

**Re-humanising primary education –
placing trust in teachers, learning from the legacy of Christian Schiller**

The Christian Schiller Lecture

Dr Tony Eaude

19th April 2018

tony@edperspectives.org.uk

www.edperspectives.org.uk

I am delighted and honoured to have been asked to give the 2018 Christian Schiller lecture. Not least because I have many happy memories of attending, reading and being inspired by previous Schiller lecturers in the 1990s and since. They re-affirmed many of my beliefs, challenged others and introduced me to new or half-forgotten ideas. I hope that this evening's session will do something similar for you. I plan to talk for about forty-five minutes and then invite questions and responses.

I vividly recall two experiences when I was starting my PGCE to become a primary school teacher at Goldsmiths' College in 1975-6. One was on the first day of the course, as a relatively successful and academic history graduate, from a prestigious university, being told to draw a vegetable from life. Somewhat reluctantly, I drew a green pepper, all too conscious - and somewhat resentful - that the result was not very good, compared to other people's. The second was, I think, in November 1975, attending a lecture given by a tall man with a somewhat military bearing who seemed to be, and was, about eighty years old. This was Christian Schiller and he kept his audience spellbound. A few months later we heard of his death. Exactly what he said I cannot remember very clearly, but how he spoke and how he was remains with me powerfully. To both of these points, I shall return.

I wish to draw attention to four aspects of Schiller's legacy which come through clearly in what he said.

1 One is his profound shock at the appalling, inhumane conditions in Liverpool and the surrounding areas in the 1920s and the elementary schools, especially in what was provided for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and the dull and decontextualised tasks they were set; and his amazement at the breadth and depth of their imagination and knowledge when involved in more familiar and engaging tasks. Schiller read an advance copy of the Hadow report of 1931 on the Mersey ferry and its words 'what a good and wise father desires for his own children, a nation must desire for all its children'. As he looked out at the desolate docklands and the Cammell Laird shipyard closed during the Depression, so that most schools had not a

single father in work, he dreamed that transforming those elementary schools into more humane places of learning was a vision to be pursued, one which he tried for the next forty years, with a great deal of success, to bring to fruition.

2 The second, leading on from that, was Schiller's emphasis on children's experience (though he always spoke of individual children by name rather than as a supposedly homogeneous group) and the need for each Mary and John to find, and be allowed, space to make sense of their experience, especially through the arts. He believed that 'all children, given opportunity and encouragement, could express themselves through painting, craft and movement.' (Schiller, 1979 : xi).

3 The third was the importance of seeking to meet the needs of each Mary or John as she or he is now rather than thinking only what she or he may become or doing just what is convenient for teachers.

4 The fourth was his belief that real, lasting change comes from the bottom up and the need, therefore, to trust the teachers who understand individual children's needs.

Of course, as Schiller recognised, the context – and with it the challenges and types of deprivation - changes and has done so massively, in social and cultural, and policy, terms, especially in the last thirty years.

I suggest that primary schooling has in many respects become soulless, though this is largely the result of policy rather than the fault of teachers, and we need to restore the humanity which Schiller espoused. In exploring how we can re-humanise primary education, I shall refer to some of my own writing and that of others such as Margaret Donaldson, Jerome Bruner, Robin Alexander, Andy Hargreaves and Nel Noddings. Should anyone want the references, or the text, I will make them available.

Let me explain what I mean by primary education having become soulless and losing its humanity. Sadly, words such as soul and humanity do not figure much in the current discourse of education, dominated as we are by the language of data, standards, targets and delivery. Teachers, parents and policy makers need to know what effect we are having but this cannot, and must not, be reduced to data, what can be measured (often with an alarming level of inaccuracy) in some limited aspects of English and mathematics. Life is fuller, richer and more complex than that. As Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012 : 44) argue, 'data can inform improvement, guide instruction, and prompt earlier intervention . . . But data can replace professional judgement instead of enhancing it, directing teachers ' attention only toward the tested basics and driving them to distraction.' And, even more forcefully,

Andy Hargreaves (2013 : xvii– xviii) warns that ‘data-driven and hyper-rational environments produce consequences of a highly adverse nature. These include destructions of innovation and creativity, distractions of participants’ energy towards producing the appearance of numerical results and degradations of people’s essential humanity through machine- like environments that assault people’s emotional and moral integrity’.

Standards are important, but do we ever step back and ask ourselves, and each other, standards of what? Worthwhile standards relate to much more than knowing how to use a fronted adverbial or to multiply vulgar fractions. Surely we must start to think more in terms of standards of conduct, of curiosity, of imagination, of teamwork, of compassion. I am not opposed to targets as such - I have at home a constantly changing and never-ending list of things to be achieved - but when targets are too closely defined by the teacher, they constrain children’s imagination and creativity – and I suggest contribute to the remarkable and lamentable achievement of making many young children bored with, disengaged from, and sometimes disaffected with, learning. However, I cannot bear the language of delivery. Boxes and babies, possibly even lectures, are delivered, whereas teaching should be a reciprocal, two-way process, characterised by mutual respect, led by and encouraging a love for learning. As Hargreaves (2003: 161) states, ‘teachers are not deliverers but developers of learning. Those who focus only on teaching techniques and curriculum standards . . . promote a diminished view of teaching and teacher professionalism that has no place in a sophisticated knowledge society.’

The 1985 White Paper ‘Better schools’ stated that ‘many children are still given too little opportunity for work in practical, scientific and aesthetic areas of the curriculum which increases not only their understanding in these areas but also their literacy and numeracy ... Over-concentration on the practice of the basic skills in literacy and numeracy unrelated to a context in which they are needed means that those skills are insufficiently extended and applied.’ (cited in Alexander 2010: 243). I fear that this remains true over thirty years later.

Too often, a narrow curriculum, and the tests devised to police coverage of, and compliance with, this, emphasises convergence on what the curriculum or the teacher demands, rather than divergence, following the child’s interests and lines of enquiry. And the lowest attainers are those who often receive the thinnest gruel, endlessly repeating what they find difficult and often pointless. As a result, too many

children are bored and disengaged, with much of their most valuable learning happening out of school. There is little incentive for teachers to enable what the EPPE (Effective Pre-school and Primary Education) project (Sylva et al., 2010) called 'sustained shared thinking' in the desperate dash to cover an over-full and unbalanced curriculum and achieve short-term results. The humanities and the arts are marginalised in a Gradgrind world of grammar and sums. Such considerations permeate the whole system but are especially damaging for young children.

The Royal Society of Arts published a report 'Schools with Soul: A New Approach to Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Education' in 2014, highlighting the importance of SMSC, as enshrined in law, though too rarely emphasised in Ofsted reports and often marginalised in practice. The RSA report calls for more emphasis on longer-term, less measurable outcomes related to the whole child, rather than just cognitive development and academic attainment. Qualities and dispositions such as creativity, resilience and teamwork are those which children need to succeed both in the present and as global citizens in a future faced with changes which we struggle even to imagine.

Let me dwell on the idea of soul. In many religious traditions, the soul is what enters the body at birth and leaves it at death – and so is associated with life itself. For me, the idea also captures something about the essential aspects of who one is as a person, many of which are ineffable and not measurable in ways that are either meaningful or desirable. While many of the qualities involved in acting in a thoughtful, humane way – such as compassion, empathy and generosity - are sometimes dismissed as 'soft skills', they are much more than skills and certainly not soft in the sense of easily learned. Moreover, the word 'soul' refers to environments and systems, usually when they are considered to be 'soulless' - lacking the human warmth, care and responsiveness which are essential for an environment to be welcoming and genuinely inclusive. This is the main sense in which I am suggesting that schooling, rather than primary schools themselves, has too often had the life sucked out of it and become soulless and lacking in humanity, as children with all their wonderful diversities and eccentricities are treated as widgets on a production line.

These considerations led me to argue in a chapter I wrote recently (Eaude, 2016) that we have not really escaped the legacy of the elementary school, which Schiller deplored; and that the current emphasis on literacy and numeracy skills separated

from practical application institutionalises low expectations. There is no test as rigorous as actually using one's skills to make something work in practice.

In saying this, I am not suggesting that all was perfect in some golden era, which never existed, or that it is awful now - it is not. For instance, there is now much more emphasis - at least in principle - on including children with disabilities, on children's talk, on mental health and well-being and on the damaging effects of abuse and poverty. Children are now encouraged and enabled to articulate their thinking, often in pairs and small groups. However, we still need, as teachers, to listen to children more and talk at them less; and to ask authentic and challenging questions, without immediately providing them with our own answers to questions they may not have even considered. Despite the current focus on young children's mental health, the answer is all too often programmes - many well thought-out, others not so good - encouraging a particular, usually behaviourist, approach to help children to control their emotions and behaviour - and particularly suppress their anger - rather than addressing the root problems, be they poverty, a lack of sensitive and supportive relationships or excessive demands on children from too early an age. In Lilian Katz's words, (1997: 368), 'if formal instruction is introduced too early, too intensely and too abstractly, the children may indeed learn the instructed knowledge and skills, but they may do so at the expense of the disposition to use them.'

Jerome Bruner (1996) reminds us of how even very young children are meaning-makers and the importance of maintaining their sense of agency, of the influence of culture in how attitudes and values are learned and how learning is a social process, even though it occurs in ways specific to individuals. Margaret Donaldson's beautiful research and writing (1982, 1992) highlights the centrality, especially for young children, of the relationship with a trusted adult in determining how, and how well, they understand a task and what they can achieve. And lasting changes of behaviour and attitude are created on the basis of relationships of trust created through careful observation and attunement to children, over time.

As neuroscientific research increasingly suggests, confirming what generations of teachers have known, young children need a broad and balanced range of experiences to develop - and indeed uncover - what Howard Gardner calls their 'spectrum of talents', reflecting his view of intelligence as multifaceted. I love the idea of the 'horizon of possibility' which extends and reveals new opportunities as one approaches it.

Most learning occurs outside school settings, for better or worse. As Gonzales, Moll and Amanti (2005) suggest, teachers need to draw much more on children's existing 'funds of knowledge', those aspects which are often not valued in school, to engage children who are otherwise alienated by, and disengaged from, school learning. Examples include fishing and disco dancing, martial arts and computer games, but I extend this idea to include knowledge, and experience, of other activities from chess to astronomy, photography and religious texts, gardening and cooking; and types of music and art which may not be those usually introduced at school – or appealing to teachers. On one occasion, when a fuse had blown on an electrical plug and I was becoming increasingly frustrated, trying to fix it, Jason, who could at ten years old, barely read and wrote pages of incomprehensible scrawl, whispered quietly to me 'Here, give it me' – and in a few seconds had fixed the fuse. Drawing on, and extending, these funds of knowledge is essential if children are to continue to recognise that learning is endlessly fascinating and worthwhile; especially so for children from backgrounds where what is taught in school too often is associated with failure and fails to engage them.

I nearly called this lecture Re-humanising the curriculum, but Schiller's view was that curriculum development tends to lead to more curriculum, when it is the quality of the teacher which breathes life into any curriculum. I like the old Puritan saying 'God loveth adverbs; and careth not how good, but how well.' In other words, in this context, the *how* of teaching and learning matters more than the *what*. I shall return to this, but first let me consider how 'the humanities' can help to re-humanise primary education.

I don't know what, if anything, comes to mind when you think of 'the humanities'. Probably, history, geography and Religious Education - and perhaps citizenship. This was where the four of us of who edited a recent issue of the journal *Education 3-13* started. However, in my article (Eaude, 2017), I argue that, while the humanities have always traditionally been seen as a central aspect of education, there is no agreement on which disciplines this term embraces; and that in primary schools we should adopt a broad view of the humanities, including literature, poetry, drama and philosophy as well as history, geography and RE. And that we should consider what the humanities, and education more broadly, seeks to achieve – an understanding of what it means to be human and of the different ways in which culture has reflected and shaped this. This requires, in my view, a holistic, overarching approach taking into account the whole range of children's experience and interests – which for me

brings into question whether dividing the timetable into discrete subjects is beneficial, especially for young children. For instance, drama can be used in almost any subject area to enhance children's understanding of themselves, and empathy for, other people; and literature and stories contribute to children's learning and enjoyment far more broadly than just in English lessons. To illustrate the power of drama, I recall how when Rachel and Helen, two quiet ten year olds, were acting out being evicted from their houses, as a result of enclosure, one of them suddenly shouted out and banged the table loudly – to my utter amazement and that of the rest of the class. Incidentally, the theme of enclosure and the injustices associated with that captured the imagination of that class in a way that the life of the very wealthy in the same era never did - an example of the extent to which content and context affect children's engagement.

Other articles in that issue of Education 3-13, from the four different jurisdictions of the United Kingdom, highlighted different curriculum arrangements - broad areas of learning in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales as opposed to subjects in England. While this provided a timely reminder that England often moves in a different direction from other systems, it was evident that the humanities are marginalised in most systems, not only in the UK but around the world.

The American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum (2010), argues that the humanities are the basis of democracy, especially in a diverse society, in troubled times, not least because they help to create an understanding of, and empathy for, people who are different from ourselves. The ways of working, such as fieldwork, observation and nuanced interpretation of what is complex and hard to understand, help to strengthen the skills and dispositions associated with critical thinking and extend children's emotional repertoire.

However, the humanities in the sense of history, geography and Religious Education must not just be about memorising facts about kings and battles, rivers and mountains or what members of different religions wear or where they worship, but of having some experience of these. Children from a young age need to approach, and be helped to explore, difficult and contested questions, such as whose history is being studied, how can we, as a species, mitigate or reverse the impact of environmental degradation or how do those unlike ourselves think which leads them to act in ways we find strange, incomprehensible or wicked. Such an approach may also enable children - we all – to avoid seeing other cultures as exotic and usually

inferior to our own. All too often it is we who are strange or complacent. I suggest, though I do not have time to argue this now, that the humanities, well taught, help to avoid children adopting stereotypes based on skewed or simplistic views of religion – and probably reduces the danger of radicalisation.

I was reminded on a recent visit to the Roman fort of Reculver, near the Isle of Thanet, of how my love of history was kindled by a teacher, Mr Owen, who conjured in my mind images of the Saxon Shore forts; and prompted me to badger my father to take me to stroke, as one could then, the great megaliths of Stonehenge and the smaller but no less vivid stones of Avebury, including the one under which a barber had been crushed. Let me put in a brief plug for visits out of school, both for the day and residential. These, and local studies, do not just enhance children's knowledge of history and geography, as traditionally understood, but enable a deeper understanding of people in some ways similar to, in some ways different from, ourselves.

I have no doubt that well-planned visits to churches, mosques and synagogues – or visits into schools by members of different faith communities – enable children to understand far more about how believers think and act than the best-prepared or delivered lesson ever could. I will never forget the gasp of wonder when a group of children, some of whom had probably never been in a church before, first encountered the majestic architecture of Long Melford church in Suffolk.

Much of what I am saying about the humanities applies to the arts, such as visual art, music and design. This reflects Robin Alexander's distinction between Curriculum 1 – 'the basics' especially those aspects of English and mathematics most easily measured – and Curriculum 2 – 'the rest' including the arts and humanities, which are too often seen 'as desirable but inessential.' (Alexander, 2016, p 2). It is worth noting, and no co-incidence, that what is currently marginalised is often what most engages and motivates young children – play, physical activity, story, art, music and fieldwork.

I want to suggest that we should try to see education in different ways from how it is often now presented but one much more in line with the thinking of John Dewey – in ways which emphasise moral and ethical, rather than just technical, considerations. We should see learning more like a series of guided rambles through a museum than a frantic race, in which inevitably many of those least able to cope get left behind. As Nel Noddings (1991, p 161) writes, 'Schools should become places in which teachers

and students live together, talk to each other, reason together, take delight in each others' company. Like good parents, teachers should be concerned first and foremost with the kind of people their charges are becoming. My guess is that when schools focus on what really matters in life, the cognitive ends we are now striving towards in such painful and artificial ways will be met as natural culminations of the means we have widely chosen.'

Learning must be relational, reciprocal and endlessly exciting. And not too serious. I recall a lovely incident where I had been using Picasso's great painting 'Guernica' to try and illustrate that you should not always believe everything you see or hear. As we were about to go home, nine-year old Aaron came up and asked if I knew that the Basque country was the world's greatest produce of broccoli. I asked him how on earth he had found that out – to which his reply was 'don't always believe everything you see or hear.' I can remember many lessons and projects where the outcome was not as I intended – and not a few where they worked very differently from how I had planned them – but the learning occurred and was made evident in the process, rather than in the visible and tangible outcomes.

Schools must offer, in the playwright David Hare's words, both haven and challenge. Children thrive on challenge which they find meaningful and achievable. But they - we all - need to feel safe, especially in emotional terms, if they are to take risks and enable their creativity to flourish. For teachers, this involves creating in classrooms what I have called 'hospitable space', (Eaude, 2014), which is genuinely inclusive and welcoming, helping children to maintain and strengthen qualities such as curiosity, imagination, resilience and resourcefulness- all, along with the ability to work co-operatively, essential in a world of change and uncertainty. A space for silence and reflection as well as for activity and exploration, for children to talk and not just to be talked at.

As Noddings suggests (2013), young children – we all – need not only to be cared-for, but to care-for others. Hospitable spaces must not be too competitive. I am not against competition as such and am rather too competitive myself. But remorseless competition creates too many losers, all too often those from backgrounds where socio-economic factors and ethnicity have made exclusion and failure the norm. We need to recognise individual children's needs, now Anjum and Leroy, as well as Mary and John, and how hard life is for many children, not as an excuse for low attainment, but as a prompt to remember how they may develop and succeed in many different

ways, rather than just in terms of test scores, and to search for ways of enriching their lives.

I mentioned Schiller's insight that real, lasting change comes from the bottom up and the need to trust teachers. However weak and fallible we may be, or feel that we are, as teachers, part of our responsibility is to breathe life into the curriculum, sometimes slowly and painfully as when trying to inflate one of those mattresses or lilos – and no one is better placed to do so across the whole curriculum than the class teacher. Thousands of children and adults look back on a primary school teacher who brought the curriculum to life for them and who believed in each Jesse or Martha enough to enable him or her to experience success, often in the face of evidence which suggested otherwise. Greater respect for students and display of more passion for teaching are among the key features of teacher expertise highlighted in the Cambridge Primary Review and as Robin Alexander indicates these are correlated with children's academic success especially for younger and low-income students. (Alexander, 2010, pp. 417-8).

I wish to pay tribute to the many brave teachers and headteachers who manage to provide a broad and humane education, day in, day out, often against the odds and in spite rather than because of policy. But we all need to escape from what Robin Alexander calls a 'culture of compliance'; and reclaim a sense of professionalism based on informed autonomy and judgement.

Those outside the profession need to regain the trust in teachers which has been undermined, notably by politicians, over the last thirty years. But those of us in the profession have to help, not least by becoming better at articulating our expertise and being less self-deprecating than most primary teachers I know tend to be. We must learn to be more open, and more confident, in explaining to ourselves and to each other what 'good practice' or being 'child-centred' entails – which is complex and often paradoxical - rather than relying on such phrases as a mantra. We must challenge, and change, the language in which children, learning and teaching are thought about in the ways that I started to do earlier.

As I approach the end, let me return to the points with which I started and to Christian Schiller. All children, but especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, benefit from a broad range of opportunities to engage their interests, valuing and drawing on their existing funds of knowledge and encouraging active learning based

especially on their own experience, observation and reflection on this- and their imagination. The humanities and the arts must be central, not peripheral, encouraging curiosity and playfulness and providing opportunities to deal with complexity, uncertainty and disagreement.

Being expected to draw the vegetable was, I now know, a direct result of Schiller's thinking, not just I suspect because of his emphasis on the arts, but also to encourage teachers to be in the role of the learner faced with feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty – something we as adults should all do more often, because it helps us to feel what it is like not to know how to approach an unfamiliar or scary task. As I indicated previously, I do not recall what Schiller said, but I remember vividly the authority with which he spoke and how he conducted himself. And that highlights the most important point I am making this evening – that who you are as a teacher, the example you set and how you interact with other people, especially children themselves, matters more, and will make a more lasting impression, than what you know.

This is made manifest in the quiet word recognising when Tracey or Ajaz is finding life hard, or has finally achieved what they found difficult, the smile of encouragement, the nod of approval, the funny incident shared, the dreams acknowledged. Karen, whom I taught as a constantly-unwell ten year old, recalled some twenty years later how important and re-assuring it had been to her that I arranged for her to have a bucket available - inconspicuously- in case she was sick. Just one example of the often-tiny, but never insignificant, actions which characterise humane relationships between children and teachers.

Talking of dreams, a short poem by Langston Hughes , called Dreams.

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

Schiller tended to end his talks with a call to arms, most memorably 'Fare forward voyagers!' I cannot manage so memorable a phrase, but let us be brave and dare to dream. He recognised and warned his audiences that lasting change would be hard and slow, but essentially happens from the bottom upwards. We must not be naïve. Of course, the curriculum, assessment procedures and the inspection regime matter and need to change. But we are the ones who can and must re-humanise primary education, starting with our own children, classes and schools, rather than expecting others to do it for us. Any change, especially one of beliefs and habits, is easier together. So, let us take a deep breath as we embark together on the arduous but essential journey of finding ways to re-humanise, and breathe new life and soul into, primary education.

References:

- Alexander, R. (ed.) (2010) *Children, Their World, Their Education – Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Alexander, R. (2016) *What is Education For? Submission to the House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry into the Quality and Purpose of Education in England*. Available at <http://cprtrust.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2016/01/HoCPurposes-Inquiry-CPRT- logo-1.pdf>
- Bruner, J. S. (1996) *The Culture of Education*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.
- Donaldson, M. (1982) *Children's Minds*. Glasgow: Fontana.
- Donaldson, M. (1992) *Human Minds – An Exploration*. London: Allen Lane.
- Eaude T. (2014) 'Creating hospitable space to nurture children's spirituality: Possibilities and dilemmas associated with power', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 19 (3–4): 236–248.
- Eaude, T. (2016) 'Primary education: Can we escape the legacy of elementary education?' in Pring, R. and Roberts. M. (eds) *A Generation of Radical Educational Change – Stories from the Field*, 43–54, London: Routledge.
- Gonzales, N., L. Moll, and C. Amanti (2005) *Funds of Knowledge*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hargreaves, A. (2003) *Teaching in the Knowledge Society – Education in the Age of Insecurity* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

- Hargreaves, A. (2013) 'Preface: The day of judgment', in M. Newberry, A. Gallant and P. Riley (eds), *Emotion and School: Understanding How the Hidden Curriculum Influences Relationships, Leadership, Teaching and Learning*, xv–xx, Bingley: Emerald.
- Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (2012) *Professional Capital – Transforming Teaching in Every School*. New York: Teachers' College Press.
- Katz, L. (2003). Current issues and Trends in Early Childhood Education. In T.S. Saraswathi (Ed.) *Cross Cultural Perspectives in Human Development: Theory, Research and Application* (pp. 354-382). London, Sage.
- Noddings, N (1991) Stories in dialogue: caring and interpersonal reasoning in Witherell C. and Noddings, N. (eds) *Stories lives tell: narrative and dialogue in education*. (pp. 157-70) New York: Teachers' College Press.
- Noddings, N. (2013) *Caring – a Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2010) *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- RSA (Royal Society of Arts) (2014) Schools with Soul: A New Approach to Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Education.
<https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/schools-with-soul-a-new-approach-to-spiritualmoral-social-and-cultural-education>
- Schiller, C. (1979) *Christian Schiller in his own words*. London: A. and C. Black.
- Sylva, K, Melhuish, E, Sammons, P, Siraj-Blatchford, I and Taggart, B (eds) (2010) *Early Childhood Matters - Evidence from the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education project*. Routledge, Abingdon.