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

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THOSE DISPROPORTIONATELY DISADVANTAGED BY COVID-19

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
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INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has impacted everyone, and so in this sense, all have been vulnerable to the consequences of this global situation. Loss in its various forms, whether it is loss of social gatherings, loss of confidence, loss of health or loss of loved ones, has touched our lives and bought the fragility and vulnerability of life to the forefront of our minds. Nevertheless, the effects of the pandemic have been exacerbated for those who were already disadvantaged and challenged with hardship.

> *There are some children, who before this crisis were already vulnerable or living in precarious situations, who are facing particular hardship.*
>
> (Children's Commissioner, 2020)

WHO ARE THE VULNERABLE AND DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS?

Vulnerable Students

There is no conclusive definition of the term *vulnerable* when referring to the needs of some children (Children's Commissioner, 2017). Vulnerability is so complex in nature that it usually triggers an 'accumulation of adversity' (Bryce,2020). How often do we encounter a vulnerable child who presents with only one isolated vulnerability?

> *A child can be vulnerable to risks and poor outcomes because of individual characteristics; the impact of action or inaction by other people; and their physical and social environment.*
>
> (Public Health England, Sept. 2020)

Disadvantaged Students

Disadvantaged pupils are defined as students:
*   who have been eligible for Free Schools Meals (FSM) at any point over the last 6 years
*   who have been 'looked after'[1] continuously for at least one day in the previous year
*   who have left care through a formal route such as adoption.

(Department for Education, Dec. 2021)

Disadvantage and vulnerability can be manifested in a variety of ways. Children who are identified as vulnerable and disadvantaged may not be susceptible to academic underachievement or face learning barriers, (Welsh Government, 2020). Equally, students not formally identified by the criteria above can still be vulnerable and disadvantaged by life's challenges. This has become especially apparent during the outbreak of Covid-19.

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1   A child who has been in the care of their local authority for more than 24 hours is known as a looked after child. https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/children-and-families-at-risk/looked-after-children

> *Continued engagement with learners and families will be particularly important to understanding the specific needs and barriers faced by individual learners.*
>
> (Welsh Government, 2020)

Seeing students as individuals with their own needs, challenges, skills, and talents is core to establishing a culture where all have the support and opportunities to achieve their potential and flourish. Students will have different starting points and hurdles to overcome, there is no 'one size fits all' solution, but with sustained commitment from all who are invested in nurturing a child's full capacity, the chance to succeed is tangible.

> *While talent is spread evenly across this country, opportunity is not.*
>
> (Department for Education, Dec. 2017)

> *I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.*
>
> (John 10:10)

> *Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*
>
> (Isaiah 41:10)

HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED THOSE WHO ARE STUDENTS PREVIOUSLY IDENTIFIED AS VULNERABLE AND DISADVANTAGED?

The pandemic has had a significant impact on all school children with some facing enduring consequences. With a specific spotlight on Year 7 transition and induction students, school leaders have said that these students have arrived taking longer to settle in and establish themselves, (Ofsted, 2021). No doubt wider socio-economic strains and inequalities are contributary factors resulting in unsettled transition procedures.

The research project: *Consolation and Hope in a Time of Crisis* is considering the impact of the pandemic on Year 7 induction students with an emphasis on how children from different ethnic minority groups and children who are in receipt of pupil premium (pp) funding have been disproportionally affected. Although, this research digest cannot address every need of pp students, and the full complexities of ethnic disparities that exist, it highlights below some of the findings from recent studies linked to SEND and Mental Health issues.

Ethnic Disparities

During the initial wave of the pandemic, people from Black and Asian communities were more likely to contract the virus and encounter serious consequences, including death (Lally, 2020). As the Covid-19 virus continues to spread amongst the UK population, recent studies suggest that children from the Asian communities are more likely than any other ethnic group to be admitted to hospital with the illness (University of Oxford, 2021).

> *People from ethnic minority groups are almost three times as likely to contract COVID-19 and five times more likely to experience serious outcomes.*
>
> (Lally, 2020)

Bangladeshi and Black African communities seem to have suffered more with financial and mental health issues during lockdown than those from white communities (Lally, 2020).

The Runnymede Trust found that inequalities related to Covid infection and outcomes are likely driven by longstanding racial and socio-economic inequalities such as poor employment

and pay opportunities, poor housing, and overcrowded living conditions in areas of poverty and deprivation. The report also points out that many people from ethnic minority groups are employed as key workers that not only leaves them exposed to the virus, but if they live in households with extended family members, they too are more vulnerable (Nazroo et al., 2021).

> *People of Pakistani ethnicity are over three times as likely to live in the most overall deprived 10% of neighbourhoods compared with those of White British ethnicity.*
>
> (Lally, 2020)

> *UK Government statistics show that the highest rates of overcrowding are in Bangladeshi (24%), Pakistani (18%), Black African (16%), Arab (15%) and Mixed White and Black African (14%) background households. In comparison, only 2% of White British households are classified as over-crowded.*
>
> (Lally, 2020)

Pupil Premium Students

In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic took root on a global scale, crisis activated remote education became the substitute for face-to-face teaching and learning, and the home environment replaced the classroom. Lockdown magnified and shed light on a plethora of socio-economic issues that has impacted all lives, but more drastically those from deprived backgrounds.

> *Homelife during lockdown was functioning amid the blurring boundaries between workplace and personal space.*
>
> (Schwartzman, 2020)

In some homes tensions arising due to lockdown conditions were coupled with longstanding social problems such as abuse, maltreatment, and financial hardship, now exacerbated and aggravated by isolation and social distancing restrictions. Certainly, the environment in which we learn is crucial. According to Warfield (2016) a disruptive and unhealthy environment can affect academic progress by up to 25%, with students finding it difficult to engage in learning. Although affluent households are not immune from challenging environments, it is far more prevalent amongst the deprived. Often disadvantaged children lack even the most basic resources.

> *While the government published a list of online educational resources shortly after schools closed, the issue of access to technology was not addressed until the 19th April (over one month after the 18 announcement that schools would be closing).*
>
> (Education Policy Institute, May 2020)

> *Households on universal credit in England and Wales must earn less than £7,400 a year to be eligible for free school meals, regardless of the number of children in the family… These low limits on income mean that many children from working families are in poverty but unable to access free school meals.*
>
> (Child Poverty Action Group, August 2021)

SEND, Pupil Premium Students and Ethnic Disparities

A recent Ofsted report on SEND students has stated that rather than the pandemic creating new problems for these students, it has highlighted and exacerbated issues that were already present pre- covid, (Ofsted, June 2021).

> *Schools said that disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND have been particularly affected by the pandemic. They had concerns about the social and emotional health of pupils with SEND.*
>
> (Ofsted, 2021)

The report noted that some SEND children who transitioned to secondary school in September 2020 felt lonely and isolated in their new environment. Working closely with families of SEND children seemed to mitigate this situation, even when formal support systems were deficient due to pandemic disruption (Ofsted, June 2021).

> *Some of those transferred to new schools in September 2020, 'had not made new friends, having missed out on some of the usual transition activities. Some had just settled when the November national lockdown began.'*
>
> (Ofsted June 2021)

Pupil Premium Students and SEND

Students identified with SEND are twice as likely to be eligible for free school meals (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020)

> *38.0% of pupils with an EHC plan and 34.3% of pupils with SEN support are eligible for free school meals in 2021. This compares to 20.8% of all pupils in all schools.*
>
> (Gov. UK, June 2021)

However, data also reveals that children living in disadvantaged areas are less likely to receive SEND support than their more affluent peers. Most at risk of SEND under- identification tend to be children who are moved between schools, those who have a high absence record and those who have encountered abuse and neglect (Simpson, 2021)

> *While access to SEND support was already very unequal, the pandemic is very likely to have resulted in more children falling through the cracks or facing long waits for support. We need to significantly improve how we identify pupils with SEND, so that we can deliver consistently for families and ensure that no child is denied the support that they need.*
>
> (Hutchinson, March 2021)

Ethnic Disproportionality in SEND Identification

Recent studies have found that there is an imbalance of SEND identification and support for some ethnic minority children. In some cases, there is an under identification of needs and in other, an over- identification. For example, children from Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Other Asian communities are 50% less likely than White British students to be identified with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), whereas children from Black- Caribbean and Mixed White and Black- Caribbean students are 50% more likely than White British students to be identified as having Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs (SEMH). Furthermore, it is more likely, (1.5 times higher) for Black Caribbean and Pakistani pupils to be identified with Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) than White British pupils, (Strand et al, 2018).

> *Ethnic disproportionality exists when an ethnic group is significantly more, or significantly less, likely to be identified with SEN compared to the ethnic majority*
>
> (Strand et al, 2018)

> *Under-representation of some ethnic groups is just as important to understand as the overrepresentation of others, as it may indicate barriers to accessing services and provision.*
>
> (Strand et al, 2018)

Mental Health Issues, Pupil Premium Students and Ethnic Disparities

> *Evidence suggests that those at greatest risk of poor mental health during the pandemic include children with previous mental health or learning difficulties and those at socioeconomic disadvantage.*
>
> (Post Note 653, September 2021)

Serious concerns have been raised regarding mental health and the escalating impact the pandemic has had on this. From a survey in 2020 of 2000 young people already prone to mental health issues, 87% said their mental health concerns had escalated during the pandemic. Only 11% said their mental health had improved during lockdown, given the lack of pressure to socially interact with others (Young Minds, Autumn 2020).

> *Many experts agree that further action is urgently needed, including prioritising social and educational activities, addressing socioeconomic disadvantage, enhancing family support, and improving and expanding child mental healthcare provision*
>
> (Post Note 653, September 2021)

> ***Approximately 60% of children and young people in need of mental health services are currently unable to access them.*** *They often face high access thresholds and reject referrals followed by long waits, if they get accepted into the services.*
>
> (House of Commons Committees, December 2021)

Pupil Premium Students and Mental Health Issues

The link between mental health issues and poverty is significant. A recent NHS report revealed that children were more likely to present with a probable mental health disorder in households that have fallen behind with finances and payments (Vizard et al, 2020). There is also a concern that although mental health issues amongst secondary students seemed to remain on an even keel over time, including during and after lockdowns, with a sense of post -lockdown recovery, the reality for those living in low-income households was different. Mental health issues continued to rise and impact young people from disadvantaged families with little indication of post- lockdown recovery (Co-Space Report 11, 2020-2021).

The record number of contacts to our helpline reinforces the need for Governments across the UK to put children at the heart of their recovery plans. These must go beyond education and address the harm some have experienced so the pandemic doesn't leave a legacy of trauma for children.

(Sir Peter Wanless, NSPCC CEO, 2021)

The NSPCC has revealed that with children hidden from sight during lockdown restrictions, cases of neglect and abuse have increased and therefore, following the return to school, much work needs to be done in addressing the harm and trauma caused by this (NSPCC, 2021).

This has been reflected by our helpline service, which has received nearly 85,000 contacts from April 2020 to March 2021, a 23% increase on the previous year. Out of these calls, 47% led to a referral to an external agency, such as the police or children's services.

(NSPCC, 2021)

Ethnic Disparities and Mental Health Issues

Mental health disparities amongst ethnic minority communities have long existed but the current pandemic has intensified the problem.

Given the higher risks of mental illnesses and complex care needs among ethnic minorities and also in deprived inner-city areas, COVID-19 seems to deliver a double blow.

(Smith et al, 2020)

Kooth is an online forum reaching out to young people who need support with mental health issues and according to the Guardian, the number of under-18 ethnic minority groups contacting this forum with suicidal thoughts during the pandemic, (March – May 2020), increased by 26.6% in comparison to an increase of 18.1% by their white peers (The Guardian, June 2020).

Racial discrimination affects people's life chances and the stress associated with being discriminated against based on race/ethnicity affects mental and physical health

(Public Health England, 2020a)

Deep rooted racism and discrimination has left some members of ethnic communities lacking in trust and therefore reluctant to reach out for help.

> *Addressing deep-rooted racial inequality – including within detaining ('sectioning') of people in crisis under the Mental Health Act - is key to supporting good mental health amongst Black people, South Asian heritage people and other minority ethnic groups at the sharp end of such inequality.*
>
> (Mind, July 2020)

SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE AND VULNERABLE STUDENTS

No one should feel that a characterization or label defines who they are. Irrespective of background, culture, capabilities, beliefs etc. each person is unique and by the very nature of our humanity, we all have need.

> *Labels carry messages that often confine a child to a particular role or behaviour.*
>
> (Nicholson)

While specific identifications can be helpful as a medium for communication across various teams supporting children, such identifications can equally act as barriers that restrict and hinder personal growth. In enabling and encouraging students to flourish, it is need, not labels that should be recognised and nurtured.

> *You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.*
>
> (Psalm 139: 1)

> *I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*
>
> (Psalm 139:14)

A Recovery Curriculum

A recovery curriculum for students as they emerge from the various levels of loss and disruption is essential. Many schools are targeting gaps in learning by adapting their curriculum. Mental health and student wellbeing is also a key focus. In some schools, staff are being trained to be able to help students with initial mental health support and other schools are employing more specialist support through trained counsellors (Gov. UK, December 2021).

Spiritual Recovery

> *There is no single factor that will protect your adolescent like a personal sense of spirituality.*
>
> (Miller, 2015)

To address the academic and emotional wellbeing of students is important as part of a recovery process, yet it is also essential to connect with, and build the spiritual core. Shein (2017) argues that nurturing the spiritual core of a person is a precursor for all levels of human development.

The Role of Chaplains in Spiritual Recovery

Chaplains have a central role in fostering this level of spiritual support for students. Working as part of a team around the child, offering support on different levels of expertise builds those important steppingstones of trust that can demonstrate to the child that they are known, valued, and respected.

With the surge in mental health issues post -lockdown, participant chaplains in our virtual community of practice spoke of the frustration of not being able to build key relationships with vulnerable students because the students were being referred to specialists. However, the chaplains also reported that nurturing spiritual resilience was critical and emphasises the necessary focus on the role of spirituality and faith as an underpinning foundation.

> *Staff will send me a student that they are desperately worried about. I'll have a conversation with them and within a couple of minutes I know full well that I'm going to be referring them for counselling.*
>
> (Chaplain, VCoP 1)

> *In terms of spiritual resilience, we're trying to sort of make a distinction between spiritual resilience and any other kind of resilience, I think that's referring even more to that inner sense of who am I and what is my worth?*
>
> (Chaplain, VCoP 3)

When nurturing the spiritual flourishing of all children, especially those who are disadvantaged and vulnerable, is it important to bring to the forefront Jesus' words, *I have come that you might have life –life in all its fullness,* (John 10:10).

REFLECTIONS

1. Does anything in the literature above resonate with your own thoughts on spiritual resilience and support for disadvantaged and vulnerable students?

2. How do you support pupil premium students in Year 7 through transition and induction?

3. How do you support ethnic minority groups in Year 7 through transition and induction?

4. Where does your role as a chaplain sit in relation to school recovery plans for students needing support?

5. What needs to be put in place to offer vulnerable children ways to develop spiritual resilience?

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