

A ROUNDTABLE CONVERSATION



REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR LEARNING AT HOME

**BY BEN BROWN
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Forward

The following material is a summary of a roundtable conversation discussing some of the issues around home learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is not intended to be a final solution but to provide suggestions for possible actions and encourage wider debate.

Huge thanks go to those who participated in the discussion. If you wish to participate in similar conversations then make sure to follow @edroundtables on Twitter.

The conversation took place on 15th April 2020 with contributions from:

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Additional material was submitted by other education professionals that were unable to attend.

Thanks to:

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@LadywoodKH

Context

In this case the focus was on the issues experienced by schools in supporting learning at home.

The discussion was broad and covered a number of areas, most of which are covered in this document.

I have tried to organise the ideas and comments into a more coherent piece than the original transcript and hope that you enjoy reading it.

I apologise to any of those involved if I have misunderstood any of the conversation, these mistakes are mine – don't hesitate to offer clarification.



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Introduction

The current exceptional situation has forced schools and teachers to take on brand new roles in their communities and approach education in a new way.

The response to this has been varied, ranging from live lessons to the use of online platforms, paper-based work to recommended YouTube videos and celebrity sessions. But what is realistic to ask of schools and teachers?

Dr Mary Bousted, of the National Education Union stated that

“Teachers working at home must be given workloads which are reasonable and sustainable, and this must be negotiated with the staff. Normal education is currently suspended, and teachers should not be teaching a full timetable, or routinely marking work.”

The full statement can be found [here](#) and the NEU guidance [here](#).

Context is Key

Throughout the discussion, participants referred to the issues that they faced in their schools. Some of these issues were shared issues, others were school specific (although likely to be shared by other schools around the country). It is an

understanding of these contexts that should drive what schools expect to be achieved at home. They need to understand the barriers that staff and students face to delivering any educational activity.

Students and Families



Language Barriers

Many schools support children from families where English is not the main language.

They are communicating with parents who may not speak much English at all.

This makes supporting them with home schooling incredibly challenging.



SEN Support

Schools with high levels of SEN children may face challenges providing support to these children. SEN is not all the same and resources relied on in school may not be available in the home.

Parents will be familiar with their child's needs, which is an advantage, but may not be able to translate teaching easily to meet those needs.



Access to Technology

Not all families have devices that can access online platforms.

Those that do may not have enough devices for everyone to use and access regularly.



Poverty

Education is not equally accessible to all in the home environment.

Some families may be in a position where there is now little or no income. The number of families in poverty will have grown



Family Size

Bigger families will be more challenging for parents to manage.

Imagine trying to teach three different year groups three different subjects all with very different needs all at the same time.



Health/Wellbeing

This is a huge concern, this is a pandemic, some children/families will become ill, which will greatly affect their ability to participate in educational activities.

Some families may be affected by bereavement, and increasing number of communities will experience this over time as the death toll from Covid-19 rises.

Social distancing and isolation could have a detrimental effect on the mental wellbeing of families and children.

Teachers and Staff

Teachers want to be teaching. They are full of enthusiasm for taking on new things and doing their best, in fact they feel guilty if they feel that they are failing to do this. As leaders, letting them know that they will not be as productive in this environment but it's OK, is crucial.

There is a real balancing act for teachers, they are also members of families and will have the same challenges that other families have.

A previous discussion summary on teacher and pupil wellbeing can be found [here](#), it should prove useful.

This could result in an increase in alcohol abuse/domestic violence. Homes might not be safe spaces.

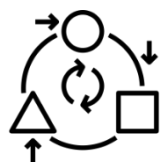


Parental Support

Not all parents have the same ability to support their children. Whether it is time, understanding or even health – parental support cannot be guaranteed during this lockdown period.

Expectations

Taking all this contextual information into consideration and interpreting union and government guidance into actions is challenging, the conversation touched on a range of topics.



The New Normal

Everyone is trying to adjust to a new way of working. New technologies and new challenges, it is a huge learning curve.

The primary concern of most leaders at this stage is the welfare and safety of pupils and teachers.

Whatever you are doing that improves the lives of your students is worthwhile.

The situation is constantly changing as everyone adapts to new information, which sometimes arrives with little to no warning.

Just do the best you can in these circumstances.

If the opportunity arises, where you have time to review what you are doing. Take it. But review it with the intent to improve it for all - Students, Parents and Teachers.



What does learning look like?

Students still have a right to an education, so some learning activities should be set for children at home. However, leaders must accept that the quantity and quality will not be the same as if children were in schools.

If pupils do not have the means to do what you are asking them to do, accept this and simplify your approach.

Some learning should be possible without online access.

A focus on reading and basic numeracy skills for primary school children was suggested as the focus. Although there are still barriers to even this.



Teachers and pupils are not working in a normal environment, expecting them to achieve what they would in a school environment is ridiculous and potentially damaging to the mental health and wellbeing of both staff and students.

Less is more. Expecting parents to home school their children is simply not practical, as is expecting teachers to deliver live lessons following their usual timetable.

We must not overload pupils, parents and teachers with our expectation.

Provide guidance and support for activities that are accessible for the majority of parents and pupils, being mindful of the tone of communications.

Stress levels are high at the moment for many and poorly worded emails and letters can exacerbate this situation.



New Knowledge or Consolidation?

Introducing new content to pupils is very difficult to do remotely. It is hard to explain concepts and respond to misconceptions without physically being in the same room.

The likelihood of gaps and misunderstanding being created is much higher.

There is also a great risk of gaps between children being created that may be difficult to overcome on returning to school.

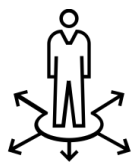
If you have taught new knowledge to only 50% of the class, what do you do when they are all in the same room again?

Consolidation of prior learning is likely to be much more beneficial.

Taking the time to fill gaps and store essential information and skills for later learning in long term memory increases fluency. Laying solid foundations for later learning.

That said, if the lockdown does continue for several more months, it may be desirable to introduce new knowledge, albeit using a lot of repetition to give greater opportunity for understanding and access by the whole student cohort.

This may be particularly true for Year 10 and 12 pupils, who are more independent learners than primary children. Though contextual issues discussed previously still apply, so care should be taken with this approach.



Other opportunities

The lockdown is also an opportunity for pupils to explore a much broader curriculum than they might find in schools.

Where the focus on attainment in SATs and exams can narrow the curriculum in some year groups opportunities can be missed for exposure to areas of the curriculum which don't feature in those tests.

Consider broader geographical or historical contexts. Spend more time on art, music or practical kitchen science.



More than one way

School leaders are captains of their own ship, although there is pressure from MATs to comply with their expectations.

Different approaches will be needed to meet the contextual needs of the school, as discussed at the beginning.

Approaches will change in response to the changing situation and as models for teaching and learning improve.

Whatever you decide to do the key is to make the experience of the students as rich and accessible as possible without excessive demands or adding stress to their lives or the lives of the staff.

Managing Parental Expectations

There was some discussion regarding the management of parental expectations, which seem to fall into four camps.



Too Much



Too Little



Just Right



Silence

The simple answer is that you can't please all of the people all of the time, but communication with children and families did resolve some of those issues.

Teachers are supporting and guiding parents to try and overcome these problems, although the silent group are a concern for other reasons.

The caveat here is that although there does need to be an open dialogue between parents and schools at this time, it must be manageable with clear expectations of when emails will be answered. This should not be immediately at any time of day or night.

It was noted that part of the issue with parental expectations was the result of comparisons with other schools.

Some school leaders appear to be using this period as a competition in the absence of league tables.

A more unified approach to the current situation would be appreciated by a number of school leaders, but with vague government guidance and many schools ignoring union advice it was recognised that this was likely to continue.

Summary



Context is key



This is not school



Learning will be different



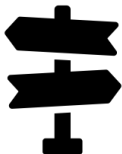
Face to face should not be an expectation



Consider breadth instead of new knowledge



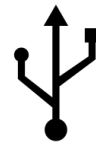
Repetition, repetition, repetition



No right way



Wellbeing should **not** be secondary



The future is uncertain.

If you have had experiences of the issues discussed and have found potential solutions, then get in touch @edroundtables on Twitter.

If you have an educational topic you would like to discuss with your peers in a confidential space. Then contact @edroundtables or visit www.edrt.co.uk



Ben Brown