TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

**Number 112**

**Sayings of the Not-so-Great, The Greatish**

Although I have made inroads into the yellowing scraps of paper in my filing cabinet there is still a pile left. One folder is full of pages of ‘bons mots’. I have already entertained you with ‘Sayings of the Great.’ Left here are a number with no names but with gloriously relevant thoughts about schools and schooling, that I cannot resist adding to my Tales.

Where have they come from?……. well, from my folder….. that is all you need to know….. You will find at least one to make you ponder.

**Standards, Stupid**

*‘In this country we love to talk down schools and be cynical about educational standards. Despite the evidence of examination results, Ofsted reports, and reviews of outstanding school music, art and drama and sport, we prefer to deny that our schools are full of high quality work. By ‘we’ I mean inevitably those politicians, ‘educationalists and commentators who have the ear of the mass media, and off whom the mass media feeds….. It is a plain fact that everyone is an authority on education, because everyone went to school.’*

(That comment did not come from me, though it could have done, I suppose…it just happens to be on top of the pile)

*‘It is more difficult than ever to solve crimes these days because the standard of education of criminals has dramatically improved.’*

(A Chief of Police report I noted in the 1990s. I put it in a letter to The Times, which printed it.)

*Our school is great, doing a wonderful job. It is all the others I worry about. We hear such bad reports.*

(A parent during a TV interview)

*‘Educational standards are shifting sands. They are always comparative. We compare what is put in by way of resources and what comes out by way of attainment i.e. two entirely different sets of criteria. We keep our fingers crossed that there will be an upward trend of both. It is our good fortune that statistics can be made to prove it.’*

(Speech at an Education Conference on Something or Other)

*‘Surely we can all understand that it is impossible to say that if we put X resources in we will get Y results out…… but that is what government ministers like to do. It makes them feel powerful.’*

(A junior Minister for Schools….. who never became senior!)

‘*I am not making regulations just for my own children but for all children in our country, who deserve the very* best.’ (A Secretary of State for Education in a Conference speech.)

*‘Remind us who ‘the deserving’ are, Minister.’* (Question from the floor)

I once heard a lecturer…. clearly keen on figures of speech, mainly metaphor and hyperbole….. railing against the confines of the National Curriculum. He banged his fist on the lectern and yelled:

‘*It is no good trying to teach a cat to bark….I know a cat who came up to a teacher and said,’ Miss, you gave me 0 for barking, but I have done very well at miaowing, haven’t I?’ ‘Brilliantly,’ said the teacher, ‘none of the dogs could match you, but miaowing isn’t in the curriculum programme, you see.’….. Just remember….even Einstein got zero marks in his primary school because his answers were not in the book.’*

He went on to say:

*‘The result of teaching in the 20th century has been – Anxiety by the age of 20; Anger by the age of 40; Distress at 60; and welcoming death at 80….. The reason? Because everything is steered from above….and what happens then? The teacher will say to the driver ’you must not drive fast or you will have an accident.’ So you drive slowly and fall asleep… and then have an accident!.... So, say instead….’Stop. I will now take over. So now you are self-steering and lo and behold the anxiety goes.’*

**On Discipline**

*Pupil Discipline, sir, is simply a nicer way of saying Pupil Punishment….is that what you really mean?*

(A speaker from the Conference floor to a Minister)

‘*The law requires schools to ‘promote in pupils a proper regard for authority and secure acceptable standards of behaviour.’ This terse codification of society’s aspirations for its schools does not contain the thunderous negatives of the Ten Commandments but is nonetheless stentorian and uncompromising in tone. The trouble is that Wayne and Shane and Sharon and Tracy are unaware of the Biblical burden placed on their poor old Head in his or her pursuit of the happiness of society at large….. Shouldn’t the government have, at least, told them?’*

(A Headteacher Association Presidential speech)

**A free-for-all about Headteachers…. and Staff…..as seen and heard**. (You are bound to find one or two that tickle your fancy)

Algernon: *‘Our Head is referred to as ‘God’, you know…… A kid skidded round a corner yesterday and ran in to Him….’O My God,’ said the little urchin. ‘Not quite, young man,’ said the Almighty, ‘but the nearest you will get to him today.’*

Beatrice*: ‘Our head has intimations of all-mightiness, too. But while he sees himself issuing commandments from the Mount, we tend to see him in the wilderness, communing with himself, with no-one else within earshot.’*

(Two friends at a Conference)

A Chair of governors told a governors’ conference that he was rung one day by the Head who said, *‘I have an opportunity to go on a decision-making course but I can’t make up my mind whether I need to do it. What do you think?’*

*‘Women are a sex all of their own…. sort of……unique…. bloomin’ difficult….you know what I mean…* ‘ (overheard at a Conference)

*‘Our Department for Education is very good at putting right things that haven’t gone wrong.’*

*‘The Minister is a bit like that, too….very enthusiastic about ordering ‘decisive’ action when all the schools wanted was a bit of guidance…It is like a Fire Service officer sitting on the end of a phone replying to an emergency call, ‘Hello, Secretary of State for Education here. Go and eliminate discrepancies at Gas Street Secondary School.’ I wonder if the Health Ministry would do the same for surgeons?*

(just a pencilled note in my file)

*‘What causes frustration in teachers? Indiscipline, of course, but much more – somebody sitting in their favourite staffroom armchair…. being told the Head can’t see them without an appointment…. not being allocated a top Year 11 group…. having to teach 4G on a Friday afternoon…. being asked to take over an absent colleagues class at short notice…. or in my case the Head responding to my complaint that the room was too dark by simply removing the window blinds… and then providing me with a pair of new woolly gloves when I told him the room was too cold.’*

(Another Note in my file*)*

A number of my Tales have included anecdotes about inspectors of schools. I have just come across this comment from an article in a teachers’ journal……. in Australia (in 1923)!

*‘I cannot remember having received a single useful hint from an inspector. The best that can be said for him or her is that they have done little harm.’*

In the same record there is this memorably pompous outpouring from a chief education officer:

‘*A short period of zeal under rigid discipline is needed in our schools to enforce training – of certain types of children – in social morality and obedience…’ /*

*If teachers are part social worker, part child minder, part detective…. part judge, part jury, part prison warder, then headteachers are these…. plus a touch of the Messiah and Macchiavelli. (Conference speaker)*

(I don’t know where that came from, but it is a suitable summing-up!)

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