

WHAT NOW?

Naomi Bartholomew, Head of St Catherine's Prep School, Bramley looks at the challenges and opportunities in prep schools in our *nearly* post-Covid world

Parents and teachers spent the first few months of 2022 in what felt rather like a parallel universe to the 'outside world'. Numbers of cases of Covid-19 in those aged 0 to nine years rose to the highest since the pandemic began and parents continued to battle with combining work and childcare, supervising learning from home and fielding endless updates and changes from their schools as situations changed daily.

Prep and primary schools grappled with 'hybrid learning', teaching those in front of them and finding creative ways to also engage those learning at home who may be asymptomatic but having to self-isolate. There's a whole new language which we and our children are now using. I came across two eager pupils this morning waiting patiently outside our music room, commenting of their teacher, 'He's on Zoom, we'll just wait for him to close the meeting.' Let's not forget how new this all is.

Meanwhile, news continues of a return to normality, relaxation of measures to curb the spread of the pandemic and 'learning to live in a world with Covid'. So, what does this new normal look like in schools? What are the opportunities for children? What are the challenges we still have to overcome?

Many of us have been charting the benefits of the last two years. For young children, in particular, there have been a number. The most obvious being a less busy schedule, more relaxed family mealtimes and less extracurricular commitments, less dashing from

place to place. This really has been of benefit. Children have had time for some 'slow learning' – enjoying time to read, be creative, practise an instrument or play chess. While I think we have all acknowledged that less in a week is beneficial, it's slightly concerning that things are returning to the pressure of pre-Covid times. With this comes anxiety and for some, a relentless fear of missing out. More time spent outdoors, simpler local holidays, time together as a family and time to really play, read and relax are things that I really hope are here to stay as they have such clear advantages for children.

In schools, there's a focus on wellbeing. This already existed before Covid-19 struck, but has now taken front and centre in our approach, planning and in the choice of resources, the layout and design of both indoor and outdoor spaces and extracurricular activities. There has been a renewed widespread recognition that social, emotional and personal development are the essence of the primary phase of education. Mindfulness, outdoor learning, quiet spaces and an acknowledgement that children need time to talk are all I very much think here to stay. Here at St Catherine's, we have wellbeing ambassadors who lead initiatives with their

younger peers, and 'a place to be' and 'place to talk' are helpful spaces for the girls at lunch times.

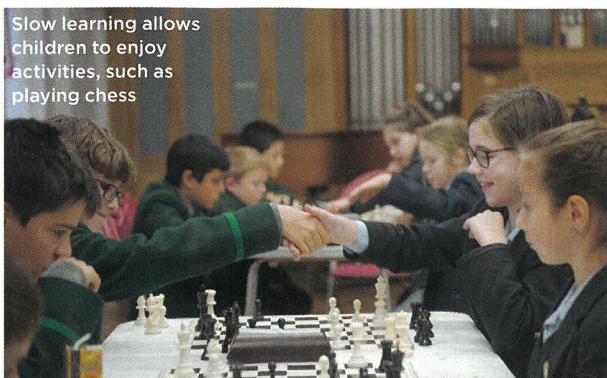
There has also been a strong appreciation for the creative arts and proof of the need for music, dance, art and drama to be very much a part of every week in school. Prep schools lead the way here and many are linking with local primary schools to share resources and specialist teachers. Adopting creative approaches and giving opportunities for children to express themselves has never been more important.

Digital learning has literally been transformed and providing exciting, productive and forward-looking ways for children to learn. Coding, AI and other elements of computer science are now really gathering momentum in schools and technology is no longer about 'learning with' but 'learning about' digital devices.

My hope is that these elements (slow learning, wellbeing, creative arts and digital learning) will now be built upon in order to foster environments within our schools where opportunities are broad and wide ranging. Never before have we been so aware that our role in schools is to help create resilient problem solvers able to work both independently and within a team. Schools need to be places where

children are given time to develop, figure things out, consolidate and practise skills and then also show initiative and direct their own learning. By doing so, we're building on their natural curiosity and developing lifelong learners ready for whatever life will throw at them. The post-Covid world demands nothing less. 🍷

Slow learning allows children to enjoy activities, such as playing chess





Playtime is essential for social development for pre-prep and prep pupils

Outdoor learning is vital to pupil wellbeing



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