



# THE SUNDAY TIMES

## THE SCHOOLS BLOG



### **Are our schools teaching despair?**

The other day, I was at a meeting in a London school's attractive and popular library. From where I was sitting I had a clear view of a side wall where I noticed a poster informing me that "by 2015, India's population will be the largest in the world". I could not read the smaller text, but I am sure it went on to tell how if I changed my way of life or made a donation I could make a difference. Beside it, another poster hung; this one was bleakly titled, "World Drug Use" with the inevitable emaciated features staring out accusingly at me. On the same wall, I saw a poster stating "For richer, for poorer - Peru's poverty crisis", and yet another headed, "South Africa's troubled schools." Finally, my conscience now staggering a little under the repeated blows, I was alarmed to learn from the last poster that "Pollution from cruising planes kills 8000 people every year."

Schools have many obligations to the boys and girls they teach. One, certainly, is to open their minds to the lives of others, to help them understand how the "milk of human kindness" connects every member of the human race with each other. When John Donne, Dean of St Paul's, wrote that "no man is an island" in his celebrated devotion nearly four hundred years ago, he made the same point. In thousands of ways, our shared humanity should make us closer, even when it often seems to drive people apart. Supporting charities, and alerting children to the lifestyles experienced in other countries, are ways of creating this sense of shared humanity.

But are we in danger of creating a sense of hopelessness, too? If on every wall she passes, the same child sees a different urgent request - a polar bear on a fragment of melting ice, a starving child, a mutilated war victim, pitted faces of victims of child abuse, refugees begging for bottled water from pitiless army trucks, impossibly huge numbers grimly foreshadowing the world's population in ten years' time - then will she really be inspired? Or will she, in some small but incremental way, begin to feel defeated? And if defeated, then will she also feel that the things that she really could do well - support her friends, help her family, be kind to the people around her, and so forth - don't really count? If the world is about to overheat, or a million people are suffering in a far-off place, what use is a kind word or generous act here in London? Why bother with anything?

As far back as 1852, Dickens was mocking the way in which charitable preoccupation with the far-away can sap the life from the close-at-hand. In *Bleak House*, Mrs Jellyby famously neglects her family as she devotes herself to "educating the natives of Borrioboola-Gha, on the left bank of the Niger." Dickens describes her as having "handsome eyes - though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if they could see nothing nearer than Africa!" Her own daughter, Caddy, is employed as a secretary writing her mother's countless letters - but enjoying no love, attention nor indeed childhood of her own. The exploited, sulky girl, drained by her mother's demands, finally blurts out, "I wish Africa was dead!"

What danger is there that we, in the twenty-first century, are also breeding a generation who cannot bear to heed the endless exhortations and warnings, overloaded with dread and guilt?

The day after I had been reading the doom-laden posters (of which, I know, there will be an equal number in my school, too) I attended an assembly. Tim Grandage, once of HSBC, spoke to the middle school at King's about street children in Calcutta. In an incredible story, he described, with matter of fact simplicity, the way that he and his wife had established a charity to house, feed and educate as many of these children as possible. With one slide after another, he showed to us how determination and simple kindness transformed every child they had taken in. What in early photographs appeared broken and brutalised children were shown in later slides to have grown into artists, teachers, rugby players and chefs.

He didn't create alarm, he didn't ask for money: he just showed what he and his wife had done close to their home in India. The distant became near, the despair became hope, and pupils left with a sense that they could, after all, make a difference.