

**A ROUNDTABLE CONVERSATION**



# **AGENTS OF HOPE**

## **RECONNECTING THE COMMUNITY**

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## Forward

The following material is a summary of a roundtable conversation discussing some of the challenges around the school community post lockdown. It is not intended to be a final solution but to provide suggestions for possible actions and encourage wider debate.

Huge thanks go to those who participated in the discussion. If you wish to participate in similar conversations then make sure to follow @edroundtables on Twitter.

The conversation took place on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020 with contributions from Angela, Chris, Lee, Fraser, Jenny, Coral, Nicky & Andrew Moffat

## Context

In this case, the focus was on reconnecting the school community when schools are fully opened.

The discussion was broad and covered many areas, most of which are covered in this document.

I have tried to organise the ideas and comments into a more coherent piece than the original transcript and hope that you enjoy reading it.

I apologise to any of those involved if I have misunderstood any of the conversations, these mistakes are mine – don't hesitate to offer clarification.



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## **Fear**

The context of the conversation is dominated by fear in the school community. This doesn't affect all families, but it does have a huge impact on many, and it is this fear that will inhibit reconnecting.

Families are scared of a virus. It can't be seen and is deadly, while this may seem an obvious statement, it can't be made enough.

It is not a slight paranoia or an irrational fear of spiders that can be overcome with a therapeutic conversation and a cup of tea or a hug, it is real and it could bring death to their doorsteps.

Despite not leaving their homes, the fear is pumped in via television, newspapers and social media gossip.

There's no outside and no escape.

This fear isn't limited to the families but affects staff and children too.

Heads reported the change that they have seen in their communities.

Some families have completely isolated, parking vans across drives, taping up letterboxes and barely leaving home.

Others are preparing to flee the country because they no longer feel safe.

The telephone conversations with parents and children have also changed, some parents are now reluctant to engage, they fear being pressured by schools to return.

Children themselves are starting to lack confidence, there is a real fear in many Y6 children regarding transition, some parents have reported that they are worried that their children may become school refusers.

This fear is not only about engaging with schools, but also with others. Connections are being broken

There is a fear of stigma being attached to having had Covid or even being of Asian descent.

This fear is being exacerbated by social media gossip, with muddled facts and rhetoric

driven messaging. Which in turn has a snowball effect on the way that people treat each other within the community.

The heads at the table were concerned about what this might mean of the wider community that they serve.

Many of them have strong links with local businesses and care homes or elderly communities.

Given the hugely negative press about the rates of Covid-19 in care homes, it may be a long time before it is safe to reconnect.

This could have a huge impact on everyone as the

connections that have been fostered over the years are broken.

Already, children are no longer connecting with their grandparents because of social isolation.

Which is in itself problematic, many children rely on these relationships when they live in houses where domestic violence is an issue.

Heads are anticipating resistance from parents to resume activities that engage more widely with the community even when it is considered safe to allow them.



## **Hostility**

Further concerns were also raised about the risks of hostility that some sections of the community may direct towards others. Particularly concerning the opening of schools and who chooses to send their children in.

Parents have different priorities, and these will reflect their actions and viewpoints,

potentially causing conflict and hostility.

Some parents will prioritize their child's safety and refuse to send them into school until they consider it safe.

Others may not have that option, the need to work may force them to send children in. Leaving them open to criticism

from those who feel it is unsafe.

While others may have no concerns at all and be critical of those who opt to keep their children away.

It could well be a reflection of the hostility shown to teachers in the media at present but directed towards other parents.

Additionally, there were concerns raised relating to the stigma associated with having had Covid-19, would families who are known to have had the disease be ostracized?

This kind of prejudice could also see a rise in racist behaviour towards families of Chinese or another Asian ethnicity.

It is with these concerns in mind that the conversation was directed to helping the community re-connect with the schools as a hub.

It was noted that some schools have remained more connected with their communities than others.

Those schools where the communities are not disparate have seen those communities pull together and support each other.

Other factors, such as where the schools have been a hub for the distribution of FSM hampers for example, or where access to online opportunities has been broadly similar have also helped keep them connected.

## Agents of Hope

The first part of this conversation was very difficult. Conversations about challenges often bring the worst of thoughts to the forefronts of our minds.

I am thankful at this point for the presence of Andrew Moffat, who has endured a hostile and fearful situation previously and worked to re-connect his community.

His contribution at this point gave the title to the eBook, as he explained the role of the school in a time like this was to provide hope.

It is quite possible that Covid-19 will be here to stay for some time and that we will have to learn to adapt to live with this. But this doesn't need to be all doom and gloom.

Schools can bring their communities together by offering a whole school narrative of hope and cohesion.

We need to show our parents, children and community that we can get through this.

No matter what we feel like inside, we have to offer hope

and show that we have an abundance of it.

We get through times like this by working together. No one else is building community cohesion for children right now.

They have seen their world fall apart, their trust in adults is at an all-time low. We must rebuild that through honesty and truth.

The basis for welcoming children back must be one of nurture, wellbeing and love.

This is not a history lesson where we know the outcome, these children are living it and we need to know what they are thinking.

What questions are they asking? What are their concerns? What answers do they need? What answers can we give?

It is a new world that must be child-centred and not exam-centred.

We need to be Agents of Hope and fill the curriculum with positive cohesion stories that make the hope explicit.



## Positive Social Stories

Don't lose sight of the light, the humour and the positives.

Andrew did share a wonderful story about two women, Mary Beth Heffernan and Cati Brown-Johnson, who created the PPE Portrait project. This simple idea pinned the faces of the people behind the masks onto the front of their protective gear to reduce the fear.

"Wouldn't they be less frightening if the person on the inside was pictured on the outside?" Heffernan is quoted as saying.

You can read more about this story online [here](#).

These positive social stories are everywhere, you just need to speak to people about the small things that have got them through the pandemic so far.

One of the headteachers in the roundtable shared a story about her school community.

The pastoral manager had taken to visiting various

families during the lockdown to check on wellbeing, most of the community live on an estate with families clustered together on the same streets and in the same blocks.

She noticed that when she arrived that the families would be waiting for her, they would come out to their doorsteps to greet her and were able to see the other families in nearby homes also coming out of their houses.

She would pull up and beep her horn, doors would open, everyone would then engage from a socially acceptable distance, it was becoming a highlight of their week and they looked forward to it.

The headteacher likened her to the ice-cream van and joked that they should perhaps buy her one.

This is a story about people coming together, about being a community.



Zoom initially received some bad press but it is a very useful tool for connecting with others. They have made some excellent changes to the security and set-up and, if used correctly, will enhance your work with re-connecting your community.

Several members of the roundtable are using them to connect with different groups of parents.

They have been key in breaking down barriers, particularly with parents who have had bad school experiences.

There are some key things to bear in mind before setting these up in your school.

They should not be formal, don't zoom from the office, step off of your pedestal and don't think you are better than them. You're not.

Be direct, no-frills. Many parents don't trust the government because they don't understand the messages that they send out.

You can't overshare the honesty in your information. Let them see your plans, let them know what you know, be honest if you don't know because the government haven't told you.

Don't set the agenda before you start, this is your agenda and doesn't deal with their issues, just the issues that you believe they have. It will reduce participation.

The first meeting should simply be to touch base, let them lead the agenda and identify future topics.

If you can't answer questions immediately follow up with the answer at the next session.

Make them fun – play bingo (you can drop bingo cards through letterboxes or email out the numbers) for small prizes.

They must feel listened to. Invite the most challenging voices to join you, just keep the numbers small (No more than 20). Make your school human and not impersonal.





## **“Friends of” Groups**

These groups can be incredibly supportive of schools, and although their activities may be limited by lockdown, they can play a role in re-connecting the community.

Perhaps by arranging virtual events and fundraisers. They will be plugged into the wider community and can support with getting school messages out to the right people.



## **School Staff**

School staff are also an important part of the community and making sure that they are also re-connected with each other needs to be considered.

Hopefully, there will be no issues as staff have been connecting throughout the lockdown, but we shouldn't assume this?

Fear can affect them too and this is where your leadership as a HT or member of SLT may be tested.

Calmness, compassion and honest conversations will be needed. Share plans and involve your staff to identify concerns and look at how you address them.

There may not be a new normal for sometime and you will need your staff to pull together and support you and the rest of the school community as you find your path through the changes that are ahead.

You and they are Agents of Hope.

## Summary

Your school is at the heart of the community, it has an important role as a hub.

People gathered to share gossip and connect at the school gate, they attended assemblies, concerts and fundraisers. They used the hall and fields for sports events or the staff as someone to support them.

Although that may all seem very distant right now, there will be a way for most of those to happen again. You are all in this together, some positives can be taken from the current situation. Find them, celebrate them and re-connect.

Andrew has kindly shared a link to his assembly plan for the PPE Portrait project [here](#).

If you have any positive social stories of your own that will help re-connect our communities please share them with us on Twitter.

Andrew has also been kind enough to share some plans for lessons [here](#) and some post-coronavirus guidance [here](#). If you aren't already, follow him on Twitter [@moffat\\_andrew](#).

If you have had experiences of the issues discussed and have found potential solutions, then get in touch @edroundtables on Twitter.

If you have an educational topic you would like to discuss with your peers in a confidential space. Then contact @edroundtables or visit [www.edrt.co.uk](http://www.edrt.co.uk)



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