

Agents of hope: managing fear and rebuilding school culture post coronavirus

Today we face a situation that is new to all of us; we are returning to schools where many children will have spent up to six months in isolation, experienced illness and bereavement in their family and watched as the world they knew at the start of 2020 fell apart. The role of teachers has always been about nurture, but now more than ever we need strategies and skills that renew confidence in safety, belonging, trust in adults and hope for the future.

We achieve this through a strong school ethos backed up by daily, consistent classroom activities. The school ethos must prioritise community cohesion; a narrative of working and living together in harmony, recognising each other's needs and supporting each other to meet those different needs.

How does the world look to children today? The BBC reported on 11/05/20 that hate crime against people of East Asian descent doubled between February and March and that children as young as 12 were being subjected to racist abuse, driven by 'blame China' narratives (BBC, 2020). Two months ago, members of the NASUWT wrote to Education Secretary Gavin Williamson over concerns about the sharp rise in racist incidents in schools; saying it had, "received reports of increased covert and overt racist attacks perpetrated against some minority ethnic pupils and NASUWT members linked to coronavirus concerns." (Whittaker, 2020)

An article in the New Yorker (2020) makes links to historical epidemics and rises in hate crime, providing advice on what to do if witnessing abuse; quoting Mike Ainsworth, director of London services at Stop Hate U.K;

"There's a narrative that happens with hate crime from the perpetrator that says, 'I am attacking you but actually lots of people agree with me'. Where hate crime becomes really dangerous, is if victims start to believe that. Ainsworth said, "I've talked to victims of hate crime in London and one of the things they say is, 'being racially abused on the tube is horrible but having two hundred people stand there saying nothing is the bit that starts to really upset me and corrode my trust in society."

It is vital that children, who will be looking to us for reassurance, do not experience a "say nothing" culture in our schools. We must talk about coronavirus with the children and its effect on us, while deconstructing any blame culture that may be filtering through in the communities outside our school gates. We will not be one of the 200 people on the tube staying silent; we will promote a strong narrative of community cohesion in our classrooms, rebuilding trust in adults and in society.

In May 2020, a letter to the education secretary from child mental health experts representing five universities asked for play to be a priority for primary schools when they reopen, to relieve stress and anxiety, arguing, "play should be a priority during this time, rather than academic progress."

(Weale, 2020). I would argue we do not have to choose between the two; timetabled structured play leads to academic progress.

The article raises some sobering points:

“Poor emotional health in children leads to long-term mental health problems, poorer educational attainment and has a considerable economic burden.”

“One study... found that children who experienced quarantine or social isolation in previous pandemics were five times more likely to need mental health interventions than those who did not.”

“All the research indicates that children’s emotional health is suffering in the lockdown and it seems likely that this suffering will, in many cases, continue into the long term. We are urging ministers and policy makers to ensure that children are afforded substantial, and if possible enhanced access to high quality play opportunities as soon as possible.”

So, what do we do at school?

In an article for Unicef (Rich, 2020) child psychologist Dr. Lisa Damour outlines 6 strategies for parents to support their children during the epidemic; but teachers could also consider these 6 strategies on our return to school:

1. **Be calm and proactive** (empathise with worries and reassure)
2. **Stick to a routine** (invent structures and schedules to get through the day)
3. **Let your child feel their emotions** (“Support, expect and normalise that they are very sad... when in doubt, empathy and support are the way to go.”)
4. **Check in with them about what they are hearing** (find out what they have heard so that misinformation can be corrected. If there are questions you can’t answer, explore together.)
5. **Create welcome distractions** (balance talking about feelings with finding distractions when kids need relief; have a family game every night or cook together)
6. **Monitor your own behaviour** (kids take emotional cues from us, relying on us for safety and security. Dr Damour explains; “(it is important that) we remember that they are the passengers in this, and we are driving the car. And so even if we are feeling anxious, we cannot let that get in the way of them feeling like safe passengers.”)

Additional inspiration for this guidance came from a real-life story of 6 shipwrecked boys aged 13-16 in 1977, as told by Rutger Bregman (Bregman, 2020). Bregman uses the tale “Lord of the flies” by William Golding to illustrate the common perception many adults have about children who are left alone for a long period of time. The chaos that ensues in the well-known story has long been accepted as a likely outcome for most children left in a similar situation. But Bregman highlights a real-life Lord of the flies story of six boys who were marooned on an island in the Pacific ocean for more than a year, before they were eventually rescued.

How did the boys survive? By co-operating. While adrift at sea for eight days, without food or water; “The boys tired catching fish. They managed to catch some rainwater in hollowed out coconut shells and shared it equally between them, each taking a sip in the morning and another in the evening.” Upon reaching an uninhabited island, the boys constructed a commune. They drew up a strict roster

to watch a fire (keeping it burning for over a year); collect food and water; guard the camp. They made a pact never to quarrel. They started and ended each day with a song and a prayer.

Bregman feels this true story, “is a tale of friendship and loyalty; one that illustrates how much stronger we are if we can lean on one another”. Bregman meets Peter, one of the boys, when writing his book. Peter shows Bregman his own memoir written about his time on the island, for his children and grandchildren. The memoir begins, “Life has taught me a great deal, including the lesson that you should always look for what is good and positive in people.”

I was inspired by the idea of a song and a prayer at the start and end of each day; to build a routine/structure for the children in my school. I can see how a common prayer, or thought, poem, saying, that is spoken each day, could unite a group of children feeling dislocated. This was the starting point for this guidance, then thoughts about how to ensure, in the event of split classes on different days or timetables, children retaining a sense of belonging; that someone will miss them if they are not around.

Rather than a series of lesson plans, this guidance is a model for an ethos. How do we start and end our school days; how do we emphasise belonging and security? The No Outsiders ethos provides lesson plans to promote community cohesion; these lessons should be timetabled as a priority in the new term as children return to school; the books used across a whole day or week as stimulus for art and the stories used to teach literacy. Lesson plans for the new scheme can be found In “No Outsiders: Everyone different, everyone welcome” (Moffat, 2020). In addition to the 42 picture books used in the No Outsiders scheme of work, there are an additional sixteen books with activities on the excelsior website <https://excelsiormat.org/work-with-us/no-outsiders>

The weekly No Outsiders assembly pictures <https://no-outsiders.com/assembly-plans> will provide consistent messages of hope and community cohesion for children. Someone in each school needs to take on the responsibility of ensuring classes are accessing these assemblies at an agreed time now that year group / whole school assemblies are not possible.

References

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Guidance

1. Stronger together

We need to unite our children after months of isolation. While visiting Church of England Schools for No Outsiders training days in the past year I have been interested to observe prayers spoken in unison during assemblies. Although not a person of faith myself, I appreciate the feelings of togetherness that these prayers can provide for children; we're all here, we're together, we believe the same, we sign up to the belief. There is a strength in that.

Why did the Shipwrecked boys in 1977 start and end each day by singing a song and saying a prayer? In a time of crisis, speaking and singing together gave the boys an inner strength that pulled them through. Perhaps it was just the routine of saying the prayer at the same time, that provided the structure and safety in routine; whatever it was, it worked for them. Could we develop a message to be spoken as a routine at the end of our school day?

But what to say? What message do we want to give? We need a simple, short message about being different and being together. It needs to be a message of hope, of achieving goals and about being strong. My proposal is we create an Excelsior Message, to be read aloud either by one person in the class or by the whole class together every day at the same time as part of our routine. We also put the message on posters and displays around the school.

"Together we are stronger"

I am strong, you are strong, we are strong together

Together we are different

Together we achieve our goals

Together we are stronger

2. Buddies: Providers and recipients

Children need to know if they are not around, they are missed; someone will be thinking of them, waiting for them to return to school. Children need to be reassured the class is different without them (we are stronger together) and they are an important part of that class.

Each day at the end of the day we assign buddies for the following day. There are ping pong balls in a covered box, each with a name of a child in the class. At the end of each day each child takes a random ball and reads the name, keeping that name secret (the teacher should write down the name so that they have a record in case of absence). It is the job of each child to welcome their buddy in the morning. Each child will then be a "provider" for the day: providing care and support and positive moments for their buddy. Each child will also be a "recipient"; receiving the same care from someone else. Each child knows that when they arrive at school, someone will be looking out for them, waiting to see them, and they will also be looking out for a buddy. We are all looking out for each other. Children should be encouraged to think about how they can make their buddy have a good day; we discourage presents or cards; this is about acts of kindness. We are encouraging an ethos of care and kindness in this time of crisis.

At the end of each day each buddy pair spends 5 minutes with each other reflecting on their day; this will need to be done twice as each child will be a provider for someone and a recipient for someone else. This time is called the “meaningful moment”.

3. Meaningful moments

We are putting a meaningful moment in to the timetable each day. Each child has a meaningful moment book; this should not be just another exercise book or jotter; these need to be special, hard-back books.

The meaningful moment will take place at the end of the day. Ask providers one at a time to go and sit with their recipients for the day; do this until everyone is sitting with a partner. Now children discuss and write down in their meaningful moment books the parts of the day when they felt happiest; for example, did their buddy say or do something that make them feel happy today? Did they do a piece of work they were proud of; was lunch time fun; did a teacher or child give a compliment, did a child help them with work? It is the job of the provider to help the recipient identify meaningful moments.

With one eye on this activity the teacher should reference meaningful moments throughout the day; “That could be a meaningful moment for you! Remember it for your book”.

Once the recipients have written their moments down, ask the next group of providers to sit with their recipients so that each child gets to spend time experiencing giving and receiving support each day.

If a recipient child is absent, their provider writes a note about what they had planned for the child and leaves it in their book. If a provider is absent the teacher will have a record of the child they were providing for, and should ask another child at the start of the day to look out for them so that they are not left out and still have a provider for the day (or the teacher / TA could act as the provider).

The meaningful moment books are a record for each child to support them through this crisis. The aim is to build up a record of moments that can provide hope and reassurance to children. The meaningful moment should be a priority in the timetable each day and must not be crammed in at the last minute. Staff need to give this time status and model enthusiasm for it, to give it purpose. The head teacher could visit a different class each day to witness the meaningful moment and join in, adding a comment in books and admiring the cooperation.

The end of the meaningful moment would be a good time to read the Excelsior message; children could take turns with a different child reading it each day or the class could read it as a whole (oracy). The message should be viewed as part of the meaningful moment; it could close the day. Whenever staff choose to do it, it must be a routine that is played out every day to provide structure and security.

4. Play / circle times

The emphasis on play is crucial and should be structured and timetabled in each day; perhaps for ten minutes following the meaningful moment. We recommend classes collect a range of board games and packs of cards, using this time to teach children how to play cooperatively. This is not a time for colouring in sheets and I-pad time in classes should be reduced considerably, if not removed altogether; our priority in this time is to promote face to face play. Teachers must join in the play, modelling enjoyment and enthusiasm.

Circle time activities are also strongly encouraged (see appendix 1: circle time games). The aim is for children to have opportunities to participate in whole class games that promote cooperation and a sense of enjoyment and well-being in class.

Working with children suffering from bereavement/ family illness

The Pastoral Care Team in each school should build a bank of resources to support children in one to one sessions, who have experienced bereavement or illness in the family. The following picture books can be used to explore feelings around coronavirus and its impact on us.

The perfect shelter- Clare Helen Welsh/ Asa Gilland - A little sister becomes ill and goes to hospital; this story explores how the family support each other and retain hope.

Waiting for wolf – Sandra Diekmann – when wolf dies, his best friend Fox waits for him to come back before realising he has gone for ever but will remain in Fox’s heart. There is a pack of work including a video of the author reading the book here <https://excelsiormat.org/work-with-us/no-outsiders>

Everybody counts – Kristin Roskifte – a counting story from 0 to 7.5 billion showing how we are all have different stories and experiences, secrets and feelings, and we often don’t know about what’s inside someone and how they are. “if you look hard enough you might even find someone just like you”

When Sadness come to call – Eva Eland this book is in the No Outsiders scheme, it talks about sadness as a physical being that cannot be ignored. We need to learn to talk to it; so that it doesn’t overwhelm us.

The huge bag of worries – Virginia Ironside – Jenny collects worries in a huge bag that follows her around getting bigger and bigger and more cumbersome until an old woman helps her to open the bag and let some of the worries out. This encourages children to recognise and talk about their fears.

Silly Billy – Anthony Browne – Billy makes worry dolls to share his worries. This book is great for an art session making worry dolls out of dolly pegs.