' experience of education. The importance of this aspect of being in school has not diminished despite the centrality of ensuring that schools are safe learning and working environments for all. The focus group participants were acutely aware of the impact of the changed school environment on their relationships and social development:

Post-primary student
Because they don't move class, first years don't get to make friends outside of their own group.

Primary pupil
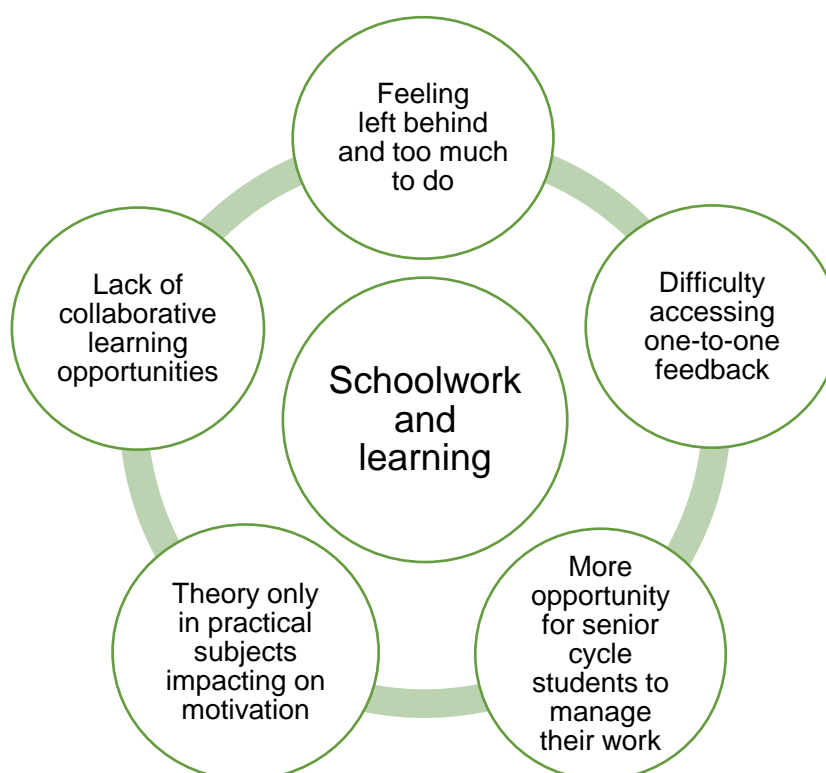Happy to be reconnecting with old friends, but missing chances to make new friends.

Primary pupil
Feeling sorry for junior infants not having the same experiences as previous years or mixing with the school community.

5. Schoolwork and learning: Key messages

Experiences of learning and schoolwork since schools re-opened for the 2020-2021 school year are reported on in this section.

Surprisingly, feedback from primary and post-primary focus groups had significant areas in common and included feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about the future.

Feeling left behind and too much to do

Lack of collaborative learning opportunities

Schoolwork and learning

Difficulty accessing one-to-one feedback

Theory only in practical subjects impacting on motivation

More opportunity for senior cycle students to manage their work

In summary, the key points emerging were:

- Feelings ranged from calm acceptance and stoic acknowledgement that we are all in a situation that is not of our own making, to acute anxiety about being "left behind" and not having time to "catch up". This range of feeling was expressed at both primary and post-primary levels.
- The difficulty of getting one-to-one feedback whether in the classroom or for homework was seen as an issue.
- Some students indicated that they were experiencing a loss of practical work and that this was having a major impact on their motivation and enjoyment of schoolwork.

One student encapsulated the whole group's feelings in a single sentence: "I would love to hold a hammer."

- Students indicated that there was a decrease in collaborative learning opportunities that has resulted from social distancing in classrooms and that this had negatively impacted on learning progress and outcomes, as well as on enjoyment of schoolwork.
- During the period of school closure, students, particularly at senior cycle, developed autonomous learning skills and took responsibility for managing their own work and their time. These students would like teachers to acknowledge these capabilities and allow them greater opportunity to manage their own work plans.

5.1 Schoolwork and learning: Reflections and observations

Reflections on schoolwork at home and learning in school

The focus group participants were keen to contrast their experiences of doing schoolwork at home with the current experience of learning in school, with the latter, despite challenges, being presented in a relatively positive light.

Post-primary student Teachers need to be aware of students' study plans, trust us. They trusted us during the lockdown, they need to trust us now.	**Primary pupil** ...more motivated to learn in school than learning alone at home...
Primary pupil My parents didn't understand the Irish so I left it to the end.	**Post-primary student** I cried at home because I couldn't do the Maths.
Primary pupil Our teacher explains things better than Google.	**Primary pupil** The teacher does things in different ways; at home it was harder.

Wellbeing, schoolwork and balance

Wellbeing was addressed obliquely and implicitly in much of the feedback. Students expressed a concern about the amount of information available to them about the arrangements for schooling and examinations; this was a cause of some anxiety for them.

In a few cases, stress and the lack of balance in the lives of the participants, were addressed explicitly:

Post-primary student
The lack of definite information about Leaving Cert 2021 is highly stressful.

Post-primary student
Teachers don't understand the amount of stress we are experiencing, the lack of balance in our lives**.**

Post-primary student
Evenings are dictated by homework … you can't plan a walk, meet friends**.**

Learning experiences and learning outcomes

Focus group participants expressed high levels of awareness of the factors that contribute to positive learning outcomes. This is reflected particularly in feedback related to integration of subjects, availability of revision materials online, one-to-one feedback and support, collaborative learning and assessment.

Post-primary student
We are doing regular little tests; this feels like you are doing the Leaving Cert every day.

Primary pupil
Some find it difficult to ask a teacher for help in front of the whole group.

Post-primary student
Not working together is having an impact on learning in some subjects.

Primary pupil
If you ask for help, the whole class has to wait. As the teacher can't come down and help individuals, she has to explain it again to the whole group.

Post-primary student
We don't get as much one-to-one feedback on homework or class work.

> **Post-primary student**
> Teachers make more tutorials and slide shows of classes. If you miss something in class, you have an opportunity to catch up at home.

> **Primary pupil**
> Subjects are integrated, it's more fun and the teacher mixes them up.

Feeling left behind

Anxiety around being "left behind", not being able to "catch up" and having gaps in learning was communicated at both primary and post-primary levels. Primary pupils were conscious of having regressed in some skills that they had mastered prior to school closure. Senior cycle students at post-primary expressed particular concerns around completing Leaving Certificate courses.

> **Primary pupil**
> I feel I am behind and didn't get to learn a lot of the things I should have learned in 4th class.

> **Post-primary student**
> When we were at home, we could manage our own time. We now have lots of homework and don't have time to catch up.

> **Post-primary student**
> Normal revision time won't be there for Leaving Cert 2021 as we are trying to make up the lost time.

> **Primary pupil**
> Before this happened, I was very good in school. Now I am not as good as I was.

Subject-specific reflections

While the focus groups did not consider individual subjects, of particular note was that the pupils' and students' experience of practical subjects, Physical Education and languages, including Irish, had changed.

> **Primary pupil**
> No singing!

> **Post-primary student**
> We are missing the normal sports programme.

Post-primary student
In some practical subjects, we are only doing theory; classes are becoming repetitive

Primary pupil
We didn't practise speaking Irish when schools were closed. We need to go back over this.

Technology and learning platforms

Since the initial period of school closure in March 2020, the use of technology to support teaching, learning and assessment has transformed how children and young people interact with schooling. Teachers and school management have introduced or consolidated the use of online learning platforms to enable inclusive access and positive learning experiences. Difficulties with the online platforms, per se, were less in evidence than the predictable issues of poor broadband and lack of access to devices:

Post-primary student
Sometimes students do not have the equipment to connect to online classes or internet signal is poor.

Post-primary student
Google Classroom is being used in school and at home; we submit homework on *Google Classroom*.

Primary pupil
Seesaw was hard because it was new.

6. Focus group feedback: Impact and influence

6.1 The Lundy model of participation and the focus group project

In planning the focus groups activity, in line with the Lundy Model, it was decided to take a number of steps to ensure that the key principle of "Influence" would receive due attention.

Lundy's Model of Participation[3]

All participants were very keen to be kept in a communication loop with the Department so that they would know about the impact of their feedback.

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[3] The graphic is based on the Lundy Model of Participation in Lundy, L. (2007) 'Voice is not enough: Conceptualizing Article 12 of the UNCRC', British Educational Research Journal, Vol. 33, No. 6, pp. 927-42.

6.2 Feedback strategies

Local feedback in school	Feedback to the system	Feedback to focus group schools
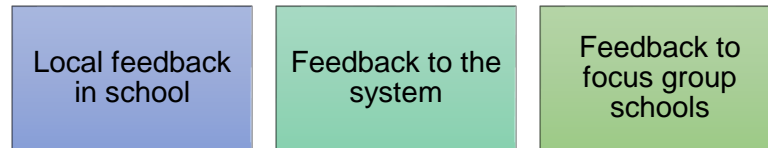
Three feedback strategies were identified for this project:

- Local feedback in school: agreed feedback to the school principal arising from the focus group meeting
- Feedback to the system: feedback around key issues to the Department
- Feedback to focus group schools: feedback to the focus group participants about the impact of the focus groups, in line with the principles of the Lundy Model.

7. Conclusion

This project was about giving voice and an open opportunity to pupils and students to share with inspectors their experiences since returning to school in September. This engagement by inspectors with pupils and students was in line with the principles of the Lundy Model of Child Participation.

Pupils and students told inspectors that they were generally very happy to be back in school and to be able to reconnect with their friends.They appreciated the amount of work done by principals, teachers and others in the school community to create a safe learning environment at school.They also spoke openly about how the implementation of new rules and arrangements in their own school were affecting them and their learning experiences in areas such as collaborative learning, feedback on their work, and assessment. Senior cycle students in post-primary schools asked for greater autonomy to manage their work.

The engagement with children and young people provided very valuable insights into primary pupils' and post-primary students' experience of being back in school in September 2020. While the number of schools, pupils and students involved in this project was small, the findings are nonetheless important for the participants themselves, for schools generally and for the Inspectorate and the Department more broadly.

One of the main findings from the engagement is the importance of children and young people being in school for the educational and social development and their overall wellbeing.The pupils and students who participated in this project highlighted the value of being back in school on a number of levels.The findings also highlight a number of areas for schools generally to consider, and to develop further where necessary, as they strive to ensure that teaching and learning experiences are as meaningful as possible for children and young people in a face-to-face schooling context in pandemic times.

Appendix A: Further information on key references in this report

Lundy Model of Participation

https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9128db-national-strategy-on-children-and-young-peoples-participation-in-dec/

Ireland's *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015)* is informed by the Lundy Model of Participation. The guiding principles of the Lundy model are underpinned by the belief that before anyone can express a view, they must be given opportunities to form that view

The four Lundy principles are:
1. Space: children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view
2. Voice: children must be facilitated to express their view
3. Audience: the view must be listened to
4. Influence: the view must be acted on as appropriate

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx

https://www.oco.ie/childrens-rights/un-convention/

The UNCRC consists of forty-one articles, each of which details a different type of right. The rights are not ranked in order of importance; instead they interact with one another to form one integrated set of rights. Ireland signed up to the UNCRC twenty-eight years ago in 1992 and in doing so, recognised that children under the age of eighteen are 'rights-holders' and that their rights should be protected, respected and made real.

Article 12, in particular, is quoted in discussion around education. It states that "*States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*"

Our Voices Our Schools

https://www.ourvoicesourschools.ie

Our Voices Our Schools is an online resource, sponsored by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, for schools to support listening to and involving young people in decision making about matters that affect them in school. It is the outcome of a decision made by *Comhairle na nÓg* National Executive 2016/17 to focus specifically on equality in the school setting. *Our Voices Our Schools* is focused on a rights-based approach to involving children and young people in decision-making and is underpinned by the Lundy Model of Participation.

Appendix B: Focus group rationale

Focus groups provide a qualitative approach to gain a detailed understanding of specific issues. Open questions are used to facilitate group discussion where the inspectors take a peripheral role as moderators and recorders. A key principle is that discussion should evolve through the participants' engagement, rather than be driven or led by specific questions or the information needs of the organisers. Participants are purposely selected groups, rather than a statistically representative sample.

The focus groups were planned and conducted using a methodology that derives from the principles of the Lundy Model of Participation and the rights-based approach of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)[4].The inspectors who were involved in the Focus Group Project (focus group team) participated in a workshop led by Anne O'Donnell, Hub na nÓg Manager, which addressed and reinforced the guiding principles related to child participation and the Inspectorate's obligations to uphold children's rights.In addition, the Inspectorate has received expert advice on conducting remote (online) focus groups with young people.

Use of focus groups to facilitate discussion with primary pupils and post-primary students during the September-December 2020 period was a good choice. Many insights into children's and young people's experiences of the resumption of schooling and their experience of schoolwork and learning have been gained through this approach.

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[4] Refer to Appendix A for references.