Contents (by most recent publication):

The Censor Within: (published on-line in The Daily Telegraph as '*We, the Public, have become our own Censors'*, 29th December, 2015)

As a nation, we celebrate the freedom that comes from being able to celebrate diversity, freedom of expression, human rights and personal liberties. After all, such beliefs lie at the cornerstone of our democracy. It is not surprising, therefore, that the idea of censorship, filters, random searches and restrictions of movement, can make us nervous and fearful that rights are being diluted or undermined. Social libertarians are quick to speak out if they feel our freedom is under threat (and they are right to do so), but the reality is that a more insidious, more pervasive censorship is

happening every day and we are not only complicit in it, but responsible for it.

Our society is shrinking in true Orwellian fashion, but not because of the number of CCTV cameras and legislation designed to track our movements, monitor our e-mail traffic and gather information about us for 'reasons of national security'. No, the reason we are shrinking our freedom is because we, the general public, have become our own censors, putting down anyone who states an opinion we disagree with, curtailing debate and polarising opinions, left and right. The malaise has now reached our universities who are deciding who they should listen to and who they should not, in the name of free speech. Debate is quashed, opinion ridiculed and the threat of litigation employed to muzzle free speech. Much of what we see as censorship today is, therefore, frankly nonsense, as every nuance, misplaced humour, any idiom is open to question. When radio host Jeremy Vine was reported to the BBC under the equality and diversity code for using the term 'man flu', then we are in a parlous state indeed.

With closed minds and self-righteous opinion to the fore, abetted by the fear of litigation and trial by social media, we have become averse to speaking our minds and having opinions. It is a dangerous place to be.

All this has happened during a time when we have made self-promotion into an art form, by putting our views, however personal and trite, 'out there'. This trend, evident in social media, is symptomatic of a world that has no place for false modesty and, along with the huge amount of information we sometimes, unwittingly, give away on-line, has undoubtedly exacerbated the problem – yet it does not excuse it. It is still deeply worrying that, in an age in which we have become obsessed with protecting our privacy and rights, we have created an inquisition of sorts, policing and regulating individual's views and opinion by ridicule and vitriol or worse, by engendering fear. The irony, the ultimate irony, is that we have created a far more invidious threat to our freedom than anything the state could ever have dreamt up.

And so, while we have never been so good at defending individual's rights, cracking down on racism, sexism, gender issues and cultural language that should manifest itself in a more open, considerate and tolerant society, the truth is the opposite. Anyone on twitter or other platforms who makes a

comment with which someone else disagrees is too often seen as fair game and open to a campaign of abuse, attacks ad hominem ad nauseam. As a result, rather than endure it, more and more people in public life are withdrawing from the battleground of social media to escape trolling and cyber-bullying and driven into silence by the cowards' weapons of choice. At the same time, bloggers, emboldened by anonymity, feel free to comment on people's appearances, ethnicity, political views, sexual orientation, background anything, it seems, they can disparage or ridicule.

This week, Nicky Morgan, the Education Secretary, announced that schools will have to have internet filters and up their game in teaching children about on-line safety, a sensible move, but one that is still bound to provoke some comment. Schools have a role to play in promoting opinions and free speech and ensuring we do not become a closed society, reluctant to say what we think rather than what we are told to think (as our examination system, sadly, encourages), but children also require some protection from the more unsavoury aspects of the internet and extremism.

Meanwhile, we have contracted as a society and become more insular and defensive, less inclined to tolerate opinion and dissension, more suspicious, more guarded, less inclined to be involved with each other. The effect is that free speech has become muted, discussions and actions guarded and freedom of expression compromised. We need to be bolder and assert our liberty and our right to give voice to our opinions. That is what being in a democracy is all about.

Choosing a Career - Do you want to be a Social Media Officer, Millennial Generational Expert, Market Research Data Miner or Digital Strategist – apply now! (Published on-line in The Daily Telegraph as '*Gap between what employers want, and schools offer, is growing*', 14th December, 2015)

As the government continues its campaign to convert all our schools into academies, (and can we please then call them all 'schools' again?) there is a growing realization that more than a name change is needed to deal with the growing gap between what schools are offering and what employers are saying, ever more stridently, that they require from their staff. In this ever-changing battleground between the present and future, few areas of

instruction in our schools are as important as the career advice we give to the young.

Society has become used to statements about schools having to prepare children for jobs that don't yet exist (Fisch and McLeod), or the challenge posed to educators by the exponential growth of knowledge, particularly in the fields of technology and nanotechnology, on what content to keep and what to discard. The warnings, after all, are not new: it is twenty three years since Dr William Daggett wrote that 'the gap is getting wider and wider between what our children need and what they are leaving school with; not because we are not working hard, but because society is changing faster than our schools.'

While the debate over the future of schools and education and the process of change is for another time, not surprisingly the area of career advice, both at home and in our schools, has taken on new importance. This is particularly apposite knowing that children are now likely to have numerous changes of jobs in their lifetimes that will require different skills and aptitudes than those of their parents, (who they often turn to for advice in the first instance before realizing they are about to inhabit a quite different world of work). It also raises the question of how much career advice is already redundant at the point of delivery and what predictive tools and data will be necessary in the future.

Last week, Jonathan Taylor, Head of North Bridge South Senior School in London criticized colleagues for pushing students into particular courses in order to gain Oxbridge places, (the currency for marketing academic schools). The obvious retort that an Oxbridge place should be of mutual benefit to individual and institution is no longer satisfactory (if it ever was) in an age when old ways are no longer the only ways, with the proliferation of choice and a blurring of disciplines. Traditionally, most academic schools have concentrated on the Russell group of universities as desired destinations rather than steering students towards entrepreneurial or vocational jobs, (including those created by new technologies), other suppliers of tertiary education or even speculative business opportunities. With the changing job market, however, the challenge for those offering careers advice is to become better acquainted with the growing diversity of employment opportunities outside of university. By contrast, in schools where university has traditionally been a minority choice, career staff are

having to learn more about the range of university courses available, especially considering the fact that numbers of students going to university have increased from around 14% in 1980 to almost 50% today (even though nearly half of recent graduates have not been successful in finding jobs in their preferred fields of study).

With a changing work market and new jobs replacing old, up to date career advice is more crucial than ever, which is why recent research claiming one in ten students feel they made the wrong choice at school is disturbing. It is a challenging situation for schools whose career departments have often been poorly resourced and tucked away in back corners of schools and for their staff who have had to operate often working in isolation. Suddenly, their role has changed and they have been propelled to the forefront, having to learn to marry their students' profiles with the ever-shifting range of choices available to them, both academic (with university placements and other avenues of tertiary education) and vocational.

Much has been done already, with Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) and the Independent Schools Careers Organization (ISCO) taking on a more prominent role. Research from such bodies as the Gatsby Foundation and pioneering work by individual schools (such as that undertaken at King's Rochester with its 'jobs network') are showing the way forward. A large number of schools are involved in similar initiatives using mentors, placements and work experience although, sadly, the picture is far from uniform. In many areas of the country, opportunities for work experience are restricted to a few local industries and whatever expertise is available in the community, while access to internships and apprenticeships, for a variety of reasons, remains largely untapped. As well, many schools, are struggling with reduced budgets, unable to invest as much as they would like in careers advice and as a consequence, risk their students missing out on receiving the most up to date information about employment opportunities or the means of accessing them.

It is this same rapidity of change that has seen the demise of well-known brands such as Nokia and Kodak and the reshaping of the high street, as the impact of technology on jobs gathers pace (for instance, the next significant change may come through 'fintechs' – financial start-ups – which are predicted to reduce the number of bank employees by a half

within a decade). Helpfully, many business leaders and CEOs are writing on the growing gap between the skill set of applicants and graduates and what industry and society, requires. As the growing dissatisfaction at the end product of a traditional education continues to rumble on, schools can only continue to resource, support and empower their careers advisors as best they can. In turn, careers advisors have the challenging task of interpreting an ever-changing job market in order to give the most relevant and informed advice they can to the next generation of students leaving their schools.

Children in Crisis 2 December, 2015

The mental health epidemic among the young represents one of the greatest challenges facing our schools.

According to the leading charity, Young Minds, between 2001 and 2011 inpatient admissions for young people who self-harm increased by 68 per cent, while in another survey 46 per cent of girls aged 11 to 21 said they have needed help with mental health issues.

Although society struggles to make sense of the causes, or indeed the extent of the problem, the warning signs have been there for some time.

When we ask ourselves what has changed to make this generation so vulnerable, so susceptible to self-doubt and depression, the same questions resurface: why are so many children struggling to cope when, on the surface, they appear so much better off materially and in terms of lifestyle than thirty years ago?

How much does the cost of tertiary education weigh heavily on the young mind or the uncertainty of future employment? What role is technology playing, whether through the pernicious effects of social media that make normality a less desirable cloak to wear, or exposure to anonymous scrutiny and cyberbullying?

Whatever the questions we choose to ask about mental health, and there are many, two things are clear: the upsurge of illness in our young should

be of huge concern to us all; and we need to look at better ways of addressing the causes rather than waiting to deal with the consequences.

"Schools that have not been averse to using anxiety – however unwittingly – and fear of failure to drive performance."

There have, of course, been many attempts to do just that. A growing number of schools have attempted to change their culture by instigating programmes aimed at improving resilience and self-esteem, by improving their pastoral and monitoring procedures or by introducing classes in happiness and well-being, but most are merely scratching at the surface.

We might not fully understand what has made so many of our young so vulnerable and lacking in confidence, but we can speculate that the focus on IQ and academic achievement above EQ and well-being, as well as the break-down of family, are obvious areas that have eroded confidence and left children without the inner resources to cope.

The need for more urgent and concerted action can no longer be ignored and, over recent months, a number of leading heads and school associations have spoken out about mental health, the impact of league tables, the increase in tutoring, the extent of depression among students and cyber-bullying, based in part on the findings of a survey of independent schools released in October.

A brave few have even acknowledged the problems existing in their own school communities, which is commendable and the first step to involving the whole school community in finding solutions.

46 per cent of girls aged 11 to 21 said they have needed help with mental health issues Photo: Time To Change

However, the response from many other heads and governors, who have ignored the growing extent of children's mental health issues in their own schools for far too long, has been disingenuous at best.

In many schools, the problems are not new and while more money and resources are now being diverted to address mental health issues, a few still

appear to care more about their academic results than the mental health and well-being of their students.

The boom in tutoring, for instance, which a number of heads are now ready to criticise, can be seen as an entirely understandable response by parents to the over-rigorous testing and entrance exams, often poorly communicated by schools by smoke and mirrors, and undertaken in such a way that shows little consideration for their impact on children and families involved.

Tutoring may well be a symptom of a system in free-fall and struggling to cope, but regardless, it is invariably the schools, not society as a whole, that has to deal with the causes of the growing mental health problems and it is the causes, not the symptoms, that need addressing in the first instance.

For that to happen, whole school cultures will need to change, and sometimes, radically so to help stem the growing epidemic.

"The consequences of the growing mental health problems lie largely with the schools and it is the causes, not the symptoms, that need addressing."
A number of steps can be taken. First, schools must recognise that it is not competition and hard work that causes stress and mental health issues among their students, rather fear and anxiety.

Schools that have not been averse to using anxiety – however unwittingly – and fear of failure to drive performance, urgently need to review their practice and ethos.
As well, in the face of a largely unregulated and often hostile virtual world, students must be taught better coping strategies, both on-line and off, and have better support from appropriately trained staff (which means some teachers being trained in social media).

What students don't need as they navigate the often difficult years of adolescence is to be over-monitored and managed, but rather guided and supported by informed adults. More counsellors are urgently needed, and, in some instances, the ethos of schools needs to be changed.

The Government, of course, has to play its part through extra funding for the sector specifically to help tackle the issue of mental health, but it is

schools that need to take a lead in protecting the well-being and mental health of their students.

Growing Aspirations: November 2015

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

"I think the difficulty is the aspirations that anyone can have placed in front of them can only be based on what you see."
John Bishop Desert Island Discs 29 June, 2012

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 many more do not), the reality is 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 families parents and teachers. It is a sobering fact that independent schools that perform no better than neighbouring state schools, have significantly larger numbers of children moving into leading universities or full-time employment. In part that is down to financial and social advantages as well as personal and tribal ambition, but too often it is down to the expectations of parents and their communities who are too happy to settle for second best, for no other reason than that is the world they know. John Bishop's telling observation highlights just how difficult it is to change attitudes and to be aspirational when one's life is restricted by school, home and their local environment.

Government is keen to tell us that opportunities for social mobility are improving and that with the right teaching and encouragement, all children can become aspirational – and ultimately successful, regardless of their social or economic background. Such traits, so the argument goes, are not the preserve of those who go to the best state schools, comprehensives, grammars and academies, or independent schools. We are a society of equal opportunity – if someone wants to do something, they can.

When politicians, educationalists and journalists peddle such stuff you wonder either how much they know of the country they live in or indeed their agenda. Yes, a few can overcome their social background, but they are

a small minority. Naomie Harris (currently starring as 'M' in 'Spectre') is one who is often wheeled out as evidence that Britain's meritocracy is alive and well, having come from a comprehensive school, brought up by her immigrant mother and ending up at Cambridge. She is having none of it:

"What people say about our society is that you can come from any background and, if you work hard, you can come out of your social circumstances and achieve pretty much anything. That, actually, is a lie. Because you have to work so much harder than people in other social circumstances to achieve the same level of success. It takes an extraordinary will to be able to do that – and drive, and ambition, and focus. You have to make huge sacrifices to leave people in your social circle behind in order to move to a different one, and that's very isolating. It's a lie that anyone can do it. Not everybody is willing to make those sacrifices and not everybody should have to. Why should they?"
So how do you replicate what is called the "Eton effect" whereby privately educated pupils emerge from their schools with the innate confidence that they will succeed. Answer: With great difficulty. After all, to replicate the confidence and social ease that is an implicit part of one child's up-bringing, immersed as they may be in the company of high achievers, (including their parents) can be quite alien if every aspect of life mitigates it.

The majority of students at independent schools expect to do well because evidence shows that those who have preceded them have always featured disproportionately well in the quest for university places and the top jobs. The problem for society as a whole, however, is that the educational divide reinforces the view that some children are born to succeed and others are not. This wider problem was recently expounded by Professor Becky Francis who commented last month that *The clearly glaring gap in the English system is that of social class. The relationship between parental wealth and background and children's educational outcomes is particularly strong and deeply problematic.* One of the most candid illustrations of this is in the apocryphal argument that Christopher Hitchen's parents had over his schooling. When his father said he could not afford private education, his mother replied, "If there is going to be an upper class in this country, then Christopher is going to be in it." Christopher went private.

It is a huge impediment thwarting aspiration and one that won't quickly go away. Money – lots of it – is a conduit for social mobility, but raising

aspirations involves one group surrendering some of the high ground to let others share it and despite such gestures as offering to share their DNA amongst educational establishments, this is unlikely to happen.

Nor is the problem restricted to attainment at school. Evidence published this week refer to a 'class ceiling' in the workplace where those 'from humble backgrounds working in higher managerial and professional jobs earn 16% less than those in the same jobs born into privilege'.   In other words, meritocratic recruitment is not enough. Once in a senior position, there are other measures that the report identified as assisting advancement including having received pronunciation or a public school accent; being well-groomed; having a good dress sense; and what are loosely called 'highbrow tastes or hobbies'. It is difficult to replicate such traits and behaviours when not living in the environment that nurtures and encourages them. Micky Flanaghan expressed as much in an interview last year by revealing that   *"when I spoke in lectures I was very self-conscious about my accent . . . . I was overcoming my class fears almost on a daily basis. Confidence is a difficult thing to get when you are working class; you have it knocked out of you. I had to tell myself my opinion mattered.'*

To grow aspirations we do need to raise standards and expectations in schools and homes; we need greater transparency of opportunity in areas such as work experience, internships and employment; we may even (shudder) need some social engineering. These things will not happen without some legislative intervention and / or social and institutional change. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that the problem is more deeply rooted than just making children more academically ambitious. For significant progress to be made, we need to address some of the social and cultural factors that stifle aspiration and dissuade many young from even trying.

Choosing Our History

'History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon' Napoleon Bonaparte

Several years ago I was engaged in a minor spat with a leading headmaster about the teaching of history in our schools. He had come out in the national press saying that he wanted to teach British history to make his

students 'proud to be British', a premise I challenged on the grounds that teaching history should not be to meet a social agenda, that being taught to be proud (or ashamed) of your country's history was not what the subject was about. It was not a particularly significant point in the persuasive case he was making for teaching a narrative story of British history (after all, Michael Gove also rejected the idea of history being used to foster patriotism), but it highlighted the potential danger of history being used as a tool to manipulate attitudes which could, in the wrong hands, support a wider and potentially more sinister agenda.

This is not to say that we shouldn't 'big up' our own history as long as we don't purport to promote it as the only history. After all, every country does just that by drawing on common experiences and employing myth, symbols and a set of agreed values. In teaching our children their nation's story, it is appropriate that our respect for democracy, rule of law and mutual respect and tolerance should underpin the key events in our past and what we see as our national mythology. History is as much about interpretation as providing a catalogue of events and 'facts', often carefully gathered and arranged, and we should celebrate that over the past fifty years, the subject has broken away from the confines of textbooks written by a relatively small group of academic historians, to a subject based on accommodation and questioning, historical enquiry and interpretation. History, after all, is best described as contested knowledge, and rather than learning a narrative by rote, useful as it may be, children need to understand that history is always open to interpretation and that at the heart of the subject is the need to question and challenge what they read and learn – something good teachers endlessly facilitate. The new primary history curriculum introduced in 2014, with an emphasis on teaching a chronological history of Britain, particularly up until 1066, as well as a mix of 'overview' and 'depth' units of work with its renewed emphasis on historical enquiry and perspective was a significant step forward in this respect, even if ambitious for the time allowed in the curriculum.

Which brings us to the events of this week. History has long been a malleable tool for politicians wanting to prey on fears or prejudices and politicians as well as historians of all persuasions are constantly engaged in a war over the same set of facts, differently presented. So it is little surprise that at the Labour Party Conference, Jeremy Corbyn expressed his own opinion about the history we should be teaching in our schools.

Rather than wars and the expansion of empire, for instance, the new Labour leader argued that we should get the story from the people where the empire expanded into rather than from those that came there to take control of it. If time allowed for all points to be considered, (noting that history has a endless supply of potential witnesses and testimonies), it is not an unreasonable argument, although it is not strictly our history. As someone who lived his early life abroad, I am very well aware that the views of empire propounded by historians and politicians in former colonies will be unrecognizable, even unpalatable to our own, but although they are no less valid, we should be careful before trying to indiscriminately import them into our curriculum.

What we must do, however, is acknowledge that such views exist and have validity. It is important for children (and politicians) to accept that history is not the private property of any one nation, and while we were once taught that our views were 'the truth", (and in this we are minor offenders compared to many countries), thanks to the dissemination of knowledge (including the sharing of national histories from our former colonies) and the world wide web, we are not quite so naïve.

On the other hand, Corbyn makes a number of perfectly valid claims for what we could be teaching in our schools, namely how we have evolved into a democracy that allows for free expression and trade unions and how revolutionary change has been achieved and freedoms won for the people by the people. Of course, he is right – as much as those who argue for the Magna Carta, the Civil War or the Act of Settlement to be at the centre of the curriculum. What is more important, however, is to be teaching an understanding of how we have arrived at where we are today, as a democratic nation that allows for a wide range of views and opinions and that encourages debate. What History we choose to teach (and in what context) is arguably less important than teaching children the skills of historical enquiry, the use of source materials and the need to challenge opinion. Historians are commonly labeled by their writings, as Marxist, revisionist, feminist or any of the many fields and categories they now occupy in the discipline, but we should pay scant regard to such stereotyping. In teaching history, our children need to study and understand their country's journey for its own sake, while subscribing to the original Greek meaning of history, that of 'investigation' with its

implicit obligations of research and questioning. That way, even if they grow up with a slightly cosy view of their own history, mixed with a healthy dollop of national mythology, they are, at the very least, aware that other views, equally valid and justifiable, also exist.

September 28, 2015

The Compulsory Teaching of Languages in Primary Schools– One Year On.

"With languages, you are at home anywhere." Edward de Waal

"You can never understand one language until you understand at least two' Geoffrey Willans

In 2012 the Minister of Education announced that from September, 2014, it would be compulsory for children aged 7 to 11 years to learn a foreign language. This ambitious plan, a product of Michael Gove's term in Office and endorsed by his replacement as Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, was intended to close the gap between the British education system and school systems abroad as well as well the yawning gulf between state and independent schools in language provision.

The rationale was and is self-evident, as Nicky Morgan explained:

'We want our young people to have the best possible start in life – that is why, as part of our plan for education, we want every child to learn a foreign language. It doesn't just help them to understand different cultures and countries, it opens up the world.'

Michael Gove went even further in extolling the extra benefits of learning languages as a way of improving the brain, arguing that

'It is literally the case that learning languages makes you smarter. The neural networks in the brain strengthen as a result of language learning.'

Many language associations, teachers and parents welcomed the decision despite the obvious logistical challenges it posed in implementing the change. There has long been a growing realization that for our children to compete in the world job market, they need to be part of the international community and by learning foreign language, they will also develop a greater appreciation of other cultures and people.

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All of which makes perfect sense. Young children immersed in a foreign language learn rapidly and the younger they start, the better. Also, while foreign languages lie mainly in the domain of secondary schools, many of the most successful education systems start earlier: at the age of six in New Zealand and Singapore, for example, nine in Finland and from the start of primary school in Hong Kong. So many other countries have made learning a foreign language, and predominantly English, a priority so it is no surprise that they have a better grasp of English than we do of other languages. Rather, we have waited for the world to come to us, with obvious cultural and linguistic ramifications.

The problems in implementing the directive were twofold: one was the inevitable problem of finding adequate time in the curriculum for the new subject; the second was the dearth of language teachers in our primary schools. It was estimated that nearly a quarter of primary schools did not have a teacher with more than a GCSE modern language qualification, and almost half had no support from specialist language teachers in local secondary schools. One year on, progress has been made and schools have responded well, looking to their communities for resources and support. But despite the injection of government money into language teaching, there is still much to do.

Historically, independent schools have been far ahead of the game in teaching languages and a hugely disproportionate number of students going on to study languages at university have come from an independent school background. That could well moderate over time, although there is no doubt there is some considerable ground to make up both is making languages more accessible, but also in selling the importance of learning languages. Some leading independent schools are making a significant contribution to demystifying the learning of languages and encouraging language acquisition, (notably the new website at www.languageprep.org) that helps break down the barriers to learning languages both internationally, but crucially, nationally as well.

'To have another language is to possess a second soul' – Charlemagne

September 21, 2015

Too Far Too Soon (a blog from 2008 – but back in the news again)

"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

15th September, 2015

What Do Computers Do for Our Children's Learning?

"We want all schools to consider the needs of their pupils to determine how technology can complement the foundations of good teaching and a rigorous curriculum. . . ."
Nick Gibbs,

The findings of the OECD think tank on the use of computers in schools released this week makes disturbing reading. Not only does it state that the use of computers in schools does not improve pupil results, but can even drive them downwards. Using data gathered from 70 countries, a clear correlation is established between the countries that spend less time using computers in the classrooms and those countries that sit at the top of latest PISA rankings: South Korea, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore (with the last-named ranking top for digital skills, despite only registering a moderate for its use of technology in school)

In three countries, at least, where computer use is high, Australia, New Zealand and Sweden, reading levels have even dropped, albeit slightly, while in other high user countries, they are stagnating. More surprising was the news that the oft-supposed benefit of computers in narrowing the socio-economic divide, has not happened, suggesting they may even have had the opposite effect.

All of which could be rather disturbing for Government who have committed £900 million for use on technology in schools, a sum so vast that, had it been used to reduce teacher / pupil ratios, help retain school playing fields or improve the training and quality of teaching, would have reaped obvious benefits and received a good deal of public acclamation.

Despite all of the above, (and I would suggest it is not, perhaps, quite as bad as it seems), there is no way of putting the genie back in the bottle. And nor should we ever want to. After all, what the report shows is not a failure of technology, but a failure of application. In the internet race, thousands of schools – indeed, whole national school systems – have taken the plunge, to greater or lesser degrees, often prematurely so, and at great financial and educative cost. One reason, therefore, for the inevitable poor outcomes was because the key question as to how, exactly, computers would provide any measurable educational benefit (if that indeed, was the aim) hadn't been properly thought out. Nor had the issue of the time required to integrate computers into the curriculum (and where that time came from), how computers could benefit learning or even the importance of computer science as a stand-alone subject been addressed. As a result, computers were often used as electronic resource banks, albeit with more bells and whistles, or interactive teaching aids, but without any evaluation of their actual effect on the quality of learning. Often, the purchase and implementation of new systems were driven by political or marketing rationales, and too often preceded the establishment of a reliable network, adequate hardware or appropriate training. Never before in history of education have teachers and schools had to play catch-up in the face of such a tsunamai of new information. It demanded, and continues to demand, a response. In this report, some countries went on the offensive, placing technology at the forefront of the curriculum while others, as in the Far East, took a more considered and conservative approach with the majority fell somewhere in the middle.

In the light of this report, we clearly need to re-examine the value of that response and what we are doing (and schools will undoubtedly need to justify the use of technology in their curricula), but it is not a red light for the use of computers, merely an amber one. We cannot blame technology for the failings in the way it has been used, or like a bad tradesman, blame the tool. The rate of technological change, already considerable, is only

going to gather speed and have an ever greater impact upon schools in the future. We just need to prepare better.

Despite the disquiet caused by revelations such as the deleterious effect of the internet on reading or the judgment that computers, overall, have had a negative impact on learning, we need also to look beyond the measures used by the OECD report. The report, after all, focuses on results in reading, mathematics or science, important for comparative reasons, but not so in other non-examined areas of learning. On the importance of coding and other skills and areas of technical knowledge that will be crucial in the workplace of the future, for instance, we just don't know what the impact of current teaching practices will be. Just as the job market is changing so dramatically, so education can no longer know the effect of the computer on its outcomes and for many teachers, who struggle with technology, that is deeply unsettling.

Education is going through its own revolution. Because we are the middle of it, we cannot be sure where it will take us. But technology and the computer are part of our world – and as the report suggests, we just to learn how to make better use of them.
Daily Telegraph On-Line Blog, 18th September, 2015

Exams are not the Only Driver

"Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten"
B F Skinner

"It is a miracle that curiosity survives a formal education."
Albert Einstein

Barnaby Lenon's interesting article ('Exams put pressure on Children: That is their Virtue') raises some pertinent issues about the importance of school examinations although, as is often the case, the devil of the article is in the detail. Much of what is written is predictable, identifying examinations as the best way of assessing children's learning and asserting that examinations encourage children to strive and to perform, all of which I concur with. Just to make sure I am not seen as one of the author's 'enemies of good education', apart from the value of examinations, I would

also stress that discipline, (especially self-discipline), competition, a sense of purpose and a good work ethic are also essential ingredients for a 'good education.'

Yet while examinations are an important tool, they are not the only measure of what constitutes a 'good education.' To have any value, learning needs to be sustainable, if not in the memory, at least in the habit. To see exams as THE essential building block of education makes one wonder what happens when the props are pulled away, as they will be in time. If children don't learn responsibility for their own learning and autonomy in their mid-teens, when do they learn? By giving exams undue prominence, often by plastering over the cracks in understanding what is learnt, we fall into the trap of letting the requirements of the test take over. We have become very good at teaching to the test and celebrate the teacher who guesses which questions are going to come up.

And yet how often do selective schools complain of pupils coming to them who have been over-prepared and never reach the same level again. Likewise, when one reads in the findings of the HEFCE Report of 2014 on the differences in degree outcomes that on a like-for-like basis, state-schooled outperform independently schooled students at all institutions, then perhaps some independent schools should question whether the importance of exams (and league tables) has clouded their thinking. Too often it seems, the importance of exams (and, implicitly for schools, league tables) has clouded their thinking to the detriment of the long-term interests of the student. Passing exams is all very well, but it is not, and never has been, enough. There is the world of difference between the purpose of education and the role of examinations, as the etymology of both words (educare and examinare) would suggest

Which leads to the contention that boys (in particular) do not respond to the carrot and therefore need the stick in order to work best and that examination pressure helps in this process. Undoubtedly this is true in too many instances, but we need to ask why. Why do so many see education (or is it just school?) as something to be endured? Why do some children not appreciate the value of education or, for whatever reason, feel that education is not going to determine or affect their journey in life? Why do children in other countries and cultures place a much greater emphasis on education than do our own children? Of course, there are all sorts of

mitigating factors, developmental, environmental, hormonal. No doubt, also, many children from successful homes know that passing or failing examinations is not going to determine their life journey (after all, if you can come bottom at Harrow and still become Prime Minister and win the Nobel Prize for Literature, it would be hard to take them seriously); others from more disadvantaged backgrounds have simply given up because that is what their parents did.

Yet one overriding reason for the lack of urgency is simply that we haven't taken the time to stress the importance of education in determining their life chances. They need to know. And in stressing the importance of examinations, we need to stress, also, that learning does not have to be examined to have value – quite the opposite as we find out as adults. It is vital for teachers to encourage an appetite for learning, to teach children the importance of asking questions and taking intellectual risk – things the examination system often militates against – and to learn for their own sake the importance and the privilege of education – and labeling such notions as idealistic is simply an abrogation of the educator's responsibility. Of course, it can be done.

Reading reader's comments after the article was posted in the Telegraph online was like reading a list of excuses for a national malaise. Our children need to realize they are competing internationally for jobs now, not nationally, that children from other countries and cultures are hungry to learn even if ours are not. Then, surely, as educators, we need to respond, not say it's always been that way. It's time to change by teaching children to take more responsibility for their own learning, especially those who don't value it. That way, children will still feel pressure in preparing for examinations and properly so, but it will be theirs, because they will have the ambition and drive to find what they are capable of achieving on their own.

Together, Alone: What's Happened to Classroom Teaching? (Blog posted, 26.08.15)

'The most stunning change for adolescents today is their aloneness. They are more isolated and more unsupervised than ever, not because they come from parents who don't

care, or from a community that doesn't value them, but rather because there hasn't been enough time for adults to lead them through the process of growing up'
Patricia Hersch 'A Tribe Apart'

'I don't care about anyone else in his class; all I care about is my son.'
Parent

'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world'
WB Yeats

Over the past two decades, we have seen a significant shift in the way children are being educated. From the traditional system of children being taught in year groups, we have moved to a more personalised style of learning and teaching, albeit still usually within the confines of the classroom. We have worked harder at identifying and meeting the learning needs of each child, rather than educating them collectively in groups, often decided without any consideration for their different aptitudes, learning styles or degrees of readiness. Undoubtedly, the greater focus on the needs of the individual was long overdue, (and especially the greater focus on the safety and well-being of the child). There is, however, a danger that this focus on the individual and on personalised learning has become the mantra for all education and that while advances in diagnosis and technology have been hugely helpful in identifying learning needs, perhaps in determining how we deal with these needs, and the needs of all children, the pendulum has swung too far.

Part of the shift in teaching has been down to improved identification of learning styles, our understanding of how children learn and, in particular, the improvements in the identification of those children with specific learning needs, who require different strategies through intervention, withdrawal or IEPs. Part of the change has also come about by a greater focus on self, on the children's rights, on greater self-awareness, on happiness and self-esteem; and yet another part is implicit in a culture in which children are listened to rather better than in the past, and encouraged to express their views and attitudes, however relevant or appropriate, occasionally even when what they want most are boundaries, some point of resistance, guidance, and honesty.

It is an idea we have given silent voice to, that the way to develop a child's potential is by focusing on their needs as an individual and to recognize that each child is unique. As we often tell them.

Except we all are. Unique, young and old; all individuals with individual needs. And that by narrowing our focus on each child, we have taken our eye off the value of community, of being in a classroom with other children, who benefit from being taught together, supporting and learning off each other. We have forgotten that sometimes, other children make the best teachers. The underlying principle of the greatest good for the greatest number is hugely unfashionable in schools and yet, at least in part, it had its benefits. It allowed children to work their way in the safety of a group, without being tagged by a label around their neck and sometimes, it worked spectacularly well. Not always and of course, there were many who fell through the cracks and I am not advocating a return to old-style teaching. But it had its value, of instilling a sense of community, or sharing ideas, of being in it together.

As education has moved on, so has classroom management, the way we teach. Teachers are more aware of the needs of their pupils and rightly so. But perhaps – just perhaps – the pendulum has swung too far. Perhaps we have overdone our adherence to data without looking at other ways performance may be affected. Perhaps, we should be looking at education in the round, not just by results. Perhaps we should be doing more work in raising expectations, in providing a more disciplined classroom environment and good whole class teaching.

I have seldom read an Educational Psychologist's report that talks about the importance of classroom immersion, or the need to work harder, or different levels of readiness or maturation. Of course, there are children for whom intervention is imperative, but I am concerned about how reports, recommendations, data from various aptitude tests, shape, wittingly or unwittingly, our expectations of children at the very time when we should be giving them a chance to prove themselves. In the wake of figures showing our children amongst the unhappiest children of any nation, we seem to ignore the fact that children are happiest when they feel they belong. We forget that sometimes the last thing a child wants to be is to be treated as an individual rather than part of a group. Sometimes they would rather swim furiously below the surface to keep up rather than being seen

as different. More than ever before, is it not beholden on the school to provide the community for children caught between split families, confronted with language barriers or persuaded by technology to abandon face to face conversations and relationships in favour of virtual ones?

Children need to be taught the value of community, of sharing, of group work. They need to judge themselves by what they do, not who they are. Self-absorption, the feeling of being alone, of not achieving, leads to depression and related health problems. It is not their fault that more and more parents place their children at the centre of the universe, but they cannot learn to orbit the stars from a fixed point. Every child matters, we know that, but every child needs to learn that every other child, and person matters too. Too many models of learning, advocated in the work of Bloom, Proctor, Huitt et al pay scant regard to the classroom dynamic, the learning and teaching that happens amongst children rather than to them and yet, done well, it is an important factor in developing that sense of belonging.

Of course, our understanding of individual learning needs and how the brain works should feed into our teaching. Of course, we need to ensure everyone can access the curriculum, can work at their own level, although levels are fluid. But children need community; they need to be comfortable together; they can even benefit from being taught together, even if data tells you that teaching a lesson to a particular group just won't work. To do so needs teachers skilled in managing groups, in bringing out the best in each, in using children to help each other. Try it. If you can double your expectations as a teacher (always the greatest determinant of success) and not look for reasons to fail, you may well be surprised.

Managing the Mail (August, 2015)

'I get e-mail, therefore I am'   Scott Adams

*"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." 213121212121111*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 44 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 183 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. But all these years on, exactly what has been the effect? In a word, it has been overwhelming, adding extra pressure and demands on schools and teachers, despite the immediacy and convenience it offers. As a head, I estimate it added, very conservatively, six hours a week – if not me, certainly to my PA. Did 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 was left trying to work out how I could reclaim those six lost hours and what to do with all the extra megabytes of often meaningless information I had 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), Apple iMessage (2011). Unroll me (2012) and Priority Inbox (2013). Facebook alone has about 800 million active users and sends 4 billion internal Facebook messages every day. Clearly, attempts to replace e-mail with real-time messaging or with new triage tools that sort messages is not the answer. So just how do schools keep up with the extra pressures while educating a generation who are born hard-wired, who learn technology from the cradle

We need to get over it – and quickly. While we might rightly bemoan that the immediacy e-mail provides has been at the cost of reflection, 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 of technology and know

how to use it, not just in order to educate our pupils, but simply so we can keep up with them. We need to learn to manage e-mail to be accessed at our convenience and not to be always checking our in-box. We need to shut our laptops down, have more face to face meetings while working out how to use it better. We need to regularise its use in our workplace, and encourage our parents to use it more sparingly, especially in avoiding the machine gun of copying everyone in. We need to monitor it and its effectiveness and see how we can use it better. This is not a choice we can defer: we have to understand and manage technology before we all get 'spammed.' Yet for the Minister to suggest that we don't look at e-mails out of school hours or on weekends suggests that the extent of the problem is not fully appreciated.

It is a very significant factor in the extra stress and demands placed on schools, as evident by the number of schools who try 'technology free' days or ban internal e-mails completely. When I look through my own mail box, it is full of offers of training, special courses, conferences, free trials or a multitude of educational resources, all unsolicited, all unwelcome, all taking up someone's time – and that is before we start training our own teachers and parents to use e-mail more sparingly and responsibly.

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