

overheard at the extra-curricula café

Finger-licking good.

Cappuccino: My granddaughter tells me that she pays for her school lunch with her finger.

Latté: What?

Cappuccino: Yes, her parents credit her account online, and in the dining room a machine recognises her fingerprint and debits her account accordingly.

Latté: Ah, 'The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ, Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.'

Cappuccino: Back in the old days I spent at least half-an-hour every Monday morning collecting and counting and recording dinner money.

Latté: And some child would insist that their mum hadn't given them any.

Cappuccino: Ah, I was wise to that. I would tell them to bring their coat from the cloakroom and we'd search for it in the pockets.

Latté: What if you didn't find it?

Cappuccino: Well nine times out of ten we did. And if not, a distressed and apologetic mum would come to the classroom door with the missing envelope, which she had found on the kitchen table when she got home from bringing her child to school.

Latté: What if that didn't happen?

Cappuccino: It was a phone call home, if they had a phone at home, which in those days they may not have had. By then half the morning had gone.

Latté: What if they didn't have a 'phone?

Cappuccino: The headteacher would dictate a letter to the secretary who would type it out and the child would take it home.

Latté: What if the letter went absent without leave, or got forgotten under their sandwich box?

Cappuccino: Then a copy would be sent by post.

Latté: By which time more money would have been spent on admin. than the cost of the dinner!

Cappuccino: Very possibly, but back in those days there was a set way of doing things.

Latté: Not like today: the Ofsted goalposts come with wheels as an essential accessory.

Cappuccino: Back then was a golden age where headteachers were gods. There was no national curriculum and it was quite possible to get through an entire career without seeing an inspector. And the nearest we got to an attainment target was the staff darts team.

Latté: I don't believe there ever was a golden age. Every age is a mixture of hope and fear, triumph and disaster, joy and sorrow.

Cappuccino: People say that our present Secretary of State for Education is creating an education system from fifty years ago. I'm not sure that's such a bad thing?

Latté: Well, if it was appropriate for the nineteen fifties, than it won't be appropriate now because society has changed.

Cappuccino: But everything was much better then. Everybody knew their place.

Latté: They did, and it's called social immobility! Could your view, and that of politicians, be coloured by the fact that the nineteen fifties is when you were growing up? Doesn't everyone want to recreate their childhood days?

Cappuccino: But surely things have deteriorated over our life time?

Latté: 'All may change but Jesus never; glory to His name.' This notion of a golden age is fool's gold; like the end of the rainbow – you can't ever reach it.

Cappuccino: Maybe you are right, but I used to quite enjoy adding up the dinner money, all those florins in piles of ten.

Latté: Florins eh? Not a very efficient use of time. Ofsted would disapprove.

Cappuccino: This was long before Ofsted was born.

Latté: Think of all those valuable teaching hours you lost. Probably twenty hours a year.

Cappuccino: Which means that children every year now get the equivalent of four extra days of education!

Latté: So standards must have risen – and all down to new technology.

Cappuccino: There's one thing that concerns me though.

Latté: What's that?

Cappuccino: I am told that all the initiatives of the last forty years haven't made a significant difference in standards overall.

Latté: Yes I know. It's an inconvenient truth if ever there was one.

Cappuccino: What's the answer?

Latté: I don't know, but government could have saved itself a shed-load on money by not doing things. No literacy strategy. No numeracy strategy. No national curriculum. No league tables. No Ofsted.

Cappuccino: Ah hah!

Latté: What amusing about that?

Cappuccino: It sound like you've put your finger on it, so to speak. ■

