

SSE UPDATE

PRIMARY EDITION

ISSUE 11 – September 2018

Moving onwards with SSE

Welcome to issue eleven of SSE Update, the e-bulletin for primary schools. During the second half of the 2017/18 school year, schools began to re-engage with the SSE process. Many schools identified their first area of focus and are moving the process forward with a view to being ready to put improvement into action early in the next school year. Principals have been telling us of their welcome for the opportunity to re-engage and use the process to focus on an area in teaching and learning that they know needs to be prioritised in their schools.

During April and May, inspectors delivered SSE seminars for school leaders to support them to get SSE back up and running in their schools. Inspectors have also been providing advisory visits in schools. We hope to be able to offer some more seminars in the autumn term – keep an eye on the SSE website for details. Schools can continue to request SSE advisory visits for the 2018/19 school year by e-mailing info@schoolself-evaluation.ie.

School leaders have found both the seminars and the advisory visits to be very useful. We've been encouraging them to keep their area of focus relatively tight and we've shared learning from the first SSE cycle. We know that in the first cycle, some schools simply tried to take on too much – sometimes they were trying to focus on too many things! There is a growing understanding that SSE is not about plans on paper but about plans in action. The red arrow on the right is pointing to what the SSE Guidelines (page 14) refers to as **'the key step in the process'**. It is only when the actions in the improvement plan are implemented that the work of the school can improve.'



This edition of the Update has three articles. We believe that DEIS schools now have a clearer understanding about where the SSE process fits with DEIS action planning for improvement. We hope the article on page 2 will add to that clarity. Then there's a short article to support your thinking about making judgements around the quality of provision in your school. It considers what 'generally effective practice' is and how you might work on it to reach effective practice as described in *Looking at Our School 2016*. Finally, article three looks at using the SSE process to support the implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum. It focuses particularly on Gaeilge and discusses how a school might go about identifying an area of focus using the quality framework to support their thinking.

The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit

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DEIS action planning for improvement and the SSE process

The process of school self-evaluation is all about action planning for improvement. For that reason, schools participating in DEIS were ahead of the curve in many ways when SSE was formally introduced to the system in 2012. After all, DEIS schools have always been required to engage in a cycle of development, implementation and review of improvement plans for each DEIS theme. So DEIS schools have become very familiar with the practices of gathering evidence, setting targets, devising actions for improvement, and monitoring progress.

It's fair to say, however, that when school self-evaluation was introduced as a national initiative in 2012, some uncertainty arose in DEIS schools about how the SSE process was intended to apply to them. For this reason, circular 39/2016 on the second SSE cycle makes this very clear statement:

Schools in the DEIS programme are required to develop and implement school improvement plans as a condition of their participation in DEIS. **The school's DEIS action plan is its school improvement plan for the purposes of school self-evaluation, and no additional or separate improvement plan is required.**

What this means is that this circular does **not** oblige DEIS schools to operate a parallel planning process, involving one set of plans for DEIS and another set for SSE. Inspectors on advisory visits to schools, and the support services in their interactions with schools, will continue to communicate this message as clearly as possible.

So does the SSE process have *any* relevance to DEIS schools? Yes, it does! Let's look at what circular 39/2016 goes on to say.

DEIS schools should, however, within their own particular contexts take note of the emphasis that the school self-evaluation process places on the core activity of any school: teaching and learning. They should ensure a focus on teaching and learning wherever relevant when planning for improvement in literacy, numeracy, attendance, retention, progression*¹, and partnership with parents and others.

The crucial point is this: **teaching and learning is the core activity of all schools, including DEIS schools.**

As we noted in an article on DEIS and SSE in [SSE Update 5](#), a lot of DEIS schools have focused on initiatives such as breakfast and homework clubs and a range of extra-curricular activities for their pupils. DEIS schools also continue to make great efforts to involve parents in their children's education. All these actions have value in supporting pupils who are at risk of disengaging from school and not achieving their potential.

But tackling educational disadvantage – and that's the central aim of the DEIS initiative – simply isn't possible without also looking rigorously at what learners are experiencing in the classroom. And that's where the SSE lens needs to be applied to the school's DEIS action plans. Therefore, it's essential that DEIS schools look at their own teaching and learning practices and ask themselves:



How do the teaching and learning practices in our school contribute to our DEIS action planning for improvement?

Take a closer look at the question. What is it getting at? And how might you go about answering it? The most straightforward way of getting to grips with this question in your school might be to take a look at your current DEIS plans and see how many targets and actions are directly related to classroom practice. Make a start with the more obvious ones: literacy, and numeracy. Here are a few questions that you might reflect on.

*The DEIS Action Plan 2017 uses the term 'transitions' rather than progression.

How many targets and actions in your DEIS plans are directly related to classroom practice?

Are the literacy and numeracy sections of your plan mostly focused on interventions that take place outside the mainstream classroom? Or perhaps they are only focused on in-class interventions that occur for a short block of time where members of the SEN team work in classrooms with the mainstream teachers.

Improving learners' experiences and outcomes needs to be about ongoing and sustained changes in teaching practices. Do the literacy and numeracy sections of your school's improvement plan include actions that change teaching and learning in all literacy and numeracy lessons? You'll remember the mantra that we included some time back – *Every classroom, every teacher, every day*. Real improvement in learners' experience involves changes in practice that are ongoing and that become embedded in teachers' practice.

Learners don't just experience learning in literacy and numeracy during English and Mathematics lessons. Have you considered how literacy and numeracy skills can be applied and enhanced across the other subjects of the curriculum? Have you thought about the importance of language learning in other subject areas? You might consider taking another look at the article in [SSE Update 10](#) on maintaining a focus on literacy and numeracy practices as part of the SSE process.

In DEIS schools, the themes for improvement are specified. Does that mean we can't have another area of focus?

It's true to say that DEIS schools are required to plan for improvement across the six themes of literacy, numeracy, attendance, retention, progression, and partnership with parents and others. Targets and action that relate to teaching and learning should permeate all six themes. All DEIS primary schools will instinctively focus on teaching and learning in the areas of literacy and numeracy but they can also weave in other priority areas across the six DEIS themes. For example DEIS schools may want to plan for improvement in another curriculum area - let's take for example Music. The school might tie the improvement target to the themes of attendance, retention and progression. As all DEIS schools know, attendance, retention and progression are very much linked to motivation and positive learning experiences. In bringing about improvement in Music, a school could consider actions that support achievement in several themes that can be related to Music.

We've heard of some schools doing very creative work in this way. For example we recently heard of a DEIS school that is looking at Digital Learning and is working to embed actions to improve learners' experiences and outcomes with regard to Digital Learning across all six DEIS themes. Similarly, we have heard of a school that is focusing on well-being and they have worked that area of focus across the themes of literacy, numeracy, partnership with parents and others, and attendance and retention. They have really examined how well-being is both an outcome and enabler of learning across the curriculum and have action planned in a very proactive way to ensure that in all of their teaching they provide experiences that promote well-being.

What should be included in the summary report and improvement plan for the school community?

The final point relates to reporting requirements, and particularly the summary report and improvement plan for the school community that is a part of the SSE process. This requirement aligns very well with the DEIS theme of partnership with parents, but obviously the full details of your DEIS plan can't be readily or meaningfully communicated to parents. For this reason Circular 39/2016 says:

When communicating a summarised report and improvement plan to parents and the community, DEIS schools may choose to highlight specific actions for improvement where they consider parental awareness and involvement are particularly relevant.

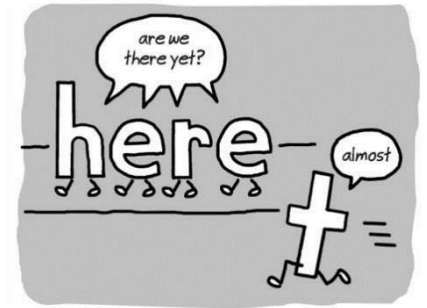
This allows DEIS schools to select which actions and initiatives it would be useful and helpful to communicate to parents. Your school should not feel obliged to summarise every aspect of your DEIS plan. It makes much more sense to support partnership with parents through giving them information about specific initiatives where they have an important role to play in improving their children's learning experiences and outcomes

Stepping up to effective practice

At times in the self-evaluation process the main focus is on making an evaluative judgement. One of these is the end of the investigation phase where you are analysing and then making judgements. What you're evaluating at this point is your practice right now: the current state of play, so to speak, in your school. This is where *Looking at Our School 2016* becomes your reference point, and the statements of effective practice are your benchmark.

Using the standards and statements of practice in this way you can inform your own judgements about the quality of your provision. How does practice in your school compare to what is described in the statements of effective practice that relate to your area of focus?

If you're not there yet, how far have you to go?



Let's look at an example of how you might apply the statements when making a judgement on your current practice. You'll find a similar approach in the [Oakleaf Primary School Scenario](#), presented in SSE Updates 8 and 9. In that scenario, the school's area of focus was oral language and they were using the statements of practice for the standard 'The Teacher selects and uses teaching approaches appropriate to the learning objectives and to pupils' learning needs'. They used these statements to identify strengths and areas for improvement in their current practice.

In the grid below, taken from the Oakleaf scenario, we've added the right-hand column. It contains an evaluation of current practice, benchmarked against the relevant statement of effective practice. We've used the term '**generally effective**' where the evidence has shown a gap between current practice and the level that's described in the statement of effective practice. You can see how this approach can identify changes in classroom practice aimed at bridging that gap.

Statement of Effective Practice	Strengths?	Areas for improvement?	Evaluation of current practice 'Stepping-up' to improved practice
Teachers strategically select and use approaches to match the learning objective of the lesson and meet the needs of pupils.	YES BUT...	Over half the teachers said that they found differentiating learning in oral language difficult	Practice is generally effective . We need to work on matching teaching approaches to the needs of the pupils.
Teachers deliver good-quality instruction which is directed at eliciting pupil engagement. Teachers maintain a balance between their own input and productive pupil participation and response.	YES	We can build on this strength to address difficulties	Practice is effective . We've worked a lot in recent years on active and collaborative learning. What would make it highly effective? We can come back to this. Right now we need to prioritise areas where we have found our practice is not yet at effective level
Teachers use a range of questioning techniques effectively for a variety of purposes including stimulating substantial pupil responses and facilitating deeper engagement with lesson content.	YES BUT...	Agreement in the evidence that we could facilitate deeper engagement with lesson content	Practice is generally effective . To bring it to effective level, we need to work on questioning with a view to helping learners engage in oral language learning in a deeper way
Teachers meaningfully differentiate content and activities in order to cater for the varying needs and abilities of pupils.	YES BUT...	Over half the teachers said that they found differentiating learning in oral language difficult	Practice is generally effective . We need to work on how we plan differentiated tasks for oral language and how we practically make it happen in the classroom. We will also need to think about how we use assessment information to help us differentiate.
Teachers purposefully develop relevant literacy and numeracy skills during lessons.	YES BUT...	Need for more clarity and focus on the skills of oral language	Practice is generally effective . We need to be clear on the skills we are focused on. We need to learn about oral language skills, and plan, teach and assess with these in mind.
Teachers enable pupils to make meaningful links between lesson material and their learning in other subjects and elsewhere.	Yes	We can build on this strength to address difficulties	Practice is effective . Integrating learning and making the links between subjects is a strength. What would make it highly effective? We can come back to this.

Primary Language Curriculum - Gaeilge as an area of focus

School self-evaluation (SSE) is designed to support schools in managing change, including curriculum change. In fact both Circular 0039/2016 (SSE) and Circular 0061/2015 (Primary Language Curriculum) both suggest that schools might use the SSE process to support the implementation of the curriculum, while at the same time focusing on improving pupils' learning.

Many English-medium schools have expressed the view that the implementation of the PLC in Irish provides a useful area of focus for SSE. This article outlines how the SSE process draws on *Looking at Our School 2016* to introduce the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) in Irish for English-medium schools. It examines Step 1 in the SSE process – *Identify Focus* – that sifting process where schools figure out their area of focus for improvement. We've further detail on how this schools managed the other steps in the process on the SSE website.

Step 1: Identify focus




This Primary Language Curriculum has 14 learning outcomes. It is important that no more than one or two of these be selected as an SSE focus. The online version of the PLC at www.ncca.ie is very easy to navigate and filter. Many schools are concerned about their pupils' ability to use spoken Irish for effective communication. In such a situation it would make sense to focus on the oral language strand.

It is advisable to read through the learning outcomes and identify one or two that are likely to have the greatest impact on teaching and learning in your context. If your main area of concern is pupils' ability to make sentences and to use language independently, then Learning Outcome 4 would provide a suitable area of focus.

Stage 1 and Stage 2	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Stage 1	<input type="radio"/>
Stage 2	<input type="radio"/>
English	<input type="radio"/>
Irish	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Oral Language	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Reading	<input type="radio"/>
Writing	<input type="radio"/>

Language New: Junior infants-2nd class

- > Language: Home
- > **Learning Outcomes**
- > Progression Continua
- > Examples
- > Support Material

Toradh Foghlama Uimhir agus lipéad	Céim 1: Naíonáin bheaga agus naíonáin mhóra (Mórchéimeanna Dul Chun Cinn a-b) Trí eispéiris chuí foghlama spráilúla, ba cheart do pháistí a bheith in ann*	Céim 2: Rang 1 agus rang 2 (Mórchéimeanna Dul Chun Cinn a-c) Ba cheart do pháistí a bheith in ann*
<p>4. Struchtúr agus gramadach abairte</p> 	<p>Abairtí gearra a tháirgeadh ag úsáid aimsir chaite agus aimsir láithreach na mbriathra go cuí chun eolas a thabhairt agus cur síos simplí a dhéanamh ar rudaí a bhfuil taithí phearsanta acu orthu.</p> 	<p>Abairtí gearra a tháirgeadh ag úsáid aimsir chaite agus aimsir láithreach na mbriathra go cuí chun eolas a thabhairt agus cur síos simplí a dhéanamh ar rudaí a bhfuil taithí phearsanta acu orthu (clocha míle: a-c).</p> 

Clicking on this icon in the online version of the curriculum reveals the progression steps relating to this learning outcome that pupils are expected to achieve from infants to second class. While the PLC is currently being implemented from junior infants to second class, you may feel that the progression steps for your selected learning outcome for infants to second class would also provide a worthwhile focus for new learning or revision in third to sixth classes. In other words it may make sense to select sentence structure and grammar in Irish *in all classes* as your SSE focus.

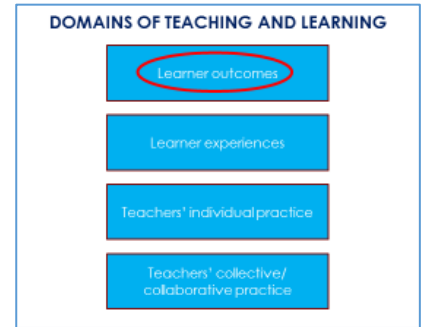
Looking at Our School 2016 can help us to structure our thinking about our SSE focus. In Step 1 it is particularly useful to consider the following questions.

(a) In which domain(s) of teaching and learning are we looking for improvement?

In all cases you are looking for improvement in the domain of **learner outcomes**. In the example chosen you want to see improvements in pupils' sentence structure and grammar.

(b) Are there any obvious implications for other domains?

The school will have to provide **learner experiences** to enable pupils to achieve the desired learner outcomes. In the example chosen these learner experiences will have to include, among other things, the immersion of pupils in Gaeilge, suitable modelling of the target language, explicit teaching of structures/grammar and frequent opportunities for pupils to practise the target language for communicative purposes. This clearly has implications for teachers' individual practice and teachers' collective/collaborative practice. Schools should look at the standards in these two domains to get a clearer idea of the implications of the area of focus that has been identified.



To read further about how a school might take this area of focus on to step 2 and beyond click on this [link](#).

Keep in touch with developments about SSE through our website and our social media presence. Click on the Icons below to access the relevant link.

