

School's in - but not as we know it

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In Ray Bradbury's sci-fi story *A Sound of Thunder*, set in 2055, the character Eckels travels back in time. He is instructed firmly by the trip organisers Time Safari Inc. to stay on the levitated path and touch nothing. Inadvertently he steps off the path and crushes a butterfly. Returning to the present, the world has changed.

Walking into three primary schools this week, there is a similar sense of a world changed.

Scared by, guided by or hiding behind science (take your pick), politicians have not distinguished themselves in recent months. Rather, it is to leaders in health, social care, charities, business and education that the nation has looked for decisive leadership. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the calm reopening of primary schools across the country this week.

Online teaching and learning continue unabated. At the same time, staff have worked tirelessly and meticulously to create new ways of doing in order to resume actual classroom commerce and reduce risk of Covid-19 infection. Despite the muddled and late missives from the DfE, schools have used wise professional judgement and common sense in the safe return of our children.

Amusingly, having been bombarded by bureaucratic red tape in how to socially distance children, the schools are festooned with actual red tape cordoning off certain areas and creating safe zones for parents.

Year 6 children sit at individual tables, no more than 12 to a room; nursery children eat their lunch at solitary tables; the teacher sits firmly behind his desk, not circulating; Year 1 exit (for staggered breaktimes) two plus metres apart, scrupulously supervised by two teaching assistants; one classroom is set aside as an emergency centre should a child be taken ill – no, this is not school as we know it – it's austere. No jostle and craic in the lunchtime queue!

Poignantly, one teacher asks me for reassurance: 'This *will* go back to normal, won't it?' I duly reassure her that it certainly will.

A few glimmers of normality: smiling children playing amongst the trees almost touching one another; teaching assistants focused on 1:1 tuition; circle time giving children time to reflect; a couple of maths and English classes with a familiar buzz; teachers at breaktime talking about learning and pupils' next steps.

Inexorably, the 'new normal' will morph subtly into the 'old normal'. Children, more resilient and adaptable than we give them credit for, will happily lead the adults. Average attendance of 50% in this first week in June will increase significantly as days go by.

And as leaders reset the dial on their schools, what do they think will be the legacy of this period? In brief:

Challenges

- More children will be eligible for pupil premium funding as households suffer increased unemployment
- Many children will take time to resume embedded routines
- Staff will need to work intensively to recreate the 'on it' culture for learning which is characteristic of good primary schools
- Children who find learning difficult will have fallen further behind their peers
- Significant rethinks on curriculum coverage will be required.

Opportunities

- Schools have glimpsed the measurable progress vulnerable children can make when in small groups, rooted in rich conversations with adults
- The 'gap analysis' on children's progress will become sharper, identifying what they really need to catch up
- Children have demonstrated high levels of independent learning at home, which must be capitalised upon
- Communication with parents through technology will be better
- Staff working practices will be improved, making effective use of online learning and holding virtual meetings.

When memories begin to fade of the Thursday 8pm 'clap for carers', and political talk of valuing keyworkers disappears from the headlines, there will be a couple of certain legacies. First, that schools matter. Second, that teachers' professionalism will have been enhanced.

The last words to the ever-resilient headteachers whom I thank for opening their doors.

One writes in her latest newsletter: 'This pandemic has given the school the opportunity to support the community: delivering food, smiles, conversations, art packs, school work – via social messages and to families' doorsteps'.

The second observes: 'Never again in schools will children's well-being be eclipsed by performance data'.

The third says, as I take my leave in reception, rubbing my hands with hygiene gel: 'I am optimistic. There is no alternative.'

Roy Blatchford's latest book is '[The Three Minute Leader](#)'