

Taking stock

From new communication technology to a fresh appreciation for reading and the great outdoors **NAOMI BARTHOLOMEW**, Head of St Catherine's Prep School, Bramley looks back on how the past year has shaped education and development

It's almost a year since we first heard of Covid-19 and the global pandemic which has turned many lives upside down. Throughout, teachers and parents have had to adapt and react to the situation that they find themselves in whether that be in school or learning from home. It has been a period where service and sacrifice have gone hand in hand and everyone has had to let go of many of the normal features of their family life; communities have come together to support each other despite the necessary physical distance between them. Communication has remained essential to ensure that we all continue to feel connected and many have attempted new ways to keep in touch which they had not previously explored.

Now feels like the right time to take stock and be proactive in terms of what we've learnt and to consider changes that may in fact have been beneficial and should remain in the aftermath of the pandemic. There have indeed been silver linings among the considerable challenges that we have all faced, and creative thinking has flourished in education.

Here at St Catherine's, we've seen some of the benefits, which I'm sure are indicative of the situation in many schools and homes. Being in the great outdoors seems to have won hands down. Time outside for both children and parents – whether that be on long walks, gardening, stargazing, or taking up a new pursuit such as kayaking – has meant that many of us have found a new level of appreciation for nature and the benefits that brings to our mental and physical health. In schools this has also led to more outdoor learning, which has many proven advantages, particularly for younger learners. So, it's hardly surprising that many families are looking to move out of cities to homes where they'll have more room and ready access to outdoor space.

Life has been slower and this has most definitely reaped rewards. A couple of the top favourite features of 'life in lockdown' quoted by children at school last term were 'family mealtimes' and 'bedtime stories.' These precious moments, that have been more possible with home working, have certainly been beneficial for children.

In school during the autumn term, the weekly schedule was less frenetic with fewer extracurricular activities both in and outside of school. We worked hard to ensure a balance ▶

Spending time outside is great for everyone's physical and mental health



PERHAPS THE MOST OBVIOUS SILVER LINING IS *the revolution in communication through digital technology* - PARENT-TEACHER MEETINGS ARE SHORT, PURPOSEFUL AND MUCH MORE PRIVATE

remained, but the reduction in options has seemed to be of benefit. School life was just a little less rushed. We observed reading progress at an accelerated rate as there's perhaps more time for it, and those who are learning an instrument have also flourished with a little more time for daily practise. Our chess club had record attendance numbers, both in person within their 'bubble' and online at our Zoom chess masterclass. Again, a sign that there's more time for some of the pursuits which may take a little more time.

One parent commented that she had read *Wilding* by Isabella Tree during lockdown and that she could see something potentially similar happening in our schools. I completely agree – as school leaders, we've been able among some of the daily firefighting of keeping everything safe for children and staff, to take a step back and reintroduce some back to basics approaches and considering what it is that really matters.

Teachers have been very successful in achieving these goals both in school and while teaching remotely, and have worked tirelessly to ensure that we've provided meaningful and rich learning activities, maintained excellent

relationships between teachers and pupils, and given the children time to learn and explore with plenty of opportunities for independent learning. By doing so, we're building on their self-belief which is perhaps more important than ever before, as a fundamental goal in terms of preparing children in an uncertain world, ready to meet the challenges ahead and to support each other along the way as they do so.

Perhaps the most obvious silver lining is the revolution in communication through digital technology – parent-teacher meetings are short, purposeful and much more private than those conducted in a noisy school hall or classroom, and which don't involve parents having to dash from the office in order to attend. The ability to connect the entire school for assembly via Zoom or to continue with your learning in innovative ways has been incredible. And more so than ever, children are confident and able to maintain contact with family and friends all over the world. ☺

GOING FORWARD...

As pupils returned to school last term, our teachers aimed to achieve the following for the children:

- Keep them safe
- Lower their anxiety about the current situation
- Make them laugh
- Make them feel loved
- Teach them something new and exciting each day

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