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Chapter 1

Causes for concern

I didn't understand what school was for. A lot of the teachers thought I was thick. I remember the head teacher saying I'd never make anything of myself in front of the whole school. My ability to learn in school had been pretty much crushed out of me quite young. I still feel scared when I hear that word, 'thick'.

Jack Dee, comedian

What we want for our children

We talk to lots of people about schools – teachers, parents, children and many others – and we think we have a shrewd idea about what is on people's minds. So here is what we are assuming about you, our readers. We know that you want the best for your children – your own and the ones you may teach. We think that means, roughly, that you want them to be happy, to lead lives that are rich and fulfilling, to grow up to be kind and loving partners and loyal friends, and to be free from poverty and fear. We assume this means having a job that is satisfying and makes a decent living. We guess you don't want your children to be as rich as Croesus if that brings with it being miserable, greedy or anxious.

Educating Ruby

We also suspect that you did not decide to have a child so that they could contribute to the economic prosperity of the country and become 'productive members of a world-class workforce'. We don't imagine that you think about your son or daughter, or the children you teach, as if they were pawns in a national economic policy or in a sociological quest for equity or upward mobility. (We reckon that you know people, as we do, who have real doubts about the idea that the more you make and spend the happier you will be, and who may even have down-sized in order to live in a way that feels more worthwhile or morally satisfying. There are plenty of happy plumbers with good degrees these days.)

And we assume that you would like your child's school to support you in those general aims. The aims of school do have to be general because we just can't know what kind of work and lifestyle will 'deliver' that quality of life for any individual. Children's lives will take many twists and turns, as yours and ours have, and whether they turn out to be accountants in Auckland, teachers in Namibia or shepherdesses in Yorkshire, we will want them to have the same general qualities of cheerfulness, kindness, open-mindedness and fulfilment, won't we? (Please insert your own favourite words to describe those deepest wishes for your children here.)

We suspect that you might still be touched, as we are, by these words on children from Khalil Gibran's book *The Prophet* (much quoted though they may be):

Your children are not *your* children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

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You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them,
But seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday.¹

If your household is full of ‘digital natives’, doing all kinds of wonderful and scary things on social and digital media – or you have ever watched a TV show called *Outnumbered* – you will be in no doubt that “their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow”! A mutual friend of ours was telling us, just the other day, about a conversation with his granddaughter, Edie, who is 12. She was doing something with her mobile phone and Martin asked her what it was. She showed him the app she had discovered for learning Japanese, which she had decided she would teach herself. Often in bed at night she would be listening and practising quietly, under the bed-clothes. Her parents hadn’t a clue what she was up to – she had not felt the need to tell them – and her teachers, earnestly trying to get her to write small essays on ‘the functions of the computer mouse’, certainly had no idea. Will Edie be working in the Tokyo branch of Ernst & Young in 15 years’ time? Who knows.

We make the assumption that you are doing your best to help your children get ready for whatever comes along, both at home and at school, and preferably both together. If you have children of your own at school, we assume you would like the school to be your partner in this crucial enterprise.

¹ Khalil Gibran, On Children, in *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923).

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And if you are a teacher, we assume that you take immense pride in the amazing job you have: helping to launch the lives of hundreds of children in the best way you know how. We are all angling the launch pad, so to speak, so that – whatever they are going to be – they get the best possible send-off. Whether you are helping little ones learn how to tell the time and ‘play nicely’, or bright 17-year-olds to grapple with A level English or the International Baccalaureate’s theory of knowledge module, we’ll assume you don’t want to take your eye off that fundamental intention of getting them ready for life. What could possibly be a more fulfilling way of earning a living?

All is not well

However, we are also going to imagine that you, like us, have some serious misgivings about what is actually happening in schools. In the boxes scattered throughout the next few pages, and later in the book, there are some stories and quotations from children, their parents and teachers. We’ve put them there to see if you share some of the same feelings and experiences. The schools and the people we talked to are all real but, in most cases, we’ve changed or removed their names to protect their anonymity.

I’d loved my primary school, but at St Bede’s Comprehensive School I felt depressed and scared, like a wild animal in a cage. I felt empty inside. I was ill once for two weeks, I felt wiped out and tired; but mentally I felt happy because of not being at school. When I returned, however, after just one day I came home and felt restless, confused, my mind couldn’t focus on one thing at a time. I felt unsettled and one tiny thing would make me flip into tears.

If ever the teacher was challenged by a pupil about what they said, the pupil would get told off. I got told off for

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telling the teacher that a boy was teasing me by saying he liked to kill animals, when we were on the subject of animal cruelty. She said to me, “Now that was a *stupid* thing to say wasn’t it?” – what I’d said, not the boy. I looked at her – why in the world would that be stupid? I raised my hand again. I wanted to say something that sounded strong. But when she said, “Have you got something *sensible* to say now?” I felt the gaze of all my classmates on my back, and I lost my nerve as tears filled my eyes and clogged my throat. “No,” I said.

I felt resentful but couldn’t bring myself to become a rebel. So I became quiet and my normal self was glazed over by someone different – who I didn’t like. There was no room at St Bede’s for someone different like me. And I felt myself turning into some fashion freak like everyone else. I hated it because keeping my feelings to myself is very hard. Because normally they’re very strong. I was always hiding myself while I battled through the day.

I had to let my feelings out, but I couldn’t wait to tell mum at the end of the day, so I turned to my friend Leanne who was good at talking about sensitive subjects. When I did she would always try to help me fix them – until one day she said, “Look, Annie, I know you’re not enjoying it, but I am and I don’t really want to talk about it because it’s not positive.” Then I had no one to talk to.

That was another thing about St Bede’s. You were told to “Stop being childish”, but we *were* children so we *had* to be childish! We weren’t allowed to run about at breaktime. This was one of the things I found utterly stupid. There was a boy in my class that was always bouncing in his seat and shouting out because of this. He had never been like that before [at primary school].

**Annie, Year 7 student,
St Bede’s Comprehensive School**

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What are your concerns about the schooling you are providing (if you are a teacher) or your child is getting (if you are a parent)? Of course, many children thrive in school, if they are lucky enough to find one that suits them. They retain their cheerfulness and gentleness, enjoy maths and English, find a sport and a musical instrument they love to play and practice, and are helped to discover and explore the interests and aptitudes that may grow into the basis of a degree and a career. (Though even conspicuous successes like Tom, on page 8, can have their misgivings.)

But many don't. A lot of parents and teachers see their 'bright' children becoming anxiously fixated on grades and losing the adventurous, enquiring spirit they had when they were small. They study because 'it is going to be on the test', not because it is interesting or useful. Or adults see their 'less able' children (we'll query this kind of terminology later on) becoming ashamed of their constant inability to do what is required, and so becoming either actively resistant to school or passive and invisible. Both ends of the achievement spectrum can experience a curious but intense mixture of stress and boredom. The obsession with grades and test scores turns some children into conservative and docile 'winners' at the examination game. Many muddle by in the middle, willing to play a game they don't fully understand.

And some children grow into defeated 'losers'. Yet these losers (like the talented Jack Dee) are not inherently stupid or lazy. Research shows that they have the potential for highly intelligent and determined problem-solving in real-life settings, but some of them, tragically, have had the learning stuffing knocked out of them by their experience at school, and as a result they are less happy, less creative and less successful than they could be. That is not giving them the best, and it is not nurturing the talent and the grit that would help them to be happy people and thoughtful citizens. Many people's concerns about school centre on the validity

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of the examination system, and on the effect that the focus on tests and exams had on them or is having on their children.

For many young people the stressful nature of school is compounded by the sheer pointlessness of much of what they are expected to learn. It is a rare parent (or teacher) who is able to come up with a convincing reason why every 15-year-old needs to know the difference between metamorphic and igneous rocks or to explain the subplots in *Othello*. Parents often find themselves trapped in a conflict between sympathising with their children about the apparent irrelevance of much of the curriculum and still trying to make them study it. Certainly up to GCSE there is a fear that, if children don't do their best to knuckle down and 'get the grades', their life choices will be forever narrowed and blighted. And, under the present antiquated system, they are quite right to be concerned. The horns of this particular dilemma are sharp and painful.

Teachers may have other quandaries – for example, wanting to impart to their students their own love of reading and literature, and knowing, from bitter experience, that the effect on many 15-year-olds of having to study *The Tempest* or *Jane Eyre* is exactly the opposite. Not everyone is brave (or foolish) enough to be the charismatic, rebellious Robin Williams character (John Keating) from *Dead Poets Society*, or Hector (Richard Griffiths) from *The History Boys*. Politicians who blithely tinker with the set books rarely spend longer in a school than it takes for the photo opportunity to be secured, so have no conception of the damage and distress their doctrinaire beliefs and prejudices may be causing. Many teachers are caught between the rock of their own values and passions and the hard place of examination requirements.