

# Education & Culture

Irina Tyk

EDUCATION

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Irina Tyk

## FAMILY EDUCATION TRUST

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# FOREWORD

**There seems to be widespread agreement that something is seriously wrong with our educational system.** Dr Johnson once said that every generation of old people feels that the younger generation is less knowledgeable than they were when they finished their education. Johnson was one of the wisest men this country has ever produced, and of course it is true that there is a universal tendency to see our own youthful days as a golden age, with everything going to the dogs since then.

However, the present crisis in education is real enough and not the result of looking at the past through rose-coloured spectacles. Employers repeatedly tell us that young people are emerging from schools and universities lacking even the basic skills required in the modern workplace, forcing employers to look increasingly to China, India and other countries for skill-sets that used to be common here. Universities are being forced to teach basic literacy and composition, as undergraduates come to them unable to write an essay. Secondary schools complain that they are having to cover work that should have been done in primary school, like reading and simple maths. Most distressingly perhaps, primary school teachers complain that they are confronted by more and more very young children who are so ill-disciplined and disruptive as to actually present a threat to their peers. The number of exclusions – *from primary schools* – is now a cause of concern.

It was against this backdrop of serious and sustained problems in education that a group of people connected with the think-tank Civitas set up the New Model School Company in 2003. The intention was to establish schools where traditional pedagogy would be accompanied by high standards of discipline and high expectations of the children. One of the first members of our little group suggested that I should contact Irina Tyk, asking if she would join us. As the Head of one

of North London's most successful and oversubscribed preparatory schools, it would have been entirely understandable if she had felt unable to take on anything else. However, there is an old saying that if you want something done you should ask a busy person, and Irina Tyk accepted the invitation immediately. She remains a governor of the New Model School and has played a vital role in helping to establish and maintain high standards in both our full-time and supplementary schools, having run our first summer school for children living in the East End of London together with her husband George Tyk in 2005.

Civitas has published two books by Irina Tyk: *The Butterfly Book*, a phonics-based reading and writing course, and *The Butterfly Grammar*. *The Butterfly Book* had been circulated, in a privately printed edition, since 1991. When the Civitas edition appeared in 2007, the *Daily Mail's* education correspondent Sarah Harris wrote an article about the method's long track record of success, used with children from all sorts of backgrounds, that resulted in over 1,000 orders in three weeks from parents and grandparents who were all desperate to do something to help their children to master literacy. The purpose of *The Butterfly Grammar* is to teach those rules that govern the way in which we place words together in sentences to convey meaning. For over thirty years now we have been hearing from educational 'experts' that these nit-picking rules spoil the whole experience of education for children; that children should learn to express themselves freely, without being held back by trivial considerations of spelling and punctuation. Unfortunately these 'experts' have acquired a stranglehold over the educational establishment, with predictable results. Thousands of young people find the door to the library of the world's literature is locked against them. For many people now – including many adults – there is no possibility of enriching their understanding of life through a novel by Jane Austen or a sonnet by Shakespeare.

One of the things that most impressed me about *The Butterfly Grammar* was Irina Tyk's insistence that the rules of grammar are not optional extras, only considered important by petty-fogging minds. They are fundamental to our understanding of the world, because the way in which we speak and write reflects the way in which we think. Confusion of thought and confusion of expression go together. We are not doing children any favours by sparing them a rigorous training in grammar, because the child will eventually emerge into the adult world 'free of logic, clarity – and incidentally free of punctuation'.

What will immediately impress the reader of the following address, which was given to the Annual General Meeting of the Family Education Trust in 2008, is Irina Tyk's insistence that education is essentially a process of moral formation. This point has been made by all of the great thinkers about education since the days of the ancients, but it has almost disappeared from the modern, official conception of the purpose of education – except in so far as teaching children about their carbon footprint can be regarded as a moral purpose. 'There is all the difference in the world between teaching an honest mind rather than a dishonest one', writes Irina Tyk. She sees it as one of the goals of a good education to encourage 'courteous dissidence': to teach the child to think and act independently of the crowd, 'to read a book while his classmates play football, to speak without swearing when swearing is the language of his peers'.

The use of the term dissidence is highly appropriate in the current educational environment. Irina Tyk writes of the extraordinary level of central control that is now imposed upon schools: teachers are directed by central government to an extent never before seen in this country. They are expected to be social workers, propagandists, police officers – anything except purveyors of discrete bodies of knowledge to their pupils. It is significant that the word 'education' does not appear in the names of the government departments that deal with schools and universities.

What makes this central control even more destructive is the way in which Whitehall seems to pick up on all of the worst ideas about education and impose them on every school in the country, so that those who are trying to keep alive a traditional view of education as something other than solving social problems and hitting politicians' targets do indeed feel like dissidents living under a totalitarian regime. It would be an exaggeration to describe English books with grammar, history books with dates and science books that treat chemistry, physics and biology as separate fields of enquiry as samizdat publications. However, those who work in the field of educational publishing can testify to the fact that we are getting there.

Irina Tyk's view of the role of education is pitched higher than the government's grossly instrumentalist approach:

One may know that a flower goes by the name of a rose; but teach a child why a rose grows as it does and you teach him how to think as a scientist; awaken him to the beauty of a rose and you teach him how to think as an artist... In order to understand his own humanity and the humanity of others, your child requires the languages of science, art and, of course, morality.

This is not the sort of language that finds favour with government apparatchiks, and those of us who share Irina Tyk's ideals must sometimes feel that we are approaching a return of the Dark Ages. If so, we must keep the flame burning until the world returns to its senses. Thanks to the monasteries, Western culture survived the Huns and the Visigoths. We must hope it can survive the new onslaught of Vandals from Whitehall. The barbarians are at the gates, but within schools like Holland House, and within the homes of parents who are concerned for their children's future, the torch is still being passed on.

**Robert Whelan**  
Managing Director, New Model School Company

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

**It was with the greatest pleasure that I accepted the invitation to address the annual conference of Family Education Trust in June 2008.** Nobody has reason to value family life more than the Head of a school. For almost twenty years I have been the Head of Holland House School and if there is one thing I have learned it is not to underestimate the family.

School continues the education that starts in the home and ends in the world. It is one thing to teach Maths and English to a child whose mind has not succumbed to the vulgar language of our time; it is quite another thing to teach a child who brings to school values and ideas shaped by the latest edition of political correctness. Ideas and goodness of character are as indispensable in the classroom as they are indispensable to the proper conduct of one's life. The classroom ought to be a moral forum, a place in which children come together with respect for one another, with respect for their teacher and with respect for the knowledge and ideas that will enrich their lives. If only it were so! If only parents imbued their children with such moral imperatives and if only the educational gurus of the moment allowed teachers to impart the body of knowledge and the development of intellect that serve a civilised mind!

I believe that it is the responsibility of every parent to take proper care of their children's moral development and I believe that it is the responsibility of every teacher to develop the minds of the children in his or her classroom so that each child may embark on the fascinating journey of life with the advantages of good character and a fine mind.

Irina Tyk  
March 2009

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period...

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859

## EDUCATION & CULTURE

**The longer I practise my craft as a Headmistress, the more aware I become of the difficulties that face young children nowadays if they are to avoid the foolishness and despair that remain undiminished a hundred and fifty years after Charles Dickens wrote these famous words.**

Perhaps the most striking absence in family life today – and hence in the minds of children – is the permanence of moral values. No longer is it the case that there is a set of moral principles to which the overwhelming majority subscribes. Children no longer come to school with a clear sense of right and wrong. There is, of course, nothing new in doing wrong; children and adults have strayed from the right path since time immemorial. What is most striking today is the lack of embarrassment, the lack of shame, the lack of conscience that I find in the young and in their parents. Children no longer assume that lying is wrong; nor do they assume that theft is wrong. Nor do their parents assume that these modes of behaviour are wrong. Such moral disinterest arises from a growing pragmatism in society according to which self-interest and self-promotion are the dominant concerns; behaviours are no longer wrong because they are wrong, they are wrong because they are not profitable, not practical, not of visible benefit. Children expect to benefit materially from everything, and such practical objectives come from a family life that has little time or interest in the spiritual and moral development of children.

It used to be the case that there was a consensus throughout the nation that there was a moral imperative upon parents to teach their children, either in the context of religious upbringing or in the context of a child's rational development, that the Ten Commandments – or a variant of the Ten Commandments – pretty well summed up the ideals to which all should aspire. Not any longer. Believe me, it is no longer the case

that there is a set of moral principles to which most of the children in class, most of the school and most of the parents subscribe. It isn't just about cultural diversity either. Different historical roots and different cultural experiences do not in themselves explain the lack of agreed moral principles. It isn't about language and it isn't about whether or not one eats with a knife and fork or chopsticks! It isn't about whether or not one's great-grandparents were slave-owners or slaves. Somehow, irrespective of our genealogy, most of us knew right from wrong.

What does this matter, you may ask, when one is teaching maths, science or English? It matters for all the world. As one who has taught pupils of all ages, from primary age to university age, I may tell you that there is all the difference between teaching an honest mind rather than a dishonest mind, between teaching a student who is familiar with the language of good and evil rather than a student who is dismissive of such distinctions.

## CULTURAL RELATIVISM

That, of course, leads me on to another of education's favourite children, as it were. I refer to the belief, now so well established that none dare question it, that children must learn to live without making judgements. In a complete misunderstanding of the Christian concepts of humility and charity, our educationalists and the moralists who inform them decided some time ago that the classroom should be a judgement-free space. This was the beginning of cultural relativism, when the achievements of all were thought to be of equal value, when blowing on a didgeridoo was of the same musical value as a Mozart Sonata. Why should one believe in the Ten Commandments or in the value of Mozart in a world without judgement and without absolute truths?

This has become the environment of the modern classroom. There are no shared moral assumptions. Instead, there are assumptions, turned

into certainties, that have come about because the media, the state and the experts have pronounced on these subjects. And what nonsense they speak. For years they have advised a method of teaching children to read that is a denial of every rational principle of education. For years they set aside the need to learn arithmetical tables because it was felt that memory devalues knowledge. The loss to children's reading standards and mathematical attainment has been immeasurable. For years history teachers have been instructed by the teachers of teachers, by the experts, to set aside the chronology of history and to set aside the achievements of great men and women who have shaped our civilisation in order that children may experience their own local history as if history were a kind of therapeutic exercise, best understood from the narrowness of personal experience. Everywhere, in the name of humility, in the name of steering clear of objective judgement, children are encouraged to immortalize their own autobiographies rather than engage with the lives and achievements of the great and the good. Personal experience replaces imagination. What one feels becomes more important than the achievements of others.

## THE RISE OF PSYCHOLOGY

This pre-eminence of feeling over thoughtfulness is due, I suggest, to the psychologising of our age. I cannot tell you how many policy documents are directed to a Head's office nowadays that are more to do with social and psychological issues than with educational ones. It is bad enough that 100 per cent of children have become suspects for the crimes and abuses of the few. Most children do not commit knife crimes, do not abuse drugs and are not the victims of sexual abuse. Try telling that to Ofsted. Their inspectors are more concerned with such abuses than with the quality of a child's mind or the intellectual development of children in school. I wouldn't like to say how many teaching hours in school are lost because of the legal requirement for staff to attend courses that have nothing to do with how best to teach

the children and everything to do with society's impression that the vast majority of children are in danger of psychological or physical abuse. Fear has made prisoners of us all, teachers and parents.

So fearful are we of private abuse that children nowadays have lost the right to silence, have lost the right to be introverts. The thoughtful child who is inclined by nature and by personality to keep his thoughts to himself is now suspected of harbouring unhealthy secrets or a state of mind that may require psychiatric mediation.

The homogenisation of our children so that all forms of dissidence have been filtered from their minds is well advanced. The majority reigns not just by dint of numbers, but by dint of their lack of intellectual differentiation. There is today a kind of communism of the mind that is, I believe, far more disturbing than the state communism of the former Soviet Union and the present Chinese state. When the government of the day in England recites the model of the community as a kind of mantra that will solve the social ills of our time, it forgets that the dignity of mankind, the dignity of young people, is individual and is not shared with those whom one knows but superficially. The solution to knife crime, and to drug and sexual abuse, lies not in the community, but in the individual development of our children. No community can take the place of the family. Those who love their children, those who are responsible for their children, those who choose to have children, must educate their children morally. They must teach their children not to settle arguments by violence. Most of all, they must direct their children along an individual path rather than a collective one.

## THE LOSS OF SELF-CONFIDENCE

It is, of course, a lack of self-confidence that causes parents and children to look outwards to the community and to the most frequently heard voices to make up for the deficit in individual certainties. When nothing

is certain, when anyone may be right or wrong, then self-confidence diminishes. And as self-confidence lessens, the more confident rule the less confident, the crowd swallows up all lone voices. So it is that a child loses the right to stand apart from other children, to read a book while his classmates play football, to speak without swearing when swearing is the language of his peers, to be different, to choose not to do what everyone else is doing. How many times have parents come to see me, 'Mrs Tyk, little Joanna doesn't want to play with my Hayley!' 'Why should Joanna and Hayley play together?' I reply. We don't all have to be friends with one another. A child must have the right to give or to deny friendship. That is not to say that children should be insensitive or hurtful; consideration for others is one thing, compulsory friendship is quite another.

Rather than the model of community, I suggest that the ideal of courteous dissidence would be a far more effective means by which to teach young people how to behave. The crimes of violence about which we hear so much today are not the product of the dissident mind, the individual mind, they are the product of those who choose to wear the uniform of their culture, the uniform of their social group! These are tribal crimes. If there is one thing I would like to communicate today, it is that neither the mind nor the spirit are suited to tribal discipline. Education ought to teach children to walk apart, to stand aside from the tribe.

## MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Another great mistake of our times is the belief that young children are too young to be morally accountable, that young children are too young to possess a moral dimension. How wrong are parents to deny children moral individuality. Here is yet another example of the communism of the human mind. If children are denied a moral dimension, when do they acquire it? Morality is not age-related. As soon as the young child

learns to act freely, he becomes a moral agent, and he then must learn that each of his choices may be right or wrong.

The Nobel prize-winning novelist, Isaac Bashevis Singer, said in his acceptance speech:

I write for children because they still believe in God, the family, angels, devils, witches, goblins, logic, clarity, punctuation and other such obsolete stuff.

How tragic that parents of children no longer believe in angels and devils, in the language and imagery of moral values, so that by the time children's books are set aside, the child believes that he is entering an adult world free of logic, clarity – and, incidentally, free of punctuation! Where there are no angels and devils, there is no right or wrong, there is no morality. And the language of morality comes from parents, from the family. It is a voice that is increasingly absent.

The moral codes of good behaviour are as visible as they always were; however, they become ever more unreachable in a climate of thinking by numbers, thinking in groups, whether it be in larger groups called communities or in smaller groups called cells.

## ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

There cannot be a Head of any school in England or anywhere else who hasn't listened to a sincere parent exclaim, 'All I want is that my child be happy!' Of course, we all want children to be happy, but when this question is brought to me in my capacity as a Headmistress, I understand the sub-text, I know that 'I want my child to be happy' is the code for 'I don't want my child to be pushed too hard academically!' It is the code for 'I don't want my child to be made to stand alone!' It is the code of fear. This is how a parent lessens the intellectual demands

that school may impose. It is, of course, a pretty state when happiness is seen as the antidote to intellectual development.

Such is the anti-intellectual climate in which schools operate nowadays that happiness and intellectual development are thought to be mutually exclusive. I could name many schools in which intellectual standards are so high that there is an assumption of unhappiness, of stress and too much pressure. I tell you that the reverse is true: if you want to find children who suffer stress, then look to the lowest-achieving schools, not the highest ones. Every year when children take their SATs exams, the media – joined by parents and teachers, and supported by all the professional bodies that represent the educational lobby – tells us how difficult these exams are, how much stress children feel in taking them, and how harmful they are to the well-being of children. So much so that the government is under pressure from none other than the teachers themselves and their political allies to phase out SATs in favour of that most dubious of methodologies, the continuous assessment.

Strong children, not necessarily clever children, have nothing to fear from such objective tests of knowledge and accomplishment. And it is the job of teachers – and the responsibility of parents – to make children strong, to give them self-confidence and to raise them to think for themselves, to value ideas – their own ideas and different ideas. Such children have nothing to fear from SATs or any other standardised objective test.

## THE LANGUAGE OF IDEAS

One of the most oft-repeated complaints of the young nowadays concerns the boredom of school life, how boring their lessons are. Not to mention how bored they are at home. Children are so bored. Why? The reason, I suggest, is the failure of parents and teachers to imbue their children with the language of ideas. Thoughtfulness

requires a language as much as French or German. Like all languages, it is best learned young. Instead of parents leading their children, they follow, so that the ugliness and vulgarity of language is repeated in homes throughout the land. I recall, on one occasion, I found myself disciplining a child for swearing in the school playground. When I put this to her mother, I was told, 'But Mrs Tyk, that's how we talk at home, my husband and I often use such language!' There it is, the lack of shame, the lack of guilt, not to mention the lack of an aesthetic dimension; and I assure you that a child from such a home carries a heavy burden. There is a moral, an intellectual and an aesthetic price to pay when speech, the daily bread of our lives, is so impoverished.

How then does a parent teach a child the language of ideas? There are no text books, as for French or German. Here are some guidelines:

- Make time for family discussions, in the old-fashioned way around the dinner table; and incidentally, is it not time that children were taught once again how to eat properly, how to hold a knife and fork properly and how to talk without shouting?
- Teach your child how to argue; show him how to disagree courteously and constructively. Teach him not to shrug shoulders at the rest of the world.
- Teach your child to contemplate, to read alone and to spend time alone, and I don't mean to spend longer in bed! Contemplation is when the mind talks to itself, discussion is when one mind talks to another mind.
- Teach your child that knowing the names of things is far removed from understanding things. One may know that a flower goes by the name of a rose; but teach a child why a rose grows as it does and you teach him to think as a scientist; awaken him to the beauty of a rose and you teach him how to think as an artist.
- How your child looks at a flower may be repeated endlessly as he looks at the landscape of the world. And then there is man himself, that most complex of God's creations. In order to understand his

own humanity and the humanity of others your child requires the language of science, art and, of course, morality. In such an education lies, I am sure, the antidote to the social ills of our time and of all times. Needless to say, the acquisition of the scientific, the aesthetic and the moral mind is not to be likened to giftedness. All may learn these languages even if all are not equally gifted.

- Teach him to think of the world as it should be, not as it is. In that lies his imaginative development, and such imagination is the antidote to the provincialism of daily life.

Children learn the language of ideas by means of such strategies. Send a child to school with such language skills and he is a joy to teach!

## THE COLLECTIVISATION OF THOUGHT AND FEELING

Man has not yet devised a better way of imbuing children with self-confidence than by training their minds, teaching them how to think by developing their rational faculty. But how difficult this becomes in a culture that is so overtly irrational, so overtly anti-intellectual and so overtly amoral. What Charles Dickens observed in his opening paragraph to *A Tale of Two Cities* survives in modern dress! If morality belongs to individuals and not to groups or communities, then so do rationality and thoughtfulness. Thoughtfulness is never plural; it is always singular. And yet everything in our culture, everything in the classroom, is about doing things in groups. Today's children live only in the plural! 'I' has been replaced by 'We'. Even the more humble 'One' is barely to be heard!

No longer do young people have heroes to admire, to be inspired by; everything has been reduced to the average, as if man cannot rise higher, perhaps should not rise higher, as if no man should aspire to be taller than his neighbour. When human tragedy strikes, we read

of grief-stricken communities as if such private and intense feelings of pain and loss are transmitted by postcode. Ideas and emotions are individual, experienced by each one of us according to our values, our experience of life, according to the way we think. And yet, everywhere, in classrooms up and down the country, in families too, individual experience is replaced by group membership, by tribal affiliations. Even the nation's love of sport is not immune from such collectivisation. No longer do football fans watch football for the love of the game, for the appreciation of sporting skill; instead it is all about a shared experience with thousands of others whose reasons for supporting a club are more to do with group psychology than with genuine appreciation of sporting achievement.

The collectivisation of thought and feeling is a major factor in the lack of self-confidence of so many of our young people. Of course, I do not refer to the natural bravado of the young, for that is nothing other than the camouflage of uncertainty, of a lack of confidence. In order to imbue children with self-confidence, they must learn to think alone, to spend time alone, to achieve alone. As the French mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal, once wrote, 'All of man's unhappiness stems from his inability to stay in a room alone.' A good education develops a capacity for solitude.

Far-fetched as it may seem, I am convinced that the unhappiness of which Pascal wrote, the inability to stay in a room alone, accounts for much of the restlessness and anti-social behaviour of which our younger generation is accused. Neither drugs nor sexual promiscuity attract those who do not fear solitude.

Modern technology has done us no favours by its creation of a 'virtual' community, with 'virtual' friends, so that physical solitude does not invite the intellectual solitude that enables the mind to function at its most productive. Thanks to the ubiquitous computer, we don't feel alone even when we are alone.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Education may not offer the immediate solution that governments crave, but a proper education will succeed where all other measures fail. The trouble is that the more and more money governments invest in education, the more they back the wrong horse so to speak, the more the wrong ideologies are advanced to the detriment of the educational approach that I have been advocating, the harder it is for every child to resist the conformity of our times, a conformity that promises less rather than more. If only the trainers of teachers, if only the state-accredited experts would return to the best of traditional teaching methods – forsaking all that was wrong in the old days – then I believe we would take a massive step in the opposite direction to the present calamity, with the result that children would have a better chance of doing justice to their God-given potential.

Teaching ought to be the simplest of things. Teaching is the means by which the one who knows more teaches the one or the many who know less. That's all there is to it. A few teachers are born, some are made. However, the process by which teachers are accredited nowadays is far removed from the simple passing of knowledge from one to another. The present-day teacher is social worker, even when none is needed; he is a parent who cannot ever do for a child what a parent must do; he is a policeman who is required to carry out checks and procedures to ensure that no crime or abuse is committed in the home. In short, the modern-day teacher has to do everything but impart an objective body of knowledge and teach children how to think rationally and logically.

Dickens may have lamented the Gradgrinds who thought that knowledge simply meant knowing the names of things, but I don't think he would be impressed by what has happened in our schools since. He would not be impressed by our culture that eschews ideas in favour of slogans and mantras, in favour of quick fixes where none exist.

It takes all the years of childhood for a parent to imbue his child with thoughtfulness and care for others, and it takes all the years of school to prepare young minds for the complexities of life that will lie ahead, complexities that each of us experiences one-by-one and that cannot be simplified by the superficialities of a one-size-for-all solution.

What should one do to avoid the oversimplifications and the mediocrity that assail our children?

- Teach children about right and wrong, by example and by instruction.
- Teach children to speak in their own voice, not in crowdspeak.
- Teach them that education is not just a means to a job with a higher income.
- Teach them to appreciate beauty, to appreciate the aesthetic dimension.
- Teach them to participate and to be alone.
- Teach them to be courteous dissidents.
- And teach them that this is the way to a wonderful life!

Many years ago an American psychiatrist, Thomas Szasz, wrote, 'Ideas have consequences.' In these pages I have tried to convey the damage suffered by children when they imbibe ill-conceived ideas, even when those ideas come from the most respectable sources, from the experts, from the state, from those who should know better but who don't.

*Teaching ought to be the simplest of things. Teaching is the means by which the one who knows more teaches the one or the many who know less. That's all there is to it. A few teachers are born, some are made. However, the process by which teachers are accredited nowadays is far removed from the simple passing of knowledge from one to another. The present-day teacher is social worker, even when none is needed; he is a parent who cannot ever do for a child what a parent must do; he is a policeman who is required to carry out checks and procedures to ensure that no crime or abuse is committed in the home. In short, the modern-day teacher has to do everything but impart an objective body of knowledge and teach children how to think rationally and logically.*

In this thought-provoking booklet, Irina Tyk reflects on the growing difficulty of training the minds of children in a culture that is overtly irrational, anti-intellectual and amoral. Drawing on her experience over almost 20 years as the Headmistress of a successful independent preparatory school, she subjects modern educational trends to a penetrating critique and outlines the steps that need to be taken if we are to rescue children from mediocrity and begin to teach them once again 'the language of ideas'.

Irina Tyk is Headmistress of Holland House School, Edgware.

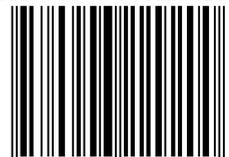
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