



Heads Up

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Since 1945, there is probably nothing that has brought the world to a standstill in the way that Covid-19 has done.

In schools, the pattern of life was naturally disrupted by the complete absence of boys, staff, parents and visitors. Much that has been part and parcel of our way of operating had to be suspended. But all is not doom and gloom. Some new approaches have worked well, and some good lessons have been learned.

It is not yet all over, but as the old year runs its course and plans for the new are made, it is time to take a rain check.

COPING WITH COVID

Despite its problems, Covid-19 brought out the best in some schools and teachers, it seems. Not long into the pandemic we saw the emergence of at least some activity with on-line learning. When the boys eventually returned, of course, it was to a very different school from the one they had vacated in March. So how did schools shape up? Pretty well, actually. Adaptation was the name of the game, and many schools continued to deliver a solid dose of education, giving direction and hope to learners and communities.

In terms of academics, it is surely a matter for congratulation that teachers on the whole took on the burden of distance learning as effectively as they did. This demanded of them a range of new skills:

- A virtual classroom meant that interest and discipline alike had to be maintained through the spoken word, without the strength lent by face-to-face encounters. It could not have been easy holding the learners' attention, discerning when they were lost, stimulating those who had grasped the work and supporting those who had not.
- Useful aids like blackboards, models and textbooks were either absent, or, at best, present in a form that required different handling.
- Teachers and learners had to get used to the virtual world, and quickly.
- And when finally the learners did return, the obligatory masks, while meeting a medical need, also hid faces, a la Phantom of the Opera. Even simple recognition required effort.

Sport, a much-loved and time-honoured constituent of our broad educational offering, was relegated to a poor shadow of what we had been used to.

- Boys generally love the rough-and-tumble, of sport, while the camaraderie of being in a team counts for so much. Their cancellation meant that many valuable and joyous learning experiences simply did not occur.
- The sense of belonging which enthusiastic supporters give could also not be expressed and the pent-up energy had to be positively channelled or controlled.

Socially it was also difficult. "I miss my friends," was an oft-heard cry. Peer groups are vital when it comes to testing ideas, letting off steam and simply enjoying companionship. An elbow bump is not quite the same as a hefty slap on the back, and friendly scraps are a necessary form of interaction.

And so where to in the after-math? Only with hindsight will we be able to evaluate accurately how we have coped, but from the thick of it as we are now, a fair assessment seems to be that our schools have coped well, and hard-to-come-by but priceless values such as patience, perseverance, calmness and making the best of difficult circumstances have been at work, thanks to the lead given by principals and staff.

Could it also be that the pandemic has spawned some real change in education with teachers having to use technology and other forms of teaching and learning strategies such as blended or flip teaching, rather than relying on blackboards, whiteboards or old handouts?

Many would argue that our schooling system still sits comfortably in the First Industrial Revolution, whereas we should be in the Fourth. Zoom and similar meetings are probably here to stay, working from home probably not.

Externally, a host of different, new-style schools seems to be popping up. Several of them, linked to for-profit independent education providers or financed by large corporates, could well get accreditation while others may be "fly-by-nights" which soon disappear. Either way, some parents are for the first time considering that an expensive school-based education is no longer a necessity, given the many new choices open to them – individual teaching with a tutor, home-schooling, group schools and online teaching could cost significantly less than traditional schooling as we have come to know it. You ignore the possibilities at your peril.

What hasn't changed is the truth that schools require teachers who are good role models as well as good educators. Quality teachers are essential for quality outcomes. In a recent international ranking of schools, most of the top-performers credited their staff for their schools' achievements. Quality principals and quality teachers with a passion for teaching and who care about each learner, have a positive effect on the entire school.

So, in the end, what will you say to your staff at the final staff meeting next month? By praising those who did their best to keep going, you can both highlight the efforts that were made and encourage those who didn't come to the party. It is undoubtedly a party worth joining!