



Working together for children

Extracts of interest from the English media

(taken from 'SEBDA News', Issue 14, Winter 2007/08)

'No-notice' Ofsted inspections plan for schools ('The Independent,' 13.12.07)

Christine Gilbert, HMCI, unveiled this plan to the schools select committee, saying to MPs' We are considering representations from parents and pupil that inspections should take place without prior notice' rather than the present two day notice. John Dunford, head of the Association of School and College Leaders, said 'No notice inspections would more punitive and create increased stress.'

PRUs, Special Schools and Children's Homes: the Annual Report of HMCI for 2006/07.

The new annual report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, published in the autumn, shows that of the settings inspected by Ofsted in the previous year, 22% of special schools were 'outstanding' and 58% 'good'. In relation to PRUs, 11% were 'outstanding' and 41% 'good'. 4% of special schools and 14% of PRUs were judged 'inadequate'.

There is no specific comment on SEBD schools but a few mentions for PRUs. Paragraph 45 (p.25) comments on a minority of struggling PRUs (catering for about 700 pupils):'They lack a clear vision for their pupils and offer an uninspiring curriculum. As a result, they fail to improve the pupils' attendance or reduce days lost through exclusion.' The report then highlights what most PRUs achieve: ' Effective pupil referral units rekindle their pupils' interest in learning, often with the help of external providers and work placements. They equip the pupils with the skills and qualifications to cope with re-entry to mainstream schooling or with a move to employment and further learning.'

Paragraph 62 reports that in 73% of PRUs 'behaviour' is judged to be good or outstanding an 'apparently positive finding', the report says somewhat grudgingly. Attendance in PRUs continues to be a cause for concern (paragraph. 61, p.28).

Paragraph 112 (p.38) concerns independent children's homes which offer education to children in public care:' Although these establishments generally had appropriate safeguarding arrangements, 39% did not have adequate classroom resources and 34% did not provide a curriculum underpinned by detailed schemes of work.'

Paras 190 - 204 are dedicated to a whistle-stop tour of CSCI inspections of children's homes (including 15 residential special schools). There seem no particular headlines to report here. Later sections cover secure settings, CAFCASS, children's services in local authorities.

Given the width the report now has to cover, there is little room for key issues in our field. As always with government publications these days, the 120 page document (last year's was 88 pages long) is a glossy, good-looking affair, with large pictures of smiling children and unexplained (presumably artistic) symbols filling up otherwise empty pages and one wonders how much all the empty glossiness costs.

The report is downloadable from the Ofsted site or for sale at £25 from the Stationery Office or www.tsoshop.co.uk. Or phone 0870 600 5522.

Children from poor families 'doomed' as social mobility stalls ('The Independent', 13.12.07). Class divisions in the UK are just as wide as they were 30 years ago, according to this Sutton Trust Report, the education charity set up by Sir Peter Lampl. It also says the expansion of higher education has almost exclusively been achieved by increasing the number of well-off students from middle-class or rich families going to university. Social mobility in the UK fell sharply between 1958 and 1970, according to the report but has stagnated ever since *[as comprehensive schools replaced grammar schools?]*

New Zealand: 'Secondary schools too eager to boot out troublesome students' ('Sunday Star and Times', 14.10.07). It's not just Britain...Chief Ombudsman John Belgrave criticised school boards in his annual report for being too ready to exclude or expel students without paying attention to 'natural justice'. 1700 pupils were excluded in the previous year for serious misconduct.

No ban on smacking, says minister (D.Telegraph, 26.10.07) Kevin Brennan, Children's Minister, says that after a review of the law, last revised in 2004, there is to be no alteration to the present state of affairs. Brennan noted [a consistent finding over the decades] that a big majority of parents (said to be 70%) did not want a ban on smacking and did not want a mild smack to result in a parent being criminalised. Representing the minority view, the Children's Commissioner, Al Aynsley-Green was disappointed, seeing this as a missed opportunity. An NCH spokesperson was more forthright in his disapproval of the minister's stance. Norman Wells, Director of the Family Education Trust said: 'The government is quite right to reject a ban on smacking. It has become a contentious issue only because of a vocal minority.'

Truancy rises to highest since Labour came to power? (Daily Telegraph, 26.10.07) DCSF figures show over 208,000 secondary pupils were classified as 'persistent absentees' who missed more than 20% of their lessons, apparently the highest figure since Labour came to power. However, Minister Kevin Brennan noted a slight fall in the 'overall absence rate'.

Girls of 6 worry over their body image (Sunday Times, 11.07) India Knight was appalled by a study which suggested six year olds were worried about being 'fat'. Where does this shocking dissatisfaction come from? From Mummy, she thinks, telling their young daughters that some foods are 'sinful' or 'naughty': 'We're all...sending out the message to our daughters that it is not only necessary but desirable to suffer in order to be beautiful.'

Worrying growth in huge, anonymous schools ('The Independent', 15.11.07) The leader in 'the Independent' says *[something that has been said many times in the past, but do all LAs listen?]* that size matters. It endorses a report by Teach First, the programme that puts high-flying graduates to teach in inner-city schools. This report points out *[what surely should be obvious by now?]* that very large secondary schools are too often anonymous and harder to control. This is because teachers do not have the same connection with the youngsters they are teaching - and the pupils are harder to teach as a result *[i.e. repeating the findings of various research projects of the 1970s e.g. by Garbarino]*. TeachFirst thinks that schools with more than 1,500 pupils should be carved up into a number of smaller learning institutions of about 150 pupils on the same site.

And yet, what has central and local government done? In 1995 there were only five schools containing more than 2000 pupils - now there are 21. This is the extreme

of the scale but 'the Independent' criticises LAs for creating large schools, because of the associated 'economies of scale' and chance to offer a broader curriculum. It cites the US experience: 'It developed gigantic schools several decades ago but has now become disenchanted with them and has started to create smaller schools. Research shows that pupil attainment increases up to a school size of 1200 students, but then tails off...The US experience with smaller schools has had a positive effect on pupil attendance and behaviour but *[it admits]* as yet no gain in exam performance. Reform would certainly be worth trying.' The TeachFirst report is called 'Lessons from the Front'.

'The Solution to Dyslexia' ('The Independent', 13.11.07) This was the bold page one headline above a report on the work of the Springboard for Children, an education charity which is backed by the British Dyslexia Association, which identifies children at risk very early and aids them in units. Its methods apparently resulted in 90% of a sample of severe dyslexic children returning to mainstream classes in Manchester and London. 'The Independent' wrote: 'The secret of the scheme is getting immediate help to children once a reading problem is identified in their first term in primary school'. Volunteers are then used to read and work with the children. Springboard also uses a mixture of games and quizzes as well as reading to children to encourage a love of learning. *[This reader would want to know far more before he believes' the Independent's' headline]*

Children develop SEBD through watching TV?

Children's TV can damage baby and toddlers' development ('The Scotsman', 6.11.07) Watching even an hour of popular children's TV programmes such as 'Power Rangers', 'Scooby Doo', (and to a lesser extent) 'Rugrats' and 'Flintstones' can damage intellectual development of children under the age of three, a University of Washington research study, suggests. Professor Dimitri Christakis said the first three years of a child's life involved critical brain development, specifically connections between neurons. Watching such programmes during the early period of brain 'plasticity' meant children were conditioned for a high level of stimulation which they were not going to get late in life. Programmes involving fighting and hitting people were shown to increase attention disorders. But 'Sesame Street' and 'Arthur' get the green light.

Reduce the time that children watch TV ('Sunday Times', 30.9.07) A separate study (conducted at John Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland) found 41% of about 3000 (possibly more) children aged either 2 ½ or 5 year olds had TVs in their bedrooms by the age of five. These children showed clear signs of behavioural problems, poor social skills and disrupted sleeping patterns. Further analysis showed that one in five children watched more than two hours of TV a day at both ages. The researchers suggested that if children reduced their TV viewing by the age of five, then the risk of behavioural and social problems disappeared.

Dr Aric Sigman, an associate fellow of the British Psychological Society and author of a book on children and television, commented that TV 'is the greatest unacknowledged health threat of our time. The key stages of development are language acquisition and social skills and if they're displaced they may be irreplaceable. He added: 'Television is isolating. Children end up spending years in front of a screen instead of speaking and socialising with real children. As a result, they don't learn how to get on with other people. At the same time, faster editing with

colours, zooms and a constant stream of images has been linked to a lower attention span.

Connexions to be funded by local authorities ('CYP Now', 24.10.07) From April 2008 instead of receiving direct government grants, Connexions are to receive their funding through local authorities.

And finally ... A revealing surprise in Nottingham classroom ('The Sunday Times', 11.11.07). Rod Liddle reported the case of a mother booking a gorillagram to turn up at her son's school, as a 16th birthday treat. Instead a woman dressed as a police officer marched into her son's class and ordered the boy onto all fours before walking him around the class on a lead. She then took off her clothes. Liddle wrote: 'At this point the teacher decided that the event had exceeded the boundaries of the national curriculum and called a halt to the proceedings.' *[Editor: I thought the KS 4 curriculum was more flexible these days?]*