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School Insights Research: COVID-19

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Summary and Key Findings:

This research report sets out a number of findings relevant to partner school adaptation(s) to the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of this, it also looks at what CenSCE's response should be within this changed context. The report is based on interviews with 11 stakeholders from Primary and Secondary Schools with attendant insight from the supporting literature, both grey and academic.

Pupil wellbeing was the central priority on pupil return to school following lockdown. Respondents did not want any significant change in CenSCE provision or core content, regardless of how delivery mechanisms may have to change (in the immediate future at least).

A number of core recommendations can be drawn, for provision in the longer term:

- There is a strong stakeholder preference, as soon as practical, for resumption of activities to be delivered in person at school and through visits at NTU. Any permanent shift to a form of blended provision, beyond any present necessity, would need to be carefully considered.
- There is particular danger of exacerbating the digital divide if provision is moved to home-based learning (even if possible with pupils at one school, digital provision certainly isn't possible with all families at all schools).
- [Parental engagement](#), often reported as critical in educational development, but difficult to foster, was reported by many as having improved during the lockdown period and after. There is potential opportunity here to further support schools in maintaining and improving these relationships.

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1. Introduction & Context

In June 2020 three new cross departmental teams were set up within CenSCE. These 'Alternative September Groups' (ASG's) were tasked with understanding the new (COVID-19) environment and report back on the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats the department had to operate in. Once this was completed the 'ASG - Schools Group' decided to undertake an additional piece of work to understand two primary issues during a period of considerable uncertainty:

- i) School/college response to the pandemic (especially during re-opening in the autumn term) and;
- ii) What our stakeholders wanted our response to be (in the changed environment).

2. Methodology

After several meetings the group decided upon a qualitative methodology employing online (via Microsoft TEAMS) or telephone semi structured interviews as the primary method. The known difficulty in having teachers contribute within a research process was alleviated, to a degree, by contacting existing contacts within the schools and colleges the department works with. The original question set was developed to explore the two themes (above). The question set was also modified mid-way through the research process (due to themes developing out of the research). See Appendix 1 for the (revised) question set.

An invitation email was sent to schools/colleges in mid-August 2020. All primary/secondary and FE college stakeholders (those who receive the benefit of CenSCE activities within Nottingham/Nottinghamshire) were contacted. Interested participants were asked to respond via 'Online Surveys' to offer a couple of possible interview dates. They were also asked to complete and return a consent/information sheet. The interviews were allocated to take place between 24 August and 9 October. The original closing date of 18 September was extended for 3 weeks.

In order to conduct the research in accordance with the highest ethical standards, we submitted and gained clearance from NTU's professional services ethics committee in mid-August. The interview team consisted of 4 CenSCE staff members. There were 15 expressions of interest, to be interviewed, with 11 completing. Of these, 7 came from Primary Schools and 4 from Secondary Schools. The participants were drawn (self-selected) from a variety of school roles, with:

- 6 head teachers/deputy head teachers
- 4 teachers (including one head of year)
- 1 who acted in a 'personal development role'

Due to the need to turn around the research findings as quickly as possible, to have utility for programme planning/development purposes within the department, the interviews were not transcribed. However, they were recorded either as MP3 sound files (after telephone interviews) or on SharePoint (after TEAMS interview). These files were then reviewed and summarised by the interviewer (with pertinent quotes) and uploaded onto 'Online Surveys'.

In total, the interview summaries constituted between 10-11,000 words. They were thematically analysed following the procedure outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). Once the paper was reviewed by the ASG Schools Group the paper was then disseminated to interested stakeholders, external and internal to NTU.

In terms of limitations, a larger number and greater spread of respondents would have been preferable. However, particularly in these uncertain times, it remains unclear how the interview rate could have been increased. Whilst the aim of the research had a clear focus, any future research could also usefully explore (in greater depth) teacher reaction and pupil/teacher reaction to new (outreach) delivery methods.

3. Results

The findings are grouped into relevant themes (the subheadings below). The themes were constructed from both the deductive assumptions arising from the question set, and an inductive interpretation arising from the actual data. The data itself was initially grouped into primary and secondary school domains and by question. The data was then subsequently divided into dominant theme(s) in an iterative process of data analysis and theme construction.

School Priorities?

We wanted to know how schools had interpreted pupil need following lockdown and a return to school. The overwhelming response was a concentration upon pupil wellbeing and [safety](#). Upon probing, when well-being was understood to mean something beyond pupil happiness, in the main, it was used to refer to issues connected to pupil mental health and anxiety in particular. One Primary Head Teacher summed up the feelings of many:

“the government want attainment, but they don’t work in a school where kids go home to domestic violence or heroin addiction. So we play two games really, or two hands. One is getting the kids mentally well, and then getting them to attain. But they won’t attain if they are not mentally well first.”

However, the above needs to be noted in the context of positive behaviour amongst most pupils, across all age groups, with many relieved and happy to be back at school. As said by one Deputy Head Teacher at a Primary School; *“at the minute I’m going ‘wow, this is so much better than I thought it was going to be’ in terms of kids being kids.”* Many interviewees commented on the enthusiasm displayed by pupils on return to school. This was interpreted, by some, as a key means through which pupils could re-engage with learning and potentially, ‘catch-up’. As noted by one Primary School Teacher; *“they are enthusiastic, if you have a level of keenness in children then you can cover quite a bit in a short space of time”*.

Some issues were particular to some schools. This Deputy Head Teacher at a Primary School noted that:

“because of the school we are, reading is really important... ..for us because they come with very differing levels of English or knowledge of English, we have to prioritise English as one of our key things... of course that wasn’t happening for 6 months, so the children who were chugging along nicely in the programme trying to catch up to their age levels in terms of language, that’s all stopped. And we know that for children who English isn’t their first language, a massive percentage of them when they go home, don’t speak English and therefore their only English is when they are at school. So if you’re out 6 months, away from all that, just

talking your home language, we know that's going to be a massive catch up to ensure they are getting back to their year group area."

A commonly held notion was that pupils will not attain as they should, regardless of the extra effort, if they are not happy and healthy and able to emotionally cope with the shift back to school life and learning. This understanding has also led to innovation, in one school, where possible, the school linked the wellbeing activities to the core subject curriculum e.g. the book the children were set to read had a mental health focus for the central character. Other schools reported using board games to develop social connections and communication. Many schools have concentrated on the core curriculum supplemented through PHSE provision. With time being spent on, *"time for talks, discussions, thoughts of the day, that kind of thing, so that is kind of a given. It happens every day"* (Primary School Deputy Head).

In one school a more sophisticated approach to well-being was adopted, with students being asked to fill in a questionnaire. The results were interesting, if disheartening, with the questionnaires showing:

"that the pupils world has shrunk and they are seeing how we are at the moment as how it is going to be...where has the hope gone in their lives?... We do hear laughter and chatter in schools but what is underneath is that their threshold of happiness is so low". "You can't catch up the wellbeing!" (Primary School Head Teacher).

Pupil Experience - Differences from Previous Years

The school learning and social environment is now very different to previous years. Whilst many respondents noted the high resilience of many pupils, the following comment summed up the interpretation of many:

"The thing the children are finding most difficult is being isolated from other children, they have adapted very well, new routine, but the thing they are struggling with, we have 450 pupils in the school but they are never seeing more than 30 at a time – so that's the biggest change for them, especially when they have brothers and sisters" (Primary School - Deputy Head Teacher).

However, the increased isolation and different routines, whilst difficult, does not seem to be causing any significant additional behavioural or emotional issues (at this point). One interesting observation, noted by a couple of respondents, highlighted the loss of independent skills developed in the classroom as a potential area for concern in the long term. With activities practised in the primary setting and used for life which are not taking place e.g. packing a bag for school / recording homework and reading in diaries / packing your place away at the end of the day and organising your own workbooks and worksheets / clearing plates at lunchtime. However, this has its benefits with orderly corridors and conduct around the school. Pupils have been quick to learn the new routines but having things done for them / making it a

process has pro's and con's. *"Sometimes we underestimate how resilient children can be...for some the gap will close. Others will require more"* (Primary School Assistant Head Teacher).

Whilst it is certainly the case that routines are different (many respondents commented on how the children like routine) - is the learning experience fundamentally different? One Primary School Head Teacher didn't think so;

"Fundamentally, it is 30 kids in a classroom being taught by a teacher. It's fundamentally the same...it would take a discerning eye to see the difference this year from last year. And that's the whole idea of it, for it to be the same for the kids."

When [attainment](#) was mentioned there was concern that some children had fallen behind: *"academic wise, they are really far behind... even with the home learning packs they have forgotten basic skills"* (Primary Teacher). However, one Primary School Head Teacher was more sanguine;

"it depends who you believe, because if you believe experts on the news, it says we have damaged a generation. I don't see that. ...the government talk in very simple terms though. They have provided £90 for each student, which is the equivalent of 3 private lessons, but that doesn't do much."

Online / Blended Learning Experiences and the Digital Divide

Schools experimented with a variety of digital mechanisms to maintain contact and instruction during the lockdown period. Experiences seemed to differ quite markedly. Some schools were able to move quite quickly to a home schooling set up with materials available online. With other schools this was simply not possible with some pupils having no access to equipment or the internet. In some environments, the only internet access was by phone. As noted by an Assistant Head Teacher at a Secondary School:

"as time went on it became apparent we were printing physical work to send home to kids in greater quantities because we have a lot of students that have no access to IT equipment – at best they have a phone but even that in some houses is shared access which made the whole online learning experience challenging".

In effect, blended outreach might be possible within school but becomes increasingly problematic outside. However, as noted by a Head of Sixth Form Teacher:

"I don't have the scope to deliver sessions to whole year groups – so it needs to be understandable to students on an individual level. I'd want some kind of checking mechanism to make sure they have accessed it – we don't have assemblies at the moment so can't ask if they have all

checked in – so making it workable where students are working independently”.

Most schools overcame digital challenges through the physical delivery of materials, with some schools adopting more of a central role in community life during the lockdown period. One legacy of COVID is that several schools will use digital platforms as a portal for homework going forward, such has been the success in engagement. For some schools, future needs revolve around; *“how to support students with their learning outside of the classroom as we’ve started down a digital path that we can’t go back from, it’s embedded across the school”.*

One interviewee related an experience of a virtual DANCOP presentation and noted that:

“whilst good, it made me think we need to look at the quality of speakers to make sure that when students are sitting in a classroom watching someone on a big screen, they need to be... their attention is harder to keep, than if you have several ambassadors in a room circulating helping to deliver tasks. So we need to think carefully about the delivery, it needs to be interactive” (Secondary School – Support Staff).

Many schools reported an increase in parental contact and involvement.

Parental Engagement

The context in which learning is supported within a home environment is problematic for many pupils. As noted by an Assistant Head Teacher at a Secondary School; *“Year eleven have come back positive but many of them are not from a background where they are good at doing that (learning) independently, or have families that would support them to do that, and this is a long term disadvantage for them”.*

However, one potential positive from the lockdown experience was increased parental involvement, particularly from previously hard to reach groups. One Primary School Head Teacher described lockdown as having a ‘bonding effect’ for the community as a whole. Where, for example, workbooks and resources had to be given out, during lockdown, schools would be kept open and manned every day (for this purpose regardless of any key worker need). Many used the opportunity, in the supply of materials, to help families to work together. However, at one school at least but perhaps across many, the; *“parental view of the world is negative and that has come through to the children”.*

Whilst many interviewees understood the main focus of CenSCE’s work as ‘raising aspirations’, the following reflection on the abandoned ‘High 5’ scheme and the term ‘academic excitement’, offers a different perspective on how to understand provision:

“we brought parents to the university on a bus who had no idea of what it was, they got dressed up, we didn’t tell them to, but they felt they should.”

I remember one girls mum, Chloe her name was, she said to me on the bus on the way back, 'I want Chloe to come here' and she would never have had that aspiration or expectation for her child without the experience of coming to the university. As a school we do residential experiences that focus on outdoor pursuits but we do not do much that promotes that fosters academic excitement. High 5 did that for the pupils and their parents and carers. Chloe is in VI form now" (Primary School Teacher).

Similarities and Differences in the Primary and Secondary Experience

There was more emphasis on attainment at secondary level but wellbeing was still a focus. Some respondents reported a definite attainment drop, others highlighted this might be down to simple 'rustiness', from being out of school for so long. The existence and extent of any attainment gap is perhaps too early to determine. In terms of wellbeing, anxiety was highlighted, as stated by a Secondary School Head Teacher;

"quite a few are expressing anxiety in terms of their post 18 options. Students are anxious about university entrance requirements - as they are not able to do work experience, for example. We haven't had the time to give the students all the information we would normally give them, or is given to them by people like yourselves, you can try to do things remotely but we all know it can't replace face to face interactions – so students are a little bit anxious about that".

Anxiety caused through lost IAG (Information, Advice and Guidance) also needs to be placed in the context of more serious concerns. As noted by an Assistant Head Teacher at a Secondary School;

"over 50% of our students are PP [pupil premium, i.e. eligible for free school meals] and don't have access to lots of resources, we also have a lot of students that would be classed as vulnerable...it was the vulnerable students that were coming in during the summer rather than key workers and that vulnerable group got bigger and bigger...more and more of them were starting to struggle with being more isolated being at home, family issues,...so there is a lot of picking up the pieces and supporting students emotionally and with mental health issues".

Different anxieties were also noted for post 16 pupils either still in education or for those who had just left. As noted by a Head of Sixth Form at a Secondary School; (for those who have gone to university)... *"all of them have gone with this idea that we are going to be this generation that nobody thinks we actually deserve it, and they are really quite disheartened by that" (in terms of teacher assessed grades).* And for present year 13 pupils:

“they will leave education feeling that has been a really stressful experience. A lot of them are very against the idea of a remote way of learning. Remote learning doesn’t work in the same way – if we could do anything remotely we wouldn’t have a job! - our students are very concerned this is going to become a typical way of life, and how will they fair?”

CenSCE’s Role in this New Context

All respondents were strongly in favour of NTU outreach provision. Many wanted a return to normality as quickly as possible and noted the most effective way to teach and/or deliver information and advice was through interaction within the classroom, not remotely or through a blended model. As one Head Teacher put it, in terms of the value and purpose behind CenSCE’s work, it is the; *“widening of our children’s world, enabling them to see that something exists that they do not have current experience of, but it is attainable”* (Primary School). Another respondent put it like this; *“coming to you is the icing on the cake, the children don’t believe there is a place that exists like this...and you get to live there, and it’s for everybody, just pushing that really”* (Primary School Teacher).

Whilst the early focus in all schools related to wellbeing, the majority focused on attainment and normal outreach provision as the central need. As noted by a Primary School Teacher; *“the government have talked about catch up schemes. We need children catching up now. 1 to 1 tutoring or anything like that, we would love it, our children desperately need the help”*. It was also noted that greater clarity and simplicity needs to be built into the idea of what university is and how it could benefit someone, especially in the context of; *“perhaps there is an, ‘image to turn around’ about what university is like, as at the moment the only thing that pupils might hear about is the negative aspects of being in lockdown at university”*.

For Secondary Schools need was more predicated towards attainment. As one Deputy Head Teacher noted:

“things that would stand out for me are support for year 11, revision support, which I know you have done before but particularly now and as early as possible because we don’t know what will happen in the future...we are hoping the exams will be back to normal but nobody knows so mock exams are going to be very important...so something along the lines of study skills, revision techniques”

However, mental health and well-being were also very much on the agenda. The following was predicated with the understanding, which probably underpins the effectiveness of most provision, that; *“having an outside provider is useful as it is a different face, children are more likely to listen”* in the context of providing wellbeing strategies for children i.e. *“things we know that they can be doing that is not sitting on a PlayStation or sitting in a bedroom alone... mental health is more important this year than it has ever been”*

An additional concern in the new environment was concern over the limited social and cultural interactions of pupils being limited long term – and role models. It suggested that, when guidelines allow, universities may be able to help by providing access to social and cultural experiences. As commented on by a Primary School Assistant Head Teacher; *"for some children the lack of social modelling has been an issue... children have become quite narrow in who they have interactions with and perhaps isolated due to the situation"*.

Many teachers and school leaders mentioned the importance, within the classroom, of the relational aspect to pupil and teacher interaction as being critical to learner development. As noted by a Primary School Head Teacher:

"when things become less intense here when we think about who we can have on site going forward, I think the volunteers who could come in and listen to children read, and be a regular reader with that child, as opposed to you read for one child and you don't see them again for the next 6 weeks... having that sort of thing happening... pairing up people... those sorts of things would be really good."

Some degree of frustration was reported by some respondents in relation to the lack of innovation (from government) in response to the changed context. *"What I found was really sad is that given the uniqueness of the situation, all they attempted to do was recreate the national curriculum. There is a mega opportunity to change things. Do things outdoors or more practical, or set up a business"* (Primary School Head Teacher).

Tutoring, mentoring, using role models and resilience were all mentioned by interviewees as having a potential positive benefit. One Secondary School Teacher commented that; *"I work with 16 year old students and you can really see where students have been on programmes where they've had 'character' education... they are much more reflective, they are more successful learners"*. And in terms of role models, one Assistant Head Teacher at a Secondary School commented, in terms of possible additional provision, that; *"some opportunities to maybe have people who are currently at NTU from similar sorts of backgrounds doing some sort of web chats or conversations that are more about, 'this is something they could do, could aspire to'"*. There was also recognition, particularly within attainment raising provision, it was necessary to determine where the gaps were, not simply to load up more provision. One key piece of advice in terms of CenSCE provision was summed up as follows;

"If people are interested in them (the pupils) they will do almost anything, but they do have to have a bit of rapport so it can't be a straight in, 'this is what we are doing today', they need ...to have built something with someone, have a bit of background and information" (Deputy Head Teacher – Secondary School).

Miscellaneous Points

- The majority of interviewees reported no experience, or contact with, the National Tutoring Programme (NTP) (an initial question on this subject was dropped from the question set)
- Schools are now in a much better, more prepared state, to educate pupils in any future (local) lockdown.
- Longer term planning is only just underway – there is still considerable uncertainty.
- Not many respondents chose to comment on staff experiences. However, one Head Teacher did note that for staff as well as pupils, the focus and stamina for teaching all day had been reduced, with ‘practicality’ the focus in terms of supporting staff. Face to face meetings had stopped, with staff at home earlier and meetings moved online. Staff have been given the freedom to, *"do what you need to do in your classroom with your children"*. Appraisals have taken a professional growth approach with self-reflection at the heart. Staff communications have also changed, as they no longer see each other, so more use is made of a staff newsletter.
- No respondents mentioned the BLM (Black Lives Matter) movement or called for any Outreach support with the issue.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, whilst attainment was still an issue, the central concern on pupil return, particularly at Primary School level, was on pupil wellbeing. However, the overwhelming opinion of respondents was that CenSCE provision maintain its core focus. No switch towards 'pressure points' was advocated. The outreach work the department does was valued and many offered to engage further either in developing a teacher panel or with programme co-design. Finally, it is perhaps apt to leave the final word to one of our stakeholders, *"I think it's great that you are doing this, you are listening to our voices, rather than saying, "this is what we are doing".*

Appendix One: Question Set (Revised)

Question Set (final – review 28.09.20):

School Planning:

-What have been your priorities, for pupil's, this term?

- What are you most concerned about? (i.e. WP attainment gap? or Behaviour or Well-being)? – What type of (new) programme would you like to see (*i.e. if attainment is the issue then do they want more tutoring? - or revision? – or character-based programmes etc?*)
- ~~To what extent are your concerns based on actual contact with pupils? (i.e. what is the evidence base for your concerns?)~~
- In what ways has the pupil experience been different since the start of term?
- How have you implemented the Government guidance? (and how do think this *has/will* change the pupil experience?)
- What do you consider the long-term impacts of an extended absence from school to be for your pupils?
- Would you now welcome NTU staff and students onto site?
- What restrictions would they need to work under for the foreseeable future?
- Have there been any issues in terms of remote learning (in using computers or digital media)? – What has been the re-action to this type of learning?
- Have there been cases where there has been no, or not enough, equipment (or internet access)? - If so, what has been the response?
- If there is a second lockdown, or a school closure, what would you do differently now, compared with March this year?
- How well prepared are you?

Outreach Response:

-What do you want from NTU and CenSCE in the new term?

- Are there ways in which you would like us to adapt our provision?
- How do you think 'digital outreach' might be received by both pupils and staff?
- To what extent would you like us to support you with attainment raising?
- What is the need for impartial IAG from NTU in your school?
- To what extent would you like us to support 'out of school time' remote learning (to make up for the lost learning over lockdown)?
- ~~How could we best supplement the National Tutoring Programme (NTP)?~~
- Would you like us to carry on delivering provision across (all) the age groups – or really begin to concentrate on key (exam) pressure or transition phases?
- Would you and/or some of your pupils like to support us with 'co-creating' some of our provision? (ask here for an expression of interest for contact at a later date)

And finally:

- What can we learn from your experiences? (*Is there anything else you would like to tell us?*)
- We would like to develop a 'teacher panel' so we have **your voice** involved in the development of our programmes – to give us feedback on how we are doing. Would you be interested in taking part?