CONSOLATION AND HOPE IN A TIME OF CRISIS: BRINGING CHAPLAINS TOGETHER TO CULTIVATE HUMAN FLOURISHING AND SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE IN RESPONSE TO COVID-RELATED LOSSES FOR YEAR 7 PUPILS

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BACK TO SCHOOL CHALLENGES, INITIAL STRATEGIES & FIRST REFLECTIONS

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

A smooth transition and induction process is essential for pupils' wellbeing and sense of belonging. This process can have an impact on pupils' academic engagement as well as their emotional wellbeing. A major longitudinal study funded by the DCSF 1[1], recognised that, for secondary schools, *transition was a study that fell under pastoral care in order to establish secure and settled children ready to engage in academic work.*

> *[The pandemic] is a once in a generation opportunity to transform the wider education system around the child so that wellbeing is truly at the heart of the learning environment in schools.*
>
> (Barnardo's, 2020)

> *Secondary schools that manage to bridge the gap well between primary and secondary phases set up their students for a lifetime's successful learning.*
>
> (Leaton et al., 2021)

WHAT WE KNOW

- Due to the pandemic and home schooling, the majority of the current year 6 cohort (2020/21) have missed out on traditional face-to-face teaching during much of year 5 and some of year 6. This situation will have resulted in an array of consequences for children both academically and pastorally.

- Positive home and primary school experiences can contribute to a smooth transition and induction process.

- Experiences of trauma and loss may not be expressed for a significant amount of time after the actual event.

- All of us experience transitions during life and it is important to recognise that children who are transitioning to secondary school may be dealing with multiple life transitions simultaneously, such as the birth of a sibling or joining new clubs. The pandemic itself has also initiated further transitionary experiences. (Jindal-Snape, 2020)

> *Planning and teaching should take into consideration the experience of the children over the past two years and make a sincere attempt at meeting the children where they are. Flexibility and an acceptance of reality will be key here as children coming from a range of feeder schools may have had different experiences.*
>
> (Severs, 2021)

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1   The Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education 3-14 (EPPSE 3-14 project) 2008

RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM 2020 -2021 TRANSITION AND INDUCTION EXPERIENCES

- Many of our initial findings emerging from the first community of practice meeting with chaplains resonate with those of Leaton et al., (2021).

- Transition and induction during the pandemic generated various responses from children. Leaton et al's (2021) study reveals that generally when children were asked in the autumn term how they were finding secondary school, most agreed that it was *the same or better than expected.*

- For some children however, the transitioning and induction experience was met with significantly raised levels of anxiety.

- Traditionally, the transition from primary to secondary school symbolically coexists with a developmental shift, during the induction phase, towards maturity and independence. However, due to enforced pandemic restrictions some students felt hindered from gaining this sense of maturity and freedom as they were *unable to access specialist subject rooms and facilities such as food technology, art rooms and science laboratories… It became clear … that many children associate the ability to move around a building for learning, and to use specialist subject rooms and equipment, with a greater sense of maturity, which they see as an important aspect of the secondary school experience that they were missing,* (Leaton et al, 2021).

- Other children welcomed restricted and closeted school procedures as it was closely related to their primary school experiences, (Leaton et al, 2021) It gave them a sense of security and safety.

THE ROLE OF THE CHAPLAIN DURING THE PANDEMIC SCHOOL YEAR 2020-2021

Creating and fostering an environment where a climate of hope exists and where relationships can develop, built on trust, underpin the chaplain's role. Chaplains have faced demanding and changing roles during 2020- 2021.

Among other things, they have:

- Transferred many of their activities and interactions online.
- Created new and interactive ways of engaging the school community in acts of worship.
- Responded to the increase of students presenting with pastoral and mental health concerns.
- Provided support for the escalating anxiety amongst the staff population.

> *There is a sense of people still being in shock. Living through this storm has been utterly exhausting. As chaplains, we create safe spaces.*
>
> (Revd Mike Haslam, quoted in the Church Times, 2021)

> *Due to COVID, a lot of the students are wobbly. All the uncertainties are very hard for them. They just need somebody to talk to.*
>
> (Becky Cox, quoted in the Church Times, 2021)

> *Some chaplains have seen an increased interest among those who seek them out in talking about big issues of meaning and mortality, and sometimes about faith and God. In their conversations with students, chaplains have also been challenging disinformation about COVID-19, and also religious beliefs about the pandemic they think are unhelpful, such as that it is a punishment from God.*
>
> (Perfect, 2021)

> *Chaplains are continuing to do the work they are called to do, albeit they are finding new ways to do it.*
>
> (Hilborn, 2020)

HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED THE VULNERABLE AND DIS-ADAVANTAGED?

A survey carried out in 2020 by Young Minds questioned just over 2000 young children with a history of mental health needs over a one-month period. They found the following:

- 80% of respondents said their mental health problems had increased as a result of the pandemic. Key indicators were elevated levels of anxiety, loss of motivation, isolation and a loss of coping mechanisms.
- 87% said they felt a sense of loneliness and isolation, despite 71% having said they had contact with friends.
- 11% indicated that their mental health had improved, but this was mainly due to the lack of pressure from having to engage with school or social environments susceptible to bullying.

The pandemic has also exacerbated the existing deprivation experienced by some of the most vulnerable groups in UK society.

- Children growing up in poverty and deprivation are less likely to succeed at school.
- Boys are more likely to underachieve than girls, especially those of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and black African origin, (Hirsch, 2007).

> *Among secondary school children, there was a gap of 45 minutes a day in learning time between the richest and the poorest third of children before the lockdown. This gap is now 15 minutes larger.*
>
> (Andrew et al, 2020)
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> *People from ethnic minority groups saw significant increases in deprivation. At the start of 2021, the share of Pakistani and Bangladeshi adults living in households where all adults are either jobless or furloughed remained 10 percentage points (ppts) higher than pre-pandemic. The rise in household worklessness for black adults (2.4ppts) was much smaller, but still somewhat higher than the national average (1.9ppts).*
>
> (Crib et al, 2021)

Pandemic-related death rates are also significantly higher amongst people of Black and Asian groups, and poor physical and mental health is more prevalent amongst ethnic minority groups in UK, (Cortina et al, 2020). UK schools shut their doors to most students during lockdown except for 'vulnerable' students and those whose parents are keyworkers. However, not all vulnerable students were included:

> *The definition of 'vulnerable children' did not include those receiving SEND[2] support without an EHC[3] plan. This accounts for approximately 1.1 million children and young people in England. Therefore, many children and young people with SEND were, like others, not able to go to school from 23 March until the start of the autumn term 2020. (OFSTED, 2021)*

Many of the children with SEND who did attend school during lockdown, flourished with smaller group sizes and increased support. (OFSTED, 2021).

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2   SEND is an acronym for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.
3   EHC is an acronym for Educational and Health Care plan.

CONSOLATION AND HOPE: FIRST THOUGHTS ON TRANSITION AND INDUCTION IN SEPTEMBER 2021

> *Wellbeing should always be of the upmost importance to those supporting children in schools, but now more than ever, schools need to think carefully about how to make the first few days and weeks of high school feel as safe and supported as possible.*
>
> (Ainsworth, 2021)

LOSS

The step from primary to secondary school can be both exciting and daunting. As children and their families are welcomed into their new school community in September 2021, some may have experienced different levels of trauma that need addressing. Bath, (2008) identifies three key pillars of therapeutic support to aid healing, that can offer a common response to most incidents of trauma recovery.

These are:
1. Promoting a sense of safety
2. Developing healing relationships
3. Teaching self-management and coping skills.

> *The common thread that runs through the current lived experiences of our children, is loss… From loss emanates three significant dynamics that will impact majorly on the mental health of our children.*
>
> *Anxiety, trauma and bereavement are powerful forces. For them all to appear at once in an untimely and unplanned fashion is significant for the developing child.*
>
> (Guest, 2020)

> *The three treatment elements outlined here can be applied by anyone who has a role in caring for, teaching, or otherwise mentoring these children and constitute the essential features of healing environments.*
>
> (Bath, 2008)
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> *All of our learners will need a holistic recovery, some may need a focused recovery intervention programme, personalised to their needs; others may need a deeper and longer lasting recovery period, enabling a fuller exploration of the severity of their trauma.*
>
> (Guest, 2020)

It is also important to remember that children entering the year 6- year 7 transition and induction phase of their education are also *dealing with the physical and psychological changes that the start of adolescence brings,* (Freud: 2021)

Although the loss of knowledge from lost days of schooling will need addressing, the primary focus should be on recovery from loss, anxiety, trauma and grief. *Without this there will be no results that have true meaning and deep personal value to the child in terms of their preparation for adulthood.* (Guest, 2020).

> *Emotional and educational recovery from the pandemic hiatus is likely to take years for some pupils, rather than months.*
>
> (Leaton et al, 2021)

CONSOLATION AND HOPE

> *We believe that for schools to become mentally healthy places for all, the value of wellbeing has to start at the very top, with organisations such as DFE, Ofsted and the Regional Schools Commissioners balancing the scales between outcomes (test scores) and emotional wellbeing.*
>
> https://www.traumainformedschools.co.uk

Leaton et al (2021) suggests the following for students joining secondary school post- pandemic:
- An extended induction period.
- Have part of the school and toilet areas dedicated to year 7 only.
- Quality break time provision.
- More controlled interaction with older students through extra- curricular clubs, school performances and trips.

> *Improving the quality of break times, dedicating areas of the school to younger students, and providing top quality technology experiences are all key to achieving this in the post-pandemic world.*
>
> (Leaton et al, 2021)

> *It should also include more mental health support and play, closer to the experience of primary school.*
>
> (Civinini, 2021)

This can then free up children's cognitive energies for enhanced learning and better-quality social engagement with their Year 7 peer group, setting a positive tone for the years ahead. (Leaton et al., 2021).

> *We talk a lot of making sure that year 6 children are 'secondary-ready'. But what if we've got that all wrong, or at least partly wrong? What if we actually need to make secondary schools 'primary-child- ready'?*
>
> (Severs, 2021)

REFLECTIONS

1. Does anything in the literature above resonate with your own experiences of student induction during 2020 -2021?

2. Chaplains have experienced a rise of anxiety amongst staff, and increased mental health issues amongst the student population. How are you, as chaplains, supported in meeting these challenges?

3. What provisions have been put in place to ensure a smooth transition and induction process during 2021-2022?

4. How will the induction process address the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children?

5. What measures will you use to ensure that year 7 students are experiencing a sense of safety and belonging to their new school environment?

6. How do you intend to nurture spiritual resilience amongst year 7, and provide opportunities for them to experience faith, hope, and a sense of meaning within the school community?

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