

Formal education:
a re-think



Our schools, colleges, and universities are failing young people. Perhaps they always have. But as the world continues to change at a fast pace, with new challenges emerging, the cracks in the system are becoming more and more obvious. The approach to formal education has to change. It's simply not good enough.

Resilience has become the new buzz word in education, as research is starting to confirm what some of us have known for ages: that psychological attitude might be even more important than historical knowledge of what happened in 1066 or being able to work out the square root of 169. But resilience - what we refer to as "never give up" - is just one of the 16 key factors that we've identified as crucial for being the best you can be. Additionally, also of critical importance, there's the considerable problem of psychological avoidance - which schools, colleges, and universities are conveniently ignoring as if it doesn't exist. So there's a huge amount of adjustment required before the educational authorities can claim that they're giving our young people the best start to life that's possible.

I quoted the opening lines from the famous Philip Larkin poem *This Be The Verse* in an earlier essay - *Love Matters* - and it's relevant to do so again here: "They fuck you up, your mum and dad. They may not mean to, but they do. They fill you with the faults they had. And add some extra, just for you." It's been voted by the general public as one of our Top 100 Poems and quoted by a British appeal court judge who wanted to scold the parents in a custody hearing for a nine-year-old child. Everyone gets it. Everyone knows that it's true. So my question is: Why are schools, colleges, and universities ignoring such a basic and important matter as social or psychological conditioning - brilliantly summarised in Larkin's poem? Yes, it's parents that initially contribute to a youngster's psychological baggage - but this is quickly followed by what happens at school. It cannot - should not - be ignored if an educational authority is being genuinely responsible. Yet it *is* being ignored. How many times do I need to keep repeating that avoidance doesn't work? This isn't fucking rocket science! (In the context of Philip Larkin's poem, plus the future wellbeing of young people, I think my use of an expletive here is appropriate.)

Another of our 16 key factors is the need to grasp opportunity, combined with hard work. If we briefly look at just the first half of this key factor - grasping opportunity - it's sad but true to say that Eminem, through his famous song *Lose Yourself*, has done a much better job than all the teachers and schools in the entire world put together in getting this valuable point across. It's worth quoting the first few words:

*"Look, if you had one shot, or one opportunity
To seize everything you ever wanted, in one moment
Would you capture it, or just let it slip?"*

If I was teaching a three-year degree course on any subject to students at university, I'd focus throughout the first term on little else other than the importance of grasping opportunity and working hard. It's fundamental to anything and everything. Yes, I'd also be linking it with the other 15 key factors - all of which are essential for outstanding achievement in life. And, yes again, of course this basic education must begin at school. But, shockingly, it doesn't. Young adults usually don't have a clue, and this sad state of affairs generally continues throughout their lives. The few that do have some kind of a vague inkling about the need to grasp opportunity and work hard got instruction not from their formal schooling but rather from the example of a parent or parents, although this is rare. The education system is supposed to be ensuring equal opportunity for all, regardless of the family you're born into. Our wildlife organisation holds interviews twice a year, so we're one of the many employers who inherit this mess of unpreparedness for life once a young person's formal education has "finished". I have to bluntly ask the teachers, headteachers,

tutors, lecturers, consulting “experts”, plus the educational authority decision makers and administrators: “Did it ever really begin?” And what’s the point of freedom if people are merely conditioned to act like sheep, with no real grasp of how to exercise their freedom of choice? The need for relevant and exact education is absolutely important. But, currently, schools, colleges, and universities are miserably failing our young people - and I know I’m repeating myself, albeit with the additional word “miserably”.

Hypocrisy is another topic that, amazingly, is completely being ignored by the educators. Yet this topic is obviously worth a verse in itself within Mr Larkin’s poem because it causes massive amounts of fuck-ups throughout society. And, as mathematics *is* taught as a subject, why hasn’t the link between the shortcomings of education and the current mental health crisis in young people been made? If you look at what’s what, adding it all up, everything becomes obvious. It’s called understanding or rational thinking. You just do the maths to arrive at the correct answer. Our educational system is part of the problem and, as things stand, it hasn’t got anything whatsoever to contribute in terms of a solution. It’s almost unbelievable.

I have to say something about teachers. How many good ones did you have when you were at school? One? Two? None? A teacher that was a genuine source of inspiration? Someone who really opened up your eyes? Shouldn’t they all be great? Everyone knows the saying “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach.” It’s largely true, with the occasional exception. A hell of a lot of teachers are mediocre. A few are atrociously bad. If a headteacher is persistent, over a long period of time, willing to battle a teacher’s union, it might be possible to get a dreadful member of staff out of their school - but only to see them moved to a different school where they can carry on “teaching” our impressionable young people. There has to be a mammoth overhaul and clear-out if there is going to be any significant change for the better.

Role models have influence. This begins with parents, soon followed by teachers. Attitude is essential - which is the consequence of applying, or not applying, or only partially applying, the 16 key factors that we’ve identified as primary or causal components (as different from secondary considerations). If we only look at the key factor of “never give up” or resilience, you’ll have to search high and low, far and wide, to find a teacher who knows a lot about this aspect of attitude. It might be a tiny reason for hope that the teaching profession is getting excited about the relevance of resilience, but what good is this going to do if they themselves don’t apply it in their own lives? You can only genuinely teach what you know and do yourself. Anything less is just superficial lip service, which will achieve a total of nothing in mathematical terms. So, to all educators, it’s “back to the drawing board” time. You’re barely scratching the surface.

This “teacher problem” is a difficult, catch-22 matter. It’ll be a tough nut to crack. My father-in-law began as a teacher, then worked his way up to eventually become head of education for Essex in the UK, responsible for 600 schools. He took early retirement to work internationally for a pioneering learning organisation, only to be sacked by the one person above him who was jealous and mistaken about my father-in-law’s intentions. Anyway, he gave a good piece of advice to us for our work regarding the education of young people: “Whatever you do, bypass the teachers.” Perhaps this conclusion, based on decades of professional experience, should be taken as literally as possible? As technology is getting better and better, with e-learning possibilities already a reality, the relevant authorities might be well advised to focus on quality content instead of the traditional teacher-led approach to a classroom of learners. Schools, colleges, and universities - if they were honest and willing enough to instigate a revolution - would find that society has a range of extremely capable individuals able to produce considerably better educational material. Others could offer time-limited exceptional support for young people, whilst simultaneously carrying on with what they’re already doing. Schools would still need highly capable co-ordinators, instead of teachers, to manage the logistics. In short: dump the teachers, making Pink Floyd happy.

A number of elements have to come together if this is to happen, which is unlikely but definitely possible. There must be a full acknowledgement that the current system is inadequate or rotten, to be replaced with a fundamentally different approach to the education of our young people. This alternative must be a vision or blueprint that can deliver great results - ones that can be unquestionably verified by ongoing research throughout subsequent adulthood. As briefly stated above, the content of educational material must be outstanding - presented in a way that will appeal to youngsters. Political decisions would have to be made - requiring honesty, intelligence, and bravery - to get the ball rolling. A pilot study would first need to be carried out, to establish the major benefits and massive improvement that must be demanded on behalf of our youngsters. Everyone in society would eventually benefit, apart from criminals. The obesity crisis and mental health crisis are easily solvable with the right attitude and approach. It's just a matter of exact know-how. And, to repeat myself yet again, it's not rocket science.

Like many areas of life, the main focus has to be the all-important psychology. (To anyone reading and taking this seriously, please don't think you can turn to psychologists because they're not much better than teachers. You need the guidance and expertise of authentic pioneers like ourselves.) And it obviously requires more than just a short essay to spell it all out. That said, here is some kind of a preliminary checklist that anyone useful would have to be highly knowledgeable of, backed up with applied capability:

- If you play the game, part of the "supposed-to-be life", forget it. You're unsuitable to be a part of any genuine change.
- There must be a solid understanding that the ubiquitous and normalised self-orientated psychology of "me, me, me" or "me, first" is the root cause of all dysfunction. If you can't see this then you're still metaphorically blind or blinkered.
- Equally, there must be a detailed understanding that psychological avoidance - in all of its various forms - is the enemy of change.
- Your meaning and purpose has to be to give young people the very best education that's possible. Nothing less will do.
- Shakespeare's advice should be heeded: "To thine own self be true" and "Be just and fear not". Integrity of values matters.
- Expectation is important: to be the best you can be. And to expect others to do their best. Set clear goals, split into manageable steps.
- You have to be an expert in grasping opportunity and working hard.
- You must be capable of facing reality, warts and all, about everything and everyone, including yourself.
- The courage and honour that typifies the spirit of an adventurer is required.
- You have to have a hunger for learning and a zest for life. If you're stuffed, get a job in a cushion factory.
- "Be prepared" is underestimated. It's a state of readiness to do the right thing at the right time. (Think "Jack Bauer" from 24.)
- The resilience and perseverance of "never give up" is easier said than done. It's also an essential quality.
- You must be able to identify hypocrisy in yourself and others, overcoming it through "actions speak louder than words". If you're not capable of this, self-deception is guaranteed.
- Service before self is essential. It's a matter of need before want. Be a willing tool, as in "No thanks for duty".
- You have to ask pertinent and challenging questions. Enquiry is the intentional way in to expose, understand, and clarify.
- Link all these essential points together. Picture building combines the components as one, to make something even more powerful.
- Forget "I want". Replace it with appropriateness, followed by preference.
- A useful reminder is "perspective and approach". The non-selfishness perspective is best and "I can" is the correct approach.
- Don't underestimate the scale of what is possible when human potential is unfolded. Think big. Pay attention to detail. Apply scale to the above worthy qualities, otherwise you'll misread, selling short what's achievable.

If teachers, with a few exceptions, are part of the problem, then they have to go. It's the only way forwards. If the bulk of them remain, they'll sabotage any attempt at serious reform because - to repeat - they're part of the problem. They're simply not capable enough to be trusted with our children's future. Instead, we need to harness the very best minds in society. The technological means already exist for their output to reach students - and these modern methods must be maximised, to a similar extent to how the innovation of robotics has changed manufacturing.

The benefits of attitude are huge. This cannot be overestimated, as some sport professionals are beginning to appreciate. It goes way beyond character development into the heart of overall capability. The result is considerably better psychological health and a flourishing of practical aspiration. There's greater social awareness and responsibility. These are big statements and worthwhile objectives - all totally achievable. The benefits are on a sliding scale, so the clear advantages can be experienced and assessed on a step-by-step basis. The potential for real change is considerable, and therefore it is right to expect significant improvements.

If you've read the above and more or less understood it, you have a duty of honour to act. Cowards take the "easy" route, doing little or nothing. Hope, or tinkering about the edges, won't deliver the necessary results. Avoidance doesn't work. Meanwhile, young people are growing up - emerging as young adults, ill-prepared for life, unaware of how to make their dreams become reality. If the need for fundamental change is identified, it can be demanded. It then might happen.

We do what we say, so we know that it works. We're the world-leading pioneers in psychological attitude.

Iain Scott, December 2020

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