



This relevant and timely article from our Chair of the Primary Working Group, **David Gibbons**, will make you smile and touch your heart at the same time. The changes described in David's account of the events rapidly unfolding in his own school will no doubt resonate with many.

The weather is beautiful; our children in school are gardening, baking, laughing, reading, playing, creating, engaging in interesting, wide-ranging and respectful conversations with adults and their peers, working with clay and singing along to *The Greatest Showman*.

'May you live in interesting times!' – an ironic 'blessing' known as the 'Chinese Curse' due to its supposed country of origin. In reality, there is no known attributable Chinese phrase which translates directly to: 'May you live in interesting times'. The nearest may well be: 'Better to be a dog in times of tranquillity than a human in times of chaos.' I'll just leave that here for a bit ...

One of the last things said during our final full meeting at school in March with all staff physically present was: 'We'll look back on this and ask ourselves, "Did this really happen or was it a dream?"' Nine weeks on and we are painfully aware of COVID-19 and its impact on our lives ... we 'stay alert' ... no dream-like state. However, I am conscious that, as I write this during the most rapidly moving and disruptive period of my 30 years in teaching, this is a snapshot of 'now'—a moment in time; in days, weeks and months to come the story told may change and mutate! We will reflect, we will learn, we will move on.

Today is the second May bank holiday; we are in school with the children of key workers as we have been for the past three bank

holidays, as school staff have been for five days a week for over two months. The weather is beautiful; our children in school are gardening, baking, laughing, reading, playing, creating, engaging in interesting, wide-ranging and respectful conversations with adults and their peers, working with clay and singing along to *The Greatest Showman*. This is probably the education that we always dreamt was possible but were always too cautious to fully commit to because of 'them'... be it Ofsted, Local Authorities, Academy Trusts, Senior Leaders, parents, our colleagues – in fact, anyone who we thought might 'judge us'. Things have changed ... and today, at least, the sun shines.

The children and staff who have been in school throughout this time have shown resilience and forbearance beyond anything that we could have asked of them. When your parents are ICU nurses or working in a 'COVID pod' or delivering babies in full PPE, coming to school is a necessity but is also a cause of great anxiety. It has been hard for children to understand why their parents are in work all of the time when the message has been: 'Stay at Home'.



Everything has changed. Our days at work became longer as childcare partners shut their doors and the school day became 8am—4.30pm. Working patterns of staff moved to an in school/ at home rota. The structure of school has changed constantly to respond to the needs of our pupils; initially things were loose and creative but as

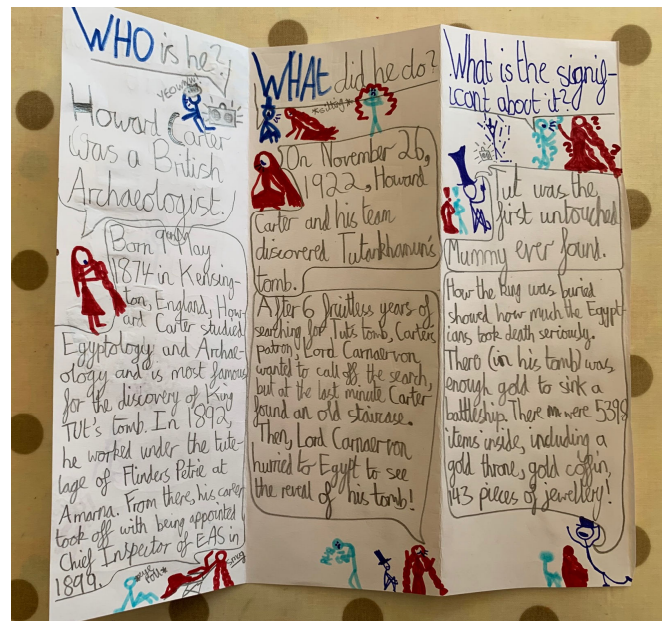
time has passed the children have needed more structure in the mornings, more of their previous 'normal'. Afternoons have continued to be 'freewheeling', being led by the special interests of staff and pupils. Rockets have been launched, art has been created, plants have been tended, dens have been built, food has been cooked, songs have been sung and many donated cakes have been eaten.

The crazy dash to re-purpose school as a 'key worker' school in late March showed us how much we are capable of at short notice and how guidance and advice could come quicker and faster than you could ever have imagined.

For some, the call of YouTube and Internet stardom was too tempting – we now have a teacher with his own series of Science videos, another who delivers all English teaching for each week through one carefully made 'Professor and The Secret Agents' weekly episode and another who lends his voice to his tortoise for the 'Tank Speaks' series of videos.

Everything seemed different, everything seemed strange but soon we adjusted to 'the new normal'. Then, as has become the pattern over this strange time, everything changed again. Families who had happily taken the opportunity to press pause and spend time with their children started to find things a bit more difficult.

As a school, we worked really hard to make sure that every family was contacted by phone, by email and in some cases by handwritten letter. We were conscious that we would always miss someone if we weren't careful and developed call systems that we never dreamt of. But then, everything had changed. Also, those staff who were not coming into school because they were 'shielding' began to come into their own—they were desperate to contribute something and spent hours each day on the phone (141 before the dialled number was another revelation for us), emailing and messaging



families. Staff have spent hours on these calls—ranging from advice and support for parents to teaching elements of 'tricky maths' and listening to children read down the phone. Reaching out to, and supporting, families who are finding things difficult has been massively important for us—whether it's food vouchers, support with engagement and behaviours at home, more intense counselling or just a good old chat.

At the same time, 'pick me up packages' prepared by our Y6 pupils for residents in sheltered and care homes just before Lockdown, and messages prepared by our key worker and vulnerable children sent out with VE cream teas to 500 local residents, have generated a wonderful exchange of experiences and memories between generations.

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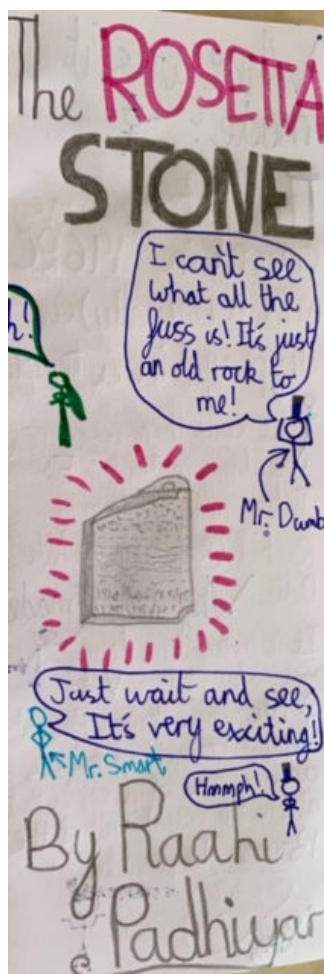
Our school website has grown exponentially with distinct home learning areas for all classes, 'Cinematheque Lockdown arthouse videos', teaching videos, assemblies, samba sessions with kitchen utensils and Lego challenges to name just a few. We had none of these 9 weeks ago!

<http://www.nettleham-junior.lincs.sch.uk/page/?title=Distance+Learning&pid=99>

Early on, we made the choice, guided by our families, to introduce more structure to what was offered for 'Home Learning'. We had initially bombarded our families with lots and lots and lots of activities and said 'take your pick'. For some this was brilliant, for others not so good. I guess that this situation confirms what we all know—when it comes to education there are as many different views as people ... no one size fits all. We might be 'All in this Together,' but we were wary not to provide something that, whilst being a perfect option for some families, might prove totally stressful and counter-productive for others.

So our staff have been producing their 'weekly timetables' with easily downloadable resources—drawing on some elements of the 'easy access' national

schemes but personalising them to our children with a great deal of material created by our staff. We can't ignore differentiation, especially now as we are not just differentiating for children but for the adults in their lives too; we are providing hi-tech solutions for the luckily tech savvy families, printed sheets for those who lack technology and everything in between ... as best as we possibly can. The danger has been that workload actually increases when working from home with teachers desperate to do everything that they have always done for every child and being used to the 'sole ownership' that they exercise in their classrooms. Over time,



a collaborative approach has proved to be the best way forward in planning, delivering and feeding back; we are definitely 'All in this Together'. The offer to 'key worker and vulnerable' children who are still attending school has increasingly seen the 'weekly timetable' which is designed for 'home learning' form a key element of morning activities in school. We've been drawn into a 'flexible consistency' for all pupils whether at home or school.

And just as we settled into a new routine and started to feel like we were delivering something that really met the needs of our school community, everything changed again. I write as we come to the end of another neurotically intense period of planning, risk assessment, uncertainty, massive amounts of guidance, feelings that we can't deliver, feelings that we are in danger of doing too much ... all compounded by a nasty strain of the 'look at those lazy teachers' virus in some areas of the media (mainstream and social).

But every conversation with staff, families, governors, children, friends and colleagues in other schools, and my local shopkeeper, confirms that we're doing what we always do – serving our communities and mutually supporting and respecting each other. Our school values have really come sharply into focus in how they inform our decisions and guide how we behave at this time ... I was taken aback when I took the opportunity to share them with our whole school community after eight weeks of 'school closure'.

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They are:

TRUST – HUMILITY – THANKFULNESS –
FRIENDSHIP – ENDURANCE – KOINONIA
(I'll let you look that one up!)

We look forward to safely seeing our pupils return to school but have been quite clear that we need to do this in a way that best suits our community. There will be children who have had a wonderful time at home, some who have suffered greatly, some who have lost loved ones, some who have struggled to understand what is happening, some who are desperate to be back in school and some who would rather be anywhere else. Education will be massively different when more and more pupils return and we need to tread very carefully rather than trying to 'get back to normal' as fast as we can ... because we'll fail our children, families and staff if we do. Most importantly, we need to have a good look at 'normal': which things do we want back and what other things have we been doing for all of these years that actually hold us back from providing the education that we actually believe in? Remember, as we keep saying, everything has changed; don't miss this opportunity to make those changes for the better.

We live in interesting times!

David Gibbons is Headteacher of Nettleham Church of England Aided Junior School in Lincolnshire and has been a Headteacher of primary and junior schools since 1998.



David has been involved with NATE, particularly the Primary Working Group, for the past fifteen years, has contributed to the organisation's publications and has represented NATE in consultations with government about primary curriculum and assessment.

When not worrying about education, he plays the trumpet quite badly in a 10 piece ska band travelling around the country and beyond, from the Glastonbury and Isle of Wight Festivals to Reykjavik and Paris.

