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GUIDANCE

Compassionate transitions: Reconnecting school communities post-Covid-19 closures

Scottish Division of Educational Psychology, 22 June 2020

INTRODUCTION

On Monday 23 March 2020 schools and early learning centres in Scotland closed to the majority of children and staff as safety measures in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic were implemented.

In late May 2020 the Scottish Government announced a phased approach to lifting these measures with children expected to return to school on 11 August. Meantime staff return to school in June to ensure appropriate safety planning is in place, and Early Learning centres will be open to our youngest children during the summer months.

This however will not be a return to learning as we previously experienced it.

Whilst the stated objective of the Scottish Government remains for children to return to full-time classroom based learning as soon as possible, we know that local authorities are also still developing contingency plans for a blended model which would allow children to be educated via a mix of classroom-based and home learning. This could include learning in smaller groups when in school and accessing digital and physical resources to support learning at home. A blended model could helpfully support those children who may struggle to adjust quickly to full time attendance or could provide additional opportunities for more individualised and targeted support for those with additional needs.

We may also face a situation that should a localised lockdown be required due to a spike in the number of cases with Covid-19 then there may again be need to provide home-based or blended learning until the virus is controlled.

Recognising the inequalities for some families in a home learning context highly dependent on digital technology to access learning, the Scottish Government has also announced investment in 25,000 laptops and tablets with internet connection.

As staff return to schools and teams consider how to effectively manage the transition in August, the Scottish Government's Education Recovery Group have produced a helpful framework ([Education Recovery Group Strategic Framework](#)) to support this planning. This framework, produced in conjunction with key partners, encourages us to be mindful of the needs of the most vulnerable families and those children with additional support needs.

The paper, produced by the Scottish Division of Educational Psychology, is intended to support teachers and education staff return to school. It provides a psychological perspective on how to manage this significant transition compassionately and in a way that takes account of the needs of all individuals within a school community. It outlines how key psychological theories can inform this process and provides practical advice about how these can be used to support school communities become more resilient as they reconnect and recover.

It is hoped that this paper will complement the Framework, providing practical advice and guidance as familiar relationships are restored, new routines established and individual needs understood and supported.

‘THE FUNDAMENTAL RESPONSE TO CHANGE IS NOT LOGICAL, BUT EMOTIONAL’¹

Transition is a complex, dynamic process and in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented change across the globe for everyone. This change was immediate, unplanned and out of anyone’s control.

As school communities plan for a gradual return of children and staff to some degree of classroom-based learning, good practice in relation to planning transitions, supporting wellbeing and identifying individual needs will be paramount.

The following psychological theories provide key frameworks for understanding needs and planning education’s response to this pandemic.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs provides a helpful way of thinking about the needs of children and young people as well as significant others in their lives (e.g. parents/carers, teachers). It comprises a five-level model, often displayed as a hierarchy, from basic physiological needs (such as food and sleep) to self-actualization². Needs towards the base of the hierarchy should be met before

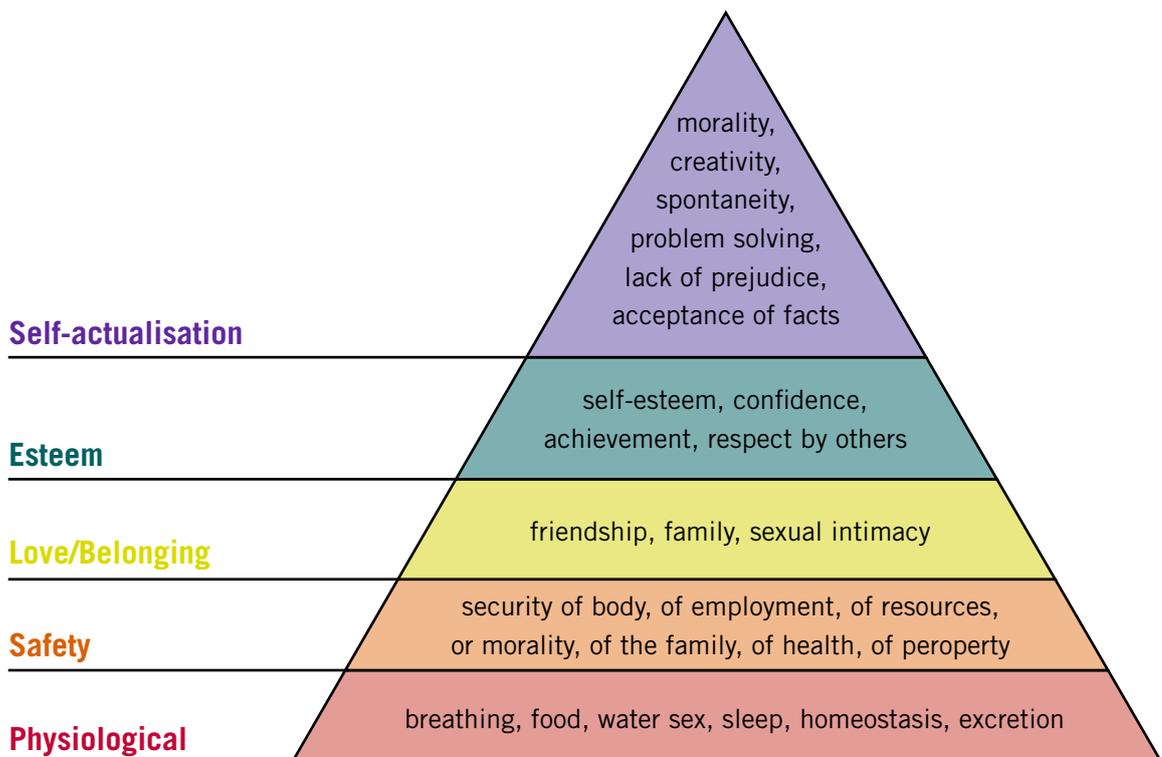


Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

(Attribution: FireflySixtySeven / CC BY-SA)

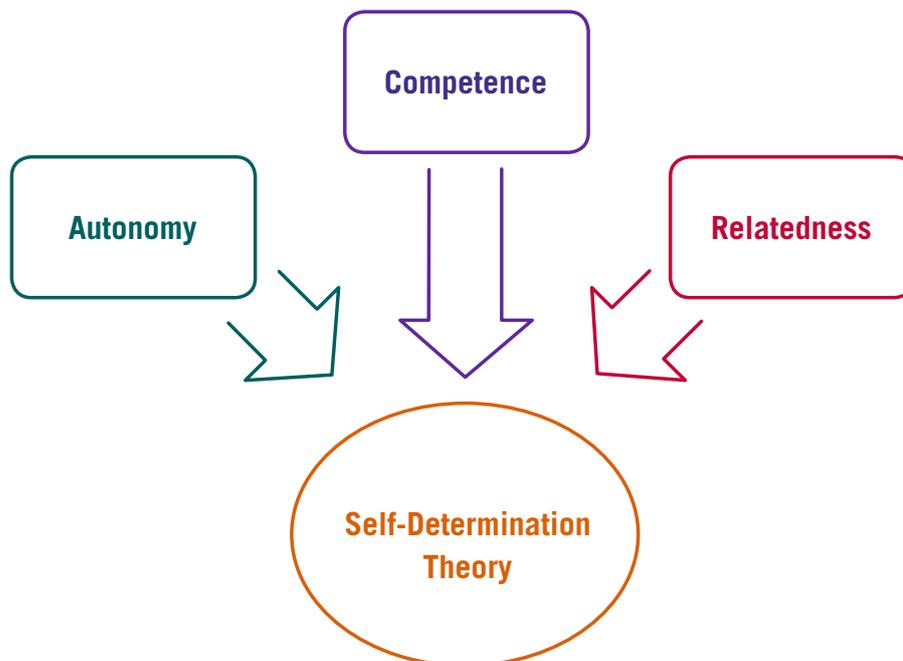


Figure 2: Self-determination theory

(Attribution: Christina Donnelly, Jtneill / CC BY)

needs higher up. During the current pandemic, Maslow's work reminds us of the importance of meeting basic needs (safety and physiological) which may be compromised at this time (e.g. loss of income due to parents being made redundant) but also that for some children more time with parents/carers will have led to strengthened connections.

Another helpful theory is self-determination theory³. All individuals are deemed to have innate psychological needs. In order to achieve healthy functioning and foster wellbeing each of these needs should be satisfied:

- **Competence:** need to feel effective in dealing with our environment
- **Autonomy:** need to control the course of our own lives
- **Affiliation:** need to have close, affectionate relationships and social identity

Due to the pandemic and actions taken to mitigate its impact, these three basic psychological needs have been significantly compromised in a very short space of time, despite the fact that schools moved rapidly to ensure that as many children as possible remained connected to their key adults in schools and to learning. However, the impact of a prolonged period of lockdown and the restrictions placed on social connection (interaction) and ability to exercise personal choice will have impact at every level of the ecological system and may leave individuals feeling anxious, disconnected and worried about being able to do/remember their school work.

For others this may have been a time of growth; learning to cope with frustrations and disappointments while developing an understanding of other people's perspectives.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory⁴ helps us to think about the ways in which children and young people interact with their environment: how they influence it and the ways in which it impacts on them. Some influences are very close to them (e.g. family) whereas other influences are further away (e.g. parent's work). A more recent theory, **Multiple and Multi-Dimensional Transitions theory (MMT)**, builds on this dynamic relationship between children and their environment³⁴. It considers the experiences which affect others in the child's ecosystem. As professionals we should consider this complex interplay between different factors and how we

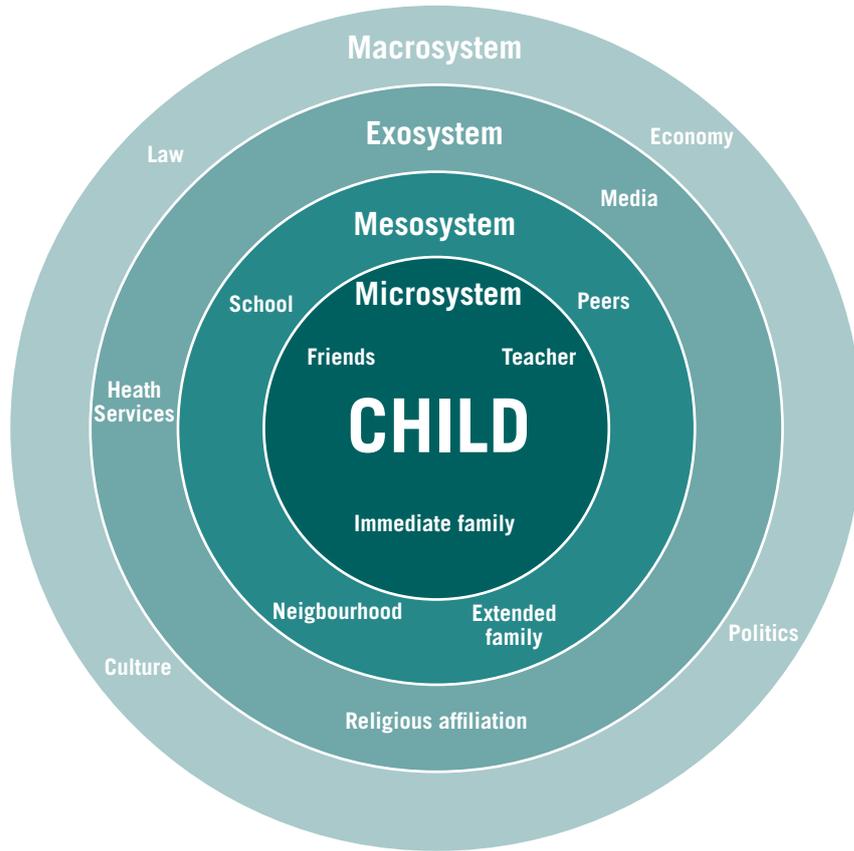


Figure 3: Ecological model



Figure 4: Key transition concepts

can best support children and young people and their families in the current context. (Note: refer to Appendix 1 for more information on ecological systems theory and MMT theory in relation to transitions).

KEY CONCEPTS FOR COMPASSIONATE TRANSITIONS

The psychological theories described above have informed the key concepts for compassionate transitions. These key concepts can be considered as part of effective transition planning during each different phase of the pandemic. Reflective questions are provided to allow establishments to consider the implications in their own context. It is recommended that schools start by considering their staff needs. However, these key areas are not linear and should be used when appropriate to context.

STAFF RESILIENCE AND SELF-CARE

Throughout the pandemic, information about self-care and managing anxiety has been readily available. (Appendix 2). As schools reopen, these strategies and supports will continue to be essential for staff, to ensure their own wellbeing. Staff who are able to model compassionate, calm and attuned relationships will be better able to self-regulate and thus support children's emerging emotional needs⁵.

Staff may also want to consider how they will support one another. Recovery from difficult experiences and emotional responses during lockdown is likely to be longer term⁶ and as well as supporting children, staff will also have had their own experiences to process. Opportunities to connect with one another, reflect and share needs will be an important part of maintaining resilience.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS – STAFF RESILIENCE AND SELF-CARE

How did staff connect before lockdown? Can they still do this? Or are alternatives required?

What can you do to recognise, share and acknowledge different staff's experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Ask staff to consider the strategies in Appendix 3

Which self-care strategies do staff find most effective?

How can staff support one another?

Do some staff need more targeted support from peers or senior leadership team?

PRIORITISE CONNECTION AND WELLBEING

Covid-19 has led to the loss of routine, structure, friendship, opportunities and freedom, and this can trigger the emergence of anxiety, trauma and bereavement in any child⁷. The impact of this cannot be overestimated. Schleicher⁸ believes 'upholding the social fabric of schools and communities' is crucial for children and their families at this time. To help ease and ensure

effective transitions, including returning to school buildings, the **focus on wellbeing, staying connected and having a sense of belonging**⁹ needs to be a priority. This focus is necessary for both the learners within a school and its staff⁸.

The provision of time to acknowledge staff and children's experiences of Covid-19 is a vital starting point. See Appendices 3 and 4 for considerations on reconnecting with children and young people and activities to support staff reconnection.

Community responses from small third sector organisations have been highlighted as being particularly important and successful in supporting disadvantaged communities during the period of lockdown. Maintaining the connections families have established with these groups and supporting a partnership approach to recovery will enhance the wider school community and maximise opportunities for successful transitions back to school¹⁰.

Curricular materials which support children to understand and manage their emotional responses and those of the people around them are already used effectively in many schools. As many schools in Scotland have embedded Nurturing Approaches, Appendix 5 provides some prompt questions for staff reflection. Applying Nurture as a Whole School Approach will also provide a framework for assessing and evaluating progress against the principles of nurture. These approaches will allow staff to have sensitive and attuned conversations as they re-establish classrooms as safe bases¹¹. The Compassionate and Connected Classroom teaching resource will be particularly useful in helping children understand the impact of trauma and adversity and provides strategies and personal coping skills to help them deal with challenge and develop resilience.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS – CONNECTION AND WELLBEING

What has worked well in keeping connected with children?

How have staff stayed connected?

Which families may need additional support to reconnect?

How will you help children reconnect to a school that may look physically different?

How will schools work with third sector organisations moving forward?

See Appendices 3 and 4 for considerations on helping staff and pupils reconnect

IDENTIFY AND ASSESS NEEDS

It is recognised by the Scottish Government¹² that the number of vulnerable children will increase because of the additional pressures placed on families and communities by the Covid-19 outbreak. Existing vulnerabilities are compounded during epidemics and research evidence so far indicates that some families who were 'just coping' have now become 'chaotic' families.¹⁰

Consideration will need to be given to the best way of identifying needs that have arisen during lockdown and what this means for each community, school, class or individual child in their current context.

- **Whole establishment:** Self-evaluation and assessment data can identify whole establishment and individual needs and provide a measure to help inform different levels of interventions. Monitoring how pupils readjust in the first few weeks of returning to school¹³ will be very helpful in identifying those who require further assessment of their needs.

- **Targeted needs:** The National Practice Model¹⁴ provides a framework for undertaking further assessment and analysis of the wellbeing indicators for individual children and ensuring all the Getting it Right for Every Child core values are considered. Consideration should be given to factors happening at all levels of the child's life. For example: have there been changes to the family's employment or financial circumstances? Has bereavement or separation had an impact on relationships?
- **Hidden needs:** Some pupils will communicate distress and trauma through their behaviour. However, schools working in a trauma-informed manner must also be aware of pupils with 'hidden needs'¹⁵, who may be anxious and stressed but do not communicate this in the school environment. A further group of pupils may not return at all and the focus will need to be on outreach and re-engagement for these pupils¹³.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS – IDENTIFYING AND ASSESSING NEEDS

How can schools monitor and identify pupils who will require additional support?

What tools/measurements can be used with children of different ages (e.g. belongingness scales, self-report, wellbeing scales)?

Which families were 'just coping' and are therefore more vulnerable?

What supports are in place at a whole-school level for those we have not yet been able to identify (e.g. Circle Time)?

Who knows these pupils best and can support them to articulate their views?

CLEAR COLLABORATIVE PLANNING

LEADERSHIP

*'School leaders, particularly principals, have a key role to play in setting direction and creating a positive school culture including the proactive school mindset, and supporting and enhancing staff motivation and commitment needed to foster improvement and promote success for schools in challenging circumstances.'*¹⁶

As education systems prepare for children returning to school, staff report¹⁷ the central role of school leaders in maintaining school values and ethos, communicating clearly and, with school communities, setting out a vision for session 2020–21.

Setting priorities which include the safety and wellbeing of staff, children and families as a central tenet for establishing new blended learning routines will support effective and longer term recovery.

Data and clear planning are important in closing the poverty-related attainment gap¹⁸ and this will continue to be the case during and after this pandemic. In uncertain times this needs – more than ever – to be collaborative. When communities and society are undergoing rapid, dramatic changes, the broadest range of knowledge and insights are required to understand the additional needs of particular groups and the lived experiences of restrictions such as the current lockdown¹⁹.

When communities support future plans and feel as if they have participated in decision making, solutions are more likely to meet the full range of needs of different populations¹⁹. In education this involves:

- Parents being involved as equal partners in transition planning and preparation⁹. By ensuring there are positive relationships with parents and by being aware of the experiences and mindset children are bringing into their classroom, teachers can create the emotionally supportive environments children will need²⁰ upon returning to school.
- **Partnership working** with other professionals and sharing good practice can also support re-engagement^{21,22}.
- Involving **all children** in transition planning, including those who are vulnerable, disadvantaged and/or have additional support needs, will be another essential aspect of transitioning back to school and possibly new ways of learning. Carpenter and Carpenter's Recovery Curriculum⁷ includes co-constructing with children a transparent curriculum to address gaps they have identified.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS – CLEAR COLLABORATIVE PLANNING

How can communication between home and school be fostered to plan for reconnecting?

What platforms can be used for multi-agency planning?

How are children's views and experiences reflected in planning?

How do we know about our school community's experiences of the pandemic?

What data do we have to help plan transitions for our school, classes and individual children and families? What else do we need?

TARGETED SUPPORT

Any transition is a **risk point for vulnerable learners**¹¹ and children and young people who experience vulnerability before the occurrence of a crisis such as Covid-19 are more likely to show symptoms of traumatic stress afterwards²². School closures are likely to widen the attainment gap through a number of mechanisms as this is a pattern evidenced during school holidays²⁴. Pupils who already have identified Additional Support Needs require a more personalised approach in order to successfully manage transitions²⁵. Targeted support is paramount for transition including supports for returning to school as well as for learning²⁶ and emotional wellbeing¹¹. This needs to be interactive and relational. A focus on the individual which includes their strengths and interests is a key factor in supporting pupils to re-engage with schools²⁷.

The **Getting it Right for Every Child National Practice Model** facilitates school staff, families and multi-agency partners in identifying wellbeing needs and agreeing appropriate support planning.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS – TARGETED SUPPORT

Consider what supports and strategies you already have in place and how they could be adapted to suit this current situation.

- Nurture Approach (see Appendix 5 for questions around Nurture)
- Seasons for growth
- Resilient kids
- Literacy and numeracy
- Emotional literacy approaches to help children and young people express their anxiety.

Consider supports that would be relevant prior to the return to school and once schools have re-opened.

A NEW TRANSITION: BLENDED LEARNING

As children and young people return to school, it is highly likely that this will involve some form of blended learning. Terminology in this area is evolving and Education Scotland have developed a [glossary of terms](#) relevant to remote learning.

The most common definitions of ‘Blended Learning’ involve a combination of online and offline instruction. For the purposes of this paper we are adopting the definition proposed by Boelens, Van Laer, De Wever, and Elen²⁸, namely ‘learning that happens in an instructional context which is characterised by a deliberate combination of online and classroom-based interventions to instigate and support learning. Learning happening in purely online or purely classroom-based instructional settings is excluded’ (p.3).

It is likely that in the short to medium term the instruction of children and young people in Scotland will take the form of a combination of approaches including attendance at school, attendance at education-early learning hubs (established for the children of key workers and vulnerable children), outdoor learning, outreach support and online teaching at home. Parents have played a key role in supporting their children’s learning during lockdown and will continue to do so as we move forward in the phased approach to easing lockdown. No decisions have, as yet, been made as to which children will participate in the different modes of teaching and learning. It is therefore important that we start to think about what blended learning might look like for children and young people and the pedagogical issues this approach raises for teachers and other educators. Importantly, we need to consider blended learning and the environments where this takes place in the context of an inclusive experience for all children and young people²⁹. In doing this we need to take account of the features of inclusive education in Scotland, namely being:

- Present
- Participating
- Achieving, and
- Supported

The following questions (developed using Boelens, De Wever, and Voet³⁰ as a stimulus) are designed to stimulate thinking, discussion and planning:

- 1 How do you integrate face-to-face and online learning activities?
- 2 How do you create an online learning environment which facilitates two-way communication between the pupil and the teacher?
- 3 How do you foster a positive affective learning environment which helps pupils feel valued and facilitates motivation to learn?
- 4 How much flexibility does the pupil have in relation to choice and sequence of learning activities?
- 5 How do you create a sense of community and encourage social interaction between pupils in the online environment using both synchronous and asynchronous methods?
- 6 How do you help learners regulate their learning?
- 7 How do you accommodate the differing needs of learners using blended learning?

- 8 How do you monitor pupils' progress in relation to their learning?
- 9 How do you provide feedback to pupils about their progress?
- 10 How do you identify and address difficulties pupils may be encountering?
- 11 How do you ensure an inclusive educational experience which achieves excellence and equity for all?
- 12 How do you ensure that the key role of parents is recognised as part of a blended learning approach?

CONCLUSION

This paper aims to complement the Scottish Government's Education Recovery Group Strategic Framework, referred to earlier. It is our aim to provide practical advice and guidance to staff in Education Services as familiar relationships are restored, new routines established and individual needs understood and supported.

Using compassionate transitions as an overarching theme, this paper gives an overview of key psychological theories and models that may support staff and educational establishments in their thinking, planning and practice as they prepare to tackle the many and varied challenges that lie ahead in preparing for the transition and return of pupils to education in August 2020.

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RESOURCES

During the Covid-19 pandemic the British Psychological Society convened a Cross Divisional Coordination Group to facilitate the rapid production of psychological advice and guidance to inform and support the UK response.

All productions from this group can be found [here](#)

The papers below will be of particular relevance to those working in education and supporting vulnerable children and families:

[Back to school: using psychological perspectives to support re-engagement and recovery](#)

[Supporting care-experienced children and young people](#)

[The psychology of play](#)

[Advice for key worker parents - helping your child adapt](#)

[When your parent is a key worker - advice for children and young people](#)

[Teacher resilience during coronavirus school closures](#)

[Talking to children about illness](#)

[Talking to children about coronavirus](#)

[UK school closures - support and advice](#)

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Appendix 1

ECOLOGICAL THEORY

Ecological systems theory was initially developed by Bronfenbrenner in the late 1970s⁴ and was subject to revision (e.g. the incorporation of the chronosystem in the late 1980s³¹). It is a theory of development which emphasises the dynamic interaction between an individual and their environment. The conceptual framework incorporates four systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem) which range from the microsystem which is proximal to the individual to the macrosystem which is most remote³².

As applied to the current context and considering ways of supporting children's transition into or back to nursery/school, there should be recognition of the importance of different factors at the level of the microsystem; the interplay between microsystems e.g. parents and school (mesosystem) and the impact of factors more distant from the child, such as the parent's work situation (exosystem).

MULTIPLE AND MULTI-DIMENSIONAL TRANSITIONS THEORY (MMT)

MMT is a more recently developed theory which builds upon ecological systems theory^{4,32} and draws on complexity theory³³. Whilst ecological systems theory acknowledges the bi-directional interactions between the child and others, it does not appear to address the transitions that others in the child's life may also be experiencing. Thus, significant others in a child's life may also be undergoing their own transitions and this theory considers the interplay between the child's transitions and those of others (e.g. peers). The analogy of a Rubik's cube has been used to illustrate this theory. For example, thinking about a child moving from nursery to school, green represents the child's ecosystem, yellow represents the parent's ecosystem, blue represents a peer's ecosystem, red represents the nursery teacher's ecosystem, white the primary 1 teacher's ecosystem, and orange the educational psychologist's ecosystem⁹. Thus, a change in one individual element can cause a ripple effect impacting on other elements.

Appendix 2

SELF-CARE AND MANAGING ANXIETY

Mind, for better mental health: [Corona virus and your wellbeing](#)

Mental Health Foundation: [Looking after your mental health during the Coronavirus outbreak](#)

Scottish Association for Mental Health: [Coronavirus and your mental health](#)

World Health Organisation: [Coping with stress during the 2019-nCoV outbreak](#)

Dr Bruce Perry: A 16-minute video where Dr Bruce Perry talks about [Neurosequential Network Stress & Resilience](#) in response to COVID

British Psychological Society: [Teacher resilience](#)

Appendix 3

ACTIVITIES TO HELP STAFF RECONNECT

Revisit core values and school vision – how have these been evidenced during school closure?

What significant events have there been?

What can be celebrated?

What other events need to be marked?

What have we learned as a team? What new innovations have we seen? How can we use new learning?

REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY FROM EDUCATION SCOTLAND

ASN Transitions and Covid-19 – Reflexive questions

Below is an example of an activity which can be done individually, as a group or as a whole school to evaluate current practice and identify areas for improvement.

TRANSITION FOCUS – (DESCRIBE WHAT YOUR FOCUS IS)

REFLECTION	IN MY CLASS	IN OUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY	IN OUR LOCAL AUTHORITY
What I / we do well			
What needs to improve			
How to improve			

Appendix 4

RECONNECTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Safety and security are basic needs for all human beings (Maslow), and schools are significant places of safety for most of our children. School closures have meant the loss of this safe base and of key adults in children's lives.

Allowing children and young people a voice in how they reconnect with school and learning from their experiences of learning at home will be important factors in ensuring these safe bases are reestablished in children's lives.

Restrictions on social, leisure and learning opportunities may have increased children's and young people's sense of powerlessness and for some this will have been an isolating and unpleasant experience.

Others will have developed new ways of learning and made connections that support this beyond the school context. Some may have learnt a new appreciation of school and what it offers!

It will be important to give staff an opportunity to think about children and young people's experiences, explore together possibilities of giving them a voice in how they reconnect to school and involve them in school recovery plans for the next session.

Below are some questions to guide this process:

What are children/young people's views about school now?

What have been their experiences of remote learning?

What do they think the future looks like for them now?

How will they be supported to:

- Transition from home: soft starts, activities, buddies...
- Reflect on their experiences – curricular supports?
- Re-establish routines
- Reconnect with peers
- Reconnect with staff
- Reconnect with learning: who might need additional support?

From Glasgow Educational Psychology Service (2020)

Appendix 5

NURTURING PRINCIPLES: RECONNECTION AND RECOVERY.

Many schools will have adopted the principles of nurture to understand children's wellbeing needs. Theories underpinning nurturing approaches afford staff an understanding of children's attachment needs and the potential impact of trauma and adversity on their development. The nurturing principles also provide a common language for school communities to use when thinking about children's social and emotional needs.

If your school community has previously worked together to understand and implement the six principles of nurture (Nurture UK) the following discussion questions may be helpful:

1. CHILDREN'S LEARNING IS UNDERSTOOD DEVELOPMENTALLY

How might children's development have been affected by school closure and lockdown? What about 'the gap'? Might some children have regressed? How would you know? What could you do to support?

2. THE CLASSROOM OFFERS A SAFE BASE

How can messages of safety be communicated? What changes have there been to the classroom? (for example, social distancing and hygiene). How do children understand and adhere to these? Some children will be adversely affected by Covid-19 measures. How will you know who they are (NP5)? What can you do?

3. NURTURE IS IMPORTANT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF WELLBEING

How do children and young people feel about COVID-19 measures? What has been the impact on them and their learning? What do they think the future might hold? How do we ensure children and young people have an opportunity to contribute to plans for reconnection?

4. LANGUAGE IS UNDERSTOOD AS A VITAL MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

Much of the communication around COVID-19 has been about the threat it poses. How can we help children and young people manage this? What changes do we need to make to the language we use to communicate the concept safety? How can we communicate hope?

5. ALL BEHAVIOUR IS COMMUNICATION

Some children will still feel frightened and may be struggling with anxiety and mental health issues and will find it difficult to leave their families and reconnect to school. Others may have had traumatic experiences whilst off school and/or may have been abused. How will we know? What changes do we have to make to reassure and support them?

6. TRANSITIONS ARE SIGNIFICANT IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN

Unstructured times like break and lunchtime may need more particular consideration as children and young people reconnect and re-establish safe and supportive relationships. Who might be more vulnerable at unstructured times? What supports might they need?

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