Some Thoughts and Resources for Supporting Children with Additional Needs during the COVID-19 Closure Period

(Kevin Cahill & Dan O'Sullivan, School of Education, University College Cork)

Children with additional needs are just like any other kids and this period of school closure and uncertainty will raise issues in terms of **anxiety, routine and learning**. It is a difficult time for kids, parents and teachers as they are all trying to balance various aspects of their lives not to mention managing the emotional turmoil associated with a global shock such as this one. **We need to be patient and kind in all of our interactions and engagements with families and colleagues. This is not a time to overload anyone. School work may not be a priority in some homes but it could help to provide routine and structure for children.**

Most children with additional needs may need to be supported more on an individual level than on a group level, this is where **student support files** can become very useful. Where children are working towards **specific targets** then work could be designed to support this learning at home.

Many children may have targets relating to literacy and numeracy so we have just signalled a couple of resources that will direct teachers to suitable content, as well as some curricular support resources that may help in designing remote learning experiences for post-primary students.

This opinion might be unpopular in the age of apps, gadgets and multitudes of learning 'businesses' but from personal experience, the best way of developing learning for any child is to use the tools they are most comfortable with, **at this point in time that tends to be their schoolbooks**. Many textbook publishers have made online content available. Go to your publisher's homepage and see what is available.

Thinking about **Universal Design for Learning** Principles might be useful for the SET. Think about providing children with additional needs with:

Multiple means of Representation (Book/mind maps/video/audio/etc.)

Multiple means of Engagement (Book/interactive link/ video clip/website/etc.)

Multiple means of Expression (handwriting/typing/mind maps/video/audio/sign language)

If they have access to technology then this can be used for communicating with teachers and accessing supplementary resources. Of course, some kids have access to Assistive Technology and they will probably be more advanced in terms of technology-enhanced learning.

Here are some ideas to consider:

- Many schools have an **online platform** (Office 365, G Suite, Schoology, SeeSaw, Edmodo, etc.). **Be consistent across the school (use one platform).** This will help students in terms of communication and information management. **Having a place where students can ask questions of their teachers and peers relating to learning is very useful**. This is where people have found Microsoft Teams to be successful but most other platforms have similar facilities to collaborate and connect.

- **Do not get carried away on technological wild goose chases looking for the next best app, the next best website, etc. Work with what you know and what your kids can access easily**

- Develop a **good routine** for the day. Have defined start/ finish times and build in physical activities, rest, food and fun. Some great examples of schedules across the age range here from Khan Academy: https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vSZhOdEPAWjUQpqDkVAlJrFwxxZ9Sa6zGOq0CNRms6Z7DZNq-tQWS3OhuVCUbh_-P-WmksHAzbsrk9d/pub

  And here is one from the DES: https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Announcements/plan-your-day.pdf

  The length of the day/ time slots should be adjusted based on what you know about individual children. **Some will do more, and many will need to do less!**

- For children with additional needs, **be flexible with timelines and deadlines**.

- If you are a SET, perhaps you should **think about how you can support the curricular material assigned to the child rather than adding more work to their day/ week**. This would need to be decided on a case-by-case basis. Every child has their own unique learning profile with their own particular strengths and needs. Of course some children may have specific programme work they are doing to support their learning in areas like spelling, fine/gross motor development, handwriting, emotional literacy, etc…This is fine but **be careful not to overload kids just because they happen to have additional needs.**

- **Assign small chunks of manageable curricular material** and **collate together in one email/ sheet/ communication** as one of the difficulties second-level parents are encountering is multitudes of contact points through multiple platforms. Imagine receiving 13 different emails from 13 different teachers on a weekly basis, it can become overwhelming. Perhaps one teacher (e.g. a class teacher) could take responsibility for collating material from subject teachers and send in one email/

page so the school has a full picture of the demands being placed on the child and the parent at this difficult time.

- **Assign work from the textbook that is being used in school**. There are amazing websites, videos and learning programmes out there but it is a job in itself patching them all together.

- **Assign one chapter from the book and support it with one visual source/online source**, for example a YouTube video, a link to an online tutorial, a short teacher video, etc…This will provide kids with additional needs an additional pathway into the learning without creating too much confusion.

- **Build in the intercative links** so that access is easy for kids and/or parents.

- Assign **specific scaffolded project work** that is connected to the curriculum or maybe particular classroom-based assessments. **Scaffolding is important.** You may need to provide a **step-by-step guide in terms of what you want the child to do**.

- **Have one method of returning work to the teacher.** Could the child email back completed work, or post it if needs be. If the school has an online platform, then ensure all teachers/ students are using it rather than jumping between different ways of communicating.

- For examination students with RACE (access to a recording device), it is possible to **practice recording spoken responses to exam papers** and submit the audio file for feedback.

- **Feedback is important for learning**. Can the child receive some feedback on the work they are doing? This will keep children focused. For instance, a teacher could provide feedback next week for work done this week. How much feedback? Specific advice that will help the student progress – **think small steps rather than giant leaps.**

- Ask parents to spend a small amount of time each day **monitoring their child's work** and **praising their effort**.

- **Can the teacher check-in via phone call/ face-to-face communication (Zoom / Skype / FaceTime) for kids with additional needs?** Parents would appreciate the support as doing work at home can be a source of conflict between the parent and the child. A short weekly support call could work wonders for children and parents alike!

Teacher Resources

Special Education Teachers Supporting Each Other- Facebook group for SETs:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/1962954580651982/ It is run by SETs for SETs Niamh O'Connor and Natalie Doyle). This is a fantastic discussion and sharing platform for SETs where they share resources, ideas and suggestions for teaching. You will need to request membership.

The **National Council for Special Education (ncse.ie)** have compiled fantastic resources for teachers and parents during these changed times:

Parents: https://ncse.ie/online-resources-for-parents

Teachers: https://ncse.ie/online-resources-for-teachers

NCSE (NBSS) Publications & Resources: Developed to support schools in addressing students' social, emotional, wellbeing, academic and behavioural needs: https://www.nbss.ie/publications-resources

Professional Development Service for Teachers: https://www.pdst.ie/DistanceLearning

The PDST have created some great resources, including an online course on Distance Learning to help teachers get off the ground

For Curricular Resources: https://www.scoilnet.ie/

Scoilnet is a fantastic resource for us because it is specific to our curriculum and our system. Scoilnet are also producing pre-designed lessons for engaging students during the current crisis. Teachers will need to select the content but it is better to have it all in one place rather than scouring the internet for hours.

World Book Online can also be accessed through the Scoilnet site.

PDST and other teachers are uploading daily links to keep you resources throughout the closure period: https://www.scoilnet.ie/go-to-post-primary/.

NCCA – National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
https://ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/supporting-the-curriculum
Click on 'Supporting Special Needs Education' link.

See '**Curricular Guidelines for Teachers of Students with Mild General Learning Disabilities'**. In the case of all subject areas go to lesson 'Exemplars' section of relevant PDF.

Face-to Face online Communication:

Zoom Calls: https://zoom.us/

Classes could be hosted on this platform if everyone is online and has some space (not always possible for many kids).

Physical Activity: Joe Wicks (The Body Coach) is doing great kids & adults workouts each morning live on YouTube (or can be played back at a different time). It is only 30 minutes and it can be done in front of the television or computer very easily: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAxW1XT0iEJo0TYlRfn6rYQ.

Touch Typing: this might be a good opportunity for kids with Assistive Technology to improve their touch typing and IT skills.

- https://www.typing.com/
  This is a popular and accessible free site for developing touch typing. We could probably all do with spending some time developing this skill!

Literacy

- Use audio versions of books for revision purposes (audible.com; borrowbox.ie): Reading is so important for our academic development. Listening is a good substitute if some children's reading skills are not where they might like them to be.

- **Immersive Reader: (available on Office 365) -** Click View in Microsoft Word Online, Click Immersive Reader – Copy and Paste any text in here and it will read it to you. This is a fantastic resource to support reading (if you have Office 365 in your school).
- **Text-To-Speech** tools on phones, tablets, etc. Practically all mobile devices now have built in text to speech. This is useful for kids who are nit independent readers who may want to access information online. It seems that more kids use their phones/ tablets than laptops or desktops. This link will explain how to turn it on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gTn4Q-9Lk8

- 14-day free trial to downloadable levelled readers: http://readinga-z.com/books/leveled-books/?fbclid=IwAR3JUICCW3-51Zfns9LMzUJzLEY3cK47xGc2M3JpKzKYZYZsHqH1E1rXyIQ

- JCSP workbooks: https://jcsplibraries.com/jcsp-workbooks/

- SNIP Literacy Programme: Downloadable PDFs (Google SNIP PDFs)
- https://breakingnewsenglish.com/: fantastic website where current news articles can be differentiated by ability level (automatically at the click of a button). Associated vocabulary and comprehension development exercises for each piece.

Numeracy

- **Khan Academy: https://www.khanacademy.org/**
  For information Seventh Grade in the US system is First year in the Irish system

- **https://www.mathsisfun.com/:** Free, easy-to-use and detailed Maths site.

Twitter

Twitter hosts some wonderfully resourceful teachers where they share and collaborate on so much work, particularly during this time. Some of the most generous we have come across include:

Stacy Stout (History): @MsStacyS – sets of quizlet/kahoot resources for the junior cycle history curriculum

The English Teacher - Clare Madden (English): @MaddenClare – fantastic resources for the teaching of English remotely and in real-time.

Mr McCoy (Geography): @MrMcCoy_Room8 - #Geogglebox gathers television resources that can be used to support the learning of geography.

Stacy Kenny (Geography): @Stacy-Kenny: Links to quizzes for junior cycle Geography: https://twitter.com/Stacy_Kenny/status/1242863887319478272?s=20

Irish Science Teachers Association (ISTA): @IrishSciTeach : twitter account that shares rsources for science from across the Twittersphere

Junior Cycle for Teachers and **Professional Development Service for Teachers** twitter accounts can also be full of great resources for teachers.

There many more, we are just providing trusted starting points.

We have listed a few links and websites that people find useful. We are sure you have your own favourites and there are many more available but we are conscious here that **people are under significant time pressure** so these are just a few to get you started. Any support you offer kids with additional needs will be welcome and we wish you well with the weeks ahead.

Good luck to all the teachers, students and parents doing such amazing work under such difficult circumstances.

Our very best wishes,

Kevin & Dan