

From home-school to school: a personal perspective

by John Joseph Hennessy

Being home educated through GCSE's was an interesting experience, for want of a more apt expression. There is, irrefutably, a certain advantage in studying towards such qualifications in a school, a point I never contended but similarly never considered sufficient reason to place myself in the system. I believed that I would benefit more from homeschooling, which offered me more freedom in my study. I didn't want to learn English literature alongside nineteen other kids my age, being told: 'in the exam, you write 'x' if they ask 'y', you write 'y' if they ask 'z', and if you don't follow this structure, you will fail.' Such an approach would undeniably extract the best results from the students but at this stage of my education I was more concerned with thinking for myself than receiving a slip of paper stamped with what our society considers 'good results'. This attitude was reinforced once I actually went to Sixth form.

I sat my exams as an external candidate, a smattering of GCSE's, IGCSE's and even a solitary O Level. I didn't prepare myself as well as I could; I was a long way from putting in maximum effort, and I hadn't even begun studying for my History or RE until about two months before I sat them. Consequently, I wasn't expecting wonderful results, nor was I overly concerned by that fact. I viewed GCSE's as relatively unimportant in comparison with the majority of my peer group, which meant that the A*, five B's and two C's (the last two for history and RE, unsurprisingly) that I eventually received were an achievement in my eyes regardless of common standards.

Up to the point at which I sat my exams, I hadn't considered where I would go from there, but, almost as an afterthought - a 'long shot' - I applied to the sixth form of the school which had accommodated me. This school was a state selective grammar, achieving exceedingly impressive results, with places in predictably high demand. I never expected to be given a place, but I was offered one on the condition that I got an A in my maths and a B in history and economics. In the end, I dropped to a B in my maths, and a C in history, but the school still gave me a place. It was only once I started that I realised just how different my education had really been up to this point. Certainly, I was expecting differences between myself and the other students, but perhaps a more superficial one than that which presented itself. I actually found myself reasonably similar in the way I dressed, walked, spoke, the things I talked about, the music I listened to: but I realised that the greatest contrast lay in the way I studied.

I was on my most even footing in maths; definitive answers generally breed a universally similar approach to the questions asking for them, and I worked in much the same way as the rest of the class. Economics and English provided two contrasting but intriguing differences. On the first day, my economics teacher provided each class member with a handout. It was, he claimed, a formula for answering the questions we'd be given in our exam. Already it appeared that the scope of this broad subject was being contained within a small boundary. From that point my teacher adopted an attitude of: 'If it's not in the course, we don't speak about it'. We passed up discussing some very interesting and enlightening points for the simple reason that the wording didn't appear in the omniscient syllabus. The book was our God. If it wasn't in the book, it wasn't worth knowing. We adhered to this approach, and didn't sway from it throughout the year. By the time my first exam arrived, there was a specific list of things to provide for each question in order to achieve the optimum grade.

English presented something different, which I noticed was more prominent in the class

taken by my more 'oldschool' teacher. He would often leave it down to his students to study portions of the textbook in their own time, or give less definitive guidelines for our instruction. The kids in his class quickly began to express their dislike of his methods, whereas I relished the change: it seemed that most students became confused when given a task to complete which required them to think outside the box of do's and don't's which every other teacher provided us with.

After about a week in the 6th Form, I discovered that the lowest achieving external applicant had gained 6 A*'s and 5 A's at GCSE, which led me to realise just how remarkable it was that I was in the school at all. In the last year, I've lost count of the number of times I've been told how amazing it is that I'm in such a 'good' school. But what does that 'good' mean? It generally means the school produces good grades. What does this mean? It occurred to me that many of the kids around me were not really much more intelligent than most, but they were given, and were able to follow, instructions in a more efficient way. If everyone was as well prepared for these exams there would be a far less difference between 'good' and 'not so good' schools. In which case, what do those impressive GCSE results mean? Perhaps, more than demonstrating the ability to think clearly and originally, they represent good training, and show an unwillingness to step outside the educational comfort zone into the realms of that-which-may-not-have-been-done-a-million-times-before. Not that you can really blame anyone for this, realistically: if it's what kids have been taught all their lives, it's to be expected.

Now that I've seen it from both sides, I feel that school represents a poorly defined understanding of education. If, as Chesterton says, "Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another", I begin to wonder what it is we are passing on. The coveted clutch of A* GCSEs of the 'good' school education doesn't seem worth the sad loss of cultural formation which so often goes with it.