

## Think Piece

### **A Recovery Curriculum: Loss and Life for our children and schools post pandemic.**

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“When will they actually go back to school?” This is the cry from many parents, as we write and there is no answer. But that does not stop us thinking about what it will be like for each and every one of our children, at whatever age, stage or ability level on the day they walk through the classroom door.

It would be naive of any Headteacher/Principal to think that the child will pick up the Curriculum at exactly the same point at which they left it on the day their school closed. Too much has happened. Listen to what the children are saying. Look at what the children are experiencing. None of this follows the usual pattern of a school year with all of the annual cycle of events. It feels like a period of true social disorder. Compassionate Leadership is crucial at this time.

When the children return to school there needs to be a Recovery Curriculum in place. Suddenly daily routines have evaporated and with it, any known curriculum framework. No more rushing to get the school bag ready and running out of the door to begin the journey to school. For most children their daily goal in going to school is not just to learn but to see their friends and to feel a sense of self-worth that only a peer group can offer. You cannot underestimate the impact of the loss of that social interaction. It is as key to their holistic development as any lesson. Human beings are fundamentally social creatures, and the brain grows in the context meaningful human to human interaction. What will the children be making of this period of non-attendance? What worries will they have because grown-ups have now stopped them going to school indefinitely?

For many children the loss of structure will be devastating. This is why parents have been encouraged to establish clear routines in home schooling their children. Children need to know what they are doing now and what will come next. If they don't, the child will become anxious and concentration levels drop; they become frustrated with themselves, and their parents as makeshift educator.

For some, the loss of freedom is constraining. What teenager wants to be with their parents 24 hours a day? Frankly they are not cool! Their whole self-image, self-esteem, and self-concept, is located in the interaction and dynamics of a peer group. They cannot test their emerging self, against the rules and routines of family life and to be taught by a parent who clearly knows nothing, (what teen acknowledges parental skills?) is to them an insult!

The common thread that runs through the current lived experiences of our children, is **loss**. Publicly it has been the loss of national examinations which has been most obvious. As one student said, "I was preparing to run a marathon, but now they tell me there is no race!" Many would think that the removal of examinations would be a matter of joy for most young people facing a gruelling timetable of examinations. But these are rites of passage; they are integral to how that young person shapes their ambitions for their life. What impact will it have on students to give their all to examinations next time around?

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. Our children are vulnerable at this time, and their mental-health fragile. And on top of that, they are witnessing a sea of adult anxiety, which they unwittingly are absorbing. There will be many students who are young carers, and this loss of freedom will be combined with a weight of responsibility that will have made academic learning feel inconsequential.

The loss of friendship and social interaction could trigger a bereavement response in some of our children. They will grieve for that group of peers, who not only give them angst, but also affirm them as the person they want to be. The rules of the peer group have vanished without warning, and our young people in particular, were ill prepared for this. They will mourn for how their life was compared to how it is now. They have undergone a period where friends and family members have been avoided because they are a threat; how long will it take for children to feel not threatened by nearness of others?

The loss of routine and structure, will be traumatic for some. Already we are receiving reports of the increased incidents of self-harm, (Young Minds, 2020). Children can find it alarming that the infrastructure of their week has been abandoned however logical the reason. The suddenness of it all may induce panic attacks, a loss of self-control, as the child feels their own intellect no longer informs their personal judgements accurately.

Anxiety is a cruel companion. It eats away at the positive mental health of the child, and can cause a deterioration in their overall well-being. The anxious child is not a learning child. Mood swings may prevail; they can become irrational and illogical. There can be a loss of sleep; the cumulative tiredness can diminish the child's coping mechanisms.

Daily, children are listening to reports of the spread of the pandemic and to the reported death toll in their country and internationally. It is probable that most children may return to school knowing of someone who has died. Indeed, they may have first-hand experience of the death of a loved one. In this respect, we have much to learn from the experiences of those children affected by the earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand. Schools there, kept a register of the deaths within a family, or other significant traumatic events, to guide and inform staff as children returned. Subsequent evidence from research studies from NZ, (Liberty, 2018) have shown that there has been considerable impact on the learning and development of those children who were under 5 years old at the time of the earthquakes, (eg speech delays, emotional immaturity, etc). We ignore such related evidence at our peril.

Those 5 losses, of routine, structure, friendship, opportunity and freedom, can trigger the emergence emotionally of anxiety, trauma and bereavement in any child. The overall impact cannot be underestimated. It will cause a rapid erosion of the mental health state in our children.

How are schools to prepare? What curriculum adjustments are crucial? What pedagogical frameworks will facilitate teaching with compassion? How will staff manage their own recovery? We inevitably have a finite resource and we must consider the gradual implementation of any form of curriculum to recover from loss. 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 and emergent attachment issues .

Teaching is a relationship-based profession. That has been clearly demonstrated in the response of the teaching profession, supporting children through online teaching during the crisis, and also caring for the children of key workers by keeping schools open and offering an activities programme. This was not without its inherent risk.

In response to the weight of loss our young people will have experienced, what are our levers of recovery? Many of us will focus on the recovery of lost knowledge, but this does not recognise the scale of impact. If we consider the definition of a relevant curriculum as the 'daily lived experience' we must plan for experiences that provide the space for recovery. Already Headteachers are saying "The children will be so far behind academically when they return." Such statements are incompatible with the process of recovery from loss, trauma, anxiety and grief. It is more about the results culture so many Headteachers are steeped in. Now is the time to return to more humane approaches concerned with the fundamental wellbeing, and secure positive development of the child. 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.

Lever 1: Relationships - we can't expect our students to return joyfully, and many of the relationships that were thriving, may need to be invested in and restored. We need to plan for this to happen, not assume that it will. Reach out to greet them, use the relationships we build to cushion the discomfort of returning.

Lever 2: Community - we must recognise that curriculum will have been based in the community for a long period of time. We need to listen to what has happened in this time, understand the needs of our community and engage them in the transitioning of learning back into school.

Lever 3: Transparent Curriculum - all of our students will feel like they have lost time in learning and we must show them how we are addressing these gaps, consulting and co-constructing with our students to heal this sense of loss.

Lever 4: Metacognition - in different environments, students will have been learning in different ways. It is vital that we make the skills for learning in a school environment explicit to our students to reskill and rebuild their confidence as learners.

Lever 5: Space - to be, to rediscover self, and to find their voice on learning in this issue. It is only natural that we all work at an incredible pace to make sure this group of learners are not disadvantaged against their peers, providing opportunity and exploration alongside the intensity of our expectations.

We suggest the Recovery Curriculum is built on the 5 Levers, as a systematic, relationships-based approach to reigniting the flame of learning in each child. Many children will return to school disengaged. School may seem irrelevant after a long period of isolation, living with a background of silent fear, always wondering if the day will come when the silence speaks and your life is changed forever. Our quest, our mission as educators, should be to journey with that child through a process of re-engagement, which leads them back to their rightful status as a fully engaged, authentic learner.

What must be going through children's minds at this strange time? Is school to be always transitory, when for you as a child, it has always been a constant, love it or hate it? Can I trust you again, as my teacher, to not abandon me? We were walking a path together, and then this 'thing', this virus, sent us on different journeys. Can our lives reconnect? Can our relationship be re-established? School is no longer the safe, constant place we thought it was. We must be ready to understand, to reframe their perceptions, and show that we are trustworthy.

The Recovery Curriculum is an essential construct for our thinking and our planning. Each school must fill it with the content they believe is best for the children of their school community, informed by your inherent understanding of your children in your community. What were the aims and values of your school before this pandemic? Use them now to guide your judgements, to build a personalised response to the child who has experienced loss. No Government can give you the guidelines for that. It is down to you, as that skilled, intuitive teacher, who can lift the mask of fear and disenfranchisement from the child. You can engage that child as a learner once more, for engagement is the liberation of intrinsic motivation, (Carpenter et al, 2015).

The Loss the children experienced during this pandemic will have caused issues around attachment - in their relationships in school that they have forged over years; these will be some of the strongest relationships the young people have, but bereft of the investment of those daily interactions, will have become fragile. Our unwritten relationships curriculum must restore the damage of neglect; it must be a Curriculum of Recovery. Now is the time to address the damage of loss and trauma, so that it does not rob our children of their lifelong opportunities. Now is the time to ensure that we restore mental *wealth* in our children, so that their aspirations for their future, can be a vision that becomes, one day, a reality.

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23rd April 2020