

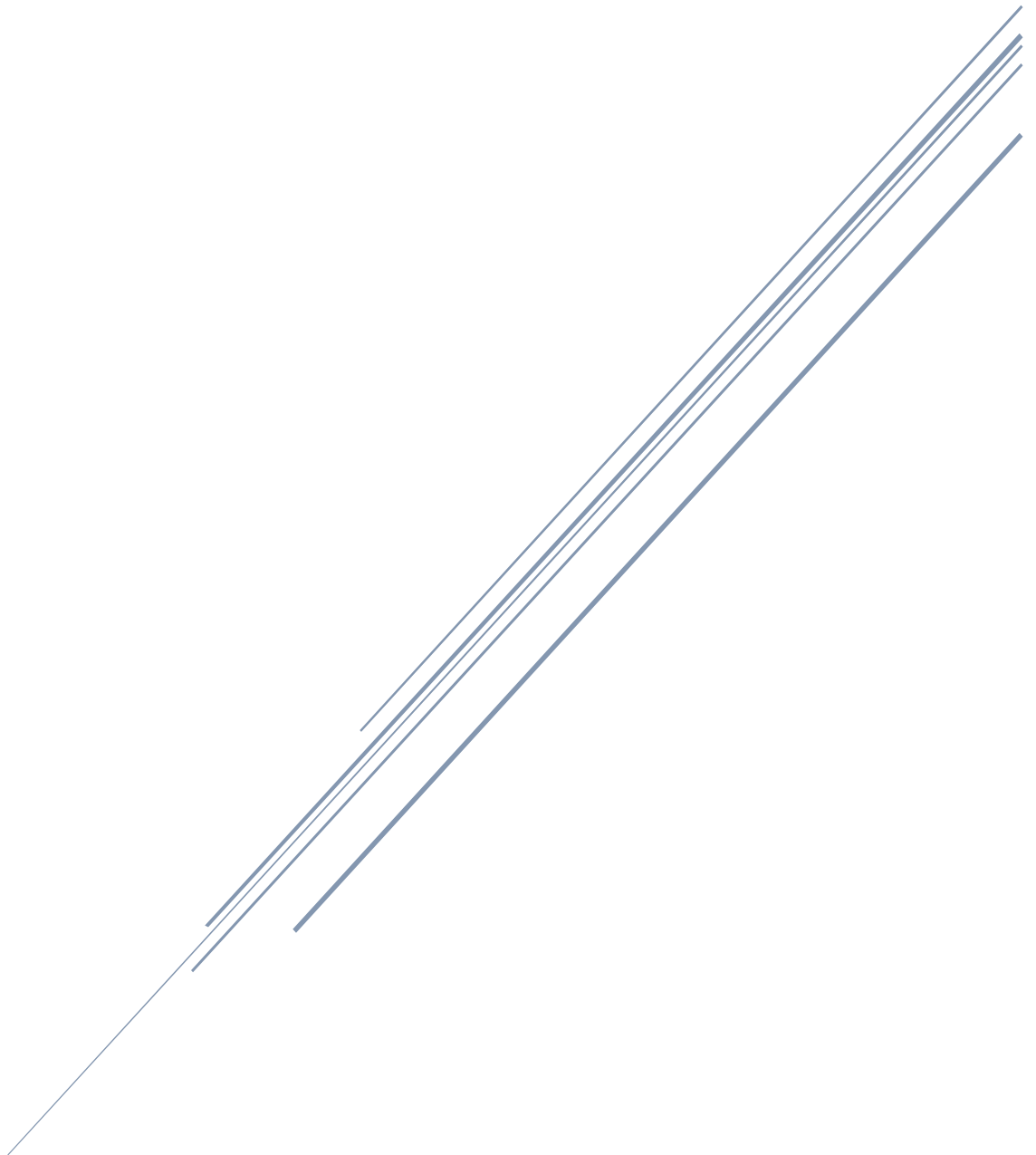


The Linking
Network

University of
Kent

VIRTUAL LINKING IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC

Insights from Linking Teachers 2021



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Summary Recommendations

1. **Keep plans realistic, simple and manageable**
2. **Build flexibility into plans**
3. **Prioritise: If you do just one thing**
4. **Build technology into plans**
5. **TLN Provide tech suggestions where able**
6. **Use techniques strategically to build connections gradually and use time wisely: start with learning about the other school, then share resources, then live games connecting linked schools**
7. **Linking is designed to be a fun and positive way of connecting with someone new: this is important to keep in mind in planning**
8. **Take time to build linked school teacher rapport and decide on means of communication, emphasise open communication**
9. **We are living through unprecedented times: any linking that can be achieved is an accomplishment**
10. **Linking provides children with a window into the wider world, which is important now as we face significant social restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic**

Section 1: Aims & Method

Section 1.1. Aims

To draw on teacher experience and observations to learn more about:

- 1) The challenges of *Virtual Linking* in 20/21
- 2) What worked and what didn't work in *Virtual Linking*
- 3) Recommendations for future linking, virtual and in-person

Section 1.2. Interview details

14 teaching staff were interviewed (from 13 schools) across the country

Insert section on demographics of the schools

Interviews were conducted by trained research staff. Interviews took place in July at the end of the academic year.

Participants were recruited by email and volunteered to take part. Interviews lasted on average 45 minutes and took from 30 mins to one hour. Interviews were then transcribed and anonymised.

Section 2: Barriers to successful *Virtual Linking*

'We had such big plans.' [P10]

2.1. Unprecedented competing demands on staff time

For many schools this year, School Linking has been stop/start. Teachers have faced unprecedented strains on their time due to COVID-19, and this has restricted their ability to engage with and deliver *Virtual Linking*. Lockdown, class bubbles, simultaneous online and home learning, and self-isolation of pupils and staff have meant for many teachers, their priority has had to be pupil well-being and trying their best to support their children's learning and deliver the curriculum in trying circumstances. This meant while linked schools may have started the academic year highly motivated and with ambitious plans, the reality was that teachers just did not have the capacity of time for *Virtual Linking* that they would have liked.

'I just don't think the staff have had the appetite for it in terms of time.... it's just been another layer.' [P3]



Many teachers reported that their link 'stopped and started' or 'fizzled out'. However, most classes and teachers were able to engage in linking to some extent, particularly at the start and end of the academic year, when classes were in school.

'Coming back from Christmas, it was lockdown. And the other teacher and I just decided that we can't it's not really a priority, unfortunately.... it was more looking after our students than anything else, unfortunately. And since being back, sadly, it's kind of just not been revisited. And I think it's just... its workload on both sides.' [P6]

'It wasn't really our priority, because we were more concerned as a school and keeping in touch with our children who were at home, and how to make things with the children in the class so that they can get in touch and see each other. But also, the telephone calls that I would make to talk to parents and to the children as well. That was our priority, not necessarily the other children. So, we carried on with the lessons. But we really didn't get stuck together properly until both schools were back at school full time.' [P10]

2.2. Plans needed to change, with long pauses between activities

'It's been a journey that started and stopped.' [P3]

Most schools had to make changes to their planned linking activities, scaling them down or extending them over longer periods of time with longer breaks in between.

'Personal issues, and we obviously had the lockdown as well. So, there was quite a pause between my curiosity questions going just before Christmas and hers coming to me just after the holidays.' [P8]

Often there was no time to regroup and make a new linking strategy or plan.

Some teachers suggested that because the linking process has necessarily spread over a longer period of time, schools could consider extending links over a 2-year period.

2.3. Teachers wish they could have done more

Some teachers also reported feeling they had let TLN down and were disappointed they had not been able to engage in linking as much as they and TLN would have liked.

'Which I wish we had more time to do it, but even those little bits it's something.' [P1]

2.4. Communication breakdown



The strain of responding to COVID-19 meant that teachers had to react quickly to new events, sometimes on a daily basis. Communication between linking teachers often stopped, sometimes with no explanation. Nearly all teachers said there were times when communication with their linking school were difficult.

'It seemed to be that I wasn't, I wasn't getting.... I was trying to do things, I wasn't getting things coming back, then I think it transpired that maybe she was off. So, you know, a few bits of communication, I think, helps.' [P11]

2.5. Technology

2.5.1 Technological knowledge, confidence and lack of essential equipment were all barriers to linking.

Linking broke down where schools with differing technical equipment and access. A teacher described how their school link broke down:

'I don't know if something happened, I think just tech issues get in the way. And when maybe your partner school is not too good with tech, then obviously that affects things you do. Because then they can't, you know, can't communicate effectively.' [P8]

Where schools had different levels of technical expertise, this can make the linking difficult and more time-consuming, and less engaging and enjoyable for the children:

'You've got to sit and watch another teacher figure out tech and then not hear them or see them for 10 minutes before the call actually starts.' [P8]

'I just think next year, I just want to make sure that there's, there's an easier and simpler way to make the classes always feel connected. So, for example, what I wanted to do initially, for example, just have an iPad on a camera always available to take like a little snapshot video of what lesson we've done, like send a clip, after every lesson, a 20 second clip of what's going on, even something really simple and basic like that, just to make the link stronger, because pandemics get in the way as it turns out.' [P2]

One teacher pointed out the importance of planning when teaching online, down to who will do what and when, especially for online live meetings, e.g., which teacher will say what, lead which activity.

2.5.2 Joint lessons online are challenging

Some schools tried to run joint lessons online with two classes, and this proved challenging due to competing demands of managing the technology, managing pupil behaviour and delivering the content.

'It was maybe tricky to try and address two classes, you know, there's two teachers doing sort of behaviour management separately. And then organise the tech and then try and keep conversation going..... just would have been easier in person to manage the situation.'

[P8]

Teachers unable to share pupils work using approved channels

In a number of cases, classes created wonderful work to share with the other class, for instance, videos or photos of artwork, but teachers were unable to share this securely using approved channels, perhaps because there was no time to find out the correct method or due to technological expertise in the school.

'We tried doing a video actually, but we didn't have the technical know-how or sort of technical equipment to be able to we all record, we both recorded the video, but it was too big to try and email over.'

Recommendations:

- 1) **Build-in flexibility to linking plans.** At the planning stage, teachers to consider: how would they simplify, slow down or pause the link if needed? What would be the priority activities?
- 2) **Focus on most successful techniques.** Teachers to focus on the *Virtual Linking* activities with the most impact that they can realistically deliver (see Section 6).
- 3) **Ensure both schools work together to form agreed on plans that are realistic and achievable.**
- 4) Make time in planning phases for establishing rapport between teachers, establishing lines of communication (even if this is to say they need to slow down or pause the link).
- 5) Consider technology at every phase of planning: how will materials be shared (e.g., photos, videos), how will online sessions be carried out, identify technology needs, have a backup plan for each activity.
- 6) **Plan online sessions strategically: Online live sessions provide an opportunity for fun and interaction.** Where possible, online sessions should be used strategically for optimal impact and used in conjunction with physical exchange of work and other means of staying in contact, e.g., paper chains, photos, letters.

- 7) **If you only do one thing....** Situations change, and linking can feel overwhelming. Linking teachers to identify one linking activity linking their schools will prioritise if the whole linking process becomes unmanageable due to changes in the school situation.
- 8) *Virtual Linking* can meet TLN objectives (see Section 3.1), and this should be emphasised to teachers to keep them motivated but also so they can see even if part of the programme is delivered, this will be having a positive impact.

Section 3: What helped teachers deliver *Virtual Linking*?

3.1. The Lesson plans

'One less thing to have to think about.' [P1]

Many schools used the resources provided by TLN and followed the lesson plans. Teachers appreciated the structure and 'off the peg' nature of the lessons. They appreciated the help with organisation and planning, which meant linking did not eat into their already stretched time.

The majority of teachers also appreciated the explicit links to the curriculum, which allowed them to fit linking into their already busy timetable.

'We don't have enough time to fit in everything. I thought that worked better because then I could do PSHE, the linking network and philosophy for children all in one lesson.... I really don't have time and on my timetable to, uh, do anything extra, but I linked all three of them, and it worked well.' [P1]

3.2. CPD can reinvigorate a link

A number of teachers reported that CP2 was critical for reinvigorating their linking work. In their case, their link had fizzled out due to lockdown in January. However, CPD2 was useful for getting them back on track, motivated and they went on to successfully deliver Phase 2 of the linking programme in their schools. As the teacher stated:

'So, the training helps to pick it up again, the training helps to keep you on track and keep you focused.' [P9]

'What really helped us was the CPD2. So, both me and (place) signed up to do CPD two, and we were the only two who did it. I don't know why, but we were the only two teachers on it. And they talked to us about Phase 2. And we found that the act of having been on our

training together we then were completely reinvigorated. And we began Phase 2 together.'

[P7]

Online training is viewed favourably by time-strapped teachers, who were much better able to attend a short online meeting targeted to them and their level of experience, compared with a whole-day meeting.

'I think it's more effective. I think it's a better use of your time, actually.' [P9]

Although teachers recognise the benefits of meeting in person, they believe the most important outcomes can be achieved online. Furthermore, a few teachers noted that the CPD training can be a little repetitive and is not essential for experience linking teachers. Online training, which is broken into different sessions tailored for new and returning linking teachers, could be better achieved via online sessions.

3.3. Schedule regular sessions

'In order to be successful, you have to always kind of constantly remind the children like throughout the day.' [P6]

'We did a virtual meeting last week with the class and actually there my class and answered there, read their answers to our curiosity questions and read an answer their curiosity questions, only within the space of a couple of weeks of them, meeting them virtually. So, it was really lovely. It was very fresh in their minds.' [P8]

'I think it was really important that each week there was something that was sent that it wasn't something that was done.' [P11]

A number of teachers noted the importance of consistency and regular meetings, and at least mentioning or reminding children about the link school and linking repeatedly throughout the term, in between the live sessions. Classroom displays, other activities scheduled on a weekly basis to keep the link school at the front of mind, even looking at their website etc. Without regular reminders, there's a risk the link will fizzle out, and children will forget about it.

3.4. Always bring back to TLN aims: a positive experience etc.

One teacher recommended the best approach is to focus on the 4 linking questions and identify simple and effective ways of achieving this through linking resources, involving the other school, or not depending on the situation.



'As long as I answer those questions. All the, all the rest will come no matter what happens.'

[P2]

Recommendations:

1. Continue to produce and encourage teachers to use lesson plans.
2. Encourage all schools to attend CPD sessions and emphasise that all schools are welcome regardless of where they are in the process. Offer one-on-one support for links.
3. Encourage regular interactions, including exchanging work but also low impact lessons such as looking at other school websites.
4. Remind teachers of the TLN principles, TLN expectations, and 'if you do one thing.'
5. Keep CPD online, consider different sessions for new and experienced linking teachers.

Section 4: Impact of *Virtual Linking*

4.1. *Virtual Linking* is delivering many of the same benefits as face-to-face linking

Teachers highlighted a number of benefits of *Virtual Linking* for their children.

The **excitement** that we normally see for face-to-face linking was still there: Children were excited about *Virtual Linking*:

'Excited around them meeting other children and speaking to them and sending messages to them and finding out about them as well.' [P1]

Confidence: A few teachers said that the online format is particularly good for shyer children.

'When they see those children are coming forward and speaking, they think they can do it as well. So, it's really good for them all for their confidence and independence.' [P1]

Learning to talk about themselves: Some teachers noted that linking helped develop children's ability to talk about themselves.

'It really gave them a chance to talk about themselves and how they see themselves, which maybe they hadn't been able to before. Plus, also, it gave them a whole new, almost skill set, for a couple of mine actually gave them the confidence to share information that maybe they hadn't wanted to share before.' [P4]

Linking as means to **develop children's understanding of themselves**, who they are, their identity, and crucially to share this information. A number of teachers commented on their children also benefited in this way due to *Virtual Linking*.



Linking to develop and model good social skills and confidence in meeting new people. One teacher described the scaffolding and support they provided children prior to linking online. Here, linking is clearly used as an opportunity to develop social skills, skills that will be carried with children. This teacher clearly maximised the impact of the session by spending time with her pupils prior to virtual meeting to rehearse and positively reinforce good/proactive interaction skills. Recommend inclusion of this in all pre-linking sessions, online and in person.

'We talked to the children about how it's okay to be a little bit nervous and a little bit apprehensive about meeting new people. And we taught them about what they can do in these social settings and support them. And there will be times throughout their lives that they will have anxiety and feel worried. And it was just all about talking to them what they can do and how can you make others feel welcome. And building their confidence as well, which I think is really good.' [P5]

'We talked about expectation, and, you know, went through all of the welcoming faces.... we talked about different scenarios. So, if you did meet somebody, and they were, you know, not welcoming and quite rude, how would that make you feel? And what would you do if you saw somebody that was behaving like that, then you're probably going to mimic that. So, we went over and had a big conversation before our virtual Zoom about being welcoming and being confident.' [P5]

Transition: Year 4 and 5 teachers noted that linking is good for transition and helping children prepare for secondary schools, as they give them a chance to experience meeting new children outside of their own class. This will help develop skills and confidence necessary for secondary where they will be meeting many new children.

'Help children when they are anxious about meeting other children from other schools [when they go to secondary] Hopefully, it will help them settle in their secondary school much better thinking that we've met people from other schools before with linked with them and... made some sort of relationship with them.... that that will help them.' [P1]

'I see it [linking] as like a gateway into the next step. Although they are key stage two, there's massive differences between four, five, and then six in terms of what they have access to and what they're allowed to do. And we've always put it [linking] there, because it seems like a logical place to have the children reflect at that sort of tipping point of their lives, at least their primary school journey and into the next step.' [Year 4 teacher, P2]

Developing positive attitudes to difference: Teachers also noted that linking helps children to resist negative attitudes and counteract negative messages they may receive outside of the classroom:

'Helps them to go in the right way, build the right ideas for them.' [P1]

'Key time to kind of catch children in their.... development. And set them on that journey. And if you catch them at this point, then they might be more receptive to other things and differences as they go through school, as they go through life. And I think if they get too old, it's harder to make the difference because they've already got fixed ways of thinking and fixed patterns of, you know, things that are different.' [P7]

Making the unfamiliar familiar. This is one of the aims of School Linking, and it appears that carefully managed, regular and engaging *Virtual Linking* can have the same effect.

'Some of the children in our class who have more difficulty with social and emotional kind of regulation and interactions, they felt uncomfortable by the fact that the children from the other school were different from them. So, for example, one of the children was wanting to talk a lot about the turbans that they were wearing.... over the course of the weeks, he no longer felt uncomfortable about the fact that the children were wearing turbans, he had, that had, he'd moved that to one side, and he was able just to join in the learning. Whereas at the start, he didn't.' [P7]

4.2. Impact of *Virtual Linking* in the face of COVID-19 social restrictions:

4.2.1 Going beyond the bubble

'I think it helps them remember that the world is out there.' [P6]

'[linking has shown children] we don't exist just in our little bubble, but then in other parts of the country and we can link them, we can talk to them, we can learn from them.' [P1]

'They really enjoyed the games that we played and like the, into having the interaction with other children, as well, you know, because of bubbles this year, like they've only had their bubbles. So, it was nice to interact with other kids, even though it wasn't face to face. They did. They did get really into it at the time.' [P11]

Most teachers said that a key benefit of *Virtual Linking* during 20/21 is that it provided a window into the rest of the world at a time when children's own social worlds have been severely restricted



due to class bubbles, being unable to visit family and lack of social opportunities beyond their classroom and immediate families.

Many teachers pointed out the value of showing children that a) children all over the country and going through exactly the same thing, and they are not the only ones, and b) widening their social circle safely, albeit virtually, so they can meet new people and make new friends - important experiences for children's social development.

'It was really nice for them to have that opportunity, especially nowadays where they're not getting [to mix with others], we're all in our own bubble, even in our school, we can't mix with another class. So, seeing another class on-screen.... they were quite excited.' [P1]

'I think because we were so isolated. And everything. I think they forgot that it was like that for everybody. So, they understood, okay, yes, there's this there's our class, but actually, that there's that class over there. And they're in exactly the same. They're in their little bubble, they can't leave. their desks are set up the same way. So, the desks are all in rows. And they've all got their wallets with all that stuff in.' [P4]

'They are not getting opportunities to mingle with other children from other classes we all used to getting together at playtime and assemblies, and they've lost all those kinds of opportunities...linking with another school and joining in...it brings them together.... making some relationship.' [P1]

'Children really enjoyed getting an insight into another classroom, particularly as they have been in their own classrooms, and in most cases seen very little of the rest of their school, being limited to their own classroom only. They noticed jumpers, uniform and classroom table arrangements.'

4.2.2 Virtual Linking as a vehicle to explore young people's experiences living through a pandemic

One teacher noted that the TLN resources provided a useful framework for children to explore their experiences throughout the pandemic, acknowledge their experiences and bring home that they are not alone: other children in their school and in other schools across the country are also living through the pandemic and struggling with many of the same challenges.

'When we've done similarities activities.... going around the room, partner work.... one child said, you know, we've both been through a pandemic, and then he sorts of heard, like this hushed silence in the room. It's been a, it's been a really creative and interesting way to deal



with sort of a tragedy.... I wish we had it during, for example, the Manchester bombing, which hit (place) as hard as any other Greater Manchester borough.' [P2]

Virtual Linking has also helped children to look beyond their own experiences.

'Helped them understand more how connected they are to the world, even if they have to stay inside all times. And I know this because towards the end of the year, now that they're talking far more about sort of social injustice, they're not talking about themselves so much anymore.' [P2]

4.2.3 Exploring their identity

'It's been such a completely disjointed year.' [P4]

Children have had a tumultuous 18 months, with much uncertainty, and have been required to adapt quickly to so many changes, sometimes on a daily and weekly basis. Teachers believe that the linking activities have supported children and given them time and space to reflect on their own identities, their connection with the world, and express their feelings in a supportive environment.

'So, I think it did give them more confidence to talk about themselves and share in what has been quite a unique experience that hopefully will never be repeated. But it has been a very interesting year. And it has given a lot of mine who maybe wouldn't have been quite so forthcoming to talk.' [P4]

One teacher commented that in Early Years there is more of an emphasis on developing a complete, rounded child, the whole child. And she felt this was overlooked in Stage 2. She felt linking, and the associated learning resources, allowed her to re-dress that balance and provide some much-needed time for self-exploration and reflection in a difficult time as children grow up in a pandemic.

'They were able to talk about and communicate with others, what's important to them and why. And then they were able to appreciate from one another, and what is important to other individuals, and what's different, and what's special about them.' [P5]

4.2.4 Linking as a way of bringing the class together *'I'd say that it has helped bring all of the class back together after having such a disjointed 18 months.'* [P4]

One teacher reported that by providing a vehicle for sharing information about themselves, learning about each other linking has allowed them to dedicate time and space in the school day for children to get to know one another and build back relationships with classmates after a disjointed year.

4.2.5 Linking resources useful, even when linking is not possible

Some teachers had limited or no opportunity for linking, in the end. But they continued to use linking resources and lesson plans and reported how beneficial these were for children.

It was even commented that Linking even *within* a class can provide opportunities for developing these essential social skills that can be carried with young people when they meet anyone who is different to them. Within a class, there will be groups of children who don't interact with each other or even know each other that well, despite being in the same class together every day for a number of years.

'Every year, somebody children in the classroom recognise that they themselves don't always speak or interact with people in their own classroom, or even other children in the school.'

[P2]

These teachers used the same resources for partner work or group work to explore similarities and differences, identity and belonging within the class, using the TLN resources, and to great effect.

A number of schools are using the linking resources to develop projects across the school.

'We've always used those in our school, even for children who are not involved in linking projects, and we've always recognised what good quality resources there are. So, we've used some of the ideas about some of their texts, we've incorporated things into our PSHE lessons because we really like the resources. And I think for our school, the whole concept of you know, who am I, who you know, and where do we live? How do we live together? All that sort of thing? It's really useful. It's really useful for our communities.' [P3]

Linking helps teachers get to know their class:

'I don't know if it was necessarily part of what was behind the linking project, or if it is just for my class person on a more personal level, is that I actually found out more about them.'

[P4]

4.3. Post COVID-19: Teachers also believe linking will be useful post-COVID.

'I think that it was a great thing to do after COVID to settle the children back in get to know get to talk to other children.' [P4]

Recommendations:

Virtual Linking can provide many of the same benefits as face-to-face linking, in terms of developing social skills, exploring identity and difference, and developing a connection with someone new. During the COVID-19 pandemic, *Virtual Linking* has provided a link to wider world. This underlines the importance of facilitating *Virtual Linking*, in whatever form, to broaden children's experience, provide a window to the rest of the world and remind children they are not alone in their experience.

- 1) Teacher experiences and observations of the positive impact of *Virtual Linking* to be shared to increase teacher confidence in the process.
- 2) Help teachers build flexibility into their linking plans so that even if circumstances change, they are still able to deliver the most effective elements of linking and allow their children to benefit from this.
- 3) If links break down, encourage schools to continue using resources within their class to explore TLN themes and develop skills within the same setting.

Section 5: Advantages of *Virtual Linking*

Teachers observed that *Virtual Linking* has a number of advantages over face-to-face linking.

5.1.1 Less stressful:

'I kind of prefer given a virtual way because I understand the benefit of meeting up and all that I really knew. And I think it's wonderful, but just all the organisation that goes into it, I find it extremely stressful and a lot of work. And yeah, especially for three visits. So, I do, I really do prefer the virtual side.' [P6]

Teachers reported that linking face-to-face, although highly beneficial in terms of the experience it gives children, is time-consuming and stressful to organise. *Virtual Linking* provides a means of linking classes but without the logistical stress required when planning in-person events.

5.1.2 Excellent resources:

'I found that all the resources they provided for the Virtual Linking were a lot more concise and easier to follow. And it's a lot of the pressure off, and it allowed me to enjoy it more as well.' [P6]

A number of teachers liked the resources prepared for the virtual sessions which were much more detailed, down to a number of minutes per activity. One teacher commented this was much easier

to navigate than the website, which has a lot of information and resources, which for a teacher new to linking is quite daunting and difficult to navigate.

5.1.3 Very shy children were able to engage more fully online than they would have in-person

Some teachers noted that the online format suited very shy children, who may have found it too difficult to approach or speak with members of the other school if meeting in person. The online format allowed them to get involved in linking experience and benefit from it, as it was less anxiety-inducing, children felt comfortable and confident enough to engage.

'Very shy children, uh, even they came forward to show their drawings on the screen and, uh, just, just interacting with them it was a good opportunity.' [P1]

Shy children also benefited from peer-to-peer modelling as they observed other children stepping up and talking, giving them the self-belief to also step up and share something with the other school:

'When they see those children are coming forward and speaking, they think they can do it as well. So, it's really good for them all for their confidence and independence.' [P1]

5.1.4 Less pressured setting than meeting in person

'I feel like obviously, it would have been better if we could have met face to face, but in a way, they're not under any pressure. Like if you're, face-to-face, you're like in a spot, and you feel like you've been doing this for, but, um, virtual, they could come away from the camera. So, I think, um, the pressure was off.' [P1]

Recommendations:

1. Retain *Virtual Linking* within the regular face-to-face linking programme so that schools meet virtually prior to meeting in person for the first time at the neutral venue.
2. Virtual meetings can also take place between face-to-face meetings to keep the link alive and at the forefront of children's minds.
3. The most productive means of doing this is via live virtual games or interactions, as this will be engaging and provide a level of interpersonal engagement.
4. Manage teacher expectations: their expectations of themselves, and what can be achieved through *Virtual Linking* (see Section 3).

Section 6: Most successful *Virtual Linking* techniques

The most successful activities, with the biggest impact, were ones that 1) had at their heart the aims of TLN those built around the 4 questions, 2) gave children a chance to connect with each other and 3) were fun, positive, enjoyable experiences.

6.1. Live games with both linking classes:

'It was nice to be able to speak to another class and wave and play silly games and make each other laugh. And yet, just learn that little bit more.' [P4]

The teachers who used interactive games, where children in each class played together via Zoom, Teams or Google Classroom, all said how beneficial these were for making linking a positive, fun and engaging experience, where children across linking classes could learn and have fun together.

'We did some games, we did the Zoom call, and we did some games, and they were drawing things on a whiteboard and, and it all made it, it was quite funny. It was quiet. Um, um, there's no pressure about anything and the way they were participating with like, um, like good in asking questions and things.' [P1]

Many teachers highlighted playing games online with the other class via Zoom, Teams or Google Classroom as the highlight of *Virtual Linking*. Schools who reported being able to do this found children enjoyed it hugely, and it helped build connections between the children, creating a sense of togetherness while also allowing children to 'meet' other children in the class on an individual level.

'We get a virtual or even a couple of virtual meetings led by both schools, it does, it may break down barriers I certainly felt like it did. Last week, when we did it, the children were so excited, it's hard, it's really hard to encapsulate exactly the feeling that was there. They were excited and wanted to meet each other. And yes, they haven't physically gone up and introduced and said my name is and shook hands or whatever. But they have an understanding, they've started to grasp who personalities were, you know, children who were, who were really confident and really loud and shouting so that they could be heard and those who were really quiet and...' [P9]

Classes playing games together online provide memorable teaching moments:

'So, I think, actually having fun with another person from a different school. If I said to them, you know, did we have a good time doing Pictionary with (place)? They'd be like, yeah, care we did. And they would have memorable moments, you don't get a memorable moment



from looking at someone's lovely artwork, that's not possible. A memorable moment is shared. So, I think the fact that the...' [P7]

Other activities also provided an opportunity to connect (outlined below), but the games were highlighted as being the most fun, engaging, and positive experience children had together. One reason face-to-face linking is effective is it is fun and interactive, so children not only learn from and develop skills necessary for meeting someone new but also associate meeting new people, perhaps from a different background to themselves, with a **positive experience**.

Based on teacher reports, although *Virtual Linking* will never have the same level of interpersonal, spontaneous fun as face-to-face linking (see Section 6), **live, online linking games are most likely the best way to re-create this virtually.**

6.2. Exchanging class work

'We also went a little bit more old-fashioned.' [P4]

Many teachers reported how effective the more traditional linking techniques were, where classes exchanged physical classwork, artefacts and resources. Exchanging children's physical work, such as paper chains, pictures of themselves with what makes them happy, identification tokens, and artwork were highlighted by teachers as effective and achievable linking activities. Teachers reported that children clearly enjoyed receiving and sharing these resources and seeing their work displayed in the other class. When the work was also used to introduce children as individuals (e.g., names, interests), this also helped children to get to know one another as individuals helped to build an initial connection between the classes.

'But we also we went a little bit more old fashioned, we wrote letters, they sent over mind maps. We sent, we exchanged. I cut up a big sheet of paper, and all the children had a section of paper that they had to write one word about their school. we have a copy in our class, and I sent another copy over to (linked school) And then they hung it up in their classroom...we reciprocated back.'

'They sent us some paper chains with messages.... they talked about those interests...what they like to do or what games they like to play... we've sent some messages by post to them.'
[P1]

'They enjoyed much more like creating things and sending them like posted. And then it was more like pen pal, or not just on Zoom or something.' [P8]

6.3. Videos and photos of the linked school

Children like to see the linking school: Particularly in COVID times, when children were limited in where they could go, seeing the linking school seemed to be a real highlight for them. A number of teachers pointed out that children were fascinated in seeing videos and photos of linking school (either specially created by teachers or through the school website). They spontaneously made comparisons with their own school and classroom, enjoyed the similarities (e.g., class set-up) and pointed out the differences. This is recommended for future linking, online and face-to-face.

'We looked on their websites, we shared the website, we shared their virtual tour, and they did the same for us.' [P8]

6.4. To get the most out of online interactions, teachers recommend 'laying the groundwork' via physical exchange of work, introducing selves via video or posters, and learning about the other school prior to live online interactions.

One teacher explained why they felt their joint online learning had been so successful at quickly building connections between children:

'We'd laid the groundwork. Like we'd already seen videos of the children, we've seen that artwork, we've kind of, we've done the kind of this (place) primary and everything. For me, it would have felt like jumping in a bit, suddenly, you wouldn't have had to done loads in phase one, but I think you would have had to at least have done a phase one, not all of.' [P7]

'We did video calls, we actually managed to do quite a few, they were quite beneficial. I think they really liked being able to see each other. And after we posted letters to each other, then when we did a video call after that.... they were all trying to find a partner on the screen.... I think that made it a bit more about the person's real like tangible.' [P8]

6.5. Importance of names and pronunciation

'We thought that seeing the children pronouncing their own names was quite important.' [P3]

A number of schools highlighted that in the early stages when children are introducing themselves to the other class, it is important to ensure children learn the correct pronunciation of children's names to support positive interactions between pupils. A number of schools made sure to include this in introduction videos, and teachers modelled pronunciation through repetition and referring to children by name throughout the linking year.



6.6. Drawbacks to *Virtual Linking*: Less meaningful, informal and natural interactions

Many teachers discussed how *Virtual Linking* can lose the interpersonal, informal and spontaneous element that makes face-to-face linking work so well.

'They can express themselves a bit more [when meeting face-to-face]. They can read the body language a bit more all of those things, um, that you can't get on camera. Um, it's much better face, I feel like it's much better face to face when we are able to do that.' [P1]

Virtual Linking also requires teachers to facilitate the interaction, meaning children don't have a chance to interact independently away from teachers, more informally, as they would in face-to-face linking.

'I would like them to meet face-to-face, go and have fun and not having teacher there overlooking everything because when we are doing Zoom lesson, we are constantly talking to them, [in person linking] they take the lead themselves.' [P1]

'Having that unstructured time, um, given to them to explore the ideas and the relationship themselves with us overlooking at it, it will be quite nice.' [P1]

'As much as the children really enjoyed the virtual meeting and they had a whale of a time and lots of fun. It can't substitute for the reality of seeing each other and meeting each other. And being friends and going out on that playground and on that field and just kicking a ball around or playing with each other. You know, and...' [P9]

'In terms of linking over Zoom, I just think the thing that was missing this year.... what you can't capture is, is improvised conversation with another person. You can put in all the resources you want; you can put in all the... conversation frames, curiosity questions, this is how we ask questions. And until the child is sat eating lunch with another child they've never met and are having a spontaneous conversation about whatever game they played last night. That's, it's not until then that you see, okay, is this working? Is it not working?'

Some schools tried to facilitate one-to-one conversations between children from different schools. Teachers views of this approach were mixed. They reported that although many children 'warmed up' by the end of their conversations, children were anxious prior to and during the conversation. And while children did their best, it was not possible to re-create the kind of interaction they would have had, had it been in person. The resulting conversation was quite superficial, and a few teachers questioned the value of this method over and above the online games.



'When they're on a computer, talking through a screen, right next to the teacher, like they've got no chance to go off and have a chat and interact as humans you know what I mean, I think, they really found it more awkward and, and they didn't know what to say to each other.' [P8]

Many teachers recognised the benefits of online linking and believed a hybrid approach that combines online and face-to-face linking would be ideal.

'Reflecting on it may be a virtual meeting, if we were to go back to nothing normal, a virtual meeting might be really good, as a bit of an icebreaker for both classes that they've got see each other. But they've got the safety of their own classroom. And those children who are on the blob tray of feeling a little bit, you know, I'm not quite sure about this. And then when they go to meet this, that those barriers may be reduced slightly.' [P9]

'I think definitely I would say I would put forward for the new teacher is doing is to actually have a virtual meeting beforehand if a mutual visit is going to take place because I think that really helps the children just to break down some barriers and actually play just play games like we did without the children feeling the pressure of having to do work per se that's attached to it. And maybe you might do one of those virtual meetings before every meeting that you're going to do. Because it was really successful.' [P9]

Recommendation:

1. Encourage teachers to **accept there will be some elements of in-person linking** that just cannot be re-created via *Virtual Linking*. But with careful management, we can do our best to make the most of what *Virtual Linking* offers and create friendly connections between children through enjoyable and meaningful activities and lessons.
2. Strategic use of online activities to create an enjoyable and positive linking experience where children develop a connection with children in another class.
3. The techniques that appear to work most effectively are 1) Familiarisation with other school via the website, photos and videos, 2) sharing artwork or other class work that features the children and information about individual class members and 3) linking school interacting via a live feed to share information about each other and play games.
4. These could be delivered in any order, but teachers felt getting to know the schools via photos and videos, followed by exchanging work, and then meeting virtually was most effective at building connections.



5. One-to-one interactions are possible to facilitate but require careful management, and although children may eventually enjoy them, they are initially quite stressful. Having the whole class (or half the class) play games with the linked class may be less stressful, less labour intensive and more fun for children.
6. At the heart of the *School Linking Network* approach is positive, fun encounters, memorable learning experiences, and connections. Any *Virtual Linking* activities that can deliver these will help reach the linking network goals.
7. A hybrid model involving virtual and face-to-face linking is worth considering when we can have face-to-face linking again.