AND ANOTHER THING

P S TAIT

2011 - 2013

PREFACE

After the first two volumes of musings, I would have thought that enough was enough, but parents and other readers have very kindly encouraged me to keep writing, despite the dangers of repetition, deviation or hesitation. Conscious of the tendency for crankiness or worse, cynicism that can result from aging, I have been careful to avoid such excesses by concentrating on the overwhelming question of 'What is the best education we can offer our children?' By so doing, I hope I can offer a view on some of the day to day issues that affect our children. Inevitably, it seems, the face of education keeps changing as do the issues confronting schools and parents. Free schools and academies, changes to public examinations and a new national curriculum inevitably alter the landscape as does the continuing raft of new initiatives from our leaders. But what doesn't change is the pressure children are under as the bar is ratcheted higher and higher each year. Our children have more opportunity and more material possessions than we could ever have dreamt of, yet they have less time, less freedom and are under more pressure to succeed. Continual assessment, examinations, tracking and targets are all very well, but they don't measure all the things that we value most and require as a society. Our job, as educators and as parents, is, first and foremost, to look after the child within and make sure their personality and their humanity shines through while being allowed to realise their potential. I hope this collection remains true to that premise.

AND ANOTHER THING

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ACADEMIC SELECTION

After selecting a good prep school, choosing a senior school remains one of the most important decisions a parent can make about their children's education. In making their choice, parents often use a variety of sources (including talking to other parents and their current schools), but many still place great stead on league tables to aid their decision. Apart from the obvious flaw of using data based on examination results to determine what is a 'good' school for a particular child, league tables often tell no more than how selective a school is, which can raise all sorts of issues, positive and negative, including the downside of placing undue pressure on children and the undesirability of streaming off children so early in their school lives.

The process of selective schooling, which can start as young as age three, focuses largely on targets, potential and attainment, but little on the ability of a school to provide a good, all-round education by making the most of the ability of each child. Thankfully, a number of leading public schools now use a range of criteria to select their pupils, other than academic ability although there are still a considerable number that see their position on the league tables as paramount and as the means to ensure that they achieve the requisite results by which they can advertise themselves.

The rationale for selection is that, by selecting students according to their academic attainment aged 11 or 13, they will achieve better results. Hence, to get into such schools, children are required to sit often very academic entry tests, having been prepared by a selective prep school education or equivalent, (augmented by tutoring in many cases). This process allows the schools to produce a disproportionate share of Oxbridge places which, in turn, adds to their reputation. As a business case for schools, it is hard to dispute, as is evident from the record level demand for places, especially in London and the south-east, leading to a boom in tutoring – even if there has been a commensurate rise in emotional and physiological problems amongst children.

We are so attached to the process and to the league tables that drive them, we often avoid asking the obvious questions as to how the process works: What happens to those children who don't reach their potential until later in life? Is there any social fall-out caused by the separation of pupils based simply on their ability to pass examinations? What is the value-added measure of students at highly selective schools over less selective or non-selective schools? Can the business case, for instance, sometimes override the moral responsibility of schools in looking after and educating all its students? Does selection produce better and / or higher achieving and / or better balanced students? How reliable are results when pupils are being hot-housed from a young age? (A subject, incidentally, Dr Christopher Ray, outgoing Chairman of HMC addressed in calling upon academically-selective schools to stop admitting pupils based on the outcome of standalone tests).

The assumption that by separating children at a young age through rigorous testing produces better adults is not one that measures up to close scrutiny. The pressure on children, often before they have reached their state of readiness, can be harmful, not only socially, but intellectually. There is a lot to be said for not cluttering the young mind and that instead, schools should be eschewing the excessive acquisition of knowledge by training their teachers to challenge and enthuse children. There is also considerable evidence from very successful school systems, in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Belgium, Canada, New Zealand and Australia that non-selective schools achieve better than schools where a rigorous selective system is employed and that by drawing on one type of intelligence to feed another, there is considerable evidence to suggest that such a system also produces a more socially cohesive society. Of course, many academic students will thrive in highly academic schools, but the reality is they will thrive in most schools. And how much better socialised they would be if they had not been separated off from their peers at an early age by their ability to pass exams.

So what are the lessons for schools? To be aware that separation of children for academic reasons can be as damaging as social segregation; to acknowledge that many of our children mature at a later stage in life and to ensure that doors are not being closed prematurely; to be aware that there are social responsibilities in educating children that extend beyond the academic; to ensure that the business plan does not contradict the ethics and purpose of education; to use better criteria for selection including an assessment of 'character.' We need to reform the process of selection and humanise our process so as to minimise stress on children for no educable reason.

There are lessons for parents also: not to be seduced by schools that are selective based solely on an entrance examination (although they may well be, quite properly, the schools that you choose); to treat league tables with caution as sometimes all they reflect is how selective schools are; to avoid schools that refuse siblings for the sake of a few percentage points or who cull at the end of GCSEs. Ask how they differentiate their teaching (and setting and streaming can legitimately be part of this process). Ensure your children are comfortable in the schools that they are going to, for they need to be challenged, but not overwhelmed. Such schools might stream and set their pupils, which is fine, but make sure their selection process is not based solely on a desire to move up the league tables for that may benefit the school, but not necessarily your child. As in any purchase, when faced by schools selling themselves by their results, dig deeper and consider whether your child will be happy there. Most importantly, be aware there is a cost for everything. Many children thrive on competition or mature early, but for others it is neither sensible nor necessary to put children in for entrance examinations that are unrealistic. This is not to lower expectations, but to manage them. Many schools with little or no selection policy will achieve equally good results with your child as the most academic. After all, children want to be enthused and challenged in their learning. Of course, there is an almost infinite amount children can be taught and they can be pushed to achieve above their chronological age, but to what end? It is distressing to

see the results when demand for school places determines the way children are taught and how their young lives are shaped by adherence to that one goal of getting into the most academic school they can. This should not be confused with education, which involves learning a much greater range of skills, attitudes and attributes than can be simply passed from a tutor sitting in a room to a child, trying to eke out every possible mark from a test paper. The happiest, most successful adults are those who have been challenged and enthused by their education, not downtrodden or ground down by it and especially not for the sake of some highly selective examination. After all, the best measure of education are the skills, knowledge, attitudes and values that survive formal schooling, not by how much is learned, jettisoned and forgotten on the way.

"COMMON ENTRANCE: FATALLY FLAWED OR FIGHTING FIT?"

A Prep School Perspective

- An Address given to the Conference on Common Entrance at Wellington College, Friday 11th February, 2011.

How is it that we are here, once again, still debating the pros and cons of Common Entrance? The reason for this conference and all the recent articles and meetings dealing with the same old issues: the problems of demand and supply, the problems wrought by schools that are unnecessarily and unreasonably selective, the costs of transfer in time and money, the culture of teaching to the test, the fact that through laziness and convenience, we have turned a syllabus into a curriculum; and so on.

Perhaps it is merely a question of inertia that we have not been bold or adventurous enough to question what we teach and why we teach it. And in this room, during this day, undoubtedly lines will be drawn and sides taken.

Frank Zappa is quoted somewhere as saying that 'people will agree with you only if they already agree with you'. I feel a bit like that every time Common Entrance is debated. Sometimes it is a little like arguing whether the ark was built of gopher wood or cypress - or if they are one and the same. Does it really matter? Isn't there something bigger going on?

Which is actually what I intend to concentrate on.

Martha Nassbaum, in her forthcoming book 'Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities,' writes

"We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance. I do not mean the global economic crisis that began in 2008; I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, but is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government: a world-wide crisis in education. Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies are teaching the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful, docile, technically trained machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition and understand the significance of another person's suffering and achievements"

It is not the problem of how we manage transfer from one part of our sector to another that matters. That is – or should be - a relatively straightforward process.

The problem is that our traditional ways of educating and measuring children needs re-visiting.

Common Entrance should not sidetrack us from the more important issues facing us as a sector. Its original function of being the gateway into senior schools has changed significantly and we all accept that there are better, more reliable measures available. And yet, for many prep and senior schools, it still serves a purpose which may be selection or setting, of giving structure to year 7 and 8 or to provide a raison d'etre for the marketing of schools. All of which are fine. My concern, however, is that with any discussion of Common Entrance, it is too often a matter of the tail wagging the dog whereby the exam is determining how and what we teach. And that is wrong.

The Problem is in part due to a lack of vision, a lack of imagination, an absence of any awareness as to what the future holds. We should be responding to the national curriculum individually as well as collectively – and yet, disappointingly, prep schools failed to respond to the new curriculum review call for evidence. We should also be protecting the integrity of our subjects. This does not mean working harder, because, frankly, our students cannot compete internationally by that means alone, but we should be, could be, working smarter.

The problem is we are hitting the wrong spots. For instance, my school, like many now, uses midYIS and find that our lowest marks are in the skills assessment. Interestingly a senior school we send a number of pupils to have, likewise, identified skills as a major weakness with children from across all their feeder schools, pupils fine in verbal, non-verbal and comprehension, but weak in this crucial area, the product in part of an exam culture that promotes an ethos of teaching to the test. They have now introduced classes specifically to address the shortcomings – proofreading, perceptual speed and accuracy. Things we should be doing. We've got to get our pupils thinking more, to teach pupils to solve problems and to reason on their own.

The problem is that in Common Entrance we have created a cash-cow. Most schools now make their pre-selections then use Common Entrance to rubber-stamp places. It is recognised that Common Entrance needs a major overhaul and the examination board, ISEB, is responsive to change. But because senior schools don't have to prepare or pay for the exam, supervise it or justify their marking of it, it is too easy for them to just accept what is. When it was mooted to the ISEB Board that senior schools should pay the £100 fee per pupil for the Common Entrance exam, (£10,000 for every 100 pupils) just as they pick up the tab for other entrance exams ranging from scholarships to entry tests from local primary schools, the suggestion was met by a stony silence. Yet I suspect if they did so, they would look at the exams more critically and become more engaged in the debate regarding the vehicles of transfer to ensure they were getting value for money.

The problem is one of integrity – we can listen to the concerns expressed by HMC about Edexecel being part of the Pearson publishing group and yet ignoring a flourishing partnership between ISEB and Galore Park which we need to manage carefully. ISEB needs to represent the best interests of its member schools, its customers as well as its constituent associations. It does not always do so.

We know what many senior schools want – they want us to prepare our pupils in a way that will enable them to get the best results possible at A Levels which will be reflected in the league tables five years on. In many instances, prep schools are expected to get pupils beyond GCSE standard on arrival so they can go on and get their clutch of Oxbridge places. Which is fine, as long as prep schools are not expected to push pupils beyond their comfort zone or compromise their broader education and well-being.

Some of these highly selective schools, rife as they are with eating disorders, mental and depressive illness and a commensurate fall-off in student performance in their first year at university, should come with a health warning. And judging by the widening of access on social grounds, it may all be for naught when their best chance of a university place might not be the number of A* at all, but where they come from and the opportunities life has afforded them.

Thankfully, though most senior schools, as those gathered here, want prep school children with a good work ethic, curiosity, a sound body of knowledge and skills and a sense of responsibility for their own learning. Sometimes, they just go about selecting them the wrong way.

Actually, we worry too much about what senior schools want. They will tell us they have their own issues dealing with IB, A Levels, modular versus linear, the Cambridge PreU and would like a little more lead from us in the KS3 curriculum.

We need to challenge our assumptions. The fact that we have a common exam is always trumpeted as a strength. Interesting, then, that Helen Wright, president of GSA,

called for universities to have their own entrance tests arguing 'I'm not sure that (A Levels) have ever been good enough for universities and it is quite right for universities to be specific about certain skills that they require and to have their own tests as a result.' Which begs two questions: The first is the necessity for a common exam at Year 8, especially if a pre-test is adopted by schools; and the second, whether it should be us identifying and developing those 'certain' skills that the universities require?

Instead of allowing the constraints of A levels to be visited upon our children, we should be listening to what employers and universities are saying. Employers will tell you what they want, loud and unequivocally – good communications skills, analytical skills, computer literacy, better inter-personnel skills, an independent work ethic, initiative and ideas.

Likewise, the Universities: Some time ago, I wrote to the Russell group of universities asking what they saw as the major weaknesses of students arriving at their doors and what we, as junior schools, could do about it. Their responses were very illuminating.

Bristol bemoaned the drilling of pupils to pass the test and the fact that 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. Oxford mentioned a lack of self-discipline and good organisation skills; the absence of intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm. Edinburgh bemoaned the failure of some of their students in being able to write in coherent sentences.

Newcastle had launched various initiatives to develop writing skills to improve accuracy in grammar, spelling and punctuation and develop appropriate vocabulary and style. Birmingham argued the need to develop active learning skills. King's College London focused on the difficulties of students moving from schools where learning is planned, closely monitored and evaluated for them by their teachers, to environments where they have to plan, monitor and evaluate large portions of learning by themselves. Imperial College London was strongly supportive of 'efforts within schools to improve standards of English including spelling, poor sentence construction and punctuation and to encourage the development of study and thinking skills'.

I would suggest there is plenty there for prep schools to get their teeth into, along with the soft skills that employers are screaming out for without compromising the academic standards we all aspire to.

ISEB began launching common pre-tests in autumn 2011. These standardised, on-line tests will assess verbal, non-verbal, numeracy and comprehension skills. They will be adaptive and predict grades at 16+ and 18+. They will link to transfer at 13+. It is expected that some senior schools will test Year 6 candidates and others in Year 7.

It will be interesting to see if, armed with this extra information, senior schools will be less insistent on requiring another round of testing at Year 8 or allow prep schools to get on with the task of educating their children. Common Entrance is not the problem. The problem is that we have placed it at the hub of our learning and teaching when it should be on the periphery. In truth, the problem is with us and our failure to identify what is the best education we can give to our children to ensure our pupils can cope with the 40% of jobs that will be available to them, but which don't yet exist in a world that is changing far quicker than our schools. We need to get a move on.

CREATING A LEGACY

Our aim . . . *"is to create the best Games the world has ever seen by unlocking the UK's unrivalled passion for sport . . . and by creating a* ***real and lasting legacy.****"*

Sebastian Coe

"A thing which I regret, and which I will try to remedy some time, is that I have never in my life planted a walnut."

George Orwell

"Everyone must leave something behind when he dies . . . Something your hand touched some way so your soul has somewhere to go when you die . . . It doesn't matter what you do, so long as you change something from the way it was before you touched it into something that's like you after you take your hands away."

Ray Bradbury, ***Fahrenheit 451***

The London Olympics defined the summer of 2012. With an army of volunteers delivering overwhelming goodwill and hospitality while supporting an outstanding Team GB who set about delivering the results the nation craved, it was a triumph for the nation, never to be forgotten.

And yet as we wallow in the afterglow that has somehow not succumbed to the wettest summer in memory, it is the challenge of Seb Coe to create a real and lasting legacy that still resonates. When the lights have dimmed and the celebratory round of chat shows finished, just how do we take the endeavours of our athletes and build a legacy? And what should that legacy be?

First, any legacy should not be measured by the medals earned in Rio (and beyond) alone, but by an improvement in the physical and mental health of our children. To achieve this is not to target how best to achieve gold medals per se, but to widen the franchise and to extend the opportunities available to a far greater proportion of the

population in a far greater number of sports. To start with we need the political will to protect school playing fields and help fund sport in schools. Not many schools anywhere in the world could provide the facilities to run a major Olympic event as did Eton College with the Olympic rowing regatta, but it is implicit on Governments and local authorities to open access to as many world class facilities to as wide an audience as possible. Sport should be egalitarian as nothing else can be, and while Lord Moynihan bewailed the fact that the disproportionate number of our medal winners attending independent schools was disgraceful, his tirade was not directed against independent schools (although many could do more in sharing their patently under-utilised facilities), but in challenging other providers, and importantly, local councils and central government, to do something to right the imbalance.

When we look at what makes an Olympic champion there are any numbers of formulae you can apply. The most over-rated criteria in many (although not all) sports is innate or raw ability, but unless one is supremely gifted like Usain Bolt, for that to succeed (noting that the world is awash with people with talent) requires endeavour, determination, work, sacrifice - call it what you will - to polish the pearl. But ability and application on their own still fall short of what makes a champion in today's world.

To complete the equation we need to add two vitally important components not accessible to the vast majority of people, namely opportunity and funding. In creating a legacy that has any meaning we need to extend opportunity to a greater proportion of the population and increase funding in areas where it can make a significant difference. It was humbling to read of Hassan, Mo Farrah's twin brother, from whom he had been separated since the age of eight when Mo was given the opportunity of beginning a new life in England. Despite his identical genes and potential, back in Somalia, Hassan had no chance of athletic success. Despite being as good a runner as his brother, Mo had access to the most technically-advanced training and advice available in the world, with top running tracks and gyms to work in, while he had nothing. Opportunity is everything and to create a legacy that has more meaning than a gold medal table, we must offer more opportunities to more people.

Gold medals are all very well and, of course, they can be the result of endeavour if all the other ducks are in a row. But let us not seek fool's gold. One moment of discomfort in what was otherwise excellent news coverage was the interview with the Lithuanian Gold Medal swimmer, Ruta Meilutyte. Ruta is pupil at Plymouth College and after her three years, she was asked whether she would like to swim for Great Britain in Rio as she would be entitled to do courtesy of her extended UK residency. However frivolous the question was, (and we see plenty of such opportunism by other national sport teams), it showed the uncomfortable underbelly of sating a nation's hunger for gold. The fact that one third of all British medals were won by immigrants to the country might appear laudable, but perhaps not in every instance when there have been inducements made and we must not be trapped into buying success as a nation and dressing it up as our own. Incidentally, to her credit the 15 year old put the BBC interviewer firmly in his place in

replying that she would only consider swimming for her own country – and quite right too.

When Seb Coe spoke of a lasting legacy I am sure this is what he meant. More opportunity for more people and a healthier Nation that embraced sport in all its diversity – that is a noble aim indeed and fitting for this twice champion, first on the track and now, as the organiser of the most successful Games ever.

DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO READ

"British teenagers slumped from 17th to 25th place in an international league table for reading standards."

December 2010

"We should be saying that our children should be reading 50 books a year, not just one or two for GCSE."

Michael Gove

"Forcing children to plough through a list of "worthy" texts is not the way to instil a passion for reading."

David Hanson, IAPS

"You want weapons? We're in a library! Books, the best weapons in the world. This room's the best arsenal we could have."

David Tennant as Doctor Who

Michael Gove's announcement in March that he wished to raise the bar of children's reading and that children as young as 11 years should complete the equivalent of one novel a week stimulated a good deal of discussion in the media. A number of columnists applauded the attempt to place reading at the heart of the revival in educational standards and agreed with the need for a more methodical approach to measure reading in our schools; others, however, including The Children's Laureate, Anthony Browne were not convinced that this was the best way of raising reading standards or encouraging children to read:

"It's always good to hear that the importance of children's reading is recognized – but rather than setting an arbitrary number of books that children ought to read, I feel it's the quality of children's reading experiences that really matter."

Philip Pullman, himself a beneficiary of the Minister's reading lists, also questioned the Minister's statement, saying that he was confusing quantity with quality and that while reading challenges had a lot to commend them, one should not dictate a pathway to children about to start reading. A number of writers spoke out against the suggestion, commenting on the hypocrisy of trying to promote reading given the Government's lack of support for local libraries.

Most focused on the process of teaching children to read, echoing Yeats' 'lighting the fire' as the way to engage children with books – rather than 'filling the pail' by determining and force-feeding a diet of books.

That is not to deny the absolutely central role that reading has in education. While some children might mistakenly feel that reading, like spelling and hand-writing are likely to become less important as technology provides the means to compensate for any short-comings, this is simply not so. The recent statement from the International Reading Society, reflecting on Britain's continuing fall down international league tables says as much:

"Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future."

So what do we need to do, if we wish to counter the ham-fisted approach of the Minister while meeting his laudable aim of encouraging reading?

What we need to do first is to acknowledge is that this is a different world that children live in, full of many different stimuli and choices available and plan our strategy accordingly. While some children read regularly, more children don't read as much now because there are more calls on their time, distractions such as social networking sites, television and the internet. Using such tools (and E-readers could be a very useful weapon in the arsenal) makes sense as a way of making reading attractive. We must also widen our definition of what is worth reading to include almost anything that develops the skill of reading. Andrea Levy said recently that despite having passed A level English, aided by the ubiquitous swot notes and revision guides, did not read a book until she was 23 years old. What is important is not the number of books read, but the ability to read books when the need or interest is awoken.

In this new world order, we need to create a time and a desire to read. We should not try to be too prescriptive and we should acknowledge that we all have different appetites at different ages when it comes to the written word.

Alan Garner, author of the children's classic 'The Weird' wrote of his own experience "*In my own primary school years I read everything I could find, which amounted to at least four books a week and as many comics as possible. The Beano and The Dandy were equal with Tarzan of the Apes, Enid Blyton, HG Wells, Kipling, wildlife books, fairy tales, encyclopaedias.*"

And that, I suggest, is the experience of all of us, picking away at books ranging in subject matter from technical manuals to fairy stories, building vocabulary, becoming aware of differences of style, while absorbing grammar and syntax and an ability to spell.

There are some things we need to guard against. One is forcing our children into reading too young, too young being best defined by 'before they are ready' evidenced by showing a natural curiosity and impatience to pick up a book and read the words. While it might be desirable to be able to boast how young one's children started reading, it is really of no matter. Boys, in particular, whose vocabulary grows slower than that of girls' and whose interests are more active than passive at a very young age, may take some time to reach this stage.

We should not worry so much. Children who begin reading two or three years after their peers can catch up in a matter of months once they have the appetite. Moreover, there is considerable danger in pushing children into reading before their natural readiness to do so. Recent research indicates that this leads to children 'guessing' words and being instrumental in reading difficulties in later life. Even as children mature, reading may not become a habit until adulthood. In fact, while we might not like to acknowledge it, many very successful people who have to deal with the written word in their everyday life, hardly read at all. Further, without wanting to divide the reading world by gender, boys often appear to stagnate for months, even years, as they make their way through school, existing on a minimal diet of books and magazines. As long as they are interested in learning, however, they will come back to reading. But we have to accept that for some long time it may only be football programmes and sports books, as it was for me, for some significant time in my young life.

The key is getting children to want to read. We need to show them that books are not only a source of information and entertainment, but can feed their own interests. Reading schemes in schools can work well, (but not necessarily centred around the number of books read), author visits, being read to, developing a reading culture in our homes and any number of methods to interest and stimulate children in wanting to read are all useful. We need to look at how the emphasis on testing affects our reading patterns. If A Level English, for instance, is not succeeding in encouraging reading, then we need to restructure our courses, purge the reading lists and look at how much encouragement is given to the reading, rather than the dissection, of books in the first place.

Reading is at the core of learning and we are right to be concerned about dropping standards, but we need to approach the problem in a way that will be sustainable and practical in an ever busier world. We need to create the hunger for books. We need to make sure reading has a point other than to help pass a test. And, sometimes, we just need to be patient.

EDUCATING BRITAIN

"Not long ago, I saw the aftermath of riots on streets near my home and wondered where these youths had sprung from; why they felt able to loot from their community and hurl stones at police. "Educating Yorkshire" provided the banal, painful answer. They sprang from our schools.' We let this generation grow up like that."

Christopher Stevens, Daily Mail, 26th October, 2013

"Self-indulgent pap."

Rod Liddle's judgement on 'Educating Yorkshire', Spectator, 28 October, 2013

"I really do not understand the negative comments I have seen about . . . the series as a whole. What a wonderful bunch of kids, and incredibly hard working and dedicated teachers".

Comment in The Guardian 28th October, 2013

The series, 'Educating Yorkshire' which was screened on Channel 4 throughout much of October provided a fascinating insight into one of our schools and the efforts being made to turn around a struggling academy in the town of Dewsbury in Yorkshire.

Along with some four million others, I watched the series with a mixture of admiration and sadness as the stories unfolded. It was absorbing viewing and highlighted some of the very best work that is going on in our schools as well as some of the social issues that permeate our society.

What disturbed me, however, was not the series, even its dark and disturbing moments, when it held up a mirror to our society, but the reaction to it. Reading the comments in the various newspapers, one understood what a fractious society we live in as the reportage quickly disintegrated into a slanging match about educational standards, north and south, about teachers and schools, about language, law and order, standards of behaviour, the lack of respect amongst the young and for teachers in general (a typical comment read *"Aren't most teachers failures who cannot attain the grades they need to be something really special, so the next best thing is to screw up someone else's education?"*). All of which could be seen as little more than hot air if the correspondents weren't so full of anger, of bile, of looking for someone to blame for the lack of respect and the often appalling behaviour that they saw about them, even if their own comments were similarly rude and crass. And while they had every right to feel concerned and appalled, their response was misguided. Why, for instance, blame the schools who have been charged by society to sort out the mess that has resulted from years of change aimed specifically at disempowering teachers? Who allowed the message that 'every child matters' to become errantly translated into 'I matter' and 'what I say and do matters.' The results of this attitude are evident for all to see. Society has been undone by the social breakdown of community, a growing emphasis on 'self', allied to a lack of empathy that has become part of modern life, all aided and abetted

by politicians constantly changing the social fabric of our schools for political advantage. Watching the programme, one could sense the reaction 'if I was a teacher, those kids wouldn't behave like that!' which is as stupid as it is naïve. Each society gets the schools it deserves and we have not done our children proud by constantly tinkering and undermining our schools so when we watch a programme such as "Educating Yorkshire", we find them almost unrecognisable. Teachers so often just want to teach and not have to provide a safety net for all of society's ills. But increasingly, the question is being asked that if schools don't do it, who does? The one thing we shouldn't ever do, is blame our schools for a society that we all colluded in making.

As Christopher Stevens concluded:
"The appalling scenes from earlier in the documentary have not faded from memory. Indiscipline, derision and arrogance seem ingrained not just at this school, but among millions of today's teenagers. And if the behaviour caught on camera is typical and tolerated, it is no surprise that so many young people leave school with contempt for the law, hatred for authority and a conviction that the world owes them more than a living…it owes them everything. The evidence of "Educating Yorkshire" is that atrocious behaviour is, sadly, commonplace, and there are no sanctions. Teachers can do nothing to enforce their authority – and the children know it and exploit it."

That is the challenge the programme presents and one schools can meet, despite the difficulties they labour under – if they are allowed to get on with it.

GIVING EVERYONE A FAIR GO

"All children should think of themselves as everyone's equal, but no-one's superior."
Shami Chakrabarti

"Judge people by what they are rather than what they have."
Gavin Ellis

"All of us do not have equal talent, but all of us should have an equal opportunity to develop our talent."
John F. Kennedy

The recent debates about university entry raised by the High Master of Manchester Grammar, Dr Christopher Ray raises some interesting points about how we see our children and how we define fairness in terms of access and opportunity. As Head of the largest independent day school in the country, Dr Ray railed against perceived discrimination against independent school pupils by some universities determined to widen participation. His argument that many children from selective state schools or

who have been privately tutored have had the same advantages as those from highly selective independent schools is a fair one – but does it really address the issue?

The answer is neither the charge or counter-charge are ideal. Many selective schools would admit that, when they interview pupils for their own schools, they seek those who show academic potential as much as a clutch of good marks. And likewise, as a country, we also want our universities populated not just with those who have the best marks on entry, but the best marks on exit and sometimes, these will not be those who have benefitted from an exceptional secondary education.

Which brings into question the whole issue of selection, something that the present Minister (and Prime Minister) appear to be fixated on. Recently I attended a conference in which one of the speakers, a very successful Army doctor spoke about his rather ordinary school career at a grammar school in Norfolk. When he was in his final year, several of his teachers complimented him that at last he was starting to work. His reply was telling: *'No'*, he said, '*I've always worked this hard. The difference is I've only just got it.'*

We all 'get it' at different ages. For some, whose school careers are like shooting stars, they are ablaze at twelve, but burnt out by twenty. Others have a longer fuse and their trajectory is enduring, so long as they haven't been placed away in a box of 'duds' somewhere for failing to ignite when required. We need to be patient; we need to keep doors open; and we need to re-assess the criteria we use to determine potential and place more stead on such attributes as attitude, curiosity and a decent work ethic.

The problem of selection at a young age is two-fold. One is that it closes doors, especially to those who mature late, whose readiness is delayed, who lack the maturity and focus of their peers; the second reason is seldom addressed and that of the social effect of removing children based almost exclusively on their ability to pass exams from their peer group who have other intelligences, others strengths and values. Selection at a young age is damaging and can create elites while reducing opportunity for others with greater potential, but lacking the opportunity, the confidence or the resources to succeed before the doors slam shut. It is how to make better use of our most valuable resource, our children, as a nation, not by competing schools and school systems with which we should be most concerned.

Sadly, also, although seldom spoken about, there is a culture of children so selected seeing themselves as superior to others. That is not surprising given the messages we send out as a society. Whether it is through their nurturing, education or their material wealth, the idea of a university education, preferably at one of the Russell group of universities is sometimes seen as a birthright, albeit one that has to be worked for. Naturally, having been given that expectation, to face social engineering in the selection process for university is galling, but if it is done in order for universities to enrol students with the greatest potential to succeed, then I would argue, it is no bad thing.

GOOD SCHOOL, BAD SCHOOL

"Am I going to find a good secondary school for my children? I feel it as a parent, let alone as a politician."'

David Cameron

"It's not about whether it's private or public – it can be either. I just want the best for my child."

Nick Clegg

"Desperate families pay thousands to win school appeals."'

The Times, March, 2013

'How to get your child into a good school?' is the question constantly being asked by parents. This year it has been occupying the minds of both the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister as they have looked for schools for their own children and in doing so, have unwittingly endorsed the widely perceived gap between what are loosely called 'good' schools and 'bad' schools.

Politicians of all persuasions have to bear the responsibility for many of education's shortcomings, each traditionally criticising the others' policies by offering some new panacea to cure all ills. Except they never do. As a result of political decisions taken by successive governments since the Education Act of 1944, therefore, we have a deeply divided system with less social mobility and more failing schools and described by the current deputy Prime Minister as corrosive, even as he was looking at schools for his own son.

While the criticism Mr Clegg received was for even considering independent education was vitriolic, by anyone who had anything to say about education (usually everyone), he was, in fact, just one more parent who had given in to their parental instincts, to do the very best for their child, whatever they perceived that to be, regardless of their stated principles and beliefs. He was not alone in wrestling with the dilemma and one should not blame him, or the tens of thousands like him, any more than the writers of the numerous articles that help advise parents how to get their children into a 'good' school, by fair means or foul, including using tutors, looking at the independent sector or even by changing their faith or moving house. The very fact that we have a society that feels the need to take such steps in order to give their children the opportunity of a good education is sad, but it is the inevitable legacy of government policy, endlessly changed and corrupted that has put paid to the opportunity of a good standard of education freely available to all. The fault, the problem, the disgrace is that not that we are a society with choice in education, but that we are a society that is made up, so we are endlessly told, of 'good' schools and 'bad' schools.

There is, of course, a problem of nomenclature. After all, what makes a good school? I am not sure I could define it any more than I could define what makes a bad school.

Sure, there are numerous indicators one could use including examination results or places won at the Russell Group of universities, but we might also highlight schools that produce well-rounded students who leave their schools without the same qualifications, but with such values as charity and tolerance, a variety of employable skills and a good work ethic.

Some schools work for some children, others work for others, but that is really ignoring the issue which is that, too often, parents are deeply concerned with the paucity of choices they face in their towns and cities. For everyone who wins a place at a good school by fair means or foul, the fact is that someone else misses out. Education should not be about winners and losers, nor should not be a lottery in which, because of social and cultural factors, the disadvantaged and disenfranchised are the children. That is a disgrace.

GROWING ASPIRATIONS

"The real tragedy of the poor is the poverty of their aspirations."

Adam Smith

"The difficulty is the aspirations you have can only be based on what you see."

John Bishop in Desert Island Discs, September, 2012

"At the age of six I wanted to be a cook. At seven I wanted to be Napoleon. And my ambition has been growing ever since."

Salvador Dali

One of the greatest impediments to raising academic standards in Britain is the difficulty in raising aspirations amongst our families and children. While many teachers tell children to aim high and work hard, (although sadly do not), the reality for too many is sadly different. Celebrity shows, music and sport may appear to offer escape routes for a small number, but far too many children are blighted by the low expectations and aspirations of their teachers and parents and, worse still, of society. We often read of teachers not being aspirational enough for their pupils in terms of further education and statistics certainly reflect this. Often, independent schools perform no better than neighbouring state schools, yet have a significantly larger number of children moving into leading universities or full-time employment. In part that is down to financial and social advantages as well as personal ambition, but too often it is down to the expectations of teachers and parents who are too happy to settle for second best, for no other reason than that is all they know. John Bishop's telling observation highlights just how difficult it is to change perceptions, and to grow aspirations when one's life is constrained not only by school, home and local environment, but by what they are constantly being told, the social divisions that are, sadly, too prevalent in the growing

educational divide. Yet the issue is of paramount importance if we are to oppose what is nothing more than a thinly disguised 'Social Darwinism', namely the shameful view that some children are born to succeed and others are not. To allow this cancer to even exist is a disaster for our children and a huge waste of our nation's talent.

As the country heralds in a new Archbishop of Canterbury, a number of commentators have commented on how Eton dominates the public face of Britain, through the Prime Minister, Mayor of London, a future king and now, Archbishop of Canterbury. To that list one can add luminaries from all fields of life, household names such as Bear Grylls, Eddie Redmayne, Sir Ranulph Fiennes, Hugh Fernley-Wittingstall, Hugh Lawrie and Bill Turnbull and you can see just how widely old Etonians permeate the public life of Britain.

Which is not casting aspersions on Eton in any way; quite the opposite, for the education it offers its students is exceptional. But logically no school of just over 1300 students, however carefully selected, has a mortgage on the talent of this country to such a degree. And when we extend that to the number of judges, leading editors, comedians, Olympians, cricketers, musicians and politicians educated at public schools we get an idea of the extent of the problem that Michael Gove talks of. Yet I would argue that each of their students, along with the majority of students at independent schools are aspirational because they are encouraged to be so, because their schools are aspirational and their parents and teachers encourage and support them in ways that links aspiration with expectation.

Apart from the obvious social difficulties, we need to do more to tap the vast reservoir of talent in our country. Both Michael Gove who spoke of the domination of public schoolboys in British life as 'morally indefensible' and Lord Moynihan who condemned the dominance of public school educated athletes as 'wholly unacceptable', were not being critical of independent schools. Rather they were raising a concern about stunted aspiration amongst our youth in general and the sense of helplessness that underlies it, fuelled by the sense that most of the top jobs and opportunities are spoken for, regardless of talent or how well they do at school, that life's order is already decided.

To change aspirations we need role models; we need greater transparency of opportunity in areas such as work experience and employment; we need teachers to work on growing aspirations in ways that are meaningful and realistic; we may even (shudder) need to do some social engineering, but unless we are happy to reinforce the divisions that not only exist, but are growing, then doing nothing is not an option.

HOMEWORK ON THE RANGE

"Have sacred homework time every day (except Sunday)."

Noël Janis-Norton, author of 'Calmer, Easier, Happier Homework.'

"Homework is a nightly curse in thousands of homes and a cause of nerve trouble, sleeplessness and family friction."

TES, 1929

"I miss the days when homework was just colouring in."

anon

Since the introduction of the national curriculum some twenty- five years ago, accompanied by guidelines for homework, there has been considerable debate over its worth. Teachers and parents have often questioned its merit, and its effect on improving learning as well as its validity as a measure of a child's own work while parents up and down the land have often cursed the role placed upon them to ensure their children do their homework, with all the tensions that can create.

There are numerous arguments for and against. Homework can undoubtedly place an undue burden on children at the end of the school day and be counter-productive; it can be a test of parents as much as children and can be divisive in families as well as adversarial between parent and child; it is often of little academic worth and can simply serve to widen the academic gap between those who receive help at home and those who don't. Moreover, if not well-planned, it can dull the mind, through repetitious and uninspiring subject matter and have little educational value.

On the other hand, advocates would argue strongly that children need to learn the habit of studying and being ambitious in doing that little extra. Noël Janis-Norton argues *'Homework is about learning self-reliance, problem-solving and tapping into inner resources'* with the added reminder that children in other parts of the world are studying much longer hours than are our children. As well, many parents like to be involved in their children's learning, and homework provides them with a window into their child's education not otherwise available.

One of the most important roles of education is to transfer the responsibility for one's education from parents and schools onto the children. Taking ownership may be a rather trite and overused phrase, and yet that is exactly what must happen. Making time for study is one thing; when senior schools admit to having supervised prep times for older students, however, we should be concerned. If students have not learned to manage their own time and commitments by then or to take responsibility for their own learning, then we will have failed them unless the drive, the commitment, the responsibility comes from within.

There is a place for children to learn about making learning a habit, about acquiring self-discipline, about meeting commitments. Homework, in the form of learning tables or vocabulary, or practising handwriting can be useful although there is less value in using the time to finish off work or undertaking projects that involve family conferences and trawling the internet. Like anything, if it is well-planned and interesting it will work; if not it can be a very negative teaching tool. Teaching children how to use lesson time well, making sure they understand what they are doing and using lesson time effectively is crucial before the idea of doing extra is even entertained.

One answer is that the school day is adjusted, lengthened if necessary, to allow for homework to be completed at school. In effect this would become an extra study lesson, but the same purpose would be served. After all, as in anything, this would involve a compromise, as French children who celebrated President Hollande's recent proposal to ban homework found out when it was followed by another proposal to substantially shorten the summer holidays instead.

I have often been asked about homework and my answer is always the same: if children did nothing else throughout their time other than read, consistently and regularly as their one prep throughout their school days, it would serve them better than anything else could possibly manage. After all, better children who can grow with imaginations on a free range than 'pooped in a coop'.

HOW TO RECOGNISE AN ANTEATER

"It is a given for old men to spend all their time explaining how the world has gone to pot since they were in charge. I, of course, like many other old men say' These kids at university, they wouldn't recognise an anteater if they saw one."

Sir David Attenborough

"You can know the name of a bird in all the languages of the world, but when you're finished, you'll know absolutely nothing whatever about the bird... So let's look at the bird and see what it's doing – that's what counts."

Richard P. Feynman

"All of life is a constant education."

Eleanor Roosevelt, The Wisdom of Eleanor Roosevelt

When children's ignorance of the natural world and their general knowledge are paraded in the press, we can be sure that the journalist's response has been founded on some observation such as that made by Sir David Attenborough. How can children, the journalist will inevitably enquire, grow up so ignorant of the world they live in, usually

providing examples of general ignorance that can make our toes curl. Which is why it is always important to read beneath the headline, especially when it is someone as wise and knowledgeable as Sir David Attenborough being quoted.

Sir David Attenborough is one of those rare beings, a British institution, admired and respected for his achievements as a naturalist and as a broadcaster over a most distinguished career, but also as a voice of moderation in a changing world. And in reading on, we find that while Sir David said he was sometimes "amazed" by young people's poor grasp of biology and the animal kingdom, he also admitted their expertise in other types of science - such as computers - towered over his own.

Having said: "Talking to teenagers and so on, I am amazed that they don't know things about natural history that I knew" Sir David went on to say that "on the other hand, I'm sure they are equally amazed that I don't know as much about Twitter, communications, computers and nano-technology as they do. The fact is that there is so much more to be learned in a technological sense today."

It is not ignorance that Sir David bemoans, for as he says *"I can find lots of things to deplore about the way the young people fritter away time on trivialities but there are lots of kids out there who know more about things than I do and ever will"* .

The fact that the world is moving so fast and that children are often brought up and live in cities with no comprehension of the natural world is sad indeed, but it is the exponential growth of knowledge, of what children are required to know that is also responsible. Sir David Attenborough might express surprise at what young people don't know, but he acknowledges the world has changed beyond measure and that there is a lot more to know. His underlying message, therefore is not so much about the animal world, but about one animal, homo sapiens, and the importance of nurturing curiosity of the natural (and manmade) world in their young.

"Both my parents were educationalists and they recognised that education is not a matter of getting facts and sowing them within brains, but that it is an attitude of mind that you teach children to find out for themselves," he said. *"Things such as how does a snake move across the ground, or how does a bird fly?"*

Curiosity may have killed the cat, but it terms of the education of young minds, it is the one trait that propels learning and leads to discovery, of self as well as the world around us. It can make young minds come alive, and keen to ask the important questions of What? How? and Why?

What Sir David bemoans is more the waste of time, the uncritical acceptance of knowledge, visual and verbal, without ever wanting to find out for oneself. That is why he sees his role, like that of a teacher, to engage, enthuse and provoke the reader or viewer and to imbue them curiosity. Of his own legacy he writes

"There is absolutely nothing that can replace an inspired teacher and I hope that inspired teachers will be able to use film of the natural world in a way which will illuminate the subjects and inspire children's minds."

Yes, we should be able to recognise an anteater for they are interesting inhabitants of the natural world we share, but more important than mere recognition is to start asking questions starting with what, how and why for therein lies the heart of learning and the process which has driven Sir David throughout his life's work.

IT AIN'T WHAT YOU DO, IT'S THE WAY THAT YOU DO IT*

"It is the quality of our work and not the quantity which will please God."

Mahatma Ghandi

"Australia must prioritise education spending. It is not a question of whether or not we have the money, it is a question of how we choose to spend it."

Bob Brown, Former Australian Politician

"I will work harder."

Boxer in 'Animal Farm'

After he was appointed Head of Basildon Academies in September 2011, Mr Fox set about raising standards and lifting the schools' academic performances, as he had been charged to do. His first initiative was to reduce teaching hours from thirty hours to twenty seven and a half hours a week which was so successful that results improved by one third in his first year. The response of his governors was, therefore, not what he expected; rather than endorsing his professional judgement, they instructed him to restore the teaching hours to their previous levels, with the inevitable result that he resigned, disillusioned at the interference by a board whose targets were at variance to his own.

As this debate was raging, a report was released in Australia based on exhaustive research asserting that homework does not improve the performance of children in primary schools and even up until the age of fifteen has a negligible effect on achievement – a view supported by President Hollande who recently proposed banning homework as part of a series of policies designed to reform the French educational system.

Both of these measures reflect the current debate at how to improve academic standards: whether the way to improvement is to work harder or to work smarter.

There should be no issue. We don't measure a life by the number of years lived; nor do we measure the time spent with our families by hours alone. In the same way, nor do we measure books by the number of words, but by the order in which they are arranged. In the same way, we should not measure education by the number of hours children spend at their desks or how much of their time is given over to formal learning. Rather, it is the quality of the time, of the engagement, that is all important.

Children may appear to have endless amounts of energy at times, but school and learning is exhausting, especially if it is challenging children to think and engage with their learning – and that is the only worthwhile education. Too often, teaching is both tedious for pupils and teachers, lacking the necessary spark and edge for the very reason that it becomes a test of stamina. That is not the way to extract the best work, the best thinking from our children.

Children's time is precious and they need to devote a good proportion of it to free-wheeling, learning to steer and propel themselves. They don't want every minute spoken for, nor to feel that life is measured by hours spent and pages written. If we can challenge them in each lesson, that should be enough. There is, of course, an infinite amount children can be taught and they can be pushed to achieve above their chronological age, but to what end? We see it in the shameful way that schools carry on in London, where demand for school places determines the way children are taught and, worse, how their lives are shaped by adherence to that one goal of learning as much as they can as early as they can. This should not be confused with education, which involves a much greater range of skills, attitudes and attributes than can be simply passed from a tutor sitting in a room to a child, trying to eke out every mark possible from a test paper. As a teacher I don't want to see children taken to the edge of exhaustion in their work and play. I want to see Government making responsible choices on how to spend the education funding. I want to see some thought going into what makes successful, well-rounded adults rather than some knee-jerk reaction to yet another slide down the PISA rankings. After all, children do best if they are excited about learning, but not swamped by it. We should stop trying to fill up their days by force of habit and show them a little respect.

"It is quality rather than quantity that matters." Lucius Annaeus Seneca

** "**It Ain't What You Do (It's the Way That You Do It)**" is a calypso song written by jazz musicians Melvin "Sy" Oliver and James "Trummy" Young and first recorded in 1939 by Jimmie Lunceford, Harry James, and Ella Fitzgerald.(*

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

"Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated."

Confucius

"Simplicity is making the journey of this life with just baggage enough."

Charles Warner

"Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another."

G. K. Chesterson

What is it that drives us to make life so complicated? Everything one attempts, from opening a bank account to setting up a mobile phone contract is fraught with difficulty and, sadly, nowhere is this more evident than in education.

In order to exist, schools are required to deal with an endless flood of bureaucracy, in the form of new initiatives, new policies, politically driven changes to inspections and curricula, new methodologies, new standards, new examinations, all of which distract us from our job of educating children. Why, we may ask, do we keep tinkering with the apparatus instead of focusing on the things that actually make a difference to the performance and education of children, namely improving teacher-pupil interaction, encouraging parental engagement and raising expectations amongst our children and then striving to meet them.

Why do we keep looking at extending school hours, starting children younger, keeping them longer, tutoring them more, labelling them by their learning needs as if these were the ways to improve academic standards? And we should really get it, shouldn't we, when employers and universities berate us for turning out children lacking the requisite skills, not just academic results, and teachers plead to be left alone to get on with their job, knowing that it is the extraneous demands on their time and energy that stop them achieving for the pupils? But nothing changes.

We have made a pig's ear of assessment, believing that the more targets we have, the more assessment we subject our children to, the better we label our children, the better we are doing. What rubbish! The real effect is that such 'data gazing' too often inhibits good teaching, detracts from the time available and turns our children into pockets of statistics that tell us how we expect them to perform, but seldom measuring how they could perform.

We have decided that selection is the answer, despite evidence from countries we try to imitate, such as Singapore, telling us otherwise. Hence, we have a public assessment system that is overly prescriptive and unreliable (and why can not markers send the scripts back to students from public examinations, as happens in other countries?), despite competitor nations such as Finland doing the opposite?

Children like to be challenged. They like to be encouraged and stimulated to learn. They like life to be fair, to have clear boundaries, to know what is expected. They are also predominantly competitive by nature and want to do well. We need to demand a lot of them, in standards, in self-discipline, but we should not fetter their minds or strangle their curiosity by being too prescriptive, too unimaginative in our teaching. Nor should we suffocate our teachers by our obsession with measurement, for between the fault lines of data, children are being ignored or lost.

There is a cost to everything. Time spent on targets, on assessment, on measurement, on record keeping inevitably takes its toll. Experiments undertaken at Harvard showed us that teacher expectations significantly improved the academic performance of their pupils and that negative expectations can become self-fulfilling prophecies and yet we persist in measuring selected attributes of children, especially verbal and non-verbal and use these to group, to stream and to determine how well they will do, ignoring such crucial traits as desire and ambition, effort and attitude and, most important, character, which are the greatest determinants of all.

In education, to paraphrase Yeats, the more things change, the more they stay the same. The body of knowledge available to us is expanding exponentially and yet the core skills – the ability to communicate clearly and accurately, to be numerate, to develop a good working memory, to build up a body of required skills and to grow the appropriate character traits – remain the same.

A parent recently told me of the search to find an employee for their business. They had advertised a job, received 49 applicants and short-listed a half-dozen. At this point they were approached by the mother of one candidate who was at the very bottom of the list, begging him to interview their son, if only for the experience. He had few of the required attributes on paper, and while his CV was adequate, it was in interview that he shone, through the strength of his character, his personality, the traits that were not measured and reflected in his school reports, but which were all important. He got the job.

Keeping it simple. Holding doors open. Encouragement and high expectations. Getting the groundwork right. This is what we need to focus on. Simple isn't it!

KINDLING THE FLAMES

"Wellington College is throwing out 16,000 books to make way for an e-reading "research and innovation centre", complete with iPads, meeting pods and feng shui water pools. The £2m library redevelopment will leave an "archive" of about 2,000 books. Rows of bookcases will be replaced by armchairs, a café and an "aptitude centre" consisting of eight rooms allocated to one of the eight "multiple intelligences"

Sunday Times 15 May, 2011

"Happy is the person who finds wisdom and gains understanding. For the profit of wisdom is better than silver, and her wages are better than gold. Wisdom is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her." Proverbs 3, vv 13 -16:

The inscription etched in glass at the counter of the new Library at King's College, Taunton, opened on 14 May, 2011.

"UK sales of digital book products increased by 20% to £180m last year. The Publishers Association found the total value of digital sales from data supplied by members for its annual yearbook was £120m last year, 38% higher than in 2009." Digital publishing is growing at an impressive rate in whichever part of the sector you choose to look," said the Publishers Association chief executive, Richard Mollet."

Guardian 3 May, 2011

"*Get stewed: Books are a load of crap.***"**

Philip Larkin

At a time when a number of schools, including Stowe, King's Taunton and Kent College, Pembury are either opening or building new libraries, the announcement that Wellington College has moved in a different direction has been met with a certain amount of scepticism. After all, the library has traditionally been the heartbeat, the pulse, of our schools, the repository of information and entertainment, a source of wisdom, pleasure and enlightenment. Even the arrival of the computer suite some thirty or more years ago didn't shake the natural order of things. Even in its rapid evolution, it has barely challenged the supremacy of the library which has remained the centre of learning for students, as well as the quiet refuge for those who favour cerebral rather than physical pursuits.

Nothing thus far, therefore, even the advent of the kindle and i-pad could have led us to the conclusion that the days of the traditional library are numbered. In spite of the fact that the operation and facilities of libraries have been quietly making use of the new technology for a whole array of purposes, including cataloguing, issuing and information retrieval, it has always been a question of adaptation rather than of survival. Indeed, many people, especially those campaigning to save local libraries, would argue vehemently that Wellington's plans were mere marketing spin and nothing more.

But are they? In an age where information is growing at an unseemly pace, when technical textbooks are out of date within months, let alone years of publication, where relying on one author's interpretation of history is so open to dispute, is it essential to rely so much on the printed word?

With the ability of kindle to save forests and minimise carry-on luggage, with Wikipedia offering a hundred ways to skin a cat, and google making old-fashioned research redundant, can we really ignore the pace and extent of change?

Logic would say no. Libraries may have an emotional place in our lives and we would all want them to remain as they are for the same reason that we like to hold onto books as physical possessions. There is something comforting about libraries, about being surrounded by books and we would all want us to continue to use them as our 'word womb'. But they are no longer the only way. Nor are they, any longer, enough on their own. Of course, there is no reason why learning centres cannot accommodate the traditional functions of a library or that the two parts, technology and paper, cannot merge sympathetically and symbiotically. More and more books are being published each year and despite all the predictions to the contrary, it does not look like the trend will diminish, but libraries, particularly reference libraries, that don't embrace the new technology most probably have a limited shelf-life. After all, there is considerable logic to reducing the amount of paper in circulation and, likewise, the space needed to store it. Without a willingness to embrace change without jettisoning the character of libraries, I fear their slow disappearance or, worse, their preservation as some sort of anachronistic relic that remains in existence solely on the grounds that no-one has the heart to get rid of them.

LESSONS FROM THE THRONE

"Like all the best families, we have our share of eccentricities, of impetuous and wayward youngsters and of family disagreements."

Queen Elizabeth II

"It's all to do with the training: you can do a lot if you're properly trained."

Queen Elizabeth II

This year is the Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen. Sixty years is a scarcely conceivable period of time for children to consider, beyond the scope of their parents' lives and therefore their imaginations. Recently, President Obama said of the Queen, 'that Presidents come and go, (as do Prime Ministers – she's managed to see off ten so far), but that she remains a constant in our post-war history'. During that time, the

Commonwealth has shrunk and the world has bumped from crisis to crisis and yet she has remained a seemingly unflappable presence, a touchstone in a topsy-turvy world.

This summer will be a time for celebration, and schools and classrooms up and down the land will be decked in bunting, studying the history of the Monarchy, the Windsor family tree and indulging in a sort of Royal Fest. Children will make special Jubilee cards and draw portraits for Her Majesty to add to the 139 Official portraits she has sat for, Flags will be raised and the mystique of the monarchy will be unravelled and dissected and celebrated. Schools will indulge themselves in street parties and banquets, with music and fine fare before turning their minds to the next pressing engagement on the calendar – the Olympics – taking down one set of pictures and posters to prepare for the next extravaganza.

Of course, there will be critics. There are always critics, telling us she has enjoyed the greatest advantage, great wealth and privilege throughout her life. They will dismiss her as an anachronism, and cite the fact that her life is about state banquets, launching ships or travelling the globe, that she knows a great deal about a great number of grand things, but little of the man in the street. But that would under-estimate her. And miss the point.

For she does know. And despite never attending school, she is very well-informed and has a greater grasp of people's realities than most of our politicians. Not to make something of the way she has lived her life would be an opportunity lost. For it is just not through the predictable subjects – English, History, Art and their ilk – that we should celebrate the Queen's legacy. Rather we should dig beneath the façade and ask what can we learn from her life of service. Her selflessness. Her unflagging energy and unwavering standards. Her ability to deal with crises in a dignified way. Her unflappable manner. Her presence as an antidote to the celebratory culture. Her subsuming of self. Her ability to keep her head when all around her are losing theirs. Her sense of family values and the mutual tolerance and understanding of person and country. How can we teach that?

It is possible to absorb and teach the lessons from the throne. We could highlight this aspect of the Queen's life in our schools as a justification for revisiting the teaching of values, so popular two decades ago. We could pitch her against the celebrity culture which highlights the showy and pretentious, the loud and the trivial, the cult of self and try to understand why she is different. We could talk of her modesty – a rare trait these days - and how willingly she accepted her birthright as a duty and has not wavered in executing it. She has lived to serve her people. Despite her age, she has not talked of retirement or hardship, nor embraced the opportunity to respond to the hundred and one frustrations and irritations she must labour with day after day. We could present her life as one of unstinting service, accepting the duties she had placed upon her given to her without a murmur or feeling of imposition and ask whether this is not a life to aspire to.

Wow! How will our children understand that? At a time when people just want their ten minutes of fame, she represents an antidote to the superficial and the trivial. In the selfish world of 21st century Britain, her selflessness stands out like a beacon. Worth a lesson or two in any school I would have thought.

MANAGING THE MAIL

"I get e-mail, therefore I am."

Scott Adams

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

Arthur C. Clarke

"I don't believe in email. I'm an old-fashioned girl. I prefer calling and hanging up."

Sarah Jessica Parker

It is 40 years since @ was first introduced into e-mail addresses. While it was not until the 90s that e-mail came into public use, since that time it has become a phenomenon, changing the way we communicate with each other. At the last estimate, there were an estimated two billion e-mail users world-wide sending about 300 billion e-mails a day. In education, as in business, instant communication seemed such a smart idea, dealing with issues and concerns as soon as they arose, without giving any time for gestation. The effect? Well, in my job it has added, very conservatively, six hours a week. Do I feel better informed? Yes, but do I really need to know about missing socks that turn up before I get to my inbox? More in touch? Yes, but often with trivia, dealing with issues that with a little reflective time on the part of the missive (missile?) firer, would simply not be sent, especially if they were given the letter test (ie if I had to write a letter, post it and wait for three days for an answer . . .) And I am left trying to work out how I can reclaim those six lost hours and what to do with all the extra megabytes of often meaningless information I have accumulated against my will.

And yet here I am, writing about something that is already old hat, improved and superseded by such messenger tools and social networking sites such as SMS (1993), hotmail (1996), blackberry (1999), Skype (2003), Gmail and Face-book (2004), Twitter (2006) Google Wave (2009), and Apple iMessage (2011). Already, Facebook has about 800 million active users, of whom more than half log in daily. Together they send 4 billion internal Facebook messages every day. So how do schools keep up with a generation who are born hard-wired, who learn technology from the cradle.

It is the same sobering lesson for those who still gather in the kitchens at parties, bemoaning a future without books and the horrors of bookless homes. Already a

generation has begun to grow up with words not on a page, but on a screen and that will be their modus operandi. Even while we mutter and shuffle our feet, personal hand-held computers, ever more sophisticated, are becoming the exercise book, the library, possibly even the teaching aid, or worse, of the future.

We need to get over it – and quickly. The reality is that the world is moving on apace and teachers and schools have to do likewise. This doesn't mean changing everything we do in our schools, but it does mean that we have to be better informed about technology and know how to use it, not just in order to educate our pupils, but simply so we can keep up with them ourselves. This is not a choice we can defer: we have to understand and manage technology before we all get 'spammed' - and I intend to start the battle in the New Year by bringing my e-mail to heel.

"*The Internet is the world's largest library. It's just that all the books are on the floor.*"

John Allen Paulos

MEASURING INTELLIGENCE

"My mother said I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and more intelligent than college professors."

Maya Angelou

"We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented, in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet."

Karl Fisch, "Did You Know"

"SIR – Our goal as educators is surely to equip children with the necessary skills and capacities that will enable them to thrive in the future and be happy, confident citizens of the world. How does one examine that?"

Letter to The Daily Telegraph, 6th January, 2012 John Brett, Headmaster, Old Buckenham Hall School Brettenham, Suffolk

With the examination system under public scrutiny, it is timely to ask why we persist in measuring our children in such narrow and limited ways. Whilst acknowledging that the examination remains a very important method of assessing learning, our traditional reliance upon exams as the sole measure of assessment is outdated. When Paul Nurse, director of the imperial cancer research fund and Nobel winner of prize for medicine in 2001 reflected that he was '*never very good at exams, having a poor memory and finding the examination process rather artificial'* and that '*there never seemed to be*

enough time to follow up things that really interested me" he was giving voice to the frustrations in a system that was not only static and retrograde, but which has often stifled the creative gene and denied those students whose work ethic, intelligence and curiosity were never properly assessed.

Simply, teaching students a requisite body of knowledge and dressing this up as education is no longer enough. We all know people who know a great deal, but cannot use this mountain of knowledge other than to opine. In a novel based on the life of Katherine Mansfield, C K Stead wrote in the person of Bertrand Russell, '*people of my sort . . . have a lot to unlearn. Too much is laid on us too early. We grow up fettered.*" There is much to be said for not cluttering the mind, freeing it from both trivia and dogma and encouraging it to think and question rather than to learn and accept.

In a world awash with data we need, therefore, to place more emphasis on thinking creatively and on recognising the other intelligences. We need to change our understanding of how we define and measure our children, and appreciate that there are other intelligences, equally important. We need to recognise that a skill in passing exams often hides any number of other deficiencies, including social, spatial or kinaesthetic intelligences.

So how do we measure what our students need: the ability to discriminate from a sea of information, available at the touch of a screen; the ability to deduce and develop their critical faculties; the ability to synthesise and analyse; to prioritise and to précis information and to express oneself coherently and accurately with knowledge and argument, in written and spoken form? Sometimes we see the intellect best in debate or discussion, in communication with others and through collaborative learning. How do we measure such things?

Until we arrive at some better way of doing so, our children will continue to be assessed by a flawed and discredited examination system that lacks transparency, but which measures them against a skills-set so narrow as to be of minimal use outside of academia. That needs to change.

MORE THAN MARKS CAN SAY

"Oxford and Cambridge are seeing a year-on-year rise in the number of young people who arrive apparently confident, with four or five A grades at A-level, but lacking resilience, lacking the ability to cope if they do not get great success."

Professor Guy Claxton

"*The more narrowly pupil success is drawn, the more likely failure becomes.*"

Professor Tim Brighouse, RSA Journal, Autumn 2008

In the mad rush for university places, the process of selection is becoming more fractious and more pressured than ever. As exams are defined, refined and redefined and entry criteria squeezed ever tighter, the clutch of A grades that would have once taken you anywhere now hardly get you out of town. In response to grade inflation, more students are being carolled, encouraged and cajoled by teachers and by schools desperate to 'succeed', without even defining the word, let alone considering the long-term consequences or sustainability of the education they are peddling. Parents, terrified of the perils of unemployment and underachievement, seek to do their best for their children without knowing what the options are other than to try harder and unaware that such pressures might not only be unproductive, but unhealthy.

The failure of the examination system to measure more than the ability to pass exams lies at the heart of the problem. But there is also a fundamental problem with schools being judged by their examination results through league tables or Oxbridge places, which puts undue pressures on teachers and departments to maximise the performance of their students, getting them through tests, but not giving them the skills to cope thereafter. Unfortunately, experience tells us that to tutor young people through exams for a short-term goal without building the requisite skills for life-long learning is irresponsible and can cause problems as students lose their props and are, properly, cast adrift.

Recent figures indicate the extent of the problem with more and more pupils producing the grades to get into university, but once there, lacking the resilience to go on. As a result, Professor Claxton speaking at a recent conference of educators noted universities are now experiencing an epidemic of considerable proportions in mental health with his sobering assertion that "*Fifteen to twenty per cent of Cambridge students will find their way to the counsellors' waiting room*" as, he added, did more than 1200 students at Oxford last year.

At the heart of the problem, Professor Claxton identifies a lack of resilience so that when students encounter a difficult problem, they lack the resources to cope. Schools that cradle their children and focus exclusively on test results might be able to boast about their place in the league tables, but ultimately are failing their students unless they are also teaching the student the skills to learn independently and responsibility for their own efforts. Too often, one fears, a dependency develops between teachers and students, both keen to achieve success in examinations, but for different motives.

Universities complain about the fact that students are starting university lacking the independence and basic inquiry skills needed and come to them not understanding that learning, ultimately, is something you must do by yourself. Until that lesson is learned, we will keep raising the bar, pushing many of our children ever harder to achieve a definition of success that is both limited and short-lived.

READING REPORTS

"I believe he has ideas about becoming a scientist; on his present showing this is quite ridiculous."

Eton School report on John Gurdon
who recently won the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine

"Judi would be a very good pupil if she lived in this world'

Mount School York School report for Judi Dench

The arrival of the school reports each term generate a variety of responses from children, ranging from justifiable pride for a term well-spent, (often) expressions of remorse for opportunities wasted (rare) or (increasingly) a tirade of blame that other factors – environmental, personnel(teachers and peers) and circumstantial had mitigated against said child. The children's responses, in turn, tend to trigger another wave from parents, covering the spectrum from praise of the child to condemnation of the institution to which they had been entrusted. The worst reports, however, are not those that are unduly blunt, but the bland ones, those that avoid saying anything even slightly critical, pampering to a need to keep a child's unblemished record. Teachers would argue that they have been forced into blandness because of the over-sensitive responses of some parents, and it is true that in this over-litigious age, the language (and the relationship) between school and home has irrevocably changed so that everything is written in degrees of positivity.

The comments made about Norman Wisdom (*'The boy is every inch a fool, but luckily for him he's not very tall'*), Jilly Cooper (*'She has set herself an extremely low standard which she has failed to maintain'*), Eric Morecombe (*'This boy will never get anywhere in life'*) or Peter Ustinov (' *He shows great originality, which must be curbed at all costs*') would not be accepted today, or worse, would result in the child being withdrawn from the school. But whatever the response, it is important that the children and parents pay heed to the serious comments made and do something about areas that need improving. As always with reports, the main focus should be on the effort expended by the child rather than on achievement (both are of course important, but one tends to follow the other), and that they are used as springboards for future improvement. It does mean reports have to be read more carefully, to get between the lines and, sometimes, to realise a thing gently said might be really quite serious

Sometimes, also, in reading reports it is difficult not to be impatient with our children, but we must remember that they mature and grow at varying paces and seldom follow the path we have plotted for them. While the achievers should continue to do well, we should not despair of those whose innate curiosity and sporadic endeavour occasionally cause us headaches and heartache, but who are growing and developing nevertheless. It is useful sometimes to reflect on the life of Albert Einstein, who was not able to talk until he was three and failed his first High School entrance examination, but strung together some useful ideas later in life. No wonder he argued

that 'imagination is more important than knowledge', something we can be tempted to forget in the all too narrow path that is the National Curriculum and Common Entrance prescription. Bad reports, it is worth remembering, have often proved the springboard for future success; bland reports may be palatable in the here and now, but sadly, do little to help children on their way. Not all of us have unblemished school records: after all, if it was good enough for Winston Churchill to have written of him *''. . . is a constant trouble to everybody and is always in some scrape or another. He cannot be trusted to behave himself anywhere "* then, surely, our children could live with a little honest criticism too

John Allen Paulos

STREAMING, SETTING AND SELECTION

"One in six junior school children in England are streamed by the age of seven."

Research published by the Institute of Education, July 2011

"So why can't we have streaming and setting, to help all children reach their potential?"

David Cameron, Address to the Conservative Party Conference, October 4, 2005

"There is no consistent and reliable evidence of positive effects of setting and streaming in any subjects, or for pupils of particular ability levels."

Scottish Council for Research in Education

"Ability grouping had "rather little impact on overall attainment" and that "the greater the extent of structured ability groupings, the greater was the degree of apparent stigmatization of those in lower-ability groups."

Finding of the Institute of Education.

Streaming: When pupils are put in a selected class for all subjects based on a judgement of their general academic ability and potential.

Setting: When children are placed in classes for individual subjects depending on their ability in that subject.

Selective School: When a school selects its students by an assessment of their academic ability and / or potential on intake.

There are few more contentious issues in education than those that surround the merits or otherwise of streaming and setting. Politicians, whose prejudices are inevitably grounded in their own school experiences, are always eager to contribute to the debate, especially if they feel their rhetoric is likely to appeal to those voters who bang on about slipping standards and values. The result is that we have one of the most selective education systems in the world and one that, according to the findings of PISA Programme for International Student Assessment, continues to fail us.

There is no doubt that mixed ability teaching has its downside, but arguably those failings have less to do with mixed ability classes than with the breakdown in classroom discipline through the disempowering and compromising of teachers to a degree that would be risible in any other country.

Yet while streaming makes apparent sense, the practice neglects four important factors: the difficulty of assessing a child's ability, especially at a young age; the nature of intellectual development which, is often irregular and depends, in part, on social maturation; the effect of motivation which can significantly improve classroom performance; and the fact that streaming can depress expectations.

Certainly, to stream children as young as seven is, in my view, nonsense. Teachers are trained to differentiate in their teaching practice to cater for the range of abilities by using groups or individual educational plans and to draw strength from the range of talents within each class. To put barriers (and streaming is an aspirational barrier) in front of children so young is wrong. Children mature at different stages and respond to the expectations of their teachers. They are very aware of labels and, sadly work to them in the same way that teachers teach to them. If we want any evidence of the way that other countries view streaming, we need look no further than Finland where all forms of streaming have been abolished in their lower secondary schools. The result (although there is a little more involved than that) is that Finland has outperformed all other countries in the latest PISA assessments. Not surprisingly, then, that the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recommended that countries should "limit early tracking and streaming and postpone academic selection."

So can streaming ever be an acceptable practice? When children are faced with different curricula, depending on the nature of the examinations they are being prepared for (yes, the tail wagging the dog again) then streaming can make sense, but as a rule, especially in primary schools, it is usually employed to reach targets and to appease some parents usually to the detriment of the majority of children.

By contrast, setting can be a useful way of meeting the individual needs of children at a stage in their education where differentiation within one class becomes limited. It allows for the child to develop certain strengths (e.g. in the sciences or languages) without removing them from their social group. To work properly, setting should be fluid and open-ended and not restricted to one or two subjects only. Because our assessment of children is so narrow, based on one or two of the intelligences only, we should always be looking for ways to promote children's strengths in other areas in the same way that we 'set' children in sport teams according to their ability and potential. As always in education, as in life, what is more important is for children to possess a good work ethic and intellectual curiosity, traits that are rarely assessed, yet are crucial determinants of future success.

Which brings us to selective schools. My last teaching post in New Zealand before coming to England fifteen years ago was at a leading senior school. Like almost every school in New Zealand it was non-selective and I well remember, in both of my last two years teaching 6th form History to a mixed ability class compromised of some very able students and some boys and girls who were there for a final year, to play for the 1st XV or just to play, before going back to the farm or on to some form of tertiary education. In both my final two years, a student from the class won a place at Cambridge University, both graduating with 1st class Honours, one going on to win a post-graduate scholarship to Harvard. I cannot help but think how much better equipped they were for life than those children who, through a process of selection, often starting as young as four years old, have been segregated from their peers, based on an ability to pass exams. Naturally, parents want the very best for their children and should be properly ambitious for them, but it is the moral responsibility of schools to keep the door as open as possible and continue to have high expectations for all children. Sadly, many of our leaders are the product of such a process of selection at a young age which is possibly what blinds them to finding a more equitable and workable solution to the widening educational crevasse that is dividing our society.

STICK TO THE FACTS!

"The trouble with facts is that there are so many of them."

Samuel McChord Crothers

"Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts; nothing else will ever be of service to them."

Charles Dickens, Hard Times

The battleground that pits knowledge and skills against each other is an illusionary one and yet there is no shortage of combatants who try to do just that. To argue for the importance of learning a bundle of facts without the means to make use of them, or vice versa, in education, as in all else, is simply nonsense. Whether we consciously learn, or acquire by osmosis, we are always gathering knowledge and information, 'facts' to be used when required, or perhaps to help define who we are by identifying the waters we swim in.

During our life's education, we acquire a body of knowledge specific to the road we choose to travel down. Whether it is learning what is required to be a neurosurgeon or an airline pilot, there is, inevitably, a certain amount of committing to memory involved - and thank goodness for that.

No-one would question the value in learning things by rote, whether it be poetry or trigonometry theorems, but we are right to question much of the short-term learning that is required simply to pass exams and then is, rightly, forgotten. We are right, also, to question the reliability of 'facts' when we are really referring to interpretation, mythology or contested knowledge. But the training of the mind to remember information, to exercise and utilise the memory is a crucial part of one's personal development.

We sometimes underestimate how much children can learn when they are receptive and captured by the moment, when their listening and observing is most acute. Children's memories, whether learning lines of poetry or play parts, (or picking up the prejudices and views of adults), are sponge-like and non-discriminatory (to my consternation, I still remember rugby team-lists and scores from some forty years ago, never consciously learned, but absorbed because I was interested in such things). Nor should we place limits on what the brain can hold or be afraid to exercise it strenuously.

Children can learn all sorts of things when their interest is captured, when they are interested and want to know. The challenge is carefully selecting what it is that they most need to commit to memory and finding the means to make them receptive enough to want to do so.

The explosion of the internet, however, gives us pause to re-visit the debate of skills versus knowledge and to look at what we need to commit to memory. The body of knowledge has grown exponentially over the past fifty years and the accumulation of this new knowledge has forced us to re-examine how we prioritise it and what we do with it. No-one would argue about the value in learning rules of grammar, scientific formulae, tables or even historical dates and lines of poetry by heart, but we would be careless indeed if we ignored the facts that (a) there is a lot more information or knowledge to choose from and (b) we now have better tools by which to find, order and store knowledge. Wikipedia and Google, whether we like it or not, have changed the emphasis from what we need to learn from what we need to commit to memory, to the technical and discriminatory skills required to access and use knowledge.

Of course we need to be careful not to try and build houses out of straw, but as someone who cannot remember his car licence plate after owning it for five years, let alone an array of passwords and pin numbers required merely to exist in the 21st century, we have to be a little selective. We need to train our memories to work for us, but realise, also, that the internet is an extension of our memory and we should learn how to use it properly. Schools have been notorious for teaching the same topics or 'facts' for decades. Change, educational change, is slow indeed, whether in rules of punctuation or the acceptance of new subjects or ideas. I recently found my father's History exercise book with its same notes, taken from some source to be trusted absolutely, but without any real explanation or analysis – for there were so many notes to take down, there was no time for anything more. Ox-bow lakes were one favourite topic that I learned about at school and then taught in turn, but only now do I ask why. Why ox-bow lakes? Why the detail of Henry VIII's regal philandering? How do we choose?

That is our responsibility. Teaching facts, as Thomas Gradgrind did so effectively, is as important in providing the building blocks of education as they ever were. The question now is what facts matter most? What new facts do children need to access a new world of knowledge? What did we once need (I think with horror of sine tables) that we no longer need? What new facts should be put into the bundle? And most important of all, what information and skills are required to produce employable and well-educated citizens in the first half of the 21st century?

TAKE A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE (I)

"*In 2006 the Departments for Children and Schools, Culture, and the Environment signed a manifesto which says the following: '**We strongly support the educational case for learning outside the classroom**." Seven years on, the BBC reports that **95% of all outdoor education centres have had their entire local-authority funding cut**.*"

George Monbiot,The Guardian 7 October, 2013

"The tragic truth is that kids have lost touch with nature and the outdoors in just one generation. Time spent outdoors is down, roaming ranges have fallen drastically, activity levels are declining and the ability to identify common species has been lost,"

Andy Simpson, Chairman, The Wild Network. BBC News 25 October, 2013

"Children who spend time learning in natural environments perform better in reading, mathematics, science and social studies". Recent research from King's College, London Last month, the film 'Project Wild Thing', telling the tale of the director's desperate efforts to get his son and daughter to put down their Playstations and go outside, was given its first screenings across England. While reviewers described it as 'funny' and 'uplifting', others saw it as alarming – as, I suspect, it was intended to be.

Recent statistics about children's connectedness with nature are alarming. It is estimated that 50% of children in the UK Children have never visited the countryside, worse, that only one in five children aged eight to twelve had any connection with nature even though a recent survey suggested that 68% of children admitted that they would like to learn more about nature.

The call from the new group, **Wild Education**, to raise awareness of the outdoors, has the backing of over 500 organisations including the National Trust, the RSPB, Play England and the NHS and is therefore to be commended. Its initiative complements the ongoing efforts of the Wildlife Trust, Forest schools, Scout, Guide and other traditional youth organisations all looking at giving children an greater awareness (and experience of) the outdoors.

While it is a very significant campaign with commendable objectives, it does beg a number of questions.

The most pressing is how we arrived at this point. Why has so little attention been made to the interaction between schools and their natural environment? Why have our children become so reluctant to roam more widely, to use their own eyes to observe nature rather than the filter of a television camera? Why do fewer children want to know about their immediate environment? Why, indeed, has so little priority been given to nature studies, as once called, in our curriculum? In short, why has it become necessary for organizations to address a state of affairs that children once sorted out for themselves through their own innate curiosity?

Of course the nanny state has a lot to answer for, as has the threat of litigation, the fear engendered in parents of the world 'out there', the busy life we force on our children in which every minutes is accounted for, and the ungoverned intrusion of technology in the form of television and the internet. Setting up organizations is all very well, but if we focus on getting children out of the house in the first instance, with a pair of wellingtons and a raincoat if necessary, then a few brisk walks, collecting leaves or the like might be within the grasp of most families.

Which, perhaps, is simple and naïve, as we all know the world is a busy place and nothing is as simple as it once was. Ultimately, however, it is up to adults to change the parameters and to emphasise what they see as important, whether in a child's leisure time or, for schools, by making space within a school's curriculum.

In my own school, the Headmaster during the First World War, Littleton Powys, encouraged his pupils to take a close interest in nature, so that they could list birds and species of flowers that they had seen. Each weekend, he would allow his charges to leave school for hours at a time, unattended, to roam the countryside, collecting specimens, exploring. His was a fine legacy, inspiring such writers as Oliver Holt and Louis MacNeice in a love of nature – achieved in part by his own inspirational teaching, but also by trusting and encouraging children to appreciate the world they inhabit.

(i) PS RIP Lou Reed, 1942 – 2013

TEACHING VALUES

"I'm not sure who I am but if I'm okay with you, then I'm okay with me."

Pinocchio (to Gapetto)

Some twenty years ago, there was a strong push in schools for more attention to be paid to the teaching of a set of core values. As a result, for a period of several years, "values education" became a mantra for a generation concerned with the ways in which ambition, hedonism and desire for material success were influencing children in their decision making and in their behaviour and attitudes, leading, by a series of assumptions, to a more selfish, less tolerant and divided society. In some countries, governments became involved in advocating specific virtues as being essential for the well-being of society, including such less trumpeted values as filial piety and a sense of shame while, world-wide, schools worked hard to ensure that, as part of their education, children were explicitly taught the meaning of right and wrong, trust and honesty (if not of love and compassion), traits that had previously been assumed, but seldom taught on their own.

Of course, the teaching of values has always been fraught with difficulties as detractors soon pointed out, and that by espousing certain values, schools could be seen as venturing into social engineering, promoting the views of church and state or simply brainwashing.

Such objections ignored the fact that in order to work, society relies on some common rules or values that go beyond the letter of the law. Such values as kindness, showing compassion and respect for others, honesty and integrity are vitally important, non-contentious and never more important than today when our moral and ethical foundations are under such threat.

Part of the problem facing us as a society is that, perhaps for the first time in our history, technology is outstripping the ethics that govern it, especially in areas of genetic modification and the decisions relating to the use of nanotechnology. Deciding how much freedom and privacy we should retain in an age where surveillance is everywhere and in which more personal information is being stored away requires governments to act with integrity, in ensuring ethical and responsible decisions are taken to ensure that the system is rigorous and transparent. And yet there is a growing issue as to whether our leaders have the appropriate values and moral strength to lead us through this period of unprecedented change and to make decisions in the best interests of the people.

Recent events would say that those on whom we should rely to make the appropriate decisions based on a clear set of values have too often let us down. Highlighting the problem, the Master of Wellington College, Anthony Seldon, recently berated his colleagues for losing their moral purpose in not pulling their weight in educational reform. Whether he was right to do so or not, if we look to the well-educated and well-

paid, it is very evident that there exists a moral dearth in the place of moral leadership. The Levenson enquiry, the phone-hacking scandal and the fiddling of expenses by members of parliament raised serious questions about the moral basis of many of our leaders. Add to that list, the questionable morality of city bankers in taking disproportionate bonuses ostensibly for failure and those who abrogate their financial responsibilities to the state through populating various tax havens worldwide and we have a fairly sorry picture of the values our society deems acceptable.

In a society where dog eating dog has, sadly, become more commonplace, it is essential that we try to encourage our children to think beyond self-interest and to act responsibly and to acquire values that will serve them, and their communities, well. Like Pinocchio, we need to teach children that they live best by pleasing others and trusting, in turn, that others will do the same for them. Values cannot simply be taught in isolation. Instead, schools need to make a concerted drive to share what they already do within their own confines, which is to promote core values, whether through assemblies, the teaching of PSHE or, best of all, as an integral part of all lessons, activities and relationships, to their wider communities. Enshrining and promoting core values in our schools can only go so far without wider acceptance from society as a whole of the need to educate our children based on values that are bedrock and therefore not easily eroded.

PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS ON TRIAL

"Exams are ruining children's time at school"

Professor Mick Waters, former schools adviser, 4th January, 2012

"*Students learn to pass, not to know. They do pass, and they don't know"*

Thomas Huxley (attrib)

"If we have to have an exam at eleven, let us make it one for humour, sincerity, imagination, character – and where is the examiner who could test such qualities?"

A S Neill

As the problems with public exams rumble on, with allegations of collusion between examiners and teachers at seminars, much of the population has lost confidence in the ways we are assessing our pupils. This evident demand for a few meagre pearls that examiners may care to cast out to paid-up audiences is yet further evidence of the impact league tables have had upon schools, and the inordinate pressures placed upon teachers to deliver results measured solely by examination marks. Nor should we

be fooled into believing that such a system is ever totally fair being dependent as it is on postcodes, the ability of families to buy advantage indirectly by shifting to areas where there are high-performing schools or directly, by moving to independent schools, employing tutors or accessing whatever help or advice is for sale. Parents, naturally, will go out on a limb for their children; a quest made more singular, more stressful, by the pressure for university places and jobs.

The problem is compounded by the fact that our system of public examinations is run by independent providers, each competing for a share of the market place. Recent errors in the setting and marking of examination papers have not helped public confidence. Inevitably, mark schemes have become increasingly prescriptive, seldom allowing for the type of originality or divergent thinking that universities are crying out for, a trend that would be further exacerbated if the recent suggestion of Barnaby Lenon, former headmaster of Harrow for exam boards to make greater use to be made of multiple choice questions in exams be adopted. Too often, one hears of teachers dissuading their students from taking intellectual risk – a throw back to university courses where tutors often wrote the textbooks and from which you deviated at your peril - only now, it is the examiners who write the course books. The idea of formulaic preparation for exams, and the oft-quoted argument that if it is not likely to be examined, then don't bother learning it, runs through much of our teaching and is a canker in our schools.

One answer is to look at the number of exams we ask our students to sit and the use made of summative and formative assessment to best measure our students. The creation of a National Examinations Board would help remove the commercial interests that have tainted some of their operations and remove the inconsistencies that currently exist as would less prescriptive mark schemes. But what we must do while tidying up the system we have, is to question the purpose of the exams themselves and whether they are usefully and accurately measuring our children. Otherwise, we will just keep producing students who may be good at passing examinations, but little else.

So how do we measure what our students need: the ability to discriminate from a sea of information, available at the touch of a screen; the ability to deduce and develop their critical faculties; the ability to synthesise and analyse; to prioritise and to précis information and to express oneself coherently and accurately with knowledge and argument, in written and spoken form? Sometimes we see the intellect best in the debate, in discussion, in communication with others, in collaborative learning. How do we measure such things?

Until we arrive at some better way of doing so, our children will continue to be assessed by a flawed and discredited examination system that not only lacks transparency, but which measures them against a skills-set so narrow as to be of minimal use outside of academia. That needs to change.

THE JOY OF LEARNING

"Teaching should be such that what is offered is perceived as a valuable gift and not as a hard duty".

Albert Einstein

"Rewards and punishments are the lowest form of education".

Chuang-Tzu, philosopher

"To me education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul. To Miss Mackay it is a putting in of something that is not there, and that is not what I call education. I call it intrusion".

Muriel Spark, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie

One occasionally hears the comment from adults that education is wasted on the young. Nonsensical though it sounds, for many adults suffering a mid-life crisis of one sort or another, the idea of being able to go back to university or pursue some other form of study ranks right up there alongside travelling the world with a back pack or throwing in a well-paid job in the City to grow organic olives on the Isles of Scilly.

Sometimes by packaging education as work we rather spoil it for children. Of course, the ability to work hard is the means to the end, but work, as we all know, can be enjoyable, in fact must become so, if we are to get on. Life without work, some purpose, becomes pointless and empty – just ask someone desperate for work who cannot get a job or the reluctant retiree.

Learning should be a joy and good teachers make it so. The tragedy is that poor teachers can turn the joy to drudgery. We have a responsibility not just to educate but to inspire, not to impart, but to impel, to properly light the fire.

That is what Littleton Powys wrote on when he wrote his two volumes of autobiography, 'The Joy of It' and 'More the Joy of It' on his experiences as the Headmaster of Sherborne Preparatory School. His philosophy was evident in all he did, warning against schools where children are 'so drilled and repressed by the conventions that surround them that never will they dare to show their true minds again.' His great love was of nature and it was something he instilled in his pupils, for in his view, 'therein lies one of the greatest, in my own opinion, the greatest, source of happiness this world can give; but how are we to give them encouragement if their individual efforts are to be restrained.' It should be the mantra of all teachers, however academic they may want to be, to impart a joy and thirst for knowledge in their teaching

THESE ARE THE YEARS THAT COUNT

If there is one overwhelming frustration that prep schools share, it is that the value of a good prep school education is too often not recognised, or is misunderstood, even ignored, by prospective parents and the general public. This should not be surprising for because of their relatively small size and the diversity of what they offer, prep schools rarely receive the accolades due to them. Nor is the key role prep schools play in the independent sector properly acknowledged except from within their own schools, by grateful parents and happy, engaged children. This lack of voice has improved over recent years, especially through the work of IAPS, but compared to the constant exposure of HMC heads in particular, (whose public pronouncements are often to our detriment as a sector), we are still far too muted.

This is attributable in part to the widespread mythology that suggests spending on education becomes more important the older children get, a view, not unnaturally, promoted by public schools concerned as they are with league tables and Oxbridge places, who seldom acknowledge how much of their success is due to the prep school children who inhabit them. More fundamentally, however, it is due to the erroneous belief that education should work from the top down rather than from the bottom up, (a view demonstrated by those senior schools who try to tell prep schools which books to exclude from their reading lists); and in part, it is due to prep schools not getting the message out that they are not mere feeders, preparing children for a more important place, but that they are that important place. After all, children who have spent most of their years of schooling in a good prep school education should be able to cope with whatever the world throws at them wherever they go on to.

To help parents with their decisions as to where to spend their education pound, therefore, prep schools need to throw off their excessive caution and historical cloak of deference and shout what they already know, that nothing will ever be as important in the lives of children as these formative years, when they are in their care. 'These are the years that count' should be the mantra of every prep and pre-prep and should be used on every hustling, on every prep school website. Prep schools should stop labelling themselves as mere feeders to a raft of public schools and trumpet the fact that prep school is where children learn how to learn, how to think, how to work hard and take responsibility for their own education, so they are better prepared for the straightjacket of public exams that follow. And parents, likewise, should note that not only is prep school considerably less expensive and that delaying a decision until the senior years, is often too late, but it is the most important time to invest in a child's education.

By the time many of our pupils leave prep school they may have been in the same environment for up to ten years, crucial, impressionable years of remarkable physical and intellectual development. It is the stage of the greatest personal and social growth, when character and personality are shaped and moulded, attitudes formed and work habits established. It is also the time when the foundations of learning are laid down, as

children traverse Piaget's four stages of cognitive development, when literacy and numeracy skills are made secure, when language is acquired, curiosity and imagination developed and when the child learns most of the skills and knowledge they will require to see them through life. They should also leave with a sense of responsibility and values, having been enriched through their music, art, drama and games and a myriad of other extra-curricular activities. If all has gone to plan, they will also have acquired self-knowledge, a set of values and the discipline to use time efficiently and be the major shareholder in their own education.

When they leave prep school, many pupils will be at a standard not far below (and in many cases, above) the requirements for GCSE. Many selective schools take pupils at such a high level of entry (often achieved, it must be noted, to the detriment of the child), in order to ensure their own position in the league tables is not compromised and they still get their clutch of Oxbridge places - as they certainly should! Too often, however, the well-being of the student (including their physical and mental health) as well as their intellectual curiosity can be marginalised by a narrowness of purpose in seeking the best possible grades, regardless of whether this education will serve them best in the future.

If this all sounds a little extravagant, it is worth looking at the criticisms often levelled by the Russell Group of universities at the students arriving at their door aged 18 years. Too often, they argue, the students have no sense of intellectual curiosity, are unable to think for themselves and lack the self-discipline and organisational skills necessary for independent study as well as deficiencies in grammar, sustained reading and written English.

Without wanting to sound at all presumptuous, prep schools can and should provide all of this. It is what prep schools do best, teaching the core skills and knowledge while encouraging children to embrace learning and develop as well-rounded children, a time when they learn to think and work independently and develop a sense of purpose and accountability to self so crucial to success thereafter. We can – and do – do all that.

Having taught in both prep and senior schools, there is no doubt which is the most challenging and rewarding experience. Much as I enjoyed teaching History and the History of Art to 6th formers, it was always teaching to an end, which was the exam. Sadly, as a result, the freedom to develop ideas, to move off piste, to expand beyond the curriculum and to imbue children with a love of learning, intellectual curiosity and social and intellectual growth were all compromised. By contrast, the prep school years offer all of those opportunities and the chance to set children on the path for life. There can be no greater investment for parents than in these crucial years when children discover the joy of learning and learn the habits that will serve them well throughout their lives.

A version of this article appeared in Attain magazine in the summer of 2013

THOSE CRAZY, LAZY, HAZY DAYS OF SUMMER

"Pupils in England should spend more hours at school each day and have shorter holidays"

Michael Gove, 13 April, 2013

"A child educated only at school is an uneducated child".

George Santayana

"Children have to be educated, but they have also to be left to educate themselves".

Abbé Dimnet, Art of Thinking, 1928

The recent pronouncements of the Minister on the need for shorter summer holidays and longer teaching days touched a nerve with working parents, seeing it as a way of reducing childcare costs. Judging by the reaction on *mumsnet*, it was also picked up as a comment on the length of teachers' holidays – after all, as one correspondent wrote, how much harder **can** they work than those who only get four or five weeks holiday a year and as for needing six weeks to recharge their batteries, well!

Without banging on about the fact that it is the quality (not the quantity) of time in class that counts and the rather contrary examples the Minister provides, by word or example (for instance, in holding up the independent sector as an exemplar of good practice when they have significantly longer holidays than state schools or his own alma mater, Oxford, whose terms stretch to an underwhelming eight weeks), I started to reflect on how this vast desert of time can be put to best use. In the ideal holiday, children should have time for rest and relaxation, but also find some incidental ways for reinforcement and renewal in looking for new ways to solve old problems. And so it is. Used to their optimum, holidays are rich sources of education, covering the whole gamut of subjects. I reflected on how I welcomed the holidays by taking to my bicycle and beginning with an exercise in local geography, exploring the contours of the riverbank, navigating street grids, reading place signs, studying weather signs and exploring the surrounding countryside. I learned many aspects of mathematics: I mowed lawns for pocket money and took empty bottles back to the corner store for refunds, thereby learning to understand the value of labour. I built carts and tree huts, ropes and swings, calculating angles, load-bearing boards,

elementary carpentry, principles of physics, sometimes getting it wrong and learning from that too.

I would fly a kite on the beach and learn about on-shore and off-shore breezes, and tying knots. I learned how to row boats, study the tides, where to dig for mussels, about buoyancy, hay-fever, sandcastles and the futility of building in sand (re. Matthew 7 vv 24-27)) or trying to hold back the tide (re. King Canute).

I read all those old books that children read then, Biggles, Famous Five, Secret Seven, seditious and sinister tracts, many since banned, along with a mish-mash of adventure and science fiction, classic comics, Tiger, Lion and Look and Learn, plus the magazines my father ordered for the surgery, the Saturday Evening Post, Punch, Time, the National Geographic. . . .

I learned to fish ('teach a man to fish . . . .') from a little wharf on the river.

I made elaborate papier mache islands which I would invade with plastic boats collected from the cereal packets. I would design elaborate board games for siblings and learn to play board rugby with a button and two teams of fifteen drawing pins and rules so elaborate as to make today's scrum laws look arcane; I would make the Eiffel Tower out of Meccano (a precursor to Lego) and discover such hidden geographic delights as San Marino and Monaco via stamp collecting.

I would play the piano with a child's enthusiasm and find out what sounded right, even if just to me and draw pictures for fun. On hot days I would learn about the ferocity of the sun's rays, the laying pattern of chickens, the life cycle of the monarch butterfly, spiders in the woodpile.

I would see my friends, become part of a neighbourhood gang, go camping, explore the food pits and forts of the Maori who once lived there. And I amused myself, endlessly and joyously, kept out of my parents' hair and learned so much about place and person.

So I was horrified to read today that around 60% of parents anticipate spending up to £300 during the holidays on entertainment, while one in 10 expects it to amount to more than £450 (Observer 21 July, 2013); I am sad to see how few children can amuse themselves other than on a screen and still complain of being bored. What an indictment of curiosity, of initiative, of childhood. There are other ways of improving academic progress, by making lessons more effective and focusing on the quality and not the quantity of learning and letting schools be schools, doing what they were set up to do. You don't need more time. You need to use what time there is rather better and let children do a little bit of self-discovery. Interestingly, the lessons I learned on holidays were the best of all and have lasted the longest.

"In school you're taught a lesson then given a test. In Life, you're given a test that teaches you a lesson."

Tom Bodett

THE TUTOR TRAP

"Parents across the county are protesting about letters from their children's schools that help to market a DVD home tuition scheme. In return for sending out the letters on school-headed notepaper, signed by the headteacher, the school receives a payment for 'administration costs.'"

The Guardian, 10th May, 2011

"I had a really academic upbringing, was hot-housed through everything, and held up as an example for my academic achievements. Yet I honestly feel I didn't start thinking or learning anything remotely relevant to life until I was 25. In fact I think my education was in many ways a handicap."

Quote from mumsnet, 10th May, 2011

"A 2002 study by academics at King's College, London found that more than half of 11 year olds at some of the capital's primaries had at least 18 months of private tuition in English and Maths before sitting the 11+".

Quote on study from King's London

The number of tutor agencies has been growing steadily over recent years, many peddling their wares to expedite the frenzy created by 11+ and GCSE. While most tutors have been employed to offer support to those children who have fallen behind in their work or who have learning difficulties and therefore need specialist help, too many now are used simply for exam preparation, feeding the concerns or neuroses of schools and parents, many of whom see their children heading towards the looming precipice of national or entrance examinations. Their promissory notes to parents, sent by underfunded schools drawn in by financial inducements to parents desperate for their children to succeed, have led to an unregulated industry that needs reining in.

The definition of a tutor, that of a private teacher, someone employed to give extra instruction or remedial help, has blurred in recent years and broadened to include such diverse roles as being a surrogate parent or a motivator, trying to engender some enthusiasm in underperforming students, teaching study skills or providing advantage for those that can afford it.

The last definition is being played out in London today as parents, (many of whom already pay fees for private education), rush to employ tutors to augment what is already an intensive education. They do this not to rob their child of a little breathing space they have left in this busy world, but in order to prepare their children to pass the vastly oversubscribed 11+ exams (each year up to 75,000 children sit for 20,000 places) or GCSE's, A Levels and the equivalent. The explosion in internet-based tutoring companies, often charging more than £100 an hour, attest to the pressures schools and children are under simply to pass their exams, to give them the greatest opportunity in the future.

It is unhealthy. It should be unnecessary and children need to be protected from a system that feeds the overt ambition of schools and the worries of parents. This is particularly so when other mechanisms of assessment are available. Teaching children how to pass exams by cramming is ultimately counter-productive; as is narrowing education to a series of targets in a restricted number of subjects. This is not to downplay competition, but tutoring removes the idea of fair play, of a level playing field. Further, to subject children who have been working a forty hour school week, plus homework to extra tutoring, in term time and through holiday courses is simply wrong. What are we doing?

The problem is not one parents can easily answer, for the blame, in most instances, does not lie with them. Peer pressure, the fact that the quality of education is so variable from one school to the next, and the natural desire to do the best for one's child all play a part in their actions. Nor can the tutors be blamed, although a number of agencies egg up the fears and anxieties for self-benefit. But it is an artifice, in which childhood has been sacrificed in a race for places because schools can not work out a better way to sort out their intake.

At the heart is the gap between good schools and bad schools, between schools that act as conduits to a stage beyond and those where children atrophy. It is exacerbated by a reliance on an intensive series of tests to sort out their intake. It is a tragedy and especially for those who cannot afford to take part.

We should look at what is best for the children and what is in the national interest. And it is not this. If my child worked hard all day at school and I was then told that he or she needed to have extra tutoring, not to fill in any glaring holes, but simply to become better than his or her neighbour, I'd be pretty brassed off. Which I think is what I suspect a number of parents currently are.

TO FAR TO SOON

"School trips are an essential part of every child's education and by not finding a way to make them happen we are failing in our duty to prepare them for life."

Judith Hackitt, NASUWT Conference, 2011

"*It is wrong to wrap children in cotton wool as they grow up. Trips and getting out of the classroom should be part and parcel of school life".*

Ed Balls, Conference for Outdoor Learning, Greenwich, 2008

"Health and safety is one of the main issues. It's impossible to take large groups anywhere really interesting, so coursework is limited to local areas and small-scale studies."

Comment to an ISI inspector from a 16 year old geography student

"Harrow takes pupils on many excursions abroad each year, and has recently visited Japan, China, North America, South America, Tanzania, Canada, Germany, Italy, South Korea, South Africa, Tunisia, Malta, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Namibia & Botswana, Kenya, Spain, Brunei, Spain, Australia & New Zealand, and the Himalayas."

Harrow School Website

A recent report that tells of declining numbers of children visiting some of our major cultural and historical institutions, particularly the great art galleries and museums, makes disturbing reading. Recent figures released this week suggest that thousands of children are missing out on visiting such national institutions as York's National railway Museum, London's Science Museum and the Natural History Museum because of funding cuts. Further, twelve field study centres are about to close because of cuts to local funding with many others under threat.

Until recently, health and safety and the need for exhaustive risk assessments have shouldered most of the blame for deterring teachers from taking children out of school. In making these decisions, teachers were encouraged by teaching unions who advised members against leading trips for fear of being sued should anything go wrong. As the recession has started to dig deeper, however, it is more often financial reasons that are cited. The average cost of residential school trips rose fivefold between 2002 and 2007, and while the rate of increase has slowed, the damage has been done. Schools and families, both under the financial cosh, no longer have the wherewithal to cope with such additions to school and family budgets, especially as so many trips are now tendered out. Partly to protect themselves, schools have come to rely on companies to organise their trips and excursions, which in turn has led to fewer students being able to afford the opportunity to see life out of the classroom. As well as the demands of time required to plan such trips, students also have more grandiose views on what a school trip should be. Sadly the days of travelling by coach, of packed lunches and fending for oneself in self-catering hostels with all the commensurate social and practical benefits are no longer, not just because of a lack of imagination and energy, but because of the constraints of bureaucracy and time.

The same malaise is evident in trips abroad. Apart from trips for field work or to our great galleries and museums, many schools make use of the proximity of Europe for such purposes as studying the battlefields of World War One or for studying foreign languages. Such trips should be encouraged and can be done prudently with some careful planning and assistance from companies.

By way of contrast, there is an increasing trend for wealthier schools – mainly independent schools – to treat the world as their classroom. Reading prospectuses and magazines from such schools is like reading a fist full of travel brochures, full of the remote and exotic. In a recent letter to the Daily Telegraph (14 May, 2011) a teacher from Wellington College recounted that he had driven a minibus with nine students aboard to play matches in Manchester and Wakefield. Of the nine, all had been to Europe, eight

had been to South Africa, six had visited Australia or New Zealand and three had visited the Caribbean, all on previous school trips. Only two had been to Lancashire and one to Yorkshire, neither through the school. Sadly, while each trip has its justification, often philanthropic, to help communities in the third world, one wonders about the effect of showing children so much of the world before they have learnt to pay their way in it. In the worst instances, some such trips smack of neo-colonialism or paternalism, at best. It is hard to escape the feeling that while students have been privileged to visit exotic parts of the world, and no doubt gained a great deal from the experience, many would benefit from staying at home and seeing a little more of their own countries. Such indulgences by schools, and the pressures they place on their parents to fund them need to be considered very carefully indeed. After all, when children aged 12 and 13 go on cricket tours to South Africa or New Zealand, you do wonder what is left.

"*Too often travel, instead of broadening the mind, merely lengthens the conversation.*"
Elizabeth Drew

TRY A LITTLE KINDNESS

"We should be careful / Of each other, we should be kind / While there is still time".
Philip Larkin 'The Mower'

"This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness."
Dalai Lama

Hearing of another conviction for what the police euphemistically call 'hate crimes', one wonders what has gone wrong with the world. Not only do we seem immune to acts of violence enacted in our streets, but we appear to accept gratuitous violence on our television screens with scarcely a murmur.

How has it happened that we have been desensitised without realising it, becoming in the process, isolated, strangers even to our next door neighbours, disparate parts of communities that have no beating heart?

In a society in which every man, woman, child and family for themselves seems to be the unspoken mantra, it is vital that we try to give our children something tangible, some moral instruction to hold onto. Not something as esoteric as 'follow your dreams' or 'you can do whatever you want to do in life', but something a little more practical and less likely to lead to disillusionment and resentment.

I have thought long and hard about what we should be teaching our children by way of a simple philosophy and have settled on an adage – hardly original - I feel comfortable with: it is simply to *"Work hard and be kind".* Not as catchy as most school mottos, but nor should it be. Of course, hard work doesn't always guarantee success because ability is not evenly distributed; nor, in this age of unspoken patronage, is life fair (and they should learn to accept that that is never a reason for not trying), but what opens the doors that talent and ability does not. Someone who is essentially decent and who knows how to work will always find a refuge, even amongst the scoundrels.
We can all understand the value of hard work and accept that even genius needs its requisite 10,000 hours *, but kindness is another matter. After all, it is one of those words like 'nice' that has had a lot of its personality drained from it and yet its simplicity belies its strength. Trite-sounding it might be, but under its umbrella comes everything that matters: compassion for others; the sense of charity; tolerance; understanding; empathy and treating people with decency, with respect and with the consideration due to us all. Teaching children to be kind is not an instruction to be given, but an example to be shared.

"Kindness, I've discovered, is everything in life."

Isaac Bashevis Singer

"No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted."

Aesop

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

(an extract from the Headmaster's review of the School Year, 2012)

"I once made the mistake of once saying that when pupils leave the school and their paths diverge, where, to paraphrase Robert Frost "way leads onto way," they may lose touch forever and slowly fade from each other's lives. But I had forgotten face-book and social networking, the fact is that this is the most together generation in history. Already, I suspect, they are linked up for life whether they like it or not.

Which is a reminder to us all of how quickly the world is changing and the implications that has for us as schools. Information today can be accessed from home, through virtual learning environments, through the information mines of Wikipedia and the like. The last fifteen years has seen the democratization of knowledge: we can find out almost any fact, any piece of information via mobiles, i-phones and similar gadgets, wherever we are – even, rather sadly, in examination rooms if teachers are not vigilant and the teaching of morals has fallen off the timetable.

So with all this knowledge at our fingertips, what is our role, as teachers, as educators? Ian Gilbert in his thought – provoking book, *Why do I need a Teacher when I've got Google*? argues that the role of teachers has changed from that of imparting knowledge to helping children know where to find knowledge, how to use it, apply it, synthesize it, to be creative with it. The democratization of learning as he sees it.

Undoubtedly, we need to teach new skills. We need to improve the quality of children's thinking. After all, we know the value of a degree or qualification becomes largely irrelevant after a few weeks in a job. At that stage, a person's adaptability, enterprise, work ethic and communication skills, both written and spoken, define how good they really are. And it is these traits we are seeking to nurture and encourage by embedding them in our curriculum and in our teaching.

But there is another, more fundamental role. That is to ensure the children learn to live collaboratively, to see happiness as something they give to others; to see success in terms other than money and position; to see self-esteem and confidence not as gifts that are bestowed, but as things you build, block by block by trying harder; to learn how to think independently and take responsibility, to learn right from wrong, to learn to shoulder responsibility, to communicate and to behave morally and ethically.

Of course, many of these lessons occur at home as well as at school, through following the example of parents and teachers, modelling behaviours and attitudes. And we, as adults, have a huge responsibility to get it right.

We are looking forward to the educational challenge that lies ahead. Schools cannot afford to bury their heads in the sand and assume that what they do now will be good enough in the future. Passing a test or exam is, but one measure and if we wonder why so few of our top scholars become entrepreneurs, it is because one isn't encouraged to take risks to pass exams. We need a broader definition of success, one that relates to the world beyond schools and doesn't just perpetuate the mythology of academic excellence being the only gateway to success. Trying hard, yes, thinking more, yes, working to one's potential, yes, we must work to achieve all those things, but let us not delude ourselves that we are serving our children if we don't challenge them also to be more autonomous learners, to think more, to learn how to problem solve and to use technology to enhance their own education. That is what will be needed to succeed in the future and we will work hard to ensure we are developing such habits here. We must make sure we are not falling into the trap of producing pancake pupils, thinly spread, knowing less about more, without any real depth of knowledge or understanding.

We want to do our best to prepare our children for the future. Which might make our decision next year to increase lessons in English and Maths in some year groups, to place more emphasis on handwriting, grammar and spelling seem rather retrograde. On the contrary. These skills - and learning tables and lists of vocabulary – provide the basis for all else. After all, you cannot be a reflective reader unless you first learn how to read. So

next year, we are going to concentrate on tightening the core: better communication; more exacting standards in presentation of work; higher standards of accuracy and stressing the value of hard work. For the flower to bloom, the roots need to be deep and self sustaining.

WHY SCHOOLS MUST CHANGE

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

John Gardner

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

David Pratt

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

Ian Gilbert

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

Such an idea is, of course, old hat now and such provision is available (although not quite in the form we envisaged). As well, the Government is busy setting up eleven "virtual schools" as part of the Government's strategy to support children in care and this model will no doubt be extended in time to other situations and needs. A few other schools, acting on the latest research on adolescents and the brain, have dramatically changed their school hours to optimise learning. As well as flexible school hours, the wider use of new technologies, praise pods, spaced learning and the teaching of

entrepreneurial skills are all the new initiatives being trialled around the country. The government is encouraging schools away from the traditional knowledge-based curriculum to a more broadly-based skills curriculum in order to ensure children will be employable as well as properly educated in the wider sense.

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

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

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

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

The Royal Society of Arts in their education initiative have argued along similar lines:
"*For two centuries, the school curriculum has been a collection of subjects, it's main aim to transmit subject content to students. Other aims, such as the development of competencies – thinking, creativity, communications etc – have been essentially, by-products, assumed to emerge from the proper teaching of subjects. As knowledge expanded, extra subjects were added to the curriculum. The National Curriculum attempted to define what students needed to know, an attempt doomed to failure by the impossibility of balancing the claims made for subject coverage against limitations of time and space.*

But there is no longer any way – if, indeed, there ever was – to define a package of subject matter that will do all this. At the same time people need an increasingly complex range of competencies to manage their lives, and their education should develop these. Something has to give."

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

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

1066 AND ALL THAT

"History is a vast storehouse from which we take what we need, but we must choose wisely."

Voltaire

"We need to return to an old-fashioned method which had governed the teaching of history for generations, namely 'dates, conventional divisions and an insistence upon mechanical accuracy'"

Hiliare Belloc, 1924

"1066 and all that without the jokes."

Professor Simon Schama's assessment of the new History curriculum

Of all the subjects being promoted in the new curriculum, none has elicited a greater reaction from teachers and academics than that of History. Defended by traditionalists including David Starkey and Dr Amanda Foreman who see it as the vehicle to teach children to learn about, and take pride in, their country's heritage, the new course has

recently been roundly criticised by a number of leading academics, most notably Professor Schama for being little more than "*a ridiculous shopping list of subjects*" which he describes as "*… essentially memories of A-Levels circa 1965, embalmed in aspic and sprinkled with tokenism.*"

There is nothing wrong in following a chronological history and in teaching facts, even by rote learning - in fact, such an approach has much to commend it. The problem comes when politicians and academics begin arguing about what facts should be included and for what purpose.

At best, although we might prefer it otherwise, much of history can best be described as 'contested knowledge'. So much history once taught as fact is now acknowledged as anything but (the historiography of the Black Hole of Calcutta being an excellent example). Too often we talk of history when we mean mythology or story-telling or else a history intended for internal consumption, that elevates some events while dismissing others. Such an approach may have its place, but what children need in learning history is to learn that, behind the skeleton of irrefutable facts, almost all history can be contested with as many interpretations as there are commentators or observers. Anyone trying to explain the emergence of Modern Israel (or sorting out a playground incident) would recognise that.

David Priestland, who teaches History at Oxford University argues that *"Nobody would disagree that children should have a good knowledge of British history. But as citizens of a multi-cultural society and open economy in a globalised world, they are being seriously short-changed by these politicised and philistine reforms.*"

Certainly there is a good argument for replacing some of the subjects and topics in the new draft with others. For instance, if we want our children to understand our relationship with the rest of the world, some explanation of the role of the cartographer following the break-up of the Ottoman Empire and the 'Scramble for Africa' would be invaluable in showing what happens when national, cultural and racial groupings are ignored in the process of creating new nations. History should give an understanding and insight and provide the tools for deductions to be made and conclusions drawn.

There is also a danger in giving a list of topics without any guidance, knowing that in many history classes, especially in the younger years, children will not be taught by specialists. For instance, in Key stage 3, to teach the Indian Mutiny (or the first Indian War of Independence), requires a sensitivity and awareness of the wider issues than mere dates and a narrative; to present such topics as 180 degree history is perilous, for if not taught with a proper understanding of the issues and sensitivities, it can be worse than not teaching the subject at all.

Many historians have weighed into the debate. Niall Ferguson initially gave his support to Michael Gove until he felt that the prescription was too limited. Sir David Cannadine,

Dodge Professor of History at Princeton argued that the new curriculum was unsustainable and that the answer was for more time to be allocated to the subject than one hour a week. Tristram Hunt argued that what we want for our children is to have a richer sense of our national past, but should preferably locate it in an international context. Other historians criticised the language used, and asked whether the material is age –appropriate while the selection of topics also caused some raised eyebrows. When Michael Gove suggested that pupils study British heroes, for instance, it is sensible to place them in a wider context, remembering that one person's hero is another's villain. It is difficult for schools to see a way forward without more time being allocated to the subject. But perhaps the answer is to focus less on purpose and detail and on fulfilling an agenda, rather than on developing the skills of the subject, including questioning, synthesis and analysis. As *Richard J Evans, Regius Professor of History at the University of Cambridge* wrote: "*Michael Gove wants the teaching of history to give pupils a positive sense of national identity and pride. Yet history isn't a form of instruction in citizenship. It's an academic subject in its own right.*"

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

Having finished his term as Chairman of the Education Committee of IAPS as well as his time as a director of ISEB and a member of the ISC Education Committee, he has turned his attention to writing a regular column in Attain magazine as well as other publications.

Peter has lectured at conferences and is the author of Florence: Mistress of Max Gate' a novel centred on the relationship of Thomas Hardy and his second wife, Florence and its prequel, 'Emma: West of Wessex Girl.' Previously he had written a biography of Sir John Ormond, the first New Zealand Boarding Schools' Handbook and a number of articles on education and related topics published in various magazines and journals. He is a member of the Powys Society, The Thomas Hardy Society and, along with his wife Sarah, is the bemused owner of a bookshop in France (**www.theenglishbookshop.org**)

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