An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

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

Contents

1. Introduction

This report shares the outcomes of focus group meetings with pupils and students that were carried out by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education in a small number of primary and post-primary schools in late November 2020. It is one of a series of reports on the Inspectorate's research activity in schools during the 2020/21 school year. It is the second report on research through focus groups with pupils/students conducted since September 2020.

2. Inspectorate's focus group research project: Overview

2.1 Project background

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

- informing policy decisions and the provision of further guidance and supports for schools, teachers, children and young people
- recognising good practice in schools through the lens of pupils' and students' experiences of school in the September – December 2020 term
- realising the Inspectorate's commitment to pupil/student voice and the principles of the Lundy Model of Child Participation[1].

The purpose and focus of the work were similar to those of the focus groups that were carried out in September and October 2020.

2.2 Schools that participated in the focus groups

Focus groups were held in eleven schools in November 2020. Six primary and five post-primary schools participated.

- A combination of DEIS[2], Irish-medium, rural and urban, small and large, single sex and co-educational schools were included.
- All focus groups took place in school settings.
- All schools were requested to inform their board of management and/or senior management teams that the school was participating in the Inspectorate's Focus Group Project.

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[1] 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. Refer to Appendix A.

[2] 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 Regulations and School Protocols	Separate Junior and Senior Focus Groups	Assent and Consent
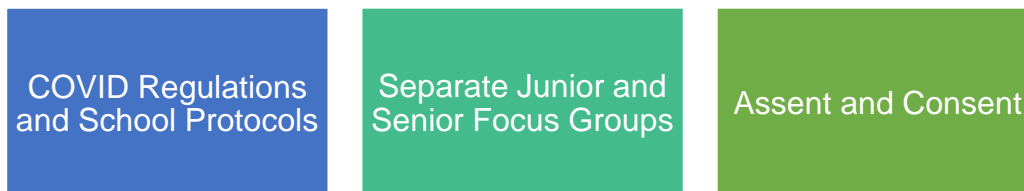
COVID-19 Regulations and School Protocols

COVID regulations, health and safety guidelines and the schools' protocols were paramount in the organisation and conduct of the focus groups in schools. 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

Senior and junior focus groups were run separately in both primary and post-primary schools. This reflected physical distancing requirements and the need to respect bubbles and pods. As observed in the previous focus groups, an unexpected consequence of this arrangement was the better experience for interaction that the small number of participants in each group provided and a greater likelihood of the sharing of experiences among the participants.

In instances where only one year group or class group made up the composition of the focus group due to procedures involving pods or working with a new school, the participants invariably spoke very freely. Some participants reported that the fact of having just one class or year group together created a sense of 'beginning a new journey together' and that 'they wouldn't be alone', they could speak and 'no one was going to judge…'

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	• Transition Year • 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/guardian consent were received in advance of meetings.[3] In addition, each participating school was requested to inform its board of management and senior management teams that the school was participating in the Focus Group Project.

2.4 Focus group outline

The same key discussion topics, supported by a small number of guiding questions, were used as with the focus groups in September and October 2020. 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. The main topics and the supporting questions were addressed through the rubric of discussing what is working well, and identifying the challenges.

Looking back	• Can you remember what it was like when you had to leave school in March? How did you feel? • Can you remember what was it like to do school work at home?
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 schoolwork 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?

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[3] 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.

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 the period of school closure
- A range of achievement levels
- All school programmes, e.g. 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, 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 during the focus groups fitted comfortably within one or other of the main areas that were discussed during the focus groups in September and October 2020. In November 2020, the focus group participants used this opportunity more to reflect and reinforce points which they felt were significant during the discussions or to raise areas on which they wanted support and further guidance. Some examples of the particular issues raised by participants included:

- Pupils and students wanted to be involved in discussions and requested that they be asked to provide feedback on areas that directly involve them. For example, they want to be asked about how they were finding the safety routines and rules at school and what they thought about COVID-19. Those who spoke about this made reference to the fact that others should not speak on their behalf all of the time.
- Some primary school pupils advised that they wanted learning to be more fun.
- For some pupils/students, public transport was a cause of anxiety and contributed to making the school day longer.

The focus group participants in November 2020 also requested that specific questions be asked and inspectors facilitated such requests. One such example included, 'Do you feel safe in school?' While participants overwhelmingly agreed that they felt safe, the request for the inclusion of COVID-related questions, together with the extensive commentary by pupils and students about COVID procedures during many of the focus group sessions, is indicative of the significant impact that the pandemic and the associated safety arrangements was having on pupils and students.

To capture the pupils'/students' experiences of being back at school in the first term of this school year relative to those associated with the period of school closure, the focus group facilitators spent some time asking students to 'look back' at the period of school closure and the early days of school reopening.

4. Back to school: Key messages

When talking about being back at school, participants were asked to consider their experiences of returning to school and the health and safety guidelines that had been in place since schools re-opened in September 2020.
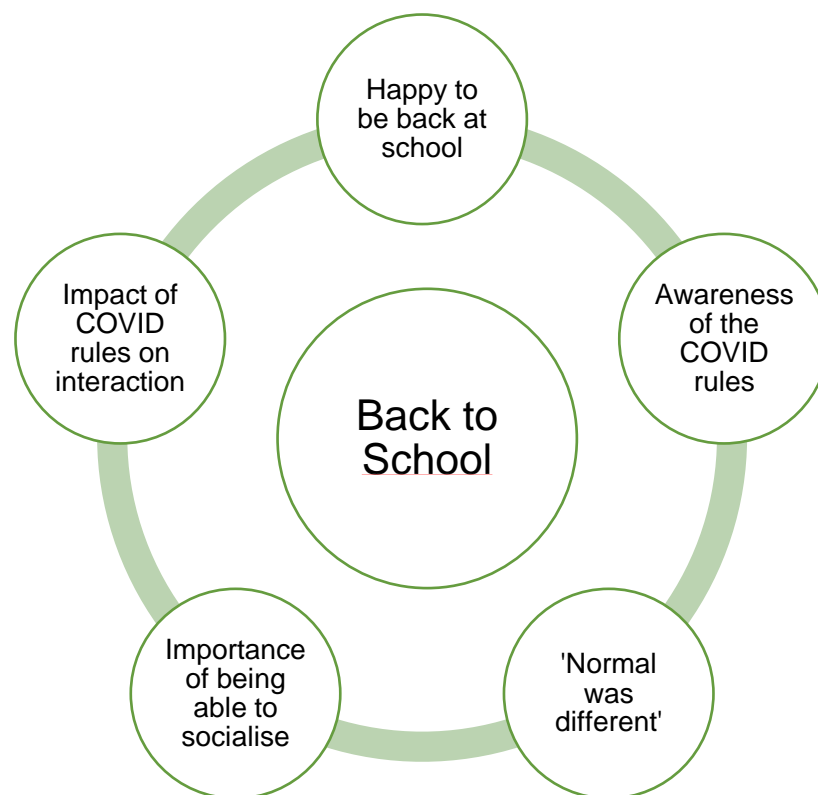
The key points emerging were:

- Overall, pupils and students were happy to be at school. They indicated a very strong preference for being in school rather than working from home.
- Pupils and students had a heightened awareness of the new rules and procedures related to COVID-19 and spoke persistently about the measures in place at school to limit the spread of the virus. While understanding the measures in place and feeling safe as a result of these measures, participants spoke of a fatigue around the measures.

- The impact of the new rules, particularly the use of masks and physical distancing measures on the experience at school and on interaction with others was commented on repeatedly by participants. Not being able to hear peers or teachers speak owing to the wearing of masks or to read or gauge emotion was of great concern to focus group participants. For some students, mask wearing made it difficult to make friends and get to know their teachers.
- Participants at primary and post-primary level commented on the importance of socialising with their friends and classmates. They also advised of the role the school should take in continuing to organise and facilitate these interactions. Suggestions offered by participants included 'swapping rooms to give the biggest rooms to the biggest children', 'more opportunities for interaction between year groups (outside)', and use of breakout rooms and Perspex dividers between students.
- Participants showed considerable maturity when reflecting on an experience of school that was now very different for children and young people. While participants had a real sense of loss for activities that were previously undertaken, they also appreciated that the new way of doing things had some benefits.

4.1 Back to school: Reflections and observations

While many themes raised during the September-October 2020 focus groups resurfaced, pupils and students in the November focus groups spoke about each theme with a greater intensity. This may be due to the fact that pupils'/students' understanding of the implementation of COVID procedures was more established at this point of the school year and this had given them a greater confidence when talking about these themes. It may also be that the impact of the measures on pupils and students was more pronounced in November 2020. Notwithstanding this, the participants in the November 2020 focus groups also emphasised that there was a stronger sense of community in their schools and appreciated that principals and teachers were doing the very best that they could.

Appreciation for being back in school
Focus group participants described their anxieties about returning to school in September, including nervousness about the use of public transport to travel to school. On the other hand, they also described a sense of excitement and appreciation in relation to being back at school, indicating a very strong preference for being in school rather than working from home. Students reported that they were happy to be with their friends and that there was a sense of reassurance in knowing that their teachers were back at school too.

Primary pupil	**Post- Primary student**
It makes it much easier when teachers are there and you actually start understanding.	I need the motivation and expectations of teachers to complete work.

> **Primary pupil**
> I really like the routine of school.

> **Post-Primary student**
> I was happier than other years going to school.

> **Primary pupil**
> I didn't think that I was learning anything new at home. When we are in school we are actually learning.

> **Primary pupil**
> I was scared that I wouldn't get to mix with my friends and we would be stuck in one chair for the whole day.

> **Post-Primary student**
> I was personally happy, looking back it had a huge impact on me in third year ...

> **Primary pupil**
> I liked home-schooling at first, but now I never want to hear about it ever again.

Heightened awareness of the new rules

Focus group participants in November 2020 appreciated the importance of the new rules in keeping them and their family members safe although unsurprisingly, their responses also indicated a level of fatigue and frustration with the sustained implementation of the measures. In particular, students in post-primary schools noted that the COVID policy was the most consistently implemented policy in their schools. Pupils and students demonstrated a clear understanding of why they undertook the safety procedures and identified appropriate associations with COVID protocols as was captured in one participant's observation, 'Pupils were sent home if they coughed.'

Post-primary students mentioned that they were, at times, reluctant to interact with peers as they were conscious that they did not know where their peers had been or with whom they were in contact. These students reported that their reluctance came as a result of several factors, including the jobs of their parents/guardians, especially where parents/guardians worked in health care, and/or they had someone vulnerable or elderly at living at home.

Despite a level of fatigue around the measures in place in relation to COVID-19, pupils and students demonstrated a high level of interest in having access to all relevant information about matters that affected them. They advised that they wanted more communication about COVID-19 and shared ways in which they felt this could be done, for example, specific

announcements that pupils and students could listen to, or 'letters home explaining about the new situation' (the learning environment).

Primary pupil
When I heard the WHO say that masks were good to use and all our teachers wore masks this made me feel comfortable.

Post-Primary student
The COVID policy is very comprehensive. It was clear; different subjects and each department all worked and acted the same.

Post-Primary student
Social distancing made it hard to make new friends.

Primary pupil
A few things changed in the classroom. We have to sanitise coming in and out.

Post-Primary student
(I am) nervous about making friends, when you don't know where they have been or who they were with ...

Primary pupil
When I'm in the class, I always mess around with my friends and I find it difficult to remember I need to social distance.

Impact of COVID-19 rules at school

There was also a more acute awareness of the impact on pupils and students of procedures and protocols related to COVID-19 than that evidenced among participants in the earlier focus groups in September and October 2020.

Post-primary students predominantly commented upon their own wearing of masks and the impact of this on their learning experiences. First-year students reported that the wearing of masks by them and others at school impacted greatly on their capacity to make friends. Primary pupils spoke positively of the fact that their teacher was wearing a mask and it made them feel safe. However, they also indicated frustration with not being able to understand and hear the teacher with the mask or to see their teacher's expression.

Participants' views of physical distancing measures such as pods and bubbles varied from acceptance to frustration. Some pupils and students felt that schools were very strict while others felt that they would like more supervision and reminders about social distancing. In some instances, pupils and students wanted more supervision and space during break times as these were the times when physical distancing was not adhered to as rigidly.

Post- Primary student
Don't really know what the teachers or principal look like. Although we have really got to know their voices. Would be good if they had more photographs of themselves around.

Primary pupil
We can't hear the teacher and read her lips as well as before due to the masks.

Post-Primary student
…have less space to move around...and it's harder to social distance. We need to take more safety measures to stay safe.

Primary pupil
(There is need to) use the yard more often with more supervision and make sure everyone is keeping the rules.

Post-Primary student
I am worried about passing COVID onto family members who are elderly or have underlying conditions.

'Normal was different'

Participants referred to being confused initially about how being back at school would work because the new arrangements associated with the pandemic were very different to previous arrangements. A few participants expressed shock that there would be 'that many people in a room' whilst others reported that it was difficult to get used to COVID-related measures such as enhanced cleaning that were being undertaken daily. Participants spoke positively about new systems and about some changes, for example, staggered breaks and having no lockers. The simple act of hugging was missed and in describing how things used to be in school, participants had a sense of loss for the activities that were once undertaken. Pupils and students spoke of varying practices across schools in relation to the organisation of extra-curricular activities and the use of and access to the yard and/or to sports equipment.

Primary pupil
You couldn't hug your friend when you saw them after such a long time.

Post-Primary student
School kids can train outside of school and can't do (so) in school.

Post-Primary student
(We) do not like eating lunch in base room.

Primary pupil
SNAs play games with us in the yard.

Primary pupil
Moving around the classroom for games, e.g. *GoNoodle*, can't happen now. It's hard to stay at desks and not be able to see one another's work.

Post-Primary student
We are using IT more; COVID made the shift faster and it's better. We are using less books and no lockers. (We) do not miss the lockers.

Post-Primary student
This year, we are doing more in class because we are not missing for extra-curricular activities. This is a good and bad thing.

5. Schoolwork and learning: Key messages

This section of the report shares the feedback that pupils and students provided regarding their learning experiences and schoolwork since returning to school for the 2020/21 school year.
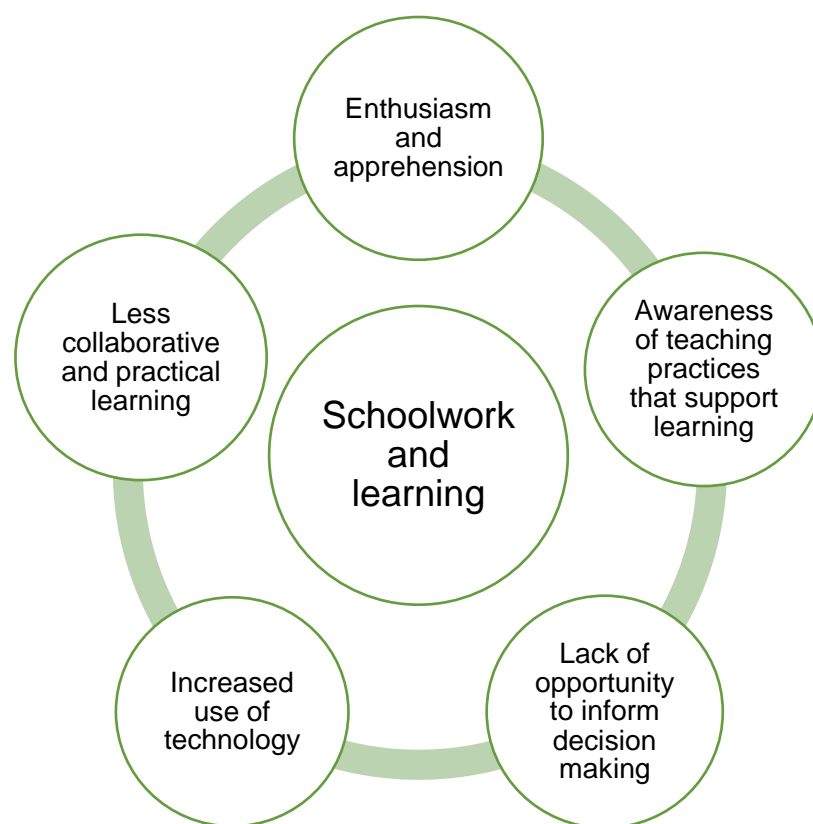
In summary, the key points emerging were:

- Participants expressed a range of feelings when discussing their experience of schoolwork and learning since returning to school in September 2020.These alternated between enthusiasm about being back and apprehension about gaps in learning and assessment. They were generally very happy to have ready access to their teacher in school.
- Participants were strongly aware of the teaching approaches that best support their learning.

- Participants reported that they were being provided with fewer collaborative and practical learning opportunities and that this impacted negatively on their learning experiences.
- Participants were very positive about the increased use of digital technologies by their teachers.
- Some participants felt that they were not consulted on decisions that affected them: 'Adults are making the decisions and rules, but children are experiencing them.'

5.1 Schoolwork and learning: Reflections and observations

Focus group participants commented extensively on school work and learning. While in general, participants were happy and appreciated being back at school, they had strong opinions about their learning experiences and the impact of teaching approaches.

Approaches that make a difference

Participants were very aware of how approaches to teaching and learning impacted their learning. Having access to a teacher onsite was generally viewed very positively and made it easier to ask questions or to clarify aspects of their learning. Participants appeared somewhat doubtful about '...lots of time spent going over things' but were happy to note that 'more time is given now to learning how (to learn)'. Some post-primary students highlighted teaching practices that focused on information-giving and note-taking in lieu of access to textbooks in class. Fewer practical and collaborative learning activities was a particular concern for a number of participants at both primary and post-primary level.

Primary pupil
Thinking about secondary school and thinking about the bits of learning we didn't do or we missed (is difficult).

Post-Primary student
In some subjects, teachers are getting us to take notes because we don't have the book. The teacher is reassured that students have the information but (it's) not good for students; there is a lot (of information.)

Post-Primary student
Note taking has increased as photocopies are no longer allowed and it would be helpful if this could be managed better.

Primary pupil
Teachers still have fun with their class but the games are limited.

Practical activity

Participants indicated that in some instances, their experience of learning was limited by the constraints on practical activity arising from their school's COVID-19 rules. A reported absence of practical learning led some participants to conclude that learning was 'more difficult'. Activity associated with practical subjects such as Art and Physical Education (PE) was reported to be more limited than in previous years although the situation appeared to have improved as the term progressed.

> **Primary pupil**
> Now Art is limited because we can't share the materials

> **Post-Primary student**
> When doing some project work, like in Science, we have to ensure we social distance and this is very difficult.

> **Primary pupil**
> PE has changed to outside all the time. Wet days mean no PE. The hall/equipment can't be used so PE is boring and the same routine always.

> **Primary pupil**
> PE has changed a lot; the only activities we have done are badminton and rounders and it has to be outside.

> **Post-Primary student**
> Transition year is very different. All of the practical elements of the course are gone**.**

Collaborative learning experiences

Whilst talking about their learning, pupils and students in general reported that they were being given limited opportunities for group work and collaboration. Some participants commented upon the fact that they missed the interactions with peers, both in a social way and also in supporting their learning. Primary pupils advised of their reservations about pods with comments such as, 'Pods, they are difficult. The teacher chose them'; 'Pods, I know why they are in place but I don't like them'. That said, pupils and students agreed overwhelmingly that schools and teachers were doing their best under the circumstances.

Primary pupil
We are not allowed out of our seats.

Post- Primary student
(It is) hard to rely on a small group (pod). If you are stuck, more paired work (is okay) as it is hard to work on your own.

Primary pupil
We are with people who are our own age and who can help you and know what you are doing.

Primary pupil
I've always found school hard and I continue to find school very hard now.

Post-Primary student
I would rather have a busy classroom and collaborative class. Learning on your own isn't beneficial.

Post- Primary student
I love having group discussions. If you are taking notes, it takes time. The discussion is fun. Fun is missing.

Post- Primary student
Pods (overflow classes) are not conducive to learning.

Post- Primary student
I like not having to work in groups.

Concern about gaps in learning

Students at junior cycle in post-primary particularly spoke of feeling anxious about gaps in learning. Students in third and sixth year spoke of the anxiety and uncertainty they felt about classroom based assessments (CBAs) and Certificate examinations. Some senior students, however, spoke about their own personal learning journey and about how they managed their own learning. For others, school closure and the extended time out of the classroom offered some students time to reflect on their own attitudes to and aptitudes for learning.

> **Post-Primary student**
> (Third year)
>
> We are not sure about exams, nothing is definite. (There are) a lot of teachers talking about what they think will happen.

> **Primary pupil**
> The longer we are back we are doing more work. This helps me feel more educated. The teacher did a fifth class test and that helped me to see what I needed to do.

> **Primary pupil**
> Everybody is dealing with things differently.

> **Primary pupil**
> I don't feel I got educated enough last year.

> **Post-Primary student**
> Calculated grades and the uncertainty led to the fact that teachers put a lot more work on us. It's gone down a bit. Teachers wanted a substantial amount of work to grade.

Technology and learning

Pupils and students spoke favourably during the focus groups about the changing and increased use of digital technologies by their teachers to support their learning. For the most part, they were happy to see the inclusion of digital technologies and further use of devices in the classroom. They welcomed and praised their schools for the flexibility and pace with which their schools and teachers had adopted digital learning approaches. Nonetheless, a few students advised that they would like increased use and further development of digital learning opportunities in their classes.

> **Post-Primary student**
> The digital shift has really helped me adapt. Teachers give instructions with the assumption that everyone could do (it) and that wasn't the case.

Post-primary student
They (the school) should allow mobile phones. Some teachers are not consistent with phones. The school are afraid if you are recording. (This is) something that could be looked at.

Primary pupil
I like the app. You can use your voice to tell teacher the answers; you can text and you can take pictures of your work.

Primary pupil
We have new equipment for PE and laptops for English.

Primary pupil
We are using computers to research projects and we like that work.

6. Focus group feedback: Impact and influence

6.1 The Lundy Model of Participation and the focus group project

In planning the focus group 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[4]

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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[4] 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
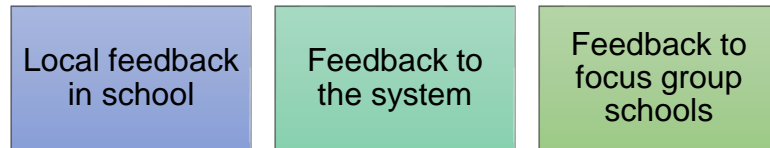
Three feedback strategies were identified for this project:

- 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 groups schools: feedback to the focus group participants about the impact of the focus groups, in line with the principles of the Lundy Model, to be implemented at the conclusion of the project.

7. Conclusion

The student voice project was about giving voice and an open opportunity to pupils and students to share with inspectors their experiences of being in school since September 2020. The focus groups with pupils and students in November 2020 were carried out in accordance with the principles of the Lundy Model of Child Participation.

Many of the themes which emerged from the September/October focus groups with pupils/students resurfaced but with a greater intensity. Pupils and students demonstrated a heightened awareness of the rules associated with COVID-19 and the impact of the pandemic on their experience of school. Pupils and students shared valuable insights into the teaching approaches that best support their learning. They also shared valuable suggestions on how their learning and well-being could be supported at school in the pandemic context. In particular, they highlighted the importance of collaborative and practical work and the need to involve them in decisions that affect them. 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.

A key message from pupils and students during the focus groups in November 2020 was that being in school, despite restrictions owing to COVID-19, was very important in terms of their wellbeing, their socialisation and their learning. Pupils and students were very happy to be in school and articulated a new found appreciation for the work of their school and teachers. They also indicated a very strong preference for being in school rather than working from home.

As with the September 2020 report, 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 DCYA, 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)[5].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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[5] Refer to Appendix A for references.