

Friday 10 December 2021

## Headlines

*Nativities were fabulous. Look out for the Circular. Christmas hasn't been cancelled.*

*School Carol Service on the last day of term is going ahead. Parents are welcome, but please wear masks. Details to follow.*

*Y7+ assessments for new joiners in September 2022 will be held on our first week back on Thursday 13 January. Share your love of SPCS as widely as you can and do encourage your friends to get in touch.*

Dear Everyone

As the year comes to an end, newspapers start to publish lists of things. The *FT Weekend's* panoply of *Women of 2021* came as no surprise and some high delight. What marks them out? Altruism, a commitment to social justice and democracy, honesty in how they operate and a demand for change and saving the world from the ravages of mostly human created problems.

Curious, I Googled Men of 2021. Top hits: Hottest Men of 2021, Sexiest Man Alive, 10 Most Handsome Men in the World (try it). This isn't amusing, the pressure on young men to be body beautiful is an unwelcome phenomenon that is crippling boys as much as it has always done for girls. Added to that, for all the emancipation of women, the sexualisation of young people is significantly more prevalent than it ever was when I was growing up, and is now available 24/7 on their smart phones.

My heart sinks.

Some time ago, when I was Head of Year 9 in a senior school, I hosted a discussion with a good friend who is, among many other things, an organisational psychologist, about why we need women on the boards of companies. We presented and engaged in discussion with the 100 or so 13 year-old boys and girls in the cavernous school hall. The boys were much more vocal than the girls, sometimes defensive but also curious about what this was all about. There is empirical evidence that shows that companies with a more equal gender balance in leadership fair better. Everyone wins.

But in practice that is not easy. We all know that women more often shoulder the burden of child-care, and as schools we reinforce this. When there is a concern, it's generally mum we call. Our systems in the UK are not well suited to equity in this domain and while there is change afoot, at least in social attitudes in some areas of society, the underlying mechanics make it hard. Paternity leave is not the same as maternity leave, the shared parental leave scheme is flawed, and an examination of unequal pay is still failing to resolve the problem. One of our parents has written a quite brilliant analysis of gender pay gap reporting and how it is being manipulated.

This new age of hybrid working is making it more feasible for men, especially those working in the knowledge economy, to spend more time with their children, but I wonder how widespread this has become. The number of dads that drop children at SPCS is really lovely to see, but I suspect we're an outlier.

The boy/girl question is a conundrum, and at its simplest is paradoxical: homogenous in aim, while celebratory of difference, and it certainly isn't binary. Not all boys are destined to be leaders, and not all girls want to be, either (*define leadership* – a whole other discussion). We need to have *all* people in the room to talk this out, not separate them or cancel different points of view.

It is always dangerous to make generalisations, yet working in schools for almost 15 years I see patterns: boys, but not all, tend to be more overtly competitive in their free unstructured time in the playground, and girls, but not all, tend towards social games. Boys, but not all, are more likely to take the shortest and least effortful route in their school-work, and girls, but not all, are more prone to maladaptive perfectionism. Boys, but not all, will fall out and make up with their friends quickly, sometimes quite physically, while girls, but not all, can let their animus fester for weeks. Is this socialisation from birth, or some innate pattern?

I know we have parents that work in neuroscience and I'd be interested to know more. In the meantime, here is a magazine article that aims to weave between the nature/nurture question and challenge assumptions.

<https://www.parents.com/toddlers-preschoolers/development/behavioral/what-science-really-says-about-boys-and-girls/>

Elsewhere, young men's attitudes about women are being tested, and are, according to Hope not Hate's survey, slipping too easily in the wrong direction as a consequence of a growing far-right ideology, while the Fawcett Society notes that more young men are identifying as feminists. The World Health Organisation finds that men's health is weaker in more gender unequal societies. A summary of a number of studies can be found here:

<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/half-of-young-men-oppose-feminism-uk/>

Some readers will look at all this and sigh, given there is so much missing in this account and, surely, the conversation has moved on. Only slowly it seems, and sometimes backwards.

Instead of music this week, here's one of Paula Rego's paintings, *Dancing Ostriches from Disney's 'Fantasia'* (1995). Paula features in the *FT Weekend's Women of 2021*



Have a good weekend, and prepare for the final day-school week of Christmas fun as we head towards the end of term. How did that happen?

Best wishes

Simon