

Throw off dead hand of the state and live!

Fear and mistrust thrive in our exam factory system, sucking the individuality out of pupils and teachers. **Anthony Seldon** sees salvation in schools liberated from government, free to develop their children's aptitudes

Education should be designed to open out all the potentiality that is latent within each human being. Schools, the principal facilitator of this process, should be places of delight; instead they are shunned and marginalised by many children. The teaching profession should attract those with the best degrees and highest moral qualities; instead, it finds it hard to attract and then retain top graduates. Parents should feel boundlessly grateful to schools for all that they do for their children, and should be eager to be involved: instead, many take schools for granted, and are uncooperative and evasive. Leading schools should be the apex of all professions, with the opportunity to shape thousands of minds, including teachers and parents as well as children: but instead many headteacher posts

are left open. What is going wrong? Why is education so often a disillusioning experience for teachers and, sadly, for students at school, as well as university?

The chief culprit is government, with its reduction of education to the passing of exams, with schools evaluated wholly on the basis of their exam and league-table success. In this diminished world, teaching all too often becomes instruction, with creativity and individuality sucked out of the system. Students feel that education is something done to them, not for them. Parents see schools principally interested in the exam successes they can extract out of their children, rather than the development of them as human beings. Heads live like football managers, fearful of the next visit by inspectors, and August's crop of exam results. It is a regime driven not by delight but by fear, motivated not by trust but by mistrust.

Schools need to be freed up from the dead hand of government, and should be left (unless they show themselves to be unworthy of it) to be run substantially as the head, the students, the parents wish. The dull and restricting hand of central government, en-

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forced by the bloodless Ofsted, is choking our schools, much as Charles Dickens foresaw in *Hard Times*. The most exciting minds in education are not to be found in the corridors of the Department for Children, Schools and Families, exam boards or Ofsted, but in schools. If the grey bureaucrats were any good, they would be in the classroom or running schools, rather than telling other people how to do their job, and instructing them how and what they are to teach. Schools need to be reclaimed by teachers themselves.

We can do this much better. Why is it that children in the developing world, in Africa, Sri Lanka and South America, often love the experience of being in school, and feel enormous pride in belonging to one, even if their schools have little or nothing in the way of material provisions? Why are parents so full of gratitude that their children are in these institutions, and why do they treat teachers with respect and even reverence? Why has this human spirit and reverence for education been lost when we have so much material wealth? Has a hundred years of research into schools by university departments taught us anything of enduring value about how to develop young minds?

Children are naturally creative. Schools do not have to teach them to be creative; they must merely stop squeezing it out of them. A creative spark is a child’s individuality; it is what makes that child unique. That is why the five creative arts – music, dance, drama, visual art and creative writing – should lie at the very heart of the curriculum, and should not be some bolt-on for those who show talent (which is of-

ten synonymous with those who have been encouraged by their parents). Creativity is sucked out of children by lessons that teach the young that there is one right answer, which must be expressed in a certain way to gain marks in public exams. Such learning has nothing to do with education or the academic subject purporting to be taught. It is utterly degrading that government continues to exert an ever tighter stranglehold in its desire to dominate schools and to dictate what is to be taught.

Howard Gardner, the Harvard professor, was an early developer of the thesis that human beings do not possess merely one form of intelligence, which is intellectual, but rather possess multiple intelligences. His writing directly challenged the work of those like Hans Eysenck and others who elevated ‘IQ’ to all-governing proportions, culminating in the belief that the only valid form of measuring human beings was by ‘intelligence tests’, based on the notion that one is born with an intelligence level which is fixed for life. Sadly, many academics at universities have chosen to belittle the work of Gardner. Some highlight issues of semantics or question his methodology, such as John White, while traditionalists such as the University of Berkeley’s Arthur Jensen continue to see intelligence as genetic. Those interested in this debate should read ‘Howard Gardner Under Fire’ edited by Jeffrey Schaler.

As someone who runs a school, I am interested in the debate, but am not deflected one iota from my belief that Gardner is essentially right. My job is not to dabble in academic debates about educational psychology; it is rather to teach the young and develop them in all their fullness. Whereas some of Gardner’s assertions can certainly be criticised, such as his choice of the different form of intelligences, his basic argument is absolutely correct: there are many different forms of intelligence possessed by each human being, and education should be giving more weight to them.

At Wellington College, we have developed our own model of ‘eight aptitudes’, based on a mixture of Gardner and our own experience of bringing up the young.

We believe that while students are with us, it is our job to develop all eight of these aptitudes, in the belief that what we do not help flower by the age of 18 is unlikely to be developed in later life. The aptitudes fall into four pairs: the logical and linguistic; the creative and physical; the moral and the spiritual; and the personal and the social. We hold that all are equally valid. Our students, at the start of each year, fill in a form which lists all eight of these aptitudes, and they write down how they will be developing themselves in each of these areas, which they then discuss with their tutor. At the end of each year they assess their own progress, again in discussion with their tutor, so they, and the school, can form a clear impression of how much progress they have made. Reports home are based on progress in all eight areas. When they leave, they are presented with a certificate at their graduation service which lists all they have achieved in all these eight domains.

This holistic approach is as popular with parents as it is with teachers. It visibly shows that we are not letting ourselves become an exam factory, and are taking our responsibilities for education very seriously. One might, perhaps, have expected examination passes to decline in the five years since we adopted this approach, because of less focus on academic results. In fact, our A and B passes at A-level have risen from 64 per cent in 2004 to 92 per cent in 2009, making us one of the most improved schools for A-level passes in Britain.

Allied to the eight-aptitude approach is our focus

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on well-being and the teaching of happiness, another strongly contested area by university academics such as Carol Craig, as well as by writers such as Frank Furedi and Barbara Ehrenreich in her recent *Smile or Die*. The critics, as with multiple intelligences, have valid points to make, but make no impression on my determination that every child should be taught about well-being and happiness. The chief but by no means only influence here is the American academic Martin Seligman from Pennsylvania University, above all in his works like *Learned Optimism* (1991), and *Authentic Happiness* (2002).

At Wellington we have developed our own model which we are again keen should become widespread across the education system. At its heart is the learning by each child to take responsibility for decisions affecting their bodies, minds and emotions. They learn how to find harmony within themselves and between themselves and others. The basis of our own course is about relationships, not only with oneself and with others, but also with technology and with one’s environment. Its essence is reflective, where the students learn to make their own decisions about their lives, rather than being told what to do and think. We have found the whole approach to be enormously popular again with students and with parents, and it has contributed to an enormously positive atmosphere in the school, in which pride in achievement is palpable.

Education has to be reclaimed from government, which can no longer be trusted to drive it. State-run education has achieved much, but the engine has run out of steam, just as steam-powered locomotives did in the 20th century.

We are in a new era, and one that needs to engage the hearts and minds of teaching professionals, parents and children. This is not an impossible dream. Many state and independent schools are already cutting loose from the dead hand of the exam factory: they are the harbingers of the future. Schools should be there to educate young people not to live half lives, but to live full lives. No change in society is more important than this.