

A Report On

Digital Learning During the Pandemic

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Project working on behalf of OCC (with COMF funding) to conduct research into the impact of digital inclusion in schools during the pandemic

Digital Learning During the Pandemic

Aims and Objectives

Working as a team of three primary and secondary teachers, the aim of this project was to discover the impact that the pandemic has had on digital literacy in primary and secondary schools across Oxfordshire. COMF funding (Containment Outbreak Management Fund) was secured for this project in order to facilitate discussion across Oxfordshire schools. The aim of this report is to present an analysis of the difficulties, successes, achievements, and cutting-edge practices employed by staff, and experienced by pupils during the pandemic. The report also illustrates where good, innovative practice has taken place and makes some recommendations for the future.

The project explored the following objectives:

- To discuss the impact of remote learning on staff and pupils.
- To discover new skills and future pedagogical practices.
- To consider where schools will be digitally in ten years' time.
- To understand any significant digital difficulties during the pandemic.
- To evaluate how digital literacy changed during the pandemic.
- To identify cutting-edge digital practices in education.
- To understand the impact of technical limitations on remote learning.
- To realise the benefits of a more digitally mature education sector.

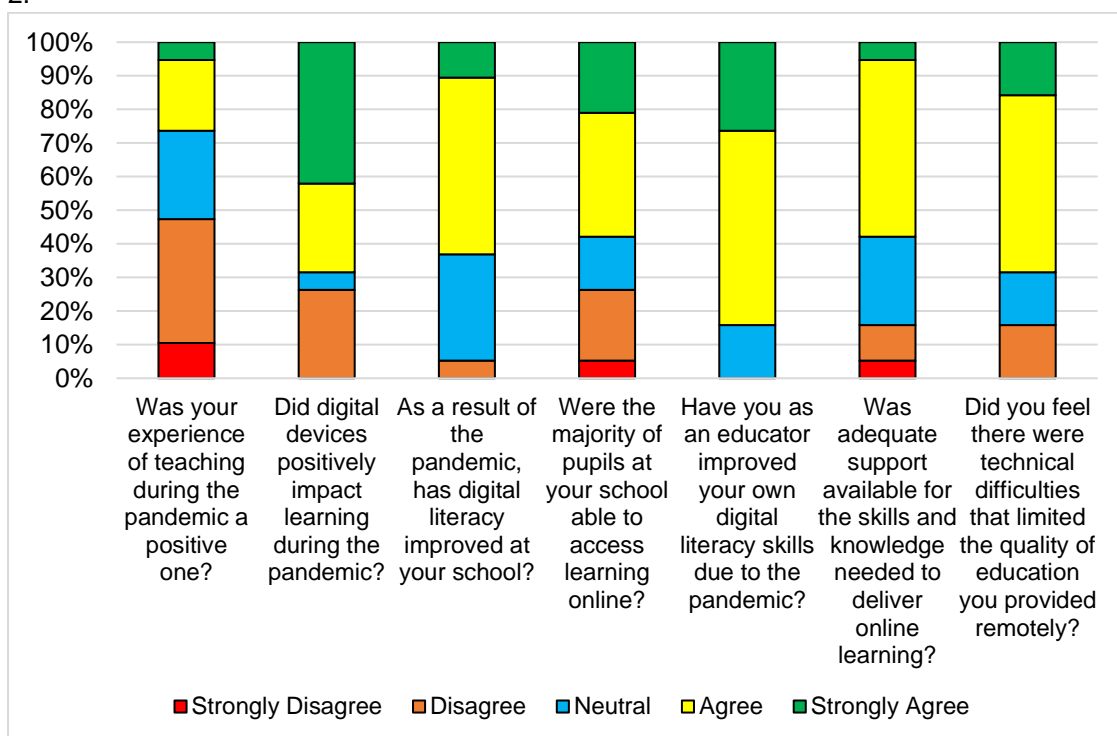
In order to meet the objectives, Oxfordshire headteachers of primary, secondary and special schools were contacted, inviting their participation in the project. Schools could opt-in in a variety of ways. Staff had the option to participate in a live online discussion and both staff and pupils had the option to complete online surveys using Google Forms. The total number of schools that took part was 11, including 25 members of staff and 398 pupils.

The report findings were categorised into primary and secondary, including special schools within these categories.

Report Findings

Primary Staff

The members of school staff that chose to take part in the survey included teaching assistants, specialist teachers, class teachers, assistant heads, deputy heads and headteachers. The age range was inclusive of nursery to upper key stage 2.



Overall Experience of Primary Staff

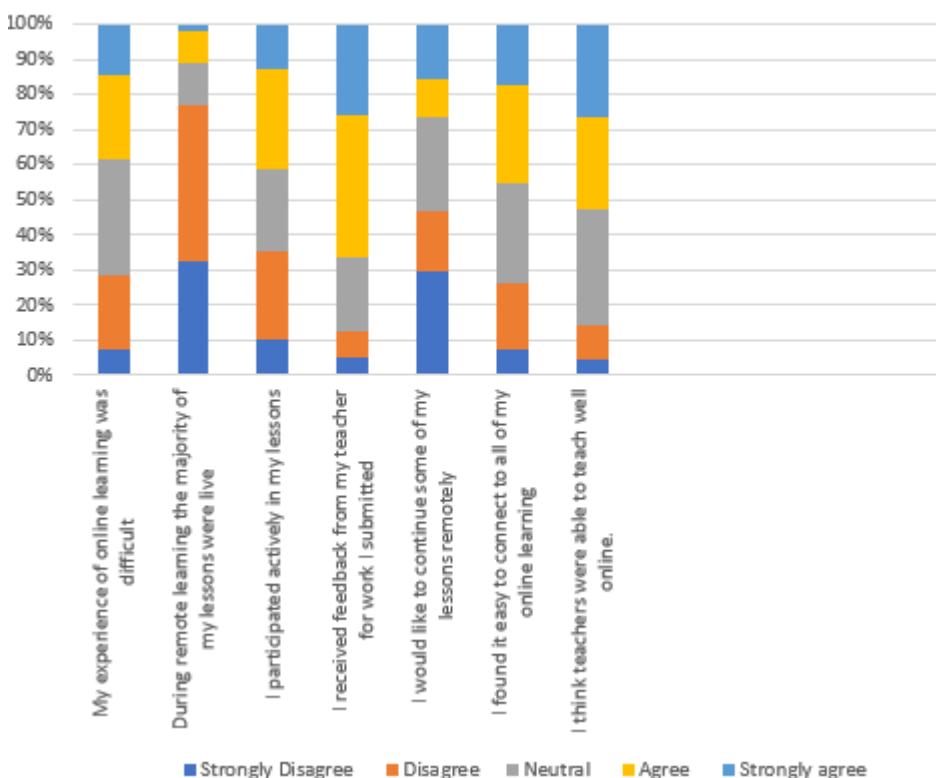
The majority of staff in primary schools reported that digital literacy had improved in their schools as a direct result of the pandemic. The data also highlighted that the digital literacy skills of staff had improved as a direct result of remote learning and 32% said that they employed inspirational practices during remote learning. The majority of staff reported that digital devices positively impacted learning during the pandemic. Over half the staff responses acknowledged that pupils had access to online learning in some capacity. On average, staff felt that adequate technical support was given to them but 69% reported that technical difficulties limited the quality of education that they could provide. Some staff responses showed that more technical support was given to parents/carers and other members of staff, rather than to pupils. The most popular platform used in primary schools was Teams, followed by Google Classroom and Zoom. Detailed responses regarding teachers' experience of remote learning included comments on the difficulties of teaching remotely whilst working with pupils in school under the key-worker scheme. *'It was challenging for teachers to juggle the remote learning alongside providing for the children attending school.'* *'Teaching children in person, in the class, as well as teaching those at home doubled the workload overnight.'*

Some teachers felt that a particular success of remote learning was that education could continue with relatively little preparation or technical training. Some commented on how they created videos, used applications e.g. Sway, and that certain platforms were useful for uploading work and setting and marking homework. Others reported that it gave pupils the opportunity to engage with their own interests and, *'parents became more familiar with the educational online resources that helped their children with their learning.'* *'Lots of parents supported doing extra reading at home.'*

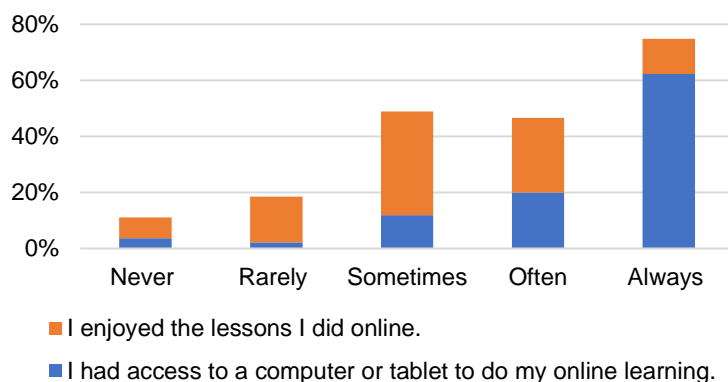
Responses regarding disadvantages of remote learning included a general sense of isolation, lack of motivation and increased workload. Teachers commented on pupils' lack of devices, stating, *'lots of families did not have enough devices or the capacity/space to be able to support several children learning at home.'* Technical limitations and boundaries were commented on, *'asking a question was much more difficult via email or by typing it into Teams.'* Staff commented on particular interventions and year groups, *'It was, 'very hard to differentiate learning for reception-aged children.'* In addition, there were, *'technical difficulties, it was harder to give 1:1 or small group support and it was difficult to receive and provide feedback.'*

Primary Pupils

Primary Pupil Survey 1



Primary Pupil Survey 2

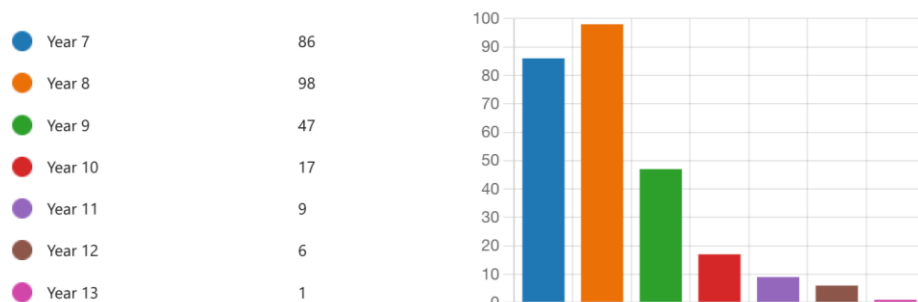


The survey responses showed that the majority of pupils accessing and engaging in online learning received feedback from staff, their teachers taught remote lessons well and that they found the experience of remote learning difficult. Half the pupils completing the survey engaged with remote learning and found it easy to connect to devices and the Internet. The majority of pupils expressed that most of their lessons were not live and they wouldn't like to continue some of their lessons remotely. The data shows that 62% of pupils always had access to a computer or tablet to engage in online learning and 77% of pupils sometimes, often or always enjoyed their lessons online.

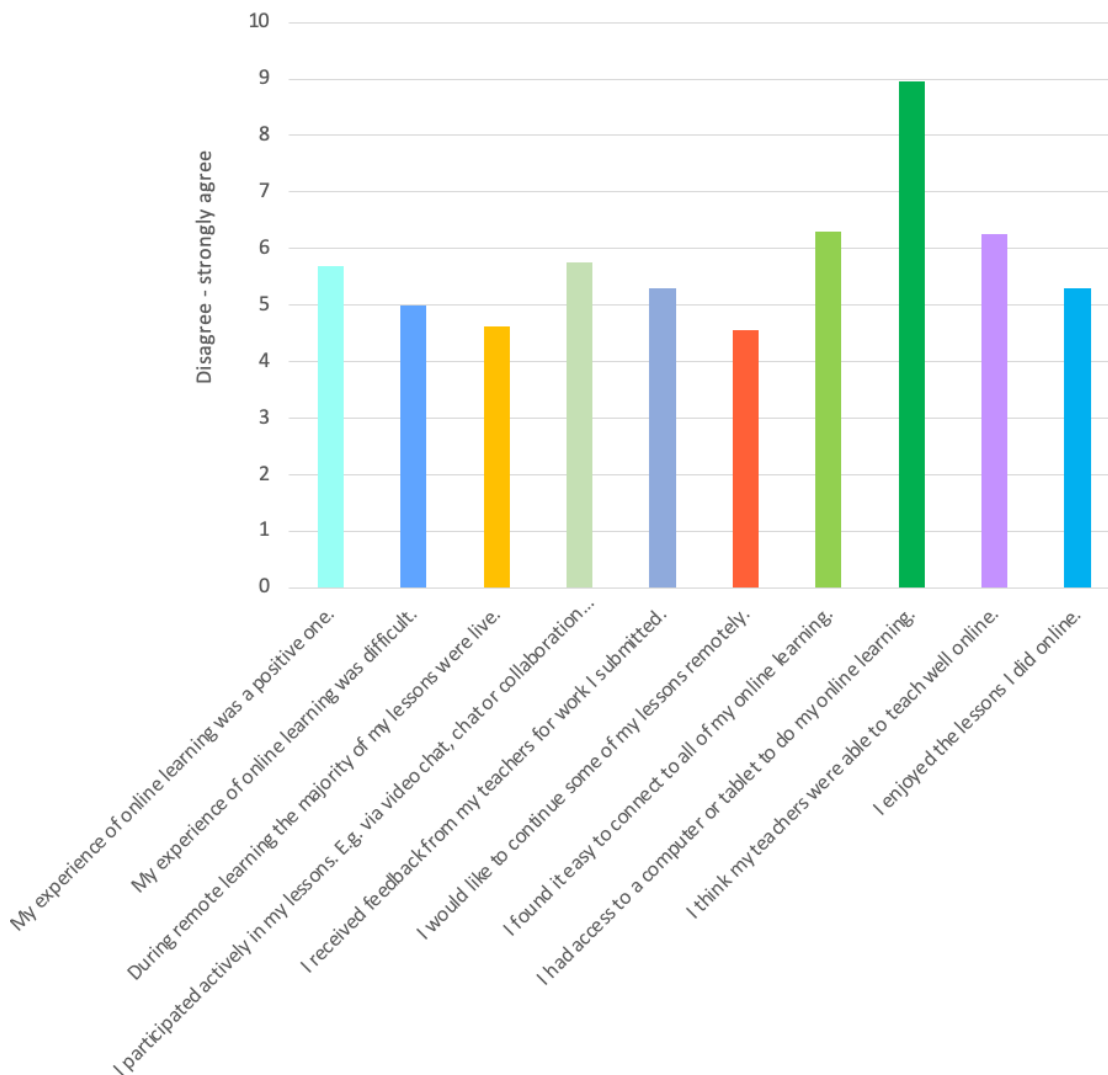
Pupils commented that they enjoyed online lessons. *'They were laid out so that I actually wanted to do them,' 'I enjoyed my lessons online because I didn't have a strict finishing time and that I could spend as much time as I needed,' 'There was no one else to distract you.'* Pupils suggested ways in which remote learning could be improved, *'There should be more live lessons,' 'More support from teachers,'* and, *'Lessons could be more interactive by having time to talk in small groups.'* Pupils thought lessons could be improved in the future by, *'If there was another reason our class had to shut it could be used again,' 'If you have illness that means you can't go to school, you could have a live lesson with your class,'* and, *'for people who are ill or unable to come to school for any reason in the future.'* Pupils were able to articulate their future needs, *'We could have robots for learning and to support,' VR (Virtual Reality) could be used in lessons,'* and *'Everyone should have their own laptop or iPad to use in all their lessons.'* Pupils were able to reflect on how their experience has changed since returning to school. *'Teachers have more live lessons,' 'We did live lessons with our classmates who weren't able to be in school due to Covid,' 'Lessons are easier with an adult because we don't have online learning,' 'We don't use laptops anymore,'* and *'I don't do any online learning'.* The majority of pupils overall felt they would prefer in-person or live teaching over videos of lessons, this was due to having an adult in place to support them. It is worth noting that pupils liked the essence of recorded lessons because they felt less pressure to complete work when compared with live lessons. Whereas teachers felt they would prefer recorded lessons, as it allowed for better time management around preparation of lessons, whilst supporting their own children at home or having a private space to work in.

Secondary Staff

Which year group are you currently in?



Secondary Pupils



Schools faced many challenges at the start of, and during, the pandemic. Pupils, staff and parents needed to participate in rapid training to build their digital confidence so that they could work effectively. Parents played a significant role in supporting their children. As a result, the attainment gap widened where pupils received significant home support. There was, and still is, a misconception that pupils knew what they are doing with IT. They are, 'supposed to be,' digital natives, but for many, the desktop computer is, 'not a thing'. Initial help was given in the form of hardware but unfortunately this was not often compatible with school systems. Government schemes were effective and were supported by mobile phone operators to provide connectivity. Some pupils continued to attend school throughout the pandemic as part of the Key Worker Scheme and were supported by their teachers, who ensured that schools remained open. Responses to our survey from staff and pupils were often emotive, particularly from staff. During the first lockdown staff found it difficult to draw the line between work and home and found it time-consuming to mark and return pupil work. Some staff reported that they were doubtful about how much pupils responded to their feedback.

What we have learned

Primary staff

The majority of staff members reported that their experience of teaching remotely during the pandemic was largely negative with factors including, a lack of engagement and motivation from pupils, difficulty in maintaining differentiation, general workload, technical difficulties and, in some cases, limitations and an overreliance on parents to support at home. Some members of staff felt that they had to support parents with technical issues and that some pupils did little or no learning; they reported finding general questioning and answering difficult and live marking, too. Members of staff also commented on the length of time it took to adapt existing lessons and schemes of work, maintaining a good balance of education for children of key workers and found that assessment for learning (AfL) was particularly difficult. Some staff were still working after hours, more than the norm. Teachers also reported that: planning and uploading took longer,

some subjects were more difficult to teach remotely than others, for example Music, and that it was hard to balance the needs of pupils who would normally have received 1:1 or small group support. Members of staff also reported that where pupils' digital skills advanced, their social skills did not develop at the same rate.

Other members of staff reported that they found innovative ways to engage with pupils during remote learning, stating that they enjoyed creating videos and that, in their experience, pupils were able to access learning in their own time. Other staff members reported advantages such as, replaying videos to consolidate learning, taking learning at their own pace, increased communication and a greater involvement with parents. Other comments included pupils engaging with their own interests and having newly developed digital skills, also an ability to conduct research and send photos and videos of work to teachers. Members of staff commented on their compatibility with the online platforms, finding particular functions useful.

Primary Pupils

The majority of pupils in this sample didn't enjoy learning online. However, benefits were identified as: being more focused in lessons, an increase in pupils' confidence in giving them a voice, independent management of their own learning time. This included aspects of learning such as, independent research and fostering curiosity. The majority of pupils had access to devices and were given support with connectivity. Pupils felt they would like more live lessons (as opposed to recorded lessons) which were interactive e.g. projects with different elements to research in breakout rooms prior to coming back together to collaborate as a class.

The offering that most pupils experienced was of recorded lessons. This was an option that allowed pupils who had to share devices to access lessons at different points throughout the day. This allowed pupils to review and replay teaching inputs in order to consolidate learning. Looking to the development of digital literacy in the future, pupils would like classroom technology to incorporate access to individual devices in all lessons. This unprecedented Covid experience improved pupils' digital literacy and ensured they returned to school with a good skill base with which to move forward.

Secondary Staff and Pupils

Most secondary pupils had access to a computer or tablet. *'For most of my subjects, my teachers did live meetings which made me understand the learning well'*. Pupils commented that they would like to use technology more in lessons instead of, *'just doing it in our exercise books.'* Not doing so is a missed opportunity to build on the nascent skills developed during the pandemic by both staff and pupils. *'I think they should be used more, we live in a modern society where technology is all around us and sooner or later, we are going to have to know how to use it for our learning.'* Staff made a significant effort to ensure that learning took place. It is often forgotten that many members of staff have their own families to support during the pandemic as well as having to run live lessons from their homes. Some staff neither had the knowhow nor the equipment to run home learning and felt under great pressure to deliver a regular timetable. Unfortunately, some staff members reported online bullying by students.

Using a hybrid learning model (both pupils in school and those learning remotely) has allowed schools to broaden the curriculum, for example, offering subjects that would not be possible to run during the normal school timetable such as Astronomy GCSE. For students a hybrid learning environment offers variety and choice, whether it is learning through video, online quizzes or other learning materials. This gives students agency allowing them to take control of their own learning under the guidance of their teachers. Schools need to use technology strategically and ensure they have a plan for its use, being clear about its purpose. It needs to be easy to use for teachers. Learning with technology can be powerful and transformational. Teachers need continuing professional development in order to build on the skills acquired during the pandemic.

Most secondary pupils experienced live lessons for exam classes at KS4 and KS5. Pupils in KS3 experienced lessons via online learning platforms, either through live lessons, pre-recorded videos or set activities. In all lockdowns staff made a significant effort to provide a substantive curriculum. Some staff commented on the lack of training and technology to enable them to provide successful learning environments. As a result, some staff experienced a considerable amount of stress during online learning during the pandemic.

Where pupils engaged with online learning it was generally reported as a positive, with reference to their teachers and their delivery of online learning. Pupils reported a strong response in having access to a digital device for online learning, although households with multiple siblings often had restricted access. It is worth mentioning that where pupils had continued difficulties accessing technology they were able to join the Key Worker Scheme with schools remaining open throughout the pandemic.

Recommendations

This report shows that:

- Pupils would benefit from having access to devices at school at all times as well as an increased use of technology in the classroom. This would embrace and embed the strides made throughout remote learning in digital confidence.

- School development plans should include a digital learning strategy. The main purpose of the strategy should be focused on developing pupils' skills to flourish in a hybrid learning setting and in preparation for a future work environment.
- School development plans should set up pilot schemes to share experiences across broader teaching groups which could be a power agent of improvement and change. This could be achieved by county-wide working groups that share best practice in teaching, learning and working in a hybrid environment.
- Schools could appoint a Digital Learning Coordinator to build on the knowledge gained during the pandemic and investigate the best current practice in technology and pedagogy and share through CPD.
- Information sharing and collaboration among schools is essential; some of this has started already, within academies and trusts.
- Schools may provide opportunities for continued use of remote learning to promote the retention and development of identified key digital literacy skills.
- Schools could consider further use of VR (Virtual Reality) and AI (Artificial Intelligence) as identified by pupils during this survey.

Finally, it is important to consider how we move forward in education with the strategic use of technology to develop and effectively use digital skills. The learning experience that all schools have acquired during the pandemic should not be lost. Looking to the future, it is essential that schools provide pupils with the necessary skills to compete in the hybrid world of learning and work.