THOUGHTS FROM THE STUDY

P S TAIT

2005 - 2007

PREFACE

In April 2004, I travelled to New Zealand for my father's 80th birthday. On my return, sitting down to produce the monthly newsletter, I decided to conclude the cavalcade of news and achievements with a few paragraphs on a topic that both reflected his life and, I felt, had some relevance for us too. The topic – the importance of having a purpose in life – was something he and his contemporaries, their lives shaped by the war years, undoubtedly had and which seemed to be increasingly missing from our own. A few parents were kind enough to say they enjoyed the postscript to the newsletter and so, encouraged, I repeated the exercise the following month.

Over the past four years, what started as an afterthought developed a life of its own and since that first musing, each one of the forty eight monthly newsletters to parents at Sherborne Prep School has ended with an article of indeterminate length on some aspect relating, however tangentially, to education. In time the articles were collected into four small booklets and sent to prospective parents as an insight into the philosophy of the school or, more precisely, that of its curmudgeonly Headmaster. Throughout the book, a number of ideas are revisited and reworked in different guises. No doubt, in the wrong hands they were a double-edged sword, but I certainly enjoyed writing them and the opportunity to vent my educational spleen, to man the soapbox or take the cudgel to some new trend or fad proved irresistible. I hope you enjoy reading them and can identify with some of the joys and frustrations of running a school and of educating and raising children (and parents!) in the 21st century.

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A PURPOSE IN LIFE

Easter is traditionally a time of reflection. This year my father's 80th birthday was a time for his family to come together to reflect on his life from his early experiences as a young man, flying Lancasters in the Second World War to his eventual retirement after more than 40 years as a GP. In measuring his lifetime, it is hard not to notice how the world in which he has lived has so fundamentally changed. My father had always wanted to be a country doctor and, accordingly, he relished the opportunities offered by living and working in a small rural community, many miles from a major hospital, with all the diverse responsibilities that entailed. His was a fulfilled working life, full of purpose, doing what he loved most.

In some ways the choices my father's generation faced, despite growing up in the Depression and World War Two, were so much more simple and in many ways easier than those facing our children. We are constantly confronted today by such facts such as over 40% of the jobs advertised today didn't exist a few years ago or that our children will have three or more jobs in their working lives. With such rapid changes, it is no wonder that so many children, even at the end of their schooling or well into their tertiary studies, have no idea what they want to do and so drift through their twenties, aimless and uncertain. Many find it hard to leave home and do not have the skills or confidence or motivation to cope as they are faced with a bewildering array of choices and decisions, thereby losing what little focus they once had.

Although it is difficult to fully prepare our children for the world ahead, it is vitally important that we try to arm them with the means and tools to cope and make their way in a rapidly changing world. While it is not important for children to focus on choosing a future vocation at this young age (fortunate indeed, and rare, is the child who knows what he wants to do and sets out single-mindedly to achieve it), it is still important to instil into our children, in all they choose to do, a sense of purpose. And although they cannot know the direction their lives or studies will take them, the desire to learn, (and be prepared to keep learning) and the willingness to develop their special strengths and talents and to learn the right values to live by are so very important. It is, after all, having a purpose that gives our lives meaning and it is this sense of purpose that is the great gift we wish for all our children, so that they can enjoy their life's work and build a sense of achievement and fulfilment.

A SENSE OF PERSPECTIVE

The education of children in schools is a most extraordinary pursuit in that it deals with a variety of human beings gathered en masse, each with their own flaws and foibles, energy and aspirations living out their genetic blueprint shaped by a raft of social and environmental factors. As parents, most, if not all, judgements we make for our children are subjective, coloured by the fundamental desire inbred in all of us, to do the best for our children. Compelled often by guilt, we fall into the trap whereby all we think about is our children while they, in turn, are encouraged by inference, to think of no-one, but themselves. Balance and the sense of objectivity are lost as the talents of other children are dismissed in favour of our own.

One comes across many parents who think that the problems facing their child are somehow unique and demand extraordinary measures, that their child is misunderstood, that every

observation that they make is the whole truth, that he/she is being treated unfairly and is actually better than other children. Such comparisons about the relative strengths and weaknesses of children are invidious when foisted on teachers who can usually see and assess the child more objectively. In pondering the problem (and it is a problem, of perception, of balance, of judgement) I was reminded of the conjugations that regularly appear from Craig Brown in The Daily Telegraph highlighting how differently we can see things, depending on our own prejudices and point of view. With blinkers on, we can look foolish. We can even become unreasonable and lose that sense of perspective about the abilities of our own children. The adage that all children are equal, but some are more equal than others is sadly, too often applied to one's own children.

The following conjugations are courtesy of Craig Brown with one or two extras thrown in for good measure!

Our child is a leader
Your child has a strong character
Their child is a bully

Our child is intelligent
Your child is precocious
Their child is a nerd

Our child is energetic
Your child can't sit still
Their child is hyperactive

We are caring parents
You are concerned parents
They are neurotic parents

Our child is an individual
Your child is unusual
Their child is weird

My child mixes well
Your child is chatty
Their child is a gossip

- all, I venture, a matter of perspective!

A TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

One of the difficulties of running a school today is trying to meet all the demands placed on an ever-burgeoning curriculum. While trying to ensure that the core subjects of Mathematics, English and Science have enough time to ensure that pupils are properly schooled in these key areas, we need to find room for such new acronyms as ICT, PSHE and DT as well as the range of 'traditional' subjects including French, Latin, History, Geography, Music, Art, Drama, PE and Religious Education. Always, we need to look at what we are teaching and why, and ensure that we are not straying from our brief which, in its widest form, is to educate our pupils in preparation for life.

Despite all the changes in curriculum, what most parents want for their children is still a 'traditional education' so long as what is deemed 'traditional' is still seen as 'relevant'. As adults, we often harp back to what was and criticise new standards, forgetting the explosion in knowledge and the greater breadth and speed of change that pupils have to deal with. Many teachers and parents of a certain vintage (and I include myself in this group!) want to preserve standards of presentation and spelling at a level well above those currently required by the modern examination system, with its focus on content and process – and, I feel, we are

right to do so. Certainly when we speak of a traditional education we are not just referring to what is taught – until comparatively recently, for instance, science had no place in a 'traditional education'. What is meant is the sum of the requisite skills that underpin all learning: A good working knowledge of the core subjects; greater intellectual rigor; more attention to detail; higher standards of presentation and note-taking; a greater focus on listening skills and developing the memory; better communication skills; the inculcation of good work habits and a healthy work ethic. What is taught (and we are striving to extend the breadth of our curriculum in years 3 to 6) is not as relevant as to how it is taught and the insistence on good habits and commensurate high standards of learning. There is a challenge in this for our staff as well, in raising expectations and improving the quality of their teaching. But in our schooling and our values, we are, and will remain, unashamedly 'traditional' in our desire to give our pupils the best possible start in life.

A TRIBE APART

A recent documentary on Channel Five filmed the experiences and impressions of a group of six members of a remote village in Papua New Guinea on visiting England. At the outset, I feared that the documentary was setting out to replicate some of the most unfortunate social experiments of the early 19th century, in which peoples from other cultures, whether North American Indians, Aborigines or Maoris were brought to England as curiosities, to be taken around the grand houses of England and to be feted by the good and the great. (This was a strategy always likely to backfire as when the King and Queen of Hawaii succumbed to measles). Thankfully, the programme avoided any such embarrassment and allowed us a glimpse of our own culture and society through their eyes.

By the end of three programmes it was hard not to feel humbled by their observations, particularly on our attitudes to family and the elderly, to consumerism, our work ethic and our faith. The clarity of their perception and the lack of any cynicism in their speech, gave their observations real poignancy and relevance.

Their views of London were particularly interesting; their experience of the Underground ('London is a double city; one city is underground and the other is on top) and the 'joined up houses' were simple visual observations; more revealing was the conversation that took place on the London Eye when their guide pointed out St Paul's Cathedral, with the comment that 'three hundred years ago it was the biggest building in London'. This fact was quickly picked up by one of the group who said that the Spirit House must always be the biggest building in a village, so what were these buildings that had appeared that were now bigger than God's house – what had replaced God in importance? Later, they visited St Paul's (where the Chief was so impressed by the soaring architecture that he was moved to comment 'I believe this building was created not by man, but by God') and Buckingham Palace where the Chief was disappointed not to meet the Queen for, as he said, he was also a Chief and because of his age, he was unlikely to come back to England again. They were unimpressed by the supermarkets, seeing no reason for buying anything they did not need and were dismissive of the work ethic they saw although many things amused and intrigued them. Their visit to an Old Folks' Home elicited a good deal of disapproval which was explained by one of the group who said, 'when I was a baby, my mum and dad looked after me when I walked around naked; I must pay back'.

As they were leaving, having made a huge impression on their hosts, they were asked what was their over-riding impression of Britain and they answered, it was the lack of respect that people showed for each other.

Sometimes, with all our trappings of civilization, we appear to have lost our way, along with the ability to ask the simple questions of life, questions that are often also the most profound. As we peel back the layers of western civilization, and particularly the values we espouse, it is hard to escape the feeling that the very word 'civilization' needs redefining. Sometimes it takes the eyes and observations of others to better see ourselves and the world we have made.

ADOLESCENCE

'The most stunning change for adolescents today is their aloneness. They are more isolated and more unsupervised than ever, 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***

I still remember the relief I felt in re-entering the prep school world in 1998 after spending several years as Senior Housemaster in a public school, dealing with waves of adolescents as they traversed the teenage years. The openness, eagerness and enthusiasm of prep school children lies in stark contrast to the cynicism, mock indifference and world-weariness of many teenagers, who often appear lost and bewildered, but unable to say just why. Although most teenagers navigate through the white waters to the safety of the banks that lie on the other side of childhood, there are too many casualties for us to ignore the symptoms and manifestations of full-blown adolescence without ensuring that we, as adults, are properly informed of the condition and ready and able to help.

It is not easy being a teenager, and even less so managing one. As hormonal change gathers pace and the vocabulary of once articulate children shrivels to a few grunts and stock phrases, parents can end up feeling as though each day they are constantly walking a tightrope. At times, it is a rope that almost feels at breaking point as they grow to resent being used as a banker, (always a banker), a chef, a taxi driver, a counsellor, a hotelier, and a dish-washer/ laundry maid often without any thanks or regard. During these dark years, parents struggle to accept that their children are no longer dependent on them and won't even listen to them as they once did. They have to learn that the onset of adolescence in their children, affects them too. It is a delicate time. One needs a cool head and a battle plan. Raising an adolescent is like holding the reins of a runaway horse – you cannot pull too hard or too soft – or else!

AND THOSE WHO ARE LAST SHALL BE FIRST

'He possesses, neither by experience nor talent, any managerial ability at all'
A Glasgow Industrial Tribunal's ruling on St Mirren's sacking of Alex Fergusson

One of the most difficult jobs of any Head is to convince parents that childhood is a journey and not a destination. It is human nature to want success for our children in some form or another en route, to be able to trumpet their progress in some way, but prep school is not a time for finished products and its achievements are more often than not, transitory, a reflection of a stage of maturation, little else. Life-long success, rather, comes in many different guises bound up in the main part with the acquisition of a number of habits and attitudes that manifest themselves over time in order to rise to the surface.

Of course, it is disconcerting to find some things are felt to be immeasurable; such arguments, when proffered by schools, are seen as an abrogation of their responsibilities. But if one looks at a number of successful people, it is possible to isolate various traits in their make-up that made them high-achieving adults. Many have succeeded even where their relationships with authority and academia were often less than satisfactory; what came to count most on their journey was their marriage of imagination and ambition assisted by a degree of cussedness and a propensity for hard work. They needed to be hungry. They needed to be robust. They needed to be independent. They needed to have the skills to relate to other people. Exam marks, class sets, sports prizes, and any number of certificates give us pointers to the future direction of our children, but without the character to sustain their rate of progress and allow them to capitalize on their native wit and ability, they are things of memory, transient as childhood itself.

School reports have often been used as evidence of how successful people have done well despite identified failings at school. Some of the reports of successful people celebrate the person by highlighting aspects of character that are the basis of who they have become: risk-takers, free thinkers, rebels with a desire to question and to challenge, not always traits schools encourage. Yet, as we know, children need to do these things, to push out their boundary fence, to stake their claims, to fall over, get up and keep going. At a young age, children are changing constantly, physically and mentally. They need the opportunity to keep reinventing themselves and finding who they are, constructing their adult persona. That is why doors should be kept open as long as possible to give time for the life-defining traits and character to take over from the tutelage of parent and school. It is building resilient, adaptable and determined human beings that is all-important, learning the ability to overcome adversity by trying harder and thinking smarter – therein lies success. For Alex Fergusson, the 27 trophies he has won in the ensuing 30 years since his appearance at the tribunal in Scotland, says as much.

BULLY-PROOFING CHILDREN

No-one likes a bully. Nor can any school afford to ignore bullying, or fail to discipline bullies in a way that will both correct behaviour and educate the miscreant as well as demonstrating that such behaviour is simply unacceptable. Schools work hard to develop the right culture to tackle unacceptable behaviour, although we are hampered by a society that is becoming more fractious, more aggressive, more selfish outside of the school gates. While our most recent CSCI report was very complimentary about the School's stance and record on pastoral care and the way it deals with bullying, there is never room for any complacency (and beware, always, of the school that says it has no bullying!) The way forward is, of course, for home and school to work together in teaching manners, respect for others and on imparting a proper value system, for it is in promoting these core values that bullying is most effectively countered. Every school, naturally, seeks to be a bully-free zone and have policies in place that deal with bullying; it is equally important that we educate our children for when they venture from such zones and educate them to care and respect others and to cope in an often unfriendly and unforgiving world.

In this age of increasing sensitivities and a diminished immune system, however, we are at the same time increasingly in danger of subsuming the real problem by allowing the definition of bullying to become so watered down as to be almost meaningless. Two pupils call each other names; one shrugs it off; the other tells the teacher he/she is being 'bullied'. Three children leave another out of their play for they are spoiling their game, but under new rules parents complain, the teacher intervenes and uneasy truces are drawn and new confederations are imposed from without rather than being allowed to evolve naturally from within. Friendship groups are manufactured, the process of social evolution is interfered with and an uneasy truce that fools no-one is formed.

Adult intervention is only part of the answer and must be even-handed and for teachers, that is the hardest job of all. Dealing with the 'bully' (although few parents would ever recognise their child as thus) is often the easy part. It is bully-proofing the victim that takes more time. Sometimes, children who see themselves as 'victims' – a term I use warily – need to help themselves to learn not to be so accepting or pliable in social situations or to avoid doing anything to help themselves on the pretext that others will sort out their social environment and relationships. Sometimes their vulnerability can be linked to poorly developed social skills and low self-esteem; to comments they are wont to make about others; to some inappropriate behaviour or mannerism, that can be irritating to other children, intentionally or otherwise; to parents who are endlessly citing imagined slights; or, sometimes sadly, because they want to be included in a social group who won't welcome them. Yes, on one hand we must teach greater tolerance, but sometimes children and parents need to realise that in life, artificial inclusion is not the answer to a problem, although it can sometimes help smooth the way forward. In these instances of incidental bullying where parents align themselves beside their children, arguing their rights and ready to wage war to correct any slight, to seek redress for any grievance regardless of where the fault may lie, their intervention often doesn't help. Parents, too, need to see that what they see as bullying is often little more than the shaking down in social relations within a peer group. Temporarily you can correct the fault but what happens when the fault is at home, in the attitudes the children have inherited, in excessive closeting, in how much the child has been allowed to be centre-stage? Schools may be 'bully-free' zones, but we have a responsibility to arm our pupils for when they leave the school-zone and venture into other areas of life.

So what do we mean by bully-proofing? It is about how to make the child able to deal with life's challenges without having to compromise his or her personality and character? How to make them cope or how to make them more resilient. No-one should ever have to put up with being made to feel less than they are capable of being. Schools have a responsibility to educate children properly as to ways of asserting one's personality and to provide strategies, to teach a child that sometimes people don't like you for no other reason than they don't have the same interests – not because you are less, but that you are different to them. Sometimes the strategy is just providing the right vocabulary, or showing pupils that what they take exception to or worry about is rendered harmless if they re-act in a positive way. Education for life must be practised in the social arena as well if schools are to remain honest.

How do we deal with such situations as adults? Because bullying of sorts happens daily, in the workplace, at home and in other spheres of life. We need to look at how we apply the lessons of the adult world to ensure that our own children are better educated, better looked after and better able to cope. Some adults, as we know, are inclined to bully others in order to get what they want, for they have grown up assuming this is acceptable. Sometimes, we have to explain to children why such behaviour is wrong, for they learn by watching and listening to what takes place about them. By looking at what is unacceptable in our world, we can arrive at the answers that are helpful in telling us how we should talk to our children and the values we should endeavour to teach them.

What we used to understand by bullying is far less prevalent today than it used to be, but in its place, other means are used, some subtle and some, such as 'taunt-texting' and 'cyber-bullying', the by-product of new technologies. Children have an infinite capacity to invent new methods of cruelty, and while they can be both callous and nasty, their behaviour can equally be unthinking, the result of a lack of awareness and sensitivity and a self-centredness characteristic of adolescence. But the problem can be exacerbated by excessive sensitivity. We cannot tell children who they will like and not like and often they cannot see that ignoring classmates is wrong – after all, they see such selection happens with their parents and their friends. We all continue to keep working at changing the culture, and disciplining (and counselling) the bully; but bully-proofing, I contend, providing a means for an individual to counter anything that they feel diminishes or threatens them, is a crucial part of any programme if we are genuinely concerned about children and their long-term well-being.

CHEATING ON LIFE

The whole concept of education based upon the recall of specific facts is exceptionally flawed. If I had a choice of employing two people: one who had stuck to the rules and crammed information the previous night or someone who showed the initiative to 'cheat' – I'd go for the cheater every time. Exams only prepare you for crosswords and quiz shows. The real world is about initiative and imagination.

David Garratt, Leeswood, Wales

Whatever measures are put in place students will find a way round. When I did my A levels it was relatively easy to cheat and I only passed my history exam with the aid of a ruler that had every act of parliament on it for the period we had studied. In maths the programmable calculators were very helpful!

Nik, Staines, England

One of the most disturbing trends in recent years is the prevalence of cheating in our schools and universities. While it can be seen as a result of more pressure for places at universities and the use of more unsupervised coursework for assessment, it is also in part a reflection in attitudes of what is deemed as broadly acceptable in society. Last week I received a document from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) entitled '*Authenticating Coursework*', guiding schools on ways to detect plagiarism in pupils' work. Universities and schools now openly talk of a 'cut and paste' culture, and the widespread buying and selling of essays on the internet. The number of 'unauthorised items' being taken into examinations at senior schools – mostly mobile phones used for carrying or receiving information – rose by 60% last year. Over the same period, there were 6000 students disciplined at British universities for cheating, and even at our most prestigious universities the problem is on the increase. Earlier this year the Senior Proctor at Oxford University, Professor Alan Grafen, warned that plagiarism was becoming a serious problem at the university and, following his public pronouncements on the subject, a survey of students found that 44% admitted to having used someone else's work and not crediting it. Even in primary schools, as indicated by a recent MORI poll, parents are struggling to draw the line between assisting children with their coursework (which 63% were polled as doing) and those who actually draft their children's work for them (5% of parents polled). And while metal detectors are used to check for mobile phones and a whole industry is busy producing software to detect plagiarism from an ever growing number of websites and essay banks set up to help students cheat, it is a battle that is unlikely to be won by technological means alone.

In all the responses one reads to the problem, very few deal with the moral issue, and the teaching of the appropriate values to children. Sadly, the views contained in the quotations at the top of the page are too easily deemed justifiable, if not acceptable. They are not. Children need to learn that cheating is wrong, both on a personal and a public level. While the old adage about cheating yourself might not hold much water for those desperate to get through an examination or get a job, it is nevertheless true that if you do not do the work or the thinking yourself, you are not learning, or certainly not learning what is intended to be learnt and that you will eventually be found out. At some stage in the future they will have to look in a mirror and not feel ashamed. Children need to learn the values of honesty and fairness and that cheating is seeking advantage of others who choose not to do so. To turn a blind eye to cheating is a huge indictment of the world we are raising our children to live in, for if they cheat in school they learn to cheat in life. The responsibility on parents trying always to do their best for their children is huge. If there are faults in the system (and the over

reliance on coursework and unsatisfactory knowledge-based and repetitive examination papers are two), we need to address them, but most of all we must teach our children to do their own work and their own thinking in order to develop their own minds and learn the skills that they will need in life. They won't learn them otherwise, whatever other 'skills' they may learn by trying to beat the system. It is a moral issue in the end though and battles fought on the grounds of right and wrong are the most difficult of all to fight, but we must try. Before cheating becomes a life-long habit, we need to drum the purpose of education into our children, our schools and universities that it is not about passing exams by regurgitating the ideas of others, but in having our own. We – parents and teachers collectively – should instill into our children the skills and values to enable them to contribute to a society that needs honesty and integrity as never before. For if we don't try to do that, the moral basis of our world looks shaky indeed.

CHOOSING A SENIOR SCHOOL

One of my key roles as a Headmaster is to advise parents on senior schools, when asked to do so – which I regularly am. While every child's circumstances and needs are different, as are the range of senior schools available, there are some fundamental questions that are worth asking or points to consider in making this crucial decision. These include:

- Word of mouth is often the best guide – ask other parents and pupils about the senior schools they have attended or sent children to and their opinions.
- Trust your instincts when you visit a school. Would your child be comfortable there? Would the school meet his or her individual needs?
- Talk to the pupils – do they have the values and attitudes that you would want for your son or daughter?
- Listen carefully to what the Head has to say, as well as to key boarding and teaching staff you may meet. Are they a team? Are they all settled in their current posts? Remember you are buying into the future, not the here-and-now.
- Ask for the School's 'value-added' data – how do they set about to bring out the best in each child and how do they measure progress.
- Ask about the School's policies and approach to smoking, alcohol, mental health and drug-use.
- When considering schools, don't place too much store on league tables; ask how the most able and least able students perform in external exams. A high place in the league tables may just be a reflection of a more selective intake.
- Ask what each school does to track its alumni and whether independent learning skills are nurtured so that students maintain the level of performance they achieve at School through their tertiary education.
- Don't ignore the option of local schools – many do very well academically and produce excellent, well-rounded adults.

- Look also at where education is going – many schools are offering the International Baccalaureate, IGCSEs and soon, the Cambridge PreU.
- Don't be over-impressed by facilities – parents pay for these, one way or another! Consider, instead, how much use your child can make of these facilities.
- Ask about the responsibilities placed on the pupils and what is expected of them.
- Ask how you are kept informed of your son's/ daughter's progress throughout the school and who you communicate with when you have a problem or concern.
- Ask about the code of discipline, school rules and the teaching of life-skills.
- Ask to see the School's Mission statement and Ethos and consider whether this is reflected in the culture you see.

Remember, the benefits of a good prep school education in providing the work ethic, motivation and self-discipline for life-long learning. In choosing wisely once, you have already done the most important thing for your children!

CO-EDUCATION – A PERSONAL VIEW

I am occasionally asked for my thoughts on the issue of single-sex education versus co-education. Having taught in a state primary school (co-educational), prep schools (boys only and co-educational), a girls independent school (11 – 16 years) and a senior independent school (13 – 18 years but co-ed in the 6th form), I know that I prefer teaching co-educational classes. While that is not the same as deciding what is best for one's own children, it is worth giving some reasons why I have this preference as they may go some way to explain why I also feel a co-educational school is the most natural environment for all children although, of course, it may not suit all in the same ways. The reasons are various and personal also, but are related to the feeling that, with co-education, you are dealing with a wider spectrum of personality type, a more diverse range of interests and different perspectives and points of view. Boys and girls are often different learners and tend to look at things differently, think differently and respond differently – making the teaching and learning experience much richer and more diverse and certainly more stimulating. To counter my enthusiasm, there is some research that says that children do 'better', at least academically, in single-sex schools, particularly during those 'awkward' years from 13 – 16 years and at that stage, single-sex schools are a sensible option. However, at a younger age, while children may perform better isolated from 'distractions' (and we can class members of the opposite sex as just that), in terms of 'value-added', in terms of the child's overall social and emotional, as well as intellectual, development, co-educational schools appear, in my experience, to produce on the whole, better balanced and more socially confident pupils. There is so much 'skimming off' in education, the more we can keep children together in life's mainstream, the better. As a rule, I feel girls tend to keep the boys 'honest' while the boys keep the girls 'real' – a stunning generalisation, but you probably understand what I mean! Sometimes the girls you most feel like sheltering from co-education are the very ones who would benefit most from mixing with boys – and vice versa! So long as there is no

educational cost – and as a rule, our boys appear to benefit from the work ethic and conscientious approach of girls while our girls benefit from the boys by becoming more confident and resilient, able to question and rise to intellectual challenges. The fact that over the past three years, more than 60% of our Year 8 girl leavers have left with an award or scholarship to their senior schools indicates that they have benefited academically by remaining in a co-education environment until the age of thirteen.

COPING STRATEGIES

'You can't be brave if you've only had wonderful things happen to you' – ***Mary Tyler Moore***

We are all aware, to a greater or lesser degree, that the world in which our children are growing up is quite different to the one we knew in our own youth. While we strive to promote the same values and attitudes to ensure that our children have every opportunity in life, we need to recognise that there are significantly different pressures at work upon them. In our wisdom, we have made children safer and yet more vulnerable; more comfortable and yet often, less happy; more physically secure and more mentally fragile; more knowing and yet less aware. It is ironic that by giving our children, for instance, cleaner and more sanitised environments, we have reduced their immune systems and made them more susceptible to various illnesses, especially asthma. We all know much of what has happened in the world has been sensible in theory, and yet disastrous in practice. Through the internet and television, it is hard now for children to remain ignorant of a world that was once adult, but is now everyone's, like it or not. They grow up knowing so much more about society and its problems, its lurid and ugly side, its excesses and its casualties. It is very difficult now to prolong the innocence of childhood and ignoring it, sadly, is no answer. And yet, as many would tell us, things have never been better and that what has happened to our society is **not** that things have deteriorated, but are merely different. We just need to give our children an appropriate survival kit for the new world and they will cope just fine.

Perhaps it is that easy, although the number of children suffering from stress and depression keeps growing, as many struggle to cope with it all. It is important, therefore, that we instil in children mechanisms to cope with the world as they see it. They need to know how to cope with health issues, real and perceived, how to comprehend the graphic images they may see on television without feeling fearful, how to make their way in a fiercely competitive world, and how to deal with all the doubts and uncertainties once associated with adolescence, but no longer exclusively so. Children have to learn how to place global issues like terrorism and climate change into some sort of perspective and not become obsessed with self. We can do some of this by encouraging appropriate discussion in schools, by listening, by ensuring pupils are properly informed of issues and by ensuring that they have the chance to air their concerns and by giving those concerns a sense of proportion. What is less straightforward is how we can build the inner strength and coping mechanisms required when the school or parent is not there.

I often reflect on an incident several years ago when an irate parent came to see me because his son had been kept in at break along with his class. What irked him was that his son had

just returned from a music lesson and had not been party to any of the alleged misbehaviour. Technically, of course, he was right and yet, partly in frustration, I suggested that the parent could have dealt with the matter in a quite different way. By coming to see me, I suggested, and by aligning himself with his son's perceived injustice on such a minor matter, how would his son ever learn to stand up for himself? When parents listen to everything their children say and become their unflagging advocates, often flying blindly into battle for some perceived slight, what does that do for the parent-school accord or, more important, for the child? The other issue, I suggested, was that children need to learn the very important lesson that life is not always fair. This was a wonderful opportunity for the parent to sit the child down and say just that, that life is not always fair, that sometimes you will get away with things and sometimes you won't and that will happen all through life and you need to accept, on one level at least, the swings and roundabouts of life. What a pity that such an excellent opportunity to teach such a valuable and useful lesson had been lost.

Coping strategies are made from such incidents and by children being made to pick themselves up occasionally. Children are not helped by being told endlessly that they are special, as currently in vogue amongst celebrities. They need a little bit of dirt on their hands, to learn to handle a few knock-backs and the valuable lesson of going without occasionally. Ultimately, they need to find their own way in life and have the chance to draw their own map and to learn that they will not always be right. They need to build up inner resources rather than relying always on outside help for that is what will allow them to deal with the pressures they will face in life. They (and we) need to keep a sense of perspective about everything that happens to them, good and bad. That way, they will better learn to cope with what lies ahead.

DEBATING THE ISSUE

'Some of them would have protested if they could have found the right arguments. Even Boxer was vaguely troubled. He set his ears back, shook his forelock several times, and tried hard to marshal his thoughts; but in the end he could not think of anything to say.' ***Animal Farm p. 36, George Orwell***

One of the most important aspects of education is learning to communicate ideas and information effectively so as to be able to present, in either verbal or written form, reasoned and well thought out points of views.

In order to develop their public speaking, in Years two, four and six, all of the pupils at Sherborne Prep enter the English Speaking Board (ESB) examinations. There has always been a number of children who don't necessarily shine on paper, but who excel in this medium. Indubitably, the knowledge, skills and confidence acquired by all children in preparing for, and taking the exams, are of considerable value and assistance in later life.

When we look at some of the more specific skills needed to get children thinking and expressing themselves, however, and their ability to grapple with issues and to build an argument, it seems appropriate that we consider, as an alternative, the idea of including

debating as a part of our curriculum for Years 7 and 8. While it does not naturally follow on from where ESB leaves off, it does allow pupils to develop one crucial area of communication, that of learning to present a particular point of view and it has many merits as a tool for education.

Aristotle gave four good reasons why debating was particularly helpful to intellectual development, citing these as: sharpening wits; stirring up the intellectually complacent; clarifying philosophical issues; and simply because it is an enjoyable pastime.

Once pupils learn the techniques and the rules for debating, the value of being able to construct logical arguments and properly debate issues should assist the curriculum. Also, the same skills and processes will invariably assist in the development of their broader reasoning and thinking skills, benefiting particularly those subjects which rely on the construction and deconstruction of a body of information or point of view.

Later this term, we have invited Stephen Farrow, Director of Teaching and Learning at Bedales School, to lead a workshop on debating with our Year 7 classes and a small group of our teachers. When teaching at Dulwich College, Stephen was very closely involved in the experiment in making debating an integral part of the curriculum, with all pupils from the ages 11 – 14 years having one period of debating a week – a scheme that has been judged as particularly successful. Stephen is an enthusiast of debating, arguing that *'Debating is not only an enjoyable mental exercise, but it is also the best way I have ever found as a teacher of encouraging my pupils to think both independently and critically'*. We are equally enthusiastic to hear him and see him in action before possibly making our own decision to restore the ancient Greek practice to its rightful place in our own curriculum.

DO YOU REMEMBER NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN?

Appeasement, that is the containment of potential conflict by granting more and more concessions, is a term widely associated with the deteriorating political situation of the 1930s. Under Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister from 1937 until 1940, appeasement became the cornerstone of British foreign policy, particularly in response to the aggression and territorial ambitions of Hitler and Mussolini. It was, of course, doomed to failure. With the outbreak of World War Two came the realization that appeasement would have to give way to confrontation. Enter, Winston Churchill. Exit, Neville Chamberlain.

Unfortunately, despite its pejorative overtones, appeasement has once again become the basis of British policy – but this time domestic rather than foreign. In place of the beaches and landing fields, appeasement now takes place in our homes and in our schools as we meekly make concession after concession to our children in order to secure peace in our time. While that is fine in the short-term, it is, however, the future we should be worrying about. Whether it be the attempts made to appease children about what they eat or don't eat (a policy that, started young, leads to a life-time of battles on the rims of dinner plates and results in generations of selective grazers); whether it be in the home, where rulings over manners or bedtimes become the subject of protracted negotiation; or whether it be in some inner-city schools, where appeasement has led to a breakdown in law and order as children feel

legitimacy rests with them – the results are the same and the warning signs there to heed. Simply stated, unless rules are laid down, the natural order preserved and principles adhered to, we are heading for a major conflagration.

The opposite of appeasement is not confrontation in the first instance, but firmness. Firmness and consistency, both good allies, are what children need to realise they just can't invade other areas, can't take what they want, can't tread over everything and everyone. The fault, however, is that so often we – society – let them! And so, we must stand up to appeasement. We must fight it at the dining table, we must fight it in the playground, we must fight it in the classroom, but we should not let our standards slip, nor allow our sanity and self-respect to be wrung from us by giving in to unreasonable demands. We should never surrender our role as parents and teachers by giving up what we know is right for some short-term expediency or fleeting moment of calm. We need to be clear about what is expected of us and concede only that which is patently worthless or wrong. Perhaps, today, parents and teachers are the select few, flying in the face of educational nonsense, legislative lunacy and social tomfoolery. Much depends on us. Instead of storing up trouble by appeasing our children, we need to stand firm, for their sake and teach them values. After all, children need to know where the boundaries are and the rules by which they are expected to live in order to stave off dependency, to learn worth and responsibility and help secure that lasting peace.

DRAFT PROSPECTUS FOR THE NED LUDD ACADEMY

(A suggested blueprint for those overwhelmed by modern educational theory and seeking to retreat from the excesses of the 21st century)

Strapline: Keep the Apple out of Eden.

Reflection: *'It has become appallingly clear that our technology has surpassed our humanity',* Albert Einstein.

Motto: 'Cum Grano Salis'.

Mission Statement: To provide an education system that relies not on the manifestations of technology but on hard graft, the alphabet, obedience and the Bible.

What is offered: Writing paper and stamps; a barter system for school fees; fountain pens and copperplate script; archaeology, anthropology and astronomy; humility; humidity; copies of the table charts up to 12 x 12; the periodic table (first 92 elements only); the ABC; a study of Greek culture in Latin; a study of Latin architecture in Greek; corporal punishment; incarceration; school cadet corps; cold showers; green meat, brown fruit, black vegetables; ties, gowns and caps; the British Empire; the Old Testament, the old ways.

What is not offered: Telephones; photocopiers; computers; fax machines; jargon; scanners; football; overhead projectors; television; i-pods; the metric system; e-mail; excuses; pity; child-friendly reports; understanding; forgiveness, explanations.

What is not tolerated: Intolerance; modern languages; visitors; litigation; criticism; questions; decimal currency; sloppiness; anything European; failure; excuses.

Site: The School will be situated in a disused warehouse. No electricity (natural light only), wooden benches, concrete playing fields; high windows, stocks, no running water.

Boarding Houses: Peterloo and Tolpuddle.

Old Luddites: Four cabinet makers, three cabinet ministers, two ministers of education and one educated minister and the Partridge family (sans tree).

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

'According to his pre-prep school, my five year old has 'immature motor skills', which seems to mean he has difficulties with his handwriting. So far, he's had help from a specialist in 'conceptual awareness', who encouraged him to copy patterns, and has been passed on to a paediatric physiotherapist, who suggested that he's dyspraxic and would benefit from a (very expensive) programme of exercises with her. She says his motor skills need to be worked now because later will be too late. Like all parents, we want to do the best for our child. But are we being taken for a ride?'

A question to John Clare, Educational Columnist in The Daily Telegraph, May 26th, 2004

As our knowledge of how children learn has increased, with its accompanying proliferation of experts with their own particular education language, there are renewed pressures on schools and parents to make sure that they are meeting their children's educations needs. After all, the numbers identified as being in need of, and receiving learning support are growing rapidly and there is a growing concern as to how schools are dealing with the individual problems, or questioning as to whether the problem is actually as significant as is made out. A growing demand for individual psychological assessments both by parents, concerned for their children, and by schools and educational psychiatrists, concerned to ensure that they are meeting their legal obligations as well as the educational needs of the child, can generate an excessive reaction, as in the letter above, where the parents are made to feel guilty if they choose not to act on the advice given, irrespective of the cost and validity.

As in all things, a measured approach to children with learning difficulties is needed, at home and school. A modicum of common sense based on sensible, professional advice are good rules of thumb to go by. With any educational need, it is important that strategies are established and followed, little fuss is made and that the difficulty is not allowed to become a crutch. Children need to learn that experiencing some difficulty in their learning is not that unusual and that a good work ethic, good self-esteem and a positive attitude are hugely important in overcoming any difficulty. Just as a right-hander who breaks his arm may have to learn to write left-handed, so the child with a learning difficulty has to be prepared to work at his/her area of weakness, whatever the difficulty, for a good work ethic is hugely important. I have been privileged to see children with moderate learning difficulties make light of their problems through sheer determination to achieve. At The Prep, we are fortunate to have an experienced learning support team who will assist parents in translating the jargon and implement a programme, where necessary, that will focus on specific difficulties. With a substantial percentage of the school-age population being

diagnosed with one learning difficulty or another, it is important that we do not allow the identification of learning difficulties to deflect us from expecting the same effort and high standards from all our children.

EH! WE WERE LUCKY!

Monty Python's skit, a horror tale of unsurpassed 'one-up-man-ship' is amongst the most popular comic scripts of all time. Part of the reason for its durability is that it has as its resonance the idea that the current generation has it easier than the one before, most recently reflected in the television series 'Grumpy Old Men' (with which, rather sadly, I found myself, more often than not, nodding in agreement). It is human nature to exaggerate our past hardships, how far we walked to school, what we went without, what we had to do by way of chores, and so on in order to provide a soapbox for commenting on today's youth. This is, of course, sometimes useful to stir the young from their pursuit of leisure and to counter their nefarious attempts at one-sided negotiations for improvements in their material well-being and constant demands for (un-earned) increases in pocket money, invariably out of all proportion to the cost of living index.

In many ways, of course, as 'we' all know, life was tougher. There were fewer material comforts, fewer choices, less money and freedom and a greater expectation that you would somehow help pay your way – and even a suspicion that A levels were considerably more difficult to obtain. And it is, of course, easy to join the detractors and the doubters of today's youth and wish them some artificial hardship (compulsory military training springs to mind) by which they can learn what 'life is really about'. Likewise, it is easy to question why they seem so reluctant to accept their adult responsibilities and just want to live at home; why they prefer the epithet 'dependent' to 'independent'; and how they can live off their parents, seemingly without remorse or conscience, into early middle age.

When I reflect back some forty years, however, on what our parents' generation enjoyed, a period of almost guaranteed employment regardless of qualifications, free healthcare, free university education and free milk in schools, a period when inflation paid off the mortgage and overdrafts and pensions were guaranteed, it is hard not to feel a little sympathy for the young. When they leave school they (or is it still us?) will have to pay for their university education and their health services. Mortgages are increasingly hefty, house prices out of reach and good jobs scarce and no longer for life. Even their savings are taxed!

None of which, of course, concerns them, or so we are led to believe. After all, they think nothing of travelling to the world's exotic places, living off credit, armed with i-pods, mobile phones, digital cameras and every other convenience gadget in some hedonistic party that can stretch a decade or more. But I think they are concerned, most of them at least, and, sadly at an age where they shouldn't have to be dwelling upon such things. Perhaps it is because when they look ahead, they see the world is a far less certain place in which to live, get a job and raise a family and that the security we enjoyed is not there for them.

I don't propose we should tell the young all these things. I think it appropriate that they believe it was tougher for us, that we had to work to get to where we got to and that they should too.

But I do think we should be aware, also, of some of the pressures and stresses facing them and to show a little leniency and understanding along the way. They are conscious of the pressures on them and the implicit expectations of their parents, even if they do not always visibly respond to them in the way we think they should. It is implicit on us, as parents and educators, to try to work out constructive ways of helping them on their journey without necessarily travelling with them. It is a delicate balance. And while we don't often say it out loud, we can occasionally whisper to each other, 'eh, we were lucky', even if we didn't know it at the time.

GENERATION X: LOCKED UP FOR LIFE

'Twenty years ago, 70% of all seven year olds walked to School; today it's five per cent . . . a bit of tough-minded unconcern is welcome to children'

Let Them Grow Up Anne Harvey

'We have become seriously risk-adverse – fearful as a nation, scared of terrorists, child molesters and violence on the street – and as a result we make it harder and harder to help those who need our aid'

Baroness Neuberger 24 September, 2008

History will tell us that the suspicion and fear engendered in our children, already trapped within diminished environs and horizons, will over time, do incalculable harm to the generation of children passing through our schools. The increasing diminution of community, the fragmentation of our towns and societies and an adult population galvanised by fear and mistrust will affect us all and will lead, inevitably, to a more suspicious, less secure world in which lives will be lived behind high walls, metaphorically or even (as happens in places today), literally.

I have no doubt that in the quest for greater safety for our children we have made them more vulnerable. In an attempt to protect our children by making decisions for them, we have suppressed their common sense and not allowed their own survival instincts to take bud; in an attempt to inoculate them against modern life, we have removed their powers of resistance. By losing our nerve, as parents, we have made them nervous, scared, less able to cope and less secure. The result is a tragedy for our society and for our children, a tragedy whose long-term consequences we cannot even begin to measure or understand.

The subject of risk-adverse children, who have been taught to trust no-one, regularly slips in and out of the national press. Government initiatives and the rabid mouthpieces of a multitude of organisations, do-gooders and academics, bureaucrats and libertines all have their say on what constitutes danger and how to avoid it. Competitiveness is frowned on, talking to strangers makes everyone a stranger and all sorts of perceived and imagined risks are seen as lurking 'out there'. The fault, however, does not lie with Government alone and all its disparate bodies and agencies, for there is an overwhelming case that says that the way to change lies with families, in what parents say to their children and how they bring them up. We need to recognise that blame and suspicion are corrosive and eat away our society; that trust must underpin good communities; that as a country, as a community, ultimately, united we must stand or divided, we will most surely fall.

Children need to be encouraged to grow, yard by yard, year by year, by being given more responsibility and shown more trust. They need to walk alone at times, use public transport even, go for a bike ride; they need to learn how to cross a road, go to the shops on their own, do some jobs that challenge and are difficult and arduous, use money responsibly, acknowledge other people, talk when spoken to, realise that they should be responsible and caring and look out for others. They shouldn't approach life defensively for life, the life worth living, is best lived out of the shell.

It is sad beyond words to see children who trust no-one, as it is to hear parents whose focus, whose whole concern is limited to themselves and their immediate families. It is sadder to see the lack of care given to those in our community who need it because of fear or suspicion or the isolation caused by prejudice and ignorance. But saddest of all is the fact, the irrefutable fact, that by suffocating our children by confining them to 'safe houses', we are doing them enormous long-term harm. We need to teach them to survive on their own or else their world will be small indeed and their lives, mere shadows.

HABITS OF MIND

'We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit' – ***Aristotle***

We are all creatures of habit. We deal with what happens to us in life according to a set of responses that we have developed since birth by imitation, by accident, by experience or by learning. There is a saying that reads (more or less) *'watch your thoughts, they become words; watch your words, they become your actions; watch your actions, they become habits; watch your habits, they become your character; watch your character it becomes your destiny'* Habits are, as Aristotle wrote, what we repeatedly do; it is therefore, implicit on us, as educators and parents to ensure that children learn the right habits at a young age.

Dr Arthur Costa, a world-renowned educator, identified 16 key habits as being important in developing children's thinking and core values. These habits of mind, broadly defined as providing the means for *'behaving intelligently when confronted with problems, the answers to which are not immediately known'* have long been recognised and adopted by academics and educational organisations internationally. While not rocket science, as a taxonomy they are used today by a great number of schools to underpin what they, in turn, are attempting to do to improve the life-long learning habits of children.

Listing the habits without a proper description is a little misleading, especially when some habits are described in 'educational jargon or psycho-babble'; however, they are worth the reading, accompanied as they are, by a brief note and occasional pertinent quote or thought. They are also worth teaching our children, at a time when many good habits are in danger of disappearing because of expediency and the pace of modern life.

1. Perseverance – Stick to it! Seeing a job through to completion.
   'Persistence is the twin sister of excellence; one is a matter of quality; one is a matter of time'.
2. Managing Impulsivity – Take your time! Thinking before acting; remaining calm, thoughtful and deliberative .

'Count to 10 – this traditional advice is supported by recent brain research that tells us that it takes several seconds for the logical side of the brain to catch up with the emotional').

3. Listening with empathy and understanding – Understand others! Look at the ideas and points of view of others.
   'Silent and listen are spelt with the same letters'.

4. Thinking flexibly – Look at it another way! Be able to change perspectives, generate alternatives, consider options.
   'If you never change your mind, why have one'. – ***Edward de Bono***

5. Thinking about Your Thinking – Meta-Cognition – Know your knowing! After all, to read without reflecting is like eating without digesting.
   'When the mind is thinking, it is talking to itself'. – ***Plato***

6. Striving for Accuracy – Check it again! Always do your best. Set high standards
   'A man who has committed a mistake and doesn't correct it is committing another mistake'. – ***Confucius***

7. Applying Past Knowledge – Use what you learn! Accessing prior knowledge; transferring knowledge beyond the situation in which it was learned.
   'I've never made a mistake. I've only learned from experience'. – ***Thomas A. Edison***

8. Questioning and Posing Problems – How do you know? Having a questioning attitude; finding problems to solve.
   'The formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution, which may be merely a matter of mathematical or experimental skill. To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advances'. – ***Albert Einstein***

9. Thinking and Communicating with Clarity and Precision – Be clear! Strive for accurate communication in both written and oral form, avoiding over-generalisations, distortions, deletions and exaggerations.
   'I do not so easily think in words . . . after being hard at work, having arrived at results that are perfectly clear . . . I have to translate my thoughts in a language that does not run evenly with them'. – ***Francis Galton, Geneticist***

14. Finding Humour – Laugh a little! Finding the whimsical, incongruous and unexpected. Being able to laugh at oneself.
    'Humour is the great thing, the saving thing. The minute it crops up, all our irritations and resentments slip away and a sunny spirit takes their place'. – ***Mark Twain***

15. Thinking Interdependently – Work together! Being able to work in groups and learn from others in reciprocal situations. Team work.
    'He climbs highest who helps another up' .

16. Remaining Open to Continuous Learning – Learn form experiences! Having the humility and pride when admitting we don't know; resisting complacency.
    'Insanity is continuing to do the same thing over and over and expecting different results'. – ***Albert Einstein***

HAPPINESS IS NO LAUGHING MATTER

Those who regularly peruse the educational pages of the national press will be aware of the recent debate resulting from the decision to teach happiness as a part of the school curriculum at Wellington College, Berkshire. The announcement by the new Headmaster at the School, Anthony Seldon (previously Head of Brighton College and biographer of Tony Blair and John Major) stated that his school would introduce a course in happiness and positive psychology in the new year, to be taught by the School's Religious Education staff overseen by the 'Well-Being Institute' at Cambridge University' (shades of George Orwell!)

Not surprisingly, the decision has provoked a good deal of comment in the national press and a prolonged debate on whether happiness should, or indeed can be taught. Anthony Seldon explained his decision by arguing that the main function of any school was to turn out pupils who were 'happy and secure' and not blinded by 'celebrity, money and possessions' and that, in order to do so, pupils needed lessons to understand themselves better. Others however, were less impressed by his ideas, seeing the initiative as naïve and misguided. An article from Mr Seldon's successor at Brighton, Richard Cairns, while avoiding explicitly attacking his predecessor's initiative, argued that we should not be seeking to make school too easy for children, quoting Winston Churchill's recipe for success, 'the ability to go from one failure to another without any loss of enthusiasm' as his own mantra. It was an article full of good sense with a well-scripted argument about the plusses for making education more challenging and not allowing children to opt out when things were difficult, but in essence said little else that was new. Mr Seldon's reasons as to why he was proposing to teach happiness, on the other hand, while easier to dismiss as slightly faddish, were prompted by his very real concern that schools were turning out 'too many tortured and unhappy pupils.'

Teaching happiness as part of a school curriculum, however, hardly appears the answer even if the concepts and principles that underpin happiness can be learned. Part of the problem with focusing on happiness is the danger that by doing so, we become party to the self-obsession and self-analysis that has caused so much unhappiness in children. For happiness, it has long been concluded, comes not so much from reflection and self knowledge, but from gaining a proper sense of one's place in the world through developing such traits as empathy and compassion. Many would concur with the Dalai Lama's recipe for personal happiness as 'The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater is our sense of well-being' although it is a path more often talked about than taken.

The goal of undiluted happiness has always been unrealistic and unsustainable, even undesirable and begs the overwhelming question as to why depression is almost exclusively a disease of western society when, compared to vast swathes of the world's people, our children bathed in so much comfort and security have, in relative terms, so little to fear. Their worries, real enough to them, are on a level that can in most instances be described as superficial, even trivial, but such has been the focus on them as unique individuals that they have lost any sense of perspective of their own worth.

Happiness after all is usually the by-product of a productive life, and is best reached through positive effort and personal achievements, however small. It is not bestowed, nor can it be bought. In short, we should let our children, or even help them, even propel them to do things for themselves and others so that they can develop that sense of achievement that underpins a feeling of self-worth and leads to happiness. Children learn best by learning to see themselves and their lot in life as part of a great mass of humanity, thereby acquiring a

better sense of perspective by which to judge themselves. They need, of course, to be taught the right values and avoid self-indulgence, especially where emotions are concerned. We really do need to stop cosseting our children and pandering to them and if, by some chance this is what Mr Seldon's courses set out to do, then perhaps there is some merit in them after all. If they focus on further analysis of self and attempt to insulate children further from the vagaries and realities of life, in all shades and colours, then a life of unhappiness is almost guaranteed.

HISTORY AS CONTESTED KNOWLEDGE

'History will be kind to me for I intend to write it' – ***Winston Churchill***

History is arguably, one of the most important subjects we teach in prep school and one that shapes the attitudes and thinking of our children more than almost any other. As such, it is vitally important that it is taught properly, and not hi-jacked as a means of teaching political correctness (in league with citizenship classes) or used to reinforce national myths and stereotypes. It is important, also, that pupils learn to look at history objectively and are taught how to make proper historical judgements rather than just learn a body of facts. History needs to develop proper skills of enquiry in pupils, for picking randomly from the smorgasbord of facts without a secure framework does nothing for our pupils' understanding. We need to teach the skills of analysis and the importance of questioning – not instead of narrative, but to complement (and make sense) of it.

The idea that some of the history we know from childhood is more properly described as contested knowledge is one we need to grow into, treading, as it does, the thin line between history and myth. When we look back on some of the history that we learned at school and realise that, what we took as incontrovertible fact at the time was sometimes nothing of the sort (the Black Hole of Calcutta being a good example), we begin to ask such questions as to who wrote the history and why – and realise that Winston Churchill wasn't being entirely flippant in his comment above!

Focusing on the triumphs and vicissitudes of our own history is perfectly justifiable on one level, but fraught with danger if done in isolation, in that by so doing, we risk the reinforcement of national and racial/cultural prejudices and do little to provide children with the skills and tools by which, properly and objectively, to weigh and measure the events of the past. That the National Curriculum is intended to raise national awareness by promoting a sense of belonging, even a sense of patriotism through extolling a common past is not without justification – after all, this is a well-trodden use of history to help nation-building. On close examination, most history taught in Schools world-wide treads this (albeit, dangerous) path between objectivity and subjectivity, trying to serve two masters, the national interest and the discipline. There is a clear danger in teaching History that all issues

could be approached from one vantage point and that prejudices will be reinforced not dismantled, that we will end up by teaching 'half-histories', experiences limited to a world distant in time, but close (and comfortable) in place. History should be 360° and should look at cause and effect to be properly effective.

A recent Government-backed study (April, 2007) stating that a lack of subject knowledge, particularly amongst primary teachers, has resulted in history being taught in a 'shallow way, leading to routine and superficial learning' is of concern nationally. We are fortunate at the Prep to have two History graduates teaching our pupils who know the pitfalls of the subject and the need to focus on teaching history as a discipline, with all the requisite skills, and not as just the story of the past. What is more, we are keen to use our independence to ensure that pupils are taught history properly and are not encumbered by other constraints. After all, history is a wonderful subject, made more glorious by the thinking it promotes.

(Although, you may of course, prefer the Jane Austen take on History)

'History, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in.... I read it a little as a duty; but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilences in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome.' – (spoken by Catherine Morland in '*Northanger Abbey*') ***Jane Austen***

HURRAH FOR THE TORTOISE!

Abraham Lincoln's Road to the White House
Failed in business in 1831
Defeated for Legislature in 1832
Second failure in business in 1833
Suffered nervous breakdown in 1836
Defeated for Speaker in 1838
Defeated for Elector in 1840
Defeated for Congress in 1843
Defeated for Congress in 1848
Defeated for Senate in 1855
Defeated for Vice President in 1856
Defeated for Senate in 1858
Elected President in 1860

One character trait that appears to be increasingly out of fashion is that of perseverance. In this age of instant-rewards and quick-fixes, we often forget to instil into our children the value of sticking to a task and seeing it through to completion. The result is that children who struggle with a subject, seek to change it; children who get tired of running, stop; children who don't enjoy an activity, give it up; children who don't like a particular food, leave it and are given something else. It is all too easy. We fail to acknowledge that success, more often than not, is achieved not by the talented nor lucky, but by those who are there at the end of the journey, those who persevere even when the odds appear stacked against them. We forget that children need to learn to honour their commitments, to keep trying even when

the threat of failure looms large. There are too many examples of very able children who never learn that sometime in their lives they will have to dig deep, that they will have to fashion their talents through hard work, and that life is for those who keep on trying long after others have stopped and gone home.

The great sadness about children giving things up so readily is that they never find out either what they are capable of, or the joy – and it is a joy – of achieving something they thought they could never do 'of tackling the thing that couldn't be done and doing it'. Tony Little, the Headmaster of Eton, identifies three qualities in appointing staff that he calls the three 'e's' – enthusiasm, energy and endurance – and of these, endurance is probably the most difficult to find in today's increasingly mobile world. And yet, we know that the people who succeed in life are those that keep trying and who risk failure for the chance of winning. They don't duck challenges. They are dependable. They last. Children – all children – need to learn to persevere, to put up with, to commit, to endure, to build up resistance and inner-fibre to cope with the mundanity and tedium of life as well as its excitement and challenges. Not all things in life are fun. Not all things are spectacular or easy. Not all things are as they want them to be. Next time your son or daughter wants to give up, help them weigh up the reasons, talk with them and challenge them to try again – often the prize is not too far over the horizon.

IF WE WANT TO WORRY ABOUT OUR CHILDREN, WE SHOULD WORRY ABOUT THIS

'The most stunning change for adolescents today is their aloneness. The adolescents of the 90's 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

As the world has become busier, so has the role of parents changed. Rather than fulfilling their age-old function as providers and guides, heads of the tribe, providing and dispensing sustenance and guidance, parents have taken on a role more akin to that of premier league managers, negotiating, advocating, championing and, of course, best buddies with their protégés, pushing hard and expecting nothing but the best. And they worry. They worry about grades. They worry about marks. They worry because their children are not achieving as well as others; they worry about which class their offspring are in; they worry about their schools and their teachers; they worry because their children seem disinterested in work; they worry because their children don't seem as goal-orientated as they were; they worry because they perceive their children are wasting time; when they could be learning another instrument, being better taught, more professionally coached; they worry because the time is passing and they want to fill their children's early years with a smorgasbord of experiences, learning new skills and tasting the very best of everything that the allowable money can buy. They worry because they cannot see an instant return on their investment, of time, of interest, of money, because they are impatient, because they do not understand the emotional nutrients of growing up.

They should not worry about such things. But they should worry about their child's mental health; they should worry if their child is not comfortable in their own skin. They should worry that 20% of all adolescents suffer from depression, 5% seriously so. We should worry about the fact that prozac is now detectable in our drinking water and that the number of prescribed anti-depressants increased from 9 million to 24 million between 1991 and 2001. They should worry about the soaring rates of teenage suicide; they should worry about binge-drinking (last year, 350 children aged between 11 and 17 were treated in London alone for binge-drinking); they should consider how to instill a proper respect for their bodies; they should concern themselves about teaching values and respect; they should worry about the fact that 20 years ago, 70% of all 7 year olds walked to school whereas today only 5% make the same journey; they should worry about the time-bomb of obesity and the lack of physical exercise; they should worry about smothering their children, about making them dependent so they don't know how to cope when the time comes to face the world on their own; they should worry about their children's physical well-being, what they eat and what exercise they take; they should worry that Britain has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Europe and that incidents of gonorrhoea have more than tripled in boys aged 13 – 19 between 1995 and 2002; they should worry about the life-long effects of social drugs like marijuana and alcohol; they should try to detract from exam pressures not add to them; and they should worry about how they can take a step back and become old-fashioned parents again.

I WANT IT NOW

It is generally acknowledged that most worthwhile things that we achieve in life involve some form of struggle – whether with ourselves, or with the world – and requires tenacity and a sense of purpose. Not everything achieved follows this process, (just as not everything we work for is worthwhile), but it is a belief that is widely held, that perseverance and perspiration are important ingredients to life-long success as is occasionally going without. That being so, it is difficult to explain the current indulgence of our children and our willingness to give them all they need when they simply ask for something and to do all we can for them at the drop of a hat without questioning their motives. Too often, parents, in making decisions for their children (sometimes where no decisions are required) allow their hearts to rule their heads and wade in on behalf of their off-spring whenever they are in difficulty. A culture that gives to children what they ask for when they ask for it and makes excuses for children's failure to meet their commitments robs them of the opportunity to develop the strength of character that they will need when faced with real difficulties.

The replacement of diminishing time with surplus money has affected parenting. We don't seem have time to educate our children in the social niceties and too often fall into the trap of doing whatever is convenient in solving problems. Often this means giving the child what they want in order to avoid hours of haggling and argument or giving way on something that doesn't in itself seem important, but the long-term costs of capitulation are high. To a degree, the immediacy provided by technology is in part responsible as we hide behind the mistaken assumption that we control the technology. The telephone, for instance, will ring, the parent

will answer, feel compelled to listen, and will respond with the heart, not the head. There are few things more plaintiff than our offspring offloading tales of woe and misery, of hardship real or imagined, and it is a rare heart (but a true one) that will respond by encouraging the child, in the first instance, to do battle with their demons, to learn that life is not always fair, and that, sometimes, they must learn to make do.

It is natural for children to want. They are acquisitive by nature and, not surprisingly, are influenced by advertising and particularly by their peers. This is where some social (and economic) education is invaluable, preferably conducted around the kitchen table and by the parents. While, time-consuming, teaching children such skills as budgeting and the laws of demand and supply as well as an acceptance that they cannot have what they want is crucial for them. Too many children, sadly know the cost of everything but the value of nothing, simply because they have not been taught to value either people, ideas or possessions, the latter because the tap of supply, sadly, has never been properly turned off. Parents often ask me whether their children would benefit from a better bat or racquet and while I often agree that they would be helpful, I do so with the rider that the child should do something to help pay for it – after all, if we keep buying our children things they will never learn the value of them. Wise parents, who require their children to work and save for things they want, are scarce indeed, but their rewards are obvious. When a child has worked hard for his cricket bat, he looks after it so much better than one bought by indulgent parents. Children can be manipulative and work life to their advantage or simply become lazy and assume that life should be unfolded for them, like a Christmas gift. Which is not the way it is.

How often today does a child bale out when the going gets tough – afraid of a challenge they might fail at, wanting to get out when a situation becomes uncomfortable, the sick note because they hate something, usually exercise or some food or school commitment? The excuse, the apology. How often do children demand things they think they need without understanding the means? Or the value? How often are they stunted by their refusal to grow when all they needed to do was to work through whatever problem they were encountering. If we seek for our children to avoid the struggles of life, they will learn nothing of which they are capable, except the tools of avoidance. If we, as parents, circumvent the struggle, or worse still, take it on our shoulders to do unending battle for our children, they will never grow and, worse, will never learn how to cope later in life. So, as parents, we mustn't fight their battles; we must love but not cosset; assist but not do; enable, but not give; and we need to look at the broader picture of what we want for our child. They should learn patience and how to do without and how to make choices that involve sacrifice as well as gratification. After all, no boy or girl will grow into an independent and responsible adult if their parents have taken all the decisions of their youth for them.

LEARNING BY DOING
MY EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING HISTORY OF ART

I had long been interested in the history of art. However, in my early years of teaching, there were two significant restraints holding me back from developing my interest beyond a mere browsing in books and galleries (the latter, no easy task in New Zealand) in order to be able to teach it. In five years of full-time university study, I had never had time to pursue my interest in art history; moreover, I was no artist, not even a fledgling one and my interest was simply that of a vicarious observer, looking at how the great artists represented, interpreted and reflected their world.

In 1989, I decided to enrol for a survey paper on the History of Art – not a sensible time, really, in that I was returning to England in September of that year, just two months before the final examination. However, an arrangement was made with the University of Bristol for me to sit the exam there, which I duly did.

On my return to New Zealand two years later, I was appointed Head of History at Wanganui Collegiate School, one of the country's premier independent schools, but still harboured a desire to use the little knowledge I had gathered to teach, also, History of Art. After badgering my then Headmaster, he agreed that the subject could be floated as an option at Bursary and National Scholarship level (A level equivalent). It proved to be a popular choice and before realising quite what was happening, I was presented with a class of twenty for the following year.

I did not realise the enormity of what I had undertaken until I read the prescription in a little more detail. The curriculum – an intensive study of Italian art in the Trecento and Quattrocento far exceeded the knowledge of Italian art that I had learnt in my broad survey paper (that covered the artists of the High Renaissance, but little else). Resources were expensive and very hard to obtain. Fortunately, another school loaned us half a dozen tired copies of the most useful text on the subject, a lecturer in Art History at Victoria University gave me a few dozen slides and, armed with some cribbed teaching notes, I set out to learn and teach (and often both, concurrently) the course.

It was a hard year. There was much I had to learn and no doubt I made many mistakes. And yet, in the national examinations, History of Art was the top performing subject in the school; one pupil was placed in the top ten in the prestigious national scholarship examinations; and – most important – the pupils (and I) enjoyed it immensely.

Two years later, Wanganui Collegiate had three History of Art classes. The School had assisted me in visiting Italy and collecting as many resources as I could. We had a full set of the main textbook and an impressive supplementary library. In my teaching room, I had a computer/projector and a number of CD roms, two slide-projectors, laminated posters from all over Italy, hundreds of slides and a television/video unit, along with many wonderful videos detailing the works and techniques of key artists – Giotto and Duccio from the Trecento and Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, Uccello and all the better know names from the Quattrocento. And yet, and yet . . .

Yes, we still performed well as a department. The pupils still loved the subject and each year, GAP years would send cards from galleries all round Europe. But, in my own mind, I never

taught it as well again. I never taught it by the seat of my britches. I never taught it through being a student as well. All of which, told me several things about teaching.

The first of these is that you teach much better if you have a real passion and love for the subject. If you are not inspired, you cannot expect your pupils to be.

Secondly, one never knows what part of what you learn will become important – that one paper (out of more than 30 I had sat at under-graduate or honours level) ended up accounting for 75% of my teaching load.

Thirdly, too many teaching aids can detract from the effectiveness of the teaching, even if adding to the quality and diversity of resources and images. The process of teaching is all about enthusing students, guiding, exploring, celebrating, sharing ideas, arguing the point and so on.

Fourthly, we don't need to know everything to be good teachers – in fact people who know everything (or worse still, think they know everything) are often the **worst** of teachers. We usually teach best what we most want to know ourselves. I am constantly frustrated by teachers who feel that they cannot venture outside their area of expertise. The same inflexibility is also found within subjects when teachers steer for the safe ground of what they know. I believe that we could all teach subjects other than our own, possibly some in which we think we have little or no ability, and really surprise ourselves by how much we learn, how much we enjoy the new challenge and how well we teach.

Fifthly, I learnt, also, that it is hunger and the feeding of that hunger that is all important in teaching – lighting the fire and not filling the pail. Many students, once started, just wanted to go on, do more, find out more, visit galleries and go on to study art history at university – as many did. Freshness is all important and teachers should always be looking for ways of teaching new things – by changing their course around, using new texts, tackling optional papers, or just by varying the way they teach. If teachers stay interested, so (usually) do pupils.

And lastly, that learning is to do, above all, with motivation and desire, with doing the hard yards, often together, with not being given easy answers and with having to think things out for oneself – and in 1993, the teacher and class had to do plenty of that!

LEARNING TO LEARN
A RESPONSE FROM THE RUSSELL GROUP OF UNIVERSITIES

'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***

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'

Director of Admissions, Cambridge University

In March 2008 I wrote a letter to a number of the leading universities who come under the umbrella of the Russell Group. My letter was directed at the press coverage given to students arriving at universities with poor literacy and study skills (and a lack of initiative and independence). The response has from the universities been very positive indeed.

What they identified:

- A lack of self-discipline and good organisation skills.
- Problems with students who have been used to reading for plot rather than paying attention to what is written down.
- The need for clear, logical and analytical thinking, interest and enthusiasm.
- The absence of intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm and an ability to digest and assimilate significant quantities of data and argue from evidence. (Oxford University.)

Bristol University noted the success of the new national curriculum to address areas such as creativity, independence and making connections between subjects in relation to wider educational themes such as education for sustainable development, enterprise, cultural diversity and technology. They added the following proviso: '*However, the issue of narrow testing at the end of KS2 and KS3 has not yet been addressed and unless changes are put in place for assessment then teaching will continue to focus on drilling pupils to pass the test.*'
They added that their experience was that pupils knew the literacy terminology but didn't know how to apply it. Students were given highly detailed essay frameworks which required little independent thinking. Literary skills were often taught from extracts and not enough emphasis was given to reading for pleasure and sustained reading, concluding *'Perhaps it is not surprising that undergraduates are having trouble thinking for themselves, need help designing their own study plans and have a utilitarian approach to education'*

As part of their ELLI (Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory) they identified seven dimensions which described a person's motivation or power to learn:

i Changing and learning
ii Meaning Making
iii Curiosity
iv Creativity
v Learning Relationships
vi Resilience
vii Strategic Awareness

At Newcastle there are various initiatives to develop writing skills to address deficiencies in the area of writing texts other than essays for assessment purposes (eg critiques, book reviews, literature reviews, business or technical reports, project proposals). They listed a number of skills / aspects of writing that pupils needed help with including:

i Understanding assignment and exam questions
ii Planning, structuring, drafting and revising assignments
iii Using reading sources without plagiarism
iv Citation and referencing conventions
v Writing analytically and critically
vi Writing theses and dissertations
vii Accuracy in grammar, spelling and punctuation
viii Appropriate vocabulary and style

At Edinburgh, the problem that was identified was the diversity of English produced by students and the inability of some to write in coherent sentences.

Birmingham argued that active and independent learning skills are at the heart of their vision to enable all their students to '*profit from a culture of learning, aligned with a research ethos, which is based on critical enquiry, debate and self-motivation.*' In support, they provided an excellent paper entitled 'A Vision for Birmingham Learning' that focused on enquiry-based learning and equipping students for life-long learning.

A further paper was provided from King's College London entitled 'A Framework for Transition: Supporting 'Learning to Learn' in Higher Education' that looked at the moves from school where learning is planned, closely monitored and evaluated for them by their teachers to an environment where they have to plan, monitor and evaluate large portions of learning by themselves.

The Imperial College in London was strongly supportive of '*efforts within schools to improve standards of English and to encourage the development of study and thinking skills*' They listed a number of concerns held by their staff about the standard of written English including:

i Poor sentence construction
ii Lack of clarity of expression
iii Inaccurate spelling
iv Lack of or inappropriate use of punctuation, capital letters and paragraphs
v Poor essay writing skills; in particular, an apparent lack of understanding of the importance of presenting information in a logical order so as to develop a rationale argument or 'tell a story'

Other responses received were from Cardiff, Leeds, Glasgow, Nottingham, UCL and Cambridge Universities, all on a similar theme and I am very grateful for the time taken by the universities for their helpful responses. Collectively they provide a very clear message for us and a challenge to the way we teach and organise our curriculum, and to what we prioritise in our schools. As always, it is somewhat reassuring that what was important, before education became a plaything of politicians and bureaucrats, remains so and the schools that insist on a good standard of English and teach the children how to think and be active, independent learners are most certainly on the right track.

LIGHTING THE FIRE THROUGH READING

'Reading is to the mind like exercise is to the body' – ***Joseph Addison***

Reading is the cornerstone of children's education, especially in the early years, and children who acquire the habit of reading widely and regularly at a young age are fortunate indeed. Reading does not, however, come naturally, unlike speech, as children need to learn first how to read and then, remembering the old Chinese saying that 'learning is like rowing upstream; not to advance is to drop back', keep reading so that it becomes habitual. To further improve reading standards, from September we are extending the place of reading in the curriculum and providing greater opportunities for children to read. This will happen initially through English classes and extend into more directed reading time out of class, particularly in the quiet times at the end of the day. New reading lists will be disseminated, children will have more opportunity for reading aloud in class and assemblies (the most reliable way of improving reading), new reading logbooks will be introduced and there will be a requirement in our Bronze, Silver and Gold awards pertaining to reading, based on the child's own abilities.

Reading is, of course, part of the school-home accord and I thought it useful to look briefly at ways that we can jointly promote reading, using (if you will excuse the indulgence) a number of pertinent quotations.

1. *'Once you learn to read, you will be forever free'*
   Frederick Douglas

   'The more you read, the more things you will know
   The more that you learn, the more places you'll go'
   Dr Suess

Children need to see the value in widening their reading. Boys, in particular, are notorious in flying a limited range when it comes to choosing books and we will be encouraging children to try at least one book from a range of different genre (including travel books, biography and such non-fiction works as Bill Bryson's excellent *A Short History of Nearly Everything*)

2. *'A home without books is a body without soul'*

   Marcus Tullius Cicero

   'So please, oh please, we beg, we pray
   Go throw your TV set away
   And in its place you can install
   A lovely bookshelf on the wall'

   Roald Dahl '*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*'

One of the most important things parents can do for children is to establish the right environment for children to read. I am concerned about children living more of their lives in isolation within the home, wired to technology, in rooms where they once used to go just to sleep. I heartily concur with Roald Dahl's sentiments about the dangers of television (and the internet) being available in children's bedrooms, especially at the expense of books and would hope that every home has a good supply of suitable books for children to read at bedtime.

3. *'Children are made readers on the laps of their parents'*
   Emilie Buchwald

   'Reading aloud with children is known to be the single most important activity for building the knowledge and skills they will eventually require for learning to read'
   Marilyn Jager Adams

There is little to add to the above sentiments except to say that both quotations resonate with wisdom. Children who are brought up in homes with a reading culture and who are read to by their parents from a young age are fortunate indeed.

4. *'The man who does not read good books is no better than the man who can't'*
   Mark Twain

Finally, there are many children who read and read well, but do not further the habit of reading as a means of extension or entertainment. While I am loathe to use the term 'good books' there are books that do both entertain and challenge and one of our jobs as a school is to promote good literature to our children. To this end, our school librarian, Mrs Lucy Dillistone is an expert as to ways to get under the guard of the reluctant reader and is always willing to guide and advise pupils and parents. Reading Circles for children and a reading culture at home will do wonders for your children. Happy reading!

LOUIS MACNEICE

'I went to school in Dorset, the world of parents
Contracted into a puppet world of sons
Far from the mill girls, the smell of porter, the salt mines
And the soldiers with their guns'

Next month sees the anniversary of the birth of one of the most famous of our old preppers, the poet Louis MacNeice who was born in Belfast on 12th September 1907. The son of a Protestant Minister in Belfast, the family moved to Carrickfergus in 1908 where Louis spent his early childhood in the large rectory with his sister Elizabeth and brother Willie. At the age of five, however, his life changed when, following an unsuccessful operation, his mother sank into an agitated melancholia and, in 1913, she went into a nursing home where she contracted tuberculosis. The children never saw her again and she died in Dublin the following year.

The following years were not easy for Louis as Miss Craig, a sour and puritanical woman took over the household. Louis wrote of her, 'though small, she was strong as leather and we soon developed new reflexes when we saw the slaps coming'. Worse was to follow when during 1917 his father remarried in London, arousing a fit of rage in Louis who promised 'when my stepmother came home I would show her what I thought; her life would just not be worth living' .

His older brother, Willie, who had been born with Downs Syndrome was sent off to an institution for the mentally handicapped in Scotland in 1916, the same year that tensions between Catholic and Protestant erupted in the Easter Rising. It was no doubt a combination of all these factors and the presence of a new stepmother that led to Elizabeth being sent off to Sherborne School for Girls in mid 1917, to be followed a few months later by Louis who started at The Prep in November, 1917.

Louis was to spend four years at Sherborne Prep School during the Headmastership of Littleton Powys (whose person he later celebrated as Owen in his 'Autumn Sequel') and after only a short time, felt confident enough to state that he preferred school to home for 'at school one was a person, at home one was just a child'.

He adapted quickly to his new life at boarding school, and while he was daunted at first by all the other boys, knew especially about butterflies, wild flowers, birds (not of which was surprising for Powys was a 'lyrical nature lover'), motor cars, aeroplanes, the County batting averages and conkers, he soon found his stride and slipped easily into the rough and tumble of school life. Through his unfinished autobiography 'The Strings are False' and the excellent biography on MacNeice by Jon Stallworthy, we are given numerous insights into his days at The Prep, none perhaps more illuminating than Louis's own report on his first term:

'When I first got there, everyone kept asking me what was my name and where I lived about 100 times. Then there was a play and we argued afterwards if Baldwin was a lion, a bear or an ass. One day we played footer but it was soccer and soccer's no good. Then I had rather a queer time because I'd forgotten nearly everything. Rugger was jolly good only I tried to collar Whitely and pinched him instead and when I was collaring Sweetenham, he asked me to let him go so I did. Then we had a lot of matches. Then we had exams. Then we had house supper and play. Then we went home.'

It was Littleton Powys who was credited with awakening in Louis MacNeice a love of literature, reading to the boys regularly and Palgrave's Golden Treasury soon became Louis's favourite book. In his final year, a new master, Mr Charles, further encouraged his growing love of literature, lending him many books of verse and during this period, Louis read avidly including The Fairie Queene, Malory's Morte d'Arthur and the works of most of the romantic poets, especially Keats.

Throughout his time at The Prep, Louis appeared happy and busy and his writings (and his school reports) tend to reflect this. In one of his letters home, Louis wrote a list of things that made the summer term different from other terms, which illustrated both the influences in his life at the time and a boyish range of interests, consisting as it did of caterpillars, butterflies, cricket, exchanging stockings on Monday, collecting flowers, going out after tea, no gas, bats, balls and nets! By his final year, his life was dominated not only by such commonplace activities as rugger, cricket, swimming and shooting, but also by his more eclectic interests including astronomy, fossil-collecting along with his growing love of literature. He was an able scholar and in 1920 Littleton Powys wrote to his father that Louis '. . . had an intellect which is distinctly above the average and it would be worth while his having a shot for a Scholarship next year'.

He was, however, no conformist, and after he was successful in winning a Classical Scholarship to Marlborough, to where he was to move onto in September, 1921, he resolved 'no more buffoonery. At Sherborne, I had become established as an eccentric and that gets awfully boring.'

At The Prep, we will celebrate Louis MacNeice on the anniversary of his birth with a poetry reading and by beginning a commemorative book of the best of the pupils' poetry in the coming year as an adjunct to the MacNeice poetry prize. As with any poet worth his salt, it is, of course, his poetry that tells his story best and for those of you that have an edition of his poems gathering dust on a shelf somewhere, I would recommend it is worth dusting off and re-reading and even sharing the more accessible verses with your children.

RAISING THE BAR

The Olympics have provided a good deal of interest over these last two weeks and no doubt many children will have enjoyed watching the many different competitions. The sight of sportsmen and sportswomen pushing themselves to the limits in order to achieve better times and greater distances with all the ensuing emotions of success and failure is both humbling and inspiring. In watching the efforts top athletes make to achieve their goals, it is pertinent to ask whether we demand enough of ourselves and to reflect on how easy we find excuses to avoid making that extra effort that takes us from 'good' to 'excellent' (or from 'poor' to 'good'). In my first prep school, I taught with one of those formidable teachers of the 'old school' who started each year by asking pupils for a page of their best writing. When they dutifully handed it in, he simply said 'not good enough', tore it up and told them to do it again. The children slaved away, producing work of a standard they had never previously achieved, but, alas, the reaction was the same, even more gruffly delivered. On the third occasion, having reached a standard whereby the children could scarcely recognise the quality of their own work, so neat and accurate was it, he collected it in silence as the children feared the worst: Eventually he spoke: 'Good', he said, 'You and I now know what you are capable of. This is your standard. Never drop below it. Never give me less than your best. Never be less than you are capable of being. Ever.'

Such behaviour these days would bring a rail of protest from parents and children and could hardly be advocated as a method of teaching. But I do remember the respect the children had for this teacher and the quality of their work throughout the year and I do wonder what our children would be capable of if really pushed. Children adapt to the standards demanded of them when they are often capable of so much more. Sometimes we do need to set the bar higher so they can find out what their personal best really is. The smile on Kerry Holmes' face in Athens said a good deal of the joys of finding out.

READY STEADY GO

Recent news of the United Kingdom's slip in work rankings in the major subjects has been a major disappointment for a government pledged to improving standards in education. According to OECD figures released in December through its PISA (Programme for Individual Assessment) survey based on tests taken by 15-year-olds which aim to assess their ability to

apply their knowledge in 'real world' situations, the UK had fallen significantly in English, Mathematics and Science. If that were not bad enough, the reading performance of 10-year-old children in England has fallen from 3rd to 19th, according to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study.

The papers are full of reasons for the demise and raise many peripheral issues and questions. The overwhelming conclusions, however, seem to be that we need to start formal education earlier and work the children harder. Both responses merit a little examination.

When we look at the countries that are above the United Kingdom, it is worth considering just what countries do well. Finland, for example, was 2nd in Reading (UK 17th) and Mathematics (UK 24th) and first in Science (UK 15th) and yet formal education doesn't begin until 7 years old and there are no standardized national tests until children are 16 years old. Other countries high on the list are countries where education is valued and sought after; even New Zealand (which doesn't necessarily fit comfortably into that grouping) was placed 5th, 11th and 7th respectively and yet education doesn't start until 5 years old and is certainly not subject to the pressures that afflict the United Kingdom, whose children are the most tested in the western world.

Nor is it to do just with working children harder; indeed there is an argument that the adage 'I must work harder' should be set aside another, more important, adage that says 'I must work smarter'. More important by far, in looking at figures such as these, is not to focus on teaching longer hours but being more effective in what we do. Sometimes, there is so much emphasis on the delivery of curriculum, on technology and on assessment that it seems someone forgot to check whether the children are learning (although the government might argue that that is what their barrage of tests is about). More important than working 'harder' per se is to establish the right climate for learning and to stop being so soft and ambiguous in our approach to education. The biggest difference between the United Kingdom and the vast majority of countries above it on the list is the appetite for learning, the value placed on education by the society, and it is this that we need to replicate, to make children hungry for knowledge, to be motivated and enthusiastic about learning, not more tests. If we want our children to compete internationally, as they surely will have to, then they need the appropriate skills and well-rounded personalities along with the inner drive to succeed, rather than being driven harder from without.

Certainly the message from the world outside education is loud and clear and best summed up by the CBI's Director General, Richard Lambert, who said, 'at a time of increasing global competition, the UK cannot afford to be 'average'. We intend, at The Prep, our children to be anything but.

RISK ASSESSMENT POLICY: TREE-CLIMBING

Subject of Risk: To assess the risks and inherent dangers of not allowing children to climb Trees

Hazards: That children will grow up closeted and will not learn essential skills to ensure their own independent growth, to test their physical resources and capabilities; that they will lose the ability to commune with nature; that they will lose the capacity to see how well they

operate above ground level; that they will never feel as comfortable with heights; that they will never develop the prehensile skills so useful in later life; and that they will always wonder what it's like up there.

Step One: Expose children to trees. Turn children loose into woods and orchards. Remind children that trees are living things that need to be nurtured and treated with care. Teach respect for trees and all that dwell there. Ensure bird life is protected, that trees are shared, not commandeered.

Critical Control Point: Getting onto the first branch is usually the most difficult task. Leg holds may be difficult to find especially on less-accommodating trees without a judiciously placed branch system. It is suggested that a ladder may be found and a tree hut built as a way station (but let the children build it themselves, their way!)

Control: In the hands of passing adults who reminisce with children as to what it was like to climb trees in their day, how to reach the highest branches, how to build a tree hut, what are the most exciting trees to climb etc. Common-sense would prevail if it were felt children were in genuine danger – hanging from the tips of fir trees or preparing home-made parachutes may give cause for concern.

Monitoring Procedure: Reports of injuries resulting from fraternising with trees weighed against mental well-being of children. Difficult to assess – ask the children (self-assessment of risk is often the most reliable indicator of perceived risk).

Review: Annual by parents, staff and children. Children will laugh more often, smile and display grazes with child-like pride. Children will be more resilient, adaptable and creative. Children will develop a head for heights. Tree climbing is excellent for team-building.

Conclusion: While there is an obvious safety risk in children finding themselves above ground level, the risk of staying earthbound is infinitely greater. In all areas of life there is risk. The answer is not to avoid it, but to measure it and learn how to deal with it. Without taking risks this planet would never have been explored, mountains would never have been climbed, life-saving discoveries would never have been made. We need to reach beyond ourselves and explore new domains. And if a tree beckons, then climb it! The world looks different several branches up – and take a book, just in case you want to stay there!

SAYING PLEASE MATTERS

'Good manners are a combination of intelligence, education, taste and style mixed together so that you don't need any of those things' – ***P. J. O'Rourke***

In a world full of people in a hurry, we sometimes forget the impact that good manners can have on others. Even the most simple courtesies are in danger of being lost in the rush for self in a brusque new world, as portrayed daily in the media and epitomised by the new wave of footballers, politicians and chefs. The irony is that in an age in which there are more highly qualified people competing for fewer jobs than ever, it is often good manners that sets people apart and shows an awareness and consideration of others that is so vital in any walk of life. While academic qualifications, enthusiasm, initiative and personality are all vitally important

to securing a job and social acceptance, having good manners is fundamental to the impression that one makes on others and is often the lubricant that oils one's progress through life.

It is so important that children learn good manners at an early age, not as a matter of didactic instruction that can lead to mindless servility or insincerity, but as a simple courtesy and way of showing consideration and respect for others. In all areas of life, parents and teachers have this shared responsibility, of having to establish appropriate standards of behaviour and etiquette while also acting as appropriate role models – no easy task! In so doing, we adhere to several basic rules that we expect our children to follow – proper table manners; standing aside in doorways and holding doors open for others; saying please, thank you, excuse me, and the host of other courtesies; standing when visitors enter a room; looking a person in the eye when they talk to you and having the confidence to talk back; using appropriate language; and writing thank you notes that require a little effort, perhaps, but count all the more for it. In fact, it is the same list that we, as adults should embrace, but too often don't. It is very difficult for pupils to develop basic manners if they do not see them at work around them, as rudeness and disrespect for others are easily mirrored by young children.

We are constantly told that our nation's children are ill-mannered, that they are even the 'most disagreeable in Europe.' And I am sure we all wonder, at times, when some children stopped saying please or thank you, and started to interrupt conversations, eat with their mouths open and come into our houses without saying hello and leaving without saying goodbye. Thankfully, the malaise is not so widespread as to affect schools where parents and teachers are determined to give their children the best possible start in life. But we must not relax our standards, nor our expectations for the walls are thin.

SEPARATE LIVES

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.'

Wobegon Boy – Garrison Kiellor

Increasingly, over recent years there has been a blurring of the roles of adults and children. Traditionally of course, there have always been families (and schools) who have treated their children as embryonic adults, believing that it was right and proper that they be both seen and heard in adult company, that they should address their parents and their parents' friends in a familiar manner and enjoy, albeit prematurely and selectively, the privileges of adulthood. Enlightened as it may seem, however, the risks of trying to be best friends with

one's children are considerable, and especially so if the parental role is in any way compromised.

Such homogenization has spread across all levels of society as parents have surrendered their role as parents in order to become friends with their children with often disastrous results, especially when the artificial friendships have imploded and the parent tries to resume their traditional role as adviser / mentor / disciplinarian / counsellor. More and more mothers and fathers have become intricately involved with the day to day lives of their offspring, wanting to know their every move, to share in their growing up, their tastes in music and clothes and all else besides. They embrace their children's friends as their own, as a way of keeping in touch with youth, or knowing the language and the currency of the next generation. To a degree this is understandable and, in moderation, even helpful. Yet when excessive, as it too often is, children struggle to maintain any mystery or to have a private life at all.

When it all goes wrong, there is no defence. If you've made your child feel important by telling them they are special and that they have as much say as anyone in how the family is managed, then that's the way they'll see themselves. Moving from parent to friend as your children mature into adulthood is natural; to move the other way, nigh impossible. Trying to haul in disillusioned children who feel you have fudged on some primal deal by trying to discipline them is near impossible because, by your own words and sanctions, you have been rendered powerless. Too often one hears children of all ages talking to their parents in a way that is rude and ungrateful and wondering where they had gone wrong. Without going as far as saying that parents are parents and children are children and never the twain should meet, children should be allowed to have a private life in a childish world, but a life with rules and expectations of behaviour. A major mechanism for doing so today is sadly, through the internet and face-book is an attempt to escape the clutches of parents and being daring while remaining within the geographical boundaries set by your parents. Even there, however, there are parents that follow, invading sites, checking the social diaries, pushing the child into more unacceptable havens and darker places in order to breathe.

Children will shock and horrify their parents at times as they have since time immemorial. They will make you cringe and you will think, 'I could have avoided this embarrassment by a little micro-managing' but that is to interfere with the process of growing up. Their vocabulary is already more diverse than you think and should you ever do the unthinkable and read their diaries, you may well find that their inner-most thoughts may be unpalatable to you and lead you to wonder where on earth they learned these things.

But they are children and part of their lives should be mysterious to you; for it is through their own exploration of time and space that they develop and grow. If our children are always governed by the hopes and aspirations we hold for them, then they will always be constrained by the extent of our imaginations; left by themselves, they can find who they are and what they are capable of, which may be less or greater than you had ever dared hope for, but they will be themselves and may even become good friends with those who brought them up.

'The thing that impresses me most about America is the way that parents obey their children'.
The Duke of Windsor

SETTING BOUNDARIES

'A group of students were discussing plans to go out to an all-night party. While most were planning to stay over, one of the boys started complaining that his parents had said that he had to return home by midnight and were laying down strict guidelines about how he should get there and back again. As he went on and on about how hard done by he was and how he couldn't stand his parents, one of the other boys started to look more and more uncomfortable. Finally he erupted.

'Yes, so I can stay out all night and make my own way there. Actually, no-one bothers whether I'm there or not or what I'm doing and you know how that makes you feel? Before you start groaning, you should be happy that at least someone actually cares about you'.

This is a familiar story, based on the idea of parents trying to hold the line in raising their children and in the process, being accused by their vexed offspring as being out of step, old-fashioned, mean-spirited and deeply embarrassing. Such insults, usually followed up by unflattering comparisons made with their friends' parents, (who, of course, are tolerant, understanding and good fun), are hurtful, and if prolonged, can lead to serious bouts of self-doubt and depression, about whether one is really out of step with modern parenting or simply heartless and cruel.

Yet we all know (or should know) how skilled children can be at playing off parents against the shadows of other parents, often based on mere scraps of hearsay, through employing their considerable powers of coercion and bluff. It is a game to be played, a pushing out of the walls, an assertion of independence by the child against their parents. They don't, however, expect or even want the walls to break. When we look more closely we find that, as a rule, those that are happy are those who have clear boundaries within which to live and have both security of love and surety of affection. In other words, while they kick and rail against authority, they want it to be there (even if just to kick and rail against!)

Children use the power of an invisible, oft-quoted group of liberal parents as key witnesses in hunting down causes. By so doing, negotiations over pocket money are normally introduced by some sliding scale of friends, all of whom are invariably in receipt of small weekly fortunes, given over by these same generous and doting parents. The list of demands is, of course, never finite: Mobile phones, I-Pods, designer clothes are all 'must-have' items and it is important, nay vital, that the latest fashions are adhered to for children to grow and belong. Unless some rules are in place, nose studs, tattoos and hair adornments (streaked, shaved or serrated) are bound to follow, on the spurious justification that one's parents cannot possibly allow their offspring to be exceptions to the rule!

It is all a myth, of course, conjured up by devious children to test you. If you weaken, buckle even for a minute, ground is lost that can never be reclaimed. Worse, it becomes a part of the family rulebook ('He was allowed to drive / smoke / drink at 16!') based on historical precedent, according to family lore.

Parents need to stand firm. They need to check and communicate with each other. Collectively, parents have the strength to stand up to the divide and rule strategy that is in-built into children. Ratings on videos should be taken seriously (it is horrifying what children

profess to have 'watched'); serious misdemeanours (in adolescence, including such social ills as smoking) should mean no pocket money, period; staying out late, the same. Children need to meet resistance at some point in their growing up. Bedtimes are what you think they can handle, not what other children may boast of or their parents allow. Insist on thank you letters, clean teeth, combed hair, properly made beds; give the children pocket money based on their usefulness and civility and make them work for more; teach them deference and respect.

Once in my boarding house, a 6th Former presented me with a leave note from his mother for leave to visit family some twenty miles away. I became suspicious so eventually rang his mother who confessed he was planning to go to a party with some local friends and not, (as the note said) to visit an aunty. When I asked why she had signed it she said that she had been reluctant to do so, but had felt pressured and was hoping beyond hope that I would 'find out'. Somewhere, somehow, she had lost the plot. Without boundaries, every journey goes, everywhere and nowhere; parents need to build fences, preferably ones that children can look over, simply to guide them in the right direction for if they are not properly domesticated, they will run wild – and, given time, they will not thank you for that!

SPORT – AT WHAT PRICE?

A recent survey reveals that 42% of pupils at schools in England play no competitive sport at all and that the fastest growing sports are not team sports, but individual sports including multi-skills sports, dance, golf and swimming.

There has been a revolution in sport in recent years and one that shows no sign of abating. It is to do, above all, with money, silly amounts of money, and an obsession with success above all else. It is not good enough to play the beautiful game with style and panache (as Arsenal supporters say they do) or to engage in five day test matches with half-filled grounds when what is wanted is money, action (compacted into as little time as possible), and results. Martin Johnson, new supremo for English Rugby, has been offered a blank cheque to produce a winning team; cricketers are earning their pensions in a matter of weeks in India; footballers are earning five times the average annual wage in one week; and, most recently (and most upsetting) Daniel Carter has been offered $1.9 million (about £750,000) to play for Toulouse in the French championships for one year. Sport is exported to those who can afford it, players and coaches are bought and sold and we end up with a homogenised product with little sense of belonging or identity.

Perhaps it is what we want or deserve, but if so we need to know what we are losing. Sport used to be partisan; it used to be about communities; it used to have something to do with shared territory. I remember watching my provincial rugby team in the late sixties with their home-grown coach and players. They were ours, they were from our towns and schools and the coach lived next door. Now, in football, (and it is increasingly happening in the Heineken Cup as well), we are left cheering teams of players b(r)ought together by a foreign magnate or consortium; few if any grew up in the town or area they represent or even the country; some can't even speak the language of their supporters, but are idolised nevertheless just for playing under the brand

name. They are the mercenaries of the 21st century, hawking their wares and talents and for the money on offer, who can blame them? But it is sad that what is distinctive and special is being lost. For instance, six international rugby teams are currently coached by New Zealanders, no doubt using the same textbook, instilling their teams with the same antipodean blueprint; talent, ideas, players, skills have become commodities, to be bought and sold, traded and shared.

What are the implications for our schools and our children? Our pupils, like generations before them, may have the same array of sporting posters on their walls, but nationally fewer children are actually participating. Children's attitudes to sport are being changed by the way sport is promoted, marketed and reviewed, whether through the merchandising of various franchises, the excessive desire to win that leads to drug-taking or the outlandish salaries or the unacceptable behaviour of players and officials. Pupils have learned, sadly, many of the bad habits of modern sport, in their willingness to question decisions and indulge in displays of petulance, often condoned by parents and too often not dealt with by coaches and schools. At a time when the professional game has become much tougher on dissent and foul play, it is important that we teach our children how to conduct themselves from a young age and encourage parents to support their children's sport in a sporting manner. Even more worrying than some of the attitudes and behaviour that is creeping into school sport is the fact that for many of our youth, sport is something you now watch on television rather than participate in. The result has been a decline in fitness levels and an accompanying rise in childhood obesity; while we want children to continue to play the game in the proper spirit, the main challenge is simply for them to continue to play at all.

In this climate, it is refreshing that sport remains at the heart of our schools. Children, of course, should always enjoy taking part in games and physical activity and that is a primary responsibility for our teachers and coaches. They should be encouraged to be properly competitive (for what is the point otherwise?); they should be encouraged to learn new skills, to try different sports while young. At some stage, they need to learn the important lesson that, as in everything in life, you get out of something only what you put in, that success is as much perspiration as inspiration and that striving to improve one's 'personal best' is an invaluable life-long pursuit in sport as in everything else.

In order to do well and develop a love for sport, children need to be enthused and motivated, to enjoy being in teams with tangible spirit and that enjoy a positive attitude to winning and losing. They also need good coaching, but coaching that enables, not disables. I am saddened when I see teams of young children being driven by sports coaches of 35 years going on 12 who are in search of some transient glory, for their school and for themselves. We must treat our charges responsibly. I am saddened also to hear of senior schools buying in players at the top of their schools, replacing students who had worked their way through the grades, and I wonder at their morality. For many children who love their sport, an excess is not likely to cause life-long damage, but they must respect those children who have other preferences, other talents. And if a few talented and determined children want to go on to a career in sport, they need to know that money – pots of it – has just made it a whole lot harder than it used to be.

'Sports is human life in microcosm' – ***Howard Cosell***

'With the money I'm making, I should be playing two positions' – ***Pete Rose, 1977***

STOP THE WORLD, I WANT TO GET ON

As the international credit crunch gathers momentum, and as energy and food prices continue to rise, we are reminded daily that our future is increasingly linked to that of other countries and to forces outside our control. We know now that if the United States (or China, Russia or India) sneeze, then we are all likely to catch a cold and that, with each year that passes, we have less control over our own destiny. In an era where even the superpowers are mutually interdependent, being an island is no protection and that whether we like it or not, we are now part of the mainland, socially, politically and economically. Our national treasures are no longer safe, our cultural heritage, our traditional brands and industries are being bought up and subsumed by international conglomerates, and worst of all, even our national sports have been hijacked by overseas' consortia and are managed by the new wealth from Russia, from India and from the United States.

We can either wring our hands at all that is happening or prepare for the fact that we, and more importantly, our children are living in a different world than we have known and that to survive in this new competitive environment, they will need to adapt to the changes that are happening. To do so they will require greater international awareness and sensitivity, a better grasp of other languages and cultures as well as the requisite qualifications, skills and experience to compete with a burgeoning international workforce hungry for both education and openings.

Opening the eyes of our children to the world that they are growing up into is a huge challenge for schools and one that we have taken seriously, through our study of languages and our wider teaching of European and world history. Over recent years, in addition to our French trip and occasional ski trips, we have been part of two successive Comenius projects, each lasting three years, involving working with a total of ten other European schools, approved and funded by the British Council. The value of these projects has been considerable as the pupils from each of the schools have looked at topics as diverse as architecture, festivals, language, environmental issues within each country and even an oral history of grandparents in the Second World War, the findings of which are then shared with partner schools. As part of the scheme, over the past six years a number of our pupils have stayed with local families and attended host schools in Italy, Greece, Bavaria, Austria, Estonia, Hungry, Poland and the Czech Republic. By living with families, and by going into other schools, the children have been able to appreciate better the culture and workings of each society and see and learn more than is ever possible on normal school trips.

Earlier this year the School won a joint award from the British Council along with a school in Slovenia from the British Council and soon, some of our Year 8 pupils will travel to Slovenia for work on a joint project on migration. We are currently awaiting the result of our application for a further project to begin next school year.

Such projects themselves, of course, do not prepare the children for future careers working from Mumbai or Shanghai, but they do help to challenge their comfort zone, extend their linguistic and cultural understanding of other countries and cultures and help shape their world view. By broadening the children's horizons, by making them plan and work on joint projects with children from other countries and by sharing each others' homes and communities, they will undoubtedly be better international citizens for the world of the future.

TEACHING TO THE TEST

The government's exams watchdog for England yesterday told schools to stop drilling children for national tests and forcing them to sit practice Sats. Valuable teaching time was being lost because of undue emphasis on preparing pupils for tests at 11 and 14, said Ken Boston, chief executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

His remarks reflect growing concerns that schools are increasingly 'teaching to the test' to improve their position in league tables, rather than offering a broad educational experience.
James Meikle, Education Correspondent, The Guardian 2007

'Minister, we can either prepare children for testing or we can educate them – we can't do both'.
Rory Bremner 2005

'You cannot fatten a beast if you are always taking it out of the field to measure it'.

The national debate about the excessive time we spend testing our children in England rumbles on without resolve or resolution. Even the unfavourable comparisons made with other countries that do significantly less testing than we do (and start their children at schools later than in the England) and have higher levels of achievement at 18 years do not appear to sway the government from pursuing its relentless programme of regular testing (rather than using other means of assessment that don't interfere with learning and teaching) as a means of raising standards. It is apparent in talking to colleagues from other schools of the huge amount of time spent in preparing pupils to pass the tests, particularly at KS2, time that could, and should, be better spent in educating the children. The vast numbers of books and resources designed to prepare pupils (and parents!) for the Key Stage tests inevitably raises questions about the type and method of education being promoted.

Independent schools, of course, are not immune from the same pressures although we have had more flexibility in doing something about it. One of the earliest decisions we made at The Prep was to remove the school from the battery of Key Stage 2 tests that were starting to dominate our Year 6 programme and suffocate pupils and teachers. At the time, I recall that a number of our parents were concerned about how we would measure their child's progress (although the Key Stage results were always only one such measure), and we had to ask them to trust that results in Year 8 would vindicate our decision – which they have.

'It (Common Entrance) sets up all the wrong expectations about what learning is (= content heavy, test of memory, product not process, teacher-focused) in both learner and parents' .
Public School Headmistress

'There is no reason why pupils need an exam at Year 8 – after all, they are likely to end up with exams in four of the next five years'.
Public School Headmaster

Sadly, cramming for Common Entrance is part of the folklore and tradition of prep schools and continues to dominate education in years 7 and 8 (and from even earlier in many schools). In imitation of SATs, there are now numerous books available for pupils and parents to help support preparation for Common Entrance and by the time the pupils come to sit the exams, they will have been fed a regular diet of old examination papers (the sale of past papers being a major source of revenue for the examination board). Even today, when the subject of examinations is discussed, two hoary old chestnuts are wheeled out, usually by prep school heads comfortable in the security of what is and seemingly reluctant to explore what could

be: First, that pupils need a regular diet of exams because that is the way education is measured; and second, that pupils derive a sense of personal achievement from passing Common Entrance.

Both arguments deserve some critical attention. There is no question that schools should, as part of their brief, prepare pupils for examinations although we should be in no hurry to do so; we should certainly not spend disproportionate amounts of learning time for testing if other measures are available. Pupils can be taught the relevant skills of preparing for, and sitting exams at the right time in their education and when they are more likely to be able to absorb them. More important, always, is the learning that is taking place and that does need to be measured in some form or another, but not necessarily through formal, stand alone tests. I am probably like many of my generation who, coming across an examination paper I once apparently studied for and passed at university, found I had little (if any!) recall of the specific information that was fed into the subconscious prior to the exam. Something has remained, I trust, and that something, the ability and skills to find and use information, the detail of which has now been largely forgotten and an understanding of the subject taught, is the education that Skinner refers to in his oft-quoted adage that *'education is what remains after what was learnt has been forgotten'*.

It is true that there is a great deal of relief and sense of achievement in passing Common Entrance although the disparity in marks amongst schools is confusing for the pupils who do not understand that the exam is one based on supply and demand with no common marking or standard.

Scholarship papers, interestingly, allow for much more flexibility and are preferable to teach to although the range of scholarship courses is as wide as the number of schools we feed. The achievement (and relief) is not so much in passing an exam, but in gaining a place into their next school. If this process could be done in a more appropriate way, by use of one test designed specifically to assess ability and potential along with core papers in Mathematics and English and an interview that assesses initiative, character and the ability to think, without the current emphasis on prior learning then we could get on with our core job of educating our children better than we are currently allowed to.

Even if such changes come to pass, we would still have school examinations, but not three times a year as happens now in Year 8. Exams would come later in the summer and would be the culmination of the year's work; they would also be more comprehensive, designed to make pupils think and be creative in thought and argument, not just regurgitate information. There would be oral assessments in some subjects and practical components in others. We would measure the whole child, not just their ability to pass a one-dimensional test – and we would have done a better job in giving our children an education and not just the dubious satisfaction of having taught them to jump through hoops.

THE BOOK OF IDEAS

Last summer, I placed an exercise book on the table outside my Study with a label 'The Book of Ideas' on the cover. In a subsequent assembly, I talked to the school about how many great inventions were founded on an original idea and on the fact that a number of really great ideas were once thought impossible. We talked also about the importance of always thinking of new things, of original ways of doing things, probably (although I cannot recall) with some illustrations of people whose lives were changed, and who changed life as we know it, because of one really good idea.

It was like opening the flood gates and within three weeks the first exercise book was full with hundreds of ideas as a number of children contributed in the belief that 'The best way to have a good idea is to have a lot of ideas' Others wrote just one, usually on a topic dear to their hearts. Many ideas, it is true to say, were not startling, but a number were very original: having house flags and coats of arms; having an inter-class mail service; introducing a children's webpage; commissioning a birds-eye painting of the school; developing a reptile sanctuary; having class gardens; and even the idea of using pretend mould for placing in the bottom of your cup to stop others borrowing it – all showed signs of some creativity, some original thought.

In this age of prescriptive learning and dogma, it is vital to get young people to think and to be creative. We want them to really think of original ideas – and not in the manner of Stephen Fry who when asked for an original idea was quoted as saying 'That can't be too hard. The library must be full of them'

Good teaching encourages open-ended questions and helps develop a sense of enquiry, by getting pupils to think out of the box and to approach problem solving from different vantage points. Sadly, the examination system, especially at senior schools does not encourage creative thinking, although ironically it is the one thing that universities are crying out for. Getting the children to think and to write down ideas is one small way of turning them into active learners with the ability to question information and hunt down answers. Children need to be hungry, not just satisfied with thinking up ideas and then abandoning them, but being prepared to follow them through. Walt Disney was quite right when he proffered the advice 'Get a good idea and stay with it. Dog it, and work at it until it's done, and done right'. Ideas, like talent, are useless unless worked at.

Too often schools are guilty of telling pupils what to think instead of how to think; too often they have model answers they expect and are not flexible enough to accept that the answers they elicit may be more profound. We need to reinvent scholasticism and plug into the wonderful raw resource of ideas that lies within each and every one of us – and especially within our children.

THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

Throughout this year, the national press has been full of stories dealing with issues relating to education – usually fuelled by politicians determined to have their say on the nation's favourite subject or by feature writers keen to vent their respective spleens or purge some unpalatable facet of their own school days. First, the great grammar school debate was resurrected to a predictable fanfare of a gnashing of teeth as politicians (and members of the public) vied with each other to tap their own muddied experiences to pronounce upon the value of grammar schools. The ensuing arguments waged through the correspondence pages of the national newspapers were heated and covered the gamut of the post-war years and every human experience possible (for successful schools come in every shade and type) and did little to resolve any issues. While this debate was simmering, another, equally inflammable, appeared in the frankly risible suggestion that teachers from independent schools should assist those in state schools, a view that was quite rightly met with both scepticism and downright indignation and did nothing to help foster dialogue or good-will between the sectors. And as if that were not enough, another leading academic then had his turn in the sun, (a metaphor, not the newspaper!) by reigniting the row over whether dyslexia actually exists, the first of an endless stream of public pronouncements on a whole raft of issues, including the removal of unsupervised coursework from GCSE, the national obsession over testing, the attacks by Civitas on the decline of British values and history, the plan to get all children to read by the age of 6 years, countered by debates about the age to begin school, the launching of new academies, the re-emphasis on values, curriculum warfare, the teaching of languages and so on and so on.

While the politicians and feature writers have had their say, schools have tried to get on with their business, assailed as they are by more and more legislation, more stringent restrictions, more petty risk assessments, an environment sanitized by health and safety and political correctness and children who are increasingly feeling the pressures of the world into which they are being catapulted. While education has long been a tool of politicians it appears that it is becoming even more so. The world in which we live has become faintly absurd and while we all can see the ludicrous side of a clown refused to be given insurance unless he removed blowing bubbles from his act for fear of people slipping on the soapy residue, we have been powerless to do anything, but shake our heads in wonder. Through our legislation and the interference of politicians and bureaucrats, we have made children safer and yet more at risk; more comfortable and less happy; more physically secure and more mentally vulnerable. We all know much of what is proposed by the parties and the pundits may seem sensible in theory, yet senseless in practice and still the world rolls on, relentlessly, with new theories and experiments and solutions, a distended vocabulary of analysis and identification and a further disfranchising of teachers and deconstruction of schools to create a new utopia that never happens.

The crisis in education is in large part a crisis in confidence in government because, through their constant meddling, the value and values of schools have been shamelessly eroded. Their plans to extend the school leaving age to 18 and to impose a fiercely prescriptive curriculum for 3 – 5 year olds are not only unsound, but quite possibly dangerous. This is not an issue that concerns only those in the maintained sector, but all of us. After all, independent schools should exist to offer an alternative education and not, as they are perceived in some areas of the country, as the only possible escape from a system that condemns children to failure. With no foundations, the infrastructure is wobbly as education, that most pliable and accessible of all political footballs, is shamelessly used by the political parties for their own ends.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME

While sorting through some old papers recently, I came across the editorial I wrote for the first school magazine I edited in 1979 at Hereworth Preparatory School in New Zealand. The article was intended to usher in the new decade and reads now from another, distant generation. In talking of the proliferation of knowledge, it made the observations, for instance, that *'students at secondary schools study new and often nebulous subjects such as liberal and economic studies. Even at primary schools, the pocket calculator has firmly embedded itself into the equipment of maths students as much as the logbook or geometry set of a generation ago.'*

The main focus of the editorial, however, was on the process of learning how to learn as seen through the eyes of a young and rather naive teacher. Interestingly, what I wrote then on education (and the anxieties of parents about their children) has not significantly changed. Nor, it must be said, has my belief in the value of learning Latin, which I used as an exemplar of a means to instil intellectual discipline. Much of this, I think, is still relevant today:

'With such an expansion of learning, it is little wonder that parents become anxious about their son's abilities to cope with life in the 1980s. Yet, in reality, the growth of knowledge has little to do with the hard business of learning. The same pupil who was able to cope with the geography of the British Isles and trigonometry a generation ago handles with similar ease the social studies and new maths of today'

The reasons are simple: What is necessary to cope with and interpret knowledge – sound methods of enquiry, a means of communication, the ability to reason and deduce, a sound grounding in all the elementary subjects and a disciplined mind – are fundamental to all learning. Which brings us by way of illustration to the teaching of Latin.

*Latin has often been called an anachronism, a waste of teacher time and pupil perspiration. And yet in helping shape the developing mind it has admirable qualities *. Its importance is not in its intrinsic value, (which is considerable) but in providing a completely new and alien system of knowledge and communication to be learnt and understood – a process that is repeated throughout each individual's life. Sir Kenneth Clark once wrote that Latin was the most disagreeable thing that he had ever done in his life. And yet he acknowledged that he had gained from its study what he could only describe as some sort of intellectual discipline. Further, he argued, that it was absolutely vital for the conduct of life and the action of the mind to learn to do what one does not want to do. Latin is not the only means to that end, but it does offer itself as an admirable instrument in forging intellectual discipline.*

Too often recently we have read or witnessed very bright students unable to cope with the pressures of life higher up the education system. The reasons for their failures are very often attributable to the fact that learning, like the wise man's house, needs just as surely to be built on foundations of rock, not sand. And it is this rock in the form of self-discipline, good work habits, a sound grounding in the basics and the development of an enquiring mind with which education in the 80s, just as in previous decades, is primarily concerned.'

Over 27 years, despite computers, whiteboards, videos, websites, despite all the massive changes resulting from the technological revolution, the proliferation of new subjects, new curricula, more and more testing, a cavalcade of Ministers of Education, the essence of education, of teaching and inspiring children to learn how to learn, the essential formula remains as it always has been – and in likelihood, will remain so in the future.

** Mr Watters, of course, would argue that Latin is far more than this and that it has a value and beauty all of its own and that a knowledge of Latin is essential in studying any other language – including English!*

THE PARENT-TEACHER ACCORD

While I don't always place a lot of stead on the words of politicians, I did find myself agreeing with the Prime Minister in his recent speech to head teachers when he was reported as saying *'When I was younger, if a pupil was in trouble with their teacher, they were in trouble with their parents too. It is not always the case today, but it should be.'*

The parent-teacher accord lies at the heart of education and we are fortunate that our parents are so supportive of the School as it seeks to provide what is the best all-round education for their children. Equally, it is implicit on the School to ensure that we do all we can to support the home and the expectations and standards of parents, so as to ensure that the messages given to the children are always clear and unambiguous.

Teachers and parents, naturally, do not get everything right all of the time, but by working and talking together, the child sees a unity of purpose and a consistency of action. This same union of adult minds is crucial when parents have to deal with the machinations of early adolescence, as children quote the liberal social contracts their friends have allegedly managed to negotiate with their parents in order to stretch further their own boundaries. Needless to say, under cross-examination and investigation, parent to parent, these often spurious claims of erstwhile friends usually disintegrate and the line is properly restored. There is no doubt that peer pressure can result in shifts in standards and expectations, often against a parent's better judgement, and yet we sometimes forget that children are just trying to find their boundaries and having tested the waters, are usually quite happy to accept the status quo. No parent thanks another parent who has decided it is easier to appease their own child's unreasonable demands by giving in, thereby blurring the message they are giving both to their own child and to his or her peers. Just as schools and parents need to work together, so do parents need to work with other parents, for there are few things that determine the well-being and development of any child more than the collective standards and attitudes of his or her year group.

Occasionally, of course, our own children get into trouble by making wrong choices, but as the pupils hear frequently in assembly, everyone makes mistakes, and what is actually important is learning how we deal with any situation we find ourselves in. The pupils should learn to accept the consequences of their own actions, for that is how they develop character and wisdom, by acknowledging an error and learning to avoid making the same mistake again. Instinctively, as parents and even sometimes, as teachers, we want to make excuses for our children or protect them in some way instead of allowing them to learn to accept responsibility for their own actions and make amends, thereby growing as people and learning the proper lessons of accountability and responsibility. If we deny our pupils those lessons by becoming unreasonable advocates, we do so at our peril.

THE RISKS OF BEING ALIVE

'The horror of childhood is its complete lack of autonomy. If our children never take a risk, unless it is the synthetic risk of adventure camps, supervised games and fairground rides, worthy activities all, but ones over which the shadow of the supervising adult falls long and dark; if adventure become synonymous with criminality – so bad children roam the streets and control the environment, while 'good' ones sit nicely at home with their computers, eating sweeties and getting fat so they die before us – then the truth is that all this happened because we, the adults, chose that it should be'. – ***Jane Shilling (adapted) The Times***

Earlier this term, on the premise that running a school is part of the risk industry, I attended a lecture on the subject of risk in the 21st century given by Professor Heinz Woolf at the RSA in Bristol. Professor's Woolf's main thesis was founded on his observation that the world was already in real danger of strangulating itself with legislation, safety regulations and risk assessments abetted by contingency fee litigation. Many of the risks we faced, he argued, were grossly exaggerated, utterly irrational, economically damaging and scientifically indefensible and the costs of policing them, as well as writing and enforcing the legislation, were out of all proportion to the risks posed. Newspapers, he argued, are apt to distort even the most insignificant statistics to exaggerate risk, often, in medical terms, with disastrous results. Professor Woolf argued that we all need some 'Vitamin R' as he called it, for the alternative of not allowing legitimate risk was to drive children underground resulting in anti-social or criminal activity, often seen through drug and alcohol abuse.

We all know that there is no benefit which can be enjoyed which does not carry with it some risk hazard or other disadvantage, however small, and that 'intelligent living' involves being able to assess the balance between benefit and risk in a rational manner and accepting the risk. It is not easy for us to stand back and watch our children fall over, both literally or metaphorically, but so very important to their future well-being that they do reach beyond their comfort zone and test themselves. One risk that they must certainly learn to face is the risk of failure, socially, intellectually and physically. While not necessarily advocating a reclaiming of the streets, it is so important the world that children inhabit doesn't shrink anymore and that somewhere, somehow, they are allowed a little space to call their own and the freedom to find their own niche and, by trial and error, their true potential.

And the last word from The Daily Telegraph columnist, Craig Brown on the pitfalls of the age we live in . . .

' Julian began throwing pebbles into the sea.

'To see how far you can send them is the most splendid fun,' he said.

'But it's against the guidelines,' added an official from Heritage Coastline. 'Not only is this coast subject to erosion, but a passing fish could easily be injured by one of those stones. And don't you kids realise you should never pick up a stone without a trained adult in attendance – it could have a sharp edge.'

. . . So the Famous Five were forced to abandon their plans for a big adventure.

'We could always have a small adventure I suppose,' sighed Anne despairingly.

'I know!' exclaimed Julian, 'Let's all sit in front of the telly at home and eat fatty foods!'

'Last one to grow clinically obese is a sissy!' added Dick excitedly.'

An extract from *Five Stay at home and Watch Telly* by Craig Brown.

THE TRUTH ABOUT TRANSFER: THE UBIQUITOUS SCHOLARSHIP EXAMINATION

On reaching year 7, pupils in prep schools begin a two-year course of work either leading towards Common Entrance, with its set subject prescriptions or for scholarships, that have almost as many different curricula as there are schools. While both systems have their faults, often encouraging the wrong sort of learning, they form the basis of education in the final two years in almost all prep schools.

At the beginning of year 7, pupils at Sherborne Prep are placed into one of two Common Entrance classes or into a scholarship class that starts to prepare pupils for the various senior schools. While there is a common scholarship exam offered by the Independent Schools Examination Board (who also produce the Common Entrance exam), few senior schools use it, preferring still to write their own. This year, as an example, our twelve year 8 scholars are sitting scholarships for ten different schools, each with their own syllabus, with examinations stretching from January to May – a ludicrous situation for prep schools to be faced with as senior schools scramble for the 'best' pupils.

That said, (and the battle to address that particular problem rests with the various schools' associations), the requirements for academic scholarships are still more easily defined than for the going number of incidental awards that are offered by senior schools, not only in sport and music (which quite appropriately take place in the Lent Term), but for subjects like drama, design technology, art and information technology. At The Prep, all pupils in the scholarship class are expected to sit an academic scholarship while a number of them may also enter for other scholarships and awards. Pupils from other classes may enter for a range of awards, even (although not very often) academic if the entry examination for the particular school is based only on Common Entrance.

The various steps that need to be taken by parents who feel their child may be worthy of consideration for an award are (i) talk to us to agree what is reasonable and appropriate (ii) contact the selected school(s) to ask for the details of the scholarships and awards they offer (iii) complete an application form which should then come to us for a full school reference. As well, we will certainly tell you if we feel your son or daughter should be looking at an award in a particular area of the curriculum.

Different schools require different documentation – supporting references, certificates, even birth certificates, although in most instances the application form and reference are all that are needed – or wanted.

It is so important to keep the prep school informed of future plans and thinking as occasionally pupils are entered for exams that are inappropriate. Often staff (such as with Art and DT) need to assist pupils to gather their work to produce appropriate portfolios, or (as in music) help prepare certain pieces and it is important that the children are motivated to do the extra work required. We are also very happy to be consulted at any stage in the process and to advise and support parents about what different schools offer, their respective strengths and weaknesses and even to help with the vexed question as to what is realistic in line with their child's aptitudes and abilities. At present, many parents do see me, usually in year 6 or early in year 7 to discuss the next step and I would encourage parents to share plans with the School so that we can best prepare the children. It can be unsettling for children to enter year 8 without knowing where they are heading and an earlier decision helps focus the mind and settle the nerves (if indeed there are any).

With the new charity legislation, most public schools have dramatically slashed the value of awards although scholarships or exhibitions (which are, in effect, minor scholarships) can then be augmented according to need. Senior schools are usually willing to provide some broad criteria for 'non-academic' awards such as sport and music, whether it be county representation or a particular musical grade, although it is worth asking, as some schools are keen to welcome anyone. Many schools are still highly selective, demanding pupils already at close to GCSE standard and parents need to be very aware of the environments into which they are entering their sons and daughters and how well they will cope.

With senior school fees running as they are, scholarships are seen as both a way to acknowledge and reward outstanding ability and also as a way – sometimes the only way – to enable a child to stay in independent education. We are very mindful of the responsibility we have to prepare children properly for scholarship exams, and very proud of our record in doing so over recent years. While scholarships should be a by-product of the school, not the end-product, we are proud of what our children achieve and the fact that they leave us as interesting, successful and well-balanced individuals.

THE TYRANNY OF COMMON ENTRANCE

For the vast majority of pupils not sitting academic scholarships, Common Entrance is the vehicle by which to gain entry to their senior school. The process whereby pupils are assessed on up to eleven exams, sat over three days, usually based on a tightly prescribed body of knowledge (often with little consideration to the skills and understanding required to make sense of it), is, in its present form, a source of considerable frustration to many prep and senior school teachers. In Common Entrance, the standards are, of course, anything but common, with each senior school determining their own standard, usually according to the demand for places; hence, pupils are almost certain to be failed if demand exceeds supply, regardless of the calibre of the candidate and the quality of the teaching. Worse though, the style of teaching and learning that Common Entrance encourages is, in many subjects, contrary to what education at this level should be about. Instead of developing appropriate skills by teaching children how to think, how to prioritize, sort and interpret information as well as learn it, prep schools up and down the country use a battery of old papers to ensure their pupils are well-prepared for what is, in large part, a test of retentive memory and knowledge. The casualties are many: understanding, skills, enthusiasm and even mental health. It is not all doom and gloom, however, as some of the exams are well-pitched and there are even a few Common Entrance courses that are well-suited to the learning needs of the children and that properly extend and educate them; the majority, however, do little of either.

For some pupils, Common Entrance looms as a huge barrier to negotiate and the exam causes many pupils undue anxiety and stress, a situation that is exacerbated for those who have learning needs that tend to be put to one side in order to help the pupil pass the exam. The irony is that Common Entrance fails to test the skills, understanding and enthusiasm that senior schools (and universities) profess to want (it was a leading senior school head who, in a recent letter, used the term 'the tyranny of Common Entrance'); worse, the narrow

prescriptive curriculum robs prep schools and, more importantly, their children of what should be the most exciting, the most challenging, the most important years of their school life.

Until the examinations change in form, in content and design, however, it is a fact of life that pupils need to be prepared properly for it. In this area we have been very successful over many years (and it is at least eight years since any pupils were turned down because of their Common Entrance results), although that is little consolation in itself. The possibility of failure remains, however, especially where demand exceeds supply or pupils head to significantly more competitive schools nearer London; as a result pupils and schools can never relax or stray too far from the narrow, prescriptive curriculum.

It is always useful for parents to have a broad knowledge of what Common Entrance involves, both in its content and its requirements. It is important to note also in entering a child for a particular school that passing the exam is not necessarily an end in itself - what is of more importance is whether the school will suit the child and whether he / she will cope and prosper there and not struggle to keep up – hence, the need for dialogue with the prep school.

Prior to the examinations, which take place, traditionally in the last week in May, there may be dialogue between parents and school, and between prep and public school, to ascertain that pupils are on course. I write a Common Entrance report for each candidate that is used to a lesser and greater extent by all schools and which provides some guidance should a pupil perform unexpectedly badly in the exams. Some senior schools offer 'pre-testing' for marginal pupils in order to give a guide as to whether parents should begin looking elsewhere so as to avoid disappointment later. This would usually be both suggested and arranged by us, in consultation with parents and the senior schools and is not always reliable. It is worth adding that while senior schools are anxious to tie their lists down as early as possible, parents should be wary about paying large deposits unless they are refundable should it turn out that the school is not suitable. If in doubt, I am always happy to talk to senior schools on your behalf.

Common Entrance remains a very important examination and one that can shape a child's future. While it remains in its current form (and a major review is pending), we do all we can to ensure that children are properly prepared for it. That does not mean, however, that we should not strive to change a system which I believe fails our pupils.

THERE IS ANOTHER WAY (BUT IT ISN'T GOING TO HAPPEN HERE)

It is hard to escape reading about the on-going debate on the charitable status and public benefit and its implications for independent schools. Under the whip of Dame Susie Leather the Charities Commission is slowly tightening its grip on independent schools, no doubt encouraged to do so by a government whose own educational initiatives have failed to reduce the educational gap in England, much to the chagrin of the Prime Minister.

While charitable status provides some financial relief to independent schools (the most significant of which are that schools are not taxed on their surplus, as all monies have to go back into running the charity, and are only charged 20% of business rates), the actual amount of saving is small – possibly around 4% – and even less than the amount being spent by some schools to demonstrate their public benefit. I can understand some of the concerns about independent schools being classed as charities and would gladly exchange our charitable status for a more honest and transparent acknowledgement of the savings independent schools make for the State. But sadly, there is less chance of that happening than an ostrich taking flight.

There has been some talk of parents being given 'vouchers' which they can redeem at any school of their choice although experience elsewhere would indicate that this is unlikely to get off the ground. Other initiatives including lotteries seem doomed to failure while successive governments avoid facing the real issues of education head-on.

Once again, it may be useful to look at what happens elsewhere. In Australia, for instance where over 40% of all school pupils attend a total of over 1078 independent schools, the government position is clear. Grants are made on the social economic status of the community from which pupils come for all schools – state and independent – and recognise 'the responsibility of governments to support the school education of all Australians, no matter where they go to school.' This funding is used for operating costs such as teacher salaries, while 90% of the cost of buildings and equipment in the independent sector are met by parents through fees fundraising and donations. Overall, 56% of income for independent schools comes from the families and 44% from the National and State governments. Clearly, school fees are able to be set at a more manageable level than in the United Kingdom, widening access through subsidised fees and ensuring that the schools are better integrated into the local communities. Despite not being charities, because of government funding schools are not allowed to make profits (cf surpluses) and are encouraged to be part of their local communities. Significantly, and despite the considerable assistance given, the Australian government estimates it would cost taxpayers an extra $2.4 billion each year if independent school students were not educated in independent schools. What chance of the government here being equally honest and pragmatic about its own approach to independent education?

The situation in New Zealand is very similar with independent schools either being directly assisted by government or being able to integrate into the state system, receiving considerably more assistance without any loss of special character or standing. The result has been, once again, to reduce costs and increase access to independent schools alongside a strong and vibrant state sector.

Sadly, independent schools in England, through their history, their tradition, their alliances with the leading universities and their perceived role in widening the socio-economic divide are likely to have to fend for themselves. It is such a political hot potato that no government of any persuasion will touch it. The lack of political nerve and honesty, the lack of any long-term benefits of change and fairness may do the government no favours, but it is a fact of life and an inherent part of the complex society we live in.

TILTING ON ITS AXIS – A NEW WORLD VIEW FROM BEIJING

To visit China is to be faced with a country undergoing dramatic and rapid change. Traditional streets and houses (hutongs) sit comfortably alongside stunning, if geometrically improbable skyscrapers and sweeping boulevards; fleets of new Audis and Mercedes jostle with rickshaws and bicycles; wealth and poverty, ancient and modern, young and old co-exist in a world in a hurry and wanting to learn and grow. When walking around Beijing, many young people – secondary school and university students usually – would approach and ask to walk with us simply to practise their English. Out of our 9th floor window we watched a skyscraper grow two floors in a week, with a workforce of as many as seventy working 24 hours a day. The streets were clean, the people friendly, the city abuzz, the 2008 Olympics shining like a beacon. It was as if the city and the country were visibly changing by the day.

There are many reasons why we need to take notice of China, its people and its languages than ever before – even apart from its population of 1.3 billion. We can focus on the obvious facts that can be gleaned from papers, magazines and the internet: that Mandarin is the most commonly spoken language in the world with over a billion native speakers, (followed by English with 510 million speakers). We can be struck by the facts that 1/2 the world's concrete and 1/3rd of the world's steel is currently being used in the building boom in China. We can reflect on the fact that 70% of the economy is now privatised and ponder on the realisation that Shanghai, with twice the population of London, already has 4000 skyscrapers – more than double the number in New York – and that there will be a thousand more in five years time. We can digest the information that China is now the world's largest mobile phone market with 380 million handsets; that there are 100 million internet-users in China; that there are over 2,100 television channels; or, more relevantly, that by 2020 an estimated 500,000 Chinese tourists will be visiting England each year. We can also reflect more soberly on the fact that China is now the leading financier of the United States current account deficit and holds the world's largest foreign exchange resources (predicted to exceed $1 trillion = £570 billion – by the end of this year); or on how China's investment of $262.6 billion of US Treasury bonds could affect American interest rates should China move its monies elsewhere; and on how China is now moving its surpluses into the Euro, buying up international companies, strengthening its gold reserves all leading us to ponder on the role that China will play in the world's economic future.

We can read all of this, in Sherborne, and not take in what is happening. We can look at the curricula in our schools that ignore much of the wider world and pretend that a detailed knowledge of the Tudors and Stuarts is more important than understanding the attitudes, beliefs and world-views of ancient civilizations that underpin these burgeoning world powers. We can think that what is happening elsewhere will not affect our children. We might well blush when we reflect on our past dealings with China, but we should teach our children to look at our imperial history, warts and all, and also at other cultures and civilizations, so as to better know their own. The teaching of Mandarin and some explanation of the giant that is China is but a small step to opening young minds, but I would venture a very important one for us to take.

TWO EARS AND ONE MOUTH

When I was a boy, I recall being told by my parents that we had been given two ears and one mouth* so that we would listen twice as much as we talked. This was a relaxation of the position held a generation earlier when children were told that they were to be seen and not heard. It came as a shock, therefore, in listening to Sarah Kennedy on Radio 2 some weeks back when she was telling of a young child going into school for his first day and saying to his teacher 'I don't do listening'

Apart from the appalling grammar and the fact that the child was almost certainly already uneducable, it was a reflection (however humorously intended) of a generation that have an increasing amount to say at an ever younger age and have been encouraged to say it. Children 'don't do listening' because, in part, they believe they should be listened to for that is the way the world has shifted in its pursuit of the dogma of 'every child matters' to a rounder interpretation of 'everything that every child has to say matters' Children are encouraged to join in conversations and their opinions are given much greater weight than a generation back. As a result their traditional role as receivers of information, whether wisdom or knowledge has shifted as they become, like the rest of us, transmitters of often random discombobulated thoughts. As well, teaching (and life) are less centred around listening skills; the media does not demand the same levels of auditory discrimination and sensitivity required for listening to the radio, whether it be the Goon Show or the Archers (in the days when it was a wholesome radio serial) than are required from television programmes where the eyes can job-share with the ears. With an invasion of I pods and mobile phones, each armed with magazines of decibels, tolerance levels are continually reduced to the extent that when this generation are old enough to have sweet nothings whispered in their ears, they might not hear them.

On a serious note, the decline in listening skills in children is a real concern to educators. The process of learning often depends on having to follow verbal instructions and to listening and retaining even the most basic of information. A concentration span generally defined as the space between advertisement breaks on television is of real concern as more and more children fail to get things right because they do not, can not listen.

It is a challenge for schools to get pupils to listen although there are various exercises and activities to improve listening. That these are conducted by teachers, who are often, by trade, not good listeners themselves, may be slightly ironic, (although this may be the result of nothing more than excessively muted school days or an overflowing reservoir of information, long in the accumulation, waiting to be shared). We need to teach specific listening skills also – how to understand verbal instructions and how to sort, interpret and process auditory information. Listening needs to be accurate and unequivocal as too often we – children and adults – hear what we want to hear which is almost as bad as not hearing in the first place. How often do we hear something and react to it only to find out we only got half the story. It is surely no coincidence that those children who do well are those that listen best and are often, as in the movies, the strong silent types or the shy and retiring, best admired for the lines they don't get round to saying because, I guess, they are too busy listening.

* An adaptation of the old adage *'We have two ears and only one tongue in order that we may hear more and speak less'*. ***Diogenes Laertius c.150 B.C.***

(UN)NATURAL SELECTION

Every so often I have been tempted to pass comment on one or other of education's sacred cows; very occasionally I have yielded to the temptation, realising as I do that what I write may be mere rhetoric that flies in the face of reason and could never dent what is an immutable belief system. In so doing, I make matters even worse by using examples from off-shore, thereby breaking another cardinal rule, of presuming that other countries do things better than we do. But it is good, sometimes, to be a little provocative, if only to challenge our comfort zone.

The sacred cow in this instance is whether selective schools relying on entrance examinations alone produce better balanced individuals or even, more successful students, especially when the level of entry for each school is considered. After all, the whole process of selecting pupils by senior schools is fraught with difficulty. In questioning the system in place does not mean I disapprove of a competitive system of entry, but simply ask the question as to whether such rigid educational segregation as it currently exists is necessary on academic grounds at ages 11 and 13 (it is, of course, simply inexcusable at ages 3 and 7). After all, our pupils are already removed from the large majority of the population by being in independent schools, without being so rigorously skimmed off on the grounds of academic ability as well, particularly as it is such an approximate science.

The reasons I feel strongly about it are based on two factors: One is the haphazard and unreliable way it works now. Many pupils have scraped through Common Entrance and have flourished; others have failed and gone on to achieve excellent grades at other schools; I remember others who failed pre-tests, ignored the results and thrived; others who passed their entry exams with ease and fell by the wayside. In such an arbitrary process one has to ask why place pupils under such inordinate pressure and worse, why penalise the late developer? Why does the line have to be so precise to the extent of even dividing families when the end result is often quite unreliable and takes no account of the student's work ethic, character and all those attributes that make a successful adult? Worse, is the negation of the cross-learning that takes place in schools where there is a wider intake where children are able to learn off each other. Schools can deal with the mix of abilities to some degree by setting pupils of different abilities as they progress through the school, which gives opportunity to the late developer, but it is hard not to feel that many teachers are simply being precious if they feel that they cannot teach classes of wider ability, especially in years 9 ands 10. It is interesting that pupils who go to less selective schools often fare better than those who go to hothouses, obsessed with their position on the league table.

The other reason for raising the matter is more personal, based on my experience teaching in a top New Zealand Public School which, like the vast majority of New Zealand independent schools was non-selective. Teaching Upper 6th classes History and History of Art, one had a very mixed cohort. In my last year there, I had a number of students who were at school under sufferance (or for the rugby) and could not wait to get back on the farm; others were destined for sparkling university careers (and indeed one of that class went straight from Wanganui to Cambridge where she completed a 1st Class degree in Law before winning a post-graduate scholarship to Harvard). I would suggest that she learnt more important lessons from being in a mixed ability class in all sorts of ways than if she had been placed in a rarefied set.

I feel a little more sympathy with public schools such as Eton, Winchester or Bedales where they are trying to offer something truly distinctive and who use their independence in the way they

try to educate their cohort compared with public schools determinedly trying to claw their way up some arbitrary tables (which is why I always say ignore league tables when choosing schools, but ask how many old boys and girls who go on to university actually finish the course).

On the parochial side, I was interested to read that the former head of the City of London Corporation and past Provost of King's College, Cambridge and current Chair of the National Opera, Dame Judith Mayhew-Jonas has been appointed to chair the Independent Schools Council, the major umbrella organisation of independent schools in the UK. I was intrigued because she attended Otago Girls High School, a traditional New Zealand state school and almost certainly would not have sat an external examination until School Certificate (equivalent to GCSE); nor would Dr John Hood, Vice Chancellor of Oxford University who attended a large non-selective state school in Auckland, Westlake Boys High; nor Sir Graeme Davis, Vice-Chancellor of London University who attended yet another large state school in Auckland. Nor would the Prime Minister, Helen Clarke or film producer Peter Jackson and so on. I would venture that part of their success has been because they were educated in a wider educational milieu, and that while they might not have learned as much at age 16 years compared to their UK counterparts, the lessons they had learned were possibly more important in the long run, and in particular their ability to think independently, to have lived in normal school environment without the pressures of selection or over-assessment until they began university, to have been educated with pupils of varying abilities and aspirations and to have been allowed to nurture the belief that all things are possible.

We are often too impatient with education. Selection is there to try and rationalise a system of demand and supply and I am not suggesting we do away with selective schools. What we should strive for, however, are schools that don't accept pupils on the basis of raw marks alone or that are nakedly ambitious for Oxbridge places five years hence. Schools need to relax their boundaries and look at other criteria, whether keeping families together, better looking after their local community or a range of other measures of character and personality, for such diversification can only enrich the experience of all children. The system needs humanising and rationalising. What is most important at this stage is a child's appetite to learn and a good work ethic, not some false measure of what they know at point X. Beware the school that talks league tables and, instead, look at the school that takes in a wider range of pupils, is less doggedly selective and lets them grow. That's where I'd go.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY EDUCATION?

'An education ought to be very good to justify depriving a child of its liberty' – ***J.S. Mills***

I am occasionally asked my permission for a pupil to miss school for a period of time, either to travel as a family, to experience schooling abroad or sometimes simply for a family occasion or because a family need demands it. Without wanting to downplay either the education we provide as a school or invoke the ire of the Department of Education and Skills by contradicting their many pronouncements on the matter, I feel strongly that the value of travel, or having shared time together as a family and being able to enjoy different experiences and cultures is often infinitely superior to the traditional education that schools offer – although the time out should be finite and the interrupted years chosen judiciously if possible.

We are conditioned to thinking of education in a very narrow way and yet the triggers in life, the things that stick and that make us who we are, are often not learned in the classroom. I am sure I am not alone in being able to remember the most trivial of facts about things that do not matter to anyone else, yet which I have valued more and which have been more use to me than tectonic plate theory or the Act of Settlement or numerous other 'facts' I learned as a child. The danger in always trying to measure education, is that the holistic aspects of education, the personal and social, the moral and spiritual, the sporting and cultural and the downright idiosyncratic are often ignored. After all, if we ask what small crumbs of our own learning have determined our future lives, it is often a hobby or personal interest that has snowballed into something else that we refer back to. Of course schools need to achieve targets, especially academic targets, but we are very unwise to ignore the different ways that children learn by making judgments as to what is worthwhile, when what is valuable above all else is curiosity and an appetite for wanting to learn more about the world we live in.

The recent articles in The Times by two of our new parents, Nick and Rachel Tims, who have recently returned from a year travelling with their children, give a number of eminently sensible tips to those parents planning to take their children out of school, some of the most pertinent for anyone considering such a venture and are not sure of how to go about it, being:-

- Be as adventurous as you dare. Children are tougher than you think.
- Don't let other people talk you out of it. They'll have their own reasons for doing so.
- It is not illegal to take the children out of school and abroad for a year. The education authority has no jurisdiction while you are away.
- Keep schoolwork to a minimum. It is less important than the experiences you are having.
- Books, pens and paper are essential entertainment tools. Believe it or not, PlayStations and iPods are not.

So, whether you are proposing a day out for a special family occasion, the chance to go to Wimbledon, Twickenham or Covent Garden or to traverse the Pacific in a kayak, please don't be dissuaded from asking permission for your son or daughter to miss school for I am not so presumptuous as to think that, even with the excellent teaching on offer at The Prep, we would offer anything more valuable than the experience of time shared on a journey or at a special occasion with one's family.

WHERE DO THE CHILDREN PLAY?

Lost: One generation. Last seen carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. Well-spoken, polite and eminently sensible, but minds atrophied by lack of space and fresh air and an interminable pressure to better themselves. Normally seen in the shrinking playground of the 21st century, looking for a way out of the maze, foreheads creased, shoulders hunched, eyes harbours of residual boredom, souls lost in a world of unbearable silence – *From a letter to the Adult Acceleration Programme, c/o Department of Childhood Suppression*

What we are doing, it seems, is endeavouring to fill every hour of their lives with sixty minutes full of measurable and profitable worth. The result is children with no time to call their own, whose minds and bodies are stretched in so many directions that the passage of childhood becomes a blur. These are children who live with pressure, who seldom walk on their own, rarely fish in a pond, don't fly kites or have the slightest idea how to amuse themselves in solitary pursuit, unless something is plugged in. Children who desperately need an investment of time rather than money from those who have no time to give, in order to fulfil their potential and to experience the joys of growing up. They want parents, not adult friends, guidance, not steerage, space, not confinement, a childhood, not some pre-booked ticket to the next stage of life's conundrum.

And what is lost in this accelerated rite of passage? Childhood. The freedom of growing up and finding out for oneself. Of satisfying curiosity. Of being alone and enjoying the company there. Experiencing failure. We can make places for children to play in schools, and in our towns and that is important, but we need to set our children free to explore areas and things that haven't been prescribed and designed by adults. They need to be able to walk on their own, to ride a bike if not a horse, to explore exciting places, what ever and where-ever they deem those to be, to dig tunnels, build tree-huts and even fall out of them occasionally. They need to renounce boredom and learn to be curious. Why is it that we so rarely see children on their own, at a park kicking a ball, walking down a country lane? Is the world really that scary that we need to know where our children are every minute, that we cannot let them go, even briefly out of the suffocating triangle of school, home and another designated safe place. For we all know the greatest danger is from within, not from what's 'out there'. As we closet a generation, board up the cracks, turn security firms into a billion pound enterprise guarding our homes, we kill the very thing we love most: the spirit and growing independence of our own sons and daughters.

There is a risk in this as in anything, but we should not just presume that because our children are happy enough in their confinement, that is enough. In fact parents may not even know. Auden once posed the question in the last couplet of a poem:

Was he happy? Was he content? The question is absurd.

If anything had been wrong, I'm sure we would have heard.

Would we hear from our children? Or by the time they got around to asking the question, might it not be too late?

Children know the importance of striving hard to reach the next level, for they are included in all adult discussions in which teachers and schools are blamed for any failing they may have and know well their parents' feelings that the only thing standing between their progeny and outstanding success, possibly on the world stage, is a succession of dullards who cannot recognise genius.

WHY COMMON SENSE ISN'T SO COMMON ANYMORE

Why is it that with all the things we wish for our children, common sense isn't top of the list? Is it because we believe that it is innate, cannot be taught? Or do we not put enough emphasis on simply 'being sensible' – indeed to hear someone say 'she is such a sensible boy/girl' has a slightly pejorative meaning, as if being sensible somehow detracts from the sum of the personality, makes one more limited, more conservative in ideas and altogether less interesting.

Perhaps it is because we are more fearful, that common sense is not enough, that academic achievement alone is the key, that having children able to achieve at many things is a greater guarantee of future success – forgetting that the world is full of educated derelicts and talented has-beens who have wasted their time on earth simply from not having enough common sense to make the most of their opportunities.

Too often, children are encouraged to be shooting stars and to head off on exotic paths through life when a little circumspection, a little reality, a foothold on terra firma would do wonders for them. Children who exhibit common sense tend to have a more balanced view of life and have learnt to look outside of themselves. Their parents tend to expect them to solve their own problems and plough their own furrow. They come to rely on intuition grounded in good sense rather than the sharp rapier of intelligence in the choices they make. Yes, we do want risk-takers, we want exciting, lively children, but we also want children who, while flying their dreams have their feet on the ground and their decisions rooted in the practical and the achievable.

Common sense is partly to do with the process of assessing dangers and making measured judgments. It is to do with having a calm head in a crisis, learning to do the right thing, not being blinded by what one is allowed to do or not do by a set of rules. Part of it is innate, part learnt and part is shaped by the world in which we move. Children can be taught common sense by being encouraged to think about others and the consequences of their actions; by weighing up (but not necessarily avoiding) risk; by learning to think globally, not selfishly; and by learning to act and make decisions based on experience and judgment, not impulse.

Children who show common sense are usually more independent through having acquired a sense of responsibility – the ability to respond to situations through an instinctive weighing up of options and risks. Children who exhibit common sense are better able to deal with the slings and arrows of life, and more likely to possess a sense of inner equilibrium. They also tend to know themselves and what they are capable or not capable of. They tend to stand out later in life whenever tough decisions or a cool head are needed, for their ability to listen and make measured judgments. They are, however, sadly, an increasingly rare breed and as such need to be nurtured and valued.

WHY ENGLISH MATTERS

'More than half of Britain's leading graduate employers are concerned about a lack of basic skills such as reading and writing among university recruits, according to new research. A survey of more than 200 employers by the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) observed a 'striking level of concern' about the literacy of graduates. A majority (56.4 per cent) expressed concern about a lack of writing skills, while 55 per cent said an inability to communicate effectively was posing a serious problem for their business.' July 8th 2008

At times, it appears as if the English language is in danger, in the immortal words of Eliza Doolittle, of being 'done in'. If we listen to the illiterati who favour the simplicity and pragmatism of communication above all else, then the future resides in 'convenience English', in the new shorthand of texting, in the blind faith of spell check, the certainty of the flattering font and in the comprehension of the script, above all else, however superficial or inaccurately transmitted it may be.

It is perhaps surprising therefore that the 'end users' of schools, the employers and universities, have still not caught on with this significant paradigm shift and are still, for goodness sake, criticising the reading and writing skills of our graduates and bemoaning the lack of precision and accuracy in grammar and writing, unaware it seems, of how education has moved on!

It is a serious matter and one which schools must confront. Who do we listen to? Who 'owns' the language? What is important in the teaching of this 'new' English? How much should we bend to accommodate the benefits of the new technology, the short-cuts, the time saving, the advantages of reading by extract, by summary, the cut and paste revolution.

Recently, in a letter I received from the Imperial College London, the University identified several areas of concern regarding the standard of written English. They listed these as

- Poor sentence construction
- Lack of clarity of expression
- Inaccurate spelling
- Lack of, or inappropriate use of, punctuation, capital letters and paragraphs
- Poor essay writing skills; in particular, an apparent lack of understanding of the importance of presenting information in a logical order so as to develop a rational argument or 'tell a story.'

Other letters received from other universities added weight to the argument that accurate, coherently written English not only still matters but matters most of all. Oxford referred to the failure of students to read texts closely, to pay attention to what is written down; Bristol bemoaned the fact that literary skills were increasingly being taught from extracts while not enough emphasis is given to reading for pleasure and sustained reading; Newcastle listed a number of skills in which students, in their view, were deficient, including accuracy in grammar, spelling and punctuation and appropriate vocabulary and style; while Edinburgh saw a major problem as being simply 'the inability of some students to write coherent sentences.'

I'm secretly pleased at what they wrote. I am conservative/old-fashioned/pedantic enough to believe that grammar, punctuation and the ability to write cogently, coherently and above

all, accurately, are the basis of the English language and that these should be reflected in the proper amounts of time being allocated to them. I believe creative writing can be just as creative with some rules in place and that an understanding of how English is structured and the rules of the language (a skill foreign students learning English know better than ourselves) are more important than the mishmash of comprehensions, creative writing and the morsels of literature that exams demand. Children need to learn that accuracy and tidiness of presentation matter. I taught once with a teacher whose pupils emerged after a year with her with copperplate writing, even a few who arrived at her doorstep barely able to print their own name. She was inspiring. She inspired children by giving them pride in their writing and she inspired her colleagues who didn't believe, with some children, that such things were possible. The lesson, apart from never underestimating children, is that we should be relentless in our demands for accuracy in the effort taken with our language, spoken and written.

As a society, we bemoan, but fail to own, lapses in standards. We are too busy making excuses for poor English and apportioning blame. While the responsibility for teaching English sits with schools, with those who write curricula, and, in the front-line, with English teachers, the reinforcement of those lessons relies on everyone else, teachers, parents and employers, wanting and demanding the same standards. At times, our quest for accuracy and for neatness is hampered by a gluttonous and diverse curriculum and I feel sad that we have had pupils who pass their exams, but cannot use their own language as they should. That is a tragedy of deflected time and effort for a lesser (but sadly still necessary) end.

Next year, we have allocated more English lessons to our junior classes; we have laid down guidelines for the use of English across all subjects; we have looked at ways to lift standards in writing and spelling, by both encouragement and coercion. For it is right and proper that we should want our children's English toolkit to be complete when they leave us because they will not only profit by it, but it will have the not-to-be-sniffed-at side effect of pleasing future employers and universities too.

WHY IS NOBODY AVERAGE ANYMORE?

'The potential of the average person is like a huge ocean un-sailed, a new continent unexplored, a world of possibilities waiting to be released and channeled toward some great good.'

Brian Tracy

'Don't be content with being average. Average is as close to the bottom as it is to the top.'

If one wants to use a word that is truly pejorative, one that parents want to avoid at all costs, that word would be 'average'. Somehow, in this world of excess, in which opportunism, fleeting fame and fortune hold sway, being average is deemed to be the worst crime of all.

Once upon a time (because this is a fairy story) one could assume that when you spoke to a group or class, you could rely on the fact that 80% were 'average' with 10% at either extreme. That is no longer the case. Part of this is because every child's distinct and extraordinary

personalities mitigate against such branding; part because we are so busy projecting our children's talents and abilities and shortcomings that they are weighed down by labels of all descriptions, each telling their own story, each fixing the child and sadly, too often determining the expectations others have of them.

In schools, average doesn't exist anymore and the stated ideal is that every child has an IEP or individual education plan. Every child is unique. Every child has special talents and may require extra learning support or to be placed on the gifted and talented register – or both. Or else they have a learning need, some of course very real including dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and disgraphia; or possibly a behavioural problem, including ADD / ADHD and autism; or possibly some shades thereof.

It is in the shading that the problem manifests itself. There are undoubted benefits in being part of a group or a class that are on a common mission, and not only because such teaching is more expedient. By thinking they are different, children adapt to the expectations and vocabulary of difference. I have yet to read an Educational Psychologist's report that says a child is average and can be taught as part of a larger cohort without specific measures being taken, regardless of the fact that by making a better effort their 'handicap' would be addressed and even disappear over time. If a child has some minor spelling, handwriting or co-ordination difficulties, the best response is often to work at it in class, rather than seeking an external panacea, just as it is best to work at keeping fit by constant activity in one's everyday life rather than relying on weekly visits to the gym for a quick fix.

Being average has a lot to commend it. It allows you to get on unfettered and without being the centre of attention. It allows you to feel part of a group or a team and to benefit from the cross-pollination of ideas and aspirations. It allows you to gain confidence within a cohort of like-minded individuals and to stealthily develop talents and character without being weighed down by expectations to either succeed or fail. It provides a bed in which to grow into something ordinary or extraordinary, in your own time, fuelled by the right nutrients and correct amounts of sunlight and rain. While average may be as close to the bottom as to the top, there are good reasons not to visit the extremities of life until the time is right. And it may never be right, for happiness might be in staying put, rather than always reaching for the stars and, as happens when grasping heavenly bodies, being burnt.

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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.

In memory of my father, Dr Calvert. Tait, 1924 – 2008

'A life full of purpose'

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