

## **Negotiating Lockdown - A study in Creativity and Wellbeing - Richard Parker, Head of ISL London**

In March 2020, schools in the UK went into lockdown, dramatically changing the face of education. At The International School of London (ISL) we faced a period of upheaval and change on an unprecedented scale, but the school emerged from it as a stronger community. In this article I will explore why ISL was so successful in this period, and the factors leading to a new pride that emerged from the transformation we all experienced. I will also explore two fundamental lessons that we, as a school, have taken from the experience. The first lesson is that community wellbeing has to be a central feature to all planning in a period of unusual change. The second is that teachers, students, and parents are capable of extraordinary creativity in demanding and unusual situations.

### **LEADERSHIP**

One factor key to the success of any project is sound planning. International schools in the UK were fortunate in that they were not the first to go into lockdown, so were able to learn from schools elsewhere. The leadership at ISL had connections in Hong Kong, and were able to speak to leaders there and learn from their successes and stresses in experiencing lockdown. A number of key principles emerged from those conversations that helped take ISL forward.

The first was the importance of choosing a single platform from which to run our virtual programme. Schools that ran multiple platforms quickly found them difficult to support and manage. We decided to run all our programmes through Microsoft Teams. Many teachers had little experience of Teams beforehand, and one of the pleasant surprises was how quickly and efficiently teachers adapted to the new learning platforms. On top of online training, we had to review a number of policies, in particular our guidance on safeguarding, as we had learnt from Hong Kong schools that a number of unusual safeguarding issues had arisen online, including, as examples, teachers being videoed when they were not aware of it, and students appearing online in inappropriate dress for a class.

When lockdown eventually came, it was clear to the whole community that ISL was ready, which in turn led to a feeling of pride amongst all stakeholders that nobody had expected. With our teachers trained, and students equipped and excited to connect virtually with ISL, we were ready to make good on our commitment to deliver a high quality virtual education.

Leadership were continually challenged to re-think and re-plan as the landscape of the crisis changed. We had to prepare for various ongoing scenarios (rotating classes, the return of some year groups but not others, phased start and finish times), because there was always a chance that some or all students might be returning, and students numbers were also always a question, as it was never clear how many families would be in the country at any given time. However the ongoing support of the wider community went a long way to mitigate the challenges we faced.

## **WELLBEING AND PRIDE**

As stated in the introduction it became apparent even before we went into lockdown that wellbeing would have to be at the heart of our planning as we moved forward. We had learnt from Hong Kong schools that many teachers had found it difficult to cope with the demands of online learning and many students and families had themselves isolated and struggled, lacking the support they needed.

It was clear that it would be unrealistic to expect teachers to teach the same amount of periods as they would normally, and that the teachers of different age groups were going to have to be creative in their approach to some of the problems we faced. As a general rule, it seemed the younger the year group, the greater the obstacles.

In the Primary School we gave teachers a good deal of scope as to how they organised their lessons, as long as their plans fell within an agreed framework, and there was an agreed amount of onscreen time with all students. Teachers held 1:1 video conference calls with students and families daily to check in and see how people in each household were coping. From this feedback, learning was then personalised to suit the needs of each family. Each day began with an online morning meeting to build a sense of class community. Electives were run every Wednesday for the whole day to give students some variety and teachers extra time to prepare. This also provided students with extra time to catch up on their own work at their own pace. We had a big focus on sports and the arts to ensure students had a break from so much screen time. We also continued our forest school programme, pushing our children to explore the environment in their neighbourhood, and to create art work with natural materials.

In the Secondary School, our virtual programme timetable was copy of the normal timetable, but lessons were shortened, and teachers were allowed to allocate one lesson as a catch up class for students and teachers. The longer we stayed online, the more it became apparent that catch up time was needed by all members of the

community as there was a limit as to how much time anybody could reasonably spend online. To encourage a break from the virtual, sports, arts and extra-curricular activities were promoted as they were in Primary.

As teachers were separated from one another, many different activities were devised to bring the school staff together as a community and find spaces to support one another. Online mindfulness classes, yoga classes, and fitness classes were aired on Teams to support wellbeing. Teachers found many other creative means to build community bonds. One of the most popular was a multilingual poetry chain.

We wanted to ensure we had constructive plans for all our administrative and teaching staff and avoid the stress of furlough and redundancies where possible. One of our proudest achievements was the scheme we devised for our catering team. Unable to perform their usual service, we decided to direct their efforts to providing meals for a local homeless centre. This proved popular with families and helped build a sense of pride in the community. Many parents were willing to support the scheme financially, a situation we had not envisaged.

We worked hard to ensure the wider community was supported wherever possible. We scheduled all parent meetings and workshops online, to ensure we were receiving regular feedback, and questionnaires were also sent out once a week. One of the discoveries in this period was that we had much higher parental participation when meetings were online.

One of ISL's unique features is its large home language programme (we provide five lessons of home language teaching for all our language groups as part of our curriculum offering). Our home language teachers proved pivotal in our wellbeing initiatives, because they were the best equipped teachers to reach out to our families, particularly in situations where English was not a strong language. The support of those teachers proved invaluable, and we have many anecdotes of the ways in which our home language teachers were willing to go the extra mile to enrich our family's school experiences during lockdown. As one example, one of our Arabic teachers drove round to every Arabic family in school and left them a present for Eid. The Dutch language teacher ran a board games session every week for all the Dutch-speaking primary students, which required creative adaptations of games that aimed to develop language as well as maintain the community feel of the vertical groupings used during normal teaching.

## **TEACHER AND STUDENT CREATIVITY**

The most pleasing feature of the online experience was the ability of the community to adapt and find new creative solutions to the dynamics of the virtual world. Some of these have been mentioned earlier in this article, such as our online forest school, our scheme to provide hot meals to a local homeless centre and the multi lingual poetry chain, but there were many examples in all areas of school.

The IB programmes brought their own challenges, particularly where hands-on group work was the norm. In the Primary School, we ran a virtual Grade Five PYP Exhibition that proved a huge success. Each student was given an online mentor to help them prepare, but the students themselves showed phenomenal ability to adapt, as was demonstrated in their final presentations, which tended to focus on issues pertinent to the moment. One student presented plans to redesign parts of the school so it was a better space for outdoor learning, which we knew would be a priority when students returned to school. Another student designed an app to track viruses, while another wrote an adventure novel in which the reader could choose a pathway that was dependant on choices about litter and plastic waste. The final website, showcasing the Grade Five work, was a testament to the creative potential in the PYP.

Once our Grade Five students completed their virtual Exhibition, they applied their experiences as mentors by becoming mentors to our Grade One students. Over the course of the virtual learning, Grade One students inquired into different creative modes of expression including dance, photography, music, art, and poetry. In preparation for their final showcase to parents and the school community, Grade Five students met with Grade One students to provide them with feedback and suggestions for presenting virtually.

In our Electives choices that were offered to Primary students on Wednesdays, students were able to choose from classes that offered a range of creative options - from cooking to sports journalism. In the Let's Create class, students created their own renditions of paintings as part of the Getty Challenge, made their own masks, and ocean art, to name a few. Students developed their design skills in Photoshop, Adobe Spark, and other computer applications through our Let's Get Digital option.

The Secondary School community also demonstrated extraordinary creativity, particularly in the arts, where we witnessed a number of exciting initiatives. We had staff/student collaborative dance videos, with each person having to choreograph their video as a reply to the video before, or Shakespeare monologues done by groups of talking heads online. The Getty Museum Challenge, in which participants had to create famous paintings in their homes, proved popular. The Design and Visual arts department focused many of their units on exploring the home setting, which all culminated in a stunning online art exhibition designed to mimic a museum experience, modelled on the White Cube Museum in Hong Kong.

The commitment to creativity spread way beyond the arts programme. The Science Department ran an online science fair, built around experiments students could do at home or in their immediate environment. The Mathematics Department aligned the interactive whiteboard to Teams in lessons, to move close to the problem-solving school culture to which students were accustomed. The Personal Project Exhibition was run online with a website in a similar vein to the PYP Exhibition. As break from lessons the Middle School ran a House Challenge Day, again built form challenges around the home.

In the Middle School Language Development class, the students adapted a card game to playing virtually over video calls, using recently learnt British Sign Language to communicate.

Our clubs and peripatetic music programme continued online, with many new choices designed to suit the environment, such as activities built around Minecraft, a home boxing club, and mindfulness sessions.

ISL was lucky as a school, in that we were prepared for lockdown and moved online relatively smoothly, but it was the unforeseen new initiatives that brought real pride to the community. Home Language Teachers' family support, the multi lingual poetry chain, our scheme providing hot meals to a local homeless centre, online exhibitions, wellbeing programmes, diverse extra-curricular activities, and the sheer ability of the whole community to adapt to the virtual world were all welcome surprises nobody had expected.

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