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Jamie's School Nightmare

Jamie Oliver's latest endeavour *Dream School* intrigued me. I was wary of the idea of celebrity experts/amateur teachers and that they could reengage some of the 50% of our students who leave school without five good GCSE's. On the other hand I thought it would be fascinating to see if knowledgeable and successful leaders in their respective fields could inspire students to stretch themselves.

And the students are fascinating. Classroom discipline is not so much bad as nonexistent; talking is constant, students freely use mobile phones and laptops and often simply get up and walk out without explanation.

Everyone, from the villain of the piece David Starkey to the ever friendly Jamie, struggles to bear the constant chattering, interruptions and distractions. Goodwill and enthusiasm are simply not enough to hold a class's attention.

At first glance it is forgivable to take Dr Starkey's view that these are over indulged, undisciplined kids in need of proper respect for authority and someone to tell them to sit still, be quiet and do what's asked of them.

But the behaviour was not confined to the classroom. And it's not brains these children lack. Indeed they all come across as incredibly sharp. It's the basic ability to engage, to dialogue.

The basic social skills of group conversation, dialogue with another person, absorbing information from one source at a time, have receded before a wave of mobile phones, ipods, TV and video games.

We know better than ever how important the first years, up to age 5, are in determining future academic performance. Maybe it is time to look at how we integrate what were until recently basic social and relationship skills into the first years of learning.

The modern mantra of teaching, espoused by Jamie's Headmaster, is that you have to find a way to engage the student as an individual.

But it is more than this. The average child will arrive at school having heard around 12 million words, a child from our most deprived communities will have heard only around 4 million. To overcome a real deficit in a student's ability to communicate and to impart knowledge at the same time is a herculean task. And that is what strikes me most about *Dream School*. Teachers do a job very few of us could do. It is an amazing vocation - there is a reason no one forgets a good teacher.

In all the reforms politicians want to undertake, encouraging more top talent into the profession and elevating the status of teachers have to be at the top of the list.