

Campaign for Real Education

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“Freedom to teach, freedom to learn, freedom to choose”

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Newsletter

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Editorial

The teaching of Relationships Education (RE) at primary school and Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) at secondary school will become mandatory in English schools from September 2020. Not all parents are happy even though they will be entitled to withdraw their children from the specifically ‘sex-ed’ part of the teaching until the age of 15.

The age appropriateness of some of the compulsory relationships content is a major area of concern. A survey by Leeds Beckett University of 366 teachers and parents indicated that half did not agree that children as young as four should learn about transgender identities (TES 9.4.19). So concerned are some parents that well over 100,000 have signed a parliamentary petition demanding the right to opt their child out of these lessons:

We have grave concerns about the physical, psychological and spiritual implications of teaching children about certain sexual and relational concepts proposed in RSE and believe that they have no place within a mandatory school curriculum.

We believe the above factors have not been given enough consideration and that many of the RSE resources being produced by lobby groups and external organisations will actually cause more harm than good, particularly when child development and psychological factors are considered.

<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/235053>

Whilst the debate has been heated it has, surprisingly, ignored the logical supposition that teaching about LGBT should cover where and why, around the world, this community is often discriminated against or persecuted. The criminalisation of gay relationships, for example, extends to more than 70 countries.

We do not appear to be teaching children to reach a balanced understanding of why many people around the globe see LGBT communities differently from a majority of us in the West.

Why, for example, does the legal code in Qatar, host nation for the next soccer World Cup finals in 2022, include the death penalty for homosexual activity? Why, very recently, has Brunei - officially The Nation of Brunei, the Abode of Peace - made gay sex punishable by flogging or stoning? How can the 2019 winner of the Global Teacher Prize be both a Franciscan brother and teach in a country, Kenya, that has some of the world’s harshest laws against its LGBT residents?

Several major religions condemn homosexual activity as sinful and an LGBT perspective on humanity is prohibited. Should we not be teaching children, at the very least, to understand why this is so, even if we find such views repellent?

This is the other side of the coin in the row that has engulfed Parkfield Community Primary School in Birmingham; a school that is rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted. In line with the Equality Act 2010 and the requirement to promote British Values, the school has been teaching about homophobia and LGBT rights. The school's 'No Outsiders' project has the best of intentions. Who could be against teaching young children to respect the point of view of people who may be 'different' from themselves?

Not all parents, though, are onside. One mum, Mariam Ahmed, told the BBC: 'Sorry, at this age it's totally wrong . . . Children at this age don't even know if they are coming or going, let alone knowing what sexual orientation they will become.' Other parents appear to hold a similar point of view. 'It's good to teach children about respect and values but the sexual orientation aspect is against our principles,' said Asma and Mohammed Jdaitawi.

Foisting adult angst and neuroses about gender and sexuality on to young children can be cruel, confusing and unnecessary. Moreover, it is a veritable Pandora's box, for out of it jumps not only the LGBT lobby but, also, those who are in honest and sincere opposition. If we teach children that the LGBT communities, specifically, should be treated in a spirit of equality and respect, are we not demonising those billions around the world who think differently?

Are the people of Qatar, Brunei, Iran, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the UAE, Mauritania and parts of Somalia and Nigeria inherently wicked because their country retains the death penalty for homosexual activity, even if it is rarely or never applied? And what about those many countries in Africa that outlaw homosexuality without making it a capital offence? Are they all wicked people, too?

Far better, surely, to teach children only that they should treat others as they would wish to be treated themselves – the 'golden rule'. Keep the Pandora's Box of political correctness firmly closed in order to protect children from the nasty consequences that have been destroying the 'community' at Parkfield Community Primary School.

In the face of parental opposition, Parkfield and some other Birmingham schools have suspended their LGBT lessons. They are wise to show restraint. Those supporting a 'No Outsiders' policy for schools argue that schools must 'prepare children for life in modern Britain'. They should also respect cultural and religious diversity in our society and in the wider world. If we are to have a 'No outsiders' doctrine it should, by definition, be fully inclusive.

Chris McGovern

School Spending Cuts – searching for the truth

Siobhan Lowe, head teacher of Tolworth Girls' School in London, recently appeared on the BBC Radio 4's Today Programme to articulate the head teachers' case against what they perceive is the chronic under-funding of our schools. She spoke with passion and with certainty. Things are so bad and staffing numbers so reduced, she claimed, that she has to clean toilets and serve as a dinner lady.

Only £10 per pupil per year, in total, can be afforded to purchase essential items such as books and science equipment. The cuts, she argued, have been 'phenomenal' and schools are now relying on financial support from parents - up to £1,200 per child in one school.

Ms Lowe certainly made the most of the opportunity presented to her by the programme. In graphic and unrestrained terms she damned the government for cutting school budgets. The BBC decided against having her point of view challenged in the studio. It lamely asserted that the government had not taken up an invitation to give its view.

Expecting our battered, spineless and useless education department to stand up to bullying from headteachers was wishful thinking, indeed. The bullies of 'the Blob' have invariably made short work of any spokesman for the education department. Even would-be tough guy Michael Gove was sent packing. It is a hapless and hopeless department that is quite incapable of defending itself let alone promoting sane and sensible educational policy or argument.

Ms Lowe's denunciations, therefore, went largely unchallenged. They centred on data from the Institute for Fiscal Studies which showed that, between 2009-10 and 2017-18, real terms spending per pupil in England fell by around 8 per cent. The Institute's statistics are the foundation stone on which head teachers have built their case. They have, however, chosen to ignore data from the Institute pointing to a 50 per cent real terms increase in per pupil spending if one uses the year 2000 as the base point. Ms Lowe brushed this aside when it was mentioned to her. She appeared not to understand the meaning of spending in 'real terms' and was allowed off the hook; presumably, because she had referenced her toilet cleaning duties.

An avalanche of media coverage followed which largely backed up the brave headteacher for living up to her school's motto – 'Let your light so shine'. The Guardian was in the vanguard of Ms Lowe's acolytes. A letter in response from the Campaign for Real Education to its editor was, unsurprisingly, ignored. So, here it is – the viewpoint that had to be closed down:

You report widespread concern about inadequate school funding (Guardian 9 March 2019). Most worrying of all, however, is that schooling in this country is so expensive. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) we are amongst the highest per-pupil spenders internationally but compared with comparatively poor countries such as Vietnam and, closer to home, Estonia, our children get poor value in return.

The much-quoted Institute for Fiscal Studies has reported that in real terms, overall government spending on education increased by almost 900 per cent between 1953 and 2009. It also states that between 2000 and 2020 the expenditure increase will be 50 per cent. Since the 1950s, and alone amongst developed countries with the possible exception of the USA, the OECD has reported that functional illiteracy and innumeracy remained unchanged in Britain.

The current spending crisis in schools might best be explained by a glance at the most recent School Workforce Census. It shows that teachers constitute a minority (47.7 per cent) of school staff. Our fashionable, but failing, child-centred teaching methods are no longer financially sustainable. Good!

If budget constraints force our schools to use the traditional, and cheaper, teacher-led learning, common in the super-star education systems of the Asia-Pacific, we may find that the current funding crisis has a silver lining - higher standards, less stress for everyone and more money to reward good teachers. What's not to like?

'Tell the truth!' This is what head teachers tell pupils. It is Lesson 1 in most schools. But, which truth do you believe – the one expressed by Siobhan Lowe and most head teachers or the one revealed by our letter?

It seems that The Sun newspaper, at least, has smelt a rat. It has reported that, on reflection, and in the light of an investigation by its journalists, some MPs have become concerned:

Tory MP Nigel Evans accused the BBC of not setting out the true situation.

He told The Sun: 'It does seem as if the BBC are being spoon-fed selective information and not presenting the full truth.

'It is damaging the reputation and influence of the BBC when they become a propaganda tool of any particular stance.

'They really need now to have an investigation into how this happened.'

Andrew Bridgen added: 'It's misleading its viewers.'

The good news from The Sun is that Ms Lowe had less need to be upset than she imagined or than the BBC reported:

'Official accounts show the school's cleaning budget nearly doubled from £30,000 to £57,000 in the year 2017-18.

And Ms Lowe's own salary rose by at least £10,000, reaching a total of £125-130,000.'

Nigel Evans MP is right. We do need an investigation. How does the Today Programme define 'truth' these days?

A new inspection framework from Ofsted

Defiance, disobedience, disruption, disorder and disrespect! No, I am not describing the House of Commons and the Brexit debate. The 'd' words apply equally to our nation's classrooms, as the Conservative Woman's recent publication of letters from a practising teacher so clearly revealed. The teaching profession is haemorrhaging members and descending into a twilight zone of angst and despair. 'Get out if you can!' Is not a great selling point for potential recruits. Nor does it do justice to what should be amongst the greatest of vocations.

It is with some relief, therefore, that, finally, there are some signs of hope on the horizon. A new inspection framework from Ofsted is proposing to separately evaluate 'behaviour and attitudes' amongst pupils. School inspectors will have to answer the key question - Is the school environment 'safe, calm and positive'? Hallelujah! At last!

One might have thought that the need to answer this question would have been apparent back in 1992 when Ofsted was set up. It was not. Our slow-learning inspection service and education department has, for years, been addicted to measuring a school's adherence to politically correct nostrums rather than to classroom realities. I should know, I used to be one of those inspectors and was once marked down' on an Ofsted test paper for not displaying enough appreciation of gender diversity.

Ofsted's stance has been, too often, to ignore the low-level disorder that undermines learning and that drains a teacher's will to continue in the profession. Inspectors have not been required to focus in on the bullying, sometimes subtle, and disrespect that is a root cause of so much unhappiness and stress for both pupils and teachers.

What has mattered, instead, has been how committed a school is to what is seen as more important - issues of sexism, gender identity, racism, equality, diversity, anti-imperialism, so-called British Values, and so on. If a school can demonstrate its compliance to such politically-correct ideologies a blind eye might be turned to the downside disorder that is generated by our 'child-centred' philosophy of education.

Not only is the new inspection framework proposing to incorporate a specific judgement on low-level disruption, it is also proposing to reduce the over-concentration on examination grades across a comparatively narrow academic subjects.

It will, instead, give much more importance to curriculum breadth. This is, surely, a welcome development. The arts, for example, need to be unshackled from their Cinderella status in state schools; not least because the creative industries, in general, contribute close to £100 billion to the UK economy.

<https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/cultural-sector-continues-grow-faster-uk-economy>

Equally important is the educational case. Music, drama, dance, the visual arts, design and so on, can enrich a child's learning, confidence, personal wellbeing and future life, enormously. For many young people, much the same can be said of sport and physical activity - the antidote, surely, to smart phone and tablet dependency.

The proposed new inspection framework is, therefore, to be welcomed. It would be foolish, though, to imagine that inadequacies in the inspection process will disappear. There is, moreover, a very real danger of throwing out the baby with the bath water. Examination results may be open to manipulation and playing the system by so-called 'off-rolling' i.e. excluding pupils who are likely to fail, but, in context, they remain an important measure of school performance that Ofsted must not downplay.

Apologising for the past - ours is the Age of Self-Flagellation

Do countries need to apologise for the sins of their past? Should the Italian government seek pardon for its imperial Roman legions bashing the Brits to bits? Has the time arrived for the Danes to offer compensation for despoiling our monasteries, killing a load of Anglo-Saxons and making off with the silver? And how about President Macron's fulfilling his moral duty by seeking forgiveness for Norman 'genocide' in Yorkshire - the 'harrying of the North'?

Self-flagellation, it seems, is back with a vengeance. It has become a la mode and, what is more, there is money to be made! Triggered, perhaps, by the 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign and similar movements, St.

John's College, Oxford, is in the vanguard. It recently placed a job advert for someone to work on a research project called 'St John's and the Colonial Past'. Attracting a salary of £39,000 per annum, funded by the college, the job description states:

...this project will explore connections between the college and colonialism, uncovering benefactions to St John's and the alumni who served in the empire. It will also investigate the monuments, objects, pictures, buildings that evoke the colonial past.

http://www.thenationalstudent.com/Student/2019-03-30/oxford_university_s_st_john_s_collge_recruiting_for_academic_to_examine_its_colonial_past.html

This is a college self-flagellation job writ large with lots of virtue-signalling points to be earned in addition to the salary. St. John's appears to be seeking the equivalent of a 17th century witch-finder general. Expose the demonology of our past, seek out the white devils, expose the necromancy that underpins today's university education.

Providing 'proof' of how bad we were, is a key part of the task facing the successful applicant. The underlying intention is to make amends for perceived sins of the college forefathers, in particular, and of the British Empire, in general. Only through admission of shame and guilt can the sins be expiated.

The college has admitted as much in the face of benefactors threatening to withdraw their money in protest against a medieval-style 'decolonisation' hysteria that is sweeping through St. John's and through many 'western' universities around the world, especially in Britain and the United States. The Sunday Telegraph has seen a letter from Professor Maggie Snowling, the president of St. John's, in which she admits as much:

She does not... deny that the project may result in the removal of colonial links. "A minority of cases uncovered may seem more negative, but the research will give us a framework in which to tackle," she says.

(Sunday Telegraph 7th April 2019)

Yes, we are back to Perugia in central Italy in 1259 where an excess of self-mortification in response to harvest failure and famine, kicked off the mania of a full-time flagellant movement that swept across Europe, including England.

It received a boost when the Black Death turned up and a notion circulated that flagellation provided a remission of sin. Virtue signalling has always had its benefits! Eventually, in the mid-14th century, popes condemned the flagellants as heretical and, as a mass movement, it died out rapidly. Public burning of 'offenders' may have helped.

800 years on and here we go again. Ours is the new Age of Atonement! And there are deviant heretics to be sought out by a mob of flagellating academic narcissists, in love with what they mistakenly perceive as their own moral superiority to the rest of humanity. Heading their hit-list of hate figures at Oxford is Regius Professor of theology and non-flagellant, Nigel Biggar.

Biggar has dared to suggest that the British Empire may not have been totally bad. He has argued the need to 'pay careful attention to the historical variety of things that empire can be and work out a more sophisticated way of evaluating them morally.' In other words, we can stop beating ourselves up over empire.

Tame stuff this may seem but it provoked a vicious backlash amongst some self-punishing academics. 170 scholars of empire from around the world, including, the UK, USA, India and South Africa, signed a letter denouncing Biggar's views.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/dec/22/oxford-university-accused-of-backing-apologists-of-british-colonialism>

Across history most people have been either conquerors or conquered. It is too often forgotten that Britain has been in both positions. Who now is aware, for example, that Britain was once ruled by an emperor, Septimius Severus, from the Roman province of Africa and that he died in York (Eboracum) before he could carry out his decision to exterminate the entire population of those living north of Hadrian's Wall?

It is true that monstrous acts were committed under the British Empire as they have been under most, if not all, empires. It is also surely true that most subjected people across the globe in the past would, surely, have

chosen British rule to any alternative. For all of its faults, it was preferable to be ruled by the British Empire than by what was on offer elsewhere.

It right to be regretful of the blots on the record of Britain's imperial rule but it is equally important to be proud that, on balance, the good outweighed the bad. Over 75 per cent of Jamaicans are descendants of slaves and yet, in 2011, nearly 50 years after independence, 60 per cent believed they would be better off as part of the British Empire. Only 17 per cent preferred independence.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2009487/We-stayed-Britain-Shock-poll-reveals-60-Jamaicans-think-theyd-better-colony.html>

The existence of the Commonwealth of Nations, made up of 53 member states, nearly all former British colonies, is testimony to their affinity for an empire that was probably the greatest and most remarkable achievement of any nation in human history.

Our self-flagellating academic elites need to stop apologising for the Empire. It is time to wake up and smell the coffee. The aroma beyond these shores, not least in the United States, is mostly of admiration and affection. We can, after all, be proud of our British identity, whatever our racial, religious, social or cultural background. The time has arrived to stop running ourselves down.

It is an American writer, Bill Bryson, who has best summed up the psychological condition of modern Britain. What he wrote back in 1988 is even truer today than it was then.

What an enigma Britain will seem to historians...

Here is a country that fought and won a noble war, dismantled a mighty empire in a generally benign and enlightened way, created a far seeing welfare state - in short, did nearly everything right - and then spent the rest of the century looking on itself as a chronic failure.

Notes from a Small Island

Home schooling

*A free society intervenes in parental choice with humility.
Requiring children to be properly educated is, however, a hallmark of a civilised society.*

So, proclaims The Times (2.4.19), in a leading article applauding the Government's proposal to require parents to register home-schooled children. The irony of its supposition that children are being 'properly educated' in our state schools and that this is 'a hallmark of a civilised society' appears to have been lost on the newspaper.

Over a third of last summer's Year 6 pupils (10 to 11-year-olds) failed to reach the baseline standard in their SATs tests for literacy and numeracy. At GCSE the grade boundaries have had to be manipulated in order to ensure most candidates achieve a 'good pass'. For mathematics this has ranged from 15 per cent to 20 per cent over the past two years, as even The Times has pointed out.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/gcses-2017-maths-pass-mark-cut-to-15-so-enough-pupils-make-the-grade-jwl8mb9vt>

According to the OECD the UK is up to three years behind the best education systems around the world. A BBC investigation in 2016 showed that the level of GCSE maths in the UK was around the level taught at primary school in South Korea (age 7 to 12). <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-wales-38115296/south-korean-students-finish-welsh-gcse-maths-paper-in-15-minutes>

Employers' organisations are consistently complaining that at least a fifth of school leavers are unemployable. Small wonder, then, that we are so reliant on immigrants.

Meanwhile, the current A-Level pass rate of 97.6% has done nothing to alleviate ignorance. For several years universities have been running remedial catch-up courses for its first years students.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/9420771/Top-universities-forced-to-introduce-remedial-maths-classes.html>

This the reality behind what The Times sees as children being ‘properly educated’ in mainstream, as opposed to home, schooling. This is the educational ‘hallmark’ of what the newspaper claims makes a ‘civilised society’.

Worse, in the wake of the November 2015 Paris terror attacks, The Times Educational Supplement, the TES, published a model classroom lesson. It asked pupils to ‘give three good reasons for joining Islamic State and told children to imagine the world ‘from the point of view of a soldier of the faith.’ ‘Isn't it rather a challenge,’ it added, ‘rather a good way of getting to be important? Rather fun being awarded some female slaves? And you are one of the good guys too!’

Pupils were provided with ISIS propaganda and directed to the ISIS online magazine, to assist them in being ‘properly educated’.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3324681/Outcry-lessons-reasons-joining-ISIS-Plan-uploaded-popular-teaching-website-sparks-fury-claims-sympathises-terrorists.html>

In its support for a home-schooling register The Times is in tune with the prevailing orthodoxies of current educational and sociological thinking. The intention, certainly, is to be helpful to children, to parents and to society as a whole.

Currently, we do not know how many children are being home-educated although the number appears to be growing significantly. A register will provide helpful statistical data; not least, the extent of parental desperation to find an escape route from failures in mainstream provision that I have outlined.

The proposed register is, though, rather more than it seems and it is regrettable that The Times has not spotted what is going on. The BBC, though, has let the cat out of the bag:

Ministers say a register would help councils intervene when standards were poor or if children were at risk.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-47772863>

The register is likely to become the government’s Trojan Horse weapon. It will become the means by which the failed teaching and sociological ideologies of maintained schooling are foisted on to home schoolers via local authority monitoring.

‘You are not teaching your child in line with best practice,’ will be reprimand of the home-schooling inspector. Either do as we say or we will serve a ‘child in danger’ order on you. Thus, the home-schooling escape route from low standards and PC brain-washing will be cut off.

There may be a need for a home-schooling register but there is an equal need for safeguards against educational ‘enforcers’ bullying parents into conformity with what is supposed to good for their children.

To adapt and paraphrase the late US President, Ronald Reagan, for home-schoolers the twelve most terrifying words in the English language will soon be: ‘I am the home-schooling inspector and I am here to help.’

How sad that The Times, a respected and once illustrious newspaper, can no longer recognise the threat to family life and a sound education posed by that knock on the door.

Pupils’ climate change strike

School’s out! At least, it was on Friday afternoon in mid-February and in mid-March for many pupils up and down the country. They were staging a strike under the banner of:

UK YOUTH STRIKE 4 CLIMATE

It is a product of an international green movement to encourage children to protest against ‘climate change’.

The initiative was started last August in Sweden by Greta Thunberg who, at the time, was fifteen and three-quarters years old. During the Swedish general election campaign at the time she skipped school in order to sit on the steps of the parliament building displaying a sign stating Skolstrjk för klimatat (school strike for the climate). Since the election she has set aside each Friday to continue her ‘strike’.

I must confess that I rather admire Greta. Passionate and highly intelligent she is a great advert for Asperger syndrome and for the need to protect our environment. The huge amount of publicity that she has generated for her cause provided her with a platform at the recent World Economic Forum in Davos:

<https://youtu.be/zrF1THd4bUM>

If my thirty-five years teaching children count for anything, I believe that Greta's actions constitute more than simple attention-seeking. Sadly, though, her cause is being hijacked and, increasingly, she is becoming a pawn in the hands of politically-motivated agitators and extremists.

What could be more fortuitous for those seeking social revolution than the arrival on the scene of a green version of Joan of Arc? With kids around the world taking to the streets a bandwagon has started to roll. We should be concerned about who is jumping on board.

Unsurprisingly, at the head of queue has been the teaching profession. Such is the enthusiasm in many quarters for what is about to happen that the left-leaning Daily Mirror was happy to quote the right-leaning Daily Express as its source of information:

But when asked about the mass day of action, called UK Youth Strike 4 Climate, the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) said "older pupils making informed decisions... needs to be applauded," reports The Sunday Express.

A spokesman added: "Society makes leaps forward when people are prepared to take action. Schools encourage students to develop a wider understanding of the world around them. A day of activity like this could be an important and valuable life experience."

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/plans-thousands-pupils-strike-applauded-13979399>

The Guardian chipped in with this revelation:

One would-be striker, Anna Taylor, 17, from north London, said her school had given her "*mixed messages*".

"I chucked up a notice - 'school strike in a few weeks' - on the noticeboard in the common room and they wiped it off, said 'you can't actively publicise it in schools' and 'we'll give you an unauthorised absence and detention if you strike', but then they said 'you can spread it by word of mouth and we do support your cause'."

How exciting it all is, to be sure! What we have here is a new manifestation of the ill-fated Children's Crusade (1212). It, too, sprang out of international hysteria akin to that surrounding the current debate on climate change. It, too, was hijacked but, so far as we can construct a narrative, ended in the exploitation and enslavement of the children.

Roll up! Roll up! Join the climate change bandwagon 'strike'! This is the best fairground entertainment since the one attended by Pinocchio. Climb aboard, kids, and get time off school as your reward! Are really concerned about climate change? Do you know lots about it or do you just want a laff? Or perhaps you just wish to follow Jeremy's Pied Piper's tune.

We cater for each and every child, including the clueless, the illiterate and those just wanting a 'laff' and a chance to miss double-Maths. Knowledge and understanding may be 'out' but the 'climate change' bandwagon will most certainly take you where you wish to go and where we wish to take you.

Vive la revolution!

Knowledge & Delight

A personal view by Will Orr-Ewing
Founder and Director of Keystone Tutors

I have been reading an essay by the educationalist Charlotte Mason (1842-1923) and came across this arresting passage:

“We launch children upon too arid and confined a life. Personal delight and joy in living is a chief object of education... It is for their own sakes that children should get knowledge. The power to take a generous view of men and their motives, to see where the greatness of a given character lies, to have one's judgment of a present event illustrated and corrected by historic and literary parallels...these are admirable assets within the power of every one according to the measure of his mind. And these are not the only gains which knowledge affords. The person who can live upon his own intellectual resources and never know a dull hour (though anxious and sad hours will come) is indeed enviable in these days of intellectual inanition, when we depend upon spectacular entertainments pour passer le temps.”

I always had it as an essential part of a good education, but can knowledge really lead to “personal delight and joy in living”?

I pondered the question further on various walks around Oxford, London and the countryside over the Christmas holidays. These were all ‘delightful’ (mostly thanks to Izzy) but could they have been more so? Those beautiful windows along the Meadow Building of Christ Church...when were they built? I think they’re Gothic.. what exactly is Gothic? Why was it chosen?

That melodic song outside my window in the morning... I’m sure it’s a robin, but does it sing all year and always in that sweet tone? What does its song presage? That sign for Queen Caroline Street — we had a queen called Caroline?? Who was she and why is there a street in Hammersmith named after her? And so on.

As Charlotte Mason suggests, had I been sad or anxious it is unlikely such knowledge alone would have restored me to good humour and yet, again, might it not have helped in part? It seems to me that knowledge of the world takes us out of our heads and help us to engage with it - every part of it, from its history to its science. Mason believed that a child has “natural relations with a vast number of things and thoughts”; she quoted Wordsworth’s line to illustrate how children come into the world already in relationship with it...

Those first-born affinities That fit our new existence to existing things.

The sort of knowledge Mason commends to us is a rich and enriching knowledge that helps to vitalise the world. An education that prioritised this sort of knowledge would help children feel at home in the world - part of a web of allusion and meaning. I give a few further examples of what I mean at the end of the piece.

Alas, in many schools today, knowledge is never described in such terms. It tends to be served up merely as a means to an end - usually in order to pass an exam. This instrumentalist view of knowledge infects both teachers and the children themselves, who in my experience too often have their natural curiosity (what Mason calls “knowledge hunger”) smothered by their schooling such that they can be heard to ask of a lesson that dismal question: “Is this on the syllabus?”

When knowledge is so presented, is it any wonder that so many children display the “intellectual inanition” that Mason was worried about more than a century ago? I’d go further and wager that at least some of the terrible increase in problems around teenage mental health could be redressed by a new emphasis on knowledge - not for other ends but for its own delightful and joyful sake.

--Addendum--

You’ll have very different ideas I’m sure, but I jotted down a list of just a fraction of what (besides how to read, write and do basic arithmetic of course) I would love our child to know by the time he or she leaves primary school aged 11. By know, I do not mean ‘write in answer to an exam question’. I mean that s/he would have assimilated it enough that s/he could tell me the following, out loud or written down.

Working in education, I know how few 11 year olds would be able to do this, whether attending private or state schools, urban or rural:

- ... a brief summary of the life of at least one of these pivotal Wills: William of Orange, William the Conqueror, William Pitt or William Wilberforce
- ... a scientific discovery or invention that most interests you
- ... the difference between a robin’s song and a blackbird’s

- ... the story of a Shakespeare play you enjoy
- ... a description of some of your favourite British wild flowers.
- ... about one of your favourite paintings hanging in the National Gallery
- ... about the life and music of Bach, Beethoven or Mozart
- ... the story of Daniel in the Lion's Den
- ... a brief summary of the life of Odysseus
- ... what you know of Wordsworth, Coleridge or Tennyson - or quote 2-4 lines of poetry from memory
- ... what you would see approaching London Westwards from the sea by the Thames
- ... how many kinds of bees are there in a hive? What work does each do? Tell how they build the comb.

Here is how a 10-year-old studying in one of Charlotte Mason's schools in the early 20th C answered the final question, which goes some way to show the sort of knowledge, engagement and joy I have sought to argue for above:

“Three kinds. The drones or males, the workers or females, and the queen bee. The drone is fat, the queen is long and thin, the workers are small and slim. The queen bee lays the eggs, the worker bee brings the honey in and makes the cell, and the drones wait to be fed. On a summer's day you see something hanging on a tree like a plum pudding, this is a swarm of bees. You will soon see someone come up with a hive, turn it upside down, shake the bough gently, and they will fall in. They will put some clean calico quickly over the bottom of the hive and turn it back over on a bench. The bees first close up every little hole in the hive with wax, then they hang on to the roof, clinging on to one another by their legs. Then one comes away and scrapes some wax from under its body, and bites it in its mouth until it is pulled out like ribbon, this she plasters on the roof of the hive, then she flies out to get honey, and comes home to digest it, hanging from the roof, and in 24 hours this digested honey turns to wax, then she goes through the same process again. Next, the nursing bees come and poke their heads into this wax, bite the wax away (20 bees do this before one hole is ready to make a cell). Other bees are working on the other side at the same time. Each cell is made six-sided, so as to take up the least wax and the smallest space. When the cells are made the bees come in with honey in their honey-bag or first stomach; they can easily pass the honey back through their mouths into the cells. It takes many bees to fill one cell, so they are hard at work.”

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“My mind seems to have become a sort of machine out of which laws can be grinded the general laws from large amounts of facts. If I had to live my life again, I would have made a rule to listen to some music or read some poetry at least once a week. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect and more probably to the moral character by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.”

(Charles Darwin)

No Comment

What if school leaders and teachers decided, collectively, to stop the madness of the current accountability system in England by acting collectively to refuse to participate in Ofsted inspections?

Mary Bousted, joint-general secretary of the NEU teaching union, TES 10.4.19

An infant school has employed a nappy changer because some of its pupils have not been toilet-trained...

The Independent 10.4.19

Anyone who wants mass higher education and an end to tuition fees should be patient and keep schtum until higher education has expanded so much it becomes near universal.

Nick Hillman, ex-government special adviser, The Guardian 12.3.19

Four pupils have apparently 'been excluded' from a Somerset school for protesting against new unisex toilets with surveillance cameras. Children have been disciplined for damaging the cameras placed in new same sex toilets at Bucklers Mead Academy in Yeovil...
SomersetLive.co.uk 22.3.19

Struggling to read and write was not enough to stop a teacher getting a job at a top secondary school. Faisal Ahmed was given the green light by elite teacher training program TeachFirst despite having 'extreme difficulty with handwriting', problems with reading and understanding 'written tests'.
Daily Mail 8.4.19

Young people told the Committee that sexual harassment has become a normal part of school life...
www.parliament.uk