



Children and the ‘New Rules’: A Classroom Assistant’s Perspective on School Life during the Pandemic

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We are all now far more aware of distances between people, between children in the classroom and across the ‘bubbles’ within which we all now live and work. Staff in our school are safely distanced from each other at breaktime. I wear a mask in the classroom while working with the child to whom I am attached. Of course, the children are also very aware of the new need for distance. When approaching the teacher’s desk, you can see them being mindful and keeping back further than they would normally. It is all in the name of safety and everyone is clear as to the purpose and necessity for this sort of distance.

You might think this would simply dampen the spirit of the classroom, but I’ve discovered it takes more than a bit of distance to put children off learning. In fact, in some ways, I’ve seen these distances result in a greater sense of independence and responsibility in children. No one would wish these circumstances on a classroom, but it can be good to take a step back now and then and notice the good things that are currently happening around us.

The smallest routines of the classroom look different now. Whereas before I might have helped the child I am attached to in getting books out of a school bag or setting up materials to get ready to work, now – in the interest of minimizing touching and contact – they don’t have school bags with them and I am more likely to take that little bit of extra time, and patience, required to encourage the child to organize all their own materials. It is remarkable, looking back, to realise how often I simply reached for a book to hand it to the pupil, thinking I was being a helpful assistant. It is such a fine line between being helpful and being ever-so-slightly impatient with a child so that you just want to step in and move things along. The virus and this pandemic have made us look at nearly everything in a different light, and my ‘helpfulness’ is another one of those things that looks a little bit different to me now.

These changes extend beyond just the child I work with one-to-one. The children in the class now all have a rack of their materials to hand next to their desk where

they keep things organised. In the past the teacher and I might have ‘helpfully’ handed books out; that’s just not possible now. The responsibility is now more with the child to keep things organized and to prepare themselves for work, and they do this all naturally.

They are so adaptable. The ‘new rules,’ as they call them, are just the order of the day. They don’t seem particularly aware, yet, of the ways in which they are demonstrating new levels of responsibility. They had it in them all along, but it shows just how much any given classroom atmosphere impacts on pupil behaviour. They are able, in so many cases, to step up to new challenges.

At the start there were some difficulties. They are so used to sharing their equipment with other children that to be told, ‘We now just use our own things’ seemed strange to them and they needed reminded regularly. One of the advantages of being a classroom assistant is that, because I am attached to a particular child, I have moved with the entire class up through the year groups, and up through a series of different teachers’ classrooms. I have seen how, at the start of every new year, the children are faced with a series of ‘new rules.’ They are, funny enough, more used to change than we are. Every year is a change and they are happy to learn new ways. They really are built to learn.

The key with any ‘new rules,’ of course, is consistency. As long as the rules are understood and are consistently applied, children respond well. The pandemic, for better or worse, demands consistency. The children may forget the new rules briefly, but with repetition they eventually adapt.

Our school’s use of Seesaw has helped enormously to minimize the transfer of papers and materials between school and home and has brought along a new, greater emphasis on digital learning which the children enjoy. They were asked recently to record something about themselves at home and we were all able to watch these recordings — done at home — back in the classroom. It is almost as if, strangely, social distancing has brought about new ways to improve links between home and school and make the two feel even closer.

So, despite all the stresses, strains and challenges of the current situation, there are some positive experiences in the classroom to be appreciated if you keep an eye out for them. The children are aware that Covid is a problem that limits their social life and sporting activities – and we need to keep an eye on their well-being to monitor the impact of these seriously negative aspects of life in a pandemic. At the same time, the children have been very quick to accept some challenges and use their natural resilience to respond positively in many small ways that should be noticed and appreciated.