

## **What did the Staying Connected Survey tell us?**

The Staying Connected Survey was conducted during the first phase of 'lockdown'. Access to school sites was limited to children of keyworker parents and vulnerable students, including those with EHCPs. As COVID 19 initiated the need for remote learning it was felt that a sense of belonging to their school community was at risk. The Educational Psychology Service wanted to find out more about the experience of pupils in lockdown, how this affected their sense of belonging, what schools were doing to help with this and to share the good practice across BCP.

School belonging is the extent to which children and young people feel connected, included and supported within their school community (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Research has found that children and young people who report a higher sense of school belonging, experience more positive emotions during learning, are more engaged in learning, and achieve higher grades in school (Fong Lam et al., 2015; Hernández et al., 2016). Increased school belonging is also associated with better self-esteem, emotional wellbeing and social skills, and a reduced likelihood of physical and mental health difficulties (Anderman, 2002; Battistich et al., 1997; Bond et al., 2007; Gaete et al. 2016; Hernández et al., 2017).

The survey was open from 23/04/2020 to 07/05/2020. 3158 responses were received. 1264 came from primary school (YR to Y6) students, 4% of whom were attending school and 1894 responses came from secondary (Y7 to Y13) of whom 2.6% were in school.

Students were asked how well they felt connected to the school community and their class group. In the primary phase, they felt more connected to their school than they did with their class; a quarter had no contact with their classmates during this time. For those in Years 12&13 connection to peers was greater than to the setting; students reported daily contact with school/college friends through social media. Whereas secondary school students felt a similar sense of connection with school and their class; half of secondary school respondents had daily contact with their peers through online games or social media.

Social media and online resources used by the schools helped students feel they belonged. Videos were shared of pre-recorded assemblies, teachers read stories, photos sent in by students of things they were doing at home were shared. Pupils of all ages overwhelmingly favoured live lessons and chat sessions with their teachers to all other forms of communication.

Teacher contact aided student sense of belonging with their school community. Students reported that their sense of belonging was aided by:

- Connection with the school through regular contact and continuation of routine aspects of school life such as whole school events, reward schemes, pastoral support and extra-curricular clubs.
- Regular, predictable communication with teachers, providing encouragement and setting realistic expectations, two-way communication and provision of 'live-lessons'.
- Connection with their class; maintaining tutor time, enabling and encouraging chat with classmates and use of online lessons.

For many students, 'community' meant contact; sitting in a classroom with their classmates. Students reported feeling a loss of real contact. Some were feeling isolated and unsure of their friendships, whilst others had found a sense of community online. Others expressed a preference for home schooling, reporting improvements in learning.

Almost two-thirds of secondary school students did not feel that they had enough contact with their teachers; they wanted to be able to chat one-to-one with their teachers about their wellbeing as well as their work. Just over half of sixth form and college students thought they had enough; consistent response to emails and contact about other things other than work was requested e.g. messages of encouragement. A similar number in primary schools thought it was 'just right' or not enough; some parents felt they were being contacted too much and parity between schools/classes was requested e.g. everyone to be telephoned by their class teacher. Some students reported that they had been contacted by a member of staff but not their teacher.

Email was the main method of contact used by teachers. The frequency of which increased with the age of the students. Phone-calls were the second most frequent form of contact received by pupils in the primary and secondary schools, whereas contact using online platforms such as Zoom/Skype/MS Teams for lessons was the second most frequent form of contact for sixth form/college students. In the primary phase this was the least frequently used method of communication. Although this form of contact was used in the secondary schools, the occurrence of its use was half that used for the sixth form and college students.

Primary school students received less feedback about their work than secondary and Y12/13 students; 20% of Y12/13, almost 30% of secondary and almost 40% of primary school students did not receive feedback for their work.

Most students said they could contact their teachers to ask questions. Again, this increased with the age of the students; 65% in primary, 72% in secondary and 83% in Years 12/13. However, there were limitations around their contact with teachers:

- Some students reported they found it difficult to talk in live lessons as they may speak over the teacher;
- Some could ask questions but not share their ideas;
- Some reported they could only ask questions via email and if a teacher was available and it could take time to get a reply;
- Some students reported that their teachers didn't encourage two-way communication.

The vast majority of students in all school phases were looking forward to going back to school and seeing their friends again. Some of those who did not want to return, preferred being educated at home. Whereas others said there was something that worried them about going back. Most worries were around issues of safety. There were fears around the coronavirus, bullying, getting into trouble for not completing the work set and of not being able to cope with the anticipated workload.

To make going back to school easier, students wanted to receive assurances for their safety around all the above issues, especially the coronavirus. They also felt that a gradual reintroduction to school and a more relaxed curriculum would aid a return to school. Support was requested by 'vulnerable' groups of students such as those that needed help with learning and those who were about to transition to a different school phase.

Student sense of belonging to their school was not strong when this survey was completed. Pupils of all ages overwhelmingly favoured live lessons and chat sessions with their teachers to all other forms of communication. Yet most communication with students in the primary and secondary schools was via email or the telephone and 'posting' work and resources online.

The purpose of the survey was to find out from the children and young people of BCP what schools were doing to maintain their sense of connection and belonging to their school

community at a time when they had to receive their education at home. Pupils wanted to feel connected to the people in their class. They wanted to see and talk to their teachers and peers. They also wanted to feel safe. Safety for some students is likely to mean being at home and in some cases may lead to school refusal. School refusal or not, for the foreseeable future, it is likely that pupils of all ages will continue to receive some of their education at home.

It will be important for schools to consider how they are addressing pupil's sense of belonging during periods of home learning and how this will support transition back to school. Research shows that school belonging is associated with better self-esteem, emotional wellbeing and social skills, and a reduced likelihood of physical and mental health difficulties (Anderman, 2002; Battistich et al., 1997; Bond et al., 2007; Gaete et al. 2016; Hernández et al., 2017). Safety and belonging are primary needs (Maslow, 1954). Schools will need to take account of this. The survey shows that pupils are seeking assurance that their safety needs are being met before they return to school and, for their sense of belonging, they have said that they want greater contact with their teachers.

Educational provision will involve use of computer hardware and software. New technology such as MS Teams and Zoom and how to use it will need to be developed by teachers and schools. The use of technology will be inclusive for all students, including those who are anxious about school. Some students reported they found it difficult to talk in live lessons as they may speak over the teacher. Going forward, guidance on how to use the technology to allow students to contribute to lessons and talk to their peers will need to be developed so that students can feel connected to their class and feel that they belong whether they are at home or at school.

The students in the survey wanted fairness and parity of provision, e.g. some commented that not all students had access to computers or had limited use as they had to share technology within the family. The need for parity of provision was echoed by the Young Person's Forum and Youth Parliament, when they were consulted about the survey results. To this end they hoped that BCP would work on some guidelines for how home schooling should be delivered and help young people and children to feel safe in school. There are implications at every level in education should parity be achieved.

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