



School holidays: where freedom ends

So the Supreme Court ruled against Jon Platt, the Isle of Wight parent who took his child out of school during term time to go to Disneyland.

There's a part of me that sympathises with Mr Platt. Why should the state trump the rights of a parent? Isn't this a case of over-reach? And he's definitely right that holidays are massively cheaper out of term time.

On the surface, his case is hard to answer. To do so, you have to have an eye at a community wider than yourself.

School is one of the only chances a child has to move up in the world, to get educated, and we know three things:

- i. attendance matters on an individual level. The child who attends 98% of the time does better than the child who attends 90% of the time.
- ii. Attendance matters on a 'classroom' level. It's not going to be a case that 'just one child' is out for a bit. It would become a 'free for all', with a new norm of low attendance, teachers more often having to go back over work they'd covered the week before etc.
- iii. The more deprived a child is, the less the parent ensures high levels of attendance. The more the rule gets broken, the more it'll have a disproportionate effect on those lower down the socio-economic scale, who are already massively disadvantaged, as they'll feel even more entitled to skip attendance.

The move most likely to have entrenched the gap in attainment between rich and poor would have been to sanction in-term holidays, as Mr Platt asked.

Just take the statistics behind his argument: he talks up his child's 92% attendance ratio. Now 92% might sound a lot but it isn't really. 92% attendance is pretty rubbish. In a school year of 200 days, that's over three weeks of not turning up. No school will ever be considered as outstanding by OFSTED if the average attendance is less than 96%. But 92% is a lot in a world where you don't actually think that school matters that much.

I think it does. This is, of course, 'school-ist'. There's an argument for saying it's more important to have a childhood in which you went to Disneyland than one where you went to school 100% of the time during the school term. It is possible to wish for a world where there was a more relaxed attitude to school attendance and accepting lower educational attainment as a consequence.

But I don't think that's an acceptable turn of events.

On a personal level, it's a pain. There are three school holidays, Christmas, Easter and summer, and it's not like I can take Christmas or Easter off, so there are only about six weeks a year when I can actually go on holiday. But that's just the deal if we believe that education is the most important thing we can give our children.

April 2017. Thought for the Train is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. www.surbitonchurch.org.uk. You can find this online at <http://surbitonchurch.org.uk/category/thought-for-the-train/>