

The Pygmalion effect

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In a recorded end-of-term message to her colleagues one headteacher spoke powerfully: 'Let not Covid-19 define the past academic year. So much else has been achieved in our school'.

She was so right. From September 2019 to March 2020, the richness of school life continued apace across the nation - and many of the July newsletters I have read evidence that in abundance. A number of schools have deliberately produced – in various formats for students, staff and parents - *Voices & Images 2020* by way of a reminder that the academic year was not just about online learning.

In contrast, working my way through some newsletters to parents, one could be forgiven for thinking that in September schools will feel like one-way sterilised mazes to marshal the 'year bubbles'. It is not schools as we know them. It is *force majeure*. In communities where the virus has hit hardest reorganising the school day, teaching rooms and timetables is understandable.

In 1963 a young psychologist named Bob Rosenthal conducted an experiment in which his assistants placed rats in mazes, and then timed how long it took them to find the exit. They were housed in two cages: one for the smartest rats and one for the also-rans.

The assistants were not surprised to find that the smart rats solved the mazes more quickly. But Rosenthal *was* surprised because he knew the truth that both cages contained ordinary lab rats. He eventually concluded that the secret ingredient was the *expectations* of his assistants who treated the smart rats with care and the also-rans with disdain.

Rosenthal coined the phrase 'the Pygmalion effect' named after the Greek myth of a sculptor who fell in love with the statue he had carved.

When we expect the best, we get the best.

Yet defeating Covid-19 is going to take more than expecting the best of how we as social animals behave. A vaccine from Oxford or somewhere on the globe looks the only long-term solution. Meanwhile, the proper goal of school leaders is to enable children and young people to resume regular schooling while protecting their more vulnerable teachers.

This aim coincides with government initiatives to slim the population before a so-called 'second wave' occurs.

Obesity and its associated diseases disproportionately affect lower socio-economic groups. According to government statistics, in the UK twice as many 11 year-old boys from the poorest fifth of the population are as obese as in the richest fifth. Black and South Asian 11 year-olds are getting bigger at a faster rate than white children.

As with other aspects of the social mobility and 'levelling up' agenda, there is an urgent health gap to be closed. And schools are uniquely well placed to lead on the health agenda.

Whatever else schools may be putting in place for September, the more innovative have planned learning which is significantly outdoor focused. These activities, skilfully and safely orchestrated in year groups, include:

- start-of-the-day registration taken as an extended outdoor keep-fit session
- longer breaktimes and lunchtimes to include fun walks/jogs around the playgrounds and fields
- increased time allocated to PE
- lessons held in outdoor areas, including in recently installed mini-marquees
- Forest School and environmental studies sessions lengthened
- more outdoor/applied learning within the core subjects
- 'learning through landscape' courses for pupils (part of PSHE), held outdoors.

In practice in September the above list is surely set to expand, and will open up previously unimagined outdoor learning opportunities. Ofsted will write reports about it.

The healthy school will be the one which experiences no Covid-19 spikes and enforced closures, and in which it is safe for teachers to teach and students to study. Minimising indoor contact and maximising fresh air, natural light and exercise are what creative schools will be focused upon when the new term opens.

One headteacher I work with has his staff united behind a simple and sensible mantra for the autumn: *Business as usual, outdoors when we can, rigorous hygiene.*

When we expect the best, we get the best.

Roy Blatchford's recent books are '[The Three Minute Leader](#)' and '[The Forgotten Third](#)', published by John Catt Education.

