



# **And What's More . . .**

**(‘Thoughts from the Study’ Volume II)**

**Peter Tait, Headmaster  
Sherborne Preparatory School**

## PREFACE

When it was decided to gather up the various articles that first appeared in the School's monthly newsletters into a book, it was undertaken without any end in mind other than the hope that they explained a little about the workings and ethos of Sherborne Prep. Our Registrar, Sophie Harris, then took what I thought was the exceedingly bold step of sending a copy out with every prospectus. The response has been, and continues to be, surprising and not a little gratifying. Most comments we have had from those who still decided to look around the School have been complimentary although heaven knows how many pupils we may have also lost as a result! The consequence, however, has been to encourage us to repeat the exercise, for good or ill. As well as the mountain of typically curmudgeonly missives, it was decided to augment the book with some of the articles written for various education publications on a variety of subjects ranging from the philosophy of Littleton Powys to the advantages of living in the West Country. As a result, some themes and subjects have been revised in different guises. Some articles previously published in other publications are included as ballast as indicated by an asterisk on the contents page and should be treated with caution.

While some of the articles may be seen as akin to Jeremy Clarkson's take on life, I do hope that a little of what I have had to say makes sense. Having been a parent to three children and having duly received a rather patchy report card for my efforts, there is more than a little irony in writing so, but I labour under the belief that one only learns from one's mistakes and that wisdom is only ever wrought in the crucible of experience.

It is a very difficult time to be a parent as the world is changing so quickly. The weapons of technology are now held by your children, who can do things with your mobile, your laptop, your remote control at which you can only marvel. Peer pressure, the recession and competition amongst parents cause rational people to act irrationally and are an inordinate pressure for any parent to deal with. Thanks goodness that The Prep, with all its foibles and idiosyncracies remains an island of good sense in an uncertain world – or so we like to believe.

October 2010

## CONTENTS

*According to the Text*

*Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*

*Charity and the Tinkling Cymbal*

*Cruelty to Children*

*Curriculum at the Crossroads*

*Derailing the Gravy Train*

*Digging For Gold*

*Do as I do: Modelling For Life*

*Growing Up Too Soon*

*Happy New Year: Creating a Persona for 2010*

*Hey, Mr Politician, Leave Our Schools Alone*

*I Cannot Tell a Lie*

*If I Only Had Time (PS You Have)*

*Into the West*

*It's a Dog's Life*

*Lost Property*

*Loving Our Children*

*Making Silk Purses from Silk Thread\**

*Measuring the Human Spirit*

*Moving On: The Progression from Prep School to Senior School\**

*Nanotechnologies*

*Now We Are ~~Six Five Four Three~~ Two and a Half*

*Piaget and All That*

*Scholasticism Under Siege*

*Smartening Up Not Dumbing Down\**

*Spare No Expenses*

*Taking the Brain Out For a Walk*

*Teaching to the Test*

*The Atomisation of Education*

*The Atomisation of Society*

*The Blame Game*

*The Damage Done*

*The Joy of It\**

*The Invasion of Childhood*

*The Good Life*

*True Grit*

*What's Wrong with Me?*

*Who Would Be A Teacher?*

*Why Correct English is Correct*

*Why Schools Must Change*

*Why Worry?*

*Working Hours Regulations*

## ACCORDING TO THE TEXT:

*'We must go beyond textbooks, go out into the bypaths and un-trodden depths of the wilderness and travel and explore and tell the world the glories of our journey' –  
John Hope Franklin*

*'History must not be written with bias and both sides must be given, even if there is only one side' – John Betjeman*

*'Education ... has produced a vast population able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading' – George Macaulay Trevelyan*

The recent news story emanating from Arnold Schwarzenegger, governor of California that he was advocating scrapping the use of textbooks in classrooms was picked up by newspapers and wired around the world, mostly dressed as another example of what happens when an action hero runs a celebrity state without due regard to the dollars and cents.

While the motive (balancing the state's budget) might be of interest to a school bursar, the idea of existing without textbooks runs counter to many of the prejudices and beliefs of teachers and parents, raised on such standards as The First Aid In English and James Paterson and Edwin G. Macnaughton's The Approach to Latin. So no more than another madcap idea from the Terminator?

Not so, it seems according to some independent observers who have sprung to the defence of the Governor and agree that the textbook, as we know it, may well have had its day, increasingly replaced by on-line resource banks and other information sources. Maths and Science, for instance, are now able to be regularly updated and augmented by video demonstrations and interactive experiments, improving the relevance and currency of what is being taught. Moreover, they argue, while children may be more comfortable receiving information through text books, there has always been a danger in over-dependence on texts, especially in subjects which can stray towards the subjective.

As a teacher I have always appreciated having a comfortable shelf of books that I can dip into and use depending on the lesson and, like many, I have my own favourite textbooks to which I still refer back. Undoubtedly, there is still something very comforting about textbooks and in some subjects, an overwhelming case can be made for using them as the basis for a course of study – and even for restoring some of the hoary old classics in such subjects as English to their former prominence. However, the idea of subject-based resource banks as currently being set up on the internet is very appealing, as are the considerable savings for schools which may not purchase textbooks that teachers may only wish to dip into occasionally and which quickly date. Many of the very best teachers do not use textbooks at all and yet others are still inclined to use them shamelessly as a crutch to support dull and ponderous lessons, based on often dubious premises presented as gospel. In no subject is this danger more evident than in history.

As a case study, like many history students the world over, I was taught that the Black Hole of Calcutta was an horrific atrocity perpetuated by the Nawab of Bengal in which 146 British men, women and children were crammed into a cell with the result that by next morning, only 23 remained alive.

It is an account that shaped British attitudes and foreign policy towards India for over a century and was passed on through history books and textbooks until it was accepted as irrefutable fact. Which would be perfectly alright, of course, if that were so; however, since the publication

in 1915 of J H Little's article on the Black Hole that questioned the veracity of eye-witness accounts, evidence has tended to indicate otherwise.

Of the contemporary sources, the most compelling was from John Zephaniah Holwell, a surgeon and lawyer, who was one of those imprisoned and who gave the first full eye-witness account of the incident, describing the horrors and placing the death toll at 123. Captain Mills (1756), a member of the garrison and John Cooke (1756), Secretary to the Governor both put the death toll at 'more than 120', augmenting a version of events that was broadly accepted over the next two centuries.

The story changed little over the next 150 years. Dorothy Marshall, in 'Our Island's Story' published in 1902, was equally sure both of the numbers and the motives of the Nawab, which were 'horrible,' and 'sinful' and even as recently as 2002, Saul David in his book on The Indian Mutiny maintained that the death toll included 'scores of Europeans'.

Since the first appearance of Little's article, The Black Hole: The Question of Holwell's Veracity, in 1915, however, historians have been re-examining the evidence. Linda Colley, in her superb history Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600-1850 (2003) asserted that only fifty people – and not all those British – died in the incident, while more recently, Jan Dalley (The Black Hole: Money, Myth and Empire 2006) argued convincingly that the figure was perhaps as low as forty imprisoned, with as few as eight deaths. Besides, the British (according to Dalley) were mainly responsible for the incident, having refused to negotiate with the Nawab and confronting his forces with an ill-prepared garrison. The Nawab, far from ordering the atrocity, had already retired for the night when his commanders shoved the prisoners into the only cell available which was tiny. Not surprisingly, Dalley concluded that '*Historians now agree it was more of a bungle than an act of deliberate cruelty*'.

We are inevitably led to ask how then did the Black Hole, one of the best-known stories of the British Empire come to be passed down from textbook to textbook as irrefutable fact. Dalley attempted an explanation: '*Afterwards,*' wrote Dalley, '*everyone had an interest in exaggerating the horrors and hiding their ignoble role in the battle*'<sup>2</sup> – although she established that it was the Victorians (isn't it always), for reasons of empire, who converted the Black Hole of Calcutta' into a poignant foundation myth of British India: '*that great crime*', as the future Lord Macaulay called it in 1840, '*memorable for its singular atrocity*'<sup>3</sup>

As in life, motive is everything and historians, good historians, should always be digging below the surface. From this distance there is much that is unknown and the truth may lie somewhere in the middle. Where-ever the truth lies, historians and those who write textbooks, carry a considerable responsibility to either get it right or at least not to, dogmatically, get it wrong.

History can throw up rather extreme instances when subjectivity and objectivity are found jostling together in unseemly fashion. Textbooks in other subjects tend merely to date rather than distort; methods change although in some (English), we could do worse than consult and learn from the textbooks of a generation ago (why are the only pupils to learn English grammar properly, it seems, those learning it as a foreign language?). In the last thirty years or more, there has been an explosion in the number of textbooks, all peddling their own wares, giving their own distinctive take on a subject or, worse still, packaging their subjects in shorthand for the sole purpose of helping children pass exams. Many of the new textbooks represent today's superficial world, fashionable, colourful, attractive, but often insubstantial, shy on text and unable to provide enough information for pupils to build up a proper understanding of a topic. Resource banks, the internet, a greater variety of primary and secondary sources will undoubtedly enable us to be more selective in choosing what we need,

although to get any meaning from the morass, children will need to learn how to prioritise and discriminate, analyse and summarise. The store of material is growing by the day through the power of information technology and the desire of schools and parents to be always up-to-date; yet while textbooks still remain at the heart of many of our classrooms, providing structure to subjects and a route map for their pupils, their importance as the definitive and primary source of knowledge in any single subject is fast fading.

<sup>1</sup> *The contemporaneous account of a young British Officer, John Corneille published in The Raj: An Eyewitness Account of the British in India (Hudson ed, 1999) gives a slightly different account and, while recounting the horror, varied both in regards the numbers involved, but most notably in exonerating the Nawab from blame.*

<sup>2</sup> *Howell's did well out of his hero role and his self-promotion worked a treat as he was later appointed Governor of Bengal.*

<sup>3</sup> *Of course, if one reads Noel Barber The Black Hole of Calcutta 1965, the claims represented by such historians as Dalley and Colley are dismissed as 'ridiculous', 'ill-informed' and 'motivated by reasons other than a search for historical accuracy' – which just goes to show that history is often, in its detail, little more than contested knowledge.*

---

## ALWAYS LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE OF LIFE

*"School should be the best party in town"*

*"If people concentrated on the really important things in life, there'd be a shortage of fishing poles."* Doug Larson

*"Your mind will answer most questions if you learn to relax and wait for the answer."* William S. Burroughs

Education can be over-rated as a recreational pastime. In fact there are signs that in its current form it is becoming a dangerous pursuit, exacting an unacceptable toll of all who dine at its table. The recent pantomime unveiling success stories via the morning BBC news on the day GCSE results came out, the scramble for places and all the words written each year about falling standards versus improved results and the failure of a haemorrhaging education system unable to deal with the numbers seeking tertiary education are both bewildering and shocking. The growing tutor industry (and the percentage of young children receiving tutoring in London is a horrifying indictment of the pressure we place on our children in their quest for places) all make one wonder what is going on.

With the huge demand for places at our universities, and schools now much better at teaching students how to pass an exam without deviation, hesitation or repetition, there is a view that perhaps we are not measuring what is most important. With all the grades and marks and data gathered from verbal and non-verbal reasoning tests and the like, we learn little about the character of a child. And so, when we look at separating children by ability we need to do so with the utmost caution, for it is their personalities, their characters that will determine how their lives will play out. Being happy is a much under-rated pursuit. School should be places full of energy and enthusiasm and in any school, we should spend time to make children positive and happy in their work. As well as the regulatory diet, it is vital that children learn the skills that really count: diplomacy, a sense of humour, courtesy, how to communicate and get

on with all people by voice and pen. Children are wonderfully astute and uninhibited until we teach them to be otherwise.

One of my favourite teaching anecdotes shows just how perceptive young children can be.

One day, I was chatting to a Year 3 pupil early in a new school year and asked how his first few days had gone.

“Very well” he said.

“And who is your favourite teacher?”

He thought for a minute then gave the answer,

“I don’t really have one, but if you taught me, it would be you”

What can you teach a boy like that?

---

## CHARITY AND THE TINKLING CYMBAL

*‘Charity should begin at home, but should not stay there’ – Philip Brooks*

*‘A bone to the dog is not charity. Charity is the bone shared with the dog when you are just as hungry as the dog’ – Jack London*

*‘One must be poor to know the luxury of giving’ – George Eliot*

Every day through the mail we are besieged by charities, either at home or abroad, extolling good causes that need our support. As a school, we pride ourselves on our public conscience and respond by doing what we can to raise money for what is a burgeoning number of deserving causes. In the last school year, the school community assisted thirty six different charities raising in excess of £4,500 through a mixture of mufti days, appeals, cake stalls, donations, spellathons, marathons and the like. Surely, then, we can feel satisfied that we are doing our bit?

Quite possibly we are – or at least we do what we can without undergoing personal hardship, sacrifice or inconvenience. In other words we are doing what every affluent society does, giving away surplus money and goods. We seldom, though, give to the point of personal inconvenience or hardship.

Despite all the charitable giving (and the young are very aware and generous in their philanthropy), there is also a danger that children are becoming desensitized by the sheer number of charities that confront them and the feeling of helplessness or fatigue at responding to seemingly endless waves of disasters, diseases and afflictions. For a child, the world must, at times, appear to be a very bleak place.

As schools, it is important that we develop a spirit of charity but it is as important that we recognise the importance of maintaining a sense of balance, so that as well as imbuing children with a culture of giving and a sense of responsibility, they learn to think charitably, even in their own community.

One of the latest status symbols amongst the affluent young is to establish their own charity doing good in some third-world country. It is a commendable initiative and usually evolving out of travel to some remote part of the world visited on a gap year and from seeing the

disparity, the inequality, the poverty that exists. Charity, after all, is easiest managed at a distance. Helping earthquake victims in Haiti, coffee pickers in South America, refugees in Asia or the starving in the Sudan are all crucial, but are they enough? I would argue that to be properly charitable it is essential that the sense of responsibility and compassion, the spirit of charity extends to within our own community as well. It is about engendering the traits of simple kindness and thoughtfulness. It does not necessarily involve the giving of money or things (although the number of people even in Sherborne who spent last Christmas alone is alarming), but a willingness to listen and befriend those in need in our own increasingly soulless and fragmented community, people who have enough to live on, but who crave company and opportunity, people often without hope, stranded in an emotional desert.

Charity is not just about money and aid; charity should be a state of mind. It is a well-known fact that those who have little, give, proportionately, much more than those who have a lot (and who laugh off such a statement by saying ‘that is why we have a lot’). Giving away excess funds is commendable, but charity should involve genuine toil and thought; too often, money raised has come directly from a parent’s purse.

Which brings us to work days, sponsored projects and cake stalls and the like. These, and anything that raises money by dint of effort and which involves some form of commitment (or even a modicum of sacrifice) have to be good.

The hope is with the next generation. They are more community-minded than we have been, more aware, more international in their thinking. We mustn’t allow them to think of charity as just an endless stream of good causes, for there will always be good causes; we need to imbue them with the spirit of charity in their lives, so they will look charitably at those in their own country while looking without, to see what they can do to help others as citizens of the global village.

*‘Charity looks at the need and not at the cause’ – German proverb*

---

## CRUELTY TO CHILDREN

*‘I must be cruel only to be kind. Thus bad begins and worse remains behind.’ – William Shakespeare Hamlet*

*‘I have found the best way to give advice to your children is to find out what they want and then advise them to do it.’ – Harry S Truman*

*‘Don’t handicap your children by making their lives easy.’ – Robert A. Heinlein*

*‘Too often we give children answers to remember rather than problems to solve.’ – Roger Lewin*

Over recent years, there has been a proliferation of social policies on safeguarding and pastoral care. The requirements of ‘Every Child Matters’ and the policies and procedures to protect children through CRB checks on all adults working with children, better monitoring and reporting and liaison between school, social workers and health care, along with the work of such societies as the NSPCC have succeeded in putting children’s safety and well-being to the forefront of our social agenda. It is easy to forget, however, in warning children about ‘stranger, danger’ that the greatest threat to our children lurks within families and communities, not from without. The number of children killed by strangers – around eleven each year – is much

the same figure as thirty years ago, before all the checks and surveillance began. There is an argument that the nature of the campaign of 'stranger danger' has perhaps done more harm than good, shrinking the world our children occupy, making them suspicious of all adults and robbing them of their independence, their physical well-being and initiative when they need to be taught how to deal with situations, rather than hiding from them.

When we think of cruelty, we think first, of physical cruelty and that, sadly, is still too prevalent in our families and communities. But there are other acts of cruelty that are pervasive and affect many more children, causing long-term damage. These are the cruelties of emotional neglect, of unrealistic parental ambition, of abandonment to technology and of indifference.

Of most concern are the cruelties rooted in the desire of parents who try to manage their children in ways that are both unrealistic and harmful. Occasionally, I have thought that while the child sitting in front of me would be deemed well-provided for and 'safe', that he or she was in fact subject to the worst type of upbringing, a suffocating, childhood, peppered by the unrealistic ambitions of parents so controlling that their child has been drained of any fight or personality. I have seen, also, the rebellion that followed into the teenage years and worse, the depressed and cowered young adult, following a career path determined by someone else, a parent, usually, who had chosen how they should spend their life.

Likewise, when parents look at senior schools, I often wonder whether they ask the pertinent questions and use the appropriate yardsticks. I was not surprised when a London parent confided in me recently that they would never send their child to a number of (unspecified) leading London schools because of the number of students who have, or develop whilst there, some form of mental illness or eating disorder. To push children beyond their natural abilities is cruel. We can nearly all be taught to pass a test if we are tutored or practise long enough, but parents need to know that if this goal becomes disproportionate, to the child's innate ability, then there is a cost and that cost is too often played out in our children's health.

There are other families wherein the parents simply don't care because they are so wrapped up in their own lives, so busy with their world and ambitions. They expect their children to be complementary to their world, chattels, friends, but never just children receiving the care and consideration which is their due. Their cruelty is one less obvious, but still harmful, as children grow up not knowing their place, not knowing if they are loved and who never receive either the approbation or approval all children need.

There are those parents who think it their role to examine critically anything on behalf of their children to the extent that their children beg their parents not to come into school to complain about yet another thing that time would naturally resolve.

And there are those children whose nurturing is given over to technology, to computers, televisions, i-pods (and soon, i-pads) and mobile phones, who have everything technical, but live in an emotional desert. They learn to amuse themselves and are happy doing so, but the danger can be that they grow up as dysfunctional and solitary.

We all want our children to be safe, but at the same time they have to learn survival skills and to feel loved and cared for. The different forms of cruelty can be explained away and excused, but they are real and more insidious, more damaging than we care to admit.

## CURRICULUM AT THE CROSSROADS

*'In the past ten years, changes in society mean it's vital to have children who are much more resilient and psychologically strong than before. They need new learning-to-learn skills. But we only measure academic outcomes. Why don't we measure the things that matter. Every other society is talking about these things. Why aren't we?'*

**Alison Wolf** education author and professor of public sector management, King's College, London. (TES, July 11, 2008)

*'The internet is changing the very nature of human memory. Erudition and experience, the store of knowledge built up by an individual over years, is becoming less important than the ability to focus and edit: extracting information from the machine has superseded the ability to recall it unaided.'* **Ben McIntyre** The Times January 28, 2010

*'For two centuries, the school curriculum has been a collection of subjects and its main aim to transmit subject content to students. Other aims, such as the development of competencies – thinking, creativity, communications etc – have been essentially by-products, assumed to emerge from the proper teaching of subjects. As knowledge expanded, extra subjects were added to the curriculum. The National Curriculum attempted to define what students needed to know, an attempt doomed to failure by the impossibility of balancing the claims made for subject coverage against limitations of time and space. But there is no longer any way – if, indeed, there ever was – to define a package of subject matter that will do all this. At the same time people need an increasingly complex range of competencies to manage their lives, and their education should develop these. Something has to give.'*

From 'The Education Agenda for the Next Parliament' 28 March, 2001 – a collaboration between the Campaign for Learning, the Centre for the Study of Comprehensive Schools, the Lifelong Learning Foundation and the Royal Society of Arts.

*'The problem is that the subjects are still sacrosanct. We shouldn't be hidebound by them. Why do we need algebra or geometry? The answers aren't blindingly obvious. At government level, we need a curriculum based on skills, rather than on knowledge'*

John White, Emeritus Professor, Institute of Education, London (TES 11 July, 2008)

Since the National Curriculum was first introduced in 1988, neither its purpose nor content has been subject to a vigorous review. Instead of reflecting changing educational aspirations, the curriculum has kept the country anchored to an education system that is 'monolithic, interconnected and inflexible'.

This claim, made by Alison Wolf in 2008, formed part of the backdrop to the recent primary curriculum review, requesting that it redefine its purpose and significantly modify its content to include the skills required for 'learning to learn'. While arguably the new curriculum represents a change in direction, it is evident that the significant change deemed necessary for the curriculum to keep pace with societal needs and aspirations has not been achieved; as a result, it is likely that more drastic surgery is still urgently required.

This magnitude of change will not be easy to initiate let alone carry through. As we have seen in the lead up to elections, any discussion about changing the curriculum is bound up in political dogma and expediency, more likely to favour the status quo or even a regression. Recently, Michael Gove launched the Conservative education manifesto centred round a revival of traditional subject matter which he argued had served the country so well in the past. In it, he cited the value of learning the kings and queens of England, the times tables, the value of correct spelling and punctuation and being able to recite poetry by heart to replace the child-centred learning evident in our classrooms in which children vote with their feet to study such

subjects as media studies in preference to anything more rigorous. His statement caused considerable comment at the time, reassuring to some, yet ultimately disappointing in its pitch to nostalgia. The fact that it assumed that nothing has changed in the interim, that technology had not altered our landscape, that the body of knowledge has not expanded exponentially, that the tools available to us have not altered the way we should think and deliver education, was backward looking in its advocacy. While unsurprisingly it garnered some considerable support from conservatives and the elderly, largely because it reflected something that they knew as a 'good traditional education' (for it was the same they had experienced), it was, in truth, a pretty poor offering.

The new primary curriculum, released last year for implementation in 2011 starts to move the curriculum forward by identifying six key areas of learning designed to 'capture the essential knowledge, key skills and understanding' that children need, these being: understanding the arts; understanding English, communication and language; historical, geographical and social understanding; mathematical understanding; understanding physical development, health and well-being; and scientific and technological understanding. While light years from the Gove curriculum, even so, it is sobering to think that by the time it comes to be implemented, it may also be out of date.

The education manifestos of the major parties and the current curriculum, of course, only serve as appetisers to the real debate, the seminal issue as to what form our curriculum should take in the future. It is this question that may still well lead to the most drastic overhaul of the curriculum in more than a century, the unravelling of our long-held ideas about what a curriculum should be and the dismantling of its traditional subject-based infrastructure. It is possible, even, that all subjects will be subjugated to a curriculum built around competencies and skills with its focus on teaching pupils how to learn, how to adapt to different systems and patterns, how to learn to access and process information and better utilise technology as the basis for learning in order to make judgements and decisions.

Of course, nothing quite so drastic may happen. Change in national education is historically conservative, reacting to, rather than anticipating, the needs of its constituent society. And it is possible that the new primary curriculum, in spite of its reviews and amendments, will plug the gap even if it, too, is in danger of falling further behind the accelerated changes in technology and aspiration. As the voices for change, dramatic and far-reaching change become more shrill and prevalent and the clamour grows, so we must be prepared to look at what we do, not with an eye looking back to what we've always done, but to what we need to do in order simply to keep up.

---

## DERAILING THE GRAVY TRAIN OF EDUCATIONAL ENHANCEMENT

*'Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go? said Alice.*

*'That depends on where you want to get to,' said the cat.*

*'I don't much care where,' said Alice*

*'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the cat.*

*'So long as I get somewhere,' said Alice.*

*'Oh you're sure to do that,' said the cat, 'if you only keep walking.'* –

**Lewis Carroll** [Alice in Wonderland](#)

*'Change that emanates from teachers lasts until they find a better way' –*

**Roland Barth** [Improving Schools from Within](#)

*'A lesson plan is perfect until the children arrive' –* **Jane Wardrop**

If there are any two things that distinguish education today from fifty years ago, they are the emergence of a vast auxiliary workforce which has shattered the traditional concept of teachers and pupils working in tandem, and an endless stream of businesses, so-called experts and suppliers providing all manner of goods and services to schools.

Over recent years, fuelled by the growing number of school age children and the attempts to lower the teacher-pupil ratios, there are more teachers than ever before. That is understandable and commendable. What has changed out of all recognition, however, has been the introduction of auxiliary help in the classroom. Whereas the number of teachers from 1998-2008 increased by around 10% to 440,000, the number of teaching assistants trebled, from 61,000 to 183,000. The move from class-teaching to more group or 1:1 teaching is a popular one, even if lacking in justification at times. One would expect, for instance, to see some significant improvement as a result of the boom in classroom assistants, but research by the Institute of Education in 2009 found that classroom assistants did not boost pupils' progress although they did help to reduce teachers' stress levels and improve classroom discipline. More worrying, in fact was the finding that primary and secondary pupils supported by teaching assistants (TAs) actually made less progress than those of similar ability, class and gender who do not get such assistance. The plus side was seen to be the fact that students were less distracted and disruptive, leaving teachers free to work with the rest of the class – thereby rectifying, at considerable cost, the undermining of classroom discipline through the championing of pupils' right. Indeed, the study found a 'significant negative effect' of extra help in every year group studied, in English, maths and science and concluded that 'the more support pupils received, the less progress they made.'

The same argument could be leveled at the growth in learning support, especially in independent schools where greater identification of minor as well as moderate and serious problems has led to an explosion in 1:1 work. As well, we have seen a huge increase in administrative work and school bureaucracies, whether in the secretarial or bursarial fields. In those schools which can afford it, extra staff have been employed to deal with human resources, technology, marketing or manage risk, often leaving the number of teachers in the minority.

There is an argument that this has led to an improvement in our schools although, as with technology, throwing money at problems whether in the form of resources or personnel has little value in itself. Teaching assistants should add to the value of what is provided in a classroom other than just by managing disruptive classroom elements. They can be (as with us) very important and pivotal members of staff, adding to the value of what is taught. When they are used, as the study suggests, to lessen distractions and disruptions, then it just illustrates how deleterious the breakdown in classroom discipline has been.

The growth of those involved in monitoring, measuring, assessing and inspecting schools is another by-product of growing demands for compliancy. What is far more worrying and invidious, however, is the growth in the number of parasites that cling to the body of education, offering specialist advice to schools, on anything from how to survive an inspection to preparing health and safety policies. Firms of lawyers have jumped on the bandwagon, and educational law, litigious and advisory, is now very big business indeed. The demand for compliance has led to an endless stream of experts telling us the best way to run our schools, all selling different systems, ideas, resources and the like. There are endless workshops and courses, milking school budgets by charging exorbitant prices, as well as advisory bodies, guest speakers, consultants, legal firms, other so-called experts, companies offering training in preparation for inspections, to help prepare risk registers, publishers peddling more and more books advising schools about how to introduce one curriculum or another or playing on the paranoia of exams. The worst area has been in CPD or continual professional development which is at the heart of teacher appraisal and development and has attracted large numbers of providers who charge outlandish fees for courses that run for a few hours centred around some guru. Some are worthwhile, most, frankly, are not, which is why I implore colleagues to set up their own CPD courses in their districts, where groups of subject heads can gather together and talk about issues pertinent to them. For it is our teachers who are our best resources and the ones we should endeavour to use – and would, if the question of money did not come into play.

Education is changing, in its content, its purpose and its delivery, but it still has two goals at its core, best summarised by John Adams who wrote *'There are two educations. One should teach us how to make a living and the other how to live.'* In our headlong rush towards individualised teaching, meeting targets, working towards employment and accepting a philosophy of unremitting innovation, we need to be very careful to keep a clear focus on where we are going and what we are doing for our children and not sell out to those who profess to be offering us a path to enlightenment.

---

## DIGGING FOR GOLD

*'When I was a little boy they called me a liar, but now I am grown up they call me a writer.'* – Isaac Bashevis Singer

*'Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand while imagination embraces the entire world and all there ever will be to know and understand.'* – Albert Einstein

*'Thank goodness I was never sent to school; it would have rubbed off some of the originality.'* – Beatrix Potter

*'I shut my eyes in order to see.'* – Paul Gauguin

In my early years of teaching creative writing, I paid a good deal of attention to teaching the tools of the trade, stressing in particular, the importance of grammar, spelling and punctuation. My premise was that writing was a craft and to communicate well, to make use of imagination, required accuracy and precision to ensure that what was intended to be communicated, was done so accurately.

That was as it should be, for imparting the means of writing necessarily precedes the creative act – to a degree. And yet when one of my more sanguine year 5 pupils, one for whom accuracy was a half-cousin at best started a story with the sentence 'The sun came over the horizon like a chicken breaking out of its egg', I was immediately seduced in giving a mark quite disproportionate to the rest of the story, disregarding in the process its rite of passage, its denouement, the inaccuracies of syntax or the drunken, spidery script. One simile was enough to realise that the boy was capable of originality, able to imagine a picture and translate it into words, words transported beyond the meaning of a dictionary. The fact that I remember his sentence, some thirty years on, tells me that the ability to think creatively, to use one's imagination like a kite, is somehow more memorable than the construct and a reminder that when we give children the tools to think and write, we must also give them the space and encouragement to do so.

We are so busy instilling knowledge and skills into children that we sometimes don't find time for drawing on the original storehouse that all children possess to some degree or another, that inner repository of ideas and thoughts. With our obsession of measuring and doling out education in careful measured spoonfuls, drawing children back to what we think is relevant and not allowing the tangential, the peripheral, we unwittingly enforce a dangerous conformity at the very time when universities and employers are crying out for original thought, for initiative, for imagination. In so doing, we are in danger of snuffing out the part that is most important, that which lies within.

Allowing for a child's imagination to be watered and refreshed as a unique asset does not reduce the need for tools – quite the opposite, for they will learn in time to seek out their own. And there is an important role for us also, in nurturing and nourishing creative thought. For a start we should provide time and space. We should ask more questions, open-ended questions without pre-determined answers. We should be patient, letting the child develop at his or her own pace. Plato, no less, argued that *'knowledge which is acquired under compulsion has no hold on the mind. Therefore do not use compulsion, but let early education be rather a source of amusement. This will better enable you to find out the natural bent of the child.'*

For it is the natural bent of the child that too many schools are determined to straighten by too many exams designed to seek out prescribed answers. How sad that our examination system cannot measure what is most important of all, the ability to think and produce more than stock answers, endlessly rehearsed.

It is right that we demand accuracy and clarity in writing, for children need discipline and good foundations before they can fly. But we must, also, allow children flights of fancy before their childish wings drop off, and their imaginations curl up and die in the straightjacket of an education system pledged to mediocrity and conformity.

*'Sometimes questions are more important than answers.'* – Nancy Willard

*You see things; and you say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say, 'Why not?'* – George Bernard Shaw

*'The work will wait while you show the child the rainbow, but the rainbow won't wait while you do the work.'* – Erik Erikson

## DO AS I DO: MODELLING FOR LIFE

*'Careful of things you say  
Children may listen  
Careful of what you do,  
Children may see and learn*

*Into The Woods* by **Stephen Sondheim**

*'Children need more models than critics.'*

*'What a teacher is, is more important than what he teaches.'* – **Karl Menninger**

Children are very perceptive. Often, what they might not be able to understand intellectually, they sense intuitively. Up until a certain age, they seem to have an in-built moral compass and appear to know instinctively what is right and wrong (although they are not always inclined to the former). They tend, also, to learn best by example, through what they see and experience, rather than by what they're told to see, or are encouraged to see. They are inclined to believe, also, that adults have a similar moral code which is why the revelations of wrongdoings and abuses so recently demonstrated by our politicians are so very disappointing. At times, as adolescents, they may become contrary, on the one hand appearing very moralistic, judgmental even, especially where adults are concerned and yet seemingly prepared to push the boundaries in their own behaviour, ignoring the role models presented to them by family and friends (although, in reality, seldom drifting too far from their genetic shoreline). By their teens, they may be better able to make their own decisions and intellectualize the concepts of right and wrong even while disregarding them, but even in those tremulous years, they still learn largely by imitation, often now of their peer group, by seeing, rather than by being told.

It is patently obvious that children need strong and reliable role models as they grow up for they learn by mirroring the words, attitudes and actions of their parents and others who have influence in their lives. In order to educate our children in those preferred attitudes and values, we must therefore reflect those same attitudes and values in ourselves and give them voice. We must be aware of what we say in front of children and the legitimacy we give to behaviours and actions through our own words and example. If adults talk disrespectfully of other adults, including children's teachers, they cannot then expect their children to act and feel differently. If adults are fair and measured in what they say about others, that also will show through.

In this, schools and parents need to be consistent and work together for if both are not singing from the same song sheet, then children never learn what is acceptable and what is not. This can be true of simple courtesies, like opening doors, writing thank you notes and being punctual, or some of the bigger things, like respecting the law and other cultures and societies. Children dislike hypocrisy and don't like being told one thing and shown another. They revel in surety, in knowing where they stand. If they are untidy they don't want to be told so by someone who is equally untidy. If their use of language is inappropriate or they are lazy, then they need to see the correct behaviours and standards in the actions of those who correct them as well as learning the words. They respect strength and don't always appreciate being defended when they know they're in the wrong – as they occasionally are. Children's honesty is usually transparent and often their worries and concerns mirror the opinions and views of their parents or guardians or, indeed, their teachers. And so the responsibility is implicit in all of us, to ensure that the way we present to our children is consistent with the values we want them to acquire and acknowledge for words alone will not suffice.

Twice in my time here I have been compelled to ask a parent to leave our grounds for being abusive towards a visiting referee in a way that was totally unacceptable. How will that father (for it is always a father) ever be able to inculcate into his eleven year old son any semblance of sporting etiquette, or even just how to accept a decision? The answer is he probably won't (and worse still, he probably won't even try) and the child, embarrassed as he may be, will be the worse for it.

Children need models. They need to learn to respect their teachers, their government, their police force, their town council, but will do so only if the models we given them are worthy of respect. That is why leading sportsmen, like Rafael Nadal, Roger Federer and Tiger Woods\* are a power for good in the example they set to others while other sportsmen (and there are enough obvious examples without giving them space) are the opposite. Children are good on imitation, not always consciously so, and if we want them to imitate the right actions and values, and grow up as we would want them to be, we need to be the people they aspire to – for if not, they will grow up reflecting the values and behaviours we most dislike in ourselves.

\*This was written prior to his fall from grace illustrating the gap between perception and reality.

---

## GROWING UP TOO FAST

*'Young people are growing up too quickly.'* – **Dame Jacqueline Wilson**

*'More than half of parents believe childhood is now over by 11.'* –  
Result of a survey carried out for Random House

*'A boy becomes an adult three years before his parents think he does, and about two years after he thinks he does.'* – **Lewis B. Hershey**, *News summaries*, December 1951

*'I was wrong to grow older. Pity. I was so happy as a child.'*  
**Antoine de Saint-Exupéry**, *Flight to Arras*, 1942

One of my first impressions on coming to England for the first time in 1985 with a young family was just how sophisticated all the young children were. This was particularly so with girls who appeared more akin to adolescents in their fashion sense, their conversation, their interest in music and what they read. It wasn't just their self-confidence that made them stand out, their poise and interest in clothes, in make-up, in how they looked that was so unnerving and made my children look rather like naïve and innocent country bumpkins (which they probably were!). It was their whole manner that previously in my rather sheltered world had strictly been the domain of teenagers. And in many ways I admired the way these prep school children could relate to adults and the fact that they were so much more aware and knowledgeable, more like young adults, than their counterparts back home.

On reflection, though, I wondered about what had been lost, what had been jettisoned to allow them to be propelled through childhood at such a pace. I wondered if the loss of naivety and childish innocence was, in fact, such a good thing if somehow we were doing them a disservice by allowing them to move so quickly through these precious years. It is, of course, difficult to hold back changes in attitudes and behaviour, and that imposing censorship to

counter the laxity of values and morality in society is a temporary measure at best. As well, I could see that it was often the parents who aided and abetted children in their desire to be teenagers whilst still in single figures, parents that bought the clothes and make-up, who acquiesced before their children in pocket money, in bedtimes, in dress and encouraged the children to dip their toes prematurely into the waters of adolescence.

A recent survey carried out by ICM for the publishers of Dame Jacqueline Wilson, suggested that the majority of parents felt that childhood finished at eleven. It is a frightening thought. There is no doubt that children will try to push boundaries, endlessly negotiate, go on strike if necessary, sulk, rebel and hate you if you don't allow them to walk all over you, but that is exactly what parenthood is about, providing boundaries, setting the rules, managing the angst. Dame Jacqueline said that it was good that parents wanted the best for their children but it was also important to remember that youngsters still needed loving guidance and something to bounce off.

These days, more than ever before, childhood is under threat by that most schizophrenic of house guests, the internet. While it provides entertainment, information and immediate communication, it is socially inhibiting and brings an adult world into our homes whether we welcome it or not. In his book *'The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast, Too Soon'*, first published in 1981, David Elkind writes of the enormous pressure children find themselves under to act, dress and copy adult role models and stereotypes and the considerable emotional, intellectual and social cost. Not surprisingly, the 3rd edition published recently has new villains, most linked with techno toys, but his warnings have gone unheeded. Much of the blame, is attributable to the pace of life and the time parents spend indulging their children, but also the example we set children. The stability that children once enjoyed within families has been turned on its head by the explosions in divorce, drug abuse, criminal behaviour, imprisonment, and instability amongst their parents. The unpalatable facts are that over the past thirty years, among adults aged 30-60 (the ones parenting children and teenagers), divorce rates have doubled, drug abuse has risen 400%, arrests for theft have doubled and imprisonments have risen 300% thrusting the adult world and all its problems onto our children.

A recent battlefield has been that of sex education, acted out through the Children, Schools and Families Bill which sought to introduce compulsory sex education from the age of seven. The bill aroused a good deal of opposition from leaders in the community who felt that it would further erode moral standards and encourage sexual experimentation. Earlier this year, in a letter to *The Sunday Telegraph*, 640 signatories, including Catholic bishops, parish priests, university professors, councillors and doctors called for the dropping of legislation that would mean children as young as seven are taught about sex and relationships. That they were successful was little more than a pyrrhic victory and the decision received the inevitable backlash from the progressives who described it as a 'disgraceful betrayal of the next generation', but I admired their stand and, like them, question whether giving too much information to children too early is a good thing, that by so doing, we are placing more responsibility on children to make moral and behavioural decisions by saying 'grow up' – albeit, prematurely. Where there were once rules, expectations, codes of conduct within families and schools, it appears that children have to wrestle with often weighty decisions and process adult information on their own. It was not so long ago that I looked at a PSHE programme in a senior school: drug education, alcohol awareness, smoking campaigns replete with diseased lungs, visiting a crematorium, studying mental illness, learning about eating disorders, visiting a courtroom, teenage suicide and so on. I remember thinking to myself at the time what a grim place the world must seem to our children and young adults. Why could we not show them

something with a little joy in it, why this obsession with the dark and harrowing side of life with all its pitfalls, rather than focusing on celebration and the promise that life holds.

As parents, we can do something to help preserve childhood. We can spend time with our children and determine how they spend their days by monitoring technology; we can make house rules based on our own judgement, not on some quoted precedent about what other parents allow; we can share with our children in the simple things: a walk, a picnic, family games; holidays that have some collective element. We can dissuade them wearing jewellery or applying make-up until they are a little older and can monitor the magazines they read. Most important, we can talk to them about the joy of living, of giving, of sharing, or being children. Childhood is a wonderful stage of life and we should be in no hurry to encourage our children to grow up. They will do that soon enough.

---

## HAPPY NEW YEAR: CREATING A PERSONA FOR 2010

*'All media exist to invest our lives with artificial perceptions and arbitrary values.'* –

**Malcolm McLuhan**

*'The media tend to report rumours, speculations, and projections as facts... How does the media do this? By quoting some 'expert'... you can always find some expert who will say something hopelessly hopeless about anything.'* – **Peter McWilliams**

*'I suppose I have a highly developed capacity for self-delusion, so it's no problem for me to believe that I'm somebody else.'* – **Daniel Day-Lewis**

Have you noticed how you can justify almost anything these days if you read the newspapers long and closely enough? While once upon a time the concepts of right and wrong, good and bad, positive and negative were evident in our choices and behaviours, all such clarity has been smudged into a mish-mash of greys from which we can select the shade that suits us best. The recent article linking the increase in diabetes to the decline in numbers smoking, for instance, will be swooped upon by die-hard smokers, keen to justify their unhealthy appetite; those who like to liberally sprinkle salt on their food can quote research about the very real dangers of sodium deficiency; those who are addicted to coffee or beer or red wine can rest easy in the idea that their predilections can ward off strokes or the onset of prostrate cancer or the like. For everything and everyone there is a palatable answer, some slip of evidence to justify who we are and how we choose to live our lives.

The same logic applies, of course, to children who can now seek out the snippet of obscure research that serves their best interests. A recent study conducted by the North-Western University in Chicago concluded that antibacterial soap and obsessive cleanliness in childhood can damage the immune system later in life whereas exposure to infectious diseases may provide protection against heart disease and a whole range of diseases – an argument that would appeal to many children reluctant to bathe.

The corollary of that, however, is that for parents, recent news items have even greater utilitarian value. A study by Cardiff University, for instance, established that boys who are naughty are more likely to die before they are fifty. It established that children who played truant or regularly got into trouble at work were six times more likely to die or be disabled by

the time they were 48 years, with their deaths and disabilities not caused by drugs or violence, but by heart disease, cancer and other common illnesses. How tempting is that for inclusion in a parent reprimand, bed-time chat or school assembly? Or the article about how eating sweets in childhood can lead to a lifetime of crime, citing the evidence that men who had eaten confectionery daily at age 10 years were significantly (over 27%) more likely to be violent at the age of 34 years. What a wonderful justification for the banning of trips to the Corner Shop? Or even more sinister, the report that children who were smacked until the age of six were likely as teenagers to perform better at school and were 'more likely to carry out volunteer work and want to go to university than their peers who had never been physically disciplined'. Children, beware the literal reader.

Of course, much of what is written is tosh, but believing, as I do, that a lack of certainty is one of the most disquietening aspects of life in the 21st century, one does wish that money spent on research concentrated on more important causes, such as whether reading national newspapers is injurious to one's health and should be avoided at all costs.

*\* All the examples used appeared in newspapers during the recent holiday.*

---

## HEY MR POLITICIAN, LEAVE OUR SCHOOLS ALONE

*'We urge that schooling should be depoliticised. What happens in classrooms should no longer be micromanaged by government – irrespective of who wins the election.'* – Letter to The Guardian signed by fifteen eminent professors, 31 March, 2010

*'Education, Education, Education.'* – **Tony Blair's** election mantra

*'Education is too important to be left solely to educators.'* – **Francis Keppel**, U.S. Commissioner of Education (1962-1965)

The recent letter to [The Guardian](#) cited above accurately reflects the concerns of many academics and teachers that education is set, once again, to become one of the major battlegrounds for the forthcoming elections. It is an admirable and timely plea, one shared by the vast majority of those involved in our schools and universities, but a forlorn one, alas. Education has long been used in this cavalier way, as a plaything of politicians, a point-scoring pursuit, fair game for laying the inevitable platter of distortions and inducements, and to expect anything else will inevitably result in disappointment. Whether it is more of the same, by a government whose lack of constancy and direction has dogged education (despite an increase in per pupil funding of over 55% and the employment of an extra 35,000 teachers during their term in Office) or the sort of sentimental journey into the past as advocated by the opposition, the spirit sags at the thought of several weeks more of outpourings on the mantra of education, education, education. Hence the plea for an amnesty before hostilities commence in earnest, uttered as ever, on behalf of the school children who become the unwitting victims of such machinations.

In recent years, schools have increasingly been asked to take on the burdens of a failing society and to deliver all-round care. That part of education which used to be provided by parents, what we now know as the personal, social and health education has been thrust onto schools so that PSHE becomes the first port of call for inspectors. And while the accepted definition of

the word education has widened dramatically, its core, the acquisition of knowledge and skills has been subverted to fit some narrow measure that tells us little more than how well-drilled children have been to pass a rather limited set of tests. The definition 'to lead out' has been replaced by another, meaning, in essence, 'to drag up and push through', and schools, and children, are the poorer for it. At the same time, parents, having abrogated some of their age-old responsibilities are now, rather ironically, being encouraged to call schools to account for their own failings and those of the state, as government devolves more responsibility to parents, but in a way that is no longer healthy or desirable. Bureaucracy is rampant (in the last five years, for instance, the number of managers of higher education alone has increased by over a third), vast sums have been wasted, especially in technology while the world our children inhabit has shrunk from the playgrounds of the neighbourhood to the screen of a mobile phone. No wonder that state schools cannot find head teachers anymore; no wonder parents are fighting back against the post-code lottery for places and the failure of our system to cater for all children, equally; no wonder we have a proliferation of qualifications as schools search for credibility and a meaningful standard; no wonder the profession is so disillusioned and frustrated at not being able to teach because of constant interference and the demands for compliance in all things and the huge volumes of paperwork necessary to deliver government targets. No wonder we have social meltdown.

This is not to suggest that another party will do any better; indeed, it is likely that the need to meddle is so engrained in all political parties that it is best to treat all campaign pronouncements and promises with a good dash of caution.

Nor is there much evidence we can look forward to a truce. We have had so many unwelcome initiatives from government (and counter-punching from the opposition) that it would be naïve of us to hope for better in the forthcoming campaign. Sadly, none of the major parties show any sign of passing responsibility for education to those trained for the task. An agreement by the three major parties not to use education as a weapon would be welcome, of course, but we all know it isn't going to happen. Education has been a central part of the political landscape for a succession of elections over the past forty years, since the dismantling of grammar schools. As we read their manifestos, however, I would suggest that the statement (below) by fifteen professors would be a good rule of thumb to measure their policies by as anything else.

*Parliament should (as now) fund national education and control its overall systems and structures. On these national issues, parties may differ and parliamentary debate should precede government action. Government should engender respect for teachers and trust their commitment and professional competence.*

*Schools and colleges should shape classroom practice. What is taught (the curriculum), how it is taught (pedagogy), whether it is learned successfully (assessment) and how effectively each school tackles its tasks (evaluation) should properly be the local province of teachers, working collegially and supported by school governors, neighbouring schools, parents, a constructive inspectorate and, nationally, educational researchers.*

All eminent common-sense – which is one subject that the politicians haven't thought to include on a national curriculum although I would suggest, on behalf of the Pedants' Pedagogy Party, it could be a winner!

*\* For those who like another viewpoint.*

## I CANNOT TELL A LIE

*Always do right - this will gratify some and astonish the rest.*  
Mark Twain

*If you tell the truth you don't have to remember anything*  
Mark Twain

*Pretty much all the honest truth telling there is in the world is done by children.*  
Thomas Wendell Holmes

A few years ago, I took our Year 2 children for a few sessions of rugby to introduce them to the intricacies of the game. It was great fun although it demanded more flexibility and imagination than coaching the 1<sup>st</sup> XV ever had. The first realisation as to how new the game was occurred when the first boy crossed the try-line and, instead of stopping, kept running for another fifty yards or more before the chasing pack managed to persuade him to come back.

After one practice as they were taking off their size 2 boots, I complimented them on their play. "You were fantastic, guys, fantastic. When you grow up and play for England, I hope you'll remember where you started to play rugby and will send me some tickets to see you play at Twickenham."

The children looked at me, eyes open wide until the silence was broken by one of them, no doubt saying what they were all thinking.

"But you'll be dead by then, Sir."

Children's honesty is refreshing. They are likely to just open their mouths and say exactly what they think and their frank and open answers and observations are one of the most engaging things about them. As they grow older, and learn to be more circumspect, they become versed in euphemism and in learning what is appropriate and not appropriate, but even as they do so, they remain aware of the distinction between honesty and lying as black and white. That is not to say that children don't exaggerate or tell fibs – of course they do – but perhaps they are more aware they are doing so and are less inclined to use the many shades of grey. Their conversation, as a rule, is more direct, less evasive, less managed than that of adults, knowing as they do that half a lie is still a lie. At times they will slip into evasion and telling untruths (another adult euphemism!) and a small number will become habitual liars, forever blurring the realm of the imagination with reality. Children are not good, for instance, at accepting things are their fault if they can persuade parents that someone else is to blame, but in that they are like children everywhere and always. The fact they say what they feel directly and do not hedge around the truth by telling different versions to different audiences, is a breathe of fresh air in a world where conversation is too often lost in the mist.

Incidentally, I did have better luck with another visit to the Pre-Prep when a little boy looked up at me asked me, "Mr Tait, are you God?"

While disabusing him of the very idea, I did think the hint of immortality was certainly preferable to being reminded of one's mortality as my rugby team had so successfully done earlier.

## IF I ONLY HAD TIME (P.S. YOU HAVE)

*'Time is the coin of your life. It is the only coin you have, and only you can determine how it will be spent. Be careful lest you let other people spend it for you.'* – Carl Sandburg

*'The bad news is time flies. The good news is you're the pilot.'* – Michael Althsuler

One of the trademarks of a prep school education has traditionally been rooted in the idea that children should be kept busy and organised at all times. This is based, in part, on the premise that the devil finds work for idle hands but also because it is felt necessary to fill every hour with sixty meaningful minutes to give value for money and to provide a mouth-watering CV by the time the child is ready to move on. It is not a philosophy I subscribe to. Learning to use time properly (and finding time leftover for discretionary use) is one of the most important lessons of growing up.

It is staggering how often in the course of my daily life I am told that there is not enough time for something to be done or that, indeed, it (whatever it is) cannot be done. Usually it is nonsense when all that is needed is for more effort to be made or better use made of the man-hours available. Something that needs to be done in a week, therefore, rather than a fortnight can be achieved with ease if the effort is doubled, if a little 'can do' philosophy is employed. Most people can recall the outbreak of SARs in 2003 and the response of the Chinese government which was to build a 1,000 bed hospital in a week. Admittedly, using their considerable powers of coercion, they did deflect 4,000 construction workers from other building sites for the purpose, but they achieved what cynics the West said was impossible. Rather an extreme example, perhaps, but to get a job done, commitments may need to be reprioritised and time and resources redeployed. Usually, though, it is a state of mind that is the fault in making the possible, impossible.

I am a great believer in the elasticity of time, the idea that time stretches and contracts depending on how effectively we use it. When I am asked if a coach (for example) can have an extra sports practice, I am inclined to ask if the time they already have is well-used, ie. is everyone punctual, do they know what they are doing when they get there and are they actively involved in every minute of each practice? The same in class: I would much sooner the pupils have well-planned and stimulating lessons and are completely focused rather than a tired and flabby diet of extra lessons and meaningless preps.

The most efficient student I ever met was a head boy at my previous school, Wanganui Collegiate, who was so busy with his extra-curricular pursuits and other responsibilities, he seldom had time for any work out of class. He managed to survive (and win a place at Cambridge University) by concentrating for every minute of every lesson. While others ambled through lessons and tried to catch up later, he didn't need to, for his concentration on the task in hand was such that he had time left over.

I feel that one of the most important responsibilities of a prep school is to teach children how to use time better, by helping with organisation, teaching such skills as target-setting, prioritising, improving concentration or even such specific skills as speed-reading. An even more important responsibility, however, is to give children free time, time that is sacrosanct from extra practices or meetings, when children can learn to socialise and amuse themselves, time that is their own to spend as they choose. Some will waste it, perhaps, but others will learn how to use it for their own benefit, whether it be building a friendship, cloud watching or improving a skill. By learning how to spend their minutes and hours, the children will gradually learn to take responsibility for the most important finite resource in their lives: time.

*'If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!'*  
Rudyard Kipling

Vs

*What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare  
No time to stand beneath the boughs  
And stare as long as sheep and cows.*  
W H Davies

---

## INTO THE WEST

Recently I gave a talk in London on the unrealistic pressures being placed on children competing for school places, especially in the south-east of England. As an example I used the horror story of a London couple, both Oxbridge graduates, who employed a tutor at £30 an hour for their three year old in order to secure a place at one of the city's prestigious and hugely over-subscribed nurseries, finishing by asking the obvious question of how could such seemingly intelligent people be so silly?

At this point a parent put up a hand in the audience and asked what she should do then to ensure her daughter got into a good school and avoid this unseemly pressure. Put on the spot, I could not think of anything to say other than 'leave London, pack up your family, get on a train and escape'. I know it was not a particularly helpful answer, but it was all I could think of that made any sense at all.

With the increased pressure for places at the better schools, especially around London, the south-west is appealing more and more to families as an attractive place to bring up children. Dorset is one of the few counties without a motorway and yet is only two hours from London by rail. The resonance of the pastoral idyll evoked by Thomas Hardy, the Jurassic coast and the abundance of good schools is often compelling.

In recent years, more and more families have engineered their escape determined to provide a lifestyle for their children so they can enjoy school and childhood without being constantly assessed for the next stage of their education. Inevitably, some of the baggage of past schools travels with them, but it soon wears off as families jettison the London experience for fresh air, space and a more holistic approach to education.

Naturally, in moving to the south-west, families do their homework in advance, often deciding on the school before buying a house. In doing so, they also need to determine what they want for their children. There are certain rules of thumb that have a universal currency, but the following checklist may be relevant for those parents who want to make sure that they are going to change more than their environment.

1. When you choose a school for your child, make sure it is the school that best suits them, not you.
2. Don't think that your child is made better or happier simply by doing more – let them manage and enjoy free time and learn independence.
3. Children will not progress as you would want or expect. There will be times when they will lie fallow and little will appear to be happen. And that is no bad thing. Relax!
4. Look for schools that give children space, that not only say they cherish childhood, but champion it.
5. Don't worry if your children don't fly in their early years as long as they are working and learning to learn – education is a journey, not a destination.

6. Be a parent and a support, but not an unstinting advocate. Let children learn to make their own way in the world.
7. Support their schools and become part of the local community.
8. Don't buy them the world. Give them the tools to make their own world.
9. Let them fall over, graze their knees and get up again. If something isn't fair (as inevitably sometimes it won't be) tell them that is one of life's important lessons.
10. Look for schools that allow children to make mistakes – plenty of them – and then gently sends them off in the right direction.

Dorset Magazine, 2009

---

## IT'S A DOG'S LIFE

*'The dog was created specially for children. He is the god of frolic.'* – **Henry Ward Beecher**

*'The more I see of man, the more I like dogs.'* – **Mme. de Staël**

*'I loathe people who keep dogs. They are cowards who haven't got the guts to bite people themselves.'* – **August Strindberg**

The recent news that a school in Devon has been ordered to write a risk assessment on the headmistress's elderly dog – an 11 year old West Highland terrier – is another example of how topsy-turvy the world has become. The days in which having a dog about a school or in a boarding house for the benefit of children has been replaced by a mentality that sees all dogs as potentially rabid creatures, spreaders of infection, full of pent-up hostility and ready to bite some small child's hand off. This paranoia, admittedly, has been aided and abetted by the proliferation of dangerous breeds which are best avoided wherever possible, but the extent to which such dogma has permeated society defies logic and is an embarrassment to commonsense.

From the outset I should put my cards on the table. I have always found the use of dogs as ornaments and playthings rather distasteful and demeaning – after all, why shouldn't they earn their keep like the rest of us? A dog that comes home after a day rounding up sheep, helping a blind man across a street or pulling a sleigh deserves our respect and admiration; one that doubles as an ornament or who merely occupies the best seat in front of the television, does not. That was until Ella, our rather lovely lurcher, joined the family. Now, I too have been seduced into thinking that being coy and beautiful is enough, that it is right and proper that a dog should exist in perennial retirement without having to work out her pension. I have looked on with envy as she is indulged and showered with affection and is taken out for walks in weather made for frogs. I have admired her sloth, her ability to attract food and attention, to never do wrong. There is much to learn from observation although goodness knows what she thinks of us all.

Ella comes from a long canine tradition at The Prep. Looking back at early photos of the school, one cannot help but notice the pride of place occupied by her canine forebears. School photos of The Prep under Littleton Powys were seldom without a dog, usually prominently seated in the staff row while a school photo taken in the 1920s when Fred Lindsay was headmaster boasted no fewer than three dogs – a Heinz 57, a hound and a springer spaniel – each cradled in the arms of various staff and family, surrounded by a rather less-favoured and cheerful looking coterie of pupils. Dogs and schools, especially dogs and children, represent a

partnership that has existed since schools began, one trusts to the mutual benefit of both species. For when a child is being chastised for being bone-idle or for wolfing down one's food, where better to go for sympathy and a kind and forgiving paw than to a dog practised in the art of giving unconditional comfort and affection?

*Q'ui me amat, amet et canem meum.* ('Love me, love my dog.') – **St. Bernard**, A.D. 1150, 'Sermo Primus'

*'A dog is one of the remaining reasons why some people can be persuaded to go for a walk.'* – **O.A. Battista**

*'Our dog chases people on a bike. We've had to take it off him.'* – **Winston Churchill**

(February 2010)

---

## LOST PROPERTY

*"I sure feel sorry for the kids of today"*

*'Yeah, what will they be able to tell their kids they 'ad to do without.'* – **Flo and Andy Capp**

*"Let parents bequeath to their children not riches, but the spirit of reverence"* – **Plato**

*"If you want to see what your children can do, you must stop giving them things."* – **Norman Douglas**

It is a frightening indictment of our consumable society that we have so much more to lose than any previous generation. We are weighed down by things, endlessly accumulated, enough to keep a raft of charity shops open, even in Sherborne. We collect endlessly and dispose slowly, leading to bulging houses, stuffed wardrobes and overflowing bedrooms. Somehow, we have interpreted loving our children as meaning giving them everything they ask for and a little more besides. Nowhere is this more evident than in a school, where everyone has so much more than ever before. Where once a team-bag would suffice for a cricket team, boys now have their own bags, replete with new bats, pads and other paraphernalia. Where once they had a simple wardrobe, it is now littered with labels, with auxiliaries, with extras. Even to talk to each other across a room, they now use technology, with the mobile phone a must-have item for most children (the average age for getting a mobile phone having recently fallen to eight years). I-Pods, lap-tops, computer games, skateboards, clothes, jewellery are all on the list of favourite things that our children like although the list is almost endless.

Four months ago, it was announced that the average cost of raising a child from birth to 21 years in some areas had risen to over £200,000 or more than £800 per month. It is terrifying and probably not something that you would think or even wish to contemplate on the arrival of a new baby, but there are savings to be made by teaching children to look after what they have and not always be expecting more. Playing with cardboard boxes has never failed to amuse children; other countries learn to play cricket with sparse resources; building children's imaginations takes time and effort, but is usually without cost and yet of immense value. Which brings us to the related problem of looking after their things, something children down the ages have not been very good at. As a generation, they have so much and yet so little idea of the value of what they have, hold and occasionally lose. It is the age of credit, of easy come, easy go and we need to work hard to ensure children look after what they have. Shoes, clothes,

sports equipment, books, toys seem to accumulate, be abandoned, lost or misplaced. One wonders in surveying children's lockers whether they can cope with such excesses. I doubt it. Too much is seen as expendable, transient, without intrinsic value, but first and foremost it is the sheer volume of things that children have that blinds them to the value of things and makes them less careful with their property than they would otherwise be. In this, they are like us, consumers living in an age of excess.

*"In bringing up children, spend on them half as much money and twice as much time"* – **Harold S Hulbert**

---

## LOVING OUR CHILDREN

*'Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth.'*

*'The easiest way to make it hard for your children is to make it easy for them.'*

I am worried about what is happening to our children. I am worried about the fact that they are loved and yet seem, curiously, unloved. I am worried about the nature of the love we give them, a love that binds and blinds, making them more dependent and less certain.

Somehow, at some time, I feel, we have blurred the definition of love and the result is a word that has become, in some contexts, mean and insular. The bandying of the words 'unconditional love' make me feel squeamish whenever I hear them. I read of / hear of parents who see love as doing everything in their power to help one's child have a smooth passage through life, including, if necessary, re-packaging their children's personalities to fit their own aspirations and trampling on those of others. The lack of objectivity, of empathy and kindness, the absence of any societal esprit de corps and the push, push of individualism are both horrifying and Orwellian. One cannot help, but feel, that we should reflect more on what we say to, and do for, our children, step back to look at the impact and ask ourselves 'how do we want our children to grow up?'

We read in the paper, almost every day now, about how life-transforming the arrival of a baby is and how celebrities (but not just celebrities), after wallowing in the excesses of a childless life, write of having their lives turned upside down by the arrival of a baby who has become not only the focus of attention, which is understandable, but increasingly the axis about whom all things revolve, something to work and fight for, a justification for the rest of one's life, a cause to champion in a competitive world with whatever weapons are necessary. When it comes to their own children, we increasingly find rational people acting irrationally.

I am not exaggerating. Unconditional love is one thing, but unconditional advocacy, unconditional support and exclusive love are quite another and are capable of doing great harm. In many instances, our children are being smothered in the name of love. They are being burnt up in the fires of parental ambition. They are being told they are above the law, that their rights are inviolate. They are being defended in wrongdoing, pandered to and promoted shamelessly in error and taught how to manipulate, to twist the truth, to avoid commitment, to hide behind adults, who should know better than to let them. It is a hidden neglect, an abuse of person more damaging in some instances than a lack of nourishment. Great harm is being done to some children by providing them with elastic boundaries and failing to see that

love is in the letting go and loving them for who they are and not for what they want them to be. Yes, happy may seem the child whose every word is believed, whose every action is defended – but only for a while. Then they turn and you can see them crying out for something to rebel against, some way to flex their muscles other than a wall that crumples at every touch. That, or you will find them sharing your home with you when they are forty because that is the only place they feel comfortable.

Love is not giving in. Children do not necessarily tell lies, but they usually (like all of us) tell the bits of truth that suit them. They are particularly selective with parents and will be more so as they enter adolescence. How few children now accept correction when they have done something wrong without trying to blame someone or something else – and no wonder when the cavalry are poised, ready to come to their aid. If children are continually supported, they will never learn independence and responsibility. Loving our children is hard, for love, parental love must be unselfish and truthful, patient and kind. And in the end, it must be a love that liberates and allows for the exercise of free will with all that that implies.

---

## MAKING SILK PURSES FROM SILK THREAD

Preparatory schools have long assumed their brief to be the preparation of pupils for their chosen senior schools. Most prep school parents, likewise, have long seen the rationale of prep schools as a means to an end, although naturally expecting them to offer a full and varied education on the way. Even the debate about Common Entrance or scholarship inevitably returns to the issue of what it is that senior schools require to be taught in order to assist the process of transfer and implicitly to prepare pupils for GCSE. All that prep schools do over several years of education, seems to be steered towards this one, often very unsatisfactory end point of preparing children for transfer. The cost, both in educational and personal terms, is considerable, creating unnecessary pressure on pupils by compelling schools to teach to the test (as the very significant sales of past papers would testify), and to follow a procedure, that is in many ways redundant and irrelevant.

What is of concern is that these assumptions and definitions are too readily embraced by the prep school sector, whose abrogation of responsibility for what is taught in their schools implies that it is all too willing to hand over responsibility for a large part of the education of their pupils, and implicitly the thinking about their education, to others. Prep schools, in public forums or in matters of transfer, appear happy to accede to the requests of public schools who may not know very much about the stages of development and educational needs of young children in setting papers (and nor should they for that is properly our domain) but champion their own interests, quite naturally if prep schools do not voice any views or ideas of their own.

The fault clearly is not theirs – it is ours. Individually, we may all be doing wonderful things in our schools (and it is hard to fault the dedication and enterprise of individual prep schools), but collectively, we are almost anonymous. As a sector, we have provided very few initiatives of any significance; we have remained too inward looking, minding our own business, running our own parallel world of tournaments, professional development courses, art exhibitions and music courses; we have not initiated or led curriculum reform and sadly, have been reactionary at times when change is necessary; worst of all, we have not represented properly the best educational interests of our children. Our collective responses to the national curriculum, to what is going on in education at a national level are paltry. When IAPS ((The Independent Association of Preparatory Schools) spoke out about the ‘silly’ Key Stage 2

tests in February this year, it was good press, but four years too late to be truly ‘newsworthy’. Why, when the ISC (Independent Schools Council) Census figures were released earlier this month was there no national prep school comment from our 570 plus schools? Why are we so far behind what is going on in education, not only nationally, but internationally? Why are we not at the fore-front of educational thinking and change in the United Kingdom? Why is our voice so seldom heard?

As a sector, we could be doing so much more. We could – and should – be properly involved in the debate on the National Curriculum (how many submissions, I wonder, have prep schools made on the proposed Key Stage 3 curriculum); we could demonstrate how raising standards in core subjects and improving the breadth of education are not incompatible. Prep schools have their pupils for up to twice as long as public schools and at the most crucial stage of their development and their education; it is at prep school that attitudes to learning, work habits and character are shaped and formed. We should be constantly examining what we do and how well we do it – but do we?

Ours is a responsibility to which we do not always do justice for several reasons. One is that there are so many of us (nearly 600), we average only 250 pupils in each school so that to get a unified voice is very difficult. As a result, we are, too often, preparing for tests or side-tracked into education that, in some parts, has little justification other than as a means of selection. Of course, we would say senior schools should be listening and learning from us, but how often do we say anything worthwhile? How often do we suggest how the Common Entrance curriculum could be improved, for instance, so that pupils might benefit from their final years at prep schools rather than atrophy? To what extent are we the reactionaries in the field of independent education, offering nothing, happy in our subservient role, rather than setting our pupils alight?

We can ask how many senior schools have a prep school head on their board of governors? And how many prep schools don’t have a senior head on theirs? We could ask, also, how many prep schools are consulted about all their pupils have done over many years, apart from through the head’s report, or asked how they could help facilitate in the transfer of children? The fact that the lines of communication are so variable is at least partly because, too often, we have been found wanting, have not stood up for ourselves, have acquiesced in favour of the status quo. We need a voice; we need to see ourselves as the engine room of independent education; we need to lead not follow, and we need to show senior schools that we know what we are doing and, collectively, can improve the education we offer our children.

Preparatory schools should take as their brief the definition of ‘preparatory’ as providing education for life, not just for the next stage of education. Instead of responding to what senior schools want, we should be responding also to what universities and employers want. We should be constantly reassessing the curriculum, the needs of society, the way we teach and the way pupils learn. This is the stage when work habits are formed, thinking skills developed and the majority of essential learning is done, before pupils even begin senior schools. It is the time, also, to develop proper learning habits and, increasingly pertinent for independent schools, to teach the values that children and young adults need to take their place in a modern multi-cultural society.

Prep schools have the freedom to be properly independent whereas senior schools are hamstrung by the straight-jacket of being part of an exam-driven education system in which league tables, sadly, play a large part in determining their educational and marketing strategy. How often do we take the opportunity to develop new ways of challenging and stimulating our children? Why do we not have our own curriculum for Key Stage 2, for instance, that encourages us to really extend our pupils? Why does every prep school one goes into have classes working on the Romans and the Egyptians, for instance, in line with every primary

school in the country? Of course, senior schools may wish us to help lay the groundwork for GCSE, but this should not be to the detriment of providing the education that is appropriate. They would wish us even more to develop the sense of enquiry, develop enthusiasm for individual subjects and develop the skills for independent learning as well. We should utilise the freedom we have, in teaching foreign languages, in redefining the history and geography we teach, in developing better oral skills in English and practical skills in the sciences. Individually we tinker, but collectively we do too little, rarely even sharing good practice.

Most public schools would want us to be more adventurous and less timid in our teaching; they would want us to say how the process of transfer could be improved; they would prefer us to focus on developing understanding and skills while developing a greater enthusiasm for learning. As prep schools, we should be providing more curriculum initiatives: We should be using our knowledge of how children learn to improve our own curricula. We should be championing new ways to develop individual skills and talents that encourage clearer thinking and better communication. We should be concerned about providing our pupils with a sustainable education, that is, an education that will remain when the props of school are taken away and the appetite of league tables has been satisfied. Just as universities struggle to find ways to discriminate among pupils with identical grades, we need to give time and energy to the development of character, to produce pupils who have more rounded personalities and better strategies for coping for when they reach university or the workplace.

Prep schools should be writing their own Year 7 and 8 curriculum based loosely (as it must be) on the National Curriculum, but extending pupils in ways that transcend the curriculum. A new curriculum and a revised entrance procedure would be welcomed by many, if not all, public schools who, while they require a tool for selection, would welcome one that also managed to develop better informed, clearer thinking and more articulate and enthusiastic pupils.

Prep schools should realise that they make the silk for the silk purses and be proud of the part they play in independent education. If we consider that for the more academic schools where entrance is at a level akin to GCSE – and at selective academic schools pupils are already up to year 11 standard in most core subjects – the public schools have five years to prepare for two years of public exams and the time to provide the extra layers and trimmings of education that allow them to achieve their clutch of Oxbridge places. This is, in large part, due to the work of prep schools although it is seldom trumpeted as such.

We need to examine each part of our curriculum: Should we be teaching more literature, more grammar or doing more oral work in English? Is the national curriculum and Common Entrance syllabus for History the best we can come up with? Do we need to teach the amount of Bible knowledge in Religious Education to prepare pupils for an examination that is both dull and too often ignored anyway? Should we be doing more practical work in science and developing better understanding of the subject?

We need to be more assertive. Prep schools are the largest group of schools in ISC and yet we are hardly ever heard. This is not just the fault of IAPS, but because collectively, we contribute so little to the national debate on education.

We need to change attitudes about what prep schools are about and become more assertive and less deferential. There are parents who are making the choice to spend their money on a good prep school education because that is where the learning takes place, and is all they can afford. We need to reward their investment by being able to stand alone as the providers of the best education possible, and not just as means to an end.

In closing it is worth noting two recent observations. Dr Philip Evans, Headmaster of Bedford School, wrote in a recent Daily Telegraph Independent schools supplement of the need to radicalise the independent sector. He identified two challenges: The first was that of making schools more accessible to a higher proportion of the population; and the second, that schools need to increase their role as 'engines' of change for best educational practice. This, I would argue, is particularly true of prep schools.

Secondly, Chris Woodhead, in his address to the Prep School Heads Conference hosted by Wellington College last October, called for a sector wide review of prep school curriculum and in particular a review of the demand of Common Entrance exam as the crucial determinant of what is taught at the upper end of the prep school years. He also challenged heads to reflect on their own courage and resilience as head teachers and to review the breadth and balance of their curriculum.

The time is ripe for prep schools to take up the challenge themselves rather than relying on senior schools and academics to identify what are the key issues facing our sector. Our lack of enterprise does us no favours and is one reason why change does not happen – and the responsibility, lies with us, individually and collectively, to do something about it.

*Silk Purses from Silk Thread – Prep School Magazine* pp 11-12, Winter, 2007

---

## MEASURING THE HUMAN SPIRIT: MORE THAN A BUNDLE OF GRADES

*'Every human has four endowments- self awareness, conscience, independent will and creative imagination. These give us the ultimate human freedom ... The power to choose, to respond, to change.'* – **Stephen R Covey**

*'In the course of their careers ... most students take hundreds, if not thousands, of tests. They develop skill to a highly calibrated degree in an exercise that will essentially become useless immediately after their last day at school.'* – **Howard Gardner**

*'The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.'* – **Alvin Toffler**

*W H Auden, Stanley Baldwin, Alec Douglas-Home, AA Milne, Carol Vorderman and Michael Murpurgo = all recipients of 3rd class degrees.\**

The recent pronouncement of David Cameron that he would bar people with third-class degrees from state-funding for teacher-training courses brought about a number of questions, not only about his own definition of intelligence and interpretation of what makes a good teacher, but about the very way by which we measure intelligence. Needless to say, the announcement raised a good deal of comment, some of the most pointed coming from eminent holders of third class degrees and successful school drop-outs. Again, the old hoary chestnuts of Churchill and Einstein were paraded as examples of how success should not be defined by how well we did at school and the weakness in trying to measure intelligence by the ability to pass a written exam. In pursuing this line of thought we have to properly define just what we mean by intelligence. Howard Gardner, whose theory on multiple intelligences first proposed in 1983 led the way for a redefinition, argued that our traditional definition of intelligence is too limited and that by limiting the definition to logical-mathematical and linguistic abilities, we are ignoring other,

equally valid definitions, such as musical, artistic or spatial abilities. His attempt to widen the definition of intelligence soon met with the criticism, however, that it ignored the traditional and accepted meaning of intelligence as paraded in our schools, namely that of the kind of linguistic and logical mathematical thinking by which we measure success in our students. By retaining a narrow definition of intelligence as distinct from abilities or talents, critics have more or less been successful in halting a redefinition of intelligence rather than attempting to change our schools to embrace it.

Gardner reasoned that intelligence as traditionally defined does not allow us the means to measure properly the range of human abilities. His argument that someone who masters his times tables easily at a young age (which may have as much to do with stages of development as intelligence) does not mean that they are more intelligent than another child who has a different sort of intelligence or who learns better through a different – even higher level – approach. By measuring children against a broader range of intelligences, including interpersonal, visual-spatial, intrapersonal, naturalistic and existential and moral intelligences, he argues that we would be better able to acknowledge the different pathways and abilities that children show, whether it be the skill and timing of a top sportsman or the ear of a talented musician.

The implications for our schools and how we teach are considerable. It has long been accepted that children learn in different ways and that good teachers employ different tools in order to teach them. Some (a few) can listen and absorb; a far greater number learn through a practical exercise, an experiment, by combining listening, seeing and doing. More important though, is the implication as to how we assess children. There are already a number of schools that have widened their assessment of pupils from the traditional measures of linguistic-verbal and logical-mathematical to allow for children to be graded on other intelligences – no easy task for it demands more observation, more record-keeping and a different approach to learning and teaching, but one that has great merit.

It is faintly ironic in this age of educational conformity that those who often succeed in life are the non-conformists, those not so easily measured. Traditional schools cling to the number of Oxbridge places won and populate their common rooms with the same, and yet we know, that successful people outside of academia are successful because they display a mix of talents rather than solely, the ability to pass a written exam. Which is why we should always be looking for different ways of identifying and acknowledging the talents and intelligences of the children in our schools.

*\* Even the currency of third class degrees has changed with the number of 3rd class degrees at Cambridge dropping from 22% in 1960 to 3% in 2003 and at Oxford to 1.5% while the number of 1st class degrees has risen, correspondingly to 22%*

---

## MOVING ON: THE PROGRESSION FROM PREP SCHOOL TO SENIOR SCHOOL

*“We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things that we ought not to have done”*

A General confession from the Book of Common Prayer or a  
A personal confession from a prep school beholden to Common Entrance?

Thank you for your invitation to address you this afternoon at the start of your conference and the opportunity to present a prep school perspective on your conference theme. While I hope that what I say reflects a wide range of views and opinions, I should stress at the outset that I am speaking as a prep school head and not as a member of ISEB, the IAPS Education committee or as a prep school governor.

The topic you have on the table is a compelling one. It begs, of course, some crystal ball gazing to try and identify what the world to come will want from our pupils and our schools and although I suspect we know many of the answers, we cannot know them all. We can, however, identify key skills and values that will stand our pupils in good stead. Many things in our schools, of course, will stay the same, aided and abetted by improved technology, but as independent schools, there is a challenge for us all to be more creative and adventurous than we have previously been in order to provide an education that will educate our pupils properly for the world which is to come. In the future, our children will need to be adaptable, flexible, robust and curious. We need to move them quicker from the world of dependent to independent learning. Suitcases full of knowledge alone will not sustain them.

In recent years, independent schools have been presented as the true flag bearers of British education, protectors of all that is best in traditional schools and defenders of academic standards. Yet in our smugness, our complacency, we are in danger of letting an opportunity pass by not looking at what we could and should be doing if we pooled our resources properly and treated education as a continuum, each part building on what went before without the losses incurred through overlap and hiatus, by identifying together, what is required at each level and providing it. With improved technology, a greater sharing of resources and ideas and a collective will to improve what we do, we could be truly independent in the education we offer our children and take a lead in curriculum reform instead of just representing the best of what is currently available.

To return to the prep school world, I am aware that to start such a discussion with a talk on where your pupils have come from might seem to be merely providing a springboard for the conference theme, but in preparing the way ahead, senior schools need to spend time looking backwards towards their feeder schools as well as forwards towards the universities and the workplace and what they, in turn, want from our pupils. As senior schools attempt to sort out their own problems with exams through iGCSEs, through the IB and soon, the Cambridge PreU, we all need to look at ways to improve the quality of the education we offer as a sector, not just in educational terms, but in human terms as well, through the teaching of appropriate values and life skills.

What goes on in the eight-plus years before pupils arrive at senior school, often, in many subjects having reached a standard not far off GCSE needs to be considered carefully as does the question as to how we can best serve the needs of our pupils between the ages of 11 – 13

years. It is important in any discussion that academic requirements should not be allowed to steamroll all else, particularly at junior schools where children need to maintain a wide range of interests and not be dragged screaming into adulthood before their time.

While I have been a prep school head for eight years, much of my background has been teaching in senior schools. Not surprisingly, I have always been interested in the process of transition between one level of school and the next and bemoan the waste so often involved. It is sobering to reflect on just how great the gulf appears to be at times between prep and senior schools, in communication if nothing else. Prep schools are invariably smaller than their senior counterparts, pupils stay at them longer and heads, as a rule, know their pupils better than could be expected at a senior school. And yet, I am made painfully aware that it is often not the head who reads the common entrance report.(ii) It is sad to reflect that this accumulation of information and insight of pupils gleaned over several years is of relevance only in the most marginal cases. We have a good idea, for instance, of those pupils who will thrive in their next school, those whose work ethic and character will out. I have often advised a senior school that such and such a boy is worth taking regardless of marks for he has the innate ability and drive to make good. I have not yet been let down. We also know who will pass easily, but who lack the drive and attitude to carry on and make the most of their opportunity. For them, Common Entrance will not pose a problem. Because we invest a great deal of time in our pupils, it is frustrating when senior schools seem more concerned with the raw scores than the child. Often few records are asked for and an attitude of 'don't worry, their life begins when they reach us' is all too prevalent.

Part of the joy of running a prep school is the comparative freedom to design an enquiry-based curriculum that allows pupils to be challenged and stimulated without the constraints of national tests, particularly in years 3 – 6. In years 7 and 8, sadly, in many subjects, the emphasis shifts to the acquisition of a prescribed body of knowledge at the expense of understanding, skills and enthusiasm. The health issue is also very real, and when we read that children from affluent homes (defined recently by the psychologist Dr Madeline Levine as those with an annual income of more than £63,000) being three times more likely to have depressive illnesses or suffer from anxiety, we should sit up and take notice for many of these are our pupils. This situation is exacerbated the closer one lives to London schools whose highly selective schools house a hidden epidemic of mental and health problems, created by the pressure for places. I see too many pupils for whom the pressures of external exams, prematurely visited upon them become a nemesis, something that blights their final years and curtails their wider learning. Prep school pupils leave their schools, too often, having left undone those things which they ought to have done; and having done, to an excessive degree those things that they ought not to have had to bother with and full of doubts and worries and concerns about the future.

In looking at Common Entrance, I am very conscious of the furore that the past chairman of the Education committee, Michael Spinney created with his measured and thought-provoking speech to the HMC / GSA Education and Academic Policy committee on the Common Entrance debate in 2005 (ii), although I would be more inclined to fuel the furore rather than dampen it down. The reaction of senior and prep schools to Michael Spinney's speech would have done an ostrich proud and made one wonder how much thought actually goes on in the independent sector when it comes to the subject of education, of transfer, of what actually matters more than just the filling of our schools. There should be more open discussion from within prep schools many of whom still see their role as giving the senior schools exactly what they want, without question or compromise.

As a Head, I think that Common Entrance will stay in some form as long as schools want it to stay and so long as it fulfils a useful role – but that does not mean we should not challenge its place and its content. Like most heads, I believe in academic rigour, in developing study skills, independent learning and critical thinking, but not by demanding the quantities of knowledge required, for instance, by the CE Religious Education examination. Whatever changes we make should improve our standards, not diminish them, but we should also look after all our children and not just the most able. We can do better for our children and produce better thinking, more articulate and more creative pupils who will flourish at senior schools, pupils who have not lost their enthusiasm, pupils with a greater breadth of talents and interests, but we may struggle to do it with Common Entrance in its current form

It is useful to reflect on the issues Michael Spinney raised last year that aroused such comment. In summary, his main points were:

- \* the range of different examinations prep schools are being expected to prepare candidates for has widened
- \* Common Entrance best suits academic pupils and the more selective schools and does not cater well for the less able
- \* Common entrance should be more in line with the national curriculum
- \* The present model of assessment is weakened by self-interest
- \* A lack of standardisation in marking and its lack of any formative component detracts from the value of Common Entrance

- all of which seem fair and reasonable points if in need of further teasing out. Prep schools have been accommodating for too long and need to become more involved in this debate and in any discussion that improves the quality of education we offer our children.

At my school, this academic year promises to be business as usual at the top of our school as we set about our work of ensuring our pupils gain places at their chosen senior schools. We have eleven in our scholarship class this year and they are sitting scholarship examinations to ten different schools with exams starting in January and extending through until May. Two of the schools offer the Common Academic scholarship Examination, the rest their own often idiosyncratic exams that can range from two core papers in Mathematics and English to running the whole gamut of subjects at a level seemingly decided at the whim of each school.

In translation, it is like having a class of eleven students sitting A levels under ten different examination boards, with different curricula and examination papers and with the exams spread over five months. For whose benefit? To assist senior schools to get first grab at the pool of talent? To assist with their recruitment? To allow time for them to stream or set their classes? Who even considers the educational impact or asks to what degree their needs are compatible with those of prep schools and their pupils?

We have another 26 pupils sitting Common Entrance in June. While we work hard to prepare them for the papers, we know that the grades they will receive will vary enormously school by school. Pupils who are placed in the lower or middle part of our year group will collect As from some schools, while more able pupils will struggle to get Cs and Bs elsewhere. There is no common standard. Nor is there any explanation for the variations: some schools mark using grades, either A – E or A – C, some by percentages, some by raw marks and a notable few, by a combination of the above. Very rarely are there any individual comments made.

While we have not had anyone fail Common Entrance for many years, the pressure remains on the children nevertheless and the results will still ultimately depend on their chosen senior schools – as aspiring candidates at Westminster and St Paul's found out to their cost last year.

Standards are not linked just to the requirements of individual schools, but are further determined by the demand for places at that school. That Common Entrance has been a selection tool, first and foremost, is indisputable. We all know that if there are 100 pupils for 100 places and assuming that all candidates have been reasonably well screened by their prep schools, unless schools are willing to incur a financial loss in order to maintain an imaginary standard, all will pass. If there are ninety pupils for 100 places, it would take a brave school to turn any away. If, however, there are 120 pupils competing for 100 places, then 20 will fail, regardless of what standard they have achieved. Some schools even boast that to fail the occasional candidate is a sign of strength. Standards are not only determined by individual schools (and the variations are huge), but even within each school, where they can vary simply depending on how popular the school is at the time. If rolls for senior schools dropped by 25% are we so silly to think that entry requirements would not also drop? Is this the world we prepare our children for? Is being at the whim of fluctuations in demand and supply really fair to prep schools and their pupils?

Common Entrance has been the subject of debate since its founding. Prep school heads, particularly those from around Oxford, London and the Home Counties, in the main approve of it, although there are a growing number of dissenting voices. Senior schools still value it as a tool, but are, by and large, undecided about its educational worth and, with their eyes fixed firmly to the future, do not seem particularly interested in joining in the debate. I wrote to thirteen senior schools in June to solicit their views, but only three took the trouble to reply. Apathy or indifference? Many teachers and heads of department at senior schools dislike the exam because of the effect it has on the interest in, and enthusiasm for, their subject, because it does not properly test understanding and because it is not pitched at an appropriate level. In some instances, schools do not even take into consideration any other than the core subjects. One prep school head recently admitted he did not send in any geography fieldwork projects to eight senior schools last year to test the system, projects that take considerable time and effort; only one school even bothered to ask for them. The apocryphal stories pupils twiddling their thumbs for one or two years at their senior years, of papers in some subjects not being marked, of senior schools having the gall to criticise prep schools for not developing independent learners are too numerous to mention.

In many ways, prep schools, having given up SATs in increasing numbers to avoid being drawn into the league table mentality that besets them, find themselves complicit in aiding the league table obsession that affects senior schools. Common Entrance, in many subjects, is written with more than half an eye towards GCSEs and it is sad rather than flattering that many schools boast how many pupils sit GCSEs in selected subjects in their first year on the back of pressurised teaching demanded from prep schools. It is frustrating when senior heads, in acknowledging Common Entrance to be a very useful selection tool that aids setting and streaming seems to feel that that is enough to justify its existence. It could appear to prep schools that everything is geared towards how the exam can be used for the benefit of senior schools without properly considering whether it allows for the best education possible for pupils in Years 7 and 8. And the fact that it has spawned a publishing bonanza in which HMC, IAPS and GSA are the shareholders, in imitation of the publishing bonanza that accompanies SATs, makes one even more uneasy as to the type of education we are promoting through, in particular, the burgeoning sales of past papers and their implicit use.

That is our lot as prep schools. And it is simply not acceptable. Worse, it gets in the way of education, of allowing us to teach and our children to learn. And it gets in the way of what many teachers in senior schools would want us to do and what universities are crying out for

– pupils who have been taught to think critically, have good communication skills, prepared to question and develop arguments and think independently and schools that have nurtured enthusiasm, originality, thoroughness and creativity.

The simple philosophy about education is that we should always seek to provide the best education possible at each stage of a child's life. Assessment should not determine the nature of the education provided, rather it should reflect it. We could go further and ask the question that if Common Entrance did not exist and transfer between prep and senior schools was by some other criteria, would we invent it? We are, after all, the most examined country in the world and while I am not personally adverse to entrance examinations per se, there are some who might question the need for us to have a major raft of examinations at 13 years other than for selection. It is, after all, somewhat ironic that senior schools bemoan the nature and restrictions of the exam overload yet feel that prep schools should spend two crucial years preparing for the same.

It is argued by some that Common Entrance does provide a focus and a goal and a sense of achievement for many pupils. Several of the courses and exam papers are well-suited to the nature of the subjects taught. Many prep school heads – most even – stand by it, but also see the need for changes within. And even in acknowledging the considerable weaknesses in some subjects, it is the use that is made of the Common Entrance syllabus and how an unhealthy focus on passing a content-laden exam that can have the effect of inhibiting learning that is of most concern. Over the years, prep schools themselves have been strong advocates for maintaining the status quo whether through belief in the process, through apathy or self-interest, yet most acknowledge we could do it better.

So exactly what can we do to improve the system and make it more useful and less prescriptive? What can we do to help improve the transfer of pupils? What can we do to maximise the benefits of a through education in the independent sector? How can we plan for the future?

First, I suggest we need to conduct a proper review of transfer procedures and the place and philosophy of Common Entrance, rather than just tinkering with the pieces.

We need to look at the skills, knowledge, attitudes and values that children require at the age of thirteen years and establish how they are acquired.

We need to look at the draft KS3 curriculum and ask why we follow the national curriculum throughout our schooling except in years 7 and 8 where our curriculum is prescribed by ISEB.

We need to look to senior schools to encourage the very things in their entry requirements that universities berate them for not producing themselves, including a lack of creativity and imagination.

We need the space to include more debate, more drama and public speaking in our school day, time to improve the quality of work by demanding higher standards in core subjects, to place more focus on research skills, on teaching pupils to prioritise and precis information, to improve the accuracy and presentation of work, to expand their breadth of knowledge through cross-curricular teaching, to develop subjects such as history in a more diverse and enquiring way that the Common Entrance syllabus allows.

We need to look at individual subjects and ensure they are more realistic in their expectations and allow for pupils to show more than their powers of retention.

We should at least consider such possibilities as a joint humanities paper or removing history, Geography and Religious Education from Common Entrance and having senior and prep schools develop curricula that would encourage the skills and outcomes that would benefit our pupils and students.

We need to improve the relationship of trust between prep and senior schools and share information on what we are doing at each level.

We need to encourage better and more regular links between directors of studies and HoDs from prep and public schools and not just between registrars and heads.

We need to look at what is happening already in our sector as a result of an increasing number of schools setting their own entrance exams and the effect that is having on prep schools.

We need to be aware of prep schools now looking at alternatives, including the primary and middle years international baccalaureate and weigh up whether we want this to happen and, if so, how it can be accommodated in the future.

We need to question the validity of pupils sitting eleven exams in three days (or 12 in 3 and a half days for those sitting Latin or another second language).

If Common Entrance is to remain unchanged, prep schools are entitled to better feedback on how their pupils fare and more evidence that senior schools are treating the examination seriously.

We should ask how many senior schools have a prep school head on their governing body, not just to balance the considerable number of senior school heads sitting on prep school boards, but to allow for a sharing of information and views and to acknowledge the importance of the prep school in the continuum of independent education.

We should work on our sharing of information that would allow for the late developer to be better considered and for the extra-curricular strengths and character of the pupil to be properly represented.

More senior schools need to work directly with prep schools in assisting with the programme of transition from Year 8 to Year 9 by coming and talking to prep schools (something that happens with our neighbouring schools). New pupils' handbooks and orientation programmes should have some input from prep schools.

We should remind ourselves how many talents and abilities are ignored by a raft of examinations that rarely get beyond level two of Bloom's taxonomy (iii)

We would suggest very strongly – urge even – that HMC and GSA and the other associations restrict the timing of scholarship exams to a 'shooting season' of a fortnight. Ideally, this would be in the traditional slot at the end of May although, pragmatically, the most prep schools could ask for would be as late in the Lent Term as possible. This would minimise disruption to

the school year and would help curb the undignified rush for the best pupils as happens at present. What happens at present in many schools – mainly girls schools – is hugely disruptive and insensitive at best to the children and the schools.

Prep schools need to prepare pupils to pass exams, to work under pressure, to strive to achieve, but the pupils need many other things as well. We are aware because we are so often told so, that pupils come to senior schools with poor presentation skills, with gaps in their numeracy and literacy, with little enthusiasm for certain subjects, much of which can often be attributed to the pressures under which many pupils find themselves.

Year 8 should be a chance to draw breath and enjoy the fruits of being top of a school, to build confidence, widen horizons, to take on a breadth of interests, to learn social skills, to build on enthusiasms.

There should be real strength in the independent movement with each stage building on the stage before. We don't quite have that. Too often the process of moving schools is a stuttering affair coming at the very time in their lives when children should be flying. Too often we are not prepared to examine what we do and are unwilling to change. Children are under increasing pressure in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we need to question what we ask them to do on the grounds of mental health rather than educational achievement. In order to succeed, we need also to take up the challenge of Dr Philip Evans, Headmaster of Bedford School who has called on independent schools to increase their role as 'engines of change' for best educational practice. Prep schools, for so long deferential and reluctant to speak up need to do so now for their pupils and their schools. Senior schools need to know that we are providing the best foundations on which they can build. We need to pool resources, share good practice, learn more about each other's business and be forward-thinking in order to ensure the best passage for our pupils in their progress from this world to that which is to come.

(i) *A speech given at the Conference of Senior School Academic Deputies and Directors of Studies on a Conference theme of "A Pupil's Progress from this World to That Which is to Come", Lisbon, October, 2006*

(ii) *"Common Entrance: The Debate Continues" An Address to the HMC and GSA Education and Academic Policy Committee, Michael Spinney, 2005 (later reproduced in Prep School Magazine)*

(iii) *Bloom's six stages are, of course, knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation)*

---

## NANOTECHNOLOGIES

*'Starting around 2010, workers will cultivate expertise with systems of nanostructures, directing large numbers of intricate components to specified ends. One application could involve the guided self-assembly of nanoelectronic components into three-dimensional circuits and whole devices. Medicine could employ such systems to improve the tissue compatibility of implants, or to create scaffolds for tissue regeneration, or perhaps even to build artificial organs.'* – **Mihail C. Roco**, Senior adviser for nanotechnology to the National Science Foundation

*'Over the next ten years, the fields of chemistry, physics, material sciences, biology, and computational sciences will converge in a way that will define nanotechnology and impact almost every industry, including computers, semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, defense, health care, communications, transportation, energy, environmental sciences, entertainment, chemicals,*

*and manufacturing. Previously distinct disciplines will also combine: medicine and engineering, law and science, art and physics, etc. This merging will result in developments that are not simply evolutionary; they will be revolutionary.’ – Jack Uldrich & Deb Newberry*

*‘We were making the future, he said, and hardly any of us troubled to think what future we were making. And here it is!’ – H. G. Wells*

Recently I attended a lecture by Julie Arliss on nanotechnology. Before going I was, I suspect, one of a large number in the audience who knew little beyond the definition of nanotechnology as the controlling of matter on an atomic and molecular scale, the realm of atoms and nanostructures. It all sounded rather far-fetched, faddish even, especially for an interloper from the humanities, and it was difficult to see the relevance to our lives.

It took little time to be disabused of the idea that nanotechnology is not only highly relevant, but also that it will profoundly change our world and our future. The number of scientists currently working on nanotechnology worldwide is huge as are the amounts of money dedicated to research: one-third of all money spent on scientific research in the United States alone is on the possible applications of nanotechnology for industry and defence. Checking on google revealed that there were 7,390,000 references to nanotechnology – where had I been?

The uses of nanotechnology are many ranging from stain resistant fabrics, authentically textured and flavoured foods which contain a fraction of the fat and calorie content to the non-invasive and remarkably precise treatments of malignant tumours. It can be used to produce anything from food to diamonds and already, food products manufactured using nanotechnology are present on our supermarket shelves. As far back as two years ago, it was estimated that there were over 800 manufacturer-identified nanotech products publicly available in such products as food, cosmetics, sunscreens, clothing and household appliances.

While there is little doubt that nanotechnology is set to revolutionise our lives, there is also a growing concern about how early the technology can be controlled. Clearly, there are possible dangers that arise with the development of nanotechnology. It is suggested that nanotechnology could result, among other things, in untraceable weapons of mass destruction, networked cameras for use by the government, and weapon development fast enough to destabilize the arms race in addition to the unknown threats of nanotechnology to human health and the environment. While research continues apace, the inevitable ethical questions that arise from its use will increasingly, and pressingly, occupy the minds of scientists and governments.

Which brings us to the question of the relevance of the new technology to our schools, apart from the obvious fact that children today studying science may well find themselves working in the field of nanotechnology. The question as to when we introduce children to the concept of nanotechnology, or even the word itself, of course, has much to do with our current curriculum. Do we adhere to teaching a traditional body of knowledge, even when it is fast being superseded by ‘new’ knowledge or do we move from a focus on the retention of traditional knowledge, now so readily available, to ways of accessing and using that body of knowledge (especially one growing so rapidly) through the acquisition and development of the necessary skills and process? How do we include new information when our curriculum is already bulging? Do we choose to replace one body of knowledge with another, for instance, in science? Who makes the call as to what is most important?

When Arnold Schwarzenegger came out in favour of downloading science lessons from the internet rather than using textbooks, he did so largely on financial grounds. That his decision was later endorsed by scientists who felt that because of the rate of development of scientific

knowledge textbooks were quickly out of date may have been an incidental by-product, but a very practical one nonetheless. The pace of change in technology, in knowledge, in science is greater than at anytime in history. Whatever we do, and however we teach, we must keep children’s minds open to the possible, and nurture their imaginations, for what they imagine in their wildest thoughts, as in the writings of Wells and Orwell before them, has every chance of becoming real in the future.

*‘As an emerging science in its infancy, nanotechnology promises the nano-scale manufacture of materials and machines made to atomic specifications. The impact of nanotechnology on our way of life is widely believed to reach profound and hitherto unimagined levels in the coming decades. Proposed changes include clean abundant energy, pollution-free and inexpensive production of superior defect-free materials, complete environmental restoration and cleanup, safe and affordable space travel and colonization, and quantum leaps in medicine leading to perfect health and immortality. As a result of these advances, we anticipate the obsolescence of nearly all of today’s industrial and economic processes by the first half of the new century, leading to global and radical changes in life style, finance, law, and politics.’ – Behfar Bastani and Dennis Fernandez, Intellectual Property Rights for Nanotechnology*

---

## NOW WE ARE SIX FIVE FOUR THREE TWO AND A HALF

Selective Schools look for three year olds who can:

- Hold a pencil correctly
- Be a leader in group activities
- Listen and understand a story
- Recognise letter and numbers
- Sort teddy bears in order of size and colour

– Sunday Times, 2001

There’s been a lot of debate over recent years concerning the optimum age to begin formal education. With nursery vouchers, the rigour of the foundation years’ programme and the heavily prescribed targets of Key Stage One, there is a relentless drive to ensure that children begin their formal education ever younger in order to meet some spurious targets, regardless of the damage caused to the curiosity of young minds. It is apparent that the response of government and its many Medusa-like quangos to raise standards in our schools is to demand more, for longer, starting earlier. What arrant nonsense!

We don’t have to look far for other education systems that contradict this blinkered way of thinking, where children start school as old as seven and yet by age sixteen have literacy and numeracy standards that compare very favourably with ours. Nor does it take a lot of imagination to see that the same children, rather than being held back, are better adjusted, having had several years of play in the bosom of their families or failing that, in nurseries that properly recognise their jobs as surrogate parents, rather than target-setters, developing co-ordination, fitness and a sense of wonder before being sent off to school before their minds and bowels are ready.

The confusion is based on the same attritional mentality that won us the 1st World War, namely that if you are prepared to sacrifice more of your young men than the enemy, then ultimately you will win. Money, heaps of it, has been thrown at education with the same

thought, although in this instance, to little obvious end, because the officers in charge have no idea who they are fighting (although independent schools are often raised as a possible target). Too little thought is given to the quality of the educational experience; instead, the response has been to increase the mind-boggling time spent teaching children the pleasures of confinement with set targets to achieve, with classrooms little more than holding pens. Before the age of five, children should be looking forward enthusiastically to starting school, not fearing a premature ambush without adequate defences. They should be properly grounded and be able to walk on their own, either within their families or at nurseries and schools that nurture the growing child and don't batter them with targets or unrealistic expectations. They should be learning in an unthreatening environment how to succeed and fail at a myriad of tasks and challenges, the results of which matter not a jot, thereby extending their boundaries without being scarred and losing confidence.

We all lament the fact that as parents, we are less able to spend as much time with our children in the formative years as our own parents were able to. Sadly, the single wage-earner is now the preserve of few families and while we would want to spend more time with our young children, we cannot always afford to do so although, inevitably, there are choices involved. To assuage our misplaced guilt by believing that if children are away from home, then they must be achieving at an elevated level, however, is damaging for children and we all, parents and schools, must guard against placing such premature expectations upon them.

But this is all by way of a preamble to what is the real tragedy of starting too young. The real tragedy is the failure to acknowledge the concept of readiness in education. At times, one wonders if those steering the runaway train of barmy educational ideas have the slightest idea of Piaget and stages of development or even how children learn. Research tells us that children who start school 'late', after five years of age can take as little as three months to catch up to those who have been in formal education for the preceding eighteen months. Of course, those who can read early should do so for boredom is the greatest cancer of education. The real casualties, however, are those children who are simply not 'ready' to start to read at age four. Being able to read at a young age is an age-old parental boast wheeled out whenever two or more parents are gathered together, yet the facility to do so has more to do with the child's stage of development and maturation rather than intelligence. Children who learn to read later because that is their natural time to do so are better off than those taught to read by mechanics and bombardment. Learning should not be a trial of forced labour and sweated tears, demanded by parents and inexorably delivered by schools, especially when the poor child has been prematurely wrenched from his or her play-pen having not even got to their fifth birthday.

The worse damage done and the worst possible start to school years is that by age five some children have learned a lesson they should never have to learn at such a young stage: they've learned how to fail. Not because they didn't work hard enough or weren't bright enough, but because they simply weren't ready to learn the complexities of language or numerals. That is the greatest and most inexcusable tragedy of all.

---

## PIAGET AND ALL THAT

*'The principal goal of education is to create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done – men who are creative, inventive and discoverers' – Jean Piaget (1896-1980) Swiss cognitive psychologist.*

*'The current state of knowledge is a moment in history, changing just as rapidly as the state of knowledge in the past has ever changed and, in many instances, more rapidly.' – Jean Piaget (1896-1980) Swiss cognitive psychologist.*

*'Someday, maybe, there will exist a well-informed, well considered and yet fervent public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit.' – Erik Erikson, (1902-1994) Danish-German-American developmental psychologist*

*'...we discovered that education is not something which the teacher does, but that it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment. The teacher's task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child' – Dr. Maria Montessori*

Sometimes, when we are busy teaching – or raising – children and feel exasperated at the pace at which they are learning, it is useful to turn to some of the theories of development that we learnt about while undergoing teacher training. Even thirty five years on, I remember studying Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development and thinking what good sense it made and how useful it was in providing a framework for our understanding of children. The four stages of cognitive development that Piaget identified (sensorimotor or the mastery of concrete objects; preoperational or the mastery of symbols; concrete operational or the mastery of classes, relations and numbers and how to reason; and formal operational or abstract thinking and the mastery of thought) help us to see the natural progression of learning and encourages us to adapt our teaching to the needs of the children. As important as the stages was Piaget's caution that, while children pass through each stage in the same order, there is usually some variation as to the ages that they do so. Piaget gives some broad outlines (sensorimotor, 0-2 years; preoperational, 2-7 years; concrete operational, 7-11 years; and formal operational, 11 years +), but warns against anticipating readiness and that a delayed entry or exit from any stage is usually just due to maturation. As a teacher, being mindful of the different stages makes us, also, mindful of the needs of children and more able to understand and accommodate their learning at different levels. It is of course, just a theoretical construct, but a useful one.

Alongside Piaget, we were introduced to Erikson's theory on social development which ran alongside Piaget's cognitive theory. Each of Erikson's stages of psychosocial development which looked at human social development were linked with a conflict and a period of a person's life in which they were both raised and resolved.

Hope was the first virtue in which the conflict was trust and mistrust (infancy) followed by will in which the conflict was autonomy vs shame and doubt (toddlers); purpose in which the conflict was initiative vs guilt (up to age 6); competence in which the conflict was industry vs inferiority (age 6 to puberty); fidelity in which the conflict was identity vs role confusion (teenager); love in which the conflict was intimacy vs isolation (young adult); caring, in which the conflict was generativity vs. Stagnation (mid-life); and wisdom in which the conflict was ego integrity vs despair (old age). Each stage had its own descriptors and sub-text, but the framework, like that of Piaget, provided the means for us to look at social development alongside cognitive development, and while arguably less pertinent to teaching, gave a broad theoretical structure as to the stages that children move through.

Since then, of course, there have been a number of new developments and constructs by which children are measured. Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences asked more questions of the nature of intelligence and how we assess it, while current research on the brain continues to influence the way we currently think about education and teaching.

What is so important in any theory of knowledge, of course, is not that we follow it blindly, but that we are aware of it and make use of it where appropriate. It is vitally important that teachers keep well-informed about research and that we all, teachers and parents, understand the most vital fact of all, that all children are different and progress at different stages and that while the journey is the same, the timetable is at least partly locked in each child's genetic code.

---

## SCHOLASTICISM UNDER SIEGE

While the demands of a prep school education are quite enough to occupy the minds of most parents, it is difficult to ignore the current rumblings in the world of secondary education. In particular, one can not help but be disturbed by aspects of an examination system that has so much weight in determining your child's future and is clearly failing both in determining what is taught and in the process of assessment that follows.

Once again this year, it has been interesting to read of the problems experienced in the marking of GCSE and A Level papers, with revelations of misplaced scripts, the use of unqualified markers and the apparent corruption of the grading system. Apart from the inherent discrepancies between examination boards and the failings of various boards to deliver a means of reliable assessment, the variations in the standards required in individual subjects can border on the ludicrous – for instance, under the AQA Board, to obtain a C grade in GCSE, one needed to score 20% in Mathematics, 25% in Classical Greek or 27% in Business Studies while at Edexcel, 16% in Maths and 32% in French would achieve the same result. If it is not (as is usually argued) a question of standards, it is most certainly a question of currency and it is no wonder that the public has so little confidence in the process or in the value assigned to various grades. When one reflects on the fact that A Levels used to be an international gold standard, it is galling to see them now as the subject of such virulent (and usually warranted) criticism, particularly by those who, in the past few years, have lost their university places because of the ineptitude and inefficiency of some of the examination boards. Although I am not advocating that, for instance, the International Baccalaureate, (which has an even more prescriptive curriculum) would necessarily provide a better system, it is certainly better administered. There is no doubt that some changes need to take place in A Levels to restore standards and confidence.

While I am not inclined to compare systems, having been a marker with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority for Bursary History (similar to A Levels), it is evident that there are some significant differences in the way the systems are administered. One way of immediately improving confidence in the examination process in England would be to adopt what has operated in New Zealand for over a decade – namely, the practice whereby all external examination scripts are returned directly to the students – not just, as happens here, those specifically requested. As a marker, to know that the paper you are marking will always go directly back to the student (and quite often from there to the student's previous teacher or Head of Department who invariably assesses the mark you have given) does tend to make for more accuracy and fewer mistakes. When you know that you may have to be able to justify

why an essay is worth 13 / 20 (and not 12 or 14) it tends to focus the mind – and rightly so! That one small change would certainly have saved a lot of unnecessary heartache and distress for a number of pupils in the UK over the past few years.

The other concern is the fact that a number of subjects – and History is one – have either been diluted or their scope restricted, largely, again, to facilitate the process of assessment. In some examination board's, History, therefore, has tended to cling closely to its factual baseline, concentrating on political or economic rather than social history and stifling those who are willing and capable of doing more than regurgitating the ideas of others. For assessment to drive the curriculum and be so closed simply should not happen. But perhaps the most damning comment over the past few months has come from the Director of Admissions at Cambridge University who recently wrote that students are '*... able to gain A levels without showing any creativity or original thought making it more difficult ... to pick out exceptional candidates ... There's essentially an expected answer and you are judged on how close you get to that*'

And in a world crying out for initiative and creativity, that, I venture, is a crying shame.

---

## THE PROPOSED PREP SCHOOL CURRICULUM: 'SMARTENING UP NOT DUMBING DOWN'

The decision to review the prep school curriculum announced last November by the current Chairman of IAPS, Michael Spinney is long overdue, coinciding as it does with the announcement of a comprehensive review of the National Curriculum, now in its twentieth year. For too long, any discussion on a prep school curriculum has focussed almost exclusively on the exam prescription for Common Entrance, relevant only in the final two years; now that transfer and curriculum are increasingly being seen as separate entities, parents who traditionally saw the *raison d'être* of prep schools as being to prepare pupils for public schools want to know what is now so valuable about a prep school education. A new and distinctive prep school curriculum, therefore, presents an ideal vehicle for schools to demonstrate to parents that this is where they should be investing in their children's education before they move onto senior school and tertiary education.

Traditionally, a prep school education suggested pupils had been very well-taught in the core subjects, that they had a broad education and that in specific areas such as languages, the arts and humanities and they had been taken way beyond the expectations of the national curriculum. It suggested, more obliquely, an education of the whole person, culturally, spiritually, socially as well as academically; and importantly – although not something we can always boast of today – it suggested pupils who had been taught to think and become independent learners.

A major difficulty reviewing the prep school curriculum is that such a thing does not in fact, exist. Prep schools have always followed a mish-mash of curricula, starting with the Early Years Foundation Stage (birth-5 years) the National Curriculum (years 1-6) followed in years 7 and 8 by the prescription for Common Entrance, each stage embellished by individual schools, sometimes lavishly so. The degree to which schools follow the national curriculum varies enormously, from those whose pupils sit the Key Stage tests to those who cherry pick what they feel best suits their school. The idea of creating a bespoke curriculum for independent

schools therefore is an opportunity to promote an independent philosophy of education that can provide a standard for parents searching for certainty and direction for their children. It will be no easy task. Recent feedback on the IAPS Heads' poll alluded to the diversity in our sector, suggesting that no one solution will suit all schools and it is possible that the new curriculum would only be a loose framework for learning to be used and modified as schools see fit. Some will no doubt scoff at a 'one size fits all' curriculum as being too unwieldy, yet there is considerable value in identifying some commonality of purpose and content in what we teach and aspire to in our schools.

The question 'what are we educating children for?' can have many different answers, but there is some broad consensus. A recent survey of prep school heads placed the expected emphasis on the core subjects and the need for depth and breadth, but stressed also the importance of including thinking and problem solving skills, creativity and imagination. In looking at writing our own prep school curriculum, we should hold dear to B.F. Skinner's adage that education is what remains after what has been learnt has been forgotten – oft-quoted perhaps, but still resonating with good sense, especially in considering subjects such as history and geography. We certainly want our pupils to be able to communicate effectively, by word and paper; to be numerate; to be able to use technology; to have a good general knowledge, to have good values and so on. We should also want our children to be purposeful, hungry to learn and able to *think critically*, and equipped with the tools and wherewithal to keep doing so. By answering the questions 'what makes us distinctive?' and 'are we providing the best education for our pupils' we can establish a basis on which to build a curriculum that will properly represent us and reflect the philosophy of independent education.

Education nationally is in a state of flux with wave upon wave of new government initiatives couched in jargon confusing and deflecting schools and parents – when did we last have an education-free day in our papers? One thing independent schools have done well in the past is to avoid faddishness. We should continue to be properly conservative in the true meaning of the word, not opposing change (we would never have the Nuffield Science course had we done so) but ensuring that we measure what we do. Writing a good curriculum is not rocket science; the resources, the building blocks are already in place. We must prepare our pupils properly and we cannot do that without taking into account a rapidly changing world and particularly the impact of information technology and the internet. But we must stand up to the national debate where we feel strongly – in History, for instance, where we are in danger of being seduced into telling our island's story as a narrative and pretending that by so doing, we are teaching children the tools to study and appreciate history. What is important often is not the curriculum per se, but how it is taught, and to this end, it would be a very positive step for IAPS to consider establishing its own rigorous teacher training courses to accompany the introduction of a new curriculum.

The detail of what will constitute the new curriculum is, of course, the subject of the pending review. Opinions on how to proceed will be many and varied although less so than may be imagined, once prep schools accept that what is presented is an opportunity not a threat. In the junior years at least, I would envisage a prep school curriculum remaining closely aligned to the national curriculum in core subjects while including, extending or excluding others. Given small class sizes and greater resources, a wider range of academic subjects, greater parental support and higher expectations, a higher level of performance should be expected. Inevitably, there will be variations amongst schools, for instance, in the teaching of languages. At Sherborne Prep, for example, we believe that languages are gateways into other cultures which is one overwhelming reason why we teach Mandarin – not because we are attempting a mastery of Mandarin, but because we want our children to think outside of Europe.

Introductory courses in a range of languages (we offer French in Year 1, Spanish in Year 2, German in Year 3 and Mandarin in Year 4), for instance, have reinvigorated all our language teaching, including our French which pupils resume in Year 5 and seem to do better than when we offered it throughout the school. But other schools would disagree with our approach, adhering to the more traditional route of teaching French throughout the School and it is vital that these and other differences in content and approach should be properly accommodated under the umbrella of a new curriculum.

As well as extending the core of English, Mathematics, Science and languages, we should be making a better fist of teaching subjects such as History and Geography. A recent letter in The Daily Telegraph from a geographer stressed that the names and locations of rivers, town and mountains are merely general knowledge; that what happens to them, the how and why questions are geography – a good reason why General Knowledge should still have a place in the new curriculum and why we should then be developing the appropriate skills in History and Geography to better use and interpret that knowledge.

Like many schools we introduce a period of classics in year 5 as a precursor to Latin in Year 6 which forms part of our language options for the top of the school. RE, Drama, Music, PE and PSHE all take their place either in the curriculum or in the daily programme of the school – all very normal and I would expect, with few exceptions, repeated in prep schools up and down the country. The curriculum – the content of what we teach – may, therefore, not vary much amongst schools – or even when set against the framework of the national curriculum. What should make a prep school curriculum distinctive is the extra breadth and depth given to each subject, (a benefit in part of smaller classes), greater diversity of languages, the teaching of classics and a greater number of specialists in subjects such as science, art, drama and mathematics – as well as the inevitable extra-curricular smorgasbord.

As an aside, at Sherborne, while the curriculum is busy, there are no extraneous lessons, or fashionable padding. The emphasis is on the quality of time spent learning, not the quantity. Breaks and lunch-times are sacrosanct, reserved for play. Saturday mornings are given over to activities; the amount of prep is reduced and children thrive. In designing any curriculum for young children, providing time-out is important to avoid the alternative of burn-out, too often evident in today's young children.

Where there will be debate in devising a prep school curriculum will be in years 7 and 8. It is extraordinary how any attempt to change the status quo is perceived as dumbing down, how any attempt to introduce more skills into teaching has to be at the expense of knowledge, that creativity is something altogether 'wishy washy'. It is true that prep schools are innately conservative, relying on a tried and tested product, yet change will happen and rather it be by choice than having it foisted upon us.

Years 7 and 8 of course are the years in which there is an independent schools curriculum of sorts in place – or curricula if one takes into account the range and variety of entrance and scholarship courses that exist as alternatives to the ISEB's offerings of Common Entrance and Common Scholarship. The whole issue of transfer has subsumed the curriculum to the extent that schools are left with the task of preparing pupils for a whole range of entrance exams, set at times convenient to the senior schools. Many prep schools remain comforted by having the exam to teach to, while senior schools that neither pay for, nor supervise it, will no doubt continue to find it a very convenient tool, without questioning whether it best serves pupils or parents. Sadly, it does not matter how good a curriculum is if, after two years each subject is measured by a single exam that can determine a child's future school, for inevitably it will be the exam that will determine the style of teaching that takes place – something the copious sales of past papers to prep schools would attest to.

To a large extent, however, the split between transfer and curriculum is already happening. Only 30% of children entering senior schools sit Common Entrance and so already a two-tier system operates. A growing number of senior schools such as Bedford, have abandoned Common Entrance in favour of aptitude and other screening tests to assess potential; many others, such as St Paul's, have decided to design their own papers. The argument that Common Entrance provides a common exam is no longer extant although the demand for it in localised clusters of schools, most notably around London and the South-East means it is very likely to remain as an option some schools will continue to use. Other areas may opt for a truncated Common Entrance in the core subjects which only further muddies the water. ISEB itself may well in the future link itself with the new curriculum and provide a standardised measure of performance for prep schools in individual subjects as they now do with their national certificates of achievement. Prep schools don't want a plethora of entrance exams, but nor do they want a curriculum hi-jacked by transfer when other options patently exist.

A prep school curriculum in Years 7 and 8 would most likely not vary significantly in many of the subjects from what we have now. The differences, I suspect, would be rather in how it would be taught. History, Geography and Religious Education have long been seen as being in need of an overhaul although, again, removing or modifying the exam would help. The core subjects, likewise will be able to be expanded and taught better in the surfeit of time prep schools now spend practising for Common Entrance; extra emphasis can be given in English for example, to debating and public speaking, to teaching a wider range of literature, to media studies, to more creative writing, or to those pupils who struggle with literacy and require further help with reading, writing and spelling.

The solution is not radical, but it does involve a fundamental shift in the way we teach. Changes in the curriculum may not, after all, be as important as changes in how we develop thinking skills, study skills and independent learning within all our subjects. We need to ensure that any change in curriculum goes hand-in-hand with a review as to how we assess children's learning and development. Prep schools already provide an excellent and wide-ranging education, with music and sport and much else besides, but it is the time wasted, especially for those who struggle with the sheer weight of Common Entrance or who are restricted by it, and the narrowing of teaching towards the inevitable tests that is the tragedy. Any curriculum that becomes the focus for transfer will be subjected to the same narrowing process. A prep school curriculum needs to sort out this issue before it can achieve its end of becoming a gold-standard curriculum and being properly recognised as such.

*'Smartening Up, Not Dumbing Down: Thoughts on the New Curriculum,' Attain Magazine, Autumn, 2008*

---

## SPARE NO EXPENSES

*'Never judge a country by its politics. After all, we English are quite honest by nature, aren't we?'*  
– Miss Froy, *The Lady Vanishes*

*'Listen, I'm a politician, which means I'm a cheat and a liar, and when I'm not kissing babies, I'm stealing their lollipops.'* – Jeffrey Pelt *The Hunt For Red October*

*'Moral indignation is in most cases 2 per cent moral, 48% indignation and 50% envy.'* – Vittorio De Sica

The revelations about MPs' expenses during the early summer united the country as never before in a declamatory outpouring of anger in the pages of our newspapers. Over a period of weeks, the Letters to the Editor section of *The Daily Telegraph* bulged with column upon column of reader reaction, dripping with contempt, vitriol and scorn for those in Westminster as, day on day, fresh revelations exposed yet more examples of the greed and deceit from those who we, the honest and gullible public, had placed in positions of trust.

Looking back after the event and distanced now from the initial hue and cry, two things stand out. The first is how immediately we assumed guilt without any trial other than by newsprint and demanded retribution; for a week or more, mob vengeance, fed by a triumphantly vigilante press, ruled. Whether we lived by similar rules and used our own expense accounts, (for those lucky enough that have them), in a similar way, was irrelevant as we rose, united, in high dudgeon. Nor did pleas of mitigation appease us, with the occasional risible claim, such as that for the duck house, picked up by comedians as stock in trade for any subsequent skit on the recession. Politicians, after all, we righteously argued, were different to the rest of us, and accountable for their actions for we paid their wages – and, it now appeared their not inconsiderable and often dubious expenses as well. The fact that their salaries are lower than most of the leading journalists who decried them (and whose expenses one can only wonder at), and that, like many, they made the fatal mistake of trusting their financial advisors who naturally applied the letter, rather than the spirit, of their employment contracts to their outgoings, meant nothing. We elected to them to positions of trust. They may not have broken any law (although no doubt a number had), but they had betrayed our confidence, and we were right to question their integrity and honesty – weren't we?

Of course we were, but we should reflect a little in doing so on the fact that MPs are elected not only to represent us, but are also representative of us. Their morality is, at least in part, our morality, their avarice, in part ours also, the products of the society that spawned them. The old adage that people get the politicians they deserve still runs true, and their lack of judgement and honesty is a reflection on a society hell-bent on feathering its own nest. In that, they are no better or worse than the bankers who trifled with peoples' savings and livelihoods, no better or worse than those politicians of the late 19th century who used British soldiers to wage wars in Africa, to protect their shady investments or the interests of banks in which they were major stakeholders; or a century before that, those politicians who had grown rich on the profits of slavery.

Criticising our leaders is a valued privilege of living in a democracy. In the United States, Gore Vidal gave his definition of politics in two words – 'Poli' which is Greek for 'many', and 'tics which are blood-sucking insects' – and escaped unscathed. Dave Allen, likewise, on this side of the Atlantic, when accused of being critical of politicians, was able to counter by saying that while it '... might appear that I'm being slightly hard on politicians, but in actual fact I've got a very soft spot for all of them. It's a bog in the west of Ireland.' Baiting and lampooning politicians is, after all, a national pastime. What made the events of this summer unusual, however, was that their actions even fell below the rather low expectations the public had previously had of them – no mean feat.

As independent schools pride themselves on promoting a strong moral code, there is an extra relevance for us also. A recent survey ascertained that around third of new MPs elected next year will be from private schools while among Conservatives, the figure is closer to 50 per cent. If we are responsible for producing so many of the leaders, then surely we should be doing better in educating our alumni in citizenship rather than contributing to the deficiencies of a system which is clearly in need of overhauling.

## TAKING THE BRAIN OUT FOR A WALK

*'The world our kids are going to live in is changing four times faster than our schools.'* – Dr William Daggett

*'A recent US study found American teens average 72 hours a week using electronic media.'*

*'Given that technology is such a significant part of young people's lives, it will affect the way they think, behave, learn and respond to the world around them.'* – Martin Westwell, Director for the Centre for Science Education in the 21st Century

*'It's hard for the older generation to understand what's going on with their children because they communicate in a completely different way. They are a generation abandoning print and paper, and the whole integration of technology and the way they glide from one to the other is seamless.'* – Mary Duff ChildWise Research Director, 2009

Over the last ten years there has been a revolution in our society that parents and schools are still struggling to come to terms with. While the internet has been with us for a generation now, it has only been in recent years that has become accessible and affordable by all. Not surprisingly, the keenest users and consumers of the new technology have been our children and as adults struggle to understand one operating system, their children are onto the next. The gap is widening all the time and the pendulum of this new knowledge is moving irretrievably from adults to the children of generation Y.

Part of the change is the direct result of government moves to encourage technology in our schools to the extent that the computer / pupil ratio in our state primary schools is now one computer to every six children. Every two years (and the time span is diminishing exponentially) the amount of technological information in the world is doubling so that recent calls for every child to have a laptop are already being superseded by calls for PDAs (portable digital assistants) or UMPC's (ultra-mobile PCs) instead. Mobile phones, the property of over 95% of 15 year olds in Britain, can now do as much as a computer could manage a decade ago and are changing the way we think and act. The average time children spend on-line – around 12 hours a week in England – is just the tip of the technological iceberg. Children's social lives, once traceable, are increasingly centred around texting, Bebo, Facebook, Friends Reunited and a host of other social networking sites – a recent survey of 1800 children across the country found that 62% had a profile on a social networking site. In education, the immediate source of information for teenagers is no longer the teacher or school library, but wikipedia or google. The pace of change is bewildering and while we could once pretend to understand our children's homework, they are quickly disappearing over the virtual reality of a new horizon – and probably one they've constructed themselves.

The challenges for parents and schools are immense. Many children have (unfiltered) computers in their bedrooms where they have unsupervised access to an indiscriminate and uncensored world. They know more about technology than most of their parents and teachers. Their world is one in which few parents feel comfortable, let alone have the skills to manage. Recent research indicated that only 17% of primary teachers and 5% of secondary teachers were confident about using ICT and that (according to a recent NFER poll) more than a third of teachers don't even have the skills to exploit the technology available to them. Using power-point presentations to show video clips is one thing; using Wi-fi, blue-tooth and developing hi-tech teaching is quite another.

Contemporaneous with changes in technology there has been considerable research in recent years on how the brain works with over 37,000 scientists world-wide currently engaged in the

field of neuroscience. We are learning, for instance, more about how digital technologies are affecting the wiring of the brain. In his recent book, *iBrain*, Dr Gary Small states that if the brain spends more time on quick, responsive, technology-related tasks and less time exposed to other people, brain circuits involved in face-to-face contact can become weaker. In time, this may lead to social awkwardness, inability to interpret nonverbal messages, isolation and less interest in traditional classroom learning – all of which have relevance to our schools. The recent explosion in technological knowledge is not reversible and knowing more about the brain works will help us maximize the benefits of the technological explosion in our workplaces, homes and classrooms.

It is difficult to calculate or predict the long-term effects. There is already, evidence, for instance, that children are working less with their hands and that as a result young engineers' skills are being identified as deficient in conceptualizing straightforward mechanical problems. In another study, a correlation has been found between expertise of surgeons at computer games and their skill at keyhole surgery. Reading for pleasure has dropped significantly amongst children, with books being replaced by consoles. While our brains are changing, we don't yet know the benefits or casualties of the huge environmental shift resulting from working with the new technologies.

What this new information doesn't tell us is how to use the findings to best advantage. Diana Ravitch argues that schools *must still do '... far more than teach children 'how to learn' and 'how to look things up;' they must teach them what knowledge has most value, how to use that knowledge, how to organize what they know, how to understand the relationship between past and present, how to tell the difference between accurate information and propaganda, and how to turn information into understanding'*

Rather than jettisoning the old knowledge, it is clear that we should use technology to better assist learning. As well, we should be looking at the benefits of brain-based teaching for our children. To survive in the 21st century children will need to be adaptable, resilient, possess self-direction and self-belief, and have the ability to embrace challenges, a willingness to learn, especially in areas of new technology and to network. In turn, schools need to ensure that whatever curriculum they follow, whatever subjects they teach, these traits should be encouraged and developed as part of the learning process. The old habits – a willingness to learn, to work and to take risks are more relevant than ever, but they are joined now by others, and most crucially the ability to adapt and embrace change. For children faced with an uncertain world the future could be very exciting indeed, but they will still need guidance and a moral and ethical compass to steer by.

---

## TEACHING TO THE TEST:

*'The University students I teach are, almost without exception, charming young people, quiet and well-behaved, with nice middle-class names like Hannah and Rebecca. Their faces are clean and glowing with health. They attend my lectures, obediently taking notes. They hand in their essays on time. There is only one problem – they lack even the slightest spark of initiative or intellectual curiosity.'* – Andrew Conway Teaching Children Not to Think The Spectator 7 December, 2002

This year's national exam results have raised, yet again, the question of standards in our schools. On the surface, the results are very impressive indeed with one in five GCSEs taken this year scoring an A or A\*. Some of the headlines ('*Teenager gets 100% in 11 GCSEs*'), however, have raised doubts about how the exams are marked and whether the exam system has merely been 'dumbed down'.

While it is indisputable that the standard required to achieve certain grades in individual subjects have dropped, it is very disheartening for students who have worked hard to achieve their personal goals to read the disparaging comments made every summer in response to government claims of improved standards. While not defending the obvious grade inflation, there should clearly be a little more sympathy shown for the students and schools and a little more calling to account of the examination boards.

There is little doubt that the pressure is on our young people with soaring unemployment, more pressure for university places and changing requirements in the workplace. As a result, many feel that the current generation of students in senior schools are actually working harder than a generation ago, even though, to some degree, their learning is constricted and limited by exams. As a result, schools, with half an eye on league tables have become very skilled and adept at teaching to the test. By preparing pupils through constant exam practice and by concentrating on exam methodology, exam language and technique and by narrowing teaching to what will be examined, they have indisputably improved the results of their students. Whether they have provided a better education, however, is a different matter. Failing to stray from what is to be examined into the peripheral, teaching students to be safe in their assumptions and their responses may result in good grades, but diminished intellectual curiosity. Universities are increasingly dismissive of A levels and many are looking to introduce their own entrance exams in order to get the students they want, those with the ability to think and take intellectual risk; employers, also, are bemoaning the failure of education to provide the core skills and standards of written English which they seek. For so long as examinations fail to extend the more able and continue to rely on conservative marking schedules that don't reward original thought, the situation will not improve.

Teaching children to pass an exam is not the same as gaining an education. It is a part of education, an important part too, but with better forms of assessment available, schools could, and should, do better. It is sad that the same barriers exist in prep schools as well with Common Entrance which follows a very prescriptive curriculum. Exams don't have to be narrowing and many scholarship exams, for instance, are liberating, asking the pupils to show what they think and know rather than testing what they have learnt, often by rote.

While we accept that exams are part of life, they need to be used sparingly. The current focus on teaching to the test, to the exclusion of all else, does not do this. Nor does it produce what universities and employers require and, instead, ends up dulling the very minds we are trying to liberate.

---

## THE ATOMISATION OF EDUCATION

*'They say that we are better educated than our parents' generation. What they mean is that we go to school longer. They are not the same thing.'* – Douglas Yates

*'By the time he has managed French, he will be too old to cross the channel.'* School report comment

*'All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated...As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come: so this bell calls us all .....No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.'* – John Donne Meditation XVII

There was a time when school was simple. There were a finite number of subjects that were expected to be taught, with arithmetic and English at the heart of learning.

There was also only one way to learn. There was only one way to arrange desks; one style of cursive writing; one method for teaching spelling followed by all schools; one set of arithmetic text books with their mercurial log tables; one interpretation of history, one methodology of teaching which was chalk and talk.

Everyone was expected to sing and swim, run and paint, to adhere to the rules of the community that was 'the school.' Little account was made of different learning styles or social or physical impediments. Expectations were clear, the goalposts were always visible, the process, age-worn and time-tested. It produced its share of failures, who often used disappointment at O levels as a springboard for success in life. The children held on to their report comments that were often scathing and paraded them with a sense of pride

There were downsides, of course. Because the children were taught en masse, in larger classes, some children inevitably slipped through the cracks; learning difficulties were taken as lack of effort and the remedy was not more help, but more work. Discipline could be strict and conformity in work and behaviour was the expectation, shared by parents and children who acted in partnership.

Of course, it is so much better now. Education is child-centred and focused on the individual girl or boy, IEPs (independent learning plans) are now the norm in schools; learning needs are identified early on and extra help given; school reports are politic and helpful. Schools are free to teach different styles of handwriting and spelling and are given the electronic props to make mathematics accessible. Children's rights, enshrined in the charter of 'Every Child Matters' are protected and made manifest. There is no single way to teach any longer, no narrowly defined curriculum, no more being beholden to a text book and rigour with the availability of so many ways of teaching, by using whiteboards, videos, school trips and the like, to make learning fun, something to be desired and consumed. The well-being and happiness of children is now the major priority, even if it is occasionally exercised in a way detrimental to classroom order and the freedom to teach.

But have we? Why have older readers of The Daily Telegraph, for instance, recently flooded the correspondence page with examples of undoubtedly witty, yet often brutal comments from their teachers that they have lovingly preserved. Will anyone preserve the bland comments served up today? While we are producing more emotionally aware children, children more aware of their rights, even to question how and what they are taught, has something not been

lost? Are we not in danger that by listening so intently to each individual, we no longer hear the chorus?

Of course, we recognise the value of sharing and teamwork, the value of learning with and off each other, of tolerance and of team spirit, but trust, patience, accepting that children have to live in communities with generic rules and an understanding that their lives are inextricably linked with the lives of others, has been lost, to some greater or lesser degree. As has a sense of perspective by, and of, children. Self-discipline, being sometimes made to do what one does not want to do, to be taught by someone one does not like, to learn as part of a larger community and to be allowed some anonymity in doing so, still has a lot to commend it.

---

## THE ATOMISATION OF SOCIETY

*It was a good place to grow up in, Lake Wobegon. Kids migrated around town as free as birds and did their stuff.... You were free, but you knew how to behave. You didn't smart off to your elders, and if a lady you didn't know came by and told you to blow your nose, you blew it. Your parents sent you off to school with lunch money and told you to be polite and do what the teacher said, and if there was a problem at school, it was most likely your fault and not the school's. Your parents... did not read books about parenting, and when they gathered with other parents... they didn't talk about schools or about prevailing theories of child development. They did not weave their lives around yours. They had their own lives which were mysterious to you.'* – Garrison Kiellor [Wobegon Boy](#)

*'The most stunning change for adolescents today is their aloneness. The adolescents of the 90s are more isolated and more unsupervised than their predecessors... not because they come from parents who don't care, or from a community that doesn't value them, but rather because there hasn't been enough time for adults to lead them through the process of growing up.'* – Patricia Hersch [A Tribe Apart](#)

*'And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations.'* – Margaret Thatcher Interview 23 September 1987

It was all Margaret Thatcher's fault, so it was said, this lurch to the right that started in the nineteen eighties, towards rampant individualism with its unhealthy obsession on self. It was she, her critics bemoaned reading her words selectively, who started us down this path towards becoming an uncaring society, with each man or woman determined to looking after themselves by stepping over anybody and everybody in their quest for loadsamoney and worldly success. It was her jaundiced view, that there was no such thing as society that duped us into ignoring its very possibility. It was, they still say, her fault that England finds itself in the mess it is today.

All of which is rather naïve and silly and yet the truth is that, today, in many parts of England, society as we once knew it, has ceased to exist. Many areas of our towns and bigger cities are no longer safe. For many, caught up in such places, the only escape is to stay indoors, to pursue a virtual life, trying to look after their children until they have to go to school where metal

detectors protect them, but only during daylight. Those that have the means have moved abroad or live in gated communities, modern day moat and baileys. CCTV cameras watch every move we make, yet youth crime, knife crime has soared along with the number of children with single parents, the proliferation of binge drinking, drug abuse and the numbers in our prisons. Society is haemorrhaging and with it, the idea of community as families turn in on themselves, not trusting their neighbours for fear that they too might wrest an advantage from them. Obsessed with real and imagined dangers, they have drawn their children closer to them, watching and managing them, fighting for their futures. Technology has played its part as well, as our children have moved into the shadows, to inhabit a world of virtual reality preferable to the reality that they see out their windows. Communication exists best it seems via the internet, via texts, via anything that doesn't require face-to-face conversation. People are scared, not sure how to keep up or control what is happening, turning to a mantra of self-analysis and self-obsession, learning the steps to happiness, but being unable to walk them. Increasingly, communities polarize, as does the country, in terms of wealth and opportunity. Trust evaporates, surety is compromised, parenting becomes primal.

All of which is a huge challenge to our schools. We cannot swim against the tide of technology, but we can teach our children how to manage it better. We can work at instilling the key values of tolerance and understanding by getting children to look outwards, by teaching them how to cope with adversity, how to be charitable. We can encourage face-to-face communication where the eyes say what the words cannot and provide the means to communicate honestly and sincerely. We can educate against prejudice and build up a sense of shared responsibility, both within and outside the school gates. We can work on sharing and promote the value of community. We can teach respect for one's elders or for different cultures and faiths. We can do all these things, but we cannot do so on our own.

Somehow – and it is a leap of faith on the part of parents – schools must be given more support to provide the glue to hold our communities together. We must learn to trust each other more and learn to see their children as part of a community, whose immediate needs might sometimes be compromised, but whose long-term lives are enriched. We must take responsibility to educate others by example and sometimes, by simply being parents, and giving the role the gravitas it deserves. We must give our children time, not to help turn them into being successful adults, but just to be children. We must teach them that life isn't just about them, that it is right to venerate their grandparents and to sit still and listen to adults, that their friends and their friends' friends are bridges to community as are their friends' enemies. And we must keep building this sense of identity, of belonging, of being members of society with all its responsibilities and obligations for without it, the world will be a very lonely place indeed.

## THE BLAME GAME

*'Once upon a time, there were four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. There was an important job to be done and Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought that Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.'*

*'Life is an accident waiting to happen.'* – Anon

*'Accident? Accident? In my world, buddy, there's no such thing as an accident. There's always someone you can pin it on.'* – [Legal Briefs](#)

One of the most appalling and truly damaging trends in recent years has been the emergence of a highly sophisticated, highly developed blame culture. Accidents were always a part of life, but no more and the attempt to make people more accountable and therefore more prudent, has grown into a nasty business inhabited by a growing coterie of lawyers, skilled in litigation and able to exploit the law in a way that contradicts morality, commonsense and reasonableness. In the aftermath of a raft of ill-considered legislation, a new sub-class of wealthy lawyers and accountants has arisen, impervious to recession, even profiting from it, and equipped to use the law as a weapon for clients bent on seeking compensation for anything that may have gone wrong, from a branch falling off a tree to the misdiagnosis of dyslexia. Worse, they are out there, touting for business, pointing out potential areas for litigation to unsuspecting members of the public on a no-win, no pay basis. The apportioning of blame has become one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the western world and, if one could buy shares in such things, would feature alongside the department that provides CRB checks, as the most profitable business ever to invest in. It counts amongst its bastard off-shoots, the sheaves, or rather tomes of legislation on the subject of health and safety that has bowed bookshelves (and who do we sue if they break upon us?) and made life untenable for those who have to manage the excruciating detail of administering such suffocating and ultimately deleterious legislation. Worse are the volumes of risk assessment forms required for anything from crossing a road to flying a kite. It is with a certain muted sense of relief and gratitude that one realises that, should you be short of a bob, you can always find a raised paving stone to stub your toe on, knowing there is a burgeoning army of lawyers and self-proclaimed experts of no fixed purpose or scruple willing to help seek out those responsible – for a fee.

The tragedy is that this has changed the way we think. It has limited the world our children inhabit; it has meant schools have abandoned school trips and outings, it has turned the playground into a quiet zone, retarded physical development, stunted relationships and engendered suspicion. It has led to the abandonment of hanging flower baskets, of Christmas lights, of pancake races and sports days, the banning of paper planes, of conkers and skipping ropes. A ten year old boy drowns in a pool because health and safety rules forbid two support policemen to assist – a decision upheld by their superiors; another fire-fighter who saves a drowning person from the River Tay is threatened with disciplinary action for ignoring the same legislation; doctors shy away from difficult operations for fear of what will happen if they go wrong; while shopkeepers cannot clear snow from the paths outside their shops for the action of doing so would make them liable for litigation should someone slip. While the whole litigation industry could claim as its text the Book of Ecclesiastes, there is a difference between everything having a reason or purpose to the idea of blame and responsibility. Yet while we might like to think that things just happen or just are, society is no longer satisfied with that

as an explanation. A child's failure at school is now attributed to poor teaching, inadequate resources, too large or too small classes, disruptions from other pupils, some undiagnosed learning difficulty, but seldom to sloth or the child's unfortunate genetic make-up. Even teachers are in on the game, last year claiming at least £20m in compensation for accidents, pupil attacks and employment disputes. One teacher received £80,000 after slipping in mud while walking between school buildings. The staff member in St Helens, Merseyside, injured her hip and back – and was subsequently retired on health grounds. A music teacher from south-west England received £40,000 when a door blew shut on a windy day – resulting in a 'crush injury' to her wrist, the result not of God, but of local schools and councils who had not foreseen such an eventuality. It has changed the way we work and play. It has made us guarded, cautious and suspicious. It has affected the mindset of a generation, worse still our children and has made a considerable number of unscrupulous lawyers rich. As in life, as in divorce, as in buying a house or even in the simple act of dying, it is too often the lawyers who profit most – which cannot be an accident. The question is, whom do we blame?

---

## THE DAMAGE DONE

*'If you want to see what your children are capable of, you must stop giving them things.'*

*'Families centred on children create anxious, exhausted parents and demanding, entitled children. We parents are too quick to sacrifice our lives and our marriages for our kids. Most of us have created child-centred families, where our children hold priority over our time, energy and attention. But as we break our backs for our kids, our marriage and self-fulfilment go out the window while our children become more demanding and dissatisfied.'* – **David Code**

*'As a child my family's menu consisted of two choices: take it, or leave it.'* – **Buddy Hackett**

Every so often one reads an article that beggars belief. One such article recently appeared in the Daily Telegraph\* based on a survey conducted of some 2000 parents. Amongst its findings was the confession that a quarter of parents felt too worried to punish their children because they thought that to do so might upset them. And then, in the very next paragraph, 85% of the very same parents felt that children today had 'little or no discipline.' One wonders at how they explained away the obvious correlation between the two observations and if parents have either become particularly stupid or were actually struggling with the very real pressures of raising children in our broken society. Whether the result of parental peer pressure, whereby parents strive to ensure that their child has the same opportunities, the same raft of additions to their curriculum vitae as those given by other parents to their children or pressure foisted on them by the very real competition for school or university places, it cannot be easy. At least a quarter of those polled were sufficiently aware to admit that they wished they had been stricter with their off-spring at an earlier age, but it was sobering reading how parents no longer enjoyed the pressures of bringing up their children for fear that by not pushing them, they could surrender an advantage to another child, thereby failing their own.

Saddest of all, however, was the admission that when asked how they saw their role, 55% considered themselves more of a friend than a parent. So desperate are they to stay connected with their children, that the very basis of parenthood had been jettisoned in order to allow the child centre-stage. It was all very depressing.

Ironically, never before have parents tried so hard to get it right. A recent survey conducted by Dr Oriel Sullivan \*\* a leading sociologist at Oxford University established that parents spend triple the amount of time with their children compared with a generation ago as middle classes try to give their offspring a head start in life. Men especially are spending far more time with their children than their fathers did with them, spending ten times the amount of time compared with 25 years ago. Meanwhile many working mothers, in an attempt to make up for working longer hours, are caring for their children more dutifully, going on cultural trips or reading to them – whereas in a previous generations many parents were more relaxed about children entertaining themselves.

Television presenter Kirsty Young \*\*\* provoked considerable comment earlier in the year when she condemned pushy parents, seeing it as a disease whereby adults treated their off-spring as ‘extensions of their own success’. Her arguments that parents were trying to shape their children into ‘Little Einsteins’ – an unfortunate example, really, considering Einstein’s rather ordinary school career – met with a good deal of support.

She was not without her critics, however, who accused her of not living in the real world in which parents will do pretty much anything to give their children the best possible start in life, reducing the argument to a struggle borne of the lack of opportunity and equality in a failed education system.

In an age of helicopter parents, so-called, it is easier to be critical than helpful, easier to identify the problem, but less easy to show a way out. Sometimes, in parenting as in all else, the harder one tries, the worse it gets, the more money one spends, the less satisfactory the outcome. Just as, sometimes, the more you try to push children in a particular direction, the more obtuse and resistant they can become. Children need friends, but they don’t need their parents to be those friends. Instead, they need parents to offer portage, guidance and steerage. They need them to lead by example, by enthusing, by offering opportunity and desist from measuring every minute of childhood by the profitable use made of each of the sixty seconds.

The other obvious factor driving parents in the wrong direction is the inequity of educational opportunity, based on postcodes, wealth and opportunity. If there was a comparable standard of educational opportunity across England, parents could relax more and not feel that their role was one of boxing manager. It is parental instinct to fight for one’s brood, but it is important, also, that we all fight for a more level playing field so we can go back to the roles that we were intended for, as children, parents and teachers respectively and allow our children they time to lie fallow and work out how they want to spend their childhood, regardless of how wasteful it may seem to us.

*‘If I had my child to raise all over again,  
I’d build self-esteem first, and the house later.  
I’d finger-paint more, and point the finger less.  
I would do less correcting and more connecting.  
I’d take my eyes off my watch, and watch with my eyes.  
I’d take more hikes and fly more kites.  
I’d stop playing serious, and seriously play.  
I would run through more fields and gaze at more stars.  
I’d do more hugging and less tugging.’*

**Diane Loomans** "If I Had My Child To Raise Over Again"

\* *The Daily Telegraph* 17 February 2010

\*\* *The Daily Telegraph* 7 April, 2010

\*\*\* *BBC News*, 5 January, 2010

## THE GOOD LIFE

One of the most telling measures of the way in which the world has changed can be found in our understanding of the phrase ‘the good life’. When we were children the good life was something promoted, usually in unison, by our parents, our teachers and the local church and the message was invariably the same: behave in way that would make your parents proud of you, eat your vegetables, respect your elders, have good manners, say your prayers, don’t let your family down.

Goodness was bordered by salvation on one side and the strap on the other and it was in that no-man’s land that we grew up, our generation, learning that the good life was lived for the convenience and well-being of others, and to please society and parents, regardless of what long-term benefits may accrue for oneself.

In the aftermath of the sixties, attitudes changed and the phrase ‘the good life’ became intricately linked with the idealism and philosophy of the television programme of the same name. For Tom and Barbara Good the good life meant living in communion with the natural environment, an upholding of old values and practices, of thrift and hard work. Not quite living for the higher ideals of salvation and deference, but admirable enough in their own way.

It was in the next generation that things started to go awry. Terry Wogan, sounding remarkably like a grumpy old man was recently to be found ruminating on ‘the good life’ in a national newspaper and, specifically, on how the phrase had been devalued:

*‘Now it’s: ‘Be good to yourself – because you’re worth it.’ Meaning, love yourself, pamper yourself – the watchword of the ‘Me, me, me’ generation. The very antithesis of what I was brought up to believe: self-praise is no praise, vanity is a sin, and you’re not worth tuppence until you’ve done something worthwhile’*

The good life is now, sadly, linked with the idea of personal indulgence of having the best of everything. Living the good life is now seen as being an essentially personal experience. The idea of a wannabe embarrassing his or her parents by getting in debt, by being arrested, living on the state, having a criminal record, even appearing on a reality television show is overlooked by the rush to make it, to secure the ten minutes of fame suggested by Andy Warhol. ‘Good’ now implies indulgence and extravagance, even if you can’t afford it and is essentially materialistic and hedonistic.

The problem is having raised a generation to think this way, how can we imbue them also with that other sense of goodness and permanence after the ten minutes is over (if, indeed, it ever happens). We can wonder whether we are rearing an essentially superficial generation who will have criss-crossed the world by the age of thirty, but won’t know their neighbours, who will flit from relationship to relationship, but never settle, who never learn the lesson that life is a marathon, not a series of sprints. Perhaps, though, in the age-old way that one generation surprises the next, our children will surprise us. They already deal with a great deal in their busy lives, sometimes remarkably so, and it would be no surprise if they turn away from the excesses and shallowness of modern life to the good life as once defined.

## THE JOY OF IT: THE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF LITTLETON POWYS \*

*'At the age of ten I watched the wild flowers run  
Into his fingers and all Dorset burst  
In birdsong round his head, trill, twitter, chirp and chaff.'*

So wrote Louis MacNeice in his *Autumn Sequel* in memory of Littleton Powys, his Headmaster at Sherborne Preparatory School. MacNeice's evocation of the spirit and personage of St Francis in Littleton is particularly apt for one whose love of nature and unbridled optimism dominated his life and work and influenced generations of pupils. His name links him inextricably with his better-known brothers and yet Littleton Powys is worthy of consideration in his own right; his contribution to education evident in both his work and writings, was remarkable, as was the pivotal role he played in his most unconventional family although it was the old-fashioned joy he took from his life that most sets him apart.

As one of eleven siblings, Littleton's life transcended two worlds: that of the literary milieu, dominated by his three brothers, John Cowper, Theodore and Llewelyn; and that of his life as a preparatory school headmaster in a small, conservative Dorset town. In both worlds, he was triumphant. His innovations as a headmaster were widely acknowledged and celebrated in his day while his educational legacy, based on an enlightened curriculum, his devotion to literature, love of nature and most importantly, an ability to inspire children are characteristics which still resonate at The Prep today.

Littleton's own place at the heart of a prolific literary family, his relationships with his brothers and sisters and the influence he had on them and they on him should not be underestimated. Of the eleven siblings, it was Littleton who assumed the mantle as the head of the family, despite being the second-born. It was he who provided reassurance and comfort when his mother died at the outbreak of World War One, when their sister, Nelly, died aged only 13 years (an event which had such a devastating effect on Katie in particular) and when, finally, in 1923, their father died. Throughout his life, he proved to be the ballast in his eccentric and idiosyncratic family, providing stability and refuge for his often wayward brothers. His family demanded much of him and while they occasionally found him stuffy and bewailed the pettiness of the world he inhabited or his lack of intellectual ambition, he was always there to offer advice or help to his siblings, giving assistance and reassurance (often financial) when called upon, and representing the family in such practical matters as administering their father's estate. He was, for the brothers in particular, the embodiment of normality; sensible and trustworthy, they relied on him (particularly John and Llewelyn), both practically and emotionally.

And yet there was undoubtedly a personal cost, as reflected in his early retirement on the grounds of ill-health at the age of only 48. He gave a good deal of himself and perhaps the many demands made on him, by his family and his free-spirited siblings, by his school, shrunken in roll by the ravages of war and most of all from his own inveterate good nature were too much for him to sustain. His premature retirement was much lamented, and coming as it did thirty two years before his eventual death, made one wonder as to the nature of his illness and whether he had not acted precipitously.

He reflected later that 'had I learnt better the art of decentralization' I might have struggled on', but he was the embodiment of the school, in spirit and presence, and delegation did not come easy to him. When he retired in the summer of 1923, only months before the death of his father, he felt that the chief work of his life was finished, reflecting that 'in spite of all the inevitable failures, disappointments and sorrows, which are the lot of all human beings, I feel

very, very thankful that I was born into the world and was allowed the immense privilege of being in charge of this school.'

Littleton's introduction to the 1st edition of *The Joy of It* in 1937 reads more like an apology than a preface, suggesting as he does that his book should be more aptly entitled 'Yet Another' ('Yet another autobiography; yet another book by a Headmaster dealing with education; yet another book with Nature as the text; yet another Powys writing about himself'). Yet, despite his misgivings, the book justifies its presence on each score, adding inexorably to the weight of accumulated wisdom and knowledge on each subject.

Littleton listed six reasons why, in the end, he decided to write about his life: to correct any errant impressions of his home, his family and his brothers; to express his thankfulness for his remarkably happy life; to provide a comparison for the reader with the remarkable *Autobiography* of his brother, John Cowper, and with whom, in spite of all their differences, he was 'bound together by the closest ties of friendship for over sixty years'; as a tribute to the people and places that had accorded him so much happiness; to pass on his experiences as a headmaster; and finally, to express the debt he owed to nature for his happiness. In the course of the book, he provides an answer to each in turn.

*The Joy of It* is a celebration of a life well-lived, covering the first sixty three years of Littleton's life from his childhood at Shirley and Montecute, through his time as a pupil at Sherborne, his working life at Bruton, Llandovery and Sherborne and the first fifteen years of his retirement. The first chapter, which precedes his own birth and early childhood in the book's chronology, is his exaltation of nature and sets the tone for the remainder of the book, epitomising Littleton's philosophy of life, his quest for happiness and his exhortation to 'rejoice, rejoice, in all things, rejoice.'

After the homage to the natural world with which Littleton opens and closes his autobiography, he proceeds with an account of his early life at Montecute which provides a fascinating contrast to that of his older brother, whose recollections and memories appears dark by contrast to his illumination. John Stallworthy, in his biography of Louis MacNeice, identified Littleton as his father's favourite, perhaps because he had the distinguished appearance and generous nature of his supposed forebears, the ancient Welsh princes of Powysland, and perhaps also because he had not inherited from his masochistic grandmother, Mrs Knight, 'the deadly nightshade' said to run in the veins of his more famous brothers, John, Theodore and Llewelyn.

The relationship between John Cowper and Littleton was strong and enduring throughout their lives, despite their obvious differences. At prep school, Littleton was the sociable all-rounder whose physical prowess meant that he adopted the mantle of protector, looking after his more solitary, introspective, older brother who in turn he looked up to in matters of the intellect. The differences between them became more pronounced at Sherborne School where Littleton found himself in a form ahead of John, and at Cambridge, as Littleton's sporting reputation and acquaintances placed him at stark variance with John's philosophical friends. John often found himself vexed with his younger brother, criticising him for not taking his studies seriously ('You never think, Littleton: Why don't you think?') and questioned his ambition and yet there remained a bond between them that was never to be broken. In his autobiography, John Cowper wrote of how the early years he had spent at Shirley had 'bound my life with the life of my brother Littleton in so fast a knot death alone – and perhaps not even that – can loosen it.' And so it proved throughout their divergent and varied lives, each turning to the other during times of financial need, ill-health and marital loss.

Littleton enjoyed his childhood, was nourished by it and, over time, romanticised it. When writing of his early life, he did so with a mix of gratitude and celebration: 'I often wonder whether ever a happier home than ours existed. It was a home of freedom.' No one was required to eat anything they did not like, the children were allowed to do much as they pleased while their mother held only two ambitions: "Other than her children should be happy, and that they should love one another." Littleton took these principles into his school mastering; always taking onto his shoulders the responsibility of being fair and just with his pupils, of listening and weighing up concerns and always thinking the best of his charges, even when they took advantage of him. In adulthood, he was an impressively built man, nearly six feet tall, upright and with broad-shoulders, as would befit a Cambridge rugby blue, a keen games player with a booming voice and considerable presence, always well-groomed and gentlemanly in appearance. He presented, as MacNeice astutely observed, like a squire, but without a 'squire's presumption.'

After Cambridge, Littleton took up his first teaching post at King's School, Bruton in September 1896, where he was employed to teach Latin and games. Going straight from university to teaching was a challenge for the young man, but he was well supported by his headmaster, D E Norton and later acknowledged that, 'I learnt far more at Bruton to fit me for my profession than I ever learnt at Cambridge.' His record of his early years of teaching is full of acute observations: that no boy accounted dull at school ever failed in the struggle of life or that the boys who play hardest, if properly encouraged, work hardest too', while all the time developing his own idiosyncratic approach to school-mastering.

Whilst at Bruton, he also developed greater self-awareness: he realised, for instance, that he enjoyed studying the character of boys and had 'a natural bent in the direction of psychology'; that life was about making mistakes, so long as one learnt from them; and that it was an 'immense privilege . . . to be a schoolmaster, and that a schoolmaster's life could be one of the very happiest upon earth.'

Littleton was blissfully happy at Bruton, but after a period of time in the post, he was encouraged by his friends at Sherborne, Canon Westcott and G.M. Carey, to look for a position in a larger public school and was eventually tempted to do so by a letter of offer from the warden at Llandoverly College. It was a move that met with his father's hearty approval in that it built on the family's links with Wales and in some vague way, reunited him with the their ancestors, the 'Princes of Powys'. His three and a half years there were amongst the happiest of his career, culminating in his marriage to his first wife, Mabel, at Bruton in 1904. It was at that time that he was approached by his former headmaster, W H Blake to take over from him at Sherborne Prep school, an offer he keenly accepted.

From his arrival in 1905 until 1923, Littleton's life was centred around Sherborne Prep and thereafter, in his memory. He ran a happy school and his ethos, which was, as he wrote, to 'keep alive the spark of originality in the mind of each boy and to give the recognition due to his individuality' was successfully implanted into his School. As a headmaster, he was forward-thinking, although in the Powysian scheme of things, he was no doubt conservative. It was his own more conventional life, and the world that he embraced as Headmaster, full of its myriad responsibilities, strictures and conventions that also brought him so much genuine pleasure and satisfaction. He was both respected and liked by his pupils for the trust he placed in them and his obituary in The Times, fifty years after he began his headmastership, reminded readers how ' . . . he dealt with his pupils as individuals, always seeking to foster their special capabilities and interests, and to develop the originality of thought which is their priceless possession.'

Littleton's remarkably successful and forward-looking philosophy of education, was based on the premise that it was important for children to be given a good start in life so that they might 'grow up healthy and happy and kind men, men who would never regret that they had been born.' He saw his own role as being to inspire his pupils 'to yearn for the greatness of nature' which, in his view was the supreme source of happiness the world could give. His ability to enthuse children to learn the names of birds and trees and to appreciate their environment was forward-looking, as were many of his other ideas on education. He believed, for instance, in subject specialists for pupils from age nine onwards and used it as a form of teacher appraisal; he believed all children should learn the same work and therefore did not agree with setting (streaming was rarely likely to be an issue with the small numbers of pupils) although he accepted the possibility of division within the forms; he welcomed school inspectors, one of the first prep schools to do so. He read to the children, every year through the Michaelmas and Lent terms for half an hour each evening, determined that his charges would have an appreciation of English literature while including the adventures of Sir Walter Scott, Rider Haggard and John Buchan or the more usual Dickens and Bunyan. Whenever time and weather permitted, he took his pupils on long walks, most often to the ridge at Corton Denham and to Corton Beacon whereupon they would survey a view 'second to none' and gather specimens, usually (but not exclusively) flowers and build up their own collections, for, as he astutely observed, boys 'love to make collections.' He gave considerable freedoms to his pupils, and his belief that children should not be supervised other than in class and games was remarkable, even according to the mores of the day.

The effect he had on his pupils was considerable and the song of joy he writes of in this book remained with many of them throughout their lifetimes. Some twenty years after leaving school, Louis MacNeice wrote of his former headmaster that he taught him the names of butterflies and 'made the swallows loop and dive / from the high belfry louvers and so brought / Us children to our senses. Which were five'. Another favoured old pupil, Oliver Holt, in his memoir *Pipers Hill*, published seventy years after his own time at The Prep wrote of his fortunate childhood and noted that 'to that piece of good fortune, another almost as great was granted me: my love of birds and flowers and butterflies (which) was . . . immensely enlarged and encouraged by the Headmaster . . . Littleton Powys.' It was Holt, more than any other pupil, who encapsulated the Powysian spirit. While a pupil at the school, he had identified some 55 different types of birds that he had seen in the Prep grounds, a list paraded triumphantly by Littleton in his autobiography as an example of what can happen when a child is properly enthused and taught to appreciate nature in its element.

In the remainder of his autobiography, Littleton provides a cursory glance at the years following his retirement to Sherborne, where he lived in Quarry House , designed for him by his brother, Bertie. His other roles as governor at Foster's and Lord Digby's, the two local secondary schools and at King's School, Bruton and his membership of the RSPCA tell us how comfortably he fitted in with the town and the town with him. He kept in touch with his old boys and pursued his love of nature relentlessly, but he never returned to teaching, leaving that chapter behind him, although occasionally pining for the lost years. He concludes his own story with a wide-ranging chapter on school-mastering, on Sherborne School and on education, before moving on to make a rigorous defence of his brothers from comments made in contemporary writings about his family *and concluded with a rambling chapter on his years of retirement and his pantheistic faith.*

In his latter years, having buried two wives and seen his savings and investments dwindle till he was forced to sell Quarry House and move to West Pennard, he remained as optimistic as

ever. When Louis MacNeice visited him there in the latter years, he found him older, much older, but in spirit, unchanged and wrote of him wistfully:

*‘His hands are gentle with wild flowers, his memory / Latticed with dialect and anecdotes / And wisps of nature poetry; ...’*

The many qualities of Littleton Powys shine through this wonderfully evocative book and it is a joy that it is being reprinted, for aficionados of the Powys family, for those interested in nature and education and for those who wish to read of one of the most enlightened headmasters of his age. More important, and suffusing the book, is the sense that his life was a triumph because of how he lived it, something John Cowper came close to acknowledging in his own autobiography, when he wrote: ‘the more I come to recognise that the gift of expression, whether in speech or in writing, or in any art at all, is totally and entirely inferior to a certain indescribable genius for life’. I suspect he saw in Littleton this genius for life, through the sense of satisfaction and contentment with which he pursued his work and revelled in his love of nature, and through his perennial optimism. He was a wonderfully happy man, an inspirational schoolmaster and, as Louis MacNeice so aptly put it, ‘of the Kingdom.’

The Joy of It is testament to Littleton’s unwavering optimism and his love of nature, both of which permeated his whole life. His was not a life without doubt or hardship, however, and as if anticipating the inevitable questions about the unflagging omnipotence of his joy, Littleton wrote ‘possibly some will say: What of those persistent little annoyances, those petty quarrels, the monotony, the narrow outlook of a schoolmaster’s life about which we hear so much. Why no mention of these?’ and the reply that he gives is simple, that in casting his mind back, ‘Of all the disappointments that came my way, all the troubles that beset me, disappear and I only see the sun shining in a cloudless sky.’ It is this enthusiasm and joie de vie, rarely so transparent and pronounced in writers (or headmasters) today, that pervades the book and makes a new edition of ‘[The Joy of It](#)’ such a welcome addition to the Powys canon.

\* Preface to a new edition of *The Joy of It* published by the Sundial Press in 2010

---

## THE INVASION OF CHILDHOOD

*‘Slow down, you’re moving too fast (you’ve got to make your childhood last).’ – Paul Simon, with apologies*

*‘It is never too late to have a happy childhood.’ – Tom Robbins*

*‘I’d give all wealth that years have piled,  
The slow result of Life’s decay,  
To be once more a little child  
For one bright summer day?’ – Lewis Carroll ‘Solitude’*

The release of the Cambridge review into primary education in October, met with widespread approval from those involved in education. Widespread, but not, it appears, from the government who keep pushing back the boundaries in their belief that the more you do for longer, the greater the benefit to the children. Yet despite their intransigence, the suggestion that we should be starting formal education later, as happens in many overseas countries,

makes a lot of sense, begging the question as to why we start so young and yet lag behind other European countries in our levels of literacy and numeracy.

More frightening is the government’s desire for pushing learning back into the early years has been the growing realization that many of our learning problems are quite likely, at least in part, the product of our desire to teach children to read and count before they have reached the requisite stage of readiness. Children who are not ready to read start to guess and keep guessing rather than learning to see patterns. By not being ready to learn at an abstract level, they are propelled into a spiral of failure simply by being pushed too far, too early.

What if, then, what if, all that money, all those resources, all that pressure and all those expectations had actually done the very opposite of what was intended. What if? What if what has been a central plank of government’s programme has actually damaged our children? What if the government, rather than extending the years of education children had to spend in schools had spent the same money on improving pupil / teacher ratios? What if they had encouraged a different curricula that taught children better social skills, developed their awareness of the arts and culture, encouraged their physical development and co-ordination and not pushed them into formal learning until they were ready? Of course, many children are ready to read at a young age and will devour books, but this has as much to do with physical maturation as any innate ability, more to do with readiness than cleverness. It is when blanket expectations and teacher targets are in place that the greatest damage is done.

There is so much written about education that it is hard for anyone’s head not to spin. Ideas and philosophies come in and out of fashion at an alarming rate: recent articles on the downside of the carrot philosophy of positive reinforcement and the value of tough love seem to have been pulled out of the hat once again along with constant pressures placed on schools and teachers to ‘tweek’ their already severely ‘tweeked’ curricula to fit in with the latest trend, the latest medical findings, the latest political rant.

Schools, of course, must change and many are lagging behind in many areas, particularly in a strategy to deal with managing the proliferation of technology. But change must be measured and protect what we do well. Happy, secure children learn best; children who are ready to learn, can make up lost ground in a very short time. Filling children’s days does not equate with progress and we must not pretend that putting extra pressure on children is the only way for them to keep up with the rest of the world.

*‘The great cathedral space which was childhood.’ – Virginia Woolf*

---

## TRUE GRIT

*“They say he has grit. I wanted a man with grit.”*

**Marshall Reuben J. ‘Rooster’ Cogburn** alias John Wayne in ‘True Grit’ (1970)

*Vicar (passing a particularly beautiful garden: “My good man, God has certainly blessed you with a beautiful garden”*

*Man (pausing): “Yes, but you should have seen it when he had it all to himself”*

*“In the confrontation between the stream and the rock the stream always wins ... not through strength, but through persistence”*

*“Life is like an ice-cream cone. You have to lick it one day at a time.” – Charlie Brown*

As we prepare our pupils for the annual ritual of examinations for their next schools, we are doing what all schools do, trying to ensure our pupils are as prepared as they can be, instilling in them the need to read the question carefully and introducing various techniques to pick up and maximise the accumulation of marks. For most pupils the exam is an acceptable rite of passage, a form of selection to progress although, for a significant number, they represent a considerable hurdle to be overcome.

In truth, the exam is a limited measure of what makes a successful adult. It tests one skill, one ability, but not what maketh the man. There are plenty of people who can pass an exam standing on their head or who can play games with an innate skill, but have never had to apply themselves, to stick at something until they win through to a new and higher level. Often, when I am talking to a senior head about a marginal pupil, I am led to the question, what do you want? For I know what I would want. I would want pupils with character. I would want pupils with true grit.

We all know, for it has become a cliché, that the world is full of talented people who do little with their gifts: Children who naturally excel in games or who have a natural ear for music, but who don't work at getting better even when their less talented peers catch up and surpass them by dint of hard work. It is only by digging deep that we find what we are truly capable of, which is why perseverance, consistency of effort and a good work ethic are traits we all espouse in our schools. Unsurprisingly, it is very often the children for whom things don't come so easy, who do better as they grow up. Children with learning difficulties, or those who struggle with work, stamina, or who lack the innate skills tend to dig deeper and work harder at overcoming their weaknesses. Unsurprisingly, the habit of digging, once acquired, stays with them. Within a few years after leaving us, they have surpassed, even eclipsed those who sailed into their senior schools without raising a sweat. Invariably, it is character and application, not innate ability and native wit that has carried them through and will continue to do so. Those that make learning a habit of work, who practise hard, who keep trying, invariably triumph. Many an international sportsman never reached top team level at school yet by trying harder, by working when others had quit, by persevering had reached the very top. So it is in life.

We sometimes blunt the sharp edges of our children by giving them too much. They may learn to play cricket better without always having all the best coaching and equipment; they may learn better without someone doing it for them. Children need to learn that success takes time to learn, to acquire new skills. I remember spending two or three hours every Sunday afternoon while at school kicking a rugby ball, spiralling, drop-kicking, place kicking, working for accuracy with both feet. I was never a natural. Few are. But I became proficient in the skills I worked at.

Which takes us back to earlier missives on the most valuable things a child can possess: a sense of purpose; a hunger to learn; clear goals; and perseverance. Great coaches, great teachers can inspire and direct their charges, but the great hunger must come from within. What is needed is something we don't attempt to measure quite often enough – true grit.

---

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME?

*'A child educated only at school is an uneducated child' – George Santayana*

*'What we want is to see the child in pursuit of knowledge, and not knowledge in pursuit of the child.' – George Bernard Shaw*

*'I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.' – Mark Twain*

*'My schooling not only failed to teach me what it professed to be teaching, but prevented me from being educated to an extent which infuriates me when I think of all I might have learned at home by myself' – George Bernard Shaw*

For some children, schools can be daunting places. On arrival, they are placed in classrooms with a whole lot of strangers, given some rudimentary guidelines and left to get on with the whole process of learning, through a combination of instruction and osmosis. Later they make the discovery, based on what they see and hear, that they are perhaps not as bright as some children and yet are brighter than others – if without any idea what that might mean for them. By some strange internal rationalization of self and place that we all make in our lives, they will then place themselves into some sort of rank order, even if it is just of their own making. Later, when exams become a part of the process aided and abetted by the setting and streaming necessitated by external exams, then the process is nearly complete. The school has unwittingly done its work and the child can see him or herself as a fixed point in the universe, ranked according to their relative distance in space to their classmates.

Flawed the reasoning may be, frighteningly so, but that is how some children see themselves. We know the achievements in school are, but one measure of a child's abilities and a limited measure at that, but still we fail to say so loudly enough. We know that children are in school for only 15% of their waking time between birth and sixteen years and that much of their education comes from other sources than the classroom. We are slowly coming round to the idea of children having multiple intelligences, yet we are still far too slow in acknowledging them in our schools and so our definition of achievement and our acknowledgement of success remains limited and traditional. If one asks how much of the actual knowledge learned at school, say in Latin or Geography, remains with us or contributes to us getting a job, we would invariably answer not a lot. Yes, we learned how to use and process information, to be literate and numerate, to communicate and, importantly, how to learn, (even possibly, if doubly blessed, the joy of work), but in truth little of the detail remains with us or is useful other than as cerebral padding. Most of our future employment has to do with other skills, other intelligences, other interests and abilities, facilitated by what we learned at school, but not exclusively so.

The challenge is for schools to widen their radar and to recognise and nurture talents. We should always have high (but achievable) expectations for our children and engender positive attitudes to learning within the curriculum, but we should widen our definition of success and acknowledge those other traits to make for successful human beings. We should also be more aware of talents that are not measurable and not give up on anyone, at least not until they have failed at something they actually enjoy. For many children – talented, creative, mechanically minded, spatially aware, musical, athletic, sociable children – are made to feel failures because of the very narrow band by which we measure success and failure within our schools. And yet children who struggle at one stage of their life often fly at the next – and vice versa. Children change. People change. The jobs your children might end up with possibly don't even exist and in the meantime, children need to know their value as human beings and not

feel that they are defined by exam results or school reports or because rote learning or essay writing or passing exams doesn't come naturally to them.

There are many better measures of them as a human being. They do need to work at honing and developing their skills and talents, and to learn the value of perseverance, but not to despair simply because no-one has yet found their measure. The testimonies below should encourage them. So when they ask themselves 'what's wrong with me?' the answer should be – absolutely nothing – it's just that no-one yet has thought to ask them the right questions or to see just what they can do.

- *Beethoven's* music teacher once told him that as a composer, he was hopeless.
- *Winston Churchill* failed the 6th grade.
- John Creasy, the English novelist who wrote 564 books, was rejected 753 times before he became established.
- *Charles Darwin's* father told him he would amount to nothing and would be a disgrace to himself and his family.
- *Walt Disney* was fired by the editor of a newspaper because he, Disney, had 'no good ideas'.
- When *Thomas Edison* was a boy his teacher told him he was too stupid to learn anything.
- *Albert Einstein* was four-years-old before he spoke. He spoke haltingly until nine years of age. He was advised to drop out of High School. And his teachers told him he would never amount to much.
- *Henry Ford's* first two automobile businesses failed.
- *Akio Morita* and *Masaru Ibuka* sold only 100 of an automatic rice cooker which burned the rice. Later, they built a cheap tape recorder for Japanese schools. This was the foundation of Sony Corp.
- *Isaac Newton* failed at running the family farm and did poorly in school.
- *Steven Spielberg* dropped out of high school when he was fifteen. He was persuaded to come back and placed in a learning disabled class. He lasted a month.
- *F. W. Woolworth* got a job in a dry good store when he was 21, but his employer would not let him wait on customers because he 'didn't have enough sense.'

---

## WHO WOULD BE A TEACHER?

*'Teachers are people who start things they never see finished, and for which they never get thanks until it is too late.'* – **Max Forman**

*'The object of teaching a child is to enable him to get along without a teacher.'* – **Elbert Hubbard** (1856-1915) American author, editor and printer.

*'Poor is the pupil who does not surpass his master.'* – **Leonardo da Vinci** (1452-1519) Italian painter, sculptor, architect, musician, scientist, mathematician, engineer, and inventor. [Notebooks](#).

It's been tough times recently for teachers who joined the profession simply in order to teach. Over the past few years, they have seen the role change from that of mere educators to social workers, providing wrap-round care, counselling, security, entertainment and nourishment to the children in their care, while delivering a curriculum that is itself malnourished. They have seen the hours of work increase dramatically in order to churn out the documentation required for health and safety, for the raft of new policies related to child protection, early years, inspections and the like. They have seen their profession treated in a cavalier way by being

touted as a refuge for failed bankers and others who had lost their jobs in the City; they have been rendered defenceless to the whims and accusations of parents whose children have failed and have looked to blame someone else rather than their own poor parenting skills or their offspring's indolence. They will have witnessed a third of their colleagues subjected to some malicious accusations, easy targets for a blame culture instilled in the young, drunk with their rights, provided with the arrows of criticism for which they are never called to account. They have been buffeted by wave upon wave of bureaucracy and seen government via its many-headed quangos constantly shifting, interfering, demanding more accountability, more checks, more meeting of spurious targets. Worse still, they have seen increasing powers being given to pupils who now have a role in appointing teachers and determining school policy. Even when results appear to be improving, they are dismissed by the general public as a reflection of lowered standards, never better teaching. The malaise of the whole of western society, the lack of discipline, teenage pregnancy, drugs, knife crime and ignorance are all laid at the door of the teachers. Even the apples brought in to brighten their day are subject to VAT.

So why teach? Because it is, still, the most exciting and rewarding job there is and is important by any measure we give it. Because children are the future; because children are not their parents and must have their own choices and by-roads; because, even despite themselves at times, children want to learn and be inspired and enthused; because it is a job without compare for its variety, its myriad challenges, arguably its importance to society.

Which is why we should be concerned that so few teachers aspire to go on to headship. The fact that more than a third of primary schools and a quarter of secondary schools were forced to re-advertise for a head last year after failing to recruit staff at the first attempt is indicative of the pressures that are placed on heads, despite the substantial salaries offered. Nor is the shortage of applicants restricted to state schools. Almost half of Roman Catholic schools are forced to re-advertise headships. Even the independent sector is not immune as more and more headmasters and headmistresses resign their posts, move into consultancy or take early retirement, citing increased bureaucracy and burgeoning workloads, the daily onslaught of e-mails (which have conservatively added an hour to the working day) and a more demanding marketplace, for their decision.

Every country, it is said, gets the education system it deserves. So when we read of the pronouncements of the major parties on the matter, it is chilling that there seems to be no let up, especially in the government's determination to encourage parents to have a major role, not only in the running of schools, but by giving them the right to vote to get rid of head teachers. The Conservatives, meanwhile, advocate teachers setting up their own schools under the co-operative worker plan adopted by the party and even endorse the idea of teachers giving out their mobile phone numbers to students to be available '24/7' They also propose that teachers (although, thankfully, not yet student councils), will have the power to sack their heads.

All of which leads to a certain amount of disquiet as to the state of the profession. Teachers want to get back to their core purpose of teaching; they want autonomy to make educational decisions that have some underlying purpose and value; they want some support and even, dare I say it, respect as professionals in the field. Just because everyone went to school doesn't make them experts and expertise is what is wanted, or else we will end up with schooling by consensus, run by self-interested community groups and bureaucrats. We need, ultimately, to re-define the meaning, purpose and function of our schools and then seek out whom we want to run them in the future, but we should not be surprised if those who felt called to the profession, who came to teaching with a passion and excitement in the past, don't bother to apply.

## WHY CORRECT ENGLISH IS STILL CORRECT

*“An academy of English is being formed by the Queen’s English Society to protect the language from impurities, bastardisations and the horrors introduced by the text-speak generation” – Times report, 7 June, 2010.*

*“Even if you do learn to speak correct English, whom are you going to speak it to?” – Clarence Darrow*

*“The knowledge of words is the gate of scholarship” – John Wilson*

*“23% of children emerge from school as functionally illiterate”*

English is under siege. Despite the recent counter offensives launched in books such as Lynne Truss’s *‘Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation’* and Vivian Cook’s *‘Accommodating Broccoli in the Cemetery or Why can’t Anyone Spell?’* a combination of sloth and text-speak is cutting away at the very core of our written and spoken language. Why we are asked, in this age of spell-checks and grammar checks, do we need to slavishly learn lists of spelling rules and their exceptions? Why indeed?

Language and words are wonderful tools. While we can communicate adequately with a reduced vocabulary the richness of our speech and writing comes from being able to express themselves fully and accurately. When I was at boarding school, one of my friends decided that the way to do so was to learn the dictionary. It was a spectacular endeavour. The only trouble was he only got half-way through which meant that he was able to use truly obscure words that evoked wonderment, but struggled with anything more than two syllables from the letter N onwards. But what richness was in his extensive vocabulary, what diversity, what exciting ways he found to convey the nuances of feeling and meaning, albeit fenced in the linguistic parameters of a boys’ boarding school.

The requirement for good English tunes into what employers and universities are saying, that they want more than almost anything else people who can use language accurately and well. Universities constantly bemoan the number of students who cannot write legibly and accurately; employers plead for employees who can communicate clearly and without error, who are simply literate and numerate.

I am not sure whether an academy of English is the answer. The richness of the English language has always been its extensive and rich vocabulary built on its willingness to adopt, to absorb, to assimilate. Our greatest writer, William Shakespeare has been variously credited with coining between 1700 and 3000 new words, often lifting directly from classical literature and foreign languages, a trend that continues to this day. In that light, do we really need our equivalent of L’Academie Francaise, the Real Academia Espanola or the Accademia della Crusca?

Probably not. But accuracy, the ability to express oneself concisely or with feeling, to write fluently and imaginatively, to report accurately and concisely are skills that are still sought after today. While spell-check, texting, and various word programmes might tempt us otherwise, the imperative of being able to write correct English is as important and desirable as ever.

## WHY SCHOOLS MUST CHANGE

*‘I am entirely certain that twenty years from now we will look back at education as it is practised in most schools today and wonder that we could have tolerated anything so primitive.’ – John Gardner*

*‘We take young children, whose natural habitat is the open air, whose natural social context is the mixed-age play group, whose natural action is almost constant locomotion; we place them inside sealed buildings, segregate them into one year cohorts, squeeze them into ill-fitting furniture, and deprive them of fresh air, sunshine or physical movement. Under these conditions, it is likeliest that these children will be at their healthiest and fittest the day before they enter school.’ – David Pratt*

*‘Research in the workplace suggests that 60% of positions require a range of multiple intelligences that less than 30% of the population possess. Even the best educated are over their heads. We need to redesign our schools.’*

Four years ago, we investigated the idea of launching Sherborne Prep online. The brief we set ourselves was to see if there was a market for pupils who were out of school or transient, particularly families travelling or living abroad or who were being educated at home, possibly for health reasons and who wanted to be attached to an English prep school. As well as providing instruction and feedback through one-on-one tutors, it was intended that the school would organize all matters of transfer and would provide a ‘home’ for the pupils when in the United Kingdom. The review was speculative, designed in part to get us thinking of where education was going as we knew from the outset that the costs would be prohibitive.

Such an idea is, of course, old hat now and such provision is available (although not quite in the form we envisaged). As well, the Government is busy setting up 11 ‘virtual schools’ as part of the Government’s strategy to support children in care and this model will no doubt be extended in time to other situations and needs. A few other schools, acting on the latest research on adolescents and the brain, have dramatically changed their school hours to optimise learning. As well as flexible school hours, the wider use of new technologies, praise pods, spaced learning and the teaching of entrepreneurial skills are all the new initiatives being trialled around the country. The government is encouraging schools away from the traditional knowledge-based curriculum to a more broadly-based skills curriculum in order to ensure children will be employable as well as properly educated in the wider sense.

The rapid pace of change is bewildering and unsettling. One half of what students starting a degree course today learn will be out of date by the time they finish their courses. The body of knowledge – especially technical knowledge – is growing exponentially and accessing and understanding knowledge through providing better skills and tools is the priority. The internet has changed learning forever with huge amounts of money invested in technology within the classroom. Schools, as we know them, appear in some eyes destined to be consigned to museum status.

All of which sounds frightening and a considerable challenge to schools, but it is exciting also. Nor do we have to jump quite yet! What we do have to do, however, is to continue to review and adapt what we teach and how we teach it, although the core aims of making children literate and numerate will remain at the heart of learning, along with such skills as the ability to locate, discriminate, précis and summarise information. We must, though, ask what tomorrow’s children will need and ensure we don’t get distracted by a fear of the unknown and an adherence to what has worked in the past from providing it.

The greatest problem in a time of expanding information is establishing what to include and what to leave out. This has vexed many leading educationalists who have focused on the problem of the burgeoning demands placed on the curriculum and what we should be doing about it.

John Abbot of the 21st Century Learning Initiative argues in his book *The Child is Father to the Man* that 'We have to do a lot fewer things in school. The greatest enemy of understanding is coverage. As long as you're determined to cover everything, you actually ensure that most children are not going to understand. You've got to take enough time to get children deeply involved in something so that they can think about it in lots of different ways and apply it.'

The Royal Society of Arts in their education initiative have argued along similar lines: 'For two centuries, the school curriculum has been a collection of subjects and its main aim to transmit subject content to students. Other aims, such as the development of competencies – thinking, creativity, communications etc – have been essentially, by-products, assumed to emerge from the proper teaching of subjects. As knowledge expanded, extra subjects were added to the curriculum. The National Curriculum attempted to define what students needed to know, an attempt doomed to failure by the impossibility of balancing the claims made for subject coverage against limitations of time and space. But there is no longer any way – if, indeed, there ever was – to define a package of subject matter that will do all this. At the same time people need an increasingly complex range of competencies to manage their lives, and their education should develop these. Something has to give.'

When parents look at the neatness of handwriting and accuracy of spelling and bemoan falling standards (and often rightly so), they do not always take into account the breadth of subjects demanded by a modern curriculum, especially as the curriculum appears to be the repository of every cranky idea and subject that surfaces. The current arguments about what every child should learn, whether it be cooking, citizenship, dance or happiness, just illustrates what happens if we focus too much on what rather than how. Schools are being buffeted at present and while we need to be adaptable, we need to make sure our feet are firmly planted in the bedrock so that our minds can be otherwise.

Schools will change and independent schools, historically the stakeholders of traditional education will have to change too. We must do so conservatively and with due care, but to do nothing is not an option. We must constantly look at what is happening in the world and at what we are teaching our children to ensure they have the benefits of a broad, traditional education along with the requisite skills, and breadth of character to be employable. But we must not shy away from change and pretend that what was relevant twenty years ago will remain so indefinitely. As priorities change, so must we also. We owe that much at least to our children.

---

## WHY WORRY?

*"As two young recruits in basic training were talking about expected orders, one confessed that he was worried sick about the possibility of being shipped overseas. The other recruit, an amateur philosopher, said to him "there's no sense worrying about it." His friend asked, "how do you figure that?"*

*"It's this way," said the philosopher. There's a fifty-fifty chance you won't go overseas. If you don't, you've nothing to worry about. If you do, there's a fifty-fifty chance you won't see action. If you don't, you've nothing to worry about. If you do, there's a fifty-fifty chance you won't get shot. If you don't, you've nothing to worry about. If you do, there's a fifty-fifty chance you won't get killed. If you don't, you've nothing to worry about. If you are killed you won't have anymore worries. So why worry in the first place?"*

*"If all the moisture in a dense fog covering seven city blocks to a depth of 100 feet were collected it would fill one single glass."*

*"More than 600 people under the age of 25 years kill themselves in the UK every year. More than 24,000 teenagers were admitted to hospital ... after deliberately harming themselves. More than 12 million Britons – 1 in 5 – are now on anti-depressants" – WHO report*

The statistics are truly frightening. Britain has one of the highest suicide rates in Europe. Each year in the UK over 5000 people take their life. The charity 'Depression Alliance' estimates that each year there are around 19,000 suicide attempts by UK adolescents whilst more than two million children attend GP's surgeries with some kind of psychological or emotional problem. The suicide rate for 18-24-year-old males has jumped from 58 deaths per million of population in 1974 to 170 deaths per million in 1997. In October 1999, the government reported that the number of young males who commit suicide each year in the UK had doubled over the last ten years. In inner city areas, over 43% of children have considered suicide and one in six children under the age of 11 have attempted suicide. Common causes cited include bullying, abuse, poverty, and homelessness as the main contributing reasons. Suicide statistics show that in the UK at least 16 children kill themselves each year because they are being bullied at school and no-one in authority is doing anything about it.

What are we doing to our children? Materially, they are better off than ever before. The country has embraced the mantra of Every Child Matters in its schools and legislation; the law protects them better than ever before from abuse and poverty; they are better informed than any previous generation about issues such as drugs, aids and alcohol. They are counselled, listened to, encouraged to have a voice in their schools and homes. They are well-fed and well-provided for. What do they have to worry about, for goodness sake?

Probably all of the above. Through legislation, through our obsession with health and safety and risk, we have caged and smothered them and even driven them towards to the black hole that often lies within. Too often, we have substituted our roles as parents and adults with technology that entertains and takes them further away from their families. We have told them things before they needed to know them, often of a dark nature. We have dumped our expectations on their shoulders on the premise that it will help them cope with an increasingly competitive world; we have taken away the security of being children by treating them like grown-ups before they were ready. We have given them too much, except what they need most: love, time and security. We have underestimated the effect our attitudes and behaviour,

our own selfish actions as parents and collectively, as a society, can have upon them. And they worry in turn because they know too much, from the internet, from their peers, from their homes, from a world they are not yet ready to embrace.

What can we do? We can listen more. We can offer stability. We can keep children out of adult discussions. Contrary to belief, they don't want or need to know everything that is going on and that being frank and honest with children is often very unhelpful, regardless of how good it makes the adult feel. Children need to feel there is little to worry about in life and creating artificial pressures and hurdles can have a very deleterious effect. We need to put their happiness – and not a selfish, inward-looking happiness, but one borne of trust and a sense of belonging in a community – above all else. We need to nip worries in the bud.

Innocence is worth protecting and children who are sheltered longer from some of the excesses of the modern world are more able to cope with disappointment and expectation when they need to. We have to give our children surety and strong foundations while at the same time teaching them to fly. Saying 'don't worry' is not enough on its own – we need to give them fewer things to worry about at such a young age. We need to tell them how to deal with things that worry them – starting with Charlie Brown:

*"I've developed a new philosophy... I only dread one day at a time"* – **Charlie Brown**

## **WORKING HOURS REGULATIONS:**

*'Work is much more fun than fun.'* – **Noel Coward**

*'If I had eight hours to chop down a tree, I'd spend six sharpening my axe.'* – **Abraham Lincoln**

Under British employment law, all employers are bound by working hours regulations which monitor the hours that employees are permitted to work. In some instances, especially for those involved in driving (buses, long haulage lorries, taxis and the like), the regulations are particularly stringent, and rightly so while, as always, there are areas of work where the regulations fall short although in such cases, the ability of the employee to 'opt out' does give some freedom.

As well as the UK Working Time Regulations, employers are also required to abide with the EU Working Time regulations which are even more prescriptive. In recent years, for example, the decision made in the Hague that remaining in the workplace, whether working or not, (a ruling that affected doctors as well as employees in boarding schools) necessitated significant changes in employment contracts to ensure that employees' rights were protected and a proper work/life balance was achieved. Under current legislation a working week is restricted to 48 hours with a right to a rest break of at least 20 minutes during a working day of 6 hours or more along with a right to 11 consecutive hours rest per day and a right to a full 24 hour rest period each week, or a full 48 hours in a fortnight.

All of which makes sense although it is, one feels, a protocol more honoured in the breach than the observance in these straitened times. Often the intensity of work is balanced with longer holidays: teachers, for instance, good teachers often work long hours, often out of school time in marking and preparing lessons while in almost every field of life, there will be those who, in order to succeed, will always be wanting to walk the extra mile, legislation or not.

What is of concern, however, were the findings of a recent poll conducted for The Baby website which found that the average 'working day' of the 3000 children surveyed was 53 hours a week, which included a long school day, homework, clubs and hobbies. Our own school week totals around 45 hours a week at school (including all breaks), but this does not include homework and the other organized activities that take place out of the school day. This is by no means excessive and yet we find more and more children who are exhausted by the long hours and the necessity to do more when finishing the school day – a reason why I am keen to minimize prep and caution parents against placing too many extra activities on their children. After all, when we get home from work as adults, we want to rest and the idea of a regular hour's work after supper would be trying to many adults.

Young children seem to have boundless energy and enthusiasm, but both resources are, of course, finite. Children are not always the best managers of time and are more likely to 'shop until they drop' than ration their working hours. When you next feel that Malcolm or Margot would benefit from an extra cello lesson or gym club, please consider the alternative: the chance to mix with their siblings, their parents, their pets, their world and just be children.

## **P. S. TAIT, M.A., F.R.S.A.**

*Peter Tait was born in New Zealand and gained his Master of Arts degree in History at Massey University. After an early career in preparatory schools, including a deputy headship at Hadlow School in the 1980s, his most recent post prior to his appointment as Headmaster of Sherborne Preparatory School was as Senior Housemaster and Head of History at Wanganui Collegiate School.*

*Currently, he is Chairman the Education Committee of the Independent Association of Preparatory Schools (IAPS), an executive member of the Independent Schools Examination Board (ISEB), a member of the ISC Education Committee and governor of another prep school. He does wonder whether such involvement out of school is altogether useful, but struggles on under the illusion that it may serve some purpose.*

*Peter has lectured at conferences and is the author of, amongst other writings, the first New Zealand Boarding Schools' Handbook, a biography of Sir John Ormond and a number of articles on education and related topics published in various magazines and journals. He is also a member of the Powys Society and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.*



**Sherborne Preparatory School**  
Acreman Street, Sherborne, Dorset DT9 3NY  
[info@sherborneprep.org](mailto:info@sherborneprep.org)

[www.sherborneprep.org](http://www.sherborneprep.org)