Contents (by most recent publication)

Oxbridge and All That November 2017

The contention late last week by David Lammy, the one-time Minister of Higher Education, that Oxford and Cambridge Universities are not doing enough to widen the diversity of their entry was met with the predictable rebuttal by alumni of the two universities as well as from current students. They pointed, instead, to the failure of schools and teachers for not nurturing student aspirations in what is now becoming a familiar cycle of blame.

One current student who took up her pen to write on the debate talked of demystifying the Oxford experience and showing that people attend the university are 'just like them.' She didn't quite give a lie to the idea that the two universities are the place where the cleverest people go or debunk the idea that clever people are better equipped than anyone else in the workplace, other than to make a whole lot more money through their working lives (estimated at £200,000 over other Russell Group graduates, courtesy of the brand name). Clare Foges commented in one article on the subject that the issue is not to break more people into Oxford, 'but to

break the Oxbridge stranglehold on the best opportunities.' Perhaps the decision of one leading financial services firm, Grant Thornton, in 2013, to stop giving jobs based on academic criteria is a ray of hope. Four years on, it has found that four times as many appointees selected from the 10,000 applications a year who would not have met the company's previous criteria based on grades and references have made their elite group (the Games changers) compared to those who had met the original criteria.

Rather than blaming the universities or the schools, (or lazy employers, content with the name, for that matter), we should consider the historic relationship between the universities and schools. Traditionally, places at Oxford and Cambridge were secured by word of mouth, often the result of a communication between a housemaster or headmaster of a public school and a colleague at the university. The relationship was very close and a reflection of a hierarchical society where education was the preserve of the well-off and the gentry. Independent students, of course, are no longer are given places on who they know – indeed, they would argue it is now more difficult coming from a privileged background. Yet where we see this connection flourishing today is in the number of Oxbridge graduates teaching in the independent sector, where they often make up the majority of the teaching staff. Even smaller regional schools are likely to have a number in double figures. A significant smaller number choose to teach in state schools, often at Grammar Schools while there are signs that more are beginning to go outside their comfort zone to teach at comprehensive schools. In the vast majority of state schools, you might not find a single Oxbridge graduate. And why should that matter?

Rather than focusing on universities and schools, we need to unpick a whole history of class and expectations. The fact is that most independent schools are packed full of Oxbridge teachers sharing their DNA with their students. Many state schools have few / no such role models. One response I had to a twitter feed on the subject noted that at their comprehensive there was a part-time Cambridge Mathematics graduate who felt a student in Year 10 was a contender for Cambridge, adding hopefully, 'very lucky. Hoping they stick around for 3 years!' If it takes a part-time member of staff to make the connection simply on their own experience, as in this instance, we are in a parlous state in those schools where there is no provenance, no tradition, no historic connection between school and university.

Of course, many would say why does it matter, all this fuss about Oxbridge. Apart from making sure that education at all levels is open to all, and however much we disavow the idea, the composition of the student body at both universities is seen as a barometer of social mobility. Unless we get an influx of Oxbridge graduates opting to teach in the state sector, it is going to be difficult to change behaviours. People aspire to what they know and often only feel comfortable passing on their own experiences and information. Perhaps if employees can see that clever people are not always equipped with the aptitude, character and skills they actually want, then Oxbridge might start to be seen as just another option, not just for the cache of having been there.

Modelling for Life October, 2017

'The younger generation isn't so bad. It's just that they have more critics than models.'

Children are very perceptive. Often, what they might not be able to understand intellectually, they sense intuitively, but invariably while young, they learn best by imitation, through what they see and experience in the home, rather than by what they're told. Prince Charles is reputed to have said *'I learned the way a monkey does – by watching its parents'* and that is true for all of us. After all, who else has such an overwhelming presence in our young lives.

The parent is sometimes oblivious to just how much a child absorbs from all they see and hear going on around them. Sometimes the first realisation only comes after an inappropriate word or comment uttered first in the privacy of the home is innocently repeated in company by one of their off-spring. by all that children hear and see. If parents use inappropriate language, drink excessively or smoke, then such behaviours are legitimised; if they spend their time looked into their i-phones, they can expect to be imitated. Nor at they safe in sharing their more personal opinions. Children's honesty at school can often be disarming and little is safe with children when amongst their classmates.

The importance of parents providing an exemplar for their children can hardly be overstated. If children grow up in homes that don't value books, then they are less likely to do so. If parents openly criticise their teachers, it is hard for children to respect them knowing what they think. The same applies if politicians or policemen are constantly derided in the home. Yet even more important are the little things children learn by imitation: valuing effort; encouraging sharing; manners; respect; appropriate behaviour; and talking up the value and importance of education.

As children grow up, the resolve of parents will be constantly tested. During adolescence, children may become contrary, on the one hand appearing very moralistic, judgmental even, especially where adults are concerned and yet seemingly prepared to push the boundaries in their own behaviour, ignoring the role models presented to them by family and friends (although, in reality, seldom drifting too far from the values their parents espouse). By their teens, they may be better able to make their own decisions and intellectualize the concepts of right and wrong, but even in those tremulous years, they still learn largely by imitation, often through challenging the status quo.

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

Schools and parents need to be consistent and work together for if both are not singing from the same song sheet, then children never learn what is acceptable and what is not. This can be true of simple courtesies, like opening doors, writing thank you notes and being punctual, or some of the bigger things, like respecting the law and other cultures, peoples and societies. Children dislike hypocrisy and don't like being told one thing and shown another. They revel in surety, in knowing where they stand. If they are untidy they don't want to be told so by someone who is equally untidy.

If their use of language is inappropriate or they are lazy, then they need to see the correct behaviours and standards in the actions of those who correct them as well as in the words. They respect strength and don't always appreciate being defended when they know they're in the wrong – as they occasionally are. Children's honesty is transparent and often their worries and concerns mirror the opinions and views of their parents or guardians or, indeed, their teachers. And so the responsibility is implicit in all of us, to ensure that the way we present to our children is consistent with the values we want them to acquire and acknowledge that, in so doing, words alone will not suffice.

Children need models. They need be able to respect their teachers, their government, their police force, their town council, but respect has to be earned. That is why role models, whether sportsmen, like Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer or celebrities like David Attenborough or are a power for good. Children are good on imitation and if we want them to imitate the right actions and values, and grow up as we would want them to be, we need to be the people they aspire to – for if not, they will grow up reflecting the values and behaviours we most dislike in ourselves.

Classroom Discipline (Published in The Daily Telegraph, 29 June, under the headline 'What's the Answer to Classroom Discipline?')

One of the biggest issues taxing the leadership of schools is that of classroom discipline. Nothing affects learning outcomes, school improvement, academic attainment or the morale of teachers more than constant, low-level disciplinary issues that eat minutes out of every lesson, hours out of every teaching week. It is a cancer that is increasing year on year and taking up more of our teaching time and school resources. According to recent a YouGov survey, pupils are potentially losing up to an hour of learning each day because of disruption in classrooms, equivalent to 38 days of teaching lost per year. Of all the impediments against improving attainment in our schools, none is more pressing.
In response to these concerns, the government recently commissioned an independent review focusing on behaviour in schools and whose findings were published earlier this year in the report 'Creating a culture: how

school leaders can optimise behaviour. Its brief was to offer individual schools ideas and exemplars of good practice by focusing on the importance of school leaders in optimising behaviour through with reference to more directed teacher training, by establishing clear routines and expectations for pupils; and by making better use of school resources and premises. The report scratched all the familiar itches: the importance of clearly understood rules and sanctions, internal inclusion units and exclusions, school charters and whole-school values, and technology and mobile phones with the central message being that schools need effective leaders to develop the right culture to deal with behaviour and the team to deliver it. The report's author, Tom Bennett, uses a number of case studies, including Michaela Community School and its boot camp, Seymour Road Primary School where all staff are trained by an outside provider and King Soloman Academy in North London where the code of conduct is strictly enforced. Each school has its own way of approaching discipline and the case studies offer exemplars for other head teachers to adopt as required. It is all useful, sensible and, frankly, largely common sense and as guidance, will no doubt be useful for heads who lack the vision and wherewithall to address the issue on their own.

The problem with the report is that it was never intended as a panacea and its limited brief and lack of a wider context highlight the difficulties facing schools by placing inordinate pressure on school leaders who are already reeling under other constraints, including staffing. What it does not do, however, is address some of the pressing concerns facing teachers. Nowhere do we read about the alarming statistics that since April 2015 and the and the beginning of this year, 2,579 weapons were seized at schools. Nor is there any mention of the fact that according to an ATL survey conducted in 2015, over 20% of teachers had been subject to false accusations by pupils or parents- and it is getting worse. Parents, families and communities, a key constituency to a blanket approach to dealing with discipline, only appears on page 58 of a 62 page report – far too late.

In reading the report two things are apparent: one is that of finding sufficient outstanding school leaders with the ability and vision to implement change at time when schools are struggling to appoint head teachers. The second is the amount of time and resources required to deal with disciplinary issues including the provision of inclusion rooms speiclaised teachers and more targeted CPD advocated in the report at a

time when per pupil funding is falling and schools are even reducing classes to make financial ends meet.

There is also a bigger picture in dealing at discipline and that is looking at how our schools are perceived and the gap between home and school and the mutual lack in trust and respect. An alarming statistic taken from a DfE survey is that only 53% of teachers felt that parents respected a teacher's authority or supported themin their work while the ATL report argued that poor parental discipline was to blame and that "Poor parental discipline is leading to children always wanting their way. Unable to discipline children without a comeback has meant this situation . . . will escalate and good teachers will be driven out when they are most needed." With teachers leaving the profession and parents abrogating their responsibilities by not backing their schools we have an untenable stand-off where too many parents have become their children's advocates over often minor issues rather than supporting the quality of provision and the need for discipline for the benefit of all.

Schools need to work more with their communities, but in improving discipline they need to look at what is going on with our children and, in particular, at the issue of mental health.

The problem is that schools are too often places where children have to be rather than want to be. By being forced into a system that is driven by data and league tables, schools have become adversarial and attritional to too many children. We should look at the relevance of what we are teaching to ensure that schools have a better connection with aspirations and opportunities. Perhaps by talking endlessly of good schools and bad schools and selection, we are adding to the problem. Perhaps we should be looking at making schools more fit for purpose and move away from the academic bias in our curriculum that mitigates amongst so many of the children with learning and behavioral difficulties. Perhaps more emphasis on vocational opportunities and on a broader education would help, instead of the recent focus on the Ebacc. The fact that we have a generation of anxious, self-harming, depressed children is hugely worrying. Good systems, strong leadership from heads and leadership teams as suggested in the report can make hugely significant differences in individual schools, but as well as addressing the symptoms of deteroiorating discipline, let's focus on whether our schools are still

connected to youth in a way the recent election suggests not, and whether what the schools are doing in the classroom is exacerbating the problem.

Politicians and Education – Who's actually in Charge? (published in the Daily Telegraph under the headline, 'Schools have become a bureaucratic nightmare – it's time teachers wrestled back control' 2 June, 2017)

With the General Election less than a month away, education is again in the spotlight. Invariably, we are being served the same old mix of pledges, policies and promises: Free school meals, more grammar schools, abolishing university tuition fees, getting rid of the post-code lottery, all trotted out with the short-term goal of enticing the voter. If we want to dig a little deeper to see what each party's vision for education is beyond the election, invariably, we will be disappointed. There are no big ideas; no evidence, either, of long-term strategic thinking; nor are there any properly considered responses to the immediate problems of teacher recruitment and retention or on modifying what we teach to meet the changes in the world of work.

Apart from the obvious retort that without increased per capita funding for schools, everything else is compromised, we should remember that the single most important reason for the failings of our schools since World War II has been the fact that successive governments have shamelessly used education to advance their own interests. The result has been a constant stream of new policies and initiatives as political expediency and the personal egos of ministers have trampled all over the body education.

In 2010, fifteen eminent professors wrote an open letter to all parties contesting the election urging that schooling should be depoliticized and that what happens in classrooms should no longer be micro-managed by government. Seven years later, if anything, the situation has got even worse with even more intrusive bureaucracy and meddling and yet, in the crucial area of strategy, of planning the future of education beyond a five-year parliamentary term, of sorting out how to turn every school into a good school, there is a deafening silence. If we go searching for a definitive view of what our schools will look like in ten years time, again, nothing.

Nothing, also, about how schools will deal with their changing function in the next decade; nothing about how education might be delivered or what

form new and sophisticated programmes of on-line learning will take and what infrastructure will be required; and nothing on how our schools and universities will respond to new technologies, artificial intelligence and a very significantly changed job market.

Planning future strategy is not, however, the job of politicians alone. In fact, in an ideal world politicians should be taking advice and instruction, not giving it. Instead, the answer to all of the above lies in large part in our schools. Invariably, the lack of targeted strategic thinking in our staff rooms is usually attributed to a lack of time and funding cuts – how can schools, for instance, justify time for heads and teachers to engage in strategic thinking when class sizes are rising and there are increasing educational and social concerns that need to be addressed? But try we must.

Teachers are a vast, largely untapped resource in foreseeing trends and implementing educational change. Despite the pressures teachers are under, schools benefit when they provide the forum by which they can be heard (and most teachers actually like to be involved).

There are challenges that come with this. At present, too few of the main contributors to the education debate come from heads and teachers in state schools. Rather, it has been the heads of independent schools, with their more more limited range of reference that have had the greatest voice. Whether this is because they are having to constantly position themselves in a competitive marketplace or because they have more to say and less to lose by saying it, somehow we need to attract more voices from a much wider constituency.

What we urgently need is for schools to work out methods of encouraging research and debate within staff rooms; ways to encourage teachers to think more about their profession and their subject and what works and doesn't work; we need to find the thinkers in our schools (and they can anyone, from dinner lady to governor) and tap into them. As always, the challenge for schools will be to find ways to engage their staff to think, debate (and even write about) education, knowing that if heads and teachers aren't engaged in strategic thinking, then the hijacking of education policy by politicians and bureaucrats will continue. And Heads, whether in isolation, through shared practice or in peer- groups, need to set time aside for strategic planning in order to at least meet the future half-

way. Because if they don't drive the bus, there are plenty of idealists and theorists working outside of schools, who will.

You want to Teach? Try Tutoring! (published in the Daily Telegraph on 10 April, 2017 as 'Teachers must be freed from the shackles of admin work in order to do their job properly')

Recently, as I listened to a teacher talking of his role as Child Protection Officer with its raft of responsibilities, I couldn't help thinking how the skillset required to be a teacher had changed over the past decade. As he detailed his job with all its pastoral responsibilities, record keeping, referrals and time spent working with agencies, it became very obvious that this role had subsumed his other 'minor' role of teaching and had come to dominate his workload. It is a trend that can be seen everywhere in schools as more teachers are given other roles to sit alongside their teaching, including responsibilities for safeguarding, first aid, counselling, health and safety, data management, the internet or implementing the PREVENT programme. This is on top of the increased pressures that teachers are under from constant changes in curriculum and exam syllabi, for better differentiation of children's needs, more personalised learning, better identification of behavioural and learning difficulties and meeting the raft of targets demanded by league tables and Ofsted, all of which have added hugely to their workload.

Last week, one of the directors of Teacher Toolkit, Ross McGill, looked at the diminishing amount of time that teachers spend in front of classes. He posed the question that by spending less time with children, 'Am I becoming less of a teacher?' While the debate focused on whether teachers' skills are diminished by teaching less, what was also interesting was how his contact hours as a teacher had shrunk from 90% as a classroom teacher in 2000, to 72% as a Head of Department seven years later to currently 24% as a Deputy Headteacher.

Perhaps that is not so surprising, given the ladder of promotion although one suspects that in 2000 heads and deputies were still teaching

considerably more; what is surprising – and concerning – is the amount of time that classroom teachers – where Ross was in 2000 – have seen their contact time eroded by this whole raft of other responsibilities they have been asked to take on. More is being asked of teachers and schools to deliver on subjects as diverse as budgeting, philosophy, the environment, sex and relationship education, survival skills (after a prompt this week from Bear Grylls) and most recently, for internet lessons and on-line responsibilities.

The pressures on teachers can be grouped in three key areas. First is the demand for more and more data and detailed record keeping, for more accurate tracking and measurement, recording and reporting – all of which have eaten into teaching time as target grades, league table position focusing on A* – C percentages, ALPS reports and OFSTED ratings have become driving forces for improvement; second is the impact of technology which has opened up learning opportunities, but has also created enormous challenges notably through cyber-bullying as well as jamming the system with e-mail traffic; and third, through the extra social roles and legal responsibilities that schools have taken on to ensure children are safe, through safeguarding and child protection; that they are properly fed and supported emotionally and physically; and, amongst other recent initiatives, that they are protected from the influence of terrorism. Consequently, teachers have been required to learn a range of new policies and procedures delivered mainly through inset or training days (once the domain of classroom practice) at a pace that is almost unsustainable.

As the pastoral demands have become more and more time-consuming, substantially adding to teachers' workloads, schools are looking at the grim prospect of reduced funding and staff cuts. The fact that teachers are so often committed to teaching to the test (and scratch the surface of any lesson, and assessment is lurking there somewhere) takes away the room for exceptional teaching, teaching off-piste and encouraging initiatives, but this is not as it should be. New initiatives to change the face of teaching such as pupil premium are held back by lack of funding and unrealistic targets, while attempts to change the way we teach through collaborative teaching and project based teaching are compromised by lack of time and resources.

Undoubtedly it is less complicated in the independent sector as Shaun Fenton, Head of Reigate Grammar pointed out after moving from a highly successful career in state education: 'When I moved to the independent sector I realised that it was possible to do that so much more effectively without the compliance culture that comes from Ofsted — without the constant compromises that are necessitated by funding problems. Suddenly we could do the things I'd always wanted. It was liberating.'

For schools and heads, perhaps, but for teachers the same pressures remain, even exacerbated by an expection to coach sport or contribute to extra-curricular activities as well. It is a profession under seige, overloaded and underfunded and often misundersttod or unappreciated by the public. Little wonder that we read of more and more teachers quitting to teach overseas or to become private tutors, although I would suggest that the reasons cited which are usually workload and long hours may hide another fact – that it may also be that, as teachers, they just want to teach.

Discipline: The Elephant in the Room (published in the Daily Telegraph on 20 March, 2017 as 'Waning School discipline is the elephant in the classroom')

'Only the disciplined are truly free.' Stephen Covey

On Tuesday, Government launched a five week consultation period on its guidance for expelling and excluding pupils, inevitably focusing on the process and the need for schools to meet their legal responsibilities. While this may be seen as a predictable response to the increase in expulsions and exclusions over the past three years, it is also, a symptom of the breakdown in discipline in many of our schools with the most common reason cited for both permanent and fixed period exclusions being 'persistent disruptive behaviour.'

Few things eat away at the well-being of staff to teach than the disruptive student; however, like so much guidance and dictat on education, the current consultation document yet again concentrates on the effects rather than the causes of the problem. In the light of the new guidance, however, it is pertinent to ask why schools are not better supported in dealing with disruptive behaviour at an earlier point in the cycle, whether by extra

staffing, legislation or other means. Over many years now teachers have been compromised in areas of discipline and their authority eroded while students, conscious of their rights, have often used them as a justification for errant behaviour, too often supported by their parents. While a number of parents are calling for more discipline in our schools, many others are busy criticising teachers and failing to support decisions of their schools. And yet, it is only by an accord between school and home that discipline and behaviour can be addressed and steps to be taken to address disciplinary issues at the source – which is as often ats not, at home.

Late last year, several articles about Michaela Community School appeared in the national press, prompting considerable debate. The School, under the leadership of Head Teacher, Katharine Birbalsingh, has a reputation for its uncompromising stand on discipline. Her philosophy of education, outlined in the book 'Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers: The Michaela Way' raised the hackles of libertarians, educationalists and parents up and down the country with the school's 'no excuses' policy and its uncompromising insistence on standards described by her critics as the antithesis of what schools should be. Further, by stifling creativity and individuality the School was described as a joyless throw-back to education in the Victorian age.

Yet for all the criticism directed at the School, there were an equal number praising the stand it had taken, parents whose own children's schools were constantly disrupted by students who appeared out of control in an environment where they were neither appropriately managed nor sanctioned.

Stepping back from the debate, it is indubitably true that falling standards of classroom discipline and the dilution of time in which teachers can actually teach are major impediments to learning and teaching, as well as being instrumental in driving large numbers of teachers from the profession. Above all else, schools should be about the quality of engagement and maximising teaching time and when a large proportion of lessons are given over to issues of classroom management rather than to teaching, it is invariably the students who will suffer. It is not more lesson time that is required, but more teaching time.

Children need order and structure in their lives. All schools work to provide this by instilling self-discipline through encouragement and example, by giving their students a sense of purpose and clear guidelines as to how to conduct themselves. Sometimes, however, students need to be called to account, to realise that they are part of a community whose attendance at school is to learn and that they have no right to deprive others of an education.

In this, pity the teachers who have been widely derided by the public, disempowered by legislation and hung out to dry by parents. Of all the threats facing teachers, one that has taken ever greater prominence in recent years, is that of their own safety, whether from physical or verbal attacks. In 2015, according to a survey undertaken by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), over 20% of teachers had been subject to false accusations by pupils and over 12% by a parent or family friend. Poorly supported by the lack of specialist help available to deal with problems of children with behavioural problems or violent, unruly or disruptive behaviour, rendered powerless to deal with miscreants and subject to criticism by all and sundry when they do try to do so, they are in an invidious position.

This is particularly chastening when we consider that we live in a age when parents are demanding more and more from schools to whom they have handed over many of their traditional roles and responsibilities, most recently that of relationships and sex education, but also, importantly, in educating children about the internet when parents have dropped the bundle. And yet, instead of working with the schools, too often parents have become their children's advocates over issues to do with uniform or hair length, the lunch menu or why their son / daughter didn't get the main role in the school play. Of course, schools do not always get it right, but always attacking schools and teachers, especially for the small stuff, instead of supporting them to improve the standard of learning and teaching is not, I would venture, the best way forward.

There is no doubt that children learn best in an ordered and well-managed classroom and that if they are not able to manage themselves through employing a modicum of self-discipline, then some external moderation should be used until they are able to do so. It is an abrogation of responsibility for the government, for local authorities and school boards not to address the issue of discipline in the worse performing schools

before setting out to create, as the Prime Minister has vowed to do, more 'good school places.' Parents, also, need to think about what they want for their children before championing their often errant offspring. The same ATL report of 2015, stated that "Poor parental discipline is leading to children always wanting their way. Unable to discipline children without a comeback has meant this situation . . . will escalate and good teachers will be driven out when they are most needed."
In helping schools set standards often neglected at home, a good place for parents to start is in front of a mirror. After all, education is not about 'them' and 'us' or cheap point-scoring – it is about improving the future life-chances of all our children.

How will our education be Judged in twenty years? (published in the Daily Telegraph on 6 March, 2017 as 'Now sex education is compulsory, it is time to prepare students for real life)

The announcement today that classes on relationships and sex education are to be rolled out across all schools, is yet more evidence of the extent to which the roles of schools and teachers have changed over recent years. Undoubtedly, there will be some teachers and parents who are nervous about whether the information being imparted is commensurate with the child's level of emotional development or their readiness and ability to cope and understand it, while others, happy when the subject is in the hands of a skilled practitioner, may worry that not all teachers will have the ability or experience to handle such important and sensitive subject matter. While such an initiative is necessary due to the new threats faced by our children, we also know that in making our response, any response, we are in uncharted territory.

Responding to the epidemic of 'sexting' and warning of the dangers of pornography is hugely important and it may be dealing with the effects rather than the causes is where we find ourselves. It is, however, one more sign that education today is in an uneasy place, and that our schools are under ever-increasing social and economic pressures. In twenty years time, it may be that our generation's response to a range of issues, academic and pastoral, will be judged as too often reactive and poorly thought through,

merely patching holes or, worse, exacerbating existing problems. So much education policy is either catch-up or remedial, dealing with outcomes rather than causes. We still talk about improving the number of good school places instead of refusing to countenance the idea that there should be no such distinction between good schools and bad schools and adopting a much more structured formula to rank our schools according to need and to fund them accordingly. We still struggle to know how to deal with internet as it takes over the minds and bedrooms of our children; and we still haven't worked out what will be the effect of our reaction, through excessive legislation and oppressive policies, to the pressures on the children in our schools.

There are some statistics we do know. One is that Britain is a world leader in family breakdown, with 60% of children born to unmarried parents experiencing family breakdown before their teenage years; worse, by the age of five, half of children in low-income households no longer live with both birth parents. What we have not yet fully measured is the impact this lack of stability has on the lives of the young (although teaching them about relationships, albeit sensitively, is a start).

We know that 1 in 10 children aged 5 – 16 years suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder (around three in every class) and that between 1 in every 12 – 15 pupils deliberately self-harm.

We know that eating disorders, depression and emotional stress are on the rise amongst school-age children despite all our efforts to make their lives safer and to protect them from the dangers of the world and each other.

How we respond to these issues is the key. There has been a tendency to closet children, despite the knowledge that safeguarding is much more than building a wall which can make children even more vulnerable. In extremis, protecting children by making them fearful of adults and scared of their own independence is not helpful.

Recently I read that 'It's actually pretty easy to protect children from abuse: all you have to do is keep them locked up without contact with other human beings until they turn 18.' While this is deliberately fatuous (although some parents might not think so), many schools and parents have opted for a watered down version of exactly this, driving their children to the school gates in ever greater numbers, warning them of

potential dangers and threats, however miniscule, in the school environment and beyond, challenging undue competition or any element of risk while placing their child's self-esteem above their well-being. Just as we allow toddlers to build up imminity, whether by eating mud pies or the like, so children need to build up a resistance to the challenges of life by being exposed to them, in a secure and responsible way.
It is in the classroom that the judgement might be the most damning. If you go into a school anywhere and scratch below the surface, the majority of lessons are being driven by, and orientated towards, the process and actuality of assessment. Apart from the obvious constraints of limiting the breadth of learning, dampening curiosity and stifling ideas, children are increasingly required to operate under pressure, either explicit or implicit, (and one often palpable in their teachers) with everything focused on the test or exam. Having the test driving teaching rather than a methodology that encourages enquiry and questioning, teamwork, and independent study is clearly not producing the desired outcomes for the student; nor is it meeting the needs of the employer who bewails the skills students are leaving school with; nor universities who feel that in the dilution of curriculum, basic skills and the sense of intellectual enquiry have been lost. At the same time, the consequences of our assessment regime might explain the disillusionment of many students in our schools as well as the alarming increase in mental health statistics.

With society changing so quickly and the internet playing an ever greater role in young lives, schools are in an invidious position. I suspect the scorecard in twenty years time might give a pass for effort, especially in improving the safeguarding of children (although too often reactively and there is much more to be done still), but in terms of looking after the mental health and well-being of students and the success and relevance of their academic and personal education for 21st century life, I fear the report could be damning.