



Understanding the effectiveness of professional development opportunities for teachers delivered remotely



Foreword

From March 2020 onwards it became clear that if professional development for teachers was to continue, there would need to be an accelerated shift to remote learning solutions. With the ability of teachers to engage with face-to-face opportunities significantly constrained by the response to the impact of the pandemic, many organisations, the British Council included, sought to develop and strengthen provision that could be accessed remotely.

A year on from the beginning of the pandemic, this report evaluates the effectiveness of teacher development opportunities delivered remotely.

The evaluation looks at existing literature around remote learning effectiveness in general and at specific examples of the use of different remote channels currently being deployed on three British Council teacher development programmes in Palestine, Egypt and Syria; and on one regional programme involving teachers from across the Middle East and North Africa region.

From the literature review and a review of data from these four case studies, the report generates insights into the nature, challenge and opportunities of remotely delivered professional development for teachers, provides recommendations around good practice in the organisation of such kinds of teacher learning, and puts forward the case for a continued emphasis on remote delivery in line with the overall conclusions of its effectiveness.

The report is essential reading for individuals and organisations with a stake in teacher learning and contributes significantly to our understanding of what works in relation to the professional development of teachers, especially regarding opportunities engaged with in remote learning settings.

I would like to thank Steve Mann, the author of the report, for the clarity of his approach to the assignment, his hard work in both the review of the secondary research sources and his primary research, and for producing a report that makes an extremely valuable contribution to our understanding of the impact of these 'new' ways of working on the professional growth of teachers.

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Acronyms

AQUEDUTO	The Association for Quality Education and Training Online
AR	Action Research
BC	British Council
BAAL	British Association for Applied Linguistics
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CDE	Crisis Distance Education
CLIL	Content and Language Integrated Learning
CoP	Community of Practice
CoPL	Community of Practice Leader
CP	Course Participant
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
EES	English for Education Systems
E-TAG	Electronic Teacher Activity Group
F2F	Face to face
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
INSET	In-service Training
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
L1	First Language (Mother Tongue)
L2	Second Language
LMS	Learning Management System
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MoE	Ministry of Education
NCED	National Centre for Educational Development
NTTP	National Teacher Training Programme
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territory
PD	Professional Development
PPT	PowerPoint
TA	Thematic Analysis
TAG	Teacher Activity Group
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
TNI	Teacher Networking Initiative
TfS	Teaching for Success
TSG	Teacher Study Groups
UNWRA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

Executive Summary

Overall conclusion

The overall conclusion is that teachers can learn effectively through remote PD providing there is adequate induction, clear explanation, and ongoing support. Synchronous sessions are particularly valuable in fostering peer interaction and dialogue and discussions focussed on ways to motivate pupils and improve outcomes. The data presented in all four case studies shows that teachers prefer F2F to remote PD. However, the data also shows that teachers appreciate and value learning online with other teachers and levels of satisfaction are consistently high across the four case studies.

Brief introduction

This British Council report is focussed on the impact and effectiveness of remote online learning opportunities for teachers and teacher educators in the Middle East and North Africa region.

The report provides a literature review, covering important themes related to COVID-19, remote and online learning and current evidence about maximising PD effectiveness; and evaluates the PD opportunities offered in four different programmes, with a particular focus on the shift to remote learning as a response to COVID-19. The PD here is in the form of TAGs and CoPs.

The four programmes that form the case study are the MENA-wide CoP Leader Support Programme, the Egyptian National Teacher Training Programme (second year), TfS Syria, and TfS Palestine.

The report provides an analysis of primary data collected from December 2020 to March 2021 and adopts a mixed methods case study approach, characterised by the combination of at least one qualitative and one quantitative research component (Creswell, 2011). The main attraction of this method is that it can bring the best of both paradigms (quantitative and qualitative) by complementing each other and mitigating the weaknesses inherent in the individual approaches (Dörnyei, 2007).

The report considers the effectiveness of remote PD opportunities for each case in turn. It then brings together common findings and implications across the four cases.

Key contributions to effective remote delivery

We looked at the relevant existing literature and investigated four of the British Council's own programmes. We found that the following contributed to the effectiveness of remotely delivered PD for teachers:

- Providing a regular structure in synchronous sessions (e.g. review, warmers, input, open dialogue, demonstrations, video, tasks, breakout discussions).
- Giving teachers the opportunity to experience digital tools in synchronous sessions and then encouraging them to try them in their own classrooms.
- Using a flipped model with at least some tasks being done before synchronous sessions.
- Having a well-organised asynchronous platform to support work in conjunction with synchronous sessions.
- Getting to know the teachers' needs and taking them into account.
- Giving teachers specific roles within the group.
- Creating opportunities in both synchronous and asynchronous environments for peer-to-peer sharing.
- Integrating video into synchronous sessions to make explicit connections to the classroom and for modelling.
- Integrating quizzes and polls (e.g. Kahoot, Mentimeter, Wordwall, Nearpod and Flipgrid) which has a positive effect on engagement and interaction.
- Employing WhatsApp. This app plays a particularly important role in fostering interpersonal interactions, enabling flipped learning, and for organisational purposes (e.g. information, reminders and resources).
- Providing specific ideas and tasks for teachers to try out in classrooms (either F2F or online).
- Providing basic digital induction and training.

Key literature reviewed

The data collected for the study and the following literature has helped arrive at the list above. Roe (2020) provides a comprehensive review of how the current pandemic has pushed remote learning to the fore. Remote learning occurs when participants *'are in distanced locations as opposed to a traditional classroom setting and all information is disseminated through technology, such as discussion boards, video conferencing, etc.'* Adarkwah (2020) provides important evidence showing how the pivot to remote learning has revealed that countries have varied dramatically in their readiness to leverage the use of technology to support online learning (see also Bergdahl and Nouri, 2020; Tejedor et al., 2020). Hodges et al. (2020) and Hartshorne et al. (2020) also have helpful insights in considering key aspects of emergency remote teaching and PD during the pandemic.

Ur (2017) and Padwad and Parnham (2019) are useful resources for concrete ideas on how to provide a regular structure in TAG and CoP sessions. Borg (2015) and Borg et al. (2020) provide important information about running TAGs and getting to know the teachers' needs and taking them into account (see also Carrillo and Flores, 2020). Lightfoot (2019) provides a good guide to ICT and giving teachers the opportunity to experience digital tools in PD and then trying them in their own classrooms. Those teachers who have confidence in this area who were already digitally competent feel less stressed about online teaching (see Abaci et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2020).

Kiddle and Prince (2019), Dragas (2019) and Padwad and Parnham (2019) are good resources for considering how to integrate video into synchronous sessions to make explicit connections to the classroom. Rose (2019) shows how online polls have a positive effect on engagement and interaction.

Akçayır and Akçayır (2018) and Egbert et al. (2015) provide useful literature on employing a flipped model with at least some tasks being done before synchronous session, while Rhodes et al. (2020) is an important source for considering how to blend synchronous and asynchronous delivery. Hbaci et al. (2020) provide important arguments on the importance of good quality induction. Giving teachers specific roles within the group helps to foster *'collaborative teacher development'* (Johnson 2009: 241), while creating opportunities in both synchronous and asynchronous environments for peer-to-peer sharing consolidates the PD process and improves outcomes for learners (Hayes, 2019). This encourages sharing between teachers and is constructivist and dialogic (see Wyatt and Dikilitaş 2015; Mann and Walsh, 2017). Rossignoli et al. (2019) is also helpful in providing specific ideas and tasks for teachers to try out in classrooms (either F2F or online).

Motteram and Dawson (2019) and Motteram et al. (2020) have provided valuable accounts of the potential of utilising WhatsApp for language teacher development in contexts of constraint.



Case studies - key data and findings

The survey data confirms that remote professional development can be effective for teachers (even if they are not used to this medium of PD). There are also significant challenges that need to be considered and technological barriers are particularly difficult to overcome.

Qualitative data shows that teacher educators have been resilient, collaborative, patient and innovative in CoPs and TAGs. Learning gains have been passed on to colleagues within their institutions. This kind of remote PD should not be seen just as a poor, expedient or less effective substitute for face-to-face PD.

Qualitative data confirms that being part of a TAG or CoP has been a site for sharing ideas, materials, and resources, as well as an important emotional support in these challenging times. Teachers report that Electronic Teacher Activity Groups (E-TAGs) have been important sites for both social contact and emotional support during the pandemic. Teachers and students have understandably been disorientated, anxious, worried about their students, and emotionally taxed.

Survey data confirms that teachers prefer F2F but that remote PD is valuable, giving teachers the opportunity to retrieve videos, links, and other materials while saving time on travel and concentrating their effort on learning. Qualitative data finds that teachers appreciate the greater flexibility of remote PD.

The participants reported in both survey data and focus groups that they felt they had a significant opportunity to develop their digital literacy skills; getting a chance to experience digital resources and thereby becoming more confident in using them.

Across the whole data set it is very clear that the opportunities/advantages inherent in learning online in the current pandemic situation have been appreciated. Teachers report general pedagogic improvement and a greater understanding of classroom options.

There is perceived value from participant survey data and focus groups in defining roles within the TAGs (as well as confirming the core timetabling and organisation features of the group). There were strong indications that division of labour and 'taking it in turns' was seen as positive.

Observation of TAG and CoP sessions shows that teachers respond positively to videos of teaching and where video examples and short clips were used there was some reflective and concrete discussion.

There is strong evidence from both teachers and teacher educators that providing a regular structure

is crucial in ensuring a secure and productive remote PD experience. Elements like review, warmers, input, open dialogue, demonstrations, video, tasks, breakout discussions work better if there is a regular sequence or pattern.

Not all the recorded remote PD sessions observed showed sustained dialogue. In fact, some were fairly trainer-centred and this can be a tendency with remote PD (see McAleavy et al. 2018). More work needs to be done to find ways to encourage peer-to-peer discussion in synchronous sessions.

Attendance across different CoPs and TAGs varied considerably, with some groups having very regular attendance, while in others, teachers and teacher educators suggest that there has been significant attrition. This was often simply due to connection issues and lack of infrastructure. However, there is further scope to improve TAG attendance and monitoring reasons why attendance varies.

The data set reveals that teachers and teacher educators would welcome more online focussed PD so that they can teach online more effectively. In particular, they want more ideas and focus on shaping the online experience to the teachers' or learners' needs; and training on digital competence, particularly on enhancing interaction and motivation, and on digital online assessment.

Teachers are appreciative of the opportunity of TAGs and CoPs (and related events such as webinars and conferences) which are organised for them.

Emerging themes

Mixed experiences of remote PD

Whilst remote/online/distance learning has been with us for many years, in many ways, F2F professional development has always been assumed to be the most effective medium for training. However, for various reasons (e.g. geography, cost of travel, financial or political factors), remote learning has gained currency as a viable alternative. In contexts like Syria and to some extent Palestine, remote PD has been for some time the only (or at least the most viable) option for the British Council. In other contexts such as Egypt, remote learning is less valued and less visible. However, for countries like Egypt (along with the majority of countries across the world), the pandemic has ‘supercharged’ both the need for and the practice of remote learning and professional development.

Collaboration is significant and important online

Digital platforms can provide access to information, resources and repositories of content. The four case studies show that online collaboration is important and enables significant opportunities for teachers to connect and collaborate (in line with Ally et al. 2014; Lightfoot 2019).

Widespread use of tools

TAGs and CoPs have been sites for sharing tools. These have been various, and many have been demonstrated and introduced by teacher educators. There was widespread use of various tools such as Wordwall, Mentimeter, Quizizz, Baamboozle, Quill, Nearpod, ClassKick, Socrative, Kahoot, Quizlet, Crowdsignal, Doodle, AnswerGarden.

Crossing borders

Although individual countries have varied in their responses to the pandemic (e.g. whether lockdowns have happened, travel restrictions imposed, borders closed, and closing or partially closing schools), the CoP Leader Support Programme (Case 1) has shown how regional cooperation is well received by teacher educators. There is a strong sense of regional solidarity.

Local or international teacher educators

Consideration needs to be given to the balance between local teacher educators and ‘international teacher educators’. Although there has rightly been recognition that local teacher educators are often in a better position to gauge the local context and needs of teachers, some of the data

in this study confirms that local teachers prefer and appreciate ‘international’ colleagues. Remote learning means that teachers in Argentina and the Philippines can teach school children in Uruguay and teachers around the world can teach remotely in Gaza (e.g. The Hands Up Project).

Consideration needs to be given to the language for delivering PD.

In the Syrian programme the target teachers are not primarily English teachers. They teach Maths, Science and Geography and so it makes sense for the PD to be conducted in Arabic. For English teachers in the other programmes, PD will usually be delivered in English but not necessarily exclusively. Translanguaging is a viable and often desirable way of conducting PD, especially for Maths and Science teachers. However, these decisions should not be ideologically driven. They should be outcomes of negotiation and discussion between teachers and teacher educators.

Remote learning has a role to play in the future

Although it would be fair to say that the majority of teachers would prefer a F2F model of PD, there have been growing calls for such PD to have follow up and not be a ‘one-shot’ affair. In other words, all PD works better if it is ongoing and sustained (Weston and Hindly 2019). A hybrid model can help sustain PD beyond a F2F training event.

Flexibility

Teachers consider that learning online gave all of them the autonomy to manage the time and effort they could invest on learning. They said that instead of transporting themselves physically to the place where CPD training was happening, teachers had more flexibility on deciding when and how to dedicate themselves to their professional development.

Follow-up and support

In all four programmes, there is evidence that teacher educators and e-moderators are offering encouragement and support beyond the synchronous sessions. As already stated above, CPD processes are more effective with follow-up (Lamb, 1995). Avoiding a one-off PD design is important (Wedell 2009) and there is room for more follow-up work and monitoring of these CoPs and TAGs. The remote PD process has been well received. Not only should the interaction in the process be engaging but it is important to build in opportunities for follow-up, reflection and communication (Wright and Bolitho 2007). One-shot, top-down, approaches to CPD are, in many cases, limited in terms of their

long-term impact (see Murphy 2000, Joyce and Showers 2002, Vescio et al. 2008, and Cooper 2009).

Innovation

This report has established that, across the four programmes, there are many instances of professional commitment and innovation in finding ways to continue supporting the professional development of teachers and the learning of teachers' students. Teachers have found ways to use phones and social messaging (especially WhatsApp) to communicate with and engage students and their parents. They have shared ideas, tools, worksheets, activities and solutions.

Use of cameras in synchronous sessions

One interesting issue is the reluctance to use the camera function in Microsoft Teams or Zoom. This was evident in both CoP and TAG sessions and is certainly an issue for teachers with their students. The students use the chat a little to show homework or respond but as one Palestinian teacher said, *'because our community or our country, we don't like to use the camera'*. Internet speeds and data-packages are also factors here too.

No teacher left behind

The pandemic has made more evident what we already knew. Some countries (e.g. Yemen) do not have the infrastructure or provision of affordable data packages to access PD in the same way as it is possible in countries like Bahrain. Further work needs to be done on exploiting low-tech solutions as well as utilising less greedy platforms and apps. Data across all four programmes confirms that WhatsApp is often the preferred and most viable means of communicating between teachers and between teachers and teacher educators. WhatsApp is being used by teachers to provide worksheets and quizzes to language learners.

