



Starting school again - a Salesian perspective for staff

There is no doubt that the last four months have seen a unique disruption to the lives of young people at a critical time in their development. One commentator¹ suggests that they will come back to school carrying significant loss of:

- Routine
- Structured guidance
- Friendships
- Opportunity
- Freedom

Many will have lost their sleep pattern and return with raised anxiety and lower confidence as well as an impatience with fitting back into a regular timetable. Some will be relieved to get back to school, to friends and to a less intense atmosphere after the claustrophobia of some homes. Meeting up with friends may bring a changed experience as some friendships will have been on hold whilst others through social media or living closer may have developed in new directions. Others still may have experienced bereavement or the fear of bereavement close to home and carry a fragility that may be unprepared for the rough and tumble of even a phased return. Such pupils may display a need to be closer to staff as a source of reassurance as they begin school life again.



In contrast, some pupils will have adopted a much stronger role as a carer in their family and have a strong sense of responsibility and autonomy that may change their perspective of formal education for better or for worse. For them, stepping out of domestic responsibilities and coming back to school may come as a welcome relief. Many young people will have navigated this lockdown with great skill and with the solid support of family, but it will have taken its toll on their energy and their view of life. They will have changed. Others with less support and higher levels of anxiety may return with mental health issues that are more obvious than before.

The Salesian tools to manage returning pupils

It will come as no surprise to teachers that Don Bosco's approach to education responds instinctively to this return scenario. He re-opened his schools after a traumatic cholera epidemic in Turin in 1854. He welcomed child refugees from the wars that were happening in other parts of Italy during his lifetime. It was out of those experiences, and his compassion for the young, that he created the four elements of his educational approach which would create:

- A home
- A school
- A playground
- A church

¹ See Professor Barry Carpenter Webinar. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1geOf06lGwrQu--mUzq0z2B7eMv1x2Fn6/view?usp=sharing>

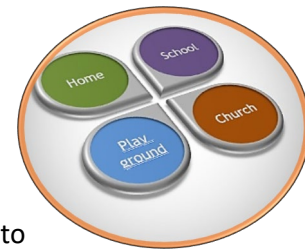


Playground

I want to start with playground because that is the place where Don Bosco began his work with troubled and abandoned young people. Having time to play, to interact and to just experience a shared space will be liberating and reassuring for many young people. For most young people relating to others, talking and playing is the major way that they can re-energise themselves for learning. Having fun will charge batteries for the catch-up learning that they all need to do. Therefore, blending play into school life and lesson time, especially in the early days of return, will pay educational dividends later in the term. One of the major blocks to learning is anxiety and it is in the playground, informal activity and fun that such anxiety is eased on the path to learning. The playground, for those unfamiliar with Salesian ethos, is not only the physical place but also the joke in the corridor, the game in the classroom and the surprises that teachers can bring into the lesson. In spiritual terms it is the place where we lose ourselves in a flow of activity and enter the present moment, the only place where we touch the mystery of God. Therefore sports, competitions, music and drama are all tools to be used to welcome young people back to their home in school.

Home

The second thing that returning pupils may need is a sense of coming home to familiar faces and known patterns of working and living together. Young people need the consistency of routine, the security of clear boundaries, an experience some may have lost touch with during lockdown. Above all home is a place where you are known and accepted as you are by adults and by peers. Therefore, each returning pupil needs to feel welcomed by familiar faces and some time given to catch up before the serious work of education has to kick back in with discipline and focus. The element of being known by teachers and other pupils should not be underestimated as part of the scaffolding for learning within each pupil. There is an opportunity during the return period to deepen a sense of community among pupils and create the educative community desired by Don Bosco. Pupils who are encouraged by their peers remain focused, motivated and achieve more for their effort. Pupils that are confident of each other in school are able to heal the hidden hurts that may lie behind their lockdown experience. Pupils who struggle fare much better when they are known and accepted with all their faults by a teacher that shows compassion and commitment to their learning. Don Bosco said that education was largely a matter of the heart, of relationships. This nowhere clearer than in the pupil who works hard to please their teacher when other parts of the pupil's life may be in tatters.



School

Don Bosco was concerned that young people reached their potential and took their place in society as honest citizens and good Christians. For him formal education gave them the passport to that fullness of life in a wider community. That is why Don Bosco would be concerned to welcome back young people to a curriculum that restored their confidence in their ability to learn and to focus after an unstructured time. Reassurance about the pupils' ability to learn will be more effective than focusing on how much they have missed and how much they need to catch up. Those things are true but a strong reassurance that together we can achieve the standards is more energising in the face of the educational challenge that schools face.

Another aspect of school takes a wider view. Pupils are emerging from a unique and varied experience of lockdown. Their stories will be different but none of them will have been without challenge, change in perspective, in relationships, in self-understanding and in their world view.



Locked into that lockdown experience is a lot of personal learning and perhaps an increased motivation to know themselves better, to ask questions and to explore new ways of talking and relating to others. In constructing a return curriculum, addressing these issues early on will move pupils along the road to maturity, deepen their understanding of others and make them better learners. This aspect of learning needs to be constructed with the advice of the pupils themselves alongside teachers who can sense the issues they have had to face and then design games, discussions and reflections that open up the latent learning behind lockdown.

Church

The last part of Don Bosco's model of ethos is church, the final building he constructed in Turin. This represents the sacred space at the heart of each person and the place where they touch the mystery of their lives that Christians have always called God. Here pupils address the questions of deep meaning in the world around them, in their families and in their lives. It is here that they touch the experience of not being alone, of living in a greater presence that eludes their words and yet persists. This sense of presence will have been tested and questioned in the space created in lockdown in many young lives. As days ran into weeks and space opened up they will have questioned the many certainties they had before lockdown. Some people have compared lockdown to a national spiritual retreat. But that space may have been confusing and anxious. A return to school may well create the space for young people reflect deeply on the experience of managing time and restricted space. Teachers may have a window of opportunity to create experiences where pupils can get in touch with their own soul.



The soul is the part of each person that is in touch with that mysterious presence that Christians call God. Their capacity for mindfulness, meditation and reflection may have increased. Teachers may well find that shared silence integrated into the lessons could ease anxieties and put young people in touch with their deepest mystery and with a sense of vocation that might re-focus their learning into the future. The provision of personally focused prayers and welcome liturgies can open up the awareness of the spiritual dimension of their return as a community on a shared journey towards meaning.

Conclusion

We as educators have the privilege of welcoming back a unique generation of pupils. They need to know that we are proud of them and their status as a special generation of pupils who have survived lockdown, are united by a common experience and ready to help each other to do well. They need to know that we expect them to be more compassionate, more resilient, and more cheerful than pupils before them. From now on they are the special generation that survived lockdown and learnt not only to do well academically but also in friendship and caring for others.

