

## Dancing with eyes wide open: On the role of nostalgia in education

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Nostalgia rightly elicits suspicion, even derision, for to give oneself up to longing for something from the past runs the risk of compromising one's capacity to act effectively in the present. But this does not make nostalgia, *by definition*, either sentimentally reactionary or wistfully unreflective. On the contrary, in the education context and elsewhere, it can be the exact opposite, though its influence, which is legitimate, particularly when articulated through the optic of tradition, needs to be constrained and justified by good argument and, where relevant, sound empirical research.

**Keywords:** nostalgia; tradition; education policy

### Backstory

Articles always have a backstory. Mine is no exception, though it has two subplots, which is maybe one more than most. These feature a very contrary book review and an extremely prejudiced broadsheet comment piece, each of which I experienced as a provocation when I first read it.

The book review appeared nearly two years ago in the *Irish Independent* newspaper. Its author was the subversive literary critic, Kevin Keily, whose target was a pair of just-published reissues of selections of Seamus Heaney's poetry. Tearing disparagingly into Heaney's usually unchallenged high reputation, which Keily sourly asserted owed more to sponsorship by Faber and Faber than poetic genius, his review acidly concluded that the famous Nobel laureate was chiefly a 'peddler of nostalgia' whose poems 'are like exhibition notes in an agricultural museum' (Keily, 2014: 22). The comment piece, published just before Christmas 2015 in the UK's *Guardian*, was written by one of its weekly columnists, Rafael Behr, who argued that 'nostalgia, and its fashion sponsor kitsch, have colonised more of our [political] culture than is healthy ... [Being] intrinsically conservative, it dwells on loss and seeks comfort in false memory' (Behr, 2015: 38).

These contributions annoyed me because each seemed so negatively prejudiced about nostalgia, which I have long considered to be an important aspect of the critical imagination, choosing entirely to trivialize any appeal it might have by ignoring completely its virtues, which are well documented. For sure, nostalgia is deservedly suspect, inasmuch as to long for something from the past always runs the risk of compromising the ability to act effectively in the present (Atia and Davies, 2010: 181). But this does not make it, *by definition*, either sentimentally mausolean, as Keily implies, or falsely reactionary, as Behr insists. On the contrary, as I plan to show, in the education context and elsewhere, nostalgia can be the exact opposite, though it is always on the back foot when it tries to be.

Like such cognate terms as 'romantic' and 'utopian', nostalgia's positive aspects have become obscured by the fact that as a word it is commonly used – as evidenced above – as a derogatory

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adjective or noun. There is good reason for this, as I will indicate. But, it is not remotely the whole story, and maybe not even the better part of it, which is why I intend to explore here some of the advantages of viewing education through the prism of nostalgia, which I roughly define as a mode of reflection in which certain features of the past are yearningly evoked as a means always to critique the present and sometimes to anticipate an improved future. Such evocations unfailingly articulate with highly favoured recollections, many of which, usually innocently, but occasionally provocatively, rewrite and rationalize the distant or recent past in order to show that it has lessons to teach us in the here and now. In education, in the UK, a good example of such reminiscence is the repeated call to restore academic selection and streaming to the secondary phase of state schooling, usually associated with appeals to preserve and add to the number of grammar schools in England, most of which were phased out and replaced by comprehensives in the late 1960s and 1970s (on all of this, see Kerckhoff *et al.*, 1996, especially Chapter 12). Or, if it is not alteration of this sort that is encouraged by nostalgia, entailing a return to the past, it is consolidation and fortification of present circumstances. For some forms of nostalgia have no serious reforming ambitions, as they seek instead to accentuate an existing way of thinking and acting that is judged to be under threat. In education, in the UK, an illustration of this tendency is the claim regularly made, frequently by right-wing critics of progressive education, about the superiority of rote-learning and whole-class instruction (see, for example, Macleod, 1996).

Those forms of nostalgia that showcase particular educational traditions, with which each of my examples here connect, and about which I will also say more later, can equally recall to mind unfulfilled or frustrated desires for particularly ambitious states of affairs, like for instance, the setting up of a system of schooling that promotes genuine equality of opportunity, entailing the abandonment of high-stakes testing and the outlawing of all private forms of provision. In seeking to redeem or augur grand designs of this kind, such traditions constitute a form of anticipatory consciousness that has close affinities with utopianism, and vocabularies of hope in general, as I have sought to show elsewhere (Halpin, 2003).

This whole process does not just entail drawing admiring attention to currently marginalized or long-forgotten ways of doing things. It can also focus approvingly on a neglected individual or source – such as a key text or personality – with the aim of restoring one or other or both to a position of influence. Two examples that are associated strongly with my own intellectual biography are Thomas More's *Utopia*, which this year is celebrating its 500th birthday, and Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels' mid-nineteenth-century *The Communist Manifesto*; and in discussions of school policy, I regularly acknowledge approvingly insights derived from John Dewey's century-old *Democracy and Education*. Most people I know who think seriously about education and other things are also able to identify long-ago published books and comparable textual sources that similarly continue to impact positively on their thinking and attitudes, suggesting that what I am writing about here is not idiosyncratic fancy.

There are also literary nostalgias of place, of which James Joyce's paean to early twentieth-century Dublin in *Ulysses* must be one of the best fictional examples. Peter Ackroyd's (2000) biography of London is a more recent non-fiction illustration of this kind of writing, as is Luc Sante's (2015) recently published account of Paris's bohemian past. On the other hand, Raymond Williams's (1973) cultural critique of rural sentimentalism in his masterwork *The Country and the City* warns us of the dangers of taking such nostalgias of place too far, notably when we write into them versions of reality that are easily falsified by actual historical and social circumstances.

And then there are musical nostalgias, of which we all have personal favourites, which may include Elgar's 'Nimrod' theme from his set of 14 *Enigma Variations*, which features at every UK Armistice Commemoration; and, less mournfully, Elton John's popular song 'Goodbye Yellow

Brick Road', which Bernie Taupin, who wrote the lyric, says is about how to live successfully in a more tranquil setting than the one offered by rock-and-roll celebrity.

I am especially aware of intellectual forms of nostalgia because, as I have indicated, I am prone to them, having intermittently since 2001 raised from the dead various ancient men of letters (including Thomas More, William Hazlitt, and Michel de Montaigne) in order to explain their relevance to contemporary education debate (see Halpin, 2001; Halpin, 2011; and Halpin, 2015). Indeed, the more I think about all of this it becomes clear to me that I have a partiality explicitly to think and act on the basis of ideas self-consciously gleaned from either very ancient or more recent pre-twentieth-century sources. But this is not particular to me.

For we all do this because it is impossible entirely to escape the influence of the past. It is just that we are not sufficiently aware of how most of the ideas we hold dear – not only about education, but about life in general – go back a very long way, and often so far back that we have lost touch with their origins, especially when they feature strongly in our personal and collective assumptive worlds. I am talking here about a form of received wisdom or a culture held in common that we habitually, but selectively, draw on. And I am acknowledging too, as Freud supposes, that we unconsciously and unavoidably live through sets of repressed meanings created a very long time ago, mostly during childhood, which we can only hope currently to modify partially, and always slowly and with great effort.

It is not just then that we all keep reinventing the past; it is also the case that the past relentlessly interpenetrates the present, a fact that partially explains why it is very difficult to write down or speak a genuinely original thought or even to define what one might look like. It also accounts for the authority that aspects of the past have on our thoughts and actions, though the key question neither asked nor answered enough is why certain selections from history – particular nostalgic moments and sources – exert a greater and persistent hold on education policymakers than others. The grammar school question, to which I alluded briefly a moment ago, is an extreme but highly relevant case of this, which is why I will discuss it more thoroughly towards the end of this article.

## Meaning and effects

Look up the English word 'nostalgia' and you will speedily discover that it is based on a Greek compound, consisting of νόστος (nóstos), defined as 'homecoming', and ἄλγος (álgos), meaning 'pain' or 'ache'; and that its early history – in the 1830s – was associated with military medical diagnosis, specifically to describe the intense homesickness felt by some soldiers and sailors on active service in faraway places, whose symptoms included a state of fever and extreme lassitude. Although its definition has widened a lot since then, nostalgia's links with the yearning need therapeutically to re-engage with something that is lost, or from which one is reluctantly parted, remains.

Not surprisingly, therefore, it is a term that features prominently in modern-day experimental psychology and psychoanalytical practice. Relevant research in the first of these fields (Sedikedes *et al.*, 2004) highlights, for example, how nostalgia's yearning aspects, if satisfied in acceptable ways, can heighten people's positive emotions, serving as a coping mechanism that helps them to feel better about themselves. Other investigations have drawn attention to the ways nostalgic reminiscences can perform a restorative function for individuals suffering from acute loneliness by offering renewed visions of social connectedness. Further studies suggest that nostalgic remembrances can also help to increase people's self-esteem and perceived meaning in life, and even assist them better to buffer existential threats. While we are not always told in this research what kinds of nostalgia are more or less likely to have particular effects, the message is clear:

nostalgia can sometimes be highly beneficial emotionally at the personal level, so giving the lie to Rafael Behr's one-eyed claim I cited earlier that it always dwells pathologically on loss and seeks comfort only in false memory. In this connection, I am conscious of the way fondly articulated remembrances of the personalities and teaching styles of individual teachers with whom they once came positively into contact shape the expectations of young new recruits to teaching, helping them to construct an idealized image or role model of the sort of teacher they would like to become (on this, see Moore, 2004). A similar process, of course, informs the outlooks of parents about the schools their children attend.

Behr's extremism, on the other hand, does give rise to an important health warning: indulging in excessive nostalgia is dysfunctional, often causing those who embrace it too enthusiastically to invent castles in the air that do not exist, obscuring concurrently the truth of those on earth that do. And I am not writing here about the convulsive surges of long-lost memories that Oliver Sacks dramatically encountered and labelled as 'incontinent nostalgia' in his post-encephalic patients overexcited by L-Dopa (Sacks, 1986: 158f). I am referring instead to such seemingly benign phenomena as the UK's highly popular television costume drama, *Downton Abbey*. Its parable of humble below-stairs contentment in an English stately home in the 1920s encourages viewers nostalgically to ignore the nasty reality that was then the life of being 'in service', which entailed servants being treated as drudges (Lethbridge, 2013), concurrently propagating a view of the landed gentry that belies the negative social consequences of their considerable unearned wealth and income, and the class privileges its members generally enjoy. It constructs them not as acquisitive reactionaries, but rather as bountiful benevolences. So, while *Downton Abbey* is unquestionably high-end popular entertainment, it is also, simultaneously, a form of hegemonic bourgeois ideology cleverly disguised as inter-class congeniality (Gramsci, 1971), making it a good example of 'retrogressive nostalgia', which is nearly always a vehicle for inventing mythical fairy-tale societies that are devoid of conflict and vested interests, in which everyone lives happily ever after. The *Guardian* columnist Suzanne Moore satirically, but accurately, describes such a society as one in which people 'work for ever, have a partner for ever, and have a perfect child at a perfect time in a perfect home, all held together with the fantasy of romance and the repackaging of the domestic as leisure, not work: Baking! Sewing! Tidying up!' (Moore, 2016: 5). I contrast this with 'reflective nostalgia', which is far more aware socially, often in an ironic and always critical way (on this, see Boym, 2001 and Davis, 1979).

*Downton Abbey*, of course, is not a drama about nostalgia. Rather, it is nostalgia. Consider, then, by contrast, a very insightful drama that deliberates and critiques nostalgia itself. Brian Friel's famous play *Dancing at Lughnasa* contemplates the death of a way of life in 1930s rural Ireland that both supports and stifles the lives of its characters. It is a nostalgic elegy for humanity as it encounters a disruptive modern, increasingly industrialized, world. The women characters in it certainly experience ecstasy – chiefly through dancing – but only fitfully, and ultimately bleakly. It is one of the tricks Friel plays on us, subtly reflecting nostalgia's double life, that audiences experience the drama as both a wholly warm tribute to the 'five brave Glenties women' and a lament about their ultimately unfulfilled lives. Michael's mesmerizing final curtain speech takes this theme on directly. What might be felt in production as a celebration of melancholic memory, Michael reminds us, is actually something much harsher:

There is one memory of that time that visits me most often. And what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact. In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory ... When I remember it, I think of it as dancing – dancing with eyes half closed because to open them would break the spell.

(Friel, 1990: 71; my emphasis)

## Nostalgia and tradition

Friel's metaphor of dancing with eyes half closed is one I want slightly to park, but still hold on to, as I move towards thinking about one of nostalgia's most specialist cultural embodiments, that of tradition, which exerts a powerful and distinctive influence on how education is constructed and practised, not to mention on how people behave in other major areas of social life, notably the sphere of politics.

Having written earlier that it is difficult to be original, it occurs to me that what I am about to write next may constitute a moment of fame, because I have not been able to identify a single source during my searches among the extensive academic literature on nostalgia that directly and systematically articulates it with tradition and its affiliate traditionalism. But then I did not make such links from the other direction when I first started to write about the role of tradition in education over fifteen years ago. In 2000, I published in the *Oxford Review of Education* a theoretical paper that discusses the different ways that contrasting educational traditions influence the construction of teachers' professional and institutional identities (Halpin and Moore, 2000). Its five-thousand words contain not a single mention of nostalgia. The only possible explanation for this absence must be that the literature about tradition at the time did not either, which is why I then missed the link, and which I will try to make up for now.

A working definition of tradition offered by the cultural historian Raymond Williams will help the process along. This draws attention to how tradition amounts to 'significant received and recovered elements of the past which represents a desired continuity' (Williams, 1981: 187). Eric Hobsbawm, writing subsequently, agrees with Williams about tradition, describing it as denoting 'particular sets of practices or embodiments of practice that seek to inculcate certain values and norms [and which] ... attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past' (Hobsbawm, 1983: 1). Continuity is a key term in both these interpretations, as it is, of course, where nostalgia is concerned.

But there is a crucial difference. Generally speaking, narratives of nostalgia entail positive remembrances that embrace all manner of things, and usually in ways that are easy-going and non-threatening – from John Lewis Christmas advertising, to the amateur spirit of the Olympic ideal, and retail-free Sundays. But the more specialist nostalgic evocation of a particular tradition nearly always incorporates power of one kind or another, and so possesses much greater virulence, posing even a direct challenge to how some people think and act in specific contexts. Traditions, in other words, and more often than not, seek explicitly to mobilize a bias in a way that nostalgia regularly does not. As such, they are often prescriptive, and rarely promulgated on a 'take it or leave it' basis.

The nostalgic reciting of certain patriotic traditions, for example, such as those that stress nationhood and heritage, facilitates the mobilization for government of measures that privilege the national interest; while the nostalgic advocacy in the UK at the moment by many ordinary members of the British Labour Party of the ethical socialist political tradition contrasts markedly with the social democratic outlook espoused by the majority of its members of parliament. More disturbingly, certain domestic traditions are nostalgically appealed to by particular kinds of men to justify the continued subjugation of women, both in the home and in the workplace generally.

Sexist invocations of tradition of this last kind, which are used arbitrarily to reinforce unequal relations of power, are examples of what I understand by *traditionalism*, which I define as a way of arguing that appeals to the very notion of tradition itself to justify beliefs or actions that might be at other times deemed unacceptable (Giddens, 1994: 85). Again, this is not a feature of nostalgia *per se*, but it is a characteristic of its embodiment in tradition. For while persons of a nostalgic disposition rarely appeal to nostalgia itself to justify their mostly innocent preferences, traditionalists customarily cite tradition for their more contested ones.

In education, the division of school knowledge into subjects, the need for school uniform, and the value of rote-learning and 'teaching from the front' are often defended nostalgically by 'traditionalists' in precisely this way. They constitute a form of what I earlier called retrogressive nostalgia – a mode of thinking that studiously finds ways to avoid being self-critical because its exponents assume they are right by definition. In the first case the epistemological arbitrariness of subject boundaries is scarcely acknowledged; in the second no reference is made to the relatively short history of strict dress codes for school-age pupils; while in the third there is a neglect of the medieval social and cultural context within which 'learning by heart' was first appropriated as the most expedient way of communicating important religious truths in the absence of the mass publication of sacred and other texts.

What all this highlights is that getting any kind of reflective handle on the role played by nostalgia in education, and its embodiment especially in particular educational traditions, must entail interrogating the evidence that their advocates commonly deploy in making their cases, and too often take as read as they do so. Accordingly, what I am arguing for here is not the ending of tradition's nostalgic influence on educational reform, but rather a deeper, critical, and less traditionalist or fundamentalist engagement with it as relevant policy is considered and created. As Edward Robinson, commenting on the role of tradition in theological argument, rightly puts the matter: 'No human society can prosper without tradition, but tradition if it is to be kept in good heart needs constantly to be rescued from those who would preserve it from change. ... If it is to be kept in good health, it must be by a continuous process of organic renewal' (Robinson, 1987: 29 and 40f).

Such reconditioning is more likely to be successful if it starts out from the kind of definition of tradition that Eric Hobsbawm proffers, which I approvingly cited earlier. This draws attention to how traditions 'establish a continuity with a suitable historic past', which is achieved by drawing positive attention to 'particular sets of practices that seek to inculcate certain values and norms'. This description can be successfully applied to a wide range of well-known traditions in education, each of which persistently seeks, often via nostalgic entreaty, to influence the form, content, scope, and direction of education policy for schools. Three examples from the UK are especially illustrative of what I mean: the technical or vocational tradition is regularly nostalgically cited as an approach to school education that is better suited to preparing young people for employment; the progressive education tradition, on the other hand, is totally uninterested in training pupils for the world of work, being more anxious to promote an approach to learning from experience that places the child at the centre of the process, granting it rights over the form, content, and direction of what constitutes the curriculum; while the community education tradition promotes learning and social development work with individuals of all ages in defined localities using a range of formal and informal methods in which democratic processes are very much to the fore.

In drawing attention to these three educational traditions, I am entirely unconcerned on this occasion to evaluate either their singular or relative merits, being anxious rather to elucidate their broad natures, including crucially, after Hobsbawm, the values and practices they nostalgically embody, and to signal the need to enquire about the credibility of the evidence each draws on to influence public debate. For criss-crossing each of these well-known traditions, and most other ones operating in the education context, are sets of assumptions about the nature of curriculum knowledge, the purposes of schooling, the psychology of learning, and what counts as effective pedagogy, each of which articulates with nostalgically inflected answers to key questions: Should all pupils be initiated into the principles and procedures of particular high-status disciplines of public enquiry? Should schools offer a liberal or specialist education, or a mixture of the two? Should formal education be regarded as a continuous lifelong process or

should it be restricted to the early part of people's lives? What kind of pedagogic relationships foster high-quality outcomes? What are the best ways of grouping pupils for learning? And when, how, and why is it better to learn collaboratively rather than on one's own, and vice versa? The fact that three of these questions are about values suggests that good answers to them will depend on superior philosophical reflection; and the fact that the others are characteristically empirical points towards the need for answers to them to be found via sound enquiries of a social scientific kind. So, while the sorts of educational traditions I have identified are likely to continue to flourish, and rightly to feature strongly in people's nostalgic reflections about education, they must (to quote Anthony Giddens) 'more and more be contemplated, defended, sifted through, in relation to the awareness that there exists a variety of ways of doing things' (Giddens, 1994: 83).

### **Eyes wide open or half shut?**

Grasping the different ways particular educational traditions retain or struggle to maintain influence through nostalgic evocation reveals a lot about the fluctuating state of debate about the direction and content of national policy for schooling. Indeed, such nostalgia is an integral part, even a necessary element, of what this process is all about. Moreover, it is not something policy formulators can choose to opt out of. On the contrary, attempts to get away from nostalgia in education policy deliberation nearly always require those involved to hurry towards new versions of it.

Parallel tendencies, as Alistair Bonnett's excellent study of the politics of nostalgia points out, are evident elsewhere, as in postcolonial argument and anti-racist forms of radicalism (Bonnett, 2010: Chapter 3). To that extent, nostalgia, as Bonnett also tells us, is capable sometimes of being deeply countercultural, as it was once in the avant-garde rejections of Dadaism in the first decade of the last century. This same tendency is found in the student activism of the 1960s; and, more immediately, it is detectable too in the anti-capitalist arguments of the Occupy protesters. In education, particular nostalgic narratives about child-centred learning and democratic curricula can also challenge the status quo, calling it to account better for itself. Nostalgia, in other words, can be a powerful discourse of resistance, both in general and in education specifically (Strangelman, 1999: 743).

But, typically, it can also puzzle and divide us, as arguably is the case with the contrasting nostalgic rhetorics put about in Ireland a little while ago about how best to commemorate the centenary of its Easter Uprising: Were the Dublin insurgents perfect patriots? Or were they an unrepresentative minority of a minority engaged in a tragically insane act? What should the rebellion's place be in the title deeds of the Irish state? Could all the most important objectives of Irish nationalism have been achieved without the bloodshed and violence of 1916? Parallel questions, each infused by a special brand of nostalgically invoked 'British greatness regained', were a strong feature of the anti-EU campaigners' appeal to British electors to vote 'No' in the UK-wide referendum held earlier this year on membership of the European single market.

Such questions bring into sharp focus the way nostalgia is universal, contagious, and persistent. The slate cannot ever be wiped completely clean of it, as some naively articulated versions of postmodernism would have us think is possible. On the other hand, to recall Brian Friel, as we engage nostalgically with education's past, notably via the various traditions that exist about it, are our eyes half shut or fully open? In using history as a resource to make new policies for education, do we sentimentalize yesteryear, grounding our thoughts in a mode of retrogressive nostalgia; or is ours rather a subversive re-engagement with days gone by, founded on a form of backwards critical reflection? It surely ought to be the latter; because to opt for the former,

as Rafael Behr cautioned at the very beginning, is to run the danger of basing policy on a mixture of false memory and fantasy.

For an illustration of how badly wrong this process can go, consider the very recent re-engagement in England with the debate about the need to expand academic selection and encourage the provision of more grammar schools. Behind this debate, which interestingly never seems to go away, are legitimate questions about the maintenance of academic standards and the fostering of increased social mobility. On the further side of it too are the memories of individual working-class children whose grammar schooling once helped them up the ladder of opportunity. You are reading an article written by one of them. But neither my positive experience of being selected nor the asking of the right questions leads inevitably to the example of the Weald of Kent Grammar School in Tonbridge in the UK, which has decided to expand its provision by opening an annex nine miles away in Sevenoaks.

Whether to retain and increase the number of grammar schools is one of those questions in education in the UK where the evidence has almost ceased to matter, with the arguments in favour being heavily skewed by a form of retrogressive nostalgia in which supporters stubbornly refuse to think intelligently. Do they not know that poor children in selective Kent do worse in national league tables at GCSE and rich ones better in adjacent comprehensive counties? Do they not know either that today's grammars, in the vivid phrase of Sir Michael Wilshaw, chief inspector of UK schools, are 'stuffed full of middle-class kids' (Boffey, 2013)? Do they not know that, of the remaining 164 grammar schools, 161 have less than 10 per cent of their pupils eligible for free school meals; and that 98 of them have less than 3 per cent of children in receipt of the same benefit? And have they not heard what a former Conservative shadow education secretary, David Willetts, who one might expect to be on their side, has said about the issue: 'we must break free from the belief that academic selection is any longer the way to transform the life chances of bright poor kids. We have to recognize that there is overwhelming evidence that such selection entrenches advantage, it does not spread it' (Willetts, 2007).

However, I need to be careful in what I write here, because supporters of non-selective schooling similarly need open-mindedly to look at the research findings about the success or otherwise of their preferred organizational tradition and the values and ways of teaching it privileges. Do comprehensives provide diverse and inclusive curricula? Are their public examination results all that they should be? Is the quality of teaching that goes on in them of the best kind? Are girls disadvantaged in co-educational comprehensives? Of course such questions can be asked about any system of schooling, which is why both egalitarians (who favour the common school) and meritocrats (who advocate academic selection) have a *shared duty* to think critically about the traditions they nostalgically espouse, including being self-aware of their ideological inclinations, asking even if these compromise their willingness sometimes to look sincerely at the evidence that makes suspect their respective preferences. Neither the Left nor the Right possesses a monopoly of truth about anything, which means each is required to look hard at the evidence that both supports and queries the policies they respectively advocate about the organization of secondary schooling, and which they too often champion nostalgically in ways that are insufficiently self-critical.

This applies elsewhere, of course, taking in importantly discussions about effective teaching styles, which sometimes seem to this observer of them to veer close to arguments that are more about the ethics of education than about what we know empirically about how pupils best learn particular subject matter, in specific contexts, and for what purposes. Undoubtedly, ethics matter in this context. But we should also want to know if co-constructivism as a theory of learning, which enjoys many supporters, especially among teacher educators, has application in every case, or whether it is more relevant to some than others? Does it 'work', to put the



matter bluntly, and with what observable, even measurable, effects? And are rote-learning and high-stakes testing always the enemy of creativity, and so retrograde? Is there an optimum class size for different kinds of learning? Do each of whole-class instruction and teaching from the front deserve a bad name? When, specifically, is teaching subjects through integrated enquiry a good idea, and when might it be ill-advised? Was there ever a golden age of teacher autonomy; and, if there was, when exactly did it take place, and what effects for the better did it have on the quality of pupils' learning experience?

## Conclusion

Being nostalgic about education need not then be disabling; it can instead encourage highly invigorating debate. To be sure, nostalgia has a paradoxical, even contradictory, character: it can be reactionary or rebellious; it can be utilitarian or utopian; and it can be retrogressive or reflective. But its ubiquitous and persistent nature means it cannot be ignored, least of all abandoned. Indeed, in these anti-nostalgic, postmodern, and untraditional times of ours, during which it is sometimes said 'anything goes', and where the past is interpreted as mere pastiche and so empty of significance, nostalgia can remind us of what is worth arguing about, even fighting for. Thus conceived, it challenges us to ask what exactly it is that we most want to imagine, making it therefore a source of hopefulness, which is the best antidote I know of for radical self-doubt and those forms of intellectual homesickness that are experienced as a loss of direction or weakened resolve, capable of fostering not just lively discussion, but also inspirational foresight. As such, it is a voice from below that deserves to be taken account of, though always with one's eyes wide open.

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