

Primary concerns

It's the preppies I think about most. A gorgeous five year old boy with large green eyes under increasingly riotous curls is asking "why"? It could be about why we are sitting when yesterday we stood, or why he has to do this lesson first when he wants to do that one, and all I can think of is that this is not what his experience of Prep should be.

His pretty, young, newlywed teacher is in lockdown, and he has me, grumpy, middle-aged, and tired, herding 21 students between Prep and Year 5 whose parents both work in the medical field. The little ones are on campus so their parents can keep working, and I am with them because their regular teachers are at home videoing lesson plans and hosting Google meets.

I am 'between jobs' as they say, and unlikely to find work during this time, so I took this gig, and because the Deputy Principal who asked is an old friend. My three children at two schools are home, being sustained by my husband, and I am subject to a thorough scrub down and disinfecting regime when I return each day, so as not to transmit anything to my family. At home I feel like a slightly tiresome houseguest, spending most of my evenings in my bedroom, and sitting on a designated chair adjacent to the family couch for TV time.

At school the parents morphed from grateful to demanding in three days - why is Lavendar on youtube when she's not allowed to have screen time at home? Why has Norton not completed all his lessons? Why did Molly not make her individual check in time with her teacher? The correct answer is because we're anxious and antsy and have 8 hours to fill with 4 hours of official lessons? Because we know it's weird, spreading over three classrooms to maintain social distancing, which the kids ignore as they confer over a laptop, play ball at recess, and cuddle together during story time.

There are moments of delight, of course. The impromptu talent show Friday afternoon - a mix of flashes of competence amid a sea of awfulness that is every Primary performance. The obstacle course designed by the "big kids" of Years 4 and 5 for PE time, and getting to watch the gentle encouragement boys can give to young children and siblings when their peers aren't around to mock them. But mostly it is like long day care, extremely long day care, trying to follow a regular timetable for 6 different year levels, plus enrichment for several and remedial language class for others.

I reread L M Montgomery's 'Anne' series, as she matures out of Green Gables, taking over a one room schoolhouse with similar issues over curriculum, discipline and the howlers perpetrated by learners of all ages. Watching tiktok at lunchtime I marvel at those who are bored in iso. I'm exhausted.

The students are astonishing in their adaptability, quickly setting routines, and learning how to log on to their computers, find a class and play the first video. It's a lesson too, in the value of face-to-face learning, as they turn to me and say plaintively: "I've finished the video, but what do I do?" Reading, writing, maths, science, geography, history, religious instruction, language, sport, ICT, music, art - the teachers are diligent if variable in their appeal online, and the kids would rather be here than alone at home, or with their nanny. They relish being with their

friends, and I see the value in kids working at their own pace, taking regular snack and movement breaks, and helping each other out. I hope the school can hold onto some of the cross age connections, and camaraderie of this time.

I return home, scrub and then settle with my zoom to tutor my various Year 10-12s, who are still preparing for exams and learning to analyse texts. They're digital natives. Adept at connecting with peers online, and helping me learn screen share and all the other new skills of this month. My voice is going as I try to compensate for the distance by exaggerating the voices of different characters, encouraging my reluctant readers to become Atticus Finch, or Macbeth, or Wilfred Owen. Later I watch John Krasinski hold a virtual prom night, and a virtual graduation on his Some Good News vlog, and I weep.

And this is the first wave.