

What's the Point of School?

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The main arguments of the book

Teacher in inner-city school: 'Adele, how many legs does a grasshopper have?'

Adele: 'Oh man, I wish I had your problems.'

1. Education is, above all, a preparation for the future. That means: helping to give all young people the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and values they need to thrive and contribute to society, in the face of the challenges and opportunities they will meet. The curriculum and means of assessment must support that preparation.
2. We have lost sight of this fundamental purpose. We have come to value the Transmission of Knowledge not as a means to a deeper end, but as an end in itself. That loss of vision has led to endless rounds of impotent tinkering and sterile debate. The ills of education will not be solved unless we go *right* back to basics.
3. Young people are stressed. Their worlds are complex, demanding high levels of cognitive and emotional expertise; traditional guidelines and sources of support are indistinct and conflicting; and they feel ill-equipped to cope. So they behave erratically and self-destructively, and feel anxious and inadequate. That's what 'stress' is: ill-judged attempts to cope when Perceived Demands outweigh Personal Resources. Education should be helping them to develop those Personal Resources — and it isn't.
4. Educational debate is kept shallow by a few tacit images and assumptions that, unquestioned, block deeper thinking. Some of these concern what kind of thing 'school' is. Buried images include 'school as seminary' and 'school as production line'. Other beliefs concern children's minds and how they grow. The prevalent idea that children are endowed with a fixed quantity of 'intelligence' that caps their 'potential' leads educators to see minds as 'fillable' but not 'expandable'.
5. Recent discoveries in cognitive science show clearly that intelligence is a composite of habits and attitudes that is perfectly capable of being cultivated. Minds can get 'fitter', just as bodies can. Seeing this, we can replace archaic images of school with more productive ones: school as 'learning gym', and school as 'exploratory'. A learning gym is a place to stretch your mental muscles and build up your learning stamina. An exploratory is a place full of interesting things to explore that builds young people's confidence and capacity for further exploration.
6. Recent attempts to teach 'thinking skills' or 'learning to learn' have often foundered because they treat 'thinking' and 'learning' as new *subjects* (new operations on the production line). But knowing about thinking does not make you a better thinker, any more than knowing about fitness makes you run faster. (Recent suggestions for courses on 'happiness' are doubly

misguided. Understanding what makes people unhappy doesn't stop them doing it. And it's not 'happiness' or 'well-being' that young people lack so much as confidence.)

7. Nor can the resources that young people need be treated as 'skills'. They have to be *ready* and *willing* to deal with difficult things, as well as merely *able*. What they need is better thought of as traits or dispositions than as technical 'know-how'. Intelligence cannot be separated from personality. Being ready, willing and able to deal with difficulties is a matter of character. Education must focus on moulding characters for the learning age.
8. The confident learner possesses eight such traits, the 'Magnificent Eight'. They are
 - curiosity: wondering and questioning
 - courage: being resilient and 'up for a challenge'
 - exploration: researching and evaluating information
 - experimentation: practising, tinkering and improving
 - imagination: productive fantasy, intuition and mental rehearsal
 - reason: thinking carefully and critically
 - sociability: balancing independence and collaboration
 - reflection: being strategic, standing back and taking stock
9. Twenty-first century schools and teachers have to put the cultivation of these qualities at the centre of everything they do. That requires small, progressive changes in five areas. First, the *language* that teachers use to talk about learning and learners has to revolve around the Magnificent Eight. That means writing reports, marking students' work and talking to them differently. Second, *activities* have to be structured so that pupils are always clear about what quality is being strengthened (as well as what content is being learned). Third, students have to be prepared to take on more and more *responsibility* for selecting, organising and evaluating their own learning. Fourth, the physical environment has to invite exploration and support independent learning. And fifth, everyone in the school has to see themselves as a role model of positive learning characteristics.
10. All this can be done without chucking out revered topics, or reverting to a child-centred free-for-all. Lessons continue, but an accumulation of small, precise changes signal to students a new ethos, in which the development of learning capacity comes to be genuinely valued above the certified mastery of specific bodies of knowledge. However, all the evidence is that more confident students do better in their exams (so everybody wins, including the Whitehall bean-counters).
11. Parents can help their children grow in confidence and capacity by following these same principles at home. They may have to change some widespread but counterproductive habits, like praising their child for every small achievement or continually telling them how smart they are. It has been found that both of these parental habits breed vulnerable and anxious kids, not brave and resourceful ones. Likewise, employers and team-leaders at work can do more to create conditions in which their people's capacity to be tenacious, creative and reflective emerges and grows.
12. Education can be saved. It can and should be reoriented towards building in young people the rudiments of confidence: the appetite and capacity to engage with hard things. But this will not happen through centralised tinkering with structures and procedures. We should have learned that by now. What is needed is for teachers to adjust their daily habits; to see with their own eyes the growth in ability and responsibility that results; and to create fast, effective grapevines that enable teachers and parents to share what they are learning. That *is* what is happening — but it needs to happen more and quicker. Politicians need to affirm the vision of a true learning society — and then enable people to experiment their way towards making it a reality.