LARKHALL'S CHILDREN

"IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHILD"

ANCIENT AFRICAN PROVERB
It is in their homes that children first learn to socialise; it is on their way to the shops that they first come to realise that not everyone thinks or behaves like their parents, and it is in school that they learn to connect all that together and steadily flex their mental powers. A quality education is like a three-legged stool that can balance on any surface, however rough, providing its legs – home, community and school – are of the same length.

Children are, first and foremost, children; only secondly are they school children. Yet politicians continue to emphasise the importance of school, at the expense of home and community. This troubles parents and grandparents. It scares teachers because, as they well know, it is children who come to school full of enthusiasm for what they see in the world around who do best in school.

Because we believe passionately that children’s education involves more than just what happens in school, we think it preferable not to attempt revitalising a conventional secondary school, but rather bring together St Saviour’s Infant School, St Saviour’s Junior School, and St Mark’s (two already being on one site, and one just across the road) so as to eventually create a single, all-through school for children aged 5-16 nominally called by us, for the purpose of this document, The Larkhall School.

A local resident, a former headmaster of a large comprehensive school and now Director of an international research organisation on how children learn, has recently published a book, *Overschooled but Undereducated*, which has excited several of us. This book has made us question the appropriateness of the age of eleven as the point of transfer between generally small primary schools, and much larger secondary schools. Most countries just don’t do this, and the English only started to do this (as a financial compromise) in 1944. The Scandinavians, and the Finns in particular, don’t even believe that there should be two different kinds of schools and have “all-through” schools from six or seven until the age of sixteen. In international tests Finnish pupils consistently outperform the English.

A report on Transition from primary to secondary school in nearby Bristol paints a worrying picture of how transfer at this age “reduces a significant minority of pupils’ confidence in learning, (leading them) to fail to progress as expected and can cause great trauma...” It goes on, “we were surprised to discover the extent to which the dominant school system has continued to reinforce what we call the ‘two tribes,’ the tribe of secondary teachers (with their emphasis on teaching subjects) and the tribe of primary teachers (with their emphasis on personal development). This is especially confusing for those children who “have developed an independent approach to learning in their primary schools (who) can have this compromised or even reversed in the larger, more complex environment of secondary school.”

This research should be taken very seriously. It is a fact of life that children are born naturally curious and so weave new ideas into their existing understanding. The essence of this is, as Confucius once said, that if we simply give a child an answer...
that satisfies us (the adult) but which means nothing to the child, the child will take no notice and simply forget it. However, if we take time out and show a child why something is as it is, the child will most likely remember it, but – and here is the critical thing – if you allow the child to experiment for itself it will not only remember what happens, but understand it as well. This has a technical name, Cognitive Apprenticeship – in the simplest terms it means learning in the way that apprentices have always learnt by mixing theory with practice. The children of the Lambridge Valley deserve teachers who understand this and can get children to be ever better at thinking for themselves, rather than simply remembering stuff they have been told.

To understand the case we make for a 5-16 school in Larkhall you need to appreciate how the present situation developed. In the latter part of the 19th century, when many of today's so-called 'primary schools' were built, they were all-through Elementary Schools offering courses from the age of five through to 14, 15 or even 16. Government thought such schools challenged the traditional grammar school and in 1902 forced the elementary schools to stop teaching any pupil over the age of fourteen.

Then, in 1944, public pressure to develop secondary education for everyone (when the country was effectively bankrupt by the War), led to the catastrophic decision to fund this by taking three years away from the elementary school, and adding this to just one more year’s worth of money to create a four-year secondary school. Many older residents of Larkhall may have suffered from this. Schools such as St Saviour’s, as with other elementary schools were told to do in the seven years from five to eleven what they had earlier done in ten years in the elementary school. By the late 1950s Walcott Secondary School for Girls was reopened in Larkhall as St Mark’s – a secondary modern school for local boys and girls who did not qualify for a grammar school place.

It all changed again in the early 1970s when Bath turned each of its secondary schools into comprehensive schools for pupils from 11-18. St Mark’s, maybe because of its reputation as a former secondary modern school and at a time when many of the parents came to assume that an independent school education balanced education becomes impossible.

From this we have concluded that it is important to retain the St Mark’s site, but not in its present form as an 11-16 school. To us the reason is all too clear; the people of Larkhall and the Valley need reassurance that the years from 11 to 16 will be more inspiring, more challenging and more relevant to their children than what such a ‘restrictive’ secondary school has not so far been able to achieve.

The intended closure of St Mark’s provides the people of the Lambridge Valley with an opportunity to develop, in the very heart of Larkhall, a single school which could build on these insights which emerge from the research on children’s learning. Firstly, in the earliest years of life, the nature of the young brain means that children learn incredibly quickly by following the example of people they admire. In this sense they are clone-like in their learning, something which over the millions of years that it has taken our species to evolve means that we are able to learn very quickly. The second finding has only become clear in the past ten years through the use of expensive brain imaging technologies. It is this: the so-called ‘angst’ of the teenage blues is an essential biological adaptation whereby there is something going on in the teenage brain that forces it to rebel against simply being told something, and to struggle (often against parents and teachers) for the space to do it for itself.

While it is quite natural for youngsters below the age of ten to sit still and listen to a teacher, it is almost unnatural for healthy adolescents to do the same thing. To over-pressure them to do this is actually to deny their biological need to start taking responsibility for their own activities, and actually trivialises the very youngsters it claims to help.

1. An issue that affects St Saviour’s Junior School as well.
Formal schooling has therefore to start a dynamic process through which pupils are progressively weaned of their dependence on teachers and institutions, and given the confidence to manage their own learning. Within an all-through school this becomes a continuous, and seamless, process right through from the age of five to sixteen provided, and delivered by, teachers who have both technical subject knowledge and considerable expertise in both pedagogy and in child development. Such an all-through school would have a unique opportunity to redirect the more generous resources currently assigned to older pupils and so front-load the system that all children would be progressively prepared to take ever more responsibility for their own learning.

To rupture a child’s schooling at the ages of seven and eleven does untold harm, but to continue treating young people at 16 and above as school pupils is to so go “against the grain of the brain” that it wears out the schools, and turns off the youngsters themselves. It would be better for the education of the post 16s, for this to take place in colleges which, by extending the principles of cognitive apprenticeship, offer courses that ground rigorous theory in continuous practical experience, and through the use of distance learning programmes broaden the concept of learning far beyond the walls of any college.

In its determination to ‘sort out’ the problem of excess places in its secondary schools BaNES is in danger of missing a magnificent opportunity to completely reshape it’s provision for the bringing up of its children in the future. The Lambridge Valley could show how this might be done.

Remember this: without the spontaneous energy of teenagers the Lambridge Valley would be like a well-tended garden minus the singing of birds and the buzzing of bees... and we all know what that means in terms of damaging the sustainability of life.

We, the undersigned, have issued this brochure in advance of inviting hundreds of the citizens of Larkhall and neighbouring areas to sign a petition to BaNES.

Councillor Richard Maybury
Councillor Bryan Chalker
Julia Bowen
Nick Bird
Victoria Wells
Katherine Faraway
Paul and Clare Younger
Edward and Rachel Leigh-Wood
Mike Langbridge
John and Anne Abbott
Joanna and Christopher Wright
Lesley Bees
Paul Hollin

ACTION!
IF THE PEOPLE OF LARKHALL ARE TO SEIZE THIS OPPORTUNITY THEY WILL HAVE TO ACT SPEEDILY AND WITH DETERMINATION. THE FORMAL CONSULTATION ENDS ON MAY 30TH, BY WHICH TIME ALL VIEWS HAVE TO BE REGISTERED. BANES HAS ORGANISED A FORMAL MEETING TO DISCUSS THEIR PROPOSALS AT ST MARK’S AT 7PM ON THE 12TH MAY. WE WILL HOLD A PUBLIC MEETING TO SET OUT OUR ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL AT THE NEW ORIEL HALL ON SATURDAY THE 22ND MAY AT 7:30PM, AND WILL HAVE CIRCULATED THIS DOCUMENT TO AS MANY HOMES AS POSSIBLE BEFORE THAT DATE.

Copies of Overschooled but Undereducated can be obtained from Mr B’s Emporium, 14/15 John St; from Langbridge Home Hardware Store, or from any good bookshop.