



OPINION

What we lost by banning parents from school buildings

JOSH FULLAN

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Josh Fullan is the director of Maximum City, a national education and engagement organization.

I didn't think much about not being able to visit my daughter's classroom during the pandemic – until I finally got the chance to see it. Last week, for the very first time, I was allowed to go inside my daughter's school building, where she gave me a tour of her classroom and the artifacts that adorn it.

First, the small round table where she sits with her kindergarten coterie on chairs with tennis balls on their feet. Then the wallpaper display of cartoon crocodiles, each one coloured by a different classmate. An activity station with baskets of art supplies. "These markers smell SO good, Daddy." When she was done showing me around, my daughter wandered over to her teacher's desk to sneak a look while no one was there. I stood silent, taking in the material goodness of the stuff around me.

For more than two years, public-health restrictions largely barred parents and caregivers across the country from entering the spaces where their children spend the majority of their waking hours. Instead, parents flanked the perimeters of child care centres at the end of the day, or idled in cars near school property, waiting passively for children to be discharged. For a sense of the learning environment, many of us subsisted on shared moments from the digital apps that schools now use to post classroom activities. The photos are nice enough, but feel carefully curated and are a poor facsimile of the real thing.

In the fatal sweep of a global pandemic, not seeing your kid's classroom is perhaps a small sacrifice, a manufactured crisis amid multiple real ones. But now that some schools and child care centres are starting to figure out how to let parents and other guests back in as they remove the insular armour of COVID restrictions one layer at a time, some parents are getting an in-person glimpse of what they were missing. In my case, seeing my daughter's classroom was a solemn initiation into her world.

A classroom is more than just four walls and furniture. It is a monumental space in a child's life and development. It is a teacher's domain centred on the child. It is a multisensory stage for an agglomerating spectacle of touching, moving, observing. And even when it sits empty and silent, a classroom is a living laboratory full of meaning. Italian Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy, called the learning environment "the third teacher." His point was that social and learning experiences, especially for the youngest, are shaped by the physical environment where they happen.

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Those scented markers and cartoon crocodiles in my daughter's classroom, the drifts of coloured paper and the rectangular window slits where the light from the schoolyard comes in at odd angles, are not just "stuff" but the various matter that shapes her daily mood and development. The substance and contours of a classroom entrap or beguile, inspire boredom or wonder.

A classroom is also a community, and communities are strongest when all members participate. As a parent, I am only an honorary member of my daughter's classroom, but a full-fledged member of the broader school community. When school communities don't include parents – for whatever reason – they suffer. While the pandemic has weakened education systems in multiple ways, the literal and symbolic distance it has marked between parents and schools might be a particularly insidious effect that no one is talking about. Thankfully, it is also easy to fix and does not require a change in government or major policy reform. It simply requires that parents show up, get out of their idling cars and walk inside.

When parents show up inside schools, they bump into other parents. They chat with the principal in the hallway, put faces to names they've heard a hundred times and see the

cubby or locker where their kid stashes their stuff. This is how social capital gets built, one encounter at a time. The valuable networks of social capital can make or break school communities.

My advice to parents and caregivers: go forth and invade your children's schools. Advocate for re-entry by reminding your principal or local school board trustee of the proven value of schools open to community members – parents, guest speakers, volunteers. Look inside your child's classroom. Occupy it. Resew some of the connective tissue that binds you to your kid's daily world and to the broader school community. Get your kid to give you a half-sheepish, half-proud tour of their classroom when no one is around. Bend low to see things from their level. Breathe the air they breathe. And pay attention to what happens in that moment of discovery and connection.

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