

15 July 2020

Dear Principals, SMT members, Religious Education Coordinators, and Teachers of Religious Education and Life Skills / Life Orientation

COVID-19, Religious Education and Life Skills/Orientation

On the eve of the reopening of schools, Sr Kathy Gaylor wrote to principals and staff on behalf of the Catholic Board of Education. She recognised the vulnerability we feel, but spoke of the care and courage we can offer to each other – and the importance of hope. This letter is worth reading again – perhaps as each set of learners return to school, particularly as we enter the ‘surge’ phase of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is natural that we and our learners will have anxious moments at this time. We may fear for the health and wellbeing of those close to us; our awareness of our own health has been sharpened. We know the pandemic has already changed our lives, and we know that our society – its institutions of government and schools, and our economy are all under great stress. This, too, is felt within our families and schools.

So what can we do?

1. Take care of yourself, your colleagues, and your learners

Begin with the duty of care towards yourself. Then, stretch your awareness to the needs of colleagues and learners. Identify those who may need support and refer them to pastoral care structures in the school and, if necessary and possible, to social or psychological support.

Work constructively with the ethos of the Catholic school, and consider how in the Catholic school, our prayer life reminds us that we go about our work in the Holy Presence of God.

Rhythms and routines bring calmness and stability into our lives. So too does regular time for prayer and quiet reflection. A site you may wish to explore is: <https://www.jesuitinstitute.org.za/covid-19-resources/> If you find it helpful, then share material with colleagues, and use it in classes with learners.

Be neighbourly. Look after each other. Our response to Covid-19 shows us how basic practices of care can be: assume that you could transmit the virus without being aware that you are infected; wear a mask to protect others; keep physical distance; practice cough etiquette; carefully wash or sanitise hands frequently; stay home if not feeling well; keep classrooms, offices, and kitchens well ventilated; wipe frequently touched surfaces regularly; keep toilets clean.

Become fully informed about Covid-19. <https://sacoronavirus.co.za/> has reliable information and keeps a daily tally of infections, recoveries, and deaths. Explore the viral infections related to Influenza and Covid-19, and the effect of secondary infections. Build an understanding of why age and the presence of co-morbidities increases the particular risk Covid-19 poses to significant numbers of people. Follow the growing understanding of how hospitals can improve treatment of those whose experience of Covid-19 brings serious threat to them. **Remember that the large majority of those infected with Covid-19 recover at home, and often experience minor symptoms or even none at all.** Being open and curious about Covid-19 is a way of addressing fear and anxiety.

2. Practice hope

When our fear and anxiety rises within us, and we feel off-balance and disoriented, we can lose perspective of ourselves, our relationships with others, and our work. Dr Gloria Marsay, an Education Psychologist known to many in the network of Catholic schools, offers a way to re-ground our mental activity in hope. In the box below, you will find four questions she offers as a way to help us:

- (a) find a place of positivity,
- (b) recover from the experience of negative emotion (such as fear or anxiety, or of grief),
- (c) find and keep focus, and
- (d) remind us of our ability to be generous.

Here's a suggestion for working with these questions. Use the instructions as far as they fit with your worldview or belief. First try it yourself. Then, see if your colleagues would be willing to join you. Try it with the learners you teach. Encourage – or offer to assist – colleagues to try it with their classes.

Find a space. Bring writing materials with you. Perhaps a candle and matches – and a safe place to put the candle.

Light the candle.

Seat yourself comfortably. (Take a moment to straighten your spine and stretch upward. If you are seated on a chair, place your feet flat on the floor.)

Acknowledge you are in the Holy Presence of God.

If you are aware of stress or tension in your body, acknowledge it and see if you can ease it.

When you are ready, write a response to each of these questions. Take some time over each.

- a) What have I experienced during lockdown that I've liked? / What has happened since my return to school that I've liked?
- b) What have I done differently during this time that has worked for me?
- c) When I manage to keep focus on tasks, what helps me?
- d) What have I done that's special for someone else?

Then, consider: What can I give thanks for?

Note how you are feeling now.

If you wish, close with prayer.

3. Assembly, Prayer, and Liturgical Celebration

Prayer is always possible – in silence, or lead by one person, or softly vocal. **Christian Meditation** is a good option to take in these circumstances, not least because this is a calming and peaceful practice of prayer, a way of helping all of us – teachers and learners – to calm fear and anxiety, and to become present to ourselves, those around us, and God. Some resources to assist teachers with this practice can be found at <https://www.cie.org.za/pages/christian-meditation>

Even though Covid-19 will be with us for some time, we can remember to mark other days of religious significance. Consult the RE Calendar and Supplement at: <https://www.cie.org.za/uploads/files/Calendar-of-Religious-Festivals-2020.pdf>

One day to give attention to could be Tuesday, 1 September. This occasion lends itself to an outdoor tree-planting paraliturg (but see the caution below) and could mark one or more of the following:

- The World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation (Introduced by Pope Francis I, 6 August 2015, as a call to protect God’s handiwork, and an ecumenical gesture to this Orthodox Churches’ observation. Many World Council of Churches’ members have followed the Orthodox lead, too.)
- National Arbour Week in South Africa
- A gesture of memory for those affected by Covid-19 (The current surge may have passed by this stage, even if the virus will continue to be with us. So, it might be a moment to recollect those looking after the afflicted, those who have died, and those who recovered, with particular awareness of those known to the school).

A caution

Our precautions with respect to Covid-19 are based on the assumption that each of us could be carrying the virus. Class singing and joint prayer in closed spaces where voices are projected could increase the risk of transmission if even one person has the virus, even if masks are worn. This is a major reason why church gatherings and choir practices remain largely suspended. Keeping classrooms well ventilated will help to lower this risk. Physical distancing and wearing masks for a short outdoor prayer or paraliturg – even if only teachers attend – carries very little risk.

4. Curriculum

To address the loss of teaching time, the Department of Basic Education has put a recovery plan in place. Details of the Adjusted Teaching Programmes across grades and learning areas can be found at: <https://www.education.gov.za/Home/RecoveryPlan2020.aspx>

However, we also know that reopening schools are likely to be accompanied by various challenges. First, are sufficient measures in place to reopen? (We know a number of schools have not opened yet.) As more grades return, the absence of teachers with co-morbidities will be felt. As infections arise among staff or learners, schools will be caught in further rounds of closing and reopening – and will find that teachers in quarantine or on sick leave place further strain on the ability to coherently manage the curriculum requirements. These disruptions will affect timetabling arrangements that schools put in place to manage the physical distance requirements that need to be adhered to.

These disruptions will require great care and patience from all. If I take a cue from the DBE site, it is that **every effort to look after the Grade 7 and 12 learning programmes should be made.** These learners are in ‘exit grades’, and their future move depends on the completion of their academic year. After that, it will be a matter of doing the best one can under difficult circumstances – and making sure that the Circuit Office or District Office are kept informed whenever disruptions occur, and whenever learners’ progress is affected by this.

When disruption and strain affect the quality of teaching and learning for other grades, and when curriculum coherence across all learning areas is compromised, then the **second cue from the DBE site is to prioritise languages and maths.** Other learning areas should not be left out, but if some loss is going to occur, then the effort to hold the languages and maths programmes together should inform contingency planning.

5. Life Skills / Life Orientation

As learners return, and even as disruptions affect their learning, **this learning area has an important role to play**. Even a quick look over the Adjusted Teaching Plans for primary schools shows a focus on:

- the learners' social and emotional health
- attentiveness to how they interact with others,
- awareness of Covid-19 and the safety measures in place in the school,
- concern for the environment,
- and coverage of their Constitutional rights and responsibilities. This last area is particularly important as it points towards the kind of society many of us – particularly as we look at what Covid-19 has shown us – would want to have more of.

And this concern with learners' emotional and social health, along with human rights, fits with the growing emphasis in Catholic schools of Child Safeguarding.

Whether sport will be feasible or not – apart from limited exceptions at semi- and professional levels, current regulations do not allow it – this learning area does remind us of the importance of physical development and, especially for young learners, of play. Perhaps teachers could consider how some physical exercise and play can be structured into the learners' day – but with due consideration for keeping physical distance, wearing masks, and the use of outdoor spaces.

In secondary schools, the Adjusted Teaching Plans keep a focus on the learners' development and their future. This is done through asking them to explore their personal orientation to the world, their understanding of themselves in society, to consider their responsibility for social and environmental challenges, along with practicing self-management & acquiring study skills.

6. Religious Education

Catholic schools include Religious Education in their curriculum. In times like this, it is important to look after some space for this learning area – particularly for what it can offer us and our learners.

Here is a link to the Draft Religious Education Core Curriculum Statements:

<https://www.cie.org.za/uploads/files/Draft-RE-Core-Curriculum-Statement-Gr-R-7-Jan-2016.pdf>
<https://www.cie.org.za/uploads/files/Draft-RE-Core-Curriculum-Statement-Gr-8-12-Jan-2016.pdf>

In these documents you can find a list of lessons for each grade based on a selection from Lifebound and CORD. You can use these to make a selection of lessons sufficient for the remainder of the school year. The Gauteng Catholic Schools' Office (<http://www.cso.za.org/>) is kindly making their adjusted teaching programmes for RE available as various grades return to school. Ask your local office – or look for them on the site. Other resources can be found at <https://www.cie.org.za/pages/covid-19-portal>

However, if schools experience disruption (such as repeated closings and re-openings), if there is fear and anxiety (which get in the way of learning), and if there is stress and much busy-ness (in the effort to cover the Adjusted Teaching Programmes), then you may wish to take a different approach. **RE can provide a time of calm, a time to be – to take some respite from doing**. Christian meditation and lessons linked with the Prayer and Spirituality Education processes in Lifebound and CORD can help learners and teachers to become present to self and others, to turn awareness towards the school and its community. For those with a practice of prayer it is an opportunity to just place oneself in the holy presence of God.

Be gentle with yourself – and sensitive to the needs of learners. Consider what is possible at this time, and try to do it well. Be guided by what your learners seem to need – and by what they respond to. Light a candle. Give thanks for something. Pray for yourself and for others. Ask those who would like to, to list the names of those they are remembering at this time. Over a period of time, remember to pray for families, fellow learners and teachers, health care workers, police and army, those in the Departments of Health and Education, the Cabinet and President, all who live in South Africa, and at least one other country also struggling with Covid-19.

7. A time of opportunity?

I want to close with a question: Can we, across our society, see this time of disruption as an opportune moment for change? Covid-19 is not the only pandemic among us. President Ramaphosa has spoken of the pandemic of gender-based violence; events here and elsewhere have opened systemic racism to long-overdue scrutiny. And it is clear that we have to move our economies away from extraction and exploitation of nature. Our economy was struggling before Covid-19 arrived among us. And so was government. But Covid-19 has sharpened our awareness of contradiction within state and society: inequality and the violence of poverty has been rendered painfully visible. The state took steps to prepare for the pandemic's surge, yet early 'lockdown' saw heavy-handed behaviour by some in the police and army; the DBE and PDEs scrambled to secure personal protection equipment, water, and toilets to enable the reopening of schools, but the urgency to address sound infrastructural development in schools and communities in the decades of our democracy so often seemed absent. There is a chance, during this time of Covid-19, for members and institutions of civil society and the state to commit to good governance and to work for the common good, and to shoulder the task of building a just, inclusive, democratic, and environmentally responsible society.

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