

NEAG conference Alnwick Castle

Harry Potter and the Big Picture

On a cold Saturday morning in March I ventured out to Harry's place better known as Alnwick Castle scene of magic and mystery.

Today was not a production for the cinema but Northumberland Education Action Group gathering together a wide range of speakers to consider how to deal with the emerging problems of a rural LEA in a cash-strapped 21st century.

NEAG is no ordinary group of educationalists. Indeed, it must be the most disparate group of people ever gathered together under one educational umbrella to launch a major education conference; there were teachers (of course), farmers, lawyers, vicars, and even young people who wanted to know what was going to happen to their education in their Northumberland.

Harry would have been impressed with the huddle of people gathered around a large black pot (actually a very large grey box!) folding pieces of paper and breathing oaths into the cold air. The pot contained the results of many hours of fund raising raffle tickets. This was very impressive magic. With one imaginative stroke of a raffle a whole group of wizard educationalists were suddenly produced.

The master wizard of ceremonies was Bill Midgely, President of the British Chambers of Commerce, accountable to over 100,000 businesses employing over 5 million people representing over 30% of the country's workforce. Certainly a considerable part of the force was with him!

The first magician on stage was John Abbott, President of the 21st century learning imitative (www.21learn.org) based in both the UK and the USA. Stating detailed research into the biggest predictors of success at the age of 18 it was the quantity of and quality of dialogue in the child's home before the age of five, which was four times more significant than any other factor. Primary schools came in fifth place and secondary schools in seventh place. Hogwarts School was not mentioned!

John compared Northumberland, the least densely populated county in England, with Finland the least densely populated country in Europe. According to OECD it has the highest levels of literacy and numeracy of all developed countries. Children start school at seven and stay in the same school until the age of sixteen. Finnish schools are small (less than 700 pupils), but there are many of them. Finnish education policy is based on sustaining very strong local community involvement in the schools. . John was not in the least surprised that at the age of seven Northumberland youngsters perform amongst the top 10% of their age group across the whole of Britain.

Northumberland's parents were congratulated in their time consuming task of raising their young. As one American writer noted recently, children spell love as T.I.M.E. Whilst some parts of England wish to make some of their schools larger and abolish Middle schools. The rest of the world appears to be taking note of the neurosciences and paying increasing attention to the emotional/psychological needs of the adolescent. In Tokyo many Middle schools are being created where none existed before. British Columbia as a matter of educational policy establishing more Middle schools. In the USA Bill Gates has announced he is planning to allocate enormous resources to break down the large high schools far smaller units. One Chief Education

Officer of a large English city on being offered enormous sums of money by the DfEE to replace all their secondary schools with brand new buildings stated “it would be a waste of money, the last thing we need at the moment is to recreate a 19th century model of a secondary school in 21st century shopping mall of glass and steel”

Next was a real life Professor, not of metamorphic wizardry, indeed he could not transform any statistical evidence into any reason to favour any particular educational system. Professor Peter Tymms, from the University of Durham, specialises in evaluation and monitoring school effectiveness and research methodology. Currently he directs the PIPS project (Performance Indicators in Primary Schools). Despite comparing KS2 scores from a variety of schools there was no conclusive evidence that one type of state school, compared to another, performed any better. Policy decisions in education should be based on evidence wherever possible. In this particular case there is a lack of a firm evidence base for either two tier or three tier educational systems. A member of the audience asked about the mysterious “key stage 2 dip” which is becoming an educational legend in Northumberland. If it’s a dip surely it goes back to where it was? The professor was not too convinced that dips level out but such a dip was not demonstrable as being peculiar to one school system compared to another one

In 2000 Les Walton was appointed by the DfES to oversee and manage the reorganisation of education services in Bradford Metropolitan Borough as Assistant Chief Executive. During this time he managed the reorganisation of a three-tier education system, which achieved political, community and educational consensus. Les spoke about highs and lows of such change. Especially important were the management of teacher morale and the utilisation of their abilities being seen as an advantage rather than a disadvantage. The issue was not really which type of school but the effectiveness of leadership. Les, described by the Yorkshire Post as a “jargon-busting evangelist for the shape of things to come” might have been describing himself when he spoke of the need for personal values and passionate conviction. There was a need for creating the vision by strategic thinking and leading a drive for improvement. However, building commitment and support was essential and at the end of the day people had to be held accountable but this did not exclude planning for delivery by transformational leadership involving team working and developing potential. Ultimately leadership styles impact on the school climate and consequently staff performance by creating the environment in which staff work which in turn influences their discretionary effort. A highly inspirational talk was brought to an end by a Newcastle United FC home game!

Four speakers down and four to go. But now it was time for lunch and a relaxing mix and mingle with members of the audience. An excellent finger buffet in the Guest Hall of Alnwick Castle washed down with real ale by the intriguing title of “three tier”. And on to episode II.

The Rev John Kime is Head of St Edward’s one of 14 Middle Schools in Staffordshire. He is also Chair of the National Middle Schools Forum (www.nmsforum.co.uk), which is active in collating and disseminating information on Middle Schools. and has a library of information on the performance of middle schools. John was able to provide a statistical overview of the effectiveness of Middle

schools as part of a three tier educational system. Of great interest was an appraisal of the condensed Key Stage 3 project, which has been undertaken by St Edwards Middle School as part of the national project. Examples of independent schools omitting GCSE to concentrate on GCE are well known and the introduction of Open University courses in schools is also familiar. It has often been said that Middle Schools do not fit into the structure of the national curriculum when KS3 straddles both Middle and High schools. One possible solution for some pupils, or all, is the two-year KS3 programme, which aims to increase the pace of learning and enhance pupils' motivation and engagement. This leads to curriculum flexibility and silences those who might think that the last year at a Middle School is a wasted year for the most able. Progression could then lead to a three year KS4 programme of study. The essence was curriculum flexibility. A question from the floor asked whether it was better for a school cohort to achieve lower but acceptable KS3 scores over two years or higher scores over three years. Whatever was best for individual pupils' learning was John's answer. The jury is out and Ofsted together with NFER/LSE will report in Autumn 2006.

Mick Lyons, a national executive member of NASUWT, pointed out the methods of government bribery which promised large amounts of money for building new schools if you are prepared to do as you were told especially in the case of Academies. If an organisation raises/donates £2M the government tops this up typically with a whopping £25M. However, as Mick pointed out this was particularly worrying for a professional association as this created an employer who operates outside the pay and conditions regulations applied to other teachers in the state system. This was not the route Mick recommended as a solution to any financial problems faced by Northumberland because education would then be out of local democratic control.

Dr David Francis is Director of the Community Council of Northumberland and Secretary of the Northumberland Association of Local Councils. He and his colleagues are actively involved in supporting and developing vibrant and inclusive communities. The importance and the central role schools play in the life of the community and in the local economy were recognised. Nothing illustrated this better than the closure of Belford Middle School some years ago when passions ran high in the local community situated in the rural North of Northumberland. The economic problems of small rural schools have apparently been around for some considerable time.

There are many voluntary and community bodies within Northumberland and there has been a history of excellent communication and consultation, which has moved around the County. In recent years the pace of change has tended to halt the effectiveness of community consultation. A member of the audience was confused by the restriction of the Northumberland LEA plan i.e. "putting the learner first". If learning was for life what had happened to adult learners in the community. Shouldn't they be consulted?

Dr Francis was absolutely clear in his response to the challenge of how he would envisage consultation with the community. The most important factor was time so that consultation carried the community with it. A member of the audience suggested

that first schools could be more closely linked with Middle schools by actually being built in the same grounds.

The last speaker was not a familiar name on the lecture circuit. But watch this space! Steven Bridgett is only 17 years of age. He has managed to get on every youth committee in Northumberland and has awards from the Government Office North East and the DfES as a Community Champion Award winner. Steven has a fast and confident delivery. He immediately took command of his audience getting them on their feet straightaway and engaged them in a physical and mental warm up. This was much needed as the wind continued to blow outside Alnwick's Guest Hall and cold air does not rise and whilst the brain was still alive the feet were dead.

Steven confirmed current educational theory. He was exceptionally intelligent and as a result he had been exceptionally suspended from school! Fortunately one of his teachers was in the audience to confirm the fact. Steven wanted a choice and he wanted to be asked about his education. This fact was illustrated by inviting the audience to sample the variety of chocolates he had on offer. Whilst I was munching I was told I had made a choice. This lad will go far!

Northumberland's chiefs had consulted with Steven and "youth" but it had been relatively short lasting only part of a day and very limited in the numbers invited to attend.

Stephen was not too happy about the state of British education and the restrictions on what he studied and how it proceeded. Having been told that there was no chance of him changing the system this was now the prime reason for him wishing to get involved in order to change it. He would have stood for the County Council but he did not satisfy the minimum age for nomination. No political party has yet to secure him. He is keeping his own counsel for the time being.

The conference was brought to a close by John Abbott, who thanked Steven and the other speakers and finished with a quotation from Africa.

"There is an old tribal greeting that marks the coming together of two groups of friends. It is simple. How goes it with the children? The people of Northumberland need to ask each other. How will it go with the children in the future?"

The raffle had gone well. Sufficient was raised so that those who wished to do so entered the mystical recently constructed Alnwick tree house for free. The enormous fire in the middle of the room was most welcome A little incongruous but I was not paying the insurance! And a glass of red wine helped to reach the parts that the three-tier beer had not. The raffle had gone really really well! Can we have another one!?

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12 March 2005