

Friday 7 October 2022

Dear Everyone

I could eat haggis for breakfast every day. The last time I was in Edinburgh, possibly the friendliest and most hospitable city I know, I was playing the character of Basil Spears, a dysfunctional English teacher in David Hare's play *Southdowns*. A late addition to his series of plays about the British establishment, *Southdowns* is based on Hare's experience as a child at Lancing College and still tells us something about the nature of education.

I'm here in Edinburgh for the annual conference of Prep school heads, and this year we have joined up with senior school Heads. Conferences are as much about the conversations had in the tea break as it is about the speakers and presentations, and it has been invaluable to share time with the heads of senior schools. Many of them are well known to us in any case. Later this academic year, we will host a senior school event where we will be inviting senior schools to come and talk to you directly. Watch this space.

Jotting down notes, the various speakers are well versed in the sound bite and my notebook is a litter of half sentences which, when seen together make some sort of coherent sense. The co-founder of *Netflix*, Mark Randolph encourages us all to take risks, despite the constraints that surround us. I rather liked his claim that the five-year plan is not worth the effort. I think we can all agree that whatever we thought the world would look like today, it is not the climate we might have predicted even a couple of weeks ago.

Mona Siddiqui berates, quite rightly in my view, that education has become increasingly focused on knowledge towards the workplace. An instrumentalist approach that I had been discussing earlier in the week at the City of London's Education Conference focused on social mobility.

My favourite sound bite is this: information vs formation. Make of that what you will.

In Edinburgh I was asked to be part of a panel discussion around the 11+/13+ transfers, and all agreed that the system of moving from Prep to Senior is unfit for young people. And by extension is a source of needless anxiety for parents. The reality is that schools are competing with and against each other for talent, and until the unbridled free-market model of the trade in children is arrested, or at least is focused on the needs of the child rather than the needs of the institution, I fear that there is little hope to make the system properly child centred. We can at least try to do that at a local level.

There is hope, however, as the Independent Schools Examination Board (ISEB) continues to invest in ways to showcase children for who they are as their best selves. As ever, the dialogue between Prep and Senior schools continues to be paramount. Yet there is a new challenge to this open communication. GDPR regulation now prevents senior schools from sharing assessment outcomes with prep schools, so we are now entirely dependent on parents to communicate with us on their interactions with senior schools. Please keep us informed! In this way we can help you more easily.

On Monday of this week, the City of London hosted a whole day conference focused around improving social mobility. London has a distinct characteristic in the world of work. A recent report published by the Mayors Fund for London, finds that despite the astonishing levels of opportunity in London, only 17% of London's professional jobs are occupied by people from lower income backgrounds, compared to 30% nationally. The page I find most interesting as an educationalist is page 20, which has an infographic about social mobility attributes by age and stage. You can read the report here:

https://www.mayorsfundforlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/One-City-Two-Worlds_Londons-social-mobility-puzzle-February-2020-spreads-.pdf

In a round table discussion at the City conference, I commented on the poverty of seeing education as instrumentalist towards the work place, yet so much of our system is geared in this direction. There clearly is a balance to be had, and indeed the government's own statutory guidance on careers education notes that there has been an imbalance in the kinds of advice given to young people, favouring for too long an academic route at the expense of exposing young people to technical choices. You can see the guidance here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1103188/Careers_statutory_guidance_September_2022.pdf

For all that, children must also be allowed to be children, to explore, create, be curious, and all those things that we hold dear. The advantages our children at St Paul's Cathedral School already have is the exposure to a great many ideas, from the arts and sciences, to sport and academia. Simple matters of eating together, reading for leisure, experiencing life beyond school work and having conversations hold far more value than cramming another test paper at home.

If you are interested in making a wider difference to social mobility, the City is working towards a much more coherent strategy, and you can help. Even in small ways by opening up your place of work to schools if you haven't already, or by becoming a governor in one of the many excellent state-maintained schools in London. What you can do will make a real difference. It can often be one conversation with one young person that opens up a world of possibilities and change lives. The thing is, you won't know which conversation that was, so keep encouraging everyone.

We're in this together.

Good luck next week to the Y7&8s as they whizz off for a week of language immersion in France.

Best wishes

Simon

