What is school like for you? Thoughts shared by children & young people in Telford & Wrekin about their experiences of education during and after lockdown.

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Introduction

This collaborative project was devised by Hannah Williams, Laura Moore and Dr Jane Park to enable the views, thoughts, feelings and experiences about the coronavirus pandemic of children and young people across Telford & Wrekin to be heard. Through November and December 2020, Hannah and Jane facilitated workshops with small groups of children and

young people in Telford schools across the age range from Year 2 all the way up to tertiary education. Drawing on a questionnaire co-created by Southend EPS and Nottingham City EPS, small groups of pupils shared their views and experiences, which were live scribed by Hannah in real time. **This document has been prepared to enable us to share these ideas with schools and colleagues to support them in making plans to welcome children and young people back following the current lockdown.** It has also been produced as a reflection of the children's thoughts, and to acknowledge that they have been heard. It was both powerful and humbling to hear of the joys and difficulties of the children's experiences through lockdown, and a pleasure and privilege to share those thoughts and present their ideas here.

Questionnaires and Workshops

Hannah and Jane drew on a set of questions which emerged from the work of Southend EPS and Nottingham City EPS in their larger scale pupil views project which ran in May to July 2020 (Sivers *et al*, 2020). We wanted to know more about what life has been like for Telford children, and to deepen our understanding of protective factors for emotional health and wellbeing (EHWB), as well as all the challenges which our children and young people have faced. Working with groups of children across all Key Stages including tertiary, and across mainstream and specialist settings, our workshops drew out experiences, thoughts and feelings around the following key areas:

- o How was going back to school/college following lockdown?
- o Was it like you expected it to be?
- o How does being back in school make you feel?
- o If you have a problem in school/college is there an adult you can talk to?
- o If you have a problem in school/college do you have a friend you can talk to?
- o Do you feel your school/college is a safe place to be?
- o Do you feel supported in your learning?
- o Thoughts about the things our children & young people are learning at the moment
- o Thoughts about exams and assessments
- o 'Magic wand' question – what would you do to change or improve school/college? What would you do differently and what would you keep the same?

Themes

The themes as depicted above emerged from the data across all age ranges and are felt to represent the range of views and experiences as articulated by the children and young people who took part.

Relationships

Relationships and connectedness were powerful themes which ran across the views shared by the children and young people with whom we worked. Children and young people in Telford & Wrekin told us:

- there are key adults in their lives that they can go to for help and assistance
- they have missed seeing members of staff and friends/family members in other year groups as a consequence of being educated in 'bubbles'

- School and college staff have enabled children to stay connected remotely during periods of lockdown.
- Pupils feel they have missed out on being able to look after and mentor their younger peers, and miss being able to socialise freely at break and lunchtimes.
- Older students lamented the abruptness of endings, not having been able to say goodbye to peers in Year 6 or Year 11 as they moved on.

Older students presented as caring and attuned peers, recognising that others may be struggling with the pandemic context, and demonstrating awareness that anxiety might manifest in challenging ways, such as defiance or emotional outbursts. They also expressed appreciation for teaching staff making themselves easily available for learning and emotional support via email or through Teams.

Opportunities

Children and young people in Telford & Wrekin told us:

- They enjoy blended learning opportunities, and have liked being able to spend time outside in the fresh air.
- They have enjoyed doing lots of creative work, and enjoy opportunities for independent research and working using technology when in school.
- Younger Key Stage 1 pupils expressed their love for all aspects of learning, while those in Key Stage 2 sought more opportunities for hands-on creative experiences such as through Science, Art and activities such as sport and cookery.
- Across the age ranges, Telford & Wrekin pupils expressed wishes for breaks from learning and opportunities for rest and relaxation away from the stresses and uncertainties they have been experiencing, whether in school or at home during periods of self-isolating.
- Uniform was raised across age ranges – children like to be comfortable, and while they communicated an insightful understanding about the significance of school uniform, they also expressed their enjoyment of wearing comfortable clothing such as sneakers as part of their uniform.

Safety

Across all age ranges, children and young people in Telford & Wrekin let us know

- School staff have created an environment in which they feel emotionally and physically safe.
- They feel informed about what is happening to them, and reassured by the key adults in their lives.
- Worries about spreading the virus to family members were expressed, though the collective view is that schools are safe.
- All the children understood the need for additional measures such as handwashing and not mixing across bubbles, though many wished for a return to simpler times when such measures were not needed.
- Alongside practical measures such as hand sanitising and washing, children felt that friends, family and teachers will support them and keep them safe.

Older students expressed some frustrations at rules around social distancing and wearing masks around the school environment not always being adhered to, and appreciated the challenges for staff members in trying to encourage adherence to guidelines. They expressed how important it felt to have a clear picture of how government guidance applies to them, and the measures which each school needs to have in place. Some older students were keenly aware of the impact of the pandemic context on their home lives, with pressures on parental work patterns and job losses causing them anxiety.

Certainty

Children and young people in Telford & Wrekin let us know that they feel supported and informed by school staff. Guidance, though ever changing, is well communicated, and they all appreciate knowing what is going to happen when they return to school. Expectations around learning were felt to be high, but also clear. Older students appreciated the efforts of their teachers to support their learning, especially during periods of self-isolation, and felt that their work would not suffer. Older students also expressed frustration and anxiety at not knowing where they stood regarding examinations/assessments at the end of Year 13.

## Psychological Underpinning and Implications of Themes

In accordance with the work of Sivers *et al* (2020), the findings from this collaborative project are underpinned by psychological theory and may be understood through the lens of the Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954; 1987), the Ecological Systems Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979) and the Power-Threat-Meaning Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). These three theories highlight the need to keep in mind individual and systemic factors when thinking about the impact COVID-19 has had on children and young people in Telford & Wrekin. These theories also speak to the way we need to work across different levels in order to move forward with hope and optimism.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's (1954) hierarchy provides a framework for understanding the order of needs which have to be met for development and growth. The hierarchy splits needs into basic and higher level needs. Before the higher level needs (top of pyramid) such as self-actualization and intellectual achievement can be addressed, the basic needs (bottom of pyramid), such as safety and survival, must be met. **Themes of emotional, relational and physical safety in Telford & Wrekin schools resonated across all age groups**, and are clearly aligned to the hierarchy. It is useful to think about how we can impact all these levels for a child in school. Supporting our schools to be **safe spaces**, physically and relationally, will enable our children and young people to be ready to learn and engage in other higher order skill development.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs
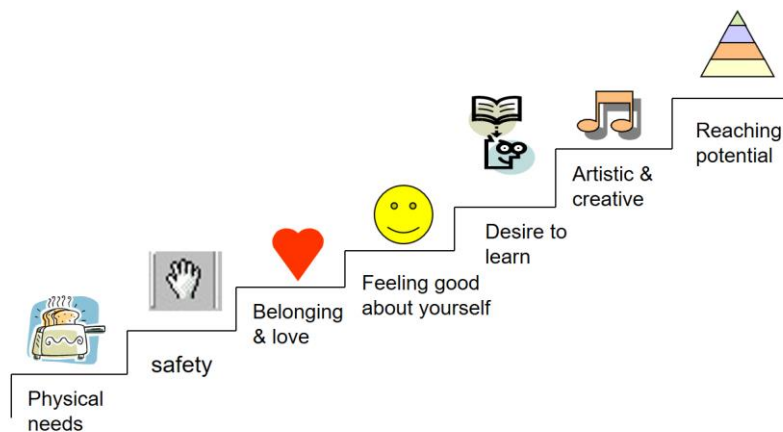
Maslow's hierarchy adapted by Young (2006)

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model provides a framework for understanding how **children's social, emotional and intellectual development is intrinsically liked to interactions with their community, which influences their future growth and progress.** The ecological systems model emphasises the importance of understanding children in multiple environments, for example their relationships within communities and wider society.
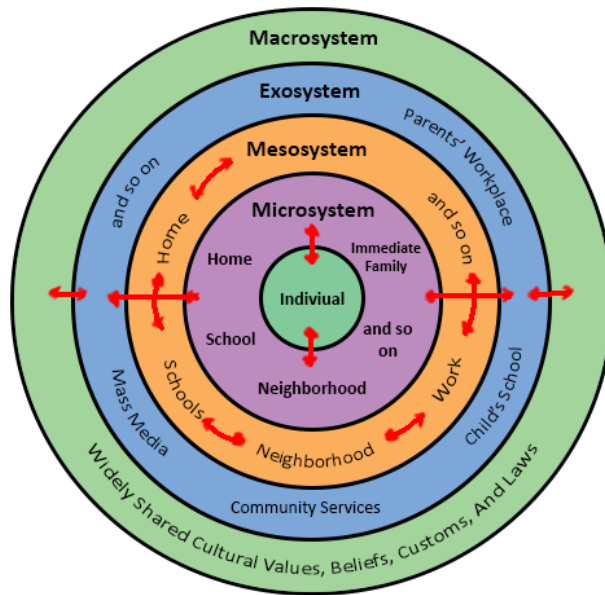
Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model

The Power Threat Meaning Framework

The Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) was developed by Lucy Johnstone and colleagues (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) to be used as a way of helping people to create more **hopeful narratives** or stories about their lives and the difficulties they may have faced or are still facing. The PTMF provides an alternative view to 'within person' or 'deficit' narratives, instead conceptualising difficulty and distress as being context-bound and influenced by cultural and societal phenomena.

The main aspects of the PTMF are summarised in these questions, which can apply to individuals, families or social groups:

▪ 'What has happened to you?' (How is Power operating in your life?)
▪ 'How did it affect you?' (What kind of Threats does this pose?)
▪ 'What sense did you make of it?' (What is the Meaning of these situations and experiences to you?)
▪ 'What did you have to do to survive?' (What kinds of Threat Response are you using?)

In addition, the two questions below help us to think about what skills and resources people might have, and how we might pull all these ideas and responses together into a personal narrative or story:

▪ 'What are your strengths?' (What access to Power resources do you have?)
▪ 'What is your story?' (How does all this fit together?)

As described by Sivers *et* al (2020), viewed together, these three psychological theories offer a framework for understanding the thoughts that children and young people in Telford &

Wrekin have so generously shared about their experiences of COVID-19 in a rich and multi-layered way.

Concluding Observations

Hannah, Laura and Jane would like to thank the children and young people of Telford & Wrekin once again for sharing their thoughts and experiences so generously. We hope that you enjoyed taking part in the Live Scribe experience, and hope that you feel that we heard your voices and views, and that the adults around you are listening and acting on what you have told us.

The views shared in our workshops demonstrated the importance of <u>looking at every layer of a child and young person's life and experiences</u>; both their lived experience and the impact and power of the wider systems around them. To enable pupils to have optimal capacity to learn, we need to ensure all levels of the Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954, 1987) are addressed and met, starting from **basic needs** such as **emotional and physical safety**, and physiological needs. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model helps us to hold in mind that the impact of COVID-19 influences every layer of children and young people's lives. Looking through the lens of the Power Threat Meaning Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) enables us to **recognise the opportunity we have in Telford & Wrekin to have a positive impact on our children's experiences**, to embrace change and create new opportunities for our children's education and wellbeing. Staff working across Telford schools in a variety of professional roles have shown that, despite adversity, we can join together, connect, collaborate and create change for pupils, families and school communities. We have shown very clearly that we care and we are committed to continuing our focus on emotional health and wellbeing with and for the children and young people of Telford & Wrekin.

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