

# WHAT I LEARNT AT SCHOOL

**AUTHOR MICHAEL MORPURGO HAS SOME FOND MEMORIES OF SECONDARY SCHOOL – ALONG WITH OTHERS THAT HE WOULD PREFER REMAINED PART OF HISTORY...**

From the age of 13 I boarded at the King's School in Canterbury. There was much about my schooling that I object to now, on all sorts of philosophical grounds, but I can also see that I was very lucky in many ways. The rooms were primitive, and the odour of cabbage, urine and showers pervaded the place – yet to live under the shadow of that beautiful cathedral, with such history all around you... it was often cold and uncomfortable, yes, but also an undeniable privilege.

Some of the teaching was dreadfully uninspiring though. Fear was the predominant feeling I had; the fear of failure. Despite the expectations placed on pupils as a result of attending such a prestigious educational establishment, I suspect it was the same whether you went to a state or private school at the time – and sadly, we seem to be coming round to that way of thinking again. It's a crushing approach to education, which certainly affected me; in academic matters I was mediocre or worse, so my natural response was to disengage, resulting in an even worse performance. Faced with something I knew I wouldn't be able to do well, I became reluctant to do it at all. That's a common, human trait, and we need to understand it in our schools – shaking off the legacy of that sense of failure is hard, and the sad truth is that some people don't manage it for the rest of their lives.

Happily for me, there were positive things happening outside the classroom to which I could cling. I was adequate or good at most sports, for example, and so that helped with my self-esteem – but it was singing that really made the difference.

Our choirmaster, Edred Wright, was one of those teachers who understands how to inspire all



## ↓ ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Morpurgo is one of the UK's best known and loved children's writers. In 2014, he will once again be judging the Wicked Young Writers' Award, which aims to inspire young people from 5-25 to use their writing to look at life a little differently. Entries can be submitted up to Monday 31st March, 2014 – find out more at [wickedyoungwriters.com](http://wickedyoungwriters.com).

children, regardless of their talent, or lack of it. That is such an important quality for an educator. I was a hopeless instrumentalist (and quite possibly the only child in the country ever to have spent six years struggling to scrape a pass at Grade One for the violin), but I could sing a little – and to do so in Canterbury cathedral, under Edred Wright's passionate guidance, was an amazing experience. I was never a great chorister, but I adored being a part of something so powerful and beautiful. As is so often the case with

enthusiasms one discovers at school, it somehow got lost when I moved on in life – but now, at the age of 70, I've found the courage to sing again in public. I perform concerts that weave my storymaking together with music making from groups like Voices at the Door, and Coopes, Boyes and Simpson. Sometimes I am able to join in with the singing as well as reading, and when I do, I feel 16 again – and it's wonderful.

It distresses me that we seem to be slipping back into a world in which standards are equated with the passing of tests. Championing the notion that you can force feed children and get the best out of them, simply shows that you don't understand children. I fear we are travelling down a road that's taking us to a false place. We may find later on that yes, the results are amazing. But what do 'results' mean? More young people at university? Higher grades?

We should be educating for life, not for a test six months down the road.

We have some extraordinary teachers out there. Thousands and thousands of them, giving their lives to this work. Then there are some who are less talented, and a few who are perhaps journeying through and not contributing much. It's probably the same in every profession – but a child has only one chance in life. It's our duty, then, to ensure that the best people teach them, and are well trained and rewarded. It's hard. And it's not cheap. But it is essential.

To be fair, our leaders are bright, and they do care, and they want the best for our children – but I fear they're going about it the wrong way. Alan Bennett in *The History Boys* says that teaching is about passing on what you love and what you care about. All good teachers – the ones like Edred Wright – know this, and we need to listen to them.