

# Grateful for Your Suggestions

## — answers to your queries

Thank you for your recent letter outlining policy ideas and priorities in the nation's education system since 1 May 1997. My colleagues and I are grateful for your helpful suggestions, and intend to implement them as soon as possible.

We have some queries, however, and hope that you can please clarify your ideas in order to assist us further. There are seven main topics on which we would value your advice. For convenience we itemise them below in note form.

### **1 School uniform and livery to be worn by teachers**

We like the designs which you submitted, but are not clear whether you are recommending rank to be shown both on the sleeves and on the lapels, and whether badges reflecting qualifications and inservice courses attended should be on both sleeves or one only.

We also like the designs you submitted for medals and campaign ribbons, but were uncertain about some of the details in your colour-coding scheme. Some of my colleagues thought that your proposals for showing previous service in above-average or below-average schools, as objectively measured by national league tables, might be a trifle complicated for less able pupils to understand.

(I should like to take this opportunity, by the way, to stress that my colleagues and I are passionately committed to promoting high standards, quality excellence and above-average access and performance for all pupils.)

### **2 Teacher retention**

We like your suggestions for ROTPLA, Raising the Teaching Profession Leaving Age, and agree there should be widespread participatory, interactive and collaborative public consultation on whether the new retirement age for teachers should be 75 or 80.

Could you please give us further information on the research you have done which suggests that approximately 15,000 teachers, when they hear of the proposals, will have heart attacks and drop down dead? As you may know, a distinguished educational researcher, Mr Christopher Woodhead, has discovered that 15,000 teachers in this country are incompetent. My colleagues and I would be *extremely* interested to know to what extent you think these may be the same 15,000.

### **3 School improvement and underclass control**

You estimate that 25 per cent of the population is surplus to requirements. Our own estimate is that the figure is closer to 30 per cent. Either way we agree that the term 'underclass' describes this section of the population with helpful clarity and that the existence of so many surplus children poses special challenges for the education service.

Your idea of taking underclass children out of schools and containing them in Pupil Reformation Units seems basically sound, and we should like further details on logistics. The acronym 'PRU', however, is not feasible, since this term is already in use for a different purpose. 'PRC' is possible, since we are ending Premature Retirement Contracts (*vide supra*), and the concept of Pupil Reformation *Camp* is in any case preferable.

Your suggestion that ships moored off the coast could be used for school improvement purposes, by accommodating pupils who are surplus to the requirements of mainstream schools, is of great interest to us. Do please send further details about costs and value for money.

### **4 Aims of education and expansion of key stages**

We accept your suggestion that teaching and learning at each key stage should be governed by the same specification of generic educational aims, and that the aim at each stage should be simply stated as: 'to prepare pupils for the end of key stage tests'.

The expansion of the key stage scheme, along the lines you propose, will be a matter of great priority for us. There is fuller information in the enclosed paper.

Briefly, this is what is proposed. There will be three further key stages after key stage four, to be known, not terribly imaginatively, as key stages five, six and seven. Seven is already sometimes referred to by Ofsted as the PD stage. Normally, in educational circles, the abbreviation PD stands for "post-Dearing". In this instance, however, it is pre-death.

The scheme is also to be expanded downwards. Key stage minus one is for nursery schools, to prepare pupils for baseline assessment before entry to infant schools, and key stage minus two will run from birth to nursery school. It will culminate in the award of a CPVE — Certificate in Pre-Voucher Education.

Key stage minus three will last almost exactly nine months, and will involve, both for instruction and for monitoring and evaluation, the use of electronic tagging. Politicians and theorists are currently discussing whether key stage minus four should be introduced, the stage immediately before conception, but are currently unable to agree how long this stage typically lasts.

## **5 Classroom-level private sector partnerships**

My colleagues and I are passionately committed, as I'm sure you are aware, to raising the morale of the teaching profession and enhancing the esteem in which teachers are held by the general public. To this end, we like your idea of re-naming all teachers as Cost Centre Managers, and requiring each teacher to be responsible for raising sponsorship funds from the private sector to finance his or her own salary, and the cost of textbooks and chalk.

## **6 Management development programmes for headteachers**

Your ideas are excellent. Please send details about your innovative work.

I had written about two programmes which have recently been trialled. The one is known as FASH, an acronym which means For Ambitious Secondary Heads, and the other as FAPH, For Ambitious Primary Heads.

I'd just like to mention at this point how sad I find it that some people nowadays are terribly negative and cynical. You may not believe this, but when they heard these terms, FASH and FAPH, one person thought they were abbreviations for, respectively, Fascist and Faffing About.

Really, isn't it sad, when people just mock and criticise and don't suggest anything constructive themselves? Postmodernism has a lot to answer for, if you ask me. Just the other day, I was cycling through the early morning mist on my way to Holy Communion — it's something which we C1s and C2s do quite often, in fact it's the reason we have bicycles — and I suddenly thought, postmodernism has a lot to answer for. And cultural relativism. Don't talk to me about cultural relativism. And as for ethical relativism, words fail me, no really.

Anyway, the point about both FASH and FAPH is that they are soundly based on schools effectiveness research and on close examination of successful school improvement measures.

The advice to ambitious headteachers goes like this. First, administer a battery of tests to your intake. Choose tests which were standardised on a population markedly different from the population of your school, and which are culturally irrelevant or (ideally) nonsensical for large numbers of your pupils. The archetypal item in all good tests is this: 'Which is the odd one out in the following list - average, normal, acceptable, minority?'

You may have at your school, I tell headteachers, some teachers who are quite humane, generous, good-natured and child-centred. That's all right, I try to reassure them, such staff have their uses.

But keep them well away from the testing. Instead, put in charge of the testing your most short-tempered, ill-mannered and child-unfriendly staff, and

administer the tests at a time of day (late morning is particularly suitable) when both staff and pupils are at their most fragile and uncomfortable. Mark the tests with great rigour.

Through these various ways you will ensure that the profile of your intake is beautifully depressed when compared with national norms. You will have a splendid baseline in consequence from which to proceed. ('Baseline': the line between deserving pupils, those who will succeed at your school, and base pupils, the villains who are going to fail and who must not be allowed to contaminate the others, or contaminate your own ambitions to be known as a successful headteacher.)

Then, over the next few years, remove as many low-attaining, base and villainous pupils as possible, for example by expelling them (this will involve first provoking them into aggressive behaviour — not at all difficult, as you and some of your staff no doubt already know), or by persuading their parents to take them elsewhere.

Replace the pupils you get rid of with high-attainers, those who deserve to achieve. Your results in due course ('outcomes') will show that you have added phenomenal value to your intake, that your school therefore is 'effective', and that you yourself deserve now to move to a really good and influential job as an inspector or government adviser.

## **7 Bedtime stories and narrative assumptions**

We welcome your suggestion that the government should send the text of an approved bedtime story by email to each school each day, and that pupils should take print-outs home to their parents for use later in the day. We agree, of course, that the stories should be carefully written but are not entirely confident that we understand the distinctions you draw between omniscient, permissive and self-referential narrative styles, or between original sin and original blessing.

If your essential point is that children should be taught by bedtime stories each evening that they themselves are ignorant, uncivilised and evil, and that narrators should never, never, never draw attention to their own storytelling tricks and techniques, since to do so would be to foster politically correct postmodernism and cultural and ethical relativism, then most certainly we agree with you.

### **Source**

This text was read out at a conference of the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) in 1997 at the University of York. The date of the conference was Tuesday 1 April (note the date!), and the occasion was the conference's opening address. The full text of the address, entitled 'Some Day', can be read at <https://www.patience-and-passion.org/pdfs/Some%20Day.pdf>.